



January 3, 2011

Press Release:

## Public Backlash Against Forced Evictions from Land a Certainty!

Plus recently leaked report:

*"Gambella Peoples' National Regional State Villagization Program Action Plan [2010-2011]"*

[http://www.anuakjustice.org/downloads/VillagizationProgramActionPlan\(2003\).pdf](http://www.anuakjustice.org/downloads/VillagizationProgramActionPlan(2003).pdf)

(Arlington, VA )- The Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) has recently acquired the Ethiopian government's official report, "**Villagization Program Action Plan,**" which gives many specific details of their plan to resettle 49 villages in Gambella Peoples National Regional State in the upcoming months and year. A total of 45,000 households will be targeted to move from homes and land occupied for generations. This totals approximately 225,000 people according to government calculations of five members per household.

The Gambella region is not alone. On November 29, 2010, Bloomberg News journalist, William Davison reported on the Ethiopian government's plans to resettle 150,000 households (an estimated 750,000 persons) from the regions of Afar, the Ogaden, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella. (See the report <http://addisvoice.com/2010/11/ethiopian-govt-relocates-somalis-bloomberg/>. Land grabs in these and other regions within the country will affect hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people as the one-party ethnic-based regime government of Meles Zenawi moves the people out of the way so foreign and internal investors are free to take over the land.



Figure 1: This is one of the villages targeted for resettlement.

In Gambella, it appears that most of the villages (kebeles) within a district (woreda) will be moved to one location within that district. It is still unclear, but suspected that these sites may be in close proximity to the new mega-farms in order to provide cheap labor. All of the Anuak districts and villages outside of Gambella town will be affected by these land evictions and resettlements; however, it also involves three districts (thirteen villages) of predominately Nuer, two districts (ten villages) of predominately Mazenger and within the district of Gambella, people of Komo and Opo ethnicity.



**Figure 2: This field, already planted with its yearly crop of sorghum, will be left behind when people are moved from the surrounding village. It is an example of the degree of farming going on adjacent to these villages.**

If you look closely at the Gambella action plan, it promises that “up to” 3 or 4 hectares of land will be provided to each of the 45,000 households, but yet the land being reserved for them is only 60,000 hectares—less than 1.3 hectares per family. Ambiguity within the plan also fails to address many questions. For example, nineteen primary schools are included, but none in some districts and no proposed high schools.

How many children would be accommodated by these schools? If existing schools are to be used; will they be within reasonable walking distance to these new resettlement camps? The same goes for water schemes, health posts, veterinary clinics, flour mills, warehouses and roads. How many people are expected to be accommodated by each of these? Roads are promised, but where do the roads lead to? Do they lead to markets and other important destinations or simply to the new mega-farms where the people are to become “cheap labor” now that they no longer have enough land for subsistence farming?

These are only a few of the abundant inconsistencies or unanswered questions that exist within the plan itself; creating the impression that nothing is certain other than that the “beneficiaries” will move whether they like it or not. The plan calls for all infrastructure and services to be in place before they move, but then disclose that they may lack the financial means to do so. This is the reality for some who have already been moved. (See Figure 4.)



Even though the plan asserts that all resettlement is “voluntary;” in truth, those who have voiced any degree of resistance have been met with intimidation, violence, imprisonment or even death. Since 2009, 18 people are known to have died in relation to the land acquisitions; mostly Anuak individuals; however, those from other ethnicities, who also claim Gambella as home, may know of others. Unknown numbers of local people have also disappeared or have been imprisoned, without trial, as a result of voicing dissent or even in cases where the individuals were perceived to be a threat to the government’s plans.



**Figure 3: This village, targeted for resettlement, is an area soon to be cleared as part of the mega-farm being developed by the Indian company, Karuturi Global.**

On December 2, 2010, the Voice of America (VOA) <http://www.voanews.com/amharic/audio/> invited the Ethiopian Minister of Agriculture to be interviewed on a program to give the government’s side, but he refused; however, an Anuak man Ato Mango from Gambella agreed to speak anonymously; articulately giving information from the ground regarding the villagization plan. During that interview he said, *“Thank you for giving me the chance to tell what is going on in the country. I am thrilled to be able to share it. Even if I die today, I will be happy because the world will know the truth.”*



**Figure 4 Figure 5: These local people have been resettled here and now must find their own materials to construct their homes in this new location.**

Since his interview, the government has been trying to identify him in order to arrest him. It was rumored that they finally identified him and he was to be arrested on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, but he has now disappeared and his whereabouts are unknown. If what was being done was truly good for the people, why such repercussions? No wonder people are so afraid to speak out!



**Figure 6: Here, villagers are waiting to be told where to go following being forced from their homes. Rights to their ancestral land will be taken over by Saudi Star under a long-term lease.**

What the TPLF/EPRDF regime is saying publically and what is happening on the ground are totally different. This is in the nature of this regime. It is how they talk about democracy, good governance, free and fair elections and the rule of law while repressing every civil right, rigging elections, closing off any political space, blocking communication technologies, robbing the people of land and property, carrying out atrocities throughout the country and perpetrating genocide in places like the Ogaden region.

This regime is stuck in a dangerous predicament. If they loosen their grip on the people, they are at risk of rebellion and so they keep tightening it; pretending it will not ultimately explode. As people return from Ethiopia, many have shared their fear that they have never seen the people so desperate and conditions so difficult. They all tell of their deep fear that it all could explode suddenly; without warning.

Yet, the regime continues to deny the truth to the world of the great distress of the people; perhaps blinded by the lucrative deals they are fast-making with countries like India and Saudi Arabia yet, even today, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, another heart-breaking report was in the news about the drowning of 80 Ethiopians in the Red Sea and off the south coast of Yemen who were trying to escape from this repressive regime in Ethiopia. Our hearts and deep sympathy go out to their families at this time. Under these deteriorating and depressing conditions, Indian and other investors may justifiably be sensing the precariousness of their investments under this self-serving regime.

Recently, during India's ITMN TV interview

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjnseXIt2w&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjnseXIt2w&feature=player_embedded) with the newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam Desalegn, who is supposedly next in line to follow Meles Zenawi, the interviewer, Vickram Bahl posed a critical question to him; saying, ***“What guarantee can the Ethiopian government give to potential foreign investors that there will not be a public backlash against land grabs or a cancellation or reversal of policy either presently or in the future?”***

He dodged the question for reasons obvious to many; the truth being that there are no guarantees. Instead, it is an absolute certainty that there will be resistance both now and in the future to land grabs and other resource grabbing that violate the rights of citizens of Ethiopia and that the current dictatorial regime has no right to make in their name.

Ato Hailemariam later claimed there would be a “sovereign guarantee” based on the strength of the Ethiopian **democratic system** and the **rule of law**. He emphasized that it was the **“system”** that they could believe in. He said that should be enough to convince potential foreign investors that these investments involving leases for not only fifty years, but for one year; regardless of who was in power, would remain in effect; however, **there is no democracy or rule of law in Ethiopia**. This is an unelected, illegitimate regime in the eyes of most Ethiopians; therefore, putting any hope in such a system, like Hailemariam suggests, is like building a grass hut in the middle of a burning field; expecting it to last.

As one man, from the fertile region of the Ethiopian regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz where the government plans to resettle many people as a result of these land grabs, said, ***“There are only two ways that peace can come. The first way will require that all of us are underneath the land [dead]; for as long as we are above the land and see our land being forcibly taken without our approval, there will be conflict. The second way for there to be peace around these investments would be if the local people are consulted as legitimate decision-makers in this process; to make sure we will benefit in some way.***



*No one should expect to enter someone's home and start ordering them to do things without expecting them to say anything. If they do not say anything, it is only because of the force being used and it will not mean they agree."*

This man speaks for the millions of Ethiopians who live in the lowlands, some of the most fertile regions of the country, but a region where the people have mostly been ignored or marginalized. This may be why Ato Hailemariam may have said that land was available in the lowlands saying "no one lives there because of the mosquitoes and malaria." He said all the small farmers were in the highlands and midlands of Ethiopia; simply forgetting about millions Ethiopians who have lived in this region for hundreds of years. This is supposedly a man who is the regime's choice for the next prime minister who does not even acknowledge the existence of these people, but freely acknowledges their resources.



**Figure 6: A meeting of local men, discussing plans after being told they will have to move and that they should start the process of building homes in a new location.**

The land grab is not just rhetoric, but is the harsh reality with which these people must now cope. Unfortunately, robbing the people of this continent has been going on for years. Once again, it is an African dictator who is selling out on the people, but such strongmen as Meles are never alone as .too many line up to become partners in exploiting this opportunity; however, they are risky. These deals are not any more legitimate or secure than the government doing it. Anyone with common sense should know that when a government is selling the "future of the country" to outsiders at such rock-bottom prices—excluding the insiders—that it is simply "too good of a deal."

Those ready to buy such "hot" deals in the "black market of global dealings" should know they are collaborating with thieves.

What do such people or regimes care if others later lose their investments? Such deals would be unthinkable where the rule of law was respected. Instead, it could only be done in places like Ethiopia or Africa where corrupt leaders—and their friends who prolong their power—both get rich while claiming how “good” it was for the people.



**Figure 7 & 8: Here are some of the hundreds of caterpillars, tractors, bulldozers, trucks and other heavy equipment parked near a 10,000 hectare plot of land leased by Saudi Star Agricultural Development; a company owned by Saudi-born Ethiopian billionaire, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Ali Al Amoudi, a close friend to the current regime. Apparently, the company hopes to potentially acquire 300,000 hectares of land for development; including plans for similar development in the Benishangul-Gumuz region.**



Is it possible that Ethiopians will remain subjugated by this regime for another five years—let alone fifty or more years—when even now the Meles regime is living in such fear that the slightest resistance or uprising may cause its final collapse that they are trying to squeeze the life and breath out of a society by brute strength? The people may finally say they have nothing more to lose and who knows what will happen!

Ethical companies can safeguard their investments only by listening to the people and respecting their rights; not by aligning with an oppressive dictatorship who has criminalized any dissent while making these secret deals behind their backs. Ethiopians do want foreign investment, but it should be done in legitimate and ethical ways that would be acceptable in countries known to appropriately protect the rights of its own citizens. Making business deals in Ethiopia is not comparable to countries where the Constitution or a government elected by the people honors commitments of past administrations. In Ethiopia, the Constitution and the rule of law are weapons in the hands of the powerful to be used at whim against opponents or manipulated to give impunity or opportunity to themselves. Decisions made in this political environment will undoubtedly be questioned later and may or may not stand.

Some indigenous people may not wait that long and will take things into their own hands. One Anuak man from Gambella said, *“If these people [investors displacing them from their land] really think they will come here, remove us by force from our ancestral land for mega-farms and think they will succeed in harvesting their crops without any resistance, they are wrong. The only way they will be right in thinking this is if their crops remain green; unready to harvest forever.”*



Figure 9: Virgin forests soon to be cleared by foreign investors.





**Figure 10: A newly constructed road dividing land to be cleared to make way for new foreign and pro-regime investors to gain access to this land.**

Foreign investors can instead take a positive role by calling for change; pressuring this apartheid-like regime—where only a few of the top elite benefit—to respond positively to these criticisms. Economic leverage from investors who want to ensure the security of long-term investments can make a difference. If the Meles regime fails to change the way it operates, prospective or existing economic stakeholders of greater moral courage or those of more cautious or practical nature—who can understand the underlying risks that exist right now—could assert a socially responsible position by providing support to opposition groups that seek a more open, fair and prosperous society.

For long-term security on any deals or contracts, it should be remembered that this regime is not considered legitimate or elected by the people. Best practice under these conditions means:

- 1. NO bribes or kickbacks to government officials or their proxies.**
- 2. Ethiopian stakeholders should be consulted and included; including providing compensation to them for losses—like their land and homes.**
- 3. The human, civil and legal rights of the citizens of the country should be upheld and not negatively affected by your business deal.**
- 4. Good relationships with the people should be built by “doing business” in a way that benefits both Ethiopian stakeholders as well as the foreign investor.**
- 5. Actions should support; rather than to undermine freedom, justice, truth, morality and the rule of law.**

Unlike the undemocratic, brutal and authoritarian regime of Meles Zenawi; which is expert at using false illusions and politically correct words to lie and deceive; companies involved in business in Ethiopia should instead incorporate laws, transparency, honesty and integrity into all business dealings that later will not bring either legal action or embarrassment to an investor.

These above proposed actions cannot only be pleasing public rhetoric for companies “doing business” in Ethiopia—a mere cover-up for opposite actions on the ground—that appear on a company’s website, in their mission statement or at a shareholders’ meeting, but instead be values and principles integrated into daily practice. This is the surest foundation and the one most likely to be respected and upheld by the people of Ethiopia; not only now, but far into the future.

May God help Ethiopians see the danger they and their country are in; causing them to rise up for what is right and for what is just! May Ethiopians stand up for the well being of all the people—putting **“humanity before ethnicity”**—for **“no one will be free until we all are free!”** May God bless **Ethiopia!**

*“He who walks righteously and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes, who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil—this is the man who will dwell on the heights, whose refuge will be the mountain fortress.”* (Isaiah 33:15-16a)

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