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January 20, 2012

President Barack Obama

The White House

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Subject: Appeal Letter on Land grabbing in Ethiopia: Evicting indigenous people from their livelihood and subjecting them to absolute poverty and famine under the guise of development, on top of other Human Rights Violations by the Ethiopian Government.

Dear Mr. President Barack Obama:

I am writing this appeal letter on behalf of International Oromo Women's Organization (IOWO), a Non-Profit Organization, established to promote gender equality and be the voice for the voiceless Oromo women in East Africa, mainly in Ethiopia.

The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, which constitute 40% of the population, out of which 50% are women. So the victims on this Land grabbing and exposed to absolute poverty and famine are those largest part of the population, especially women and children who are the most vulnerable.

This is to bring to your attention about the man made poverty and famine in Ethiopia through leasing millions of hectares of arable land to foreign investors by evicting indigenous smallholding pastoral farmers who made their livelihood on the land they inherited from their forefathers. The brutality and type of repression pursued by the Meles regime has no parallel.

The policy followed by the current regime has proven to be even worse than that of its predecessors; indeed it turned the life of the peasantry to a more brutish and miserable state of existence than the monarchic system of serfdom did. Under the current system the peasants were not only denied the right of land ownership but also the right to use it in whatever form. Land grabbing is not only a policy of dispossession but mainly that of eviction and uprooting.

This time the central government through its representatives at regional level chose to confiscate the land of the peasantry simply to sell it to foreign investors who produce crop and flowers for export. In so doing the existing regime used the land as means of impoverishing the peasantry by denying them the right to use the land they used for farming for years.

Dear Mr. President

In a country where more than 80 % of the people's life is based on farming and the entire economy rests itself, the current regime chose to lease millions of hectares of arable land to foreign investors. These investors produce crops and flowers to export back to their own country and other markets. This action simply brought about a replacement of indigenous farmers who used to produce crops for their family and sell the surplus to local markets by the so called foreign investors who export food and flowers. In this pursuit about 2.8 million peasants have already been evicted; their villages burned down and have lost all means of life. In his repeated television appearance the prime minister declared that three million hectares of land would be given away in the future. So, more disaster is on its way.

One may tend to see this problem in the context of land grabbing that takes place in other parts of the world. However, seeing this in the poorest of all poor nations where the countries reliance on food aid remained extremely high is not just a mistaken policy but simply it is a retaliatory and programmatic action by the ruling party to punish and impoverish its critics. Evidences also suggest this (<http://www.hrw.org/africa>).

Dear Mr. President

Many reports asserted that ‘aid in Ethiopia generally has been used by the ruling party to suppress and sideline the opposition in to submission.’¹ While about 13 million people needed and receive food aid from wealthy nations every year, the government used that aid not only to sideline and oppress its critics but also chose to deprive land over which the peasantry could produce food to sustain family life.

The environmental cost of leasing out land to foreign investors is also immeasurable and no one could even guess the number of wildlife that came to extinction by the regimes program of burning down vast area forests. Its effect on environmental degradation coupled with the contamination of soil and water emanating from the use of dangerous chemicals and pesticides by the investors is another disaster, which the surrounding population had to face.

Women working by getting under a dollar a day on the flower farms exposed to diseases that may cause cancer. They are working where there is no proper protection and medical treatments.

In this retaliatory campaign of land grabbing, India, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia and other countries investors took tens and hundreds of thousands of hectares for next to nothing. As these investors were given a five years tax relief and bought it about a dollar per hectare, no credible national economic justification could exist for this action than punishing the peasantry. Simply the government, as usual has been using the name ‘development’ as a cover up to evicting the people from their livelihood.

Many have reported this, but the recent report by John Vidal based on evidence has shown the sad scenario in which one ‘investor’ was given a vast land the border of which he was proudly speaking that he couldn’t even be able to locate (please watch for example <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/21/ethiopia-centre-global-farmland-rush>).

The massive eviction of Oromos starting right from Shoa (the most densely populated region) to Arsi, Bale, Borana, Guji and Wollega zone is reported by various Medias and researchers. In all of this the government claimed that people did not inhabit the land while it is in fact burning villages and jailed hundreds and thousands who protested against these measures. According to the report collected from Oromia, in the Guji area alone more than 100 criminal charges were brought against students who peacefully opposed the government measure to give massive area of their land to Midroc Company owned by Sheikh Mohammed Alamoudi; an ally of the prime minister, a vanguard supporter of the ruling party and a person who has been enjoying privileged position in the government's confiscation campaign national wealth, such as gold mines and exploration of other precious minerals. Life of many of the local people around his gold mine were affected as a result of the toxic chemical that the company was using to dissociate the primary gold from its mother rock.

<http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2010/02/10ADDISABABA370.html>

Dear Mr. President

The trend of oppression followed by the Prime Minister Meles government has already reached its climax and has become worrying. Based on the facts just mentioned and accumulated repressive measures, one can easily tell that the current regime is leading the nation down the road of civil disobedience and civil unrest that could go out of control any time soon. The cost of such thing would be immense resulting Genocide and indeed undesirable.

As the current research study from University of Maryland, the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) shows Ethiopia is among the Highest Estimated Risk for Instability (Table 2.1) and in Risks for Genocide or Politicide (Table 6.1), ranking 6th in the world

www.cidcm.umd.edu/pc/executive_summary/exec_sum_2012.pdf.

Therefore, we appeal to your good office and ask the assistance of all concerned to stand just for human right. We plead with the international community and the government of

USA to intervene and take immediate action to avert a humanitarian catastrophe before yet greater tragedies could occur in Ethiopia.

We call upon the government of USA:

- To use all diplomatic and economic leverages at your disposal to exert a pressure on and ensure that foreign companies in Ethiopia, their Ethiopian partners, and the Ethiopian government adhere to international environmental standards and obligations;
- To stand for justice and expose the TPLF led repressive agenda in every forum about the use of political power to impoverish and retaliate against citizens, among others through the policy of land grabbing,
- Finally, once again we appeal to you and international community to intervene and take immediate action to avert political and economic crises that could engulf the Horn of Africa as consequences of such reckless act of Meles regime and save future generation.

Peace and justice for all,

Yours Sincerely

Dinknesh Kitila

International Oromo women's Organization
Board Director

ⁱ See the Human Rights watch report on "Development without freedom: how human rights underwrites repression in Ethiopia" available at <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/ethiopia1010webwcover.pdf>, accessed on 01/20/2012

CC:

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