



Press Release

January 10, 2012

The people of the Omo Valley Sound SOS for help!

(Ottawa)—January 12, 2012 *Increasing human rights violations and deaths from careless state-owned sugar plantation trucks could trigger violence in the Omo Valley as the TPLF/EPRDF seizes indigenous land and water sources!*

The **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** sounds an urgent emergency alert regarding the present endangerment of the people of the Omo Valley. **These fellow-Ethiopians are being threatened with human rights violations and atrocities by the TPLF/EPRDF's troops in the region as the regime moves ahead to remove the people from their land in another cronny development scheme for a state-owned sugar plantation on 245,000 hectares of land with an additional 100,000 or more hectares of some of the most fertile land committed for other agricultural projects. Those who resist, face state-sponsored human rights crimes.**

In the last few days and weeks, trucks involved in road building associated with the land development have struck at least five people from the Bodi ethnic group, killing two of them and seriously injuring the others. Locals report that some drivers have no licenses and describe their driving as “crazy!”

On Saturday night, January 7, 2011, one of the victims, a woman by the name Bikolu, was going to her cattle camp and on the way, a truck crashed into her and she was killed. Following her burial, the family asked the government for some compensation and the government's refusal was accompanied by demeaning insults against the Bodi as a people and a hostile refusal to respond to their pleas for protection, compensation for lost lives and their constitutional rights to their indigenous land. Officials from the government said the victim's husband was to go to jail and if he did not come voluntarily, the government “will bring “the fire” to them.”

As tensions increase, fighting has broken out. Some fear that a continuation of human rights violations, the seizure of land and water, as well as the hostile response of the local authorities to the injuries and deaths caused by trucks from the sugar plantation could create conditions for a large-scale outbreak of violence as the people are pitted against the state-owned sugar plantation and the TPLF/EPRDF regime itself. In typical response—as seen in the Ogaden, in Gambella and elsewhere—the TPLF/EPRDF regime is sending more military troops to this region to use weapons and threats to force the people to leave the most fertile land along the Omo River; particularly around the area of the new Gibe III hydro-electric dam. This is the location where most of the indigenous of the Omo Valley farm.

Please find the link below for the Background report by the Oakland Institute entitled: **HALF A MILLION LIVES THREATENED BY LAND DEVELOPMENT FOR SUGAR PLANTATIONS IN ETHIOPIA'S LOWER OMO VALLEY** http://media.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/Land_Deal_Brief_Ethiopia_Omo_Valley.pdf

Interestingly, the dam project has been advanced by the TPLF/EPRDF as a means to bring electricity to Ethiopia, but the increased availability of water will provide needed irrigation to the water intensive sugar plantations that ironically are state-owned. No one expects that the people will gain from this arrangement; instead, a few at the top of the TPLF/EPRDF are certain to benefit while many fear this dam will have a devastating and far-reaching social and ecological effect that will impact hundreds of thousands of people in the Omo Valley and beyond into Kenya.

In all of Ethiopia, the 500,000 people of the Omo Valley may be among the most neglected of Ethiopians by the current TPLF/EPRDF regime. These dark-skinned and marginalized tribes—the Bodi, the Mursi, the Kwegu, the Suri, the Hamar, the Karo as well as others—have only been valued in Ethiopia for the tourism business they attracted due to their unique and primitive customs that have remained unchanged for centuries. Now, the TPLF/EPRDF has found a better use for their land and it does not include them.

The previous and present government of Ethiopia never did value them and even now, they do not see them as their own people. In the entire Diaspora of about a million Ethiopians, some experts suggest that only one person from Omo Valley is among them. This is an example of how marginalized these people are. Not only have they been intentionally denied access to entering the 21st century—it would negatively impact tourism—they have also been denied access to clean water, education, health care and other opportunities to a much greater degree than most other marginalized groups. Now, as their land is being taken away from them, they are also being denied their most prized asset, their indigenous land and water.

Just wait, the TPLF/EPRDF regime will suddenly pretend to be forcing the people from their land and into resettlement camps—where they have no means for independent sustenance—in order to “help” bring these people into the 21st century. Do not believe it! It is just an excuse to cover up for illegally stealing their ancestral land and they are ill-prepared to defend themselves!

The people of the Omo Valley are living in a nation set up under the flawed government policy of ethnic federalism. Each ethnic group is supposed to look after people of their own ethnicity, without the expectation that others will care about the rights, interests and well being of those outside their own groups. **Because of this, the people of the Omo Valley are more deprived of their rights than many others. Who speaks for them? Their land is being taken over by their own government without any consultation. The authorities did not care about them and now the people of the Omo Valley have taken matters into their own hands.**

Some limited fighting has broken out and as the TPLF/EPRDF sends troops to silence them through intimidation, human rights crimes and secretive extra-judicial killings, they seem to think they can eliminate these people without the world knowing. They are depending on the world not caring about them, but the SMNE has already received information from the people and we want to warn the Ethiopian government to stop the human rights abuses against these people and if they do not, they will be found accountable.

We also call on other peace and justice loving Ethiopians to stand up with the people of the Omo Valley. They are us. They may be deprived and they may have been used as commodities for tourism in the past, but to God and to us, they are precious, just like everyone else. The establishment of the SMNE was to educate Ethiopians about the value of those outside our villages, tribes and regions.

Our goal was to eradicate this primitive thinking where some devalue the humanity of others and turn away in apathy to their pain and suffering. This SMNE principle of putting “**humanity before ethnicity**” and caring about the freedom, justice and well being of others—neighbors near and far—is the basis for healthy societies and cooperative global partnerships.

The Bodi, the Mursi, the Kwego, the Suri, the Hamar, the Karo, the Nyangatom, the Dassenach—among others—are fellow Ethiopians. They are fellow human beings. They are us. Whether they are dark-skinned or not, naked or clothed; whether or not they have plates in their mouths; whether or not they are educated or illiterate; they are us. Humanity comes first, whether someone is civilized into the 21st century or not. Their well being is our responsibility. When they are deprived, we are deprived. When they are not free, we are not free.

We will continue to inform the justice loving people to focus on this region and to inform the Ethiopian regime of Meles Zenawi, who is already a known perpetrator of genocide and human rights atrocities, if he and his regime attempt to commit crimes in the Omo Valley like they have done in Gambella, they are building on a foundation of evidence coming from the shed blood of the Ethiopian people.

If these human rights violations continue, the SMNE will investigate and gather evidence to be used for future prosecution so perpetrators of these crimes will face justice and not get away with these crimes. The people of Ethiopia will hold them accountable under the rule of law that is not simply rhetoric. If any think that they can commit crimes without being found out, you are wrong as we already have our sources from this remote region of the country. We will continue to monitor what is going on there.

The Ethiopian Constitution gives ownership of the land to the people and the state that represents them. The “state” has come to mean Meles. The people have been left out. This is a violation of the Constitution and his duties. As we stand up for the people of the Omo Valley, let it bring us together as people who stand up for the freedom, rights and wellbeing of all of us.

Here is a plea from a voice from the Omo Valley, will you listen? **“Now the situation is going worse in the areas, the government sends more militaries to the areas in this evening and now, one of tribe man asks, “Is anyone to help us from international? URGENTLY?!!! PLEASE THE WORLD DO SOMETHING TO HELP THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE RIGHT NOW!!!!!!!!!!”**

=====ENDS=====

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your comments to Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia. Email: Obang@solidaritymovement.org.