

Where's the lesson?

Briefly

- Public education in Ethiopia has been dismantled and millions are missing out.
- The president of the Ethiopian Teachers Union, Dr Taye Woldesmiate (pictured), was recently in Australia to publicise the situation.
- Woldesmiate was imprisoned for six years for speaking out and again risks incarceration.

Dr Taye Woldesmiate is a wanted man in Ethiopia because he speaks out in support of the millions of his country's children who are denied an education. He spoke to **STEVE PACKER** on a visit to Australia.

For Dr Taye Woldesmiate, president of the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA), 29 May this year marked a tenth anniversary he didn't celebrate. On that day in 1996, when he returned to Ethiopia from Geneva where he had been denouncing his country's repressive government, policemen surrounded him at Addis Ababa airport and took him into custody. He was held for three years without trial then sentenced to 15 years in jail for charges including conspiracy to overthrow the government.

Quick to take up Woldesmiate's cause were organisations including Education International, to which the ETA is affiliated, and the International Labour Organisation. He was the first Ethiopian political prisoner adopted by Amnesty International.

Freed after six years in prison, Woldesmiate was lucky to survive. He had been shackled 24 hours a day, held in complete darkness or solitary confinement, and interrogated until his captors gave up trying to break his spirit.

Some of his colleagues weren't as fortunate. ETA deputy general secretary Assefa Maru, with whom Woldesmiate had worked since

1992, was killed in cold blood on his way to work. Shimalis Zewdie, who took over running the ETA before also ending up behind bars, was denied medical care for his tuberculosis and died shortly after his release. Kebede Desta, president of the Ethiopian Retired Teachers' Association, refused to testify against Woldesmiate and subsequently died from the ill-treatment he received.

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(posthumously) Maru were awarded Education International's Trade Union and Human Rights Award in 1998, Woldesmiate was taken from his cell and once again put before the court. The judge ordered the removal of a US Embassy human rights observer from the proceedings.

Wanted list

"I and other teachers are struggling to keep public education alive," Woldesmiate told a meeting of the AEU federal executive in Sydney in March this year. Better known as "Dr Taye", he has been a free man since 2002 but was in a precarious position

when he visited Australia in March.

While on a trip out of Ethiopia, he found out that he was on a new government "wanted list" of 129 trade union and opposition figures. Had he returned as planned, he would have been back in jail. In his absence, police had searched his family's home (he has two daughters, one at primary school and one at university) and seized notes, files and even books.

Now he is travelling from country to country, describing the dire state of Ethiopian public education, along with his own situation—because the two causes are virtually one and the same. The US and European Union countries have been his strongest supporters, and his next stop was to be Brussels.

"The government is taking action against teachers and other people fighting for a democratic society," he says. "We have over 12 million kids who are supposed to be in classrooms but the government wants them to be illiterate. If they are educated, they will know their rights and demand them." He is particularly concerned with the 65,000 children aged under 17 who are in detention for showing opposition to the government.



DEAN GOLJA

School's out for many

The dismantling and privatising of the education system began in 1991, when one Ethiopian regime ceded power to another—that of Meles Zenawi, leader of the People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. After this time, many of the poorer people could no longer afford to send their children to school.

Now, in a police state, the government has been installing policemen as school principals, says Woldesmiate. If there are discipline problems, the students are taken to the police station. "There are no textbooks. To even ask for them is a political question." To keep the international aid money coming in, the government has been under pressure to keep enrolments up, so now there are

classes of 150 or more, many with untrained teachers. Thousands of the ETA's 150,000 members have had to leave the profession and 70,000 trained Ethiopian teachers are living overseas. More than 320 are in jail for 'political' reasons.

But the government is scared, says Woldesmiate. "It is a critical time, when there needs to be pressure from the outside. The government is given money for education but that's really giving them bullets that will kill kids." Woldesmiate says the ETA is willing to assist the distribution of money so it goes directly to the community.

This is the message he would like Australian teachers to stress in letters to their own government. Ethiopians need Australia's aid,

but give it to their government and it will be spent on the military and police.

Cheerfully dignified

While he was in Australia Woldesmiate and his supporters were unable to get meetings with either the foreign minister or the shadow foreign minister. But Woldesmiate is a cheerfully dignified and determined man.

His activism started in high school in the 1960s as president of the students' union. He has a BA in agriculture and political science from Illinois State University, and a masters in political science and PhD from the University of Missouri-Columbia. In 1989, he chose to return to war-ravaged Ethiopia to work as an assistant professor at Addis Ababa University for a fraction of the salary he was earning as a visiting professor in the US. Four years later, he and 41 other academics at the university, most of them ETA leaders, were fired.

The situation for Ethiopian education is now worse than ever, he says. "The level of international support has worked for me in the past—they [the government] paid a price for that—so it is important to do that now. I have to be there to run my office and teach that we should be able to live in the same country with differences of opinion.

"Whether or not we can negotiate something, I'm going back. I'm willing to go to prison again." ●

STEVE PACKER is sub-editor of Australian Educator.

EI to Ethiopia

At the time of going to press, an Education International/International Federation of Journalists mission was due to visit Ethiopia to pledge support to the teachers and journalists unions currently being harassed by the authorities.

In an urgent action appeal in May, EI reports of the further legal means taken by the Ethiopian government to destroy the ETA. EI is calling on all affiliates to write and make representations in support of the ETA.

For more information visit: www.ei-ie.org