

***Richmond Times-Dispatch* Op-Ed about the VSSA's  
2007 Distinguished Career Award  
Conferred on Dr. Yacob Hailemariam**

**Longtime Virginia Professor:**

***Prisoner of Conscience to Receive Award in Absentia***

PETER WALLENSTEIN

TIMES-DISPATCH GUEST COLUMNIST

Thursday, March 29, 2007

Blacksburg. Dr. Yacob, as he is known to colleagues and former students, is falsely charged with capital crimes in his native Ethiopia. Two years ago, Yacob Hailemariam, who had taught at Norfolk State University for some 20 years, took early retirement to return to his native Ethiopia so he could run for a seat in his nation's parliament.

Victorious in the polls in May 2005, he and his reform colleagues soon found themselves in prison, where they have languished for well over a year. Charges against Hailemariam include genocide — a particularly vicious charge given his active work on behalf of the United Nations in the 1990s investigating genocide in Rwanda. Friends, relatives, and other supporters of what Amnesty International calls prisoners of conscience have rallied in support of Hailemariam and his jailed colleagues.

WITH YACOB Hailemariam in mind, the Virginia Social Science Association (VSSA) decided some months ago to create a new award, which will be given this year for the first time. The VSSA, meeting this weekend at the University of Richmond for its annual conference, is conferring upon him a special Distinguished Career award.

In early February, when his daughter, Seyenie Yacob, was preparing to fly to Ethiopia in support of her father at his upcoming trial (it has since been twice rescheduled), I sent this letter for her to take to him:

"At a recent board meeting, the Virginia Social Science Association made a commitment to recognize you this year with its Distinguished Career award, given to someone who has given great service to the state, the nation, and indeed the world over the years.

"We recognize you in part for your two decades of teaching and leadership at Norfolk State University. We recognize you also for your work with the United Nations, particularly with respect to the investigation of genocide in Rwanda. And we recognize you for your efforts in education, law, and politics in your native Ethiopia.

"Normally we require that the recipients of our awards be present at the VSSA's annual meeting, to be held this year at the University of Richmond on Saturday, 31 March. We recognize that we

cannot hold to that tradition in your case, and we wish nonetheless, in fact for that very reason, to go ahead and recognize you in this way.

"We plan to invite one or more of your friends, colleagues, and family members to attend the VSSA meeting to accept this award on your behalf. We are sending this letter by way of your daughter's visit. We salute you, sir."

THE AWARD is designed to recognize the sacrifice of a fellow professor, to help in some small way to leave him feeling less isolated and forgotten, and to shore up the spirits of his supporters around the world. More than that, officers of the Virginia Social Science Association hope that the award will make the plight of Hailemariam and his colleagues more visible and even that it will work toward securing their release.

The plenary session, at which awards are made and recipients typically speak, begins at 11 a.m. in Room 118 of Jepson Hall (adjacent to Weinstein Hall). The other recipients this year are Leroy Rountree Hassell Sr., chief justice of the Virginia Supreme Court; Oliver W. Hill, the great civil rights attorney, who is approaching his 100th birthday; political scientist Thomas R. Morris, secretary of education for the Commonwealth of Virginia; historian Rose Mary Sheldon of the Virginia Military Institute; and sociologist O. Kendall White of Washington and Lee University.

Planning to attend and represent Hailemariam at the event are his wife, Tegist Alemu, who lives in Virginia Beach, and their son, Sefonias Yacob, who is flying in from Stanford University, where he is a student.

News of the upcoming award has evidently been reverberating around the overseas Ethiopian political community, since in recent weeks I have received phone calls and e-mail messages from people who had heard of it. Wouldn't it be great if members of Congress, whether from Virginia or elsewhere, were to push hard for a release of these political prisoners? Wouldn't it be great to see such a release actually take place -- and soon?

Peter Wallenstein, a history professor at Virginia Tech, is the author of "Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History" and president of the Virginia Social Science Association.

See the website [www.freeyacob.com](http://www.freeyacob.com) for more information — and updates — about Professor Hailemariam.