Open Letter to the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police, Ms Grete Faremo,

Regarding the Plight of hundreds of Ethiopians seeking asylum in Norway who will be returned to Ethiopia by forced deportation.

March 2, 2012

The Honorable Grete Faremo,
Royal Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police
Postboks 8005 Dep,
0030 Oslo
Norway

Dear Honorable Minister Faremo,

Starting on March 15, 2012 and in the next months, hundreds of Ethiopians seeking asylum in Norway will be returned to Ethiopia, either by voluntary agreement that provides Norwegian funded “incentive funds” to returnees before they leave Norway as well as “reintegration funds” to be administered by the Administration of Refugee and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) once they return; or, by forced deportation to those who refuse. Most would refuse if they really had a choice; however, according to the Norwegian Ministry of Justice, these asylum seekers failed to prove their case for needed protection and as a result, permanent residency in Norway was denied. (Click here to read the memorandum of understanding between the governments of Ethiopia and Norway.)

We in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) contend that these returnees will be at risk when they return. All will face loss of basic rights and freedom. All will be subject to targeted government monitoring at first. Some will likely encounter intimidation and harassment; and, still others will face human rights abuses, particularly if they refuse to join the official political party of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an ethnic-based political party of the Tigrayan Peoples’ Democratic Front (TPLF) that now controls Ethiopia. Some will be at greater risk for simply being part of the wrong ethnic group.

For those who do not know, before the TPLF took power in 1991, the U. S. State Department had classified this Marxist-Leninist organization as a terrorist group responsible for kidnappings and murders of foreign humanitarian workers. This party and its leader, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, continue in power twenty years later and now have gained control of every sector of society; including the federal government and all its ministries, the national treasury, the regional and local governments, the Parliament, the judiciary, the military, the media, the financial system and access to all aspects of the economy—including freedom to exploit all the nation’s assets. The regime continues to commit terroristic crimes against its own people with assurance of impunity. As tensions simmer beneath the surface towards this hated, dictatorial regime, its only option for survival is increasing repression.

In light of this, the SMNE believes the forced deportation of hundreds of asylum-seekers to Ethiopia is unconscionable and will tarnish the stellar reputation of Norway and Norwegians all over the world who have been long known to uphold the virtues of peace, justice and human rights for all people. The solution today must focus on Ethiopia rather than simply deporting its refugees—the outcome of its great dysfunction.

Request:

The SMNE, on behalf of these refugees and the justice-loving people of Ethiopia, asks the Government of Norway and the Norwegian Ministry of Justice to re-examine their decision to return these asylum seekers to Ethiopia by first opening up an official investigation into the “Case of Ethiopia.” We contend that the current decision you have made is based on Norway’s acceptance of regime propaganda and their disingenuous promises. Such an Ethiopia does not exist; instead, the current Meles-controlled Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) is a brutal and repressive regime that has perpetrated widespread violence against its own citizens.

Human rights investigations have revealed the regime’s deep complicity in serial incidents of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture, political imprisonment and other gross human rights atrocities—much of it associated with shaving up its power in order to continue to rob the people of their land, property, national resources, lives and futures. The culpability of the FDRE as a serial violator of international human rights law should be carefully considered before these Ethiopians are returned against their will.

Unfortunately, Ethiopian autocrat Meles Zenawi and his one-party apartheid regime have been given undue legitimacy, inclusion, support and impunity in Western democratic circles, including in Norway, despite being one of the most repressive and abusive regimes in all of Africa. The 2011 Legatum Prosperity Index showed Ethiopia to be the most “un-free” country among the 110 countries studied. Yet, most donor nations have turned a blind eye to the deteriorating conditions in the country, while still continuing to provide foreign aid.

“I am very much terrified, frightened, worried and spending sleepless nights since I heard the news of the repatriation agreement that Norway have signed with the ethno-fascist regime of Meles Zenawi. I and other Ethiopians were victims in Ethiopia because of our different political views and opinions...We are wondering...why Norway has decided to send forcibly to a country where we will face torture, imprisonment, abuses, violations and even death because of differing and opposing political opinions and views.”

Received on March 1, 2012 at 10:59 P.M from Mr. Meleheru Melkamu, one of the many SMNE members in Norway.
Ethiopia is currently a partner in the War on Terror; however, they have exploited their strategic geo-political location to shore up their power and to manipulate the West. Ethiopians know this regime has a vested interest in inflating reports of terroristic threats or fomenting conflict in order to receive regime support and financial aid from the West. An eye-witness to an alleged attack of Christians by Muslims in late 2006 reported to our organization (SMNE) that the perpetrators were government supporters, one being a relative of the eyewitness, while the regime claimed these Muslims had been trained by radicals in Somalia. Their claims were used to help justify the invasion of Somalia and the Somali Ogaden region of Ethiopia.

That invasion and the secrecy that surrounds what continues today in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, has become a horrendous genocide related to the exploitation of natural gas and oil reserves; yet, it has received little attention until recently when two journalists from Sweden, who were attempting to report on it, were arrested, convicted and sentenced to seven years in Ethiopian prison under a vague anti-terrorism law meant to criminalize dissent. In a recent statement co-released by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and African Rights Monitor (ARM) they report the completion of extensive research regarding the ongoing human rights violations in the Ogaden and in the neighboring Oromia region and found “a shocking lack of international attention directed at the situation in these regions.”

On February 12, 2012, pleas for international intervention came from residents of the region following a new wave of genocidal action where Ethiopian government forces opened fire on civilians, killing 16 people, including children. Some insiders report that a hundred more were taken by force to some unknown place where it is feared they would also be killed. On February 15, 2012 the Ogaden Somali Community of South Africa filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court, asking for an investigation. They provided 700 pages of documentation.

As the government clamps down on rights, the opposition of the people to their tight rule increases especially in areas where Ethiopians are being forcibly displaced under the misnomer of development. In a massive marketing effort by the regime, indigenous land is being leased to foreign and crony investors for negligible amounts, without any consultation with the people or compensation for their losses. Human Rights Watch released a report in January 2012 titled “Waiting Here for Death: Forced Displacement and Villagization in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region” that revealed widespread cases of intimidation, assaults, rapes and violence directed towards any who resisted the forced displacement of 70,000 indigenous people from the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Plans are already made to move nearly 200,000 more people in the near future.

The people are promised increased access to services but find none. Instead, they have had to start all over on land that is less fertile and with less access to water, leaving behind crops right before harvest. Some have already died of hunger or exposure to harsh conditions. Produce is mostly destined for export in this food hungry country that will remain poor as long as this regime is in power.

A report just released by Survival International regarding an investigation they recently completed in the Southern region of Ethiopia also speaks of shocking violations of human rights against tribes in the Omo Valley as the local people are forced to move in order to make way for new state-controlled sugar plantations. The same is happening in the regions of Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia, Afar, Amhara, and other parts of Southern Nations.

The country you will be sending these asylum seekers back to is the one where the most courageous voices of freedom are called terrorists. Many flee the country rather than be jailed. Amnesty International reports that 100 journalists, opposition political leaders or activists have been jailed in the last year by using this anti-terrorism law, many receiving long sentences. Eskinder Nega, a well known journalist, has been arrested more than six times by this regime. His wife has also been arrested and gave birth to their child in prison. He has now been arrested again, this time in front of that child, who was terrified by it. Eskinder is a hero of democracy but remains in prison on terrorism charges, along with many other political prisoners.

One of them, Andualem Aragie, a popular spokesperson for the leading opposition political party, Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) was imprisoned on terrorism charges. Two weeks ago former Ethiopian president, Negasso Gidada, the president of the party, appealed to the International Community regarding the brutal attack of December 18 in his prison cell by a convicted murderer, who had been intentionally moved to his cell by prison authorities with whom he had close connections. Andualem received a serious head injury that was affecting his balance, yet, medical treatment has still not been provided. Numbers of other political prisoners have reported being tortured. On February 2, 2012, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Expression condemned the Anti-terrorism laws as a means to curb freedom of speech.

In a free society like Norway, such violations could be reported to authorities, the courts or monitored by civic institutions; however, in Ethiopia, all institutions are controlled by the regime. In 2009, foreign supported NGO’s who received more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources, most all of them, were effectively closed down with the Societies and Charities Proclamation, which made it a criminal offense for them to advocate for such things as human rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, rights for the disabled, promoting conflict resolution between ethnicities and religions and promoting the efficiency of justice and law enforcement services. Injustice has been given free rein in Ethiopia.

Poverty and oppression go hand-in-hand as Ethiopians remain among the poorest and least free in the world. According to a multi-dimensional poverty study, the 2010 Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), Ethiopia is the second poorest country in the world, following Niger, with 90% of its population living under the poverty level despite Meles’ claims of alleviating poverty. Even though the Meles regime also claims double-digit economic growth, little of that growth is reaching the people.

A recent preliminary report released by the Task Force for Financial Integrity and Economic Development reveals some of the reasons. Their findings indicate that Ethiopia lost US $11.7 billion in illegal capital flight from 2000-2009 and illicit financial outflows from Ethiopia nearly doubled in 2009 to US $3.26 billion, double the amount in the two preceding years, with the vast majority of that increase coming from corruption, kickbacks and bribery. Yet, during 2009, Ethiopia was the third largest recipient of humanitarian aid in the world according to Global Humanitarian Assistance, the England-based research group.
More alarming, Genocide Watch reports that Ethiopia is among the countries most likely to become a failed state; with little hope that it will be resolved without violence and possibly genocide against the ethnic group in power. It remains a partner in the War on Terror; however, their information has been unreliable, slanted or contrived and has been used to shore up their power and to manipulate the West. This regime has a vested interest in inflating reports of terroristic threats or fomenting conflict in order to receive gain legitimacy as well as financial aid from the West.

Authoritarian Regime

Most Ethiopians believe Ethiopia is being held hostage to the illegitimately-elected authoritarian regime of Meles Zenawi. During the last national election, the regime claimed they won by 99.6%. They are accountable to no one for these figures or for their methods for staying in power; however, a system of spies has been put in place to report opposition activity from the federal level to the neighborhood level. This was in effect during the pre-election period and continues today; essentially eliminating all political space. Following the election, Human Rights Watch conducted an investigation on the political use of foreign aid and found overwhelming evidence that aid was used to reward party members and the withholding of such things as food, seed, fertilizers, agricultural resources, jobs and education to non-party members was used to punish political dissenters.

Although members of the Development Assistance Group (DAG), which includes Norway, strongly dismissed these findings, we in the SMNE know their findings to strongly correlate to information we receive daily from the ground. There is no question as to the abuse of funds; particularly if one leaves the choreographed sites and staged witnesses the regime is known to produce. For us Ethiopians, these are our family members, community members and friends who provide the substantiation of this report. One needs only to view the absurd results of the election via the make-up of the parliament. The Meles regime controls all but one of the seats out of 547.

The only newspaper, radio station and TV station are all controlled by the government. Meles has admitted to jamming the programs broadcast by Voice of America and Deutsche Welle. Arab-Sat and Nile-Sat are now accusing the Meles regime of jamming their sites and have warned this regime that they will lose Ethiopia’s one government controlled station in the country if they continue to do so. Other technology is also controlled. Access to the Internet (0.5%) is among the lowest in the world; about seven times behind the African average with the government being the only provider; limiting access and closely monitoring use. Internet opposition websites are all blocked. The rate of mobile phone usage (5%) is one of the lowest in Africa; twenty times less than leading African countries and even lower than war-torn Somalia which has not had a government for the last twenty years and is considered a failed state. This is the Ethiopia to which you will be returning these people.

Ethiopians Want Security

Most Ethiopians, including those in Norway, want to return home, but there is no security there. This is not just about poverty as many claim. Why are there so few Kenyans, Ghanaians, and others from poor nations seeking entry into Norway and other countries? It is because they have a stable government where they have much greater freedom. If Ethiopia had a better government, these Ethiopians in Norway would not need to be deported; they would go back on their own. If Ethiopians had a government they respected and that cared about its citizens, they would not need “reintegration incentives” or airfare back to Ethiopia, they would pay their own money to go back home. Prior to the Meles regime, when Ethiopians studied abroad, they wanted to return home, but not anymore because it is not safe for anyone to live there and everyone wants to leave.

One must be a party member to go to the university, to get a job or to start a business. To survive as a person one must “sell one’s dignity” and oftentimes do unethical things to survive. Many refuse or reach a point they simply cannot do it any longer. They sell everything because they cannot live without a clear conscience and risk everything for dangerous passage out of Ethiopia with the hope they will find refuge in a free country. If they had a choice most would never do it.

Some Ethiopians hope for a better life through finding jobs as maids in Arab countries; however, we hear regular stories of abuse, rape and being forced to work without pay. The world saw the face of one Ethiopian woman Ms. Shewaye Molla whose face and scalp were critically burned when her employer poured boiling water over her. It was Gaddafi’s daughter-in-law who did it. After she received needed treatment, despite the pressure for her to return to Ethiopia, she refused because she so feared what might happen to her due to the lack of freedom and stability.

On nearly a daily basis the SMNE receives calls or emails from Ethiopians refugees or their family members who share heart-breaking stories of hardship, abuse or death, often becoming victims of human traffickers. This past week eleven Ethiopians died in containers which had been overloaded with other human beings by traffickers. They were being hauled by trucks to Djibouti. A few months ago, Ethiopian bodies were found floating in Lake Mali after being killed. We received distressed calls from family members of Ethiopians whose loved ones had died in the Sinai Desert after organ traffickers had removed their organs. Others have drowned trying to cross the Red Sea to Yemen or rivers in Bolivia on their way to the United States while others were raped by those they had trusted to help them find their way. Others were forced into sexual slavery; yet, in most cases, those who have fled the country say they would rather die than stay in Ethiopia.

The SMNE is also in contact with many of the Ethiopians in Norwegian camps, awaiting deportation. Many are very depressed, some with suicidal ideation, as they face an unknown fate. Here is a letter from an Ethiopian seeking asylum in Norway: “Dear Mr. Obang, as a rejected asylum seeker I am worried too much because I am certain that the Norwegian Security Service (PST) is aware of the fact that the Ethiopian regime agents and supporters are closely monitoring, filming and photographing our political activities and identities here in Norway. Many of my friends including me are actively engaged in the struggle for the real democratic change in Ethiopia. If a person is currently accused of posting “beka” (enough) on the web page and is sentenced to 14 years in prison, it is possible to foresee what will happen to me who demonstrate, condemn, shout anti-regime slogans publicly and wrote an article which exposed the tyranny regime. As a result of this I will inevitably face persecutions and other forms of retribution at the hands of the regime.”

When these deportees from Norway return home, they will be under even greater suspicion and will be viewed as a threat to this regime. It is well known among Ethiopians that the Meles regime has its spies in the Diaspora who report back to the government on all political gatherings and discourse; including who was there and what they said. It has affected their families back home to the point that many fear saying anything even in free countries of the west like Norway.
Right now, everyone who goes back to Ethiopia from abroad, not just deportees, must report to the government when they arrive for special monitoring of their activity. This regime is paranoid and so fearful of collapse that it has adopted Gestapo-like tactics. Why is there so little political will to believe the victims of this regime?

Where can these people go for safety? Now, Sudan is deporting Ethiopians seeking protection without carefully considering their cases and what could happen to them. They are violating their international obligations and working with the FDRE who wants them to return to Ethiopia where they will likely face charges and imprisonment. Italy was recently fined by the European Court for Human Rights for returning Somali and Eritrean asylum seekers back to Libya, without individual reviews of cases. Italy justified it by citing the overwhelming number of refugees seeking to enter their country. We agree with the problem, but solutions to this refugee problem must address the root problem—the highly abusive and corrupt FDRE rather than exposing the refugees “to inhuman and degrading treatment outlawed by the European Convention on Human Rights.”

The Norwegian Ministry of Justice may be hearing claims by the FDRE that the refugees will be safe in Ethiopia, but this regime is not to be trusted. They care about their image but not the people. Neither can you trust the ARRA to help them or provide the funds Norway is providing for their reintegration.

The ARRA is a government-controlled agency which monitors the activities of the refugees. In fact, during the 2003 massacre of Anuak leaders in the Gambella region, an Ethiopian eyewitness who was in the refugee camp near Gambella at the time, reports that when Anuak leaders sought protection in the camp; instead, the ARRA rounded them up and handed them over to security agents of the Meles regime who subsequently murdered them. This individual has now given his testimony to Genocide Watch. This is the group the Norwegian Ministry of Justice is trusting with the lives of these deportees.

Years of humanitarian aid to Ethiopia have failed to resolve the chronic hunger, suffering and constant flow of Ethiopians out of the country because Ethiopia needs democratic reforms. Unfortunately, this regime will never voluntarily take these actions because genuine democracy would mean an end to their kleptocratic rule and accountability for their many human rights crimes. They will desperately defend their power and control at any cost. Yet, an uprising may come and some intervention is imperative if violent ethnic-based conflict and the resulting destabilization of Ethiopia are to be avoided. Turning a blind eye is dangerous. Instead, what is needed is like what happened in Kenya after the election—pressure from donor countries, the ICC and the UN, combined with a strong and viable democratic movement of Ethiopians demanding their God-given rights.

Norway, despite being a small country with a small population, has been exemplary in the world in their contribution towards the security and humanitarian needs of others. Years of humanitarian aid to Ethiopia have failed to resolve the chronic hunger, suffering and constant flow of Ethiopians out of the country because Ethiopia needs democratic reforms. Unfortunately, this regime will never voluntarily take these actions because genuine democracy would mean an end to their kleptocratic rule and accountability for their many human rights crimes. They will desperately defend their power and control at any cost. Yet, an uprising may come and some intervention is imperative if violent ethnic-based conflict and the resulting destabilization of Ethiopia are to be avoided. Turning a blind eye is dangerous. Instead, what is needed is like what happened in Kenya after the election—pressure from donor countries, the ICC and the UN, combined with a strong and viable democratic movement of Ethiopians demanding their God-given rights.

Norway’s decision to forcibly return these vulnerable Ethiopians to a situation where their safety is insecure and where the on-the-ground conditions have not been acknowledged does not match with your own noble record and fails to acknowledge the desperate conditions. Ethiopians and other silenced voices of the oppressed in the world cannot afford to lose such a voice as yours who will speak for them out of the darkness! May God help you to uphold truth, justice, decency and peace as you consider this request.

Respectfully yours,

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Cc: Designated Recipients
The Honorable Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of Norway
Direktor Terje Sjøggestad, UNE
Direktor Ida Børresen, UDI
Mr. Knut Holm Landrådgiver/Country Analyst Afrika-desken
To all the members of the Norwegian Parliament

Mr. John Fredrik Reinfeldt, Prime Minister of Sweden
Mr. Beatrice Ask, Minister for Justice (Sweden)
Mr. Dan Eliason, Director General of the Swedish Migration Board
Miss Christina Werner, Deputy Director General of the Swedish Migration Board
Mr. Mikael Ribbenvik, Director for Legal affairs European Commission
Mr. Mario Guido Friggieri, Refugee Commissioner of Malta Ministry for Justice and Home Affairs-
Mr. Satsuki Eda, Japan Ministry of Justice - Immigration Bureau
Federal Office for Migration and Refugees Germany’s Minister of Immigration
The Swiss Federal Department of Justice and Police
Netherlands Minister for Immigration and Asylum Affairs,
Mr. Antonio Guterres, UNHCR
Mr. Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General
Ms. Navanethem Pillay, UN OHCHR
To all the members of Development Assistance Group (DAG)
International Organization for Migration
Sudan
Saudi Arabia
Lebanon
Syria
Yemen
Somalia
Sudan
Lebanon
Saudi Arabia
Syria

Joint Report from Oakland Institute and SMNE
Sounds Alarm on Foreign Agribusiness

By Sean D. Naylor, others

CC: Media

Marit Haukom, editor-in-chief of Tønsbergs Blad, Norwegian newspaper

The SMNE is based on the belief that the future well being of our global society rests in the hands of those among us who can put “humanity before ethnicity,” or any other distinctions that divide and dehumanize other human beings from ourselves; inspiring us to care about these “others,” not only because of the intrinsic God-given value of each life, but also because “none of us will be free until all are free.” These are the underlying principles of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), of which I am the executive director. The SMNE is a non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians; committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability and respect for human and civil rights to the people of Ethiopia and beyond.

The SMNE has branches in the United States, Canada and United Kingdom and chapters in various cities and countries throughout the world, including within Ethiopia. You can find us through our website at: www.solidaritymovement.org or on Facebook

Investments in Food Insecure Ethiopia


http://www.ethiobusiness.com/broad/3274.html ; The Secret War: Tense ties plagued Africa operations

By Sean D. Naylor, Navy News Staff Writer | November 30, 2011


http://www.amnesty.org/article/13388

http://www.hrw.org/report/2012/01/16/waiting-here-death


http://www.genocidewatch.org/alerts/countrisatrisk2011.html ; Current Countries at Risk of Genocide,

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