



April 28, 2011

Dropping Off Ethiopian Refugees in Deserted Areas at Night by Norwegian Police is Not a Solution to the Refugee Problem: Meaningful Dialogue Must be Pursued

Norway gives generously to refugee assistance throughout the world so what was going on in Norway on April 26th when at 10:30 PM, Norwegian police picked up sixty-three Ethiopian asylum seekers from an Oslo city “camp,” where they had been staying pending a decision on their asylum case, and transported them to five different isolated areas outside of Oslo and simply left them there?

This is the culmination of months of standoff between Norwegian immigration authorities and Ethiopian refugees who have failed to reach some kind of consensus about how to apply the new and stricter refugee law that just passed in January with refugees who have been living and working in Norway for many years. There appears to be fault on both sides.

For sure, the new law has sent shockwaves through the Ethiopian refugee community in Oslo; particularly impacting those who never completed all that was necessary to gain permanent resident status; however, before this, an overall acceptance of refugees created a more permissive atmosphere. When most of these refugees first entered Norway, they were given work permits; allowing them to freely carry on independent lives within Norwegian society. They learned the language, found jobs, set up bank accounts, bought homes and cars, raised families, paid taxes and integrated into Norwegian culture.

Since the adoption of the new bill, their cases have become a real challenge to the Norwegian system. Now, up to two hundred Ethiopian refugee seekers, living in the country for five, ten or more years, are not being grandfathered in under some special status as people who have been living in the country, but are being treated like new refugees and must start the process all over again.

In early 2011 they were told to inform their employers that they longer would have working permits and to deal with any financial or community obligations immediately so they could report to authorities for assignment to “camps” where they would be housed until a determination of their status could be made. This included a decision as to whether or not they would be deported back to Ethiopia.

Those affected decided to take refuge in a church to voice their opposition to this plan. Church leaders mediated between the refugees and authorities; which led to reaching a temporary agreement to be moved to a camp location within the city of Oslo. Since that time, authorities have told them to move outside the city to different assigned locations, but they have not responded; wanting to remain together as a negotiating group. They now have a lawyer who is willing to represent at least thirty of the strongest cases.

Problems began on Tuesday morning at 10:00 AM April 26, 2011, when police officers came to their residence; telling them that regardless of their previous refusal to go to the countryside locations, they still had to evacuate the premises. Two girls and one man refused. They were then handcuffed and detained.



One of the women fractured her leg in the scuffle and is now in the hospital after falling or being pushed to the ground.



The other woman has a bruise on her arm from being held too tightly.



The man was not injured, but was detained by the police for five hours before being released. Their bags with all their belongings were placed on the side of the street.



They were told they should find a place to go, but when evening came, they still had no place to go, so they returned to the same “camp” where they had been housed. At 10:30 PM, over twenty police officers in at least ten vehicles, a helicopter and dogs came and surrounded the house. They told the people to get out and to get into the police vans. All willingly left the premises; carrying their plastic bags holding their possessions and got into the vehicles. Each police vehicle drove their passengers in different directions.

According to the testimonies of the people, when they reached more isolated areas outside Oslo, some with forests surrounding them, they were told to get out. When they were bewildered about where they should go, they asked what they were supposed to do. They were told they were not wanted at their previous location and should go find their own places.

Through their cell phones, they phoned each other to find out the location of the others; some not even knowing their own location as they were in unfamiliar places. They were able to reach others in the Ethiopian community who were permanent residents with cars. These Ethiopians searched the outskirts of the city before finding them. They all agreed to meet in front of the church where they had originally taken refuge. Finally, around 1:00 AM, all arrived at the church compound and by 2:00 AM they had set up tents. This is where they are now. The police came back and saw them, but have taken no action.

This is a problem that will not go away without all parties actively seeking some kind of agreement; even if it means an agreement to give them refuge until peace comes to Ethiopia. Since the time they left Ethiopia, the country has even further deteriorated into a repressive authoritarian state; known for widespread human rights crimes, repression of all civil rights and a closing off of all political space.

Following the 2005 national election, widely perceived as fraudulent, nearly two-hundred peaceful protestors were shot in the head and killed; similar to what is happening in Syria. Many more were wounded and some 30,000 to 50,000 protestors were rounded up and sent to detention camps. In 2011, high levels of intimidation, imprisonment and harassment targeted any perceived opponents. If deported back to Ethiopia, these refugees will likely face higher levels of suspicion, scrutiny and persecution.

Those Norwegian government officials, refugees and their representatives who are involved should work to come up with a durable solution; however, even if these refugees are given permanent status, their lives have been traumatically interrupted and will require that they repeat some of the same steps to rebuild the independent and productive lives they had previously achieved.

One girl was crying as she shared, “I cannot believe this. I feel like a new refugee arriving in a foreign land, but I have been here for twelve years; working hard all those years, saving money. I had a car, a home, a full time job, but now I am homeless and have not slept all night. I have no bed; nothing. I am just here sitting on the ground. I cannot believe it!”

One man said, “I cannot believe what has just happened! We were dumped on some dirt road! I cannot believe this is happening here in Norway. We are not criminals. All we want is to go back to a normal life and work.”

One Norwegian, who asked to not be quoted, said, “In this country, it is illegal to abandon your dog, so you go dump your dog where there are no people. This case is no different; only its people this time.”

What has happened here has gone beyond a refugee issue. As Norwegians take a harder stance towards asylum seekers, we hope it is not covering an increasingly cozy relationship with the strongman of Ethiopia, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who is wooing investors from all over the world to eat off the carcass of some of the most vulnerable, oppressed and impoverished people in the world as they seek land, water, energy, natural resources and investments in building the infrastructure to capitalize on them. If the people benefited, it would be a good thing; however, this is all going on in secret deals that exclude the local people from the table while exploit the national resources that do not belong to a few elite at the top.

If you read the news, you can see increasing references to this emerging relationship between an Ethiopian dictator and Norwegian leaders who are endorsing false images of Ethiopia. For example in an interview with Walta Information Center (WIC), considered by most Ethiopians as a government-controlled propaganda site, the Norwegian Ambassador to Ethiopia, Odd-Inge Kvalheim—if quoted accurately—commends Ethiopia in the *“crucial role it has been playing to ensure peace and stability across the region”* and that *“African countries have a lot to learn from Ethiopia on ways of contributing to peace and stability.”*

http://www.afro105fm.com/index.php/news_magazine/local_news/4583.html

Just read some of the human rights reports from Human Rights Watch, Genocide Watch or the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report and see if you can agree with this to any degree.

Consider the fact that in less than a year, Norway's Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Environment and Development, Minister of Defense and the State secretary for Foreign Affairs have all visited Ethiopia; perhaps leading to the recent statement; again by Norwegian Ambassador Kvalheim on April 22, 2011 regarding how bilateral relations between Ethiopia and Norway are steadily growing.

This may include financing and development of new hydropower. A statement heading an article in Development Today, a Nordic Online Journal, states, ***"Promoting investment by Norwegian hydropower companies is a top priority of Norwegian aid to Ethiopia, according to a Foreign Ministry report. A large delegation representing the Norwegian dams industry will travel to Addis Ababa in late March [2011] to explore business opportunities."*** http://www.development-today.com/magazine/2011/dt_2/business/norwegian_hydropower_actors_eye_burgeoning_ethiopian_market

How much of the recent crack-down on refugees or refusal to address the realities of oppression in Ethiopia are related to maintenance of fragile relations with Ethiopia? The extent is certainly unknown, but it would not be the first time that Africans suffered after being caught in the middle between their dictators and those seeking to do lucrative business with them. **Admitting there is brutal oppression in Ethiopia is a taboo topic among those seeking to capitalize on the "give-away" sale going on in Ethiopia at the peoples' expense.**

At the end, it is about humanity, moral choices and how we value others and how we define and shape ourselves and the future by the choices we make. We have faith in Norwegians that they are wonderful, decent people who will rise to the higher road.

=====

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your comments to the SMNE Executive Director
Mr. Obang Metho, at: Obang@solidaritymovement.org
You can find more about us through our website at: www.solidaritymovement.org