

## **Begna F. Dugassa., Ph.D**

Opening Speech made on the 2013 fundraising eve for the Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa (HRLHA).

### **Knowledge Enables and Stabilizes**

Pastor Shamsadin Abdo Boru, the chairman of the Board of the Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa (HRLHA), could not attend this fundraising event. Before I prepared my opening speech I consulted Pastor Boru. I have incorporated his view in my speech.

Dear elders, friends of HRLHA, and all of our guests, welcome to this fundraising event. We are delighted to have you here in this great event. I know many of you have traveled long distances and left your busy schedules to attend this event. Your efforts remind us how important human rights work is for all of us. The principles of human rights are based on respect for human dignity. Respect for human rights and dignity can create peace, stability and harmony in our society. Human rights are something that we all cherish. As you deeply know, knowledge is power. If we know what constitutes human rights, we can stand and defend it.

Today, we the people from the Horn of Africa are entering a new era. We are building and articulating ideas and ideologies that promote human rights and social justice. We are promoting individuals rights and setting guiding principles where the safety, security and dignity of all people are respected. We are promoting collective rights (the rights of people to self-determination) where every social group and their ways of life are respected. At the same time we know that there are individuals and groups who are trying to stop the aspirations of people for change. As the saying goes, “ideas have legs“, they can walk and run- even more, “they have wings” they can fly and when ideas and ideologies that are inclusive, democratic and that promote social justice start it is impossible to stop. Promoting ideas and

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ideologies about social justice and transmitting informing about human rights facilitates knowledge construction on human rights. Knowledge changes the way we think. Changes in our thinking promote social transformation.

The concept of human rights is derived from human dignity which all human beings inherit by being human. It is something that we are all equally entitled to and treasure. Although all human beings are equally entitled to human rights, each of us has to stand up and asserts those rights. In the Horn of Africa, there are many people who do not understand their rights and those individuals and groups therefore could not defend their rights. This is very challenging. In understanding that knowledge changes the way we think and do, one of the objectives of HRLHA is to educate about human rights. To defend our rights, first we need to know what it constitutes. To promote the rights of others, we need to personally value and cherish them. If not, as the saying goes, “we talk the talk, but we fall to walk the walk”.

There are individuals and groups who talk about human rights but have difficulty living by human rights principles. Indeed, one of the major reasons that led to the formation of the Human Rights League (HRL)- the predecessor of HRLHA in Ethiopia was the observations

Oromo elders made about an organization that claims to defend human rights but adopted different standards for different groups of people. When Oromo elders took the case of Oromos who were killed by Ethiopian government security forces and family members disappeared this organization refused to take the case into consideration. The HRL was committed to preventing the mistake of this organization and decided to make its activity to be inclusive and transparent. However, after the HRL was formed, the leaders of the organization were put in prison and later on they were forced to flee their country. After these human right activists arrived in Canada they formed HRLHA.

HRLHA is organized to speak on behalf of those who are voiceless: men, women and children in the Horn of Africa. HRLHA believes until a person is proven guilty, they are innocent. HRLHA treats those individuals who are suspected of committing crime as innocent until they are proven guilty. Therefore, HRLHA is open to everyone who is willing to make a difference in promoting human rights and defending the rights of people. HRLHA is committed “to walk the walk in human rights paths”.

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Freedom and human dignity are important to everyone's daily life. It is my belief and I believe it is also yours that our dream for human rights is just. The dream for human rights is realistic and achievable. We are here to raise fund for this just activity. We are here to promote human freedom, human dignity and liberty. Your contribution goes to reduce and even prevent human suffering. It is used to promote peace and human dignity.

Promoting and defending human rights has ripple effect. It can ease the suffering of people in the Horn of Africa. It can create conditions for individuals and groups to live up to their potential. This makes all your financial contributions valuable. Do not limit your contributions to once per year donation. HRLHA needs your support every day. HRLHA needs your skills, time and networks. HRLHA wants you in your everyday life to standup for human rights.

The people who are in the Horn of Africa can do their part. They can do their part by documenting events when human rights are violated. They can record the crime as it is being committed – the images and sounds. If not, they can record the event in writing. In documenting the event, the date, time, the full names of the victims, the full names of individuals involved in perpetuating the crime need to be recorded. In the record, giving the details about the nature of the crime is helpful. Promoting human rights is not an event, it is a process. This makes recording events as important as giving financial donations. The record can be used in the future to bring the perpetrators to court, as well as helping write history. It can also teach us promote human rights or to teach and learn about human rights.

### **What can you do with the recorded documents?**

Many of the perpetrators of human rights violations know that they could be held to account for what they have done and do. They will do anything possible to make sure that no recorded evidences are kept. Therefore, individuals and groups who are willing to record events need to do so with care. After the record is done, duplicate the document and keep the original document with you and send the copies to HRLHA. If you are worried, directly sending the document to HRLHA. You can also send it to friends or someone you know in the diaspora and ask them to direct the document to HRLHA. If you have access to a computer and the Internet, you can send the electronic information to HRLHA.

### **Why do the Oromo people need to take the lead in promoting human rights?**

First, the core ideas on which the international and local laws are based are human rights principles. This means, that wherever we go, if there is no regard for human rights, there will not be any peace, stability and safety. For the Oromo people who deeply cherish the idea and principle of *nagaa* (peace) *fayya* (health), *tasgabi* (social order), and promoting human rights principles is fostering the values they stand for. For the Oromo people, the idea and principles of human rights is not something new; it is deeply ingrained in their culture. What they have to do is articulate these principles. For example, my grandmother Ba'isee Biqilee in her fireplace teachings discusses the Oromo norms of conduct when she says “*Namaati hindarbiinm, namniis siiti hindarbiin*” which can be translated as “never transgress against others and never let others to transgress against you”. The Oromo people need to galvanize their assets.

For example, our Oromo ancestors developed the Gada system – they elected their leaders every eight years. For centuries, they allowed power to be peacefully transferred to elected leaders from one to the other every eight years. This was happening when many countries of the world were ruled by Aristocrats (Queens and Kings) and Theocrats. To promote gender equity, the Oromo people developed *Siiqee* and allowed Oromo women to get organized and assert their rights. This was done when in many parts of the world people believed in the inferiority of women. To prevent marginalization of ideas and individuals, the Oromo people developed the principle where decisions are made in consensus. This was done while in many countries marginalizing groups and views was the norm. Oromo people cherish these inherited principles and they should not allow anyone to stop them from practicing the principle of Gada and human rights. There cannot be democracy without regard for human rights. At the same time, there cannot be regard for human rights without democracy. Human rights, democracy, social justice and development are intertwined. Oromo people would benefit if other peoples asserted their rights. Hence, the Oromo people not only need to assert their rights but also promote the rights of others. As we have seen repeatedly in the Horn of Africa, if the rights of other people are not respected such violations could be used to violate the rights of the Oromo people.

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Second, Oromo people have experienced widespread human rights violations since King Menelik invaded Oromia. Until 1975, and on their own land, the Oromo people were serfs and forced to give a quarter to three quarters of their harvests to Abyssinian landlords. This impoverished them and conditioned them to survive in destitution. The Oromos have a unique term for such a misery and they call it “jireenya boola oli” – life that is just above the grave. Now days Oromo lands are given away to global corporations and this makes the Oromo farmers landless and helpless. The Oromo people need to claim the rights to their ancestral lands, their rights to food, and their rights to have the basic necessities of life. There are other peoples in the Horn of Africa who are also denied the right to self-determination.

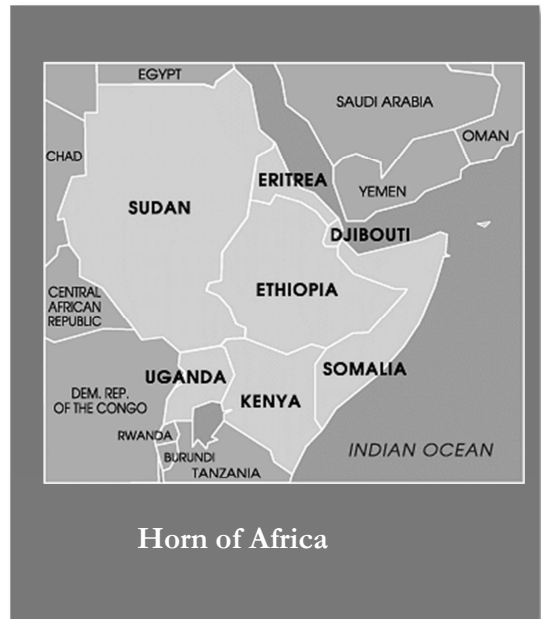
Third, human rights and democracy have proven to be the best system of governance and the people in the Horn of Africa should not allow anyone to keep them away from developing a system that is just, empowering and transparent. Regard for human rights and democratic governance empowers people to identify their needs. This is essential to understanding their social problems and solving them. It is an essential condition to establishing peace and stability, and preventing famine and improving the social conditions of the people. For these good reasons the Oromo people need to take the issue of their rights and the rights of others as matters of life and death.

Fourth, for the Oromo people the principle of diversity and equity is their way of life. Not only they respect diversity, they cherish it. If I say, the Oromo people see diversity as a beauty as it is in nature, I am not romanticizing it. In the natural world, relationships are very often symbiotic and interdependent. In natural world diversity is about beauty, sustainability, dependency and interdependency. Any idea and ideology that is intended to establish homogenous perspectives or views should be challenged. The Oromo people need to galvanize those ideas and promote the principles of diversity and equity.

Fifth, the Oromo people are the largest ethno/national group in the Horn of Africa. Their population size, settlement and the size of the land they occupy have made them the heart of the region. It is for these reasons the French writer - de Salviac characterized the Oromo people as “they could be the French of Africa”, and the German traveler - Krapf referred them as “they could be the German of Africa”. No need for the Oromo people to be the French or the Germans of Europe. However, the Oromo people need to play central role in promoting human rights and democracy in the Horn of Africa. They need to galvanize their human resources and play as a stabilizing force.

### Atrocities in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa countries include (Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya and Uganda). These countries consist of numerous ethno-national groups. In the formation of those countries, the views and interests of different ethnic groups were never taken into consideration. The borders of these countries were drawn by colonizers and maintained by the military forces. Unfortunately this has created two categories of people: rulers and those who are ruled. Geographically, the Horn of Africa is located close to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean which brings them close to the Arab world and



Europe. The close proximity of the Horn of Africa to the Arab world and Europe conditioned the dominant groups to adopt Arab and European racist theories.

When Menelik invaded Oromia in the 1880s and perpetuated mass killings and caused famine he never questioned his action in relation to human rights. Indeed, the Abyssinian ruling class claimed a connection to Biblical heroes such as King Solomon and Queen Sheba. In Sudan the Arab rulers claimed a connection to Prophet Mohammed. Menelik and the Abyssinian elites and Arab rulers were influenced by the racial hierarchy theory, openly claiming the divine right to colonize and rule. Indeed the motive for which the Ethiopian government legalized Christianity and Islam in Oromia and outlawed Waqefaata is not because these two religions teachings have superior morality or ethics; it is to convince the Oromo people that the Abyssinian elites hold divine right to colonize and exploit others. Such discourses dehumanized the people and it provided theoretical reasons to the colonizers to perpetuate genocide. In promoting human rights, we need to unravel racist theories and practices and challenge them.

Human rights violations perpetuated in the Horn of Africa are under reported. The perpetrators are not exposed and held to account. This result in perpetrators repeating the crimes they have committed in the past - and allowing others to do the same. There are cases when criminals have been rewarded for their evil actions. The victims are silenced and feel helpless. This has ripple effects. One of the objectives of HRLHA is to document human rights violations and promote and educate about human rights.

For example, in 2003, during a student protest, Amelework Buli, a female high-school student in Nekemte, Oromiya, died from the beating she sustained at her high school at the hands of Ethiopian government security forces. The Ethiopian government and police claimed she died from natural causes. The principal of the school, the mother and father were forced to lie and gave media interviews saying she died naturally. The father and mother clearly knew the cause of their daughter's death, but they said publicly what was not true. This is one of saddest cases of human rights violations. The principal of the school who was supposed to speak the truth and act as a role model for young students, told the media a story that was contrary to what these young students knew to be true. If the mother, father and the principal of the school knew about their rights, they would have spoken against the killing of Amelewoki. By speaking about it, they would have prevented another killing.

Among many horrible recent cases is the case of Ayishaa Aliyyii Mohaamed in Eastern Oromia, a case which was reported on VOA. When Ayishaa was killed, she was about 14 years old. The Ethiopian security agent who picked her up from her home arrived on a motor bicycle. He asked her to sit on the back of his motor bicycle. Most women in Oromia have no access to pads and tampons for their privacy. Probably Ayishaa have no access to pads and tampons and worried about it and resisted seating on his motor bicycle, saying "I have wound and I cannot sit on your bicycle". However, the TPLF security forced her to sit and took her to a nearby police station, after few days, her body parts were found on Suufi Mountain. For a moment, let us think in terms of human rights. Human rights are about human dignity, which includes privacy. When the Ethiopian security force forced her to sit with him on his motor bike he took away Ayishaa's dignity and privacy. Later on, he took her life. Did the Ethiopian government hold the perpetrator accountable for the crime? The answer is no.

Now let us turn to the case of Biyyansa Dhibba Gaddisa. Biyyansa, a young man politically active was noticed by the TPLF security agents when he was campaigning for the Oromo National Congress (ONC). One night, the TPLF security forces took him from his home and badly beat him. Next day his friends took him to the nearby hospital. The doctors in that hospital could not help and they send him to Finfinee. A few days later as a result of the beating, he died in hospital. As very often happens, the Ethiopian government lied about the cause of death. The government produced a fake death certificate and reported that he died of cancer. Not only that but they also produced a fake document that falsely identified him as a member of the EPRDF/TPLF party. On top of that they interviewed the father – Dhibba Gaddisa -and edited his voice and twisted it and made it look

as if the father admitted the death of Biyyansa was natural. These are examples of Ethiopian government sponsors deceiving the local and international community.

The three stories I briefly discussed are just a few of the many thousands of untold stories. There are too many names and too many stories that are not told. If it is not told as it happens such atrocities are likely to be repeated. Human rights activists and civic organizations need to speak up and expose these things. If human rights violations are not reported, theoretically and practically challenged and stopped, it might lead to genocide—the highest crime of all the crimes. I will briefly discuss what constitutes genocide and how we can prevent it.

### **Genocide**

Because knowledge is power, if we understood what constitutes genocide, and the ways it is perpetuated we can contribute our part to its prevention. I know that many of you have heard the term genocide from the media or have read about it. I believe you heard about genocide in Rwanda and Darfur. I believe you have heard the terms the Jewish Holocaust (ὅλοκαυστος, the whole burnt) and Ukrainian Holodomor (ΓΟΛΟΔΟΜΟΡ). The term Holocaust comes from the Greek words hólos, "whole" and kaustós "burnt", which means whole burnt. The term describes one of the methods the Nazi used to kill the Jews. The term Holodomor comes from the Ukrainian term and it means death resulting from famine and starvation.

The Oromo oral story and several written documents reveal that during the colonization of Oromia and consolidation of power one half-to two-thirds of Oromo people died. This represents one example of genocide. The Oromo people named the event "baraa namaa nyataa" the year of the human eater. One of the atrocities perpetuated against the Oromo people by the Menelik army was in Annole- the Oromos remember it as Harma Muraa Anolee and Harka Muraa Anolee = breast and hand mutilation of Anolee. The event occurred sometime in the 1890 to 1900 period. The Oromos named the events as "the year of human eaters" because most of the able Oromo men and women were either killed or starved to death and others died of new and old diseases. Children were taken into slavery. Only a few able persons were left to bury the dead. This created conditions for wild animals to devour the dead and those who were still alive.

### **But, what is genocide?**

The term genocide was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1933-44 by combining the Greek word genos which represents racial/ethnic/cultural groups and the Latin word cide killing. This means genocide



is killing a group (s) of people collectively. In Lemkin's initial definition, genocide includes: political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical (endangering health and mass killing), religious and moral. When the draft proposed by Lemkin was delivered for debate at UN, the Soviet Union and its allies opposed including political killing in the definition. The reaction of the Soviet Union delegate was based on deeply held beliefs that political killing were necessary to spread communist ideology. The West led by the United States opposed the inclusion of culture or cultural destruction in the definition. The reactions of these groups were consistent with their ideologies. At that time, many of them ruled their colonial people and they were deeply involved in the destruction of the culture of colonized people.

Consistent with Communist ideas, the Soviet Union pushed the need to include cultural assimilation in the definition of genocide. The West promoted the need to include political killings in the definition. Western countries intended to stop political killings perpetuated to achieve ideological and political gains. Clearly both sides made sure that the definition would not work against their own ideologies. Finally they compromised and agreed to drop the concept of political killing and cultural destruction from the definition of genocide. When they debated the rest of the other points proposed by Lemkin, they chose to insert the term "intent" which was very difficult to prove. For example, the UN Genocide Convention defined it as:

- any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, such as:
  - (a) Killing members of the group;
  - (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
  - (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
  - (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
  - (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Lemkin based his analyses of genocide on the experiences of colonized people (a minority ruling the majority) and the experiences of a minority ruled by a majority in the case of the Jewish people in Europe. Lemkin underlined the importance of culture in the continuity of people as a "unique" group. He explored the ways colonizers imposed their values and perspectives upon the colonized people and exploited their human and natural resources and conditioned them to misery and death. In Lemkin's proposed definition genocide has two phases. The first is the destruction of the national way of living of the oppressed group. The second is the imposition of the national way of living pattern of the oppressor. In the case of the Oromo, dismantling the indigenous Oromo institutions

such as Gada and Qaalu and imposing Abyssinian political and religious institution upon the Oromo people constitutes genocide. Forceful religious conversion constitutes deliberate cultural destruction.

Lemkin identified seven major conditions that lead to genocide: a) fanaticism (religious, racial); b) irredentism (national aspirations); c) social or political crisis and change; d) economic exploitation; e) colonial expansion or military conquest; e) colonial conquest; f) evolution of genocidal values in genocidist group (contempt for the alien, etc.) and g) weakening the victim group. The conditions that Lemkin identified have proven to be true. If we carefully look at all cases of experiences of first nations in America, Canada and Australia's colonial expansion led to the extermination of several indigenous peoples. In all cases of genocide, the root causes of the problem have racial/cultural and religious affiliations.

Gregory H. Stanton, the current President of Genocide Watch, has theorized that there are eight Stages of Genocide. The initial stage is Classification. Classification is categorizing people "us versus others". This means the perpetrators classify the people as "us the civilized, the entitled, the progressive, the superior race or culture "and others who are "the uncivilized, not entitled, backward and the inferior race and culture". For example, in the TPLF/EPRDF government case, we need to open wide our ears and eyes when they use terms such as "tserre andinet (anti-unity), tserre mirt (anti-production). During the Derge regime, one of the slogans was "Shirixi lebashuun bemulu belewu" in Amaharic = attack all those who wear shirti. The slogan categorized the Ogden and the Oromo people as if they were the same as the Somali government army. The actions that followed the slogan were indiscriminate killings.

The second stage is symbolization. Symbolization is presenting the group of people as if they are the same and giving them a specific symbol. For example, the Nazi forced the Jews to wear a specific symbol. In the past Abyssinians differentiated themselves from others whether or not they had a tattoo of a cross on the fore head for women or carried a cross on the neck for men. It was used to symbolize that they are Christians and not to be enslaved.

The third and the most important stage is dehumanization. According to Wikipedia, the dehumanization (or dehumanization) is understood as the denial of "humanness" to the targeted group. Dehumanization deprives human qualities such as individuality, compassion, or civility. It has been known that dehumanization occurs in two forms: animalistic dehumanization and mechanistic dehumanization, which is employed on a largely interpersonal basis. Dehumanization occurs discursively (e.g., idiomatic language that likens certain human beings to non-human animals, verbal abuse, erasing the group's history and voice from discourse), symbolically (e.g., imagery), or

physically (e.g., chattel slavery, physical abuse, refusing eye contact). Dehumanization often ignores the targeted groups (i.e., the creative and interesting aspects of their past and present) and prevents one from showing compassion towards stigmatized groups.

To understand the ways dehumanization work, we need to conceptualize that genocide is not necessarily the immediate destruction of people. It includes theorizing about the inferiority of the victim and propagating the reasons to threat on the victims who are regarded as subhuman. If the perpetrators convince their members and supporters that the victim groups are subhuman, they make the killing natural and easy. Dehumanization also targets the victim group and works to convince them that they are subhuman. If they succeed in convincing the victim group that they are subhuman, it also makes the killing easier.

Dehumanization often occurs as a result of conflict in an intergroup context. To prevent genocide, scholars and human rights activists need to closely look into the discourses in which one group presents the others. In the case of Rwanda, the radical Hutu-led government organized their supporters in an elaborate propaganda campaign that dehumanised the Tutsis, referring to them as “inyenzi” (meaning cockroaches).

Dehumanization against the Oromo people has been ongoing for over a century. For example, according to Asme Giorgis (1901/1987) the Oromo people learned their language from “evil”. This widely read book provided theoretical reasoning for conservative Orthodox Christians, to kill the Oromo people as a kind of religious duty. Indeed, the Ethiopian language policy that has denied the Oromo language legal status is consistent with the theory that Asme Giyorgis had elaborated. In the 1990s when the Ethiopian government was forced to legalize the usage of Oromo language in Oromia region, many church leaders opposed it. There are cases when church leaders condemned the teaching and learning of the Oromo language. For the “crime” of teaching in Afaan Oromo, when Aberash Debela - a young Oromo language teacher died of natural causes, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church denied her a burial place. Consistent with Asme Giyorgi’s writing, these church leaders justified their actions by saying that the teaching and learning of Afaan Oromo is an act of “evil duty”. Such radical, fanatic and irrational views are very dangerous. Human right activists and all civic societies in the Horn of Africa need to challenge such blind, irrational and outdated views.

#### Eight stages of Genocide (by Stanton, 1998)

1. Classification
2. Symbolization
3. Dehumanization
4. Organization
5. Polarization
6. Preparation
7. Extermination
8. DENIAL

Although there have been some changes, there are still issues that remain significant. For example, in January 2013, on the Addis Ababa (Finfinnee) University campuses, pamphlets and posters with racist remarks against the Oromo people were circulated in the student's, dormitories and cafeterias. When the Oromo students demanded that the administration of the university identify individuals and groups who were responsible for it, instead of making efforts to find those who were responsible for the racist and dehumanizing remarks the administration chose to imprison and expel Oromo students. Indeed, this is not an isolate case and is on ongoing problem. What are the messages that the Addis Ababa University and the Ethiopian government are trying to transmit when they imprison and expel the Oromo students who demanded justice and oppose dehumanization? If the message is that dehumanizing of the Oromo people is acceptable and justifiable, they need to rethink about it.

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The fourth important stage is organization. Once the perpetrators of genocide classify, symbolize and dehumanize, they organize their members. For example, Menelik would not have invaded Oromia if he did not organize his people and acquired gun from the European empire builders. This did not occur by accident or quickly. It required good planning and organizing.

The fifth and sixth stages are polarization and preparation. Hate groups and the colonizers broadcast polarizing propaganda. Polarization radicalizes the views of members against the victim groups. If you carefully analyze the historical past, which the Oromos describe as "bara namma nyataa= the year of human eater", it is clear that Menilik's army were trained to dehumanize the Oromo people. The Oromo were/are categorized, symbolized and dehumanized. The differences between the Abyssinians and the Oromo people were over exaggerated and used to polarize and dehumanize.

The sixth is preparation. This means the victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity. The seventh stage is perpetuating extermination. After the perpetrators of genocide convince themselves that the victim group deserves extermination, the killers do the killing because they do not believe their victims to be fully human or deserve mercy.

The last and the eighth stage is denial. Reading the works of Dr. Stanton about the eight stages of genocide, one of the stages that are clearly seen in Ethiopia is – denial of committing any wrong. During the colonization and pacification of Oromia the population of the Oromo people was reduced to a half or less. The Ethiopian educational curriculum never mentioned whether the mass death occurred or the reasons behind it. The colonization of Oromia was justified in a positive terms as they say “Aqenaan” civilized or “Andi –aderegnni” united.

The message of Dr. Stanton- the genocide watch director is that to prevent genocide we need to carefully observe these eight stages and challenge or expose actions that represent or resemble those stages. This makes it the responsibility of all people in the Horn of Africa to challenge racist ideas and ideologies that promote the domination of one group of people on the others and all other forms of irrational radicalism.

Let me end my message with a quote from the encouraging words of Frederic Douglass,—an activist in anti-slavery movement: “knowledge makes a man unfit to be a slave.” In the same analogy, your support for HRLHA helps people to know their rights. This fosters human liberty and dignity. It allows the case of Almeworki to be heard. The criminals who took the dignity and the life of Ayishaa have to held account.

To support HRLHA or know more about it, you can visit its website.

<http://humanrightsleague.com/>

Thank you

Begna