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Mr. Obang Addresses 27th International North South Media Forum At International Conference Centre in Geneva, Switzerland.

“«Is The World Shifting? » The BRICS: Power and Limits” The Quest for Land and Natural Resources in Africa

Thank you for inviting me to take part in the 27th International North South Media Forum for 2011. I give a special thank you to Jean-Philippe Rapp and Franck Simond for being such gracious hosts. I find the question before us today to be extremely relevant to what is happening in Africa and am grateful to contribute in some way to this very important discussion. The question is: *“Is the World Shifting? – The BRICS: Power and Limits.”*

As a leader of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia**, a social justice movement whose mission is to bring lasting change to Ethiopia and beyond, my quick answer is *“YES” in this global world where economic, financial, political, ideological, security and social interests have created both new partnerships and at times, competing interests. What results will have enormous consequences down the line; particularly as powerful countries, like those of the BRICS, seek land, resources and other opportunities beyond their borders.*

When the power differential is significant, like it is between Africa and the BRICS, the risk of exploitation is at its greatest and should be guarded. On the other hand, where appropriate protective mechanisms are in place to ensure that the interests of the African people are upheld, such partnerships could bring great benefits to all parties.

The focus of my presentation will consider the current quest for land and resources in Africa and how to ensure that the interests of the African people are upheld. This is not an easy task, *for Africa has long been considered like a dead carcass where anything or anyone can come and eat from it. Some want Africa to stay that way for as long as the people are poor, uneducated, disenfranchised or divided into factions or tribes, there has been no contest between them and those who have wanted to benefit from them, starting centuries ago with slavery, but continuing until today. This exploitation of Africa has come in several different waves over the last centuries.*

The first wave began when outsiders sought the most precious of all African resources—our people. Africans were trafficked all over the world and used to provide the human power and free labor to build Europe, South America, North America, the Caribbean Islands, West India and the Arab states.

The second wave was colonialism that supplied great wealth from African resources to foreign European powers who then met to divide the continent up among themselves, without the participation of the African people. Schemes to divide and conquer, along with the use of guns and money, were used to reduce resistance. Borders were drawn; often purposely disempowering groups by drawing national boundaries through their indigenous land and dismantling the social structure in such a way that has led to generations of greater hardship, vulnerability or conflict; with its effects being seen even today. It was all related to capitalizing on abundant African resources. This does not mean that genuine contributions to Africa were not also made at the same time in some arenas.

The third wave came after the independence movement where the foreign demand for African resources created new partnerships between kleptocratic leaders and foreign buyers; fueling armed conflict from the people whose rights were violated and other various players with vested interests—like the blood diamonds of Sierra Leone or Angola, oil in the Niger delta of Nigeria, the mineral, coltan, for computers and cell phones from the Democratic Republic of the Congo or oil and gum Arabic from what is now Southern Sudan.

Exposure has resulted in the development of protective laws, criminal action and lawsuits within some of the western countries doing business with these corrupt African leaders. Such laws like the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or legislation to end international trading of “conflict diamonds” has curbed some from bribing public officials, doing unethical business or from careless destruction of the environment. At times, lawsuits by aggrieved citizens in foreign countries have assessed penalties for injuries and losses or created huge legal costs for companies or those involved. These regulations have prevented many from these countries from taking such risks despite the fact that many countries in Africa have few regulations themselves or weak enforcement.

The new wave that most threatens Africa is “Neo-colonialism” where African land and natural resources are sought after in secret deals with iron-fisted African dictators and their cronies. The citizens are left out and transparency and accountability are only rhetoric used to cover up the illegality of these transactions.

Foreign partners are now coming mostly from countries with weak or absent laws governing such business deals. All parties are more than willing to turn a blind eye to the impact on the people. In fact, they purposely seek out corrupt dictators who are willing to sell out on the people. Many are willing to pay bribes and kickbacks as no laws stop them. The payoff is high and more than compensate for the risks—at least as long as the regime is in power. Political instability and an uprising of the people are the greatest threats to these kinds of investors.

One of the primary commodities sought after is the land, especially fertile agricultural land with easy access to water. At a time of increased global food insecurity, population growth, declining soil quality, environmental pollution and decreasing access to water, the race for “dirt-cheap” land in Africa is being carried out at an astounding pace.

Africa has a history of being a “commodity for sale” to outsiders with no one to defend its own interests. Whether one looks at the trafficking of human beings, which began centuries ago, the colonization of the continent by foreign European powers or the modern day collusion of autocratic strongmen with foreign governments or multi-national corporations, Africa has been “up for grabs” for too long.

The people have become impediments to securing these new acquisitions and are simply seen as being in the way. As a result, they have become victims of forced displacement, egregious human rights abuses, the expropriation of property, exile, arrest, imprisonment, poverty, hunger, compromised health and death. As the rights and lives of the African people are being trampled by the participants in the new 21st century race for Africa’s abundant resources, it is sounding an alarm that is waking up this sleeping giant.

A Case Example: Ethiopia

I will use Ethiopia as an example of what is happening in many places on the continent for I am well acquainted with what is going on here. Not only is this the country of my birth, but recently, the **Oakland Institute (OI)** <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org> published a comprehensive report: [Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa](#), which resulted from extensive research and in-country assessments of the explosion of land investment deals in nine African countries. The **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, www.solidaritymovement.org of which I am the Executive Director, collaborated with them on the study of Ethiopia.

In fact, one of the regions studied, Gambella, where I was born, has become the target of some of the greatest land and resource grabs in Ethiopia because of its fertile land, abundant water, untapped resources and marginalized people. This region, located in southwestern Ethiopia in the area of the Upper Nile, is considered the potential “breadbasket” of Ethiopia, but instead of feeding Ethiopians, food produced here may now be exported to feed the people of India, Saudi Arabia, China or beyond.

One company, Karuturi Global Limited has signed a lease with Ethiopian authoritarian leader, Meles Zenawi, and his one-party minority government for access to up to 300,000 hectares of fertile land for up to 99 years at \$1.19 (USD) per hectare per year; with the first six years given for free. Similar land in Indonesia or Malaysia reportedly brings over \$350 per hectare. Much of the produce from the land in Gambella is destined for export in this very food insecure country.

In fact, when many think of Ethiopia what comes to mind are the images of hunger, emaciated children, poverty, famine and starvation; yet, Ethiopia has vast fertile land, major rivers that supply some 80% of the water to the Nile, and vast and diverse resources. Ethiopians are hardworking, bright and industrious people; yet, why is it that in the 21st century, we still cannot feed ourselves and continue to be so heavily dependent on outsiders to feed us? Yes, we have droughts and as we speak, we are experiencing one of the worst in sixty years in the southern part of our country and into Somalia, but why are we so unprepared after twenty years under this regime? Many older Ethiopians say they were better off fifty years ago when they used to be able to feed themselves than they are now.

Why is it that after billions of dollars of aid, places like Gambella still have no tractors available for communities or small-farming cooperatives? Why is it that even though our ancestors have lived on this land for centuries, we still have no title to it and can be displaced like squatters? Although the Constitution gives ownership of the land to the State and to the people; in reality, all the land, as well as every aspect of Ethiopian society is tightly controlled by a small group of unelected elite at the top. Manmade hunger is rampant and even food aid is often linked to party loyalty or used as a weapon to control the people.

Although the TPLF/EPRDF regime denies the impact of these land grabs on the people, I personally know many of the people affected. *Before Karuturi took over the land, many villages full of people were told to leave their homes and crops for resettlement villages where they would have more access to basic services; however, they ended up living under trees with no services, no compensation for their losses, no food and no clean water. When the rainy season began months later, they were told to go back to their homes; but their homes were no longer habitable and their crops had been destroyed. Some died from lack of food. Those who opposed the regime’s plans were called “anti-development” and some ended up losing their jobs, beaten up or intimidated in some other ways. Some bodies were found floating in the river with no explanations for how they died. The number of security forces increased in the region as people were forced to leave their land.*

Karuturi has now announced on October 12, 2011 that they will be outsourcing 50,000 hectares of their 300,000 hectares of Gambella land to Indian farmers along with providing to them the necessary infrastructure for participating in a revenue-sharing plan. *Now, a foreign company has essentially taken over control of illegitimately obtained land and has excluded the real owners from any benefit except to provide cheap labor to some at levels below the World Bank's established poverty level.*

Neither Meles nor his party was elected by the people and therefore, they do not have the vested authority to negotiate these land and resource deals on their behalf. This is a regime that forcibly controlled all the political space in the last election; yet, claimed a 99.6 % victory. Since the election of 2005, when 194 peaceful protestors were killed by government security forces, this unelected autocrat has only tightened his grip on the people. *Overall, one party controls everything in the country. There is no independent election board, no independent judiciary, no independent military, no free media, no free speech, no freedom of assembly and anyone who speaks out may be arrested under the politically motivated anti-terrorism law. There is no free market unless you are a regime crony; most of whom come from the same minority ethnic group. Internet websites have been blocked and radio programs and satellite television have been jammed with the help of Chinese technicians. Internet and wireless penetration in the country is the lowest on the continent.*

No independent institutions remain in the country as all are under the control of the one-party state. One of the most restrictive civil society laws in the world prevents non-government organizations who receive more than 10% of their budget from foreign sources from advancing conflict resolution, human rights, women's rights, children's rights or rights for the disabled. They have kicked countless humanitarian groups out of the country; particularly any who might criticize them.

They recently charged two Swedish journalists as terrorists for their attempt to report on the blocked region in the Ogaden where many fear a genocide by forced starvation is being committed by this regime. The regime is known for false flag attacks against civilians that are then used to justify counter-insurgency. They are also known to foment ethnic, religious and political divisions between the people in order to prevent a unified front from rising up in opposition.

Despite all of this, Meles Zenawi has been invited to the G-20. At the recent World Economic Forum in January of 2011, he was a key participant and now Ethiopia will be host for the World Economic Forum for Africa in 2012. He represents Africa at the Climate Control meetings and is head of the economic development organization of the African Union, NEPAD, although, allegedly, he recently refused to give up his leadership and instead, extended his tenure. No surprise to Ethiopians! He claims to speak for economic growth but much is an illusion. Where is the improved health care, access to education or even a daily meal for the average citizen? Information from the ground is suppressed and who is speaking out about it?

Those donor countries, investment partners, free societies, international organizations and the media have too often ignored what has been going on behind closed doors in Africa; particularly where there are vested interests. Will BRICS countries, now that they are becoming more invested and entrenched into Africa, become part of the mechanism to suppress the rights of the people or will they seek to promote equal and sustainable partnerships that will endure regime changes? Will these new investors advance their own interests even when it means complicity in the perpetration of egregious human rights violations against the people or will they speak out? Will they follow in the footsteps of the former colonialists by exploiting the vulnerability of the people or will they seek to abide by fair, just and ethical business practices?

Solutions:

What Africa needs is an open, free society where people are empowered, educated and involved in participatory governance. The Chairperson of the AU Commission, Dr. Jean Ping, recently stated that Africa's inability to conduct reliable elections was one of the challenges to sustainable democracy on the continent. I agree. We must deal with our autocratic regimes which refuse to give up control. If a reliable election could take place in Ethiopia, Meles and his party would be soundly defeated and held responsible for the crimes they have committed; including a series of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. Such regimes are holding back the people and progress on the continent. The responsibility for just change lies in the hands of the people; however, institutions, organizations, countries and interested parties can contribute by supporting moral and legal standards that promote good business practices.

For example, international organizations and major development finance institutions could promote such practice by bringing greater transparency and accountability as conditions of their loans. As individual countries or unions seek to do business in Africa, they could hold their own citizens and corporations more accountable under their own laws so that exploitation, bribery, money laundering, kickbacks and other financial crimes that could jeopardize the international financial system and exploit the people are reduced.

The African Union or regional coalitions could take a stronger approach to advancing equitable partnerships that would reap benefits to all parties. The AU could also create conditions—like expectations of reliable elections, good governance and respect for human rights that would be acknowledged and rewarded in ways to reduce dictatorship, corruption and manmade poverty on the continent.

Concerning Ethiopia, we in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia were established to fight for the justice, freedom and rights of all the people in the country. *Motivated by the truth that no one will be free until all are free, we envision an open, free and reconciled society in Ethiopia, a society where our humanity comes before ethnicity and where the same rights, opportunities and privileges are available to all; regardless of our differences. We are working to advance these principles as the foundation of a healthy society.*

Our humanity does not have national boundaries and we should care about the well being of our brothers and sisters beyond our borders; not turning our eyes when see their shed blood nor shutting our ears to their cries of suffering. We must stop seeing others from a distance for it is easier to forget that they share our God-given humanity. We have entered into a global world together and if it is to be better, our eyes must meet theirs so we see them as us and as precious human beings. For Africans to thrive we must see ourselves as one and speak out against the injustice perpetrated by African strongmen and their cronies who are robbing Africans of their lives and futures. I would not be so concerned about the quest for land and natural resources in Africa if we had an effective rule of law, transparency and leaders who actually cared about the people.

Africans are pro-investment and would welcome partnerships, investments and trade of commodities if they were done fairly. There are exemplary models of inclusive partnerships that are working in Africa and which could be replicated. One example I have recently learned about is a model that supports small miners and farmers in a way that makes them more competitive with large corporate farms or large mining operations as an alternative to the land and resource grabs by the corporate farms and large mining companies. This reduces the need for a country to only turn to outside large corporate farms or mining company investors to increase the country's food or mineral production. In other words, instead of displacing the single family farmers and miners, the model shows how to make them as productive per hectare as the large corporate farms. More specifically, larger acreages of land could be divided into small plots for small farmers. The seed, irrigation, machinery and other important resources could be provided so that these small farmers could be as productive per hectare as the large corporate farms. They could then be connected to larger commercial markets by facilitating the processing of their products and helping to secure contracts with supermarkets or other large buyers. This gives the small farmers access to more sustainable markets and better prices and is an alternative to displacing single family farmers.

This same model could be used for small family miners. For example, small family miners could be lent \$1000 each to purchase better, ecologically sound equipment. Then their gold or other output could be combined in order to obtain better prices through international contracts. As the people share in the proceeds; the incomes of Africans will give rise to higher living standards and greater purchasing power. *African has the potential of becoming a huge new market. Money in the hands of a few elite can never create the same potential for trade. I share this model as a rebuttal to those who claim that development will only be accomplished by evicting the people from their homes and giving away their land to foreign entities for generations into the future. No one gives away their countries best assets for free, so where is the money from these deals that are otherwise too good to be true? The people of Ethiopia will not tolerate it.*

Mr. Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and his cronies, both domestic and foreign, are robbing Ethiopian of their lives, well being, land, natural resources and futures. Meles and his TPLF regime have monopolized power for 20 years through rigged elections, killing and torture of innocent people. The level of corruption is unprecedented in the history of Ethiopia. A small group of businessmen, mostly from Meles's own ethnic group has complete control of the Ethiopian economy and are running it in their own interests. Eighty million Ethiopian are living below the poverty line, on less than a dollar a day, suffer from disease, oppression, corruption, lack of healthcare, deteriorating education, unemployment and live in condition unfit for human beings. It is a matter of time before there is a "revolution" for the "liberation" of humanity in Ethiopia; replacing a sordid history of "liberation of ethnicity" for one's own family, village or tribe.

A healthy society is judged by how it treats the weak and vulnerable among them. These are not only moral decisions of right and wrong, but they are decisions that will bring very real negative consequences or blessings that could iprove the security, peace and well being of those sharing life on this increasingly shrinking planet.

The natural resources of the world are becoming scarcer, but if we act rightly and creatively, we may find new ways to share or new alternatives to replace old ones. The choices are in the hands of every one of us; not only in the hands of activists. This is a call for our conscience to guide us; to rise up for the right and for what is just; not only when it suits us! Thank you!

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