

June 28, 2012



** SMNE Media & Public Relations:*

Gambella has become an area of concern for investors and yet, most do not really know what is going on. A Western journalist in Addis Ababa recently asked Mr. Obang Metho, the Executive Director of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) and a native of Gambella, with many existing connections to the local people, to comment on the conditions in the Gambella region. However, due to the Ethiopian regime's extreme sensitivity to critical information and its willingness to utilize vague anti-terrorism laws to repress members of the media or deport foreign journalists who do not comply, this journalist and the newspaper he/she represented have decided against publishing this information while in Addis. We, the SMNE are now publishing the answers to his/her questions along with Obang's answers as we believe it may be of interest to the public.

Journalist's question: "Could you provide an up-to-date comment on the situation in Gambella?"

Obang: "Investors and shareholders need to better understand what is happening on the ground if they are seeking a safe, secure and welcoming environment for business. If Raj Ramakrishna from Karuturi, Saudi Sheik Muhammed Al Amoudi from Saudi Star or any other investor thinks that things are rosy in Gambella, they are fooling themselves. Nothing can change itself for the better without someone making an effort to actually address the root problems. If investors simply depend on unelected, autocratic regimes to forcibly create a risk-free business environment while displacing the people from their land, giving no compensation for their losses and collectively cracking down on their human rights, the results will be limited and eventually they will falter or fail. No business will prosper in such a hostile environment; instead, good business practice will require proactive problem solving that can genuinely bring inclusive benefits to all stakeholders. Whether it is Karuturi, Saudi Star or the Ethiopian government, none of them has shown any interest in doing this.

Even though land in Ethiopia cannot be privately owned, the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees indigenous land rights—as do international laws; yet, these laws are clearly being broken, with impunity, by the regime's power holders. The people have lost all rights to redress, all of which foments more, not less, resistance. Buyers beware for unless the government changes its approach and agrees to address the legitimate concerns of the people, these conflicts will create a risky, if not openly antagonistic, environment for investors.

Reports have emerged that public officials in Gambella have received hefty bribes and kickbacks from regime-friendly investors in exchange for preferential treatment; yet this is no guarantee that such favored status is sustainable. This is a corrupt and opportunistic regime whose own self-interest is primary. It can and has changed the rules at whim. Its continuity is also in question as the majority of Ethiopians are seeking regime change. If Ethiopia is to move from being a chronically needy "welfare state" to greater independence from foreign aid, it will not only require a more open free-market economy, including foreign investment, but also regulations and standards that as of now do not exist or only exist on paper rather than in practice.

Today's model has demanded the land, the livelihoods and sometimes the lives of the poorest Ethiopians while denying them of any of the benefits. To date, I have not seen or heard of any investors who have admitted, even in part, to the reality of the violations of the people's human, civil and land rights on the ground. Even though information is blocked within Ethiopia, investigations, studies and articles which expose the nature of these deals are widely available, but instead of investors objecting to the regime's practices, through silence or active complicity, these partners have promoted the government's denials, lies and propaganda and with it, the disenfranchisement of the people."

Journalist: “You have commented on the heavy presence of government security forces in the Anuak zone accompanied by reports of significant harassment directed towards the local people. Could you explain?”

Obang: “This is true. Right now the number one issue in Gambella is security and I am not the only one saying this. It has been backed up by **TPLF/EPRDF** government officials who recently assessed the Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions to evaluate the atmosphere for development and investors. The team was made up of **Addisu Legesse**, the former Deputy Prime Minister under Meles, who is now the Chairman of the Board to a group designated to support what they call the “backward regions” meaning the Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz and the Afar regions; and, **Tsegaye Berhe**, the former president of the Tigray region, who is now the security advisor to Meles. Both were in Gambella in May. They identified security and stability as being the major roadblocks to development in the region. The vice president of the Gambella region also said the same thing. Their findings in the Benishangul-Gumuz region were different. They assessed the major obstacles to development as being ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Their conclusions were reported on government-sponsored websites.

What we have been saying all along was confirmed—that nothing has changed in the Gambella region and that as a result, instability and insecurity in the region are increasing. Simply forcing submission and silence will not alleviate the rising tensions, but will instead exacerbate them.

For two years we in the SMNE have been warning the **TPLF/ERPDRF** government that their policies and practices involving these land acquisitions should change because they are not only wrong, illegal and threatening the survival of the local people, but also are fueling tensions which could explode into violence that could have been avoided. The findings of these officials confirmed that the results of ignoring these warnings are now being seen and will continue to occur.

From recent reports on the ground, the heaviest concentration of the **TPLF/EPRDF**-controlled military is in the Anuak zone and there are numerous reports of their harassment of the Anuak, especially of the men. Many Anuak are being arrested; not only in the rural areas, but also in Gambella town.

On June 7, 2012, the head of the prison, Mr. Oman Ogalla, and three Gambella regional government security agents namely Mr. Opiny Okongo, Mr. Okello Oman, Mr. Ojulu Opiti and 18 other Anuak working for the regional government—some as security agents used to hunt down Anuak opposed to the land-grabs—were arrested under suspicion that they might be supporting those in the armed resistance. They were brought to Addis Ababa last week where they were incarcerated in the 3rd federal prison in Addis. According to family members, these people were not in any communication with the Anuak insurgents but instead are considered victims of a regime that can change its loyalties overnight.

Currently, there is no freedom of movement in the region due to the lack of security; including across the international border from Ethiopia into the new and fragile Republic of South Sudan where the Meles regime’s security agents have been sent—contrary to international laws—to search out Anuak insurgents. Within the Gambella region, any Anuak is now viewed as a possible insurgent. If someone, particularly a man or older teen, is found alone by himself in a remote area, he will undoubtedly face harassment, torture, beatings, arrest or disappearance. The numbers of reported incidents have increased after the attack on Saudi Star as the Anuak are now being targeted collectively. Although the **TPLF/EPRDF** alleges to have the perpetrators of the Saudi Star attack in custody, our sources refute this claim.

Because of the lack of security in any part of the Anuak zone, most of the Anuak children and teens are not going to school. The government has even tried to block the main road leading to neighboring South Sudan in efforts of stopping Anuak from going to the refugee camp or to other parts of the country. As long as this goes on, no one is safe in the region; whether it is the investor or the local people.”

Journalist: “What in your view was the cause of the attack on the Saudi Star contractors?”

Obang: “What happened at Saudi Star is a tragedy. Lives should not have been lost, but it does not surprise me. We in the SMNE condemned the killings but this is exactly what we have been warning the government about since 2008. For a long time the people have been ignored and pushed aside by the Meles regime as well as by the investors who are all too anxious to take the indigenous land at incredibly low prices. The government has failed to give the people anything in return, even an acknowledgment of what they are doing. In public statements, there are only denials of the reality on the ground. These plans have been in place for nearly four years, but there was not a single time when either the investors or the government informed the people as to what was going on, what was planned or where they asked the people for their opinions. They never sat down to talk to the people who have depended on the land for their survival for generations.

Even though Ethiopia is known for its starvation and hunger, these indigenous people of Gambella have not been dependent on food aid but have mostly fed themselves. Now, the means to do so have been taken away. While the government lies about what they are doing, the people are living in the reality and know differently. It is inevitable that a continuation of the same will only serve to increase the tension. People will get to the point where they will resist and fight back. When you push any living thing to the edge, let alone a human being, there will be a time when they fight back.

The failure of the Meles government to address the people's interests or the people's needs is the reason that led to these unfortunate deaths at the Saudi Star farm. It is an unnecessary tragedy that could have been prevented; however, instead of addressing the root problem that could reduce tensions and resistance, they are intensifying efforts to enforce security in the region through collective punishment of innocent civilian Anuak. They are harassing, torturing and arresting many people as we have reported elsewhere." This is not the solution and will only fuel resistance as I have already said. This attitude of intimidation against all Anuak will not work and has never worked.

At some point these indigenous people will decide they have nothing to lose; some of them will resist passively, some will leave the country, others will take up guns and resist violently like was done at Saudi Star; still others, like ourselves in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) and the Anuak Justice Council (AJC), will use non-violent methods to confront the TPLF/EPRDF regime for their human rights abuses, corruption and illegal actions. The SMNE is now working with a law firm to examine various avenues for possible legal action, including international lawsuits."

Journalist: "Please comment on the bus attack in April by unknown assailants that took the lives of 17 civilians."

Obang: "This is the most horrific incident that has happened in Gambella since the massacre of 424 Anuak leaders in December 2003 by the Meles regime and militia groups. Up to today, no one has claimed responsibility for the attack; however, recently, the Governor of Gambella, Omot Obang Olom said the ambush and killings were the work of Eritreans. I highly doubt this claim and believe he is just using a lesson from Meles' playbook. Early on, many, including me, were incensed, believing that Anuak insurgents may have been responsible for the attack; however, testimony from survivors of the attack have stated that although the faces of the assailants were camouflaged, they still could plainly see that the assailants were not the indigenous people of the Gambella region.

The attack also led to an explosion of the numbers of troops deployed to the region. Now, some are wondering if the Meles regime was behind the attack, contrived as a pretext to maximize security in the region for the investors by bringing thousands of new troops to the region and by harshly clamping down on the people. This kind of "false flag operation," where the Meles regime has been accused of committing terroristic acts against their own people while posing as insurgents, would not be an unusual move for this regime who has been using such tactics since before they overthrew the previous government in 1991.

Even Wikileaks confirmed this in a report from the U.S. Embassy which indicated that the TPLF/EPRDF had blown up a car in Addis Ababa that took the lives of three people and wounded others, but which had been blamed on members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The Meles regime proceeded to arrest OLF officials. In doing it, they also were allegedly attempting to gain support from the west in the War on Terror.

Prior to bus ambush and the Saudi Star attack which followed the ambush, Anuak insurgents had targeted and killed certain government informants working in cahoots the TPLF/EPRDF governor. During these incidents, several bystanders also lost their lives or were wounded; something that increased the anxiety of investors and workers in the region.

The identity of the assailants in the bus attack is still unknown; however, what remains is a desperate need to restore stability and security to the region by addressing the root problems. The people who murdered and died were young students and they became the victims of the government's failure to deal with these issues. These were innocent young people, somebody else's children and they were to be part of the shared future of all Ethiopians, but now they have been taken from us prematurely."

Journalist: "Do you think the attacks are likely to continue?"

Obang: "Why not? What have the regional government, the federal government or the investors done differently other than to crack down all the harder on the local people? If efforts are not made to find solutions, we are afraid it will get worse and may cause the loss of more human lives and the perpetration of more human rights abuses on the part of both the government and the rebels.

The crisis of instability and insecurity will not go away without being addressed and resolved to the mutual benefit of all stakeholders. The more the regime suppresses the people, the more likely it is that some will choose the more radical approaches; especially if they believe other avenues are closed to them.

Gambella is not the only region where this is happening. The same combination of land grabs, forced displacement of the people, harsh suppression and resulting violence by both rebels and the government is going on in other regions in Ethiopia—like in the Afar region and in the Ogaden. The recent report by Human Rights Watch, “*What Will Happen if Hunger Comes? Abuses against the Indigenous People of Ethiopia’s Lower Omo Valley*”. The full report can be downloaded from: <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/ethiopia0612webwcover.pdf>. HRW provides extensive documentation regarding the Ethiopian government’s plans to forcibly displace over 200,000 indigenous people from the Lower Omo Valley from their land—the Mursi, Bodi (Mekan), Muguji (Kwegu), Kara (Karo), Hamer, Bashada, Nyangatom and Daasanach—without consultation, consent or compensation; all violations of the Ethiopian Constitution and international laws.

Resistance is already being met with intimidation, harassment and human rights abuses by government security forces. If plans go accordingly, the Omo River will soon become the site of the highest dam in all of Africa, the Gibe III Dam, which will soon redirect its water into irrigation canals to provide water for huge new Ethiopian-government owned and water-thirsty sugar plantations as well as for the 100,000 hectares of land earmarked for other commercial development. According to the same report, the potential for violent conflict over these land and water issues is extremely high, even more so than in the Gambella region because the indigenous people are so well-armed.”

Journalist: “Is there popular, widespread opposition to the land lease program?”

Obang: “Absolutely! There is no question about this. It would be difficult to find any Anuak, except regime supporters, who were not opposed to it. The Anuak stand to lose all their land and will end up poorer than they have ever been; despite already being a marginalized people. This is something that will threaten their survival. The people have never been consulted nor have they been compensated for their losses. The entire population of the region has been left out. People know who the investors are who are benefiting—they are foreigners and regime cronies. Not a single indigenous person or community owns a tractor so why would anyone think a popularly-supported resistance movement would not rise up?”

The grievances of the Anuak and others affected by these land grabs, displacements and human rights abuses in Ethiopia are not only coming from the indigenous people but are being supported by international human rights organizations and social justice groups who believe what the Meles regime is promoting is equivalent to the “second scramble for Africa.”

In my opinion, these land acquisition agreements are being made in Addis Ababa between the Meles regime and the investors, excluding the people and are no different than the Berlin Conference of the 19th century when Europeans met together, without the inclusion of Africans, to decide how to divide up Africa. The result of that decision continues to impact Africans and to contribute to an authoritarian style of ethnic-based leadership, and along with it, to ethnic conflict, poverty and suffering on the continent.”

Journalist: “Is the resettlement program ongoing?”

Obang: “Yes, what has changed? Despite the fact that the regime flatly denies it, the forced resettlement plans continue. Even the government has publically projected a figure of 45,000 households, three-quarters of the population of Gambella, who will ultimately be resettled.

Additionally, why would it not continue for it is a supremely lucrative money-making scheme that has benefited the top power-holders in the regime who are amassing personal wealth through it, including Meles and his family members. Between the years 2008 and 2009, illicit financial capital flowing out of the country has doubled according to a study by Global Financial Integrity, who highlighted Ethiopia in their report of December of 2011 as an extreme example of corruption. I am convinced that it is related to the explosion of these land grabs. They even suggested that without change, the situation is hopeless. I quote from their conclusion: “*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.*” Why would the regime voluntarily stop it without pressure to do so?”

Journalist: “Do you see the current events as a continuation of the marginalization and oppression of the indigenous Gambellan people?”

Obang: “Definitely, no question about this. It is also happening in the Omo Valley region and in other places. The regime wants the resources but not the people. This plan did not start overnight but has been in motion for years. Over twenty years ago, the Gambella region was identified as a place of great, but yet to be realized, potential in studies done by Russia as early as 1990 and by another consultant hired by the TPLF/EPRDF in 1995; both of which provided foundational information for a Master Plan for development of the region. Part of the attraction was its under-population and plentiful land and water. I believe the TPLF/EPRDF’s plan to ultimately exploit the potential of this region meant the continued marginalization of the indigenous people who would only become an obstacle to this plan if they were educated and empowered.

Has anyone wondered why the Gambella region has remained so marginalized, without one single university and only having antiquated methods of farming despite being identified in these studies as a potential “breadbasket of Ethiopia?” Gebre Barnabas also reiterated the region’s potential in 2004, following the genocide of the Anuak leaders in December of 2003.

Before the foreign investors came in 2008, agricultural development in the Gambella region was almost non-existent; yet, it is now the epicenter of land grabs on the continent. Is this by chance or by plan? What could the Anuak or other indigenous have accomplished in the region in the past if they had had access to some mechanized farming machinery? Instead, the many tractors and farm machines owned and used by the Mengistu regime were confiscated when the TPLF/EPRDF came into power and most of them were taken to the Tigray region.

No wonder there was under-utilized land when all the local people have to work with are antiquated farming methods; yet, they have succeeded in feeding themselves. Now, Gambella is one the first places investors want to come to for land.

Although the government purports that they are offering improved access to services to the local people who then purportedly are voluntarily moving to resettlements, these are not the people who have the fewest services but are people whose land is later taken over by investors. If the Meles government genuinely cared about the provision of services to the people they would go to the more rural areas where the people have nothing. Yet, they are not helping the neediest rather they are promising—although not delivering—services to the less needy whose land is wanted. In most of the regions, like in Tigray, the service goes to the people instead of forcing the people to move to the services.

Among the marginalized living in the Omo Valley, the people have been used by the government as “income-generators” for the tourism industry. Instead of educating them, giving them access to clean water and providing services, their backwardness has been maintained and exploited.”

Journalist: “Do add any other relevant comments.”

Obang: “The services at these resettlement sites have never been implemented, yet the people are left there with fewer resources than before. Even the Ethiopian delegates who went to Gambella last month openly criticized the regional government for their failure to deliver services. In their reports, they confirmed what the human rights groups have been saying. As a result of the government’s refusal to acknowledge the difficulties of the displaced, many of the local people are worrying about hunger and the potential for starvation. It is the rainy season now and they should be planting their new crops but because the new land given to them by the government is still not cleared, as promised, they are unable to proceed. Additionally, the land they were forced to leave was far superior. This new land will require fertilizers unlike before. Access to water will also be more limited. These people are not used to depending on foreign aid or government aid—even if it were available—but now, who knows what will happen?”

For more information Contact
SMNE Media & Public Relations:
E-mail: media@solidaritymovement.org
Website: <http://www.solidaritymovement.org>

¹ The current regime is controlled by the ethnic-based party of the Tigrayan Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF), which controls the current ruling regime of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) as well as every sector of Ethiopian government and society.

² For other articles, speeches and press releases please see SMNE’s website: www.solidaritymovement.org

³ <http://www.financialtaskforce.org/2011/12/05/illicit-financial-outflows-from-ethiopia-nearly-doubled-in-2009-to-us-3-26-billion-reveals-new-global-financial-integrity-report/> ; Global Financial Integrity made this quote on December 5, 2011 preceding the release of their study on Illicit Financial Outflows from Developing Countries Over the Decade Ending in 2009.