

April 5, 2012



**An Open Letter and Call to Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit,
General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and Religious Leaders everywhere,
Regarding the assault on religious freedom and religious institutions in Ethiopia.**

Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit,
General Secretary
Of the World Council of Churches
P.O. Box 2100
CH-1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland

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“Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender is strong, he will take up their case against you.” (Proverbs 23:9-11).
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Dear Rev. Tveit and Religious Leader:

We in the *Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)*ⁱ, a social justice movement of ethnically and religiously diverse Ethiopians, come to you as freedom-seeking people who believe peace can only come to Ethiopia and beyond when we value the God-given humanity in each one of us and uphold the right to one’s own beliefs and religious practices.

In light of this, we are calling on Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious leaders—who despite differences of belief, are all people of the Book and descendents of Abraham—to alert you to the assault on religious freedom and religious institutions in Ethiopia by the twenty-year old authoritarian regime of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This one-party, ethnic-based, minority government of the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) exerts iron-fisted control over all aspects of the EPRDF government, from the federal to the local level, and over every sector and institution of Ethiopian society, including religious institutions.

Its leader, Meles Zenawi, has been implicated in serial incidents of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimesⁱⁱ in Ethiopia and into Somalia based on numerous human rights investigations. *Although this regime is a partner in the War on Terror and receives more foreign aid from the West than any other African country, it is terrorizing the people, suppressing dissent, sabotaging religious practice, fomenting ethnic and religious division and committing a daylight robbery of the land, natural resources, national assets and futures of the Ethiopian people.*

Now, the regime has targeted an ancient monastery and eighteen Ethiopian Orthodox Churches for destruction because they are situated on fertile land the regime has claimed for a planned government-owned sugar plantation. The Monastery at Waldba in northwestern Ethiopia is one of Africa’s oldest Christian monasteries. Over a thousand monks will be displaced and many Christian believers will find they no longer have a place of worship. The deeply wooded forests surrounding the area will also be cleared and any residents will be displaced. Recently, the nearby ancient Ziquala Monastery mysteriously caught fire and burned down. Locals report that calls for fire assistance were ignored. This land was also allegedly marked for development. Century old cemeteries are being desecrated as bulldozers clear the area, also marked for development.

These actions strike deeply at the heart of religious practices, at treasured religious artifacts and structures and at valued traditions; all of which further weakens these religious institutions and demeans and demoralizes the people. As the TPLF’EPRDF asserts their power by destroying these physical structures that support the religious community, they are essentially telling the people “who is in charge” over every aspect of their lives.

The move has outraged members of the Ethiopian Orthodox religious community, but it is also a threat to any Ethiopian people of faith, whether Christian, Muslim, Jew or other, as it sends a warning that nothing is off limits to this regime, even important heritage and religious sites dating back over a thousand years and places of worship that are at the foundation of religious observance. This is a critical issue of religious freedom!

Ethiopians strongly value their religious history that dates back to earliest times. *Ethiopia (Cush) is mentioned throughout the Old Testament, starting in Genesis. Moses married a Cushite from the Upper Nile and it was an Ethiopian (Cushite) that saved the life of Jeremiah, the prophet. Ethiopia was the first country evangelized by the earliest disciples of Jesus Christ and as a result, Ethiopia has some of Africa's oldest Christian monasteries and churches, most of them located in this same region. Ethiopia is also a country which welcomed Muslim refugees many centuries ago after Muhammad advised his followers to seek protection under the good leadership of Negus, King of Ethiopia. Ever since, Ethiopian Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived side by side in relative peace.*

This has begun to change under the current regime due to the TPLF/EPRDF's calculated efforts to weaken religious institutions and to foment division and conflict between and among religious communities. *It has served as a tool of repression and control meant to divide the people and strengthen this minority regime. As a result, it has increased religious intolerance and persecution, incited religious-based violence—often committed covertly by proxy perpetrators, sabotaged religious independence and undermined the witness and effectiveness of religious leadership when Ethiopians most need it. These efforts now include the regime's plans to destroy religious structures that are part of the cherished Christian heritage of the country. Although this sugar plantation is labeled as a "government enterprise," most believe it will only profit the regime's leadership, their families and members of their loyal elite.*

Ethiopians are becoming expendable people in their own country as this regime has marketed its land and resources to regime cronies or foreign investors from countries such as India, Saudi Arabia, and China. Although this is going on in other African countries, according to the Oakland Institute and the SMNE's co-reportⁱⁱⁱ on Ethiopia, this country has become the epicenter of what is commonly called "land-grabs;" all done without consulting the people and without compensation for their losses. For example, Human Rights Watch^{iv} completed an investigation in Gambella, Ethiopia that documented the eviction of 70,000 poor subsistence farmers after their land was leased to foreign companies, some for up to 99 years for next to nothing. One of those deals was made with an Indian company, Karuturi Global, Ltd, which already holds the lease for 100,000 hectares of prime agricultural land with ample water sources. They have been promised a total of 300,000 hectares (741,316 acres) at a reported cost of \$1.20 per hectare.

In a 2010 report from the University of Minnesota Extension Office,^v land rental rates for the best Minnesota land in 2009 averaged \$150 an acre and was expected to steadily increase during the next year. *In Gambella, the rent for prime agricultural land at the Karuturi rate of \$1.20 per hectare would total \$360,000 (USD) whereas in Minnesota, the equivalent for 300,000 hectares—741,316 acres—at \$150 per acre would total \$111,191,400. To be fair, Gambella land has to be cleared and prepared with very high initial costs and accompanying political risks; yet, the difference explains the race for African land and the resulting suffering of the people.*

Nearly three quarters—200,000 or more people—of the region's residents will eventually be illegally evicted from their indigenous land to make way for foreign-owned agricultural enterprises where most of the produce will be exported in this food-hungry country. *Some local people have voluntarily left under government pressure accompanied by promises of being resettled in "villages" with increased services; however, those services have not materialized and the people have found themselves on smaller and less fertile plots of land with less accessibility to water.^{vi} Some have died. Those who protest have been targets of abuse. This is happening in many regions of the country. Now, the land beneath these ancient historical buildings is being targeted.*

The Ethiopian Heritage Society of North American (EHSNA) states:

"[We are] especially troubled to discover that Waldba Monastery in Gondar is among the church lands chosen for demolition. One of the oldest monastic teaching institutions in Ethiopia, countless religious leaders have been educated within its walls for over 1000 years. Waldba also holds an important archive of scriptures and texts in ancient Ethiopian languages, many of which are very important to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Ethiopian religious and cultural history."

These are not only important religious sites, but are national and world heritage sites which should be protected. Some of the monasteries and churches in the region already are protected by UNESCO and by international laws. It is no different from ancient religious sites destroyed by al Qaeda in Afghanistan. This should not be allowed to happen.

Following the strong reaction from the people, the regime issued statements from religious leaders who denied that the monastery would be affected. However, these religious leaders were not the monks from Waldba, but instead were allegedly pro-government religious leaders coming from the same ethnic-based region of the TPLF that is in power. *As most Ethiopians know, this regime sees strong religious leadership as a threat to their power and longevity. Years ago this fear led to the replacement of key leaders within the religious leadership of these religious groups with the regime's own appointees; deeply dividing religious groups like the Orthodox Church.*

This regime's bulldozing of ancient cemeteries has also caused public outcry. In response, a regime spokesman dismissed their complaints as irrelevant, asserting that the bodies of those buried decomposed in seven years anyway and that the remains had been moved to another site.

Eritrean journalist Sophia Tesfamariam reports similar actions by the TPLF/EPRDF during the 1998-2000 border conflict with Eritrea in her recent article: ERITREA: Meles Zenawi's Lower Case Treachery:

"The regime's [TPLF] forces demolished churches and mosques and burned copies of the holy books, the Bible and the Quran. Meles Zenawi's forces destroyed historic monuments like the Belew-Kelew stelae at Metera that dates back to the 3rd Century A.D.... But none was uglier than the deliberate and malicious destruction of cemeteries where Eritrea's beloved martyrs lay. The minority regime's forces dug up martyrs' cemeteries, stole their coffins, uprooted and destroyed trees planted in honor of Eritrea's martyrs. Their bones were crushed and strewn all over the place. The regime showed its contempt for Eritreans and its disrespect for their dead."^{vii}

In Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, St. Joseph Cemetery was cleared to make way for a foreign investor, Sheik Muhammad al Amoudi,^{viii} a Saudi billionaire, who wanted this prime piece of real estate in the city. In Gambella, another cemetery was bulldozed in order to "clear" the land for the previously mentioned company, Karuturi Global Ltd. This is a violation of international law and an assault on basic Ethiopian values of how we respect our dead. This irreverence towards the religious and cultural foundations of Ethiopians may become the rallying cry that unites our people of faith; something that politics alone might never be able to equally achieve.

As the violation of land and property rights are added to this attack on religious institutions and deeply held cultural practices, there is concern that tensions may erupt into ethnic-based violence, directed against this apartheid regime that has created a system that only favors its own ethnic group, region and supporters. This scramble for Ethiopian land, resources and opportunity is not about western-style economic development that normally benefits the people; but instead, it is about a regime which freely confiscates the property of some of the poorest people in the world. They get away with it through their strong-armed politics, rigged elections and human rights abuses that give them unhindered access to whatever they want. Endemic corruption and cronyism has enriched this small number of elite and left the majority in abject poverty.

According to a recent study by Global Financial Integrity,^{ix} *in the year these land grabs began in full force, 2009, the amount of money leaving the country coming from bribes, kickbacks, corruption and export mispricing doubled from the previous two years to \$3.26 billion while exports were only \$2 billion.* The author concluded:

"The people of Ethiopia are being bled dry. No matter how hard they try to fight their way out of absolute destitution and poverty, they will be swimming upstream against the current of illicit capital leakage."^x

Everything is being "grabbed" by the TPLF regime—our land, our children, our women and our futures—anything from which a kleptocratic regime might profit. In the case of our children, investigations have revealed that in many cases, these children are not truly orphans, but regime cronies are getting away with it because they are above the law. These children are sometimes exploited as commodities to unknowing and sincere prospective adoptive parents.^{xi}

In the case of our women, Ethiopian employment agencies have made a business of "exporting" our young and impoverished women to work as domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries like Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the former Libya or the United Arab Emirates where many have become tragic victims of domestic servitude, physical abuse, sexual exploitation, suicide or even murder by their employers.^{xii} The regime's ban on supplying such domestic workers to these countries seems to be meaningless as even a government-controlled website reports the intention to supply 45,000 Ethiopian domestic workers a month to the Middle East.^{xiii}

Everyone wants to leave Ethiopia, not only for safety but because life has become so unbearable for the majority. According to one study, the 2010 Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI),^{xiv} *Ethiopia is the second poorest country in the world despite regime claims to double-digit economic growth. If their claims were really true, why would so many Ethiopian risk their lives to seek opportunity elsewhere? As a result, many sell everything they own to pay human traffickers to provide them safe passage to other countries; however, many die on the way as they cross waterways in overloaded boats, as they are crowded into containers carried by trucks to the border, suffocating for lack of oxygen, as they are left to die in the Sinai desert after traffickers removed their organs—we have stories from the ground from their relatives—or as they encounter thieves or dangerous situations in other countries like Mali where numerous dead bodies of Ethiopian refugees were found floating in Lake Mali.*

Ethiopians are at risk both in their country and outside it. At the same time, *anger and tension is building within Ethiopia that puts it at risk of a Rwandan-style genocide,^{xv} something that would cause Ethiopia to disintegrate into a failed state, all of which would also further destabilize the Horn of Africa. Meaningful intervention is imperative that would bring freedom, justice, reconciliation and equality for all in order to avert such a disaster.*

We need religious leaders to help us see the precious image of our Creator in the face of each other—putting humanity before ethnicity like the Good Samaritan of the Bible who did not ask the ethnic, religious, political or national background before helping the wounded man at the side of the road. Tragically, this runs counter to this regime who is working day and night to stir up ethnic and religious hatred and division.

Since the TPLF were rebels in the bush before coming to power, they were known to be a Marxist-Leninist group that was so ruthless that the U.S. State Department classified them as a terrorist group. They were known to kill their own people in order to blame others and had kidnapped and murdered foreign humanitarian workers and missionaries. *Recently, Wikileaks exposed allegations that TPLF/EPRDF security agents had covertly planted three bombs that went off in Addis Ababa in 2006.^{xvi} The incident was then used as a pretext to harshly clamp down on members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF); some of whom were arrested and imprisoned in connection to it.*

The Oromo have been a target of this regime. They make up the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia and have suffered great persecution as a group as well as becoming the target of countless efforts to divide them; particularly along religious lines. In another incident in late 2006, Meles supporters posed as Muslims of Oromo ethnicity as they attacked and brutally killed Christian Oromos worshiping in their church. The incident was reported in numerous publications; however, we in the SMNE spoke to a Christian survivor and eyewitness of the attack who was only spared because her relative was one of the perpetrators. She reported that he was not even a Muslim despite the fact he had uttered Muslim phrases; instead, she reported that he was a known regime collaborator. This is an example of the deception that is carried out against the believers in this country in order to manipulate the west into giving more aid. *In an effort to religiously divide and conquer the Oromo, the regime is stoking the fires of religious violence, never before part of this culture. To the credit of the people, many refuse; however, it has radicalized some and is dangerous to the people, the country, the Horn of Africa and to the world.*

What is going on is not only a threat to Orthodox believers, but to all Christians as well as to Muslims and to Jews. The TPLF/EPRDF regime has even adopted one of the most repressive laws^{xvii} against civil society in the world that makes it a criminal offense for organizations receiving more than 10% of its funding from foreign sources—most all of them—to **advance human and democratic rights, the promotion of equality of nations, nationalities and peoples and that of gender and religion, the promotion of the rights of the disabled and children’s rights, the promotion of conflict resolution or reconciliation and the promotion of the efficiency of the justice and law enforcement services.**^{xviii} This law can make it a crime—punishable by imprisonment—to promote reconciliation between ethnicities or religions. What kind of a country is this?

*In response, we call on religious leaders of all persuasions to stand up against this violation of religious freedom and human rights. We come to you not only as a social justice group who cares about stopping oppression, or as Africans or as Ethiopians, but we come to you as human beings whose survival depends on each other for **no one will be free until all are free.***

Will you bring these concerns to the attention of your own government, your membership, other organizations or decision-makers that could help? Please join with us in exposing and stopping the destruction of these important religious buildings, the injustice and the expropriation of all the land. Please condemn the regime’s practice of fomenting religious and ethnic division and its interference in the affairs of religious institutions.

Our world can indeed become a better place **if people of faith show God’s love by helping each other cast off the heavy yoke of tyranny—to the praise and glory of God Almighty.**

May the Almighty God empower, strengthen and guide you as you consider how you might contribute to the protection of the vulnerable, both near and far, because our humanity has no boundaries.

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Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? (Isaiah10:1-2)

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Your brother in God’s love,



Obang Metho,
Executive Director of the SMNE
910 17th St. NW, Suite 419
Washington, DC 20006 USA
Email: Obang@solidaritymovement.org.
Website: www.solidaritymovement.org

Cc: Designated Recipients

1. His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,

2. His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, Patriarch of Constantinople, New Rome,
3. His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa,
4. His Beatitude Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East,
5. His Beatitude Theophilos III, Patriarch of the Holy City of Jerusalem,
6. His Beatitude Alexy II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia,
7. His Beatitude Pavle, Patriarch of Belgrade and Serbia,
8. His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of Romania,
9. His Beatitude Maxim, Patriarch of Bulgaria,
10. His Beatitude Ilia II, Archbishop of Mtskheta-Tbilisi, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia,
11. His Beatitude Chrisostomos, Archbishop of Cyprus,
12. His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece,
13. His Beatitude Sawa, Metropolitan of Warsaw and All Poland,
14. His Beatitude Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana, Duerres and All Albania,
15. His Beatitude Christoforos, Metropolitan of the Czech and Slovak Republics,
16. His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa on the Apostolic Throne of St. Mark,
17. His Beatitude Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians,
18. His Beatitude Ignatius Zakka I, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church,
19. His Holiness Mar Thoma Didymos I, Catholicos of the East on the Apostolic Throne of St. Thomas and the Malankara Metropolitan,
20. His Holiness Abune Paulos, Fifth Patriarch and Catholicos of Ethiopia, St. Tekle Haymanot, Archbishop of Axium,
21. His Beatitude Mar Dinkha IV, Patriarch of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East,
22. Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC)
23. Rev. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury,
24. Rev. Fredrick James Hiltz, the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.
25. Bishop Susan C. Johnson, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
26. Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and President of the Lutheran World Federation,
27. Rev. George H. Freeman, General Secretary, World Methodist Council,
28. Rev. David Coffey, President of the Baptist World Alliance,
29. Rev. Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere....

Cc: Media

Joseph Warungu - BBC editor-in-chief
 Alan Murray - Executive Editor - Wall Street Journal
 Editor in chief of the New York Times
 Washington Post - Foreign Bureau
 Guardian UK- News Desk and Editor
 Al-Jazeera English - Editor-in-Chief
 Editorial Dept. Daily Mail
 Martin Hassan - Guardian UK
 Tristan Davies - Editor, The Independent
 Martin Fletcher - The Times
 Larry Kilman, Deputy CEO of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers

ⁱ *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, United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Australia, Japan and chapters in various cities and countries throughout the world, including within Ethiopia. You can find us through our website at: www.solidaritymovement.org .*

ⁱⁱ *See multiple human rights investigations from Genocide Watch and Human Rights Watch.*

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/110608UnderstandingLandDealsInAfrica.pdf> ;

<http://www.solidaritymovement.org/110608PressReleasesOnJointReport.php> ; Joint Report from Oakland Institute and SMNE Sounds Alarm on Foreign Agri-Investments in Food Insecure Ethiopia

^{iv} <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/01/16/waiting-here-death>

^v <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/collections/special/columns/statewide/archive/2010/11/farmland-rents-rise.shtml>

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- ^{vi} <http://www.brecorder.com/world/africa/52084-ethiopias-resettlement-plan-falls-short-on-development.html>
- ^{vii} <http://www.eritreacompass.com/eritrean-news/54-politics/643-eritrea-meles-zenawis-lower-case-treachery.html> ERITREA: *Meles Zenawi's Lower Case Treachery*, by Sophia Tesfamariam, November 5, 2011
- ^{viii} <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-04-05/saudi-billionaire-to-invest-600-million-in-ethiopia-cooking-oil>
- ^{ix} <http://www.financialtaskforce.org/2011/12/05/illegal-ethiopian-capital-flight-skyrocketed-in-2009-to-us3-26-billion/>; *Global Financial Integrity, "Illicit Financial Flows from Developing Countries over the Decade Ending 2009,"* by co-author, Sarah Freitas, December 2011
- ^x *Ibid*
- ^{xi} <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/12/how-ethiopias-adoption-industry-dupes-families-and-bullies-activists/250296/>
- ^{xii} <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/06/205839.html> Video news: Housemaid's Death Rattles Lebanon's Conscience <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-lebanon-housemaidbre8330vr-20120404,0,4849757.full.story>
- ^{xiii} <http://www.newsdiere.com/lifeandstyle/2684-saudi-seeks-45000-new-ethiopian-maids-per-month.html>
- ^{xiv} <http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Ethiopia.pdf>; 2010 Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI).
- ^{xv} <http://www.genocidewatch.org/alerts/countriesatrisk2011.html>; Current Countries at Risk of Genocide
- ^{xvi} <http://www.terrorismwatch.org/2011/09/wikileaks-ethiopia-bombs-itself-blames.html>
- ^{xvii} http://www.civicus.org/csw_files/CIVICUSAnalysisEthiopiaCharitiesProc160908.pdf
- ^{xviii} <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/humanrights/documents/EthiopiaCSOPaper-Nov2009.pdf>