



## Environmental Impact Warnings Ignored in Gambella Land Grabs

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***Deforestation of 5,000 hectares of agricultural land leased to Verdanta Harvests of India could have an irreversible impact not only in Ethiopia, but also to downstream populations in Sudan and Egypt.***

The Ethiopian Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD) is ignoring objections from Ethiopian President Girma Wolde-Giorgis, from the Environmental Protection Authority of Ethiopia (EPA) and from the indigenous Mazenger people of Gambella, to the clearing of 5,000 hectares of ancient forests in the Godere District, located at the headwaters of five critical rivers in the Nile Basin that are major tributaries to the White Nile.

Despite the fact that the Mazenger and other indigenous people have depended on these forest-covered lands for their livelihood for generations and despite well-founded fears that the deforestation of the area could have serious and potentially irreversible effects on the people, habitat, wildlife and water, the Minister of Agriculture has authorized a fifty year lease of the land to the Indian company, Verdanta Harvests (VH), who plan to use the land for a tea and spice plantation; destined for export. The absolutely cavalier attitude of the MoARD towards anyone else's authority, rights or concerns gives evidence of how frenzied and money and/or power-centered these land deals have become in Ethiopia. In Godere, the clearing of the trees has already begun; blatantly disregarding all warnings, protests or claims to the land.

As objections fall on deaf ears, ***it appears that compliance with publicized protocols is non-existent with decisions being made at the whim of a few Meles-regime cronies at the top. The failure to consider the short and long term environmental risks associated with these land grabs; not even including the impact to the lives of the people, could have extremely dangerous consequences as millions of hectares of choice Ethiopian agricultural land are leased throughout the country.*** It gives the impression that Meles and his cronies are trying to make "fast money" before the regime collapses; then abandoning these investors to the mercy of a new government who might not be willing to sell out on the people.

Here is a more sequential explanation of what happened in Godere; with more details available through a recently leaked eighteen-page document (see link <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/amharic/110208TamiruAmbelo.pdf> ) in Amharic that we in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) acquired regarding the above-mentioned deal. The letters reads like a drama; ***showing a game of double-talk, manipulation and intimidation being played by this regime with the land, lives and future of the people.***

### **Summary of the Document**

Sometime last spring (2010), the local Mazenger and other indigenous people in the villages of Gomare and Bako (Godere district) discovered that their homes and forest-covered land they depended on for everything; including hunting, gathering and beekeeping, were soon to be leased to an Indian company who would be clearing the forests to make way for a tea and spice plantation. As a result, they were targeted for displacement. After hearing about this, the local people in both villages organized and sent a team of representatives to Addis Ababa. The team included: Tamiru Ambelo; Chairman of Gomare village, Ameya Kesito; secretary of Gomare village and Kasahun Kekilo; an elder from Bako village.

While in Addis Ababa, they met with the President of Ethiopia, Girma Wolde-Giorgis, supposedly the Head of State in the administration, and explained to him what was happening. They told him that ***this land should not be given away to investors; telling him that it belonged to them as indigenous people who had lived there for generations, that without it their livelihood would be destroyed, that they considered the forests sacred and that the environment would be greatly impacted through the deforestation of the region.*** Much to his credit, President Girma listened to them and supported their position.

In response he wrote a letter to the Environmental Protection Authority of Ethiopia (EPAE); saying that the EPAE should tell the MoARD to suspend this project. Again, much to the credit of the EPAE and in an effort to follow their established mission of protecting the environment, the EPAE also listened and supported the peoples' position. On May 6, 2010, the EPAE wrote a letter to the MoARD, with copies to Gambella Regional Governor, Omot Obang Olum and President Girma, saying that the short term benefit of leasing this land (including clearing it of its forests) would not outweigh the long-term costs to the country and that the lease should not proceed. They added that there were local environmental NGO's present in the district who had been very involved in teaching the locals how to protect these valuable forests for the future and that they had done a very good job.

On November 19, 2010, Governor Omot responded indirectly to this EPAE position; not to them, but by writing a letter to Godere District authorities; telling them that this land (5000 hc) had already been given to an investor, **Verdanta Harvests (VH)** and that the agreement could not be altered at this time. He explained that VH had already paid the government **\$19,000 US for 3,012 hc** of the land; towards an agreement that would give them 5,000 hectares for fifty years at **\$6 US per hectare**. He told them that the project was to proceed without interference.

His letter was backed up by the MoARD, who on November 25, 2010, sent their own team to meet with the local people in the villages. However, when they met, they excluded those officials who had opposed it; including the chairman of the village, Tamiru Ambelo. Instead, they only invited the village vice chairman, a man more "sympathetic" to their own point of view—as well as other select people—to meet with the general public. When they met, they heavily lobbied the people for their support of the project. They labeled any who disagreed with it as being "anti-development;" saying that such people opposed the very development and investment that would bring roads, employment and income to the people.

In response to this meeting, on December 9, 2010, Tamiru, Ameya and Kasahun wrote another letter to President Girma; updating him and asking him to intervene once again because despite his letter and the directive from the EPA, Gambella Governor Omot Obang Olum and the MoARD were proceeding with the clearing of the land. This time **President Girma wrote a letter directly to the Minister of Agriculture on December 10, 2010; literally telling him to stop this project from going any further because this land, with its abundant rain forests, should be protected; explaining how the headwaters of these critical rivers could be affected and how the people depended on the forests for their livelihood.** He copied the letter to Omot Obang Olum, the EPA, the local authorities, local residents and even to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi himself.

No formal response to his letter is recorded in the 18-page document we acquired; however, on January 25, 2011, the administrator of the Godere district wrote a letter to the two kebele villages of Gomare and Bako; directing them to immediately fire Tamiru from his job as chairman of the village and in his place, to immediately appoint the vice chair as chairman of the village. As mentioned previously, this vice chair had been in favor of the land investment project. **Tamiru was accused of working with "anti-development" people in trying to kill the project and of working against the interests of the local people. He was also accused of opposing literacy, job creation and other kinds of development. Currently, the project is moving forward and the forests are being cleared.**

#### **In conclusion:**

**What is happening in Godere is only one example of what is going on throughout Ethiopia as the legitimate concerns of the people are manipulated or suppressed and as those who speak out are harassed, intimidated, punished (losing jobs, property, etc), beaten, arrested or killed.** This case is only exceptional in that both President Girma and the EPAE took the side of the people; yet, even then, no one listened to them. We hope this government will not take any actions against Tamiru, Ameya and Kasahun; but if any punitive actions result, we will report on it.

**Where is the accountability and rule of law in this government that portrays itself as being democratic, environmentally conscious; even representing all of Africa in the climate talks and as a progressive crusader for economic development? The Meles regime is being run like a mafia; a kleptocracy of Meles, his family and his cronies. Regardless of its elaborate laws and grandiose rhetoric, every decision in Ethiopia is at the whim of someone at the top who might profit in some way. Punitive measures; including human rights violations, are the predictable outcome for any who dare resist by getting in their way.** From the perspective of the Meles regime, all indigenous land is for sale; regardless of the impact on the people, the environment and the country.

As one local Anuak man said, “Ethiopia has never been colonized, but now it has been colonized by the tiny minority of people who run the country. It is not only the outsiders who are complicit with them in robbing the country, but also the opportunistic Ethiopians; including some in the Diaspora.”

**Information has been leaked to the SMNE regarding names of Ethiopians both within and outside of the country who are colluding with the Meles regime in the land grab schemes.**

The SMNE continues to receive leaked information from conscientious Ethiopians who are secretly outraged by this injustice and morally convicted to not cooperate any longer with the Meles regime in their corrupt and illegal practices which have been going on for nearly twenty years now. These courageous Ethiopians have provided other information to us as well and we expect continued leaks of such documents and information to still come forth from Ethiopians who can no longer ignore this.

*One of those documents is a list of some of the Ethiopians who have capitalized on investing in these land grabs; knowingly leasing the land under situations where the people are not consulted, where the environmental impacts have not been studied or heeded and where people are being forced off their land with no compensation or provision for their needs. This displacement is not only being carried out in the rural communities; but also is going on within the city limits of Addis Ababa. The people are promised “development,” but almost none has been seen. Some see this as an opportunity to make quick money; taking advantage of the great vulnerability of the people as they rush in to exploit the moment.* However, even though no one seems to be watching; the eyes of those God-fearing Ethiopians—scattered among the villages, offices and departments throughout the country—are watching carefully and are quietly acting on it. Here is our recent example.

*The SMNE has been given a list of more than a hundred names, phone numbers and locations of Ethiopian investors in Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, Amhara region, Southern Nations and Oromiya who have taken advantage of the opportunity; buying 1,000 to 5,000 hectares of land in cooperation with this repressive government who is now starting to forcibly remove the people from their homes to resettlement villages. Many are refusing to go, but others, fearing reprisals, have left. We intend to release these names; including those who live in the Diaspora so Ethiopians can know who is helping rob the country. When this government falls, any agreement that has been signed regarding the land will not be binding. These agreements are illegal; completed without consulting the people, under the threat of retaliation and by a government who has stolen an election and kept citizens captive. Actions that have displaced the people through forced villagization projects will be reversed.*

**New Ethiopia**

In a “*New Ethiopia*,” whether in Godere, Addis Ababa, Abobo, Arba Minch, Adwa, Asosa, Awasa, Babille, Bonga, Debre Dawa, Dessie, Debre Tabor, Dimma, Dembidolo, Debre Berhan, Gambella, Gondar, Gorgora, Gog, Harar, Humera, Jimma, Jijiga, Kombolcha, Kulubi, Mek'ele, Mizan Teferi, Metu, Moyale, Negele Boran, Nekemte, Sodore, Soddu Welmal, Tullu Milki, Turmi, Woldia, Wolleka, Abelo, Yeha; and above all; in the north, south, east and west of New Ethiopia, no matter what ethnicity, political view, language, religion or any other differences, this injustice should outrage all of us as citizens of a country where “*humanity comes before ethnicity*” and where “*no one is free until all are free.*” This is what the SMNE is all about.

President Girma and the EPAE have tried to do what was right and just for the people, but were ignored! Regardless, we commend them highly for what they have done in trying to implement the law in a country where there is no rule of law. They are examples of some of the good Ethiopians trying to operate with integrity; yet who are totally compromised by a corrupt and lawless few who hold the country hostage. We also give much credit to the representatives and the people of Gomare and Bako for their remarkable work, persistence and courage; particularly the leadership.

**All of these people are heroes. May God help increasingly more Ethiopians to follow their conscience; rising up to do what is good, right and just. Eventually, with God’s help and with each other, we will reach the “tipping point;” unbalancing this regime away from evil, ethnic hatred and oppression and towards a New Ethiopia where the God-given rights of all Ethiopians are respected. Be ready for that tipping point may come at any moment! May God free our souls with His presence; lifting up the curtain of fear and apathy that binds us to our past; replacing it with love, truth, courage and the moral conviction necessary to lead us rightly into a new future!**

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