



June 8, 2012

An Open Letter to President Peter MacKinnon, University of Saskatchewan

“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.”

(Comment highlighting Ethiopia made by Global Financial Integrity on December 5, 2011 preceding the release of their study on Illicit Financial Outflows from Developing Countries Over the Decade Ending in 2009)

Dear President MacKinnon,

On June 10-15, an Ethiopian delegation of top-level officials from **Hawassa University (HU)**, located in Ethiopia’s Southern Regional State, will arrive in Saskatoon to further their long-standing collaboration with the **University of Saskatchewan (U of S)** *in the advancement of sustainable agricultural development, land management, human nutrition, community health and food security in Ethiopia, all with a strong emphasis on education.* This relationship dates back to 1997, when the U of S and HU first partnered in a project in sustainable land management, and continues today with several worthy projects.”

As a proud alumni of the University of Saskatchewan and a long-time former resident of Saskatoon, I would like to highly commend the University of Saskatchewan for their laudable efforts in reaching out beyond the borders of our great province and nation to meaningfully address the long-standing issues in Ethiopia of chronic food insecurity, malnutrition, lack of agricultural development and inadequate health care. This relationship between a major Ethiopian university in an agricultural region and the U of S is a natural one due to the U of S’s strong agricultural programs and expertise in this “bread-basket” of Canada that can be shared with a country and region globally known for its image of hunger and suffering despite its fertile land and ample resources.

As the Executive Director of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, a non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement representing the diverse people of Ethiopia, *I come to you first and foremost as human being who believes 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 SMNE.

The SMNE is committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability, respect for human and civil rights and economic prosperity to the people of Ethiopia and beyond. The SMNE has branches in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom with chapters in Ottawa, Washington D.C., Melbourne, London, Geneva, Oslo, Stockholm, Tokyo, Brussels and other cities and countries throughout the world, including Ethiopia. You can find us through our website at: www.solidaritymovement.org.

Mr. President,

Let me be clear, I do support the noble goals of these projects and partnership and believe the U of S is a great university that upholds the highest standards and practice in carrying out these projects; yet because partnering with “the Ethiopia of today” is not always what it seems to be, there may be some unknown added risks you should know about. As an Ethiopian insider and as someone who maintains many relationships with the academic community of the U of S, I have a vested interest in contributing to a successful outcome; therefore, I would like to voice some cautions, hoping to help shape current and future projects in a manner that better ensures success on the ground.

As you hope to lift local communities of Ethiopians out of dire poverty and hunger through sustainable agricultural development and know-how, it is essential that you hear from a variety of perspectives so that your many efforts are not limited, sabotaged or exploited for the benefit of a few.

Mr. President,

Hawassa University, its board, its administration, its academic staff and its regional government, are all under the complete authority of the *Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)*, whose leader, *Prime Minister Meles Zenawi*, represents the *Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)*. Members of the *TPLF*, representing an ethnic-based minority making up 7% of the population, controls and dominates nearly every aspect of every sector of Ethiopian society including all aspects of the government from the central government to the regional governments to the local districts and village governments. *This is a well known fact.*

The chairman of the Board of the HU, Mr. Shiferaw Shigute, is also the Regional President of Southern Regional State, the equivalent of being our current Premier Mr. Brad Wall of Saskatchewan. All of his and his regional government's actions are tightly controlled by the federal government of Ethiopia. As a result, *he and others are only free to discuss and disclose the approved party-line information, statistics, facts and perspectives, all of which must present a rosy picture of the Ethiopian government and its accomplishments. This means he will not be free to share the desperate needs of the people of the region and reports alleging urgent need for food aid in the region as the numbers of children and others needing therapeutic feeding have nearly doubled since 2011.*

In a stunning departure from normal, the Ethiopian government-controlled and typically self-censoring online news site, "Addis Fortune," published an article on May 27, 2012 titled, "Revolutionary Democracy Starves," written by an anonymous writer, which accuses the Meles regime of "basking in the glory of the World Economic Forum and the G8 meetings, while at the same time trying to deny and suppress the critical needs of drought-stricken farmers in Southern Regional State whose children are starving to death."¹ This is the same state governed by your esteemed guest, Mr. Shigute.

The writer also asks: *So, why did the Revolutionary Democrats in the South [Shigute administration] allow children in their own region to fall into preventable starvation? It boggles the mind. Shortage of resources does not come into it. There was plenty of carryover food stock from the 2011 drought that was available when the problem started in January. It neither is ignorance, as local officials are certainly very aware of the crisis and have been trying to generate a response, as have some aid agencies. So, it must be politics.*

Clearly, the Revolutionary Democrats do not want any bad news to undermine their charge into middle-income status. The language has to not only be positive but it has to be over-the-top enthusiastic, with targets met or exceeded and no clouds on the horizon. Under these conditions, which regional official would want to be the one admitting that there is a crisis in their neighbourhood?

The Southern officials have a reputation of causing costly political embarrassment to their comrades with high malnutrition in previous droughts in 2006 and 2008, both in the highly sensitive post-2005 election period. It seems that when problems are mentioned from the South, officials risk their necks and federal Revolutionary Democrats talk darkly of mismanagement, bad cultural practices, and food aid dependency. "

The current Ethiopian regime, which has been the subject of numerous investigations by groups like **Human Rights Watch**, **Genocide Watch**, **Amnesty International**, the **Task Force on Financial Integrity and Development**, the **Committee for the Protection of Journalists**, **Reporters without Borders**, **Survival International**, **International Rivers**, **Cultural Survival**, the **Oakland Institute/SMNE** and others *have documented repression of freedom, serial human rights abuses, blatant bias towards the regime's own ethnic group and region, favoritism towards regime supporters, the absence of or political use of the rule of law, fraudulent elections, the criminalization of dissent including the misuse of an anti-terrorism law to target voices of freedom," the repression of civil society, the use of detention and torture to punish opposition figures, the lack of transparency, government control of information, the misuse of foreign aid to shore up political power or to punish non-party members," the loss of \$11.3 billion in illicit capital flight from 2000 to 2009, most from corruption, bribery and money-laundering,"² and widespread land-grabbing that has already displaced over 70,000 rural small farmers in the Gambella region of Ethiopia; all done without consulting the people, compensating them for their losses or providing adequate services or sources of alternative livelihoods* according to a recent Human Rights Watch study.³ For your information, Gambella is the region where my family and my own ethnic group, the Anuak, has lived for many generations; settling on both sides of the river dividing Ethiopia and South Sudan.

Mr. President,

The 2011 Legatum Prosperity Index among 110 countries in the world places Ethiopia at the very bottom for freedom and 108th overall. Despite the acclaimed economic growth, extreme levels of food inflation—29.2% in May, down from 36.7% in April—have further undermined the ability of already poor Ethiopians to afford the cost of food at these prices.

Other international indexes show Ethiopia near to the bottom on many different scales such as access to the Internet—one of the lowest rates in the world at 0.5% with the government being the only provider and controlling access, monitoring use and blocking websites such as ours. Now they have installed a system to block access to the Tor network, which allows users to access blocked websites. Mobile cell phone use is 5%; 20 times less than the leading African countries and lower than war torn Somalia. Again, the government is the only provider. There is no independent media with the regime controlling the only radio and television stations. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi even admitted that they were trying to jam independent stations being broadcast from other countries.

A new law as of May 24, 2012 makes illegal the use of VoIP hardware or software, like Skype. *“Violations are punishable by 15 years in prison; however, it is likely that HU/U of S project partners’ violation of this law will be overlooked or otherwise “exempted” as long as both parties refrain from any criticism of government practices.* Another part of the law makes publishers of newspapers, magazines and other print liable for what they print.ⁱⁱⁱ This law now advises them to refuse to publish anything that might be construed to be “illegal,” which has come to mean anything in opposition to the TPLF/EPRDF regime. This law is a clear violation of the Ethiopian Constitution that assures freedom of expression.

Another repressive law, the **Charities and Societies Proclamationⁱⁱⁱ**, *which was passed in 2010, has essentially closed down most every independent civic organization in Ethiopia. At the last tally this included over 2,600 organizations. This law restricts civic organizations that receive more than 10% of their support from foreign sources from promoting human rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, rights for the disabled and efforts to bring religious or ethnic groups together for conflict resolution. Once again, the law carries harsh criminal penalties for violators. It is used for political purposes and has paralyzed civil society. In its place, look-alike pseudo-institutions have sprung up, all created and controlled by the government, oftentimes appearing legitimate to outsiders.*

Mr. President,

Religious institutions, both Christian and Muslim, have also been taken over, divided and weakened by the TPLF/ERPFD regime. The regime has played a heavy role in ensuring the appointment of their own “party-friendly” church leaders, causing the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to form a church in exile. Religious buildings and sacred sites have been destroyed or are scheduled for destruction, including an ancient fourth century Christian monastery and eighteen churches in the birthplace of African Christianity in northern Ethiopia, all to make way for a government-owned sugar plantation.

Christians, Muslims and Jews have always been able to live peaceably in Ethiopia, unlike in some other places in the world and are now taking steps to stand together in support of the religious rights and freedoms of all Ethiopians from government interference in Ethiopia. Ethiopian Muslims, who accuse the government of forcing on them leaders holding to a more extremist foreign-imported doctrine, have been peacefully protesting within the compounds of their mosques for nearly six weeks. Government security forces shot and killed more than seventeen peaceful protestors, including a six-year-old child.

Ethnic identity has also been used as a regime tactic to divide Ethiopians from each other. *This practice recently backfired when the regime, under the regional leadership of Mr. Shiferaw Shigute, deported 70,000 Ethiopians of Amhara ethnicity out of Gura Ferda in the Southern Regional State, reminiscent of Jews who were targeted in Germany based wholly on their ethnicity. Mr. Shigute himself signed a letter that gave local security forces the power to expel, kick out, throw out - force to leave or move out ethnic Amharas from Gura Ferda. Similar letter were sent to schools notifying them with fixing dates of which the children will be kicked out of school and leave the area.* You find the scanned copy of a letter with Mr. Shigute’s signature and the log of the Southern Regional State at this link <http://www.zehabesha.com/?p=5340>. The letter is written in Amharic, Ethiopian national language. These people had to leave homes and farms they had occupied, some for more than twenty-five years. Both VOA and German radio have covered this story. VOA has actually interviewed the displaced people, Mr. Shigute himself and other regional government officials on this issue.

Mr. President,

When the TPLF/EPRDF was criticized, Mr. Shigute justified the actions. He allegedly stated in public, *"We did not displace anybody. We are just telling them [the Amhara] that they should go back to where they came from, which is the Amhara region."* Prime Minister Meles Zenawi reiterated the identical argument in front of the Ethiopian Parliament.

This irrational policy not only violates the Ethiopian Constitution; but also violates international laws against the forced deportation of people as stated in the Rome Statute, which pertains to the International Criminal Court. According to the Rome Statute, Article 7, section 2 (d) prohibiting the "deportation, displacement or forcible transfer of population" from an area in which they are lawfully present, without grounds permitted under international law is a violation. This move by the regime has served as a rallying cry to Ethiopians across ethnic lines due to the shared belief that all citizens of a nation should be allowed freedom of movement within the country.

Mr. Shigute's administration will soon displace 50,000 indigenous people from the Omo Valley to make way for a government-owned sugar plantation, which will be situated near to a water-source, the newly constructed, but not yet functional, Gibe III Dam. This dam is expected to displace nearly 500,000 of some of the most marginalized people in all of Ethiopia whose lives will be in immediate jeopardy when the dam is in use. ^{xiv} The European Union and the World Bank refused to fund the project based on the human toll; however, the TPLF/EPRDF found other sources and are proceeding with their plans. This dam is also located in Southern Regional State where Mr. Shigute is president.

Mr. President,

The lack of academic freedom is another problem and most students and faculty at the U of S would be shocked at the restrictions as well as the disparity of opportunity based on politics and ethnicity. The 2011 U.S. State Department's Report on Human Rights in Ethiopia that was released yesterday, June 7, 2012, indicts the government for its suppression of academic freedom.

Access to education, scholarships, jobs, teaching positions, government contracts, business opportunities and other perks are nearly totally dominated by the party's own ethnic group and most avid party members, regime cronies and their families. Reportedly, students at colleges and universities are graded by ethnicity and loyalty to the party when in school; actually receiving a grade from A to D depending on these qualifications. Those who are of the right ethnicity and who are loyal will receive an "A" which will ensure them of the best government positions when they graduate whereas a brilliant student from the wrong ethnicity and political view will likely receive a grade of "D" which means they have little chance of later finding a job. Teachers and administrators must also tow the party line. Many of these students and professionals give up on Ethiopia and attempt to leave the country, often encountering life-threatening situations as they hope to find asylum in free and democratic countries like Canada.

Mr. Shigute is also in a precarious position following a public hearing to evaluate his performance, held on February 13-19, 2012. The evaluation was one of many held by federal government officials for the purpose of grading the performance of the regional president as well as all regional government officials. During the open hearing, it was revealed that Mr. Shigute, a major shareholder of the Sidamo Coffee Exporter Association, was allegedly involved in corruption amounting to millions of birr. In his presence, it was decided by the TPLF/EPRDF party that he had to step down and be charged accordingly.

According to sources, present at the hearing, he retorted, *"I am not alone in this matter. The Prime Minister's wife, Mrs. Azeb Mesfin, is also involved in this. We did everything together and used the money together. If I have to be held accountable, she has to be too and if I have to pay back the money, she also has to do the same."* Having said this he left the meeting place while the meeting was still going on. When the news broke to the Prime Minister in Addis Ababa, Meles reversed the decision. Allegedly, senior officials of the region were disappointed and said that the PM did it just to save his wife.

The president of Hawassa University Dr. Yosef Mamo, has also been accused of corruption in the region. Even though both cases appear to have been dropped, the implications of these charges should be of concern to the **U of S, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC)** and Canadian taxpayers who have generously provided funds for these projects. Due diligence is critical in order to make sure funds for these projects are not misused.

Mr. President,

Working with an academic institution like HU, which is subject to the control of the TPLF/EPRDF, is a challenge; particularly if the U of S is expected to turn a blind eye to questionable and opaque practices. What I am hoping is that the U of S will carefully build into every project the necessary safeguards, checks and balances, guiding values, moral expectations and accountability, which is as important in the transformation of Ethiopia into a successful and healthy nation, as is the transfer of practical knowledge, material support and good will.

Truth, academic freedom, freedom of expression and the respect for the basic dignity and rights of all people do not exist in Ethiopia. The U of S, the people of Saskatchewan and the government of Canada can all help create an environment most conducive to success by unflinchingly addressing these issues as essential elements of success and partnership. When the U of S signs a letter of intent, it should have moral and ethical standards for the administration of any grants and partnerships and expectations that partners would follow the same.

Mr. President,

We hope the U of S, the government of Canada, CIDA, IDRC and AUCC will all re-examine their policies towards Ethiopia, a country led by an increasingly authoritarian regime, so that we do not allow our cherished Canadian values to be compromised abroad where we have the opportunity to play an important and pivotal role in influencing our partners to adopt higher standards that can make them prosper.

As an Ethiopian-Canadian who has lived over half my life in Saskatchewan, I have been greatly edified by the great people who live out the very values, principles and practices we hope will become the foundation of a New Ethiopia. Please know that your moral and ethical standards are essential parts to making these partnerships most effective and inclusive. Please be strong and steadfast in helping Ethiopians to transform their country. Without truth, justice and freedom, the best and most noble efforts may never reach their goals.

Thank you for what you are doing! *I am confident that the U of S will continue to be a shining example to people near and far as this great university has been contributing to the betterment of our humanity for the last hundred years.*

In appreciation,



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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/>

² These projects include: 1) a training and development project to improve food security through improved and sustainable agricultural productivity and human nutrition, ending in 2012, 2) a project to link agro-food systems and community equity for food security in rural Ethiopia, ending in 2013, and 3) a project between selected Canadian and Ethiopian students to bring a interdisciplinary approach to improved food security, nutrition and community health systems, ending in 2013.

³ <http://www.addisfortune.net/Revolutionary%20Democracy%20Starves.htm>

⁴ <http://www.addisfortune.net/Revolutionary%20Democracy%20Starves.htm>

⁵ <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/110608PressReleasesOnJointReport.php>; Joint Report from Oakland Institute and SMNE Sounds Alarm on Foreign Agri-Investments in Food Insecure Ethiopia

⁶ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112220365.html> Letter from Reporters Without Borders to UN Special Rapporteur on Abuse of Anti-terrorism Law

⁷ <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/10/19/development-without-freedom-0>; Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression

⁸ <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/>

⁹ <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/01/16/waiting-here-death>

¹⁰ <http://www.prosperity.com/country.aspx?id=ET> ; 2011 Legatum Prosperity Index

¹¹ <http://en.rsf.org/ethiopia.html>

¹² Ibid

¹³ http://www.civicus.org/csw_files/CIVICUSAnalysisEthiopiaCharitiesProc160908.pdf; The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation prohibits any organization that receives more than 10% of its budget from foreign sources from (a) advancing human and democratic rights, (b) promoting equality of nations, nationalities, peoples, gender and religion, (c) promoting the rights of the disabled and children, (d) promoting conflict resolution or reconciliation and, (e) promoting the efficiency of justice and law enforcement services.

¹⁴ <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/8115>

¹⁵ http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?dynamic_load_id=186196

“Academic Freedom and Cultural Events: The government restricted academic freedom, including the curriculum, teachers’ appointments, and student enrollment decisions. Speech, expression, and assembly frequently were restricted on university and high school campuses. Students in schools and universities were indoctrinated in the core precepts of the ruling EPDRF party’s concept of “revolutionary democracy.” According to credible sources, the ruling party “stacks” student enrollment at Addis Ababa University, which is the nation’s largest and most influential university, with students loyal to the party to ensure further adherence to the party’s principles and to forestall any student protest. The government also restricted academic freedom in other ways. Authorities did not permit teachers at any level to deviate from official lesson plans and actively prohibited partisan political activity and association of any kind on university campuses. Numerous anecdotal reports suggested that non-EPRDF members were more likely to be transferred to undesirable posts and bypassed for promotions. There was a lack of transparency in academic staffing decisions, with numerous complaints from individuals in the academic community of bias based on party membership, ethnicity, or religion. Some college students reportedly were pressured to pledge allegiance to the EPRDF in order to secure enrollment in universities or government jobs after graduation. According to multiple credible sources, teachers and high school students in grade 10 and above were required to attend training on the concepts of revolutionary democracy and EPRDF party ideology. Many students reportedly believed that they needed EPRDF membership to gain admission to a university and consequently became members.”