

Mr. Obang speaks to the Group of 78 in Ottawa, Canada

A New Colonialism for Africa?

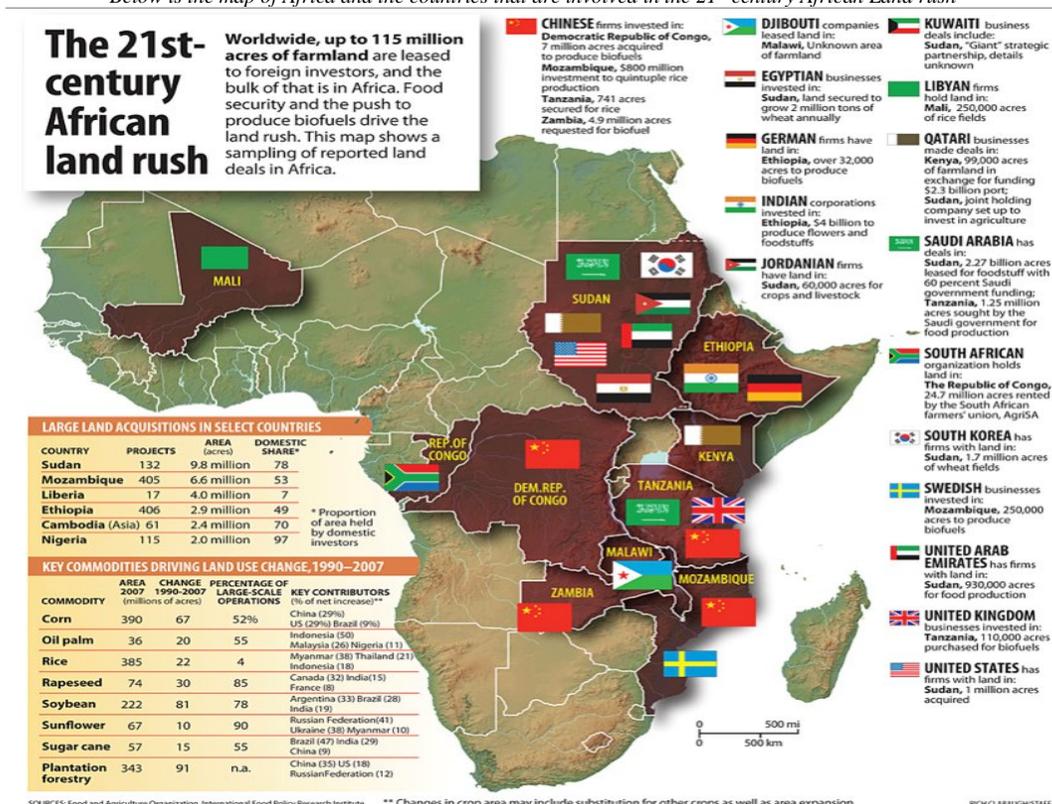
Hunger, Aid Dependency and the Selling Off of Land & Resources

Good afternoon! I am very honored and pleased to be here. First of all I would like to thank Richard Harmston, President of Group 78, for the introduction and for inviting me to speak as well as one of your members, my friend Dr. Roy Culpeper who helped arrange this talk. I also want to thank all of you for coming today. Some of you may not know that I was here in September, 2006 as a keynote speaker on the topic of African Instability and the role Canada can play in promoting stability.

At that time, Mr Gerald Ohlsen was the president of the group. I see him here in the audience and recognize others of you who were also here at the time. It is great to see you today and a real privilege to be here, among so many public servants who have contributed so much, not only to the Canadian public, but to those in many other parts of the world. Some of you have served as Ambassadors to Africa, government public policy officials, representatives of the people, social justice activists or in other fields of service. Thank you for your interest in hearing about the topic I will be discussing today, which begins with the question: "A New Colonialism for Africa?: Hunger, Aid Dependency and the Selling Off of Land & Resources."

Some of you may wonder what this is all about and the theme may even sound a bit radical because it speaks of the new colonisation of Africa; however, *it is a topic that people in Canada and others need to know more about. It is related to land grabs, the new phenomenon that is happening all over Africa. Since the food crisis of 2008, the sale or long-term leasing of prime African agricultural land, especially land with access to water, has become a scramble for millions of hectares of land on the continent. Those at the front of the race include Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and Asian countries like India and China but many more are also involved and still more are hoping to capitalize on the best deal of the century.*

Below is the map of Africa and the countries that are involved in the 21st century African Land rush



Some of the most corrupt and autocratic regimes are offering an array of incentives to attract foreign investors who will mostly export the produce either back home or to those willing to pay the highest prices; which will probably not be Africans. At the same time, many of these same autocratic African regimes depend on the West to feed millions of their own people. Does this make sense?

Individuals, organizations, businesses and governments in many places are looking for opportunities to ensure food security, both present and future, in order to meet the needs of a growing global population; which is expected to grow from the current 7 million to 9 million by 2050. Even now, in many places food security is a challenge, and such concerns is causing those in positions of responsibility to think and plan for the future. *Others see it as an opportunity for investment. Nations without adequate land and/or water resources are already looking for options for outsourcing their food production in other countries. The first place many look is to Africa because land is cheap, water sources are plentiful in many areas and there are few regulations.*

In many countries in Africa, accountability is non-existent and rogue regimes, like in Ethiopia, are reaching out to lure investors to their countries to make lucrative deals as a quick way for both to “get rich.” As a result of these new marketing campaigns, the leasing of land in Africa has sky-rocketed. *Between the years 2000 and 2010, 203 million hectares of land, worldwide, have been leased, but more than half of that land, 134 million hectares, has been leased in Africa, most of it to foreign investors or regime cronies or combinations of both. What makes this much more serious is that these land deal agreements are being done without any transparency and without informing or consulting the people. The people receive no compensation for their land and have been ending up poorer than before.*

In 2009, the intent to lease half the land in Madagascar to South Korea, for 99 years, led to the collapse of the regime after the people found out; yet, in most places in Africa, the local people are losing the battle to retain ownership of their land, especially in the most corrupt countries with the least freedom.

Within nearly the same exact span of years of these land leasing agreements, a country like Ethiopia, from 2000 to 2009, has **lost US \$11.7 billion in illegal capital flight. 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** as revealed in a preliminary 2011 report by the **Task Force for Financial Integrity and Economic Development.**¹

This pattern of gaining illegal wealth from the people of Africa may not surprise you. Unfortunately, many of the governments in Africa are autocratic regimes that have been in power for decades by rigging elections and using violence to suppress resistance; however, the elite in power are becoming extraordinarily wealthier through these land deals. Yet, as we speak, Africa is the poorest continent in the world. There is more instability, poverty, lack of knowledge about one’s rights, lack of education, human rights abuses, lack of justice and lack of protective, and enforced, laws and regulations than most anywhere else. This did not just happen for we must look at the history of how this came to be.

Briefly, most of us know that the first resource sought-after on the continent was not land, diamonds, oil or gold; but instead, it was Africa’s most precious asset, the people. It is a dark stain in our global history when Africans were hunted down to be sold as slaves in a global marketplace; however, one thing that must be known, is that those marketing in Africa’s people, did not work alone. *No outsider will get into your house without first inviting them in and no one will know how to find what is valuable within your home unless you tell them.*

At the time of slavery, there were Africans in power who were preying on the weak or lesser tribes for profit. It was they who hunted down their fellow Africans in the bush and jungles of Africa and then negotiated the financial deals with slave traders. *These outsiders could never have done it alone without such partnerships. Since that time, the problem has essentially continued. Corrupt and powerful African leaders have opened the door to outsiders who are willing to partner in the exploitation of the people and to turn a blind eye to the casualties on the ground. They deny the human rights abuses. They deny the displacement. They deny the violation of the land rights of the people. This new colonisation may have a different look today, but the groundwork for it began centuries ago.* Let me further explain.

After the first wave of colonialism, which focused on human trafficking, came the second wave, an increased awareness and felt need for the abundant natural resources on the continent. Territorial power claims by European countries soon followed. During this time in Africa, much of the power was in the hands of these outsiders. Foreign countries began to maintain power over great numbers of people by using divide and conquer tactics between tribes.

Eventually, territorial conflicts emerged between European colonizers resulting in a conference meant to resolve these issues through a formalized agreement that divvied up Africa among themselves. ***It was called the Berlin Conference and not one African was present. Decisions were made by Europeans on the future of the continent, including borders of African countries that continue to stand today. The continent was divided without considering the people or how groups had historically lived but instead according to their interests.*** Ethnic groups like my own, the Anuak, were split in half between Ethiopia and Sudan, a practice used in other places as well to divide the strength of various groups. The decisions made at this conference continue to create trouble today.

Although there were some lasting benefits from colonization during this period of history and many dedicated Europeans and others who contributed to the lives of Africans, a serious historical blunder followed independence that prepared the way for African dictators to become the new colonialists. ***When the African nations finally attained their freedom, the colonial power was transferred to the favored elite who carried on with the policies and practices of the Europeans. This meant the new rulers continued favoring their own tribal groups over any others and to maintain power and control, they utilized the colonialists divide and conquer tactics. In these privileged roles, leaders felt entitled to help themselves to the wealth of their people.***

These tactics continue to be used today. Africa has never recovered; however, the blame is not only on Africans, but it also should rest on those outsiders who participated in the exploitation of Africa. Even today outsiders have a huge influence on what happens in Africa; including sometimes playing a game of who should be the leader without really considering what the people want. Too often this is more about advancing their own national interests rather than about enhancing the well being of Africans.

Now the race for African resources is repeating itself by way of these land grabs, as well as by similar pursuits of other African natural resources in a way that the local people do not benefit. Most Africans want investment and trade opportunities, but what is going on today would not be tolerated in most places with a developed regulatory system. In some places it is the most vulnerable who are exploited, but in a country like Ethiopia, the majority of the people are below the poverty level with little chance of change as a few monopolize all opportunity.

Now they are losing their land for 99 years. The government claims the land is unused; however, antiquated methods of farming limit what they can do but this does not need to be the case in the future. How can anyone assume that such prize land could not be developed and well utilized by Africans themselves over the next 99 years, the leased time period for some of these agreements?

During the new colonization of Africa, the people of Africa are no longer being hunted down, for the new wave of interest does not include them. They are in the way and are now seen as “impediments” to be forcibly removed from the land, along with the trees and brush, in order to make way for crony and foreigners to take control of their indigenous land they have occupied since the time of slavery.

The people who invited the slave traders into Africa and who supplied the human lives they sought could have been a king of a powerful tribe or another kind of tribal leader but today they have different titles such as Prime Minister, President, Minister of Agriculture, First lady, Minister of Defense or Regional Governor. These are the people who are inviting foreign investors to imbibe in the intoxicating offers for “green gold”—fertile land for nearly free! Who would be able to acquire such prime land at such unfair prices and with such easy, user-friendly arrangements—like tracts of 300,000 hectares, each for a dollar—if these African strongmen were not in power? How would it go over in Bombay, India, Saskatoon, Canada, Bismarck, North Dakota, or in Oxford, England?

It would never be allowed because there is a government elected by the people and people would make them accountable, but in the case of Africa, it is not the case. Recently, the Oakland Institute completed a land investment study in order to better understand these deals being made in many parts of Africa. The SMNE partnered with them on the study pertaining to Ethiopia. Details can be found in the report ‘*Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa Country Report: Ethiopia.*’ <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/110608UnderstandingLandDealsInAfrica.pdf>

In all of Africa, no where are these deals being made more quickly and extensively than in Ethiopia, particularly in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, which has become the epicenter of these land grabs on the continent. Coincidentally, I grew up there. I will use Gambella as an example of what is happening in Ethiopia. The first time I spoke to Group 78 in 2006, I told you how the Anuak people, especially the leadership, had been targeted for a brutal massacre. You can still read that speech online <http://www.anuakjustice.org/060929AddressToGroupOf78.htm> Ethiopian National Defense Troops worked with militia groups they had armed to slaughter 424 Anuak in less than three days.

Many continuing human rights atrocities continued over the next several years; however, it is notable that during the initial massacre, as the militia groups and troops marched through Gambella town, many chanted something that has shown their true motives: **“Today there will be no more Anuak.” “Today there will be no more Anuak land.”** These crimes have since been classified as genocide by Genocide Watch. Details can be found in the Genocide Watch report *“Today is the Day of Killing Anuaks”* http://www.anuakjustice.org/doc_today_for_killing_anuaks.htm published in 25 February 2004. It can also be found in the Human Rights Watch report: *“Targeting the Anuak”: Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region.* <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2005/03/23/targeting-anuak> published in March 23, 2005. Such crimes do not happen in a vacuum, but usually are about resources. Today, eight years later, we can see it all the more clearly.

In Ethiopia, over 815 foreign agricultural land deals have been made, all without consulting the local people. Promises of benefits are not materializing; instead, Ethiopians, 86% of whom are subsistence farmers, are losing the means to feed themselves as they are forced off land. Those who do protest can face intimidation, assault, imprisonment or even death; however, resistance is simmering beneath the surface.

Ethiopia is a one-party ethnic/crony/family-based government that has formed a model of government called ethnic federalism which is actually structured on a primitive model of tribalism. It essentially means, “My tribe takes all,” and “It’s our turn to eat!” The current regime is the same group that went to the bush and fought the last communist government, finally overthrowing it in 1991. Prior to that, they had been considered a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department. Initially, they were accepted by those hoping for something better, but instead, after twenty years in power, they have moved the country backward. This ethnic-apartheid regime has created systemic oppression over the majority through corruption, intimidation, threats and brutal force even while using the rhetoric of democracy in order to give a manicured image to their donors from the West.

They were put to the test in the 2005 national elections. *The regime orchestrated a rally where 50,000 Ethiopians showed up. They then allowed the quickly formed opposition party to hold a rally, underestimating the response. Two million Ethiopians showed up in support of the opposition and over 36 million Ethiopians voted in the election, but when it looked like the opposition had won all the seats in Addis Ababa, the Meles regime took the election by force. When peaceful election protestors took to the streets, security officers shot and killed nearly 200 people, many in the heads.*

Since I was here before Group 78 last time, this regime has gone on to kill many more; particularly in the region of the Ogaden where humanitarian aid, human rights groups and journalists are blocked from entering. Details can be found in the Human Rights Watch report *Ethiopia: Army Commits Executions, Torture, and Rape in Ogaden* <http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/12/ethiopia-army-commits-executions-torture-and-rape-ogaden>. Please see these links <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbgoPSxDR00> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JOYH5TgtMk> for video documentation. The recent famine hit this area, the worst in sixty years, but the regime refused to open the region to those wanting to provide aid. Of course, the regime does not want the world to see that the regime’s pursuit, with foreign partners, of the Ogaden’s oil and natural gas resources are involved in what may be a famine/genocide. Again, the people of the Ogaden, like the people of Gambella and anywhere else there are resources, are seen as impediments to the regime’s plan to exploit the region.

Ethiopia is only becoming more, not less repressive with these land grabs even while they are trying to “look democratic” to outsiders and potential investors. During the last national election of 2010, the regime made sure no political space was open to any opposition, fearing what might happen. While benefits are multiplying for the elite, the rest of Ethiopians are suffering more than ever for despite all the economic growth claimed by this regime, it is not reaching to the people. All the values of freedom and justice-loving donor western countries, including Canada, are simply rhetoric, or even laws, to cover for the use of strongman tactics used to trample on the rights of the people.

For example, new anti-terrorism laws have criminalized dissent with many journalists and political leaders being charged with terrorism and put in prison where they are often tortured. *Civil society has been eliminated by a 2009 law that prohibits organizations from advancing human rights, women’s rights, child rights, rights for the disabled, conflict resolution between ethnicities and religions and justice work if they receive more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources—which includes most all of them. Instead, the regime has created and gained control of pseudo-civic institutions. Every layer and sector of Ethiopian government, law, judiciary, education, finance, business and security—the military and the police—have been taken over this regime. No wonder this government is getting away with selling the land.*

Donor countries fall easy victim to the regime's insistence that they are the only ones capable of preventing chaos from breaking out in this country, much of which they have created. They also claim that they are the only defense against terrorism in the Horn of Africa and that there is no viable alternative to their regime; however, they do all they can to make certain no alternative emerges.

Canadians could have a say on this and make a difference in the outcome. Recently, Human Rights Watch released a report regarding the villagization program in Ethiopia, particularly in Gambella, where the Meles regime has already displaced 70,000 people with 200,000 more targeted for the same. It will result in certain hunger and starvation. (Details can be found in the report 'Waiting Here for Death': Forced Displacement and 'Villagization'

<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/01/17/waiting-here-death> published this past January) These people were forced not only from their land but from crops nearly ready for harvest and some have already died from hunger and compromised health. Please see these links for reports by independent international journalists. Watch this 7 Minutes video

<http://video.pbs.org/video/2203388630> by the PBS. Or this 14 minutes video

http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/21/ethiopia-centre-global-farmland-rush?CMP=tw_t_gu by The Guardian and this 8 minutes video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Mr2xzRS73Bw by Al Jazeera about the land rush in Ethiopia.

Although the government promised increased services, the displaced were relocated to less fertile land without any services and only very limited hand-outs on food. In the past, these people were independent and did not rely on foreign donor aid to feed themselves, but now, the main tool of self-reliance—the land—has been taken away. The answer is for them is not foreign dependence. Who wants to rely on others when one could be capable oneself?



Canadian policy makers, including former policy makers like within the Group 78, could demand that we do not continue to send taxpayer's money to feed the people who could otherwise feed themselves, but this will require putting pressure on this regime for deep reforms although such reforms would probably mean the abrupt end of their regime and accountability for their crimes. Canadians could help but first we need to bring greater awareness to Canadians as to what is going on so more people will engage in this effort.

We need seminars and workshops to expose these crimes as well as pressuring the Canadian government to demand accountability for money given to this country. Also, Canada could have influence in the US and other countries that are financially supporting Ethiopia if they were to urge them to take a stronger approach to this repressive regime that uses inflated figures and propaganda to present a different picture of Ethiopia that does not exist on the ground. More importantly, Canada could take a strategic role in supporting the creation of a viable alternative to this government. It may not be able to happen within Ethiopia, but a shadow government could be started that could be prepared to set the foundation for a new Ethiopia based on truth, justice, decency, equality and the respect for the human rights of its people.

For those of you who would like some specific details about conditions in Ethiopia, I will distribute a handout, “Some Disturbing Facts about Ethiopia.” Also, please see our website at www.solidaritymovement.org for more information.

Again, thank you for inviting me and I hope you have learned something from this. *We live in a global world where we cannot turn a blind eye or shut our ears to the cries of the people from faraway lands. In fact, our global world has become so close, that there may soon be no faraway lands anymore. I am an example of that—a guy grew up in Gambella, a region now at the epicenter of the land grabs, who finished high school and university in Saskatchewan, who now lives in Ottawa and who is now talking to you about the matters of our neighbors in Africa.*

Our world is so connected—not just by Facebook, Twitter, the Internet, Skype, TV or by phone, but by people who are bound together by human to human connections. Previous boundaries are no longer present. I am with you here today; yet I was born in what was a very remote place in Africa. *We all must be active in making this world a better place. The beginning to doing so is by believing that the pain of others is ours and by seeing every human as “us” rather than seeing only their differences of birth, language, skin color, religion, or other parts of our identity.*

Can we see that their freedom is connected with our own for can we ever be truly free until others are also free? *If you see it this way, we will have the room in our hearts to share and care about each other. We will not rob and exploit the lives and property of others. Can we speak up for the well being of the vulnerable? These are the principles behind the SMNE.*

You do not have to be an Ethiopian or an African to stand up against these land grabs. Each of us can make a difference in the human fight against injustice, human rights abuses and the daylight robbery of the resources of others. You can be a Canadian and be in this room and do your part in Gambella, Ethiopia or beyond.

May God help us to become people who care about the well being of others and who will stand up for the interest of our fellow humans rather than only for our own self or national interests at the expense of others. We all will benefit! Thank you!

=====

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

¹ <http://www.financialtaskforce.org/2011/12/05/illicit-financial-outflows-from-ethiopia-nearly-doubled-in-2009-to-us3-26-billion-reveals-new-global-financial-integrity-report/>