

## Obang's Address to Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum: Human Rights and Globalization—Challenges to the Media.

Good afternoon! I would like to thank Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum for organizing this important conference on, **“Human Rights and Globalization—Challenges to the Media.”** How meaningful it is to be here in this great city of Bonn; the birthplace of Ludwig Van Beethoven whose compositions stand for the spirit of freedom, peace, dialogue and understanding known for their contributions to peace and security as well as to be at the former heart of the German Parliament where so many debates took place regarding global future-oriented issues for the betterment of the German people, Europeans and our global society.



I am honored to be among these many distinguished speakers and guests; particularly those in the media, who have come from all over the world to focus on this very timely topic. It is a privilege to be here with those who have been on the frontlines; the soldiers of human dignity and human rights, whose noble calling is to reveal the truth, to defend the defenseless and to speak for the voiceless. We have gathered together to strengthen our resolve to uphold the worth and dignity of every human being; for our God-given humanity crosses all boundaries that divide us.

I especially want to thank Erik Bettermann, the Director General of Deutsche Welle, under whose leadership, this great event has all come together. I also want to thank Dr. Guidu Westerwelle, Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dirk Niebel, Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development and Jurgen Nimptsch, Mayor of Bonn for their contributions.

I thank the Society for Threatened Peoples for giving me this opportunity to speak about the topic, **“Underdogs on the Brink; Indigenous People and the Race for Resources.”** Indigenous people have always been at risk; however, *in today’s world, where the race for resources such as oil, gas, fertile land, water, precious metals, minerals and even cheap labor continues at record speed, and as it does, the indigenous people of our world have never been in greater peril.*

New sources for commodities and natural resources are being sought as availability from previous sources is no longer sufficient. It has led many to enter into previously untapped regions where many of our indigenous people have lived for hundreds of years; mostly marginalized in terms of services, but yet, mostly undisturbed. *The indigenous are now painfully learning that when resources are found on your land it is like finding a tumor in your body.*

My talk will focus on Ethiopia and how the risks to the indigenous people are increasing as a result of the new global thirst for resources; however, *I will be emphasizing how the real threat to indigenous populations is raised exponentially in countries where governments fail to protect their own people; particularly the indigenous and other vulnerable populations. Unfortunately, in Ethiopia, the regime’s corruption, brutality and outrageous complicity in the exploitation of the people has led to extraordinary levels of endangerment and without intervention the future looks bleak.*

For people who do not know, I belong to one of these threatened indigenous groups—the Anuak—whose land is on either side of the river separating Ethiopia and Southern Sudan. The future survival of the Anuak has been in jeopardy for years. In 1986, the organization, Cultural Survival, named them as an endangered people group—both in Ethiopia and in Sudan. Services were nearly non-existent and they were largely ignored and neglected during this period of time.

A civil war in Sudan resulted in a huge influx of refugees into the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia where I grew up; creating conflicts over land and resources. In 1986, the previous Ethiopian regime of Mengistu resettled Ethiopians from the highlands in Gambella; who lived under great hardship initially, but eventually competed with local indigenous over resources. When the Ethiopian regime changed in May 1991 to a minority ethnically-based dominated party, Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), still led by Meles Zenawi); nothing improved. Instead, *these conflicts took a more dangerous turn as the Meles regime used divide and conquer tactics to maintain an iron-grip on power by fomenting conflict between the local people.*

As the regime began to dominate every sector of society, interest in some of the resources in the rural areas increased. At the end of 1996, a government sponsored comprehensive report was completed by outside consultants related to the agricultural potential in Gambella; previously, not well understood. The study reviewed past findings of a Russian study completed during the previous communist regime of Mengistu. After a thorough review, the consultants gave suggestions regarding priority development projects as well as specific recommendations for a Master Plan of development that included pre-feasibility studies of high-priority water projects. It affirmed the great agricultural possibilities that could be developed in this region and gave specific directions as to how it could be laid out. This included giving suggestions regarding best uses of various kinds of land; including which crops would be best suited for different land in the region. This also included suggestions regarding how to utilize the plentiful sources of water; including where irrigation systems and dams could be built.

The Anuak already knew that the land, the water sources and the climate made it possible to produce three crops a year; however, the potential production outcomes remained extremely low due to lack of any agricultural investment in the area or in the people. They lacked mechanized farming machinery like tractors and combines, good seed, agricultural resources, technical assistance and access to agricultural education. This was never provide despite the fact that this food insecure country received millions of dollars of donor food and humanitarian aid every year that never created a solution to the never-ending hunger.

Another discovery cemented the increasing threat to the future of the Anuak. In the late nineties, an oil prospecting company discovered potential oil reserves in Gambella and within a short time, the Meles regime started making plans to drill for oil; scheduled to formally begin in December of 2003. Despite the fact that Ethiopia's Constitution calls for regional self-determination and consultation with local populations, no one wanted to listen to the voices of Anuak leaders who called for involvement in the decision process regarding this oil development; particularly as this is a fragile region at the headwaters of the Nile. Most were concerned regarding assuring protections were in place due to the potential environmental impact. They also wanted to share in at least in some of the benefits.

Instead, any who spoke out were seen as obstructions to this plan and were targeted. This struggle reached its worst possible outcome on December 13 to 15, 2003, which became the darkest days in Anuak history. ***It became obvious that the government, which is meant to protect its citizens, had now become the biggest threat to their survival. Information, later leaked, gave evidence of a top meeting of government officials—including Meles—which was held in September of 2003 where plans were made to “teach” these Anuak a lesson.***

On December 13<sup>th</sup>, Ethiopian defense forces began an ethnically-based attack on any Anuak seen as a threat to their plan. This included those who were outspoken, educated, in a position of influence or who were opposed to the government plan. Some civilian militias—made up of those from a different ethnic background—were armed with axes and machetes and were accompanied by soldiers as they went through Gambella town. Using a pre-prepared list of nearly 600 names of some of the most vocal or influential Anuak leaders, they went house to house, pulling out these targeted persons. As these troops marched through town many chanted, “Today is the day for killing Anuak” and “Today there will be no more Anuak land.” Within three days, 424 Anuak were massacred; many ending up in mass graves. Nearly ten thousand Anuak fled to southern Sudan even while Gambella housed thousands of refugees from the same country.

After two in-depth investigations of the incident by Genocide Watch, they concluded that the human rights crimes committed against the Anuak met the stringent definition of genocide and crimes against humanity. Human Rights Watch's report, “Targeting the Anuak: Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia's Gambella Region,” <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2005/03/23/ethiopia-crimes-against-humanity-gambella-region> also provides a detailed account of what happened.

Shortly thereafter, former United States Ambassador to Ethiopia, Aurelia Brazeal, visited Gambella to meet with the people and officials. ***She recognized the increasing threat to the indigenous people of Gambella now that the present regime had renewed interest in this resource-rich region that had otherwise been abandoned for years. She warned that this area of most fertile land and plentiful water could become the bread basket of Ethiopia or even the Horn of Africa; and for this reason, what happened there would be the “conscience of Ethiopia.”***

The severity of this massacre led to the establishment of the Anuak Justice Council (AJC); with the mission of protecting the lives and well being of Anuak, wherever they were found. I was the Director of International Advocacy for this organization. Realizing that the Anuak were even more endangered than previously realized—**not only** because they were indigenous people with no voice and little power and **not only** because their land had abundant resources others desired; but **mainly they were at risk because they lived in a country governed by the corrupt, self-serving and ruthlessly brutal regime of Meles Zenawi.**

After initially focusing on the Anuak, we realized that even though the Anuak were endangered and continued to be targeted by the current regime; they were not alone. Not only were other indigenous groups targeted for human rights abuses; abuses were also committed against any within the 80 different ethnic groups who posed a threat to this TPLF/EDRDF regime or to their interests—the Oromo, the Ogadeni, the Afar, the people of Benishangul-Gumuz, the people from Southern Nations, the Amhara and those of the same Tigrayan ethnicity as the current government, but who opposed them.

For example, when Ethiopian troops finally left the Gambella region, the human rights abuses did not end in Ethiopia, *they only were committed against new victims such as the Ogadenis, whose land held large natural gas reserves. These abuses continue today; along with a devastating humanitarian disaster. Few know how bad it is as the entire area has been blocked off from entry to humanitarian groups. In the Omo Valley in the southern part of the country, half a million indigenous people face a life-threatening crisis should the Gibe III Dam plans proceed without great care and protection of the many people living in that remote area.*

Few, if any, have any education and most only speak their native language. As a result, these people have little preparation to effectively advocate for themselves or deal with life should their indigenous land be taken. Wherever resources are being found, the people are being threatened—from the Afar region in the northeast to Beninshangul in the west and to the many small ethnic groups in the South. Even the mainstream Ethiopian groups are in jeopardy. Since this regime came into power in 1992, the numbers of Amhara have been reduced by 2.4 million people—what happened to them? There are so many people of Oromo ethnicity in prison that they are said to be “Oromo-only prisons” for this largest of Ethiopian ethnic groups is a threat to this minority regime.

No one has yet been brought to justice for the Anuak massacre or for the countless other human rights violations committed ever since this regime came into power. Because of this, *we realized that until sustainable justice came to all Ethiopians, it would never come to the Anuak alone and that we Ethiopians had to start caring about each other.*

We were facing a systemic problem as a result of a dictatorial government. *This must be challenged nationally and globally rather than locally through one ethnic group or by one region of the country; particularly in a country divided by so much ethnic hatred and alienation. Instead, we Ethiopians had to become advocates for the rights, worth and dignity of each other if Ethiopia was going to break out of a self-destructive cycle of serial dictatorships.*

*The current model of “my tribe first,” did not work before and will never work in a globalized society for it only perpetuated cycles of revenge, misery and suffering. We believed in a different model—putting “humanity before ethnicity” or any other distinctive as our Creator instilled value into the DNA of every human being. Until such thinking permeates Ethiopian society; freedom, justice, peace and opportunity will be unsustainable for “no one is free until all are free.” Based on these principles, we established an inclusive social justice movement to bring about a new Ethiopia where our government would be held accountable by such standards.*

I am here today because the Society for Threatened People, located in Germany, lives out these same principles as they seek to protect the most threatened and voiceless people throughout the world; whether in Iceland, Central or South America, Asia, Africa or beyond. These are German people who care about the well being of others just because they are fellow human beings; knowing that as long as the survival of some are threatened, the survival of all of us will never be secure.



Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum is *another example of support for these same principles as they show their concern for others; bringing thousands from all over the world no matter our differences—what continent we come from, what language we speak, what religion we practice or whether we come from a first or third world country. None of this matters; what matters is our humanity. Between human beings there should be no us and them*; for there are no 99.9% human beings. We are all in this world together so when the rights of other human beings are violated, it is like our own rights were violated. If we can do something, we should do it. *It is this kind of forum that will strengthen and promote a more caring world; challenging those who are undermining the God-given rights of some for their own interests or ego.*

*The Anuak still have not recovered from the massacre and its aftermath, but now another force is threatening them as well as many other Ethiopians throughout the country. It has now come in the form of land grabs—or life-grabs as I call them—which involves the leasing of agricultural land to foreign investors and regime cronies at absurdly low prices for up to 99 years; while forcing indigenous people to vacate homes, ancestral lands, crops and futures. These land lease agreements are transacted by the federal government directly with investors and lack any transparency. The local people are neither consulted nor compensated for losses.*

Some have even died from resulting hardship or have been killed for daring to resist. Three-quarters of the people of the entire region of Gambella, 245,000, are now targeted to be resettled in a villagization project. Services are being promised, but for those who have already been displaced, no services every materialized and now they are being told to return back home for the short-term; however, their homes may be gone, their crops destroyed and the new planting made more difficult due to growth of the grasses.

These land grabs are going on all over Ethiopia. Because of the lack of good information on this, the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, of which I am the executive director, and **Oakland Institute (OI)** conducted extensive research; including an in-country assessment of what is happening on the ground. The joint report, *Understanding Land Investments in Ethiopia*, <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/110608UnderstandingLandDealsInAfrica.pdf>, was just published and gives detailed information about the explosion of land investment deals within Ethiopia.

*The land being taken is not a tiny plot of land, but in Ethiopia it has been compared to the size of Israel and in Gambella alone, to the size of Luxembourg; with one company alone, Karuturi Global LTD, leasing 300,000 hectares, the equivalent of 746,000 acres. This is some of the most fertile land. Imagine this amount of land being given away behind closed doors with no one really knowing the terms. The people who live in this land will be affected forever. The TPLF/EPRDF regime that has made these deals is not really legitimately elected by the people, but has closed off all political space, clamped down on rights and criminalized dissent.*

*The TPLF/EPRDF is an autocratic regime that has blocked off all the media. For example, there is less Internet penetration in Ethiopia (0.5%) than nearly anywhere else in the world other than in Burma and Cuba. Internet sites are blocked and there is no independent media. The only media are either government-controlled or must severely censor themselves.* This includes the lack of independent newspapers, radio stations, and television stations. The only ones which are independent are broadcast from outside the country like Deutsche Welle and Voice of America; both which are continually being jammed.

In light of this tightly-controlled repression of information, the media is more needed now than ever; not only within the country, but also on the outside as foreign-based media are needed to expose the truth to the outside world. This is particularly important within donor countries where their taxpayers support has propped up this regime. *Meles and the TPLF/EPRDF should not be given a free pass on accountability anymore, just because they know how to speak words of democracy or because they are partnering with western countries in a war on terror even though this regime is terrorizing their own people at home.*

*The Western media have the role of convincing the public in their own countries that their taxpayer money is going to support a regime that does not respect their own values and denies basic rights to its people. The media should also delve in deeper; investigating the reasons why a country that depends on foreign aid to feed their people, should give foreigners the rights to their citizens' land? Who is benefiting from these deals? Where is the money going? A country that is asking for western food for 13 million of its people; yet, with the other hand, spends \$100,000 to buy 200 tanks should be held accountable! The media has to question why this is happening!*

In July of 2003, I was returning from Addis Ababa to Canada following a trip to Gambella. I had begun a development organization and was working with many of the leaders in Gambella on issues of health, clean water, women empowerment and education. My return flight was on a Lufthansa and I happened to be sitting next to a man who worked for Deutsche Welle. We had a very good talk and we exchanged cards as he departed.

Six months later, at the beginning of the Anuak genocide, I received a desperate call from Gambella asking for help as the massacre of the Anuak leaders had begun. I made countless calls over the next 36 hours; doing all I could think of to find some way to expose and stop what was going on; particularly because the violence was continuing and every call brought more reports of death and mass graves. Near to midnight on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003, I pushed my mind for some way to expose to the world what was happening on the ground. Suddenly, I remembered the man I had met on the plane who worked for Deutsche Welle.

I had not talked to him since that first meeting but I found his card I had saved and called him. He answered and was immediately willing to help. I called the former governor of the region who I knew very well and told him he would be receiving a call and that he should expose everything that was going on. He agreed. He received the call, gave his information and within a short time, Deutsche Welle Amharic programs was broadcasting the truth from the ground when no one expected such voices to emerge from the darkness.

Immediately afterwards, the TPLF government officials were threatening him; telling him to recant the story on the air. Fearing for his life, he called me to get the phone number to Deutsche Welle. I refused to give it to him saying the truth must be told. He did not like it at first, but later became emboldened; taking a courageous stand against these officials even though it meant him going into exile. It all made a difference. Four or five days later, this broadcast forced the government to go to Gambella for damage control.

**Truth is a powerful weapon against those who rely on deception, propaganda and outright lies to accomplish their deeds. Truth liberates those in these untouched and darkened corners of the world where many of the world's most vulnerable people live. They want to tell their stories. Yet, the voiceless in the darkness may not be heard in this world except through people like you.**

**To stop the robbery of the lives, land and natural resources of the indigenous and other oppressed people of Ethiopia and beyond requires exposure and it cannot be achieved by the indigenous alone or a few activists. It requires the moral voices of the media, social justice groups, the faith community and ethical decision-makers in government, business, law and from every walk of life in order to stop the 21<sup>st</sup> century neo-colonization of Africa.**

**Just like William Wilberforce led a parliamentary movement to abolish the slave trade and the exploitation of our fellow human beings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; this is a time that requires similar moral resolve and boldness in order to demand justice for all. Let the war against exploitation and injustice be fought by all of us for no one is free until all are free!**

Thank you!

May God help us to care more about each other!

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