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## Addressing Norwegian Civil Society

### Ethiopia—An Abusive Home for its People?

*A review of the difficult conditions of life in Ethiopia leading to the large exodus of its people to other parts of the world and their hope for Ethiopia's transformation.*

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I want to thank Frontline Club Oslo, New Frontiers, Norwegian activists, Solveig Syversen, who invited me, Marius von der Fehr, our moderator, and all of those people involved in organizing today's event. It is an honor to be part of this public discussion on Ethiopia, entitled: *In the Name of Democracy: Land Grabbing and Genocide in Ethiopia*.

Norwegians are known to be some of the most socially conscious and peace-loving people in the world. I give my sincere thanks to the Norwegian people who are attending today and to all Norwegians who have opened up their arms to welcome foreigners, including thousands of Ethiopians who have decided to make Norway their second home or those who are still in the process of seeking asylum.

Although Norway is a relatively small country of five million people—the 61<sup>st</sup> largest country in the world according to the World Population Review, when there are issues of social justice, Norway's voice can be heard in all of these discussions despite its size. **It demonstrates what a significant impact can be made in the world when a culture collectively embraces principles of social concern for others outside your borders and when those value are backed up by action.** For example, Norway is known to give one of the highest percentages of their GNP to the poor countries of the world. Sweden is similar; in fact, when discussions come up regarding how countries treat their citizens, Norway and Sweden are both exemplary. This may be one of the reasons that many who have been mistreated in their own homelands, prefer to come to such well-respected countries. It is also the reason many advocates for justice seek to find a kindred spirit among Norwegians and the government that represents them.

This was my own thinking when I first came to Norway in 2004 and met with government officials in an effort to bring to their attention the December 13-15, 2003 massacre of 424 leaders from my own ethnic group, the Anuak, who lived in the resource-rich Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia. The atrocities were perpetrated by members of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and militia groups that they had incited and armed. You can read more about it on human Rights Watch report: [Targeting the Anuak](#) Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia's Gambella Region.

These groups targeted Anuak by ethnicity for killing. As they marched through the streets they chanted: "Today is the day for killing Anuak," and "Today there will be no more Anuak land."

Those Anuak to be killed were named on a prepared list. It identified Anuak who had voiced opposition to the government's plans to start drilling for oil on indigenous Anuak land without consulting the local people as required by law. The killing was only part of it. The troops purposefully destroyed the limited infrastructure of one of the most marginalized regions in Ethiopia. They proceeded to pilfer, burn and destroy health clinics, wells, schools, homes, crops and granaries. Extrajudicial killings, rape, arbitrary arrests, beatings and torture were widespread, creating fear and inhibiting movement. Nearly ten thousand Anuak fled to South Sudan for refuge; many are still there.

The troops moved to the rural areas and continued to kill, rape, beat, arrest, torture and harass the local people for days, weeks and months, especially in the area surrounding the oil drilling site. The military occupation of the Gambella region remained for nearly three years until they were moved to the Ogaden Region in late 2006 where they committed similar atrocities and destruction against those people. By the time they left the Gambella region, human rights investigations estimated that two thousand or more Anuak had been killed, a great number considering the Anuak are only 0.01% of the total population of Ethiopia. Incidentally, the wells were dry.

When reports began to surface, the current regime of TPLF/EPRDF orchestrated a cover-up, denying any responsibility and attributing the violence to simply another incident of ethnic conflict between the Anuak and another local group; however, it was later revealed that the crackdown on the Anuak was part of a calculated plan called *Operation Sunny Mountain*, which was meant to eliminate opposition to the exploitation of the oil. Evidence exists that the origins of that plan began at a meeting in the highest offices of Ethiopia in October 2003, two months prior to the massacre. Two later investigations by Genocide Watch led to their finding that the crimes had reached the definition of genocide, crimes against humanity and other gross human rights violations.

**When I first came to Norway in 2004, it was for the Anuak; but today, I am here for all the people of Ethiopia. The problem of human rights violations, resource-grabbing and the elimination of democratic rights in Ethiopia is not the experience of a few, but is endemic. Justice will never come to only one group until it comes to Ethiopia as a whole. For that reason, the social justice organization of which I am the executive director, the [Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia \(SMNE\)](#), has a mission to protect the rights, wellbeing and freedom of all Ethiopians.**

The focus of my presentation will be: **Human Rights and Land Grabs in Ethiopia**. In Ethiopia these are overwhelming issues, making it impossible to cover them all; however, with the help of my colleague Mr. Abdullahi Hussein from the Ogaden Region of southeastern Ethiopia, I hope we can bring greater light to the darkness that enshrouds Ethiopia even today. **He has used the lens of his camera to more vividly capture what has been going on in the hidden and silent places of Ethiopia. I would like to use a short power point to challenge some widely held misconceptions about the country before I start.**

To most, Ethiopia is known as one of the poorest, most hunger-filled countries in the world. Outsiders believe it is like a desert where there is little to sustain life. **When one thinks of Ethiopia, what often comes to mind is the image of a dead cow or of a mother holding a child with skinny legs, a swollen belly and flies lighting on his face. This certainly is the case in some places for Ethiopia is plagued by chronic hunger, but what outsiders may not know is that this country has great potential for change. Not only could Ethiopia feed itself, it has what is needed to become a major contributor to help feed others in the world.**

[See for yourself. \[Power point\]](#)

The obvious question is why are Ethiopians not using this rich and fertile land with access to abundant water to feed themselves? The answer to this question is that the ruling government of the **Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)**, which has been in power for more than twenty years, has miserably failed to uphold the rights of the people and has purposely excluded them from the benefits of citizenship. They have not helped to develop these resources for the benefit of the Ethiopian people.

On the other hand, the EPRDF clearly recognizes the potential value of this underutilized land and the untapped resources within the country and is now carrying out an ambitious economic development plan that favors power-holders, their families, patronage networks and foreign investors who will partner with them on their terms. The people of Ethiopia, especially those inhabiting the most agriculturally fertile and well-watered regions of the country who have been sustenance farmers for generations, are now seen to be obstacles to eliminate rather than co-beneficiaries of the potential bounty of their own land.

Since the food shortages in 2008, when people rioted in different places in the world, the situation has only intensified. Wealthy countries, like Saudi Arabia who has plenty of oil and money, but little land to use for agriculture, are seeing Ethiopia as the answer to their problems. Other Middle Eastern countries, as well as high population East Asian countries like China, India and Indonesia are seeing the potential in Ethiopia, as well as in other parts of Africa, as a way to feed their growing populations, causing a land rush for arable land.

In many of these cases, foreign governments, foreign investors and multi-national companies are making secretive deals for the long-term lease of fertile land and water use with unelected, autocratic regimes, without ever consulting or compensating the people for the loss of land their families have occupied for as long as they can remember. This has become known as land grabbing. It is also what I have called the **second scramble for Africa**. Technically, although it is called a land grab, the implications are so serious for indigenous populations that you could call it a life grab as it is grabbing the means to live from some of the most vulnerable people in the world. These land and resource grabs destroy the lives and futures of Africans both now and to come.

For most of those affected, it has led to widespread displacement and to greater, rather than less, food insecurity. World Bank President Dr. Jim Yong Kim said at their annual meeting in April 2013, *"Usable land is in short supply, and there are too many instances of speculators and unscrupulous investors exploiting smallholder farmers, herders, and others who lack the power to stand up for their rights. This is particularly true in countries with weak land governance systems."*<sup>4</sup>

Much of the food they produce is destined for export or wherever it can bring the highest price. Most Ethiopians are small farmers; though poor, they have been able to sustain themselves because of their land; however, the displaced will no longer be able to be self-reliant and may easily end up hungry or in need of food aid. Although some of the food produced will end up locally, food prices may well be beyond their ability to pay. The displaced are mostly in the rural regions where education and training have been lacking, leaving most ill-equipped to find other jobs.

In the vague contracts, previously made available on the government's website, investors are promised land, "free of impediments." Impediments, a description which refers to the people now living on the land, are citizens of Ethiopia, but instead of their own government protecting their rights, they are seen as obstacles to be "cleared from their land" as if they were squatters or intruders in their own homes. **This is most often occurring in rural areas among indigenous people who have no established land rights even though they and their families or communities have lived on the land for generations.** Neither do they have the power to resist the regime's security forces as many are forcibly evicted from their land and moved to resettlement areas where they are promised improved access to services; however, most often, those services do not exist and the land is inferior with less access to water sources. Some end up homeless, in refugee camps in neighboring countries or working for slave wages on land they used to own. In most cases those affected have neither been consulted nor compensated for their losses; in contradiction to national and international laws. When I speak today, my testimony is not as an outsider or expert, but as a witness. When I talk about the people being displaced from the land grabs, in many cases I am speaking about people whose names I know. They include my uncle, my cousins, my nephews, my extended family, my community and my people—the people of Ethiopia

[View this video to see the impact on the people.](#)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0GP3XK2j2c&list=UU8IBdGjabxkhLGRun46D-Ow>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15xyVHIABvQ&list=UU8IBdGjabxkhLGRun46D-Ow>

Who is doing this in Ethiopia? It is the elite in the EPRDF who are in cahoots with outsiders. The EPRDF, from its origin, has been controlled by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), a group that led the fight to overthrow the government in 1991 and that continues to assert tight control over every sector of society. The human rights abuses associated with land and resource grabbing, whether in Gambella, the Ogaden, Oromia, the Omo Valley, the Afar region or other places in Ethiopia, **differ little from the atrocities the TPLF carried out as a rebel movement in the bush prior to coming into power.** It led the U.S. State Department to classify them as a terrorist group at the time. This is the group in power now, minus the late Meles Zenawi, who died in 2012.

The EPRDF's structure is based around ethnically defined regions and political parties, but at the grassroots level, all regions and parties, though appearing to be led by leaders of the same ethnicity as the region, are instead pro-TPLF/ERPFD puppets, who implement their policies. **By its nature, this division of Ethiopia by ethnicity was meant to look democratic; however, in practice, it has contributed to the prolongation of ethnic-based divisions while strengthening the power of the TPLF, assuring its control of the EPRDF even though Tigrayans are a minority, making up only 6% of the total population.** However, this does not mean the TPLF speaks for many Tigrayans who have become disillusioned with the TPLF/EPRDF.<sup>ii</sup> This model also promotes an entrenched system of ethnic favoritism and perks related to loyalty to the TPLF/ERPFD, giving those in power access to exploit the land, national resources and assets with impunity.

This preferential treatment includes special privileges for regime-affiliated companies that are part of a Tigrayan-run business conglomerate, [Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray](#), known as EFFORT. EFFORT businesses are closely connected to TPLF members, family members and cronies and accounts for roughly half of the country's modern economy, according to an [IPS report](#) titled "*Examining the Depths of Ethiopia's Corruption.*" The wife of the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, headed up the organization until only recently. Despite the increasing levels of foreign investment, large scale land-leasing programs and claims of double-digit economic growth, Ethiopia has remained the second poorest country in the world according to [Oxford's Multi-dimensional Poverty Index](#). The current system creates sustainable poverty rather than sustainable development with the possible exception of the Tigray Region where many resources and efforts are directed, disproportionate to those directed to any other region in the country. I was told by one source that approximately 40% of development money from Norway was going to the Tigray region.

According to a comment from Global Financial Integrity related to their release of their study: [Illicit Financial Outflows from Developing Countries Over the Decade Ending in 2009](#), they state: "*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.*"

They also report: "*Ethiopia lost US 11.7 billion in illegal capital flight from 2000-2009 and illicit financial outflows from Ethiopia nearly doubled in 2009 to US\$3.26 billion—double the amount in the two preceding years—with the vast majority of that increase coming from corruption, kickbacks and bribery as revealed in a preliminary 2011 report by the Task Force for Financial Integrity and Economic Development.* [\[3\]](#)

#### [Repression of Democratic Rights and Civil Society Creates an Environment of Impunity for Power Holders:](#)

The problem of Ethiopia begins with a government that is not elected by the people. This is a regime that closed off political space preceding the last election in 2010, even misusing development aid to buy votes and party loyalty, but also using methods of obstruction, imprisonment, violence and intimidation to eliminate the opposition. The end result was that the TPLF/ERPFD claimed 99.6% of the vote. Out of 547 seats in the Ethiopian Parliament, only one seat is filled by a member of the opposition and that person is given only three minutes to debate any issue. When peaceful demonstrators protested the flawed election of 2005, 197 were shot and killed. No one expects political space to open up for the coming election in 2015.

Independent institutions like the judiciary, the media, the election board, and the many civic organizations that create a healthy society, cannot exist in the country. Laws are passed and misused to criminalize dissent; causing heroes of truth, freedom and justice to be charged and sentenced to years in prison as terrorists under vague anti-terrorism laws. The Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO) has totally paralyzed civil society by outlawing organizations that obtain more than 10% of their budget from foreign sources from advocating for such things as human rights, child rights, women's rights, conflict resolution between ethnicities and religions, and other essential responsibilities of civil society. It is estimated that over 2,600 organizations closed their doors in response to this draconian law. On the other hand, the TPLF/EPRDF regime has set up their own pseudo-institutions in order to deceive outsiders.

For example, many of the public agencies and financial institutions associated with land grabs, agriculture, loans, investments and regulation are under the administrative control of the TPLF/ERPFD. These include such organizations as: the Ethiopian Rural Land Management Agency, the Privatization Agency, the Investment Commission, Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Ethiopian Agriculture Transformation Agency, Ethiopian Grain Trade Enterprise, Development Bank of Ethiopia, the Federal Ethics and Corruption Commission, Information and Communication Technology Agency as well as trade institutions such as: Chambers of Commerce, The Ethiopian Commodity Exchange, Ethiopian Coffee Exporters Association and farmers and trade unions and associations.

*Control of civil society, the recruitment of their members and utilizing them to deliver regime propaganda did not start with the CSO or Anti-terrorism laws, but it has been integral to a plan adopted and implemented by the ruling party in 1993, according to inside sources familiar with the inner workings of the ruling party. That plan: [TPLF/ERPFD's Strategies for Establishing its Hegemony and Perpetuating its Rule](#), laid out specific ways to achieve control of every sector of society, including maintaining government control of land as well as control of civic institutions such as women's associations, youth associations, cooperatives, professional associations, peace organizations, human rights organizations, development associations, workers' associations, trade unions and government organizations like the army, the security, and the judiciary.[Section VI].*

Ethiopia was rejected for membership in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative based on its repressive CSO law and its crackdown on civil society. The move by the EITI Board was unprecedented. The TPLF/ERPFD has now reapplied for admission, but conditions have not improved, but worsened despite their claims.

The TPLF/ERPFD excels in democratic rhetoric and has been successful in gaining financial assistance and a place at top meetings throughout the world; however, within the country, they are robbing and terrorizing their own people; ensuring the people have no say in their future without fear of punitive actions.

These land deals are benefiting emerging Ethiopian oligarchs as more and more power holders are entering the ranks of millionaire status. However, those foreign investment partners attracted to these deals that are "too good to be true," should understand how they are set up to exploit the people. They should also be aware of how human rights violations routinely accompany these deals as punitive actions are taken against indigenous persons and communities who resist. Imagine a foreign country coming to Norway to make a deal with a few politicians who refuse to share any of the benefits with the people. You know Norwegians would react to this.

It is the reason why Ethiopia is not safe for the people who speak up; creating an influx of refugees throughout the world. According to Freedom House, Ethiopia is considered one of the least free countries in the world. This is a government set up on ethnicity where to get a job or opportunity you have to be a member of the ruling party or a member of that ethnic group.

This is the government with which the Norwegian government is aligned. No wonder so many Ethiopians are leaving the country for your own country of Norway where your citizens are valued. Yet, for the last few years, the Norwegian government has signed an agreement to deport Ethiopians back to Ethiopia to live under such a repressive and brutal regime.

### [TPLF/ERPDP's Resistance to Democratic Reform and Improved Human Rights:](#)

According to a recent report in [Transformation Index BTI 2014's country report on Ethiopia](#), it notes the following resistance on the part of Ethiopian leadership to change:

*... the extent to which the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ignores foreign advice is surprising. The government shows little interest in cooperating with bilateral or multilateral international donors on issues of democratization, trade liberalization or privatization. It has sought to avoid becoming too dependent on the political advice of foreign countries. Negotiations with the World Bank, the IMF and the European Union's Development Commission are usually tense.*

*The government tried to present itself as a credible and reliable partner, but was not trusted by all members of the international community. In regard to relations with the West, there is a clear split between the more positive U.S. attitude toward Addis Ababa and that of EU countries that complain that the relatively large amounts of foreign aid given to Ethiopia are not received with a friendlier atmosphere of cooperation. The government is regarded by some Westerners as a "partner" resistant to advice in economic and developmental affairs.*

Instead of responding to urges towards democratization, the TPLF/ERPDP has voiced increasing identification with the Chinese model of economic development where human rights are not a priority; however, this alignment is hardly new. The TPLF's plan of revolutionary democracy, coming out of their Marxist-Leninist ideology in the bush, was purposely hidden from the West for years in order to dupe them so as to gain the perks of that association. They were successful. For years the TPLF/ERPDP regime continued to commit serial perpetration of human rights violations in the dark, closed off areas of the country with little consequence, but with the increase of technology it is now harder to suppress the information from leaking out.

In response, a defiant attitude among the TPLF/ERPDP has emerged towards others who criticize their human rights record or lack of democratization. When the West takes this position or even requires some accountability or transparency, like in the recent investigation by the World Bank alleging Ethiopia's misuse of development funds, they are seen as meddling in the internal affairs of Ethiopia.

In short, the suppression of human rights has become an integral tool used to achieve perpetual hegemony over every aspect of Ethiopian life; including stripping the country of its land, assets and resources, all at risk if they lose power. Referring back to a warning in their manifesto, [TPLF/ERPDP's Strategies for Establishing its Hegemony and Perpetuating its Rule](#), the TPLF/ERPDP assert that they can achieve their goals "only by winning the elections successively and holding power without let up." They warn, "If we lose in the elections even once, we will encounter a great danger... [so] we should win in the initial elections and then create a conducive situation that will ensure the establishment of this hegemony."

After 20 years of rule, the TPLF/ERPDP's greatest problem is the rising tension between the majority of people and the TPLF elite in power. Some experts fear the country is like a ticking bomb that could explode into ethnic or religious violence if the status quo continues. The TPLF/ERPDP is stuck between two opposing internal forces—the need to open Ethiopian society up to meaningful reforms, reconciliation and inclusive justice in order to usher in a better future for all; or, the fear that all may implode if they loosen their tight grip. In the meantime, Ethiopians are finding Ethiopia to be a dangerous and inhospitable place for life itself and will continue to seek havens wherever they can find them.

### Conclusion:

The aspirations of the Ethiopian people are like everyone else's—to live in a more peaceful, just and caring society where they might find opportunity to improve themselves and their country. Despite the obstacles we Ethiopians face, with God's help, I believe this is a possible goal to achieve in Ethiopia.

This is why the SMNE was established. The system we now have in Ethiopia is backward and contrary to the common good; dehumanizing the people of Ethiopia rather than believing in the worth and dignity of every human being; purposefully inciting ethnic, religious, political or other division and undermining peace in order to divide and conquer; and grasping one's neighbors' lives, property, opportunity and futures through the abuse of power and violence rather than helping to build a better future for the common good. There is a way to avoid it. We have witnessed the problem in Rwanda and Kosovo where a few minority power holders controlled the majority and when it was not handled properly, the world witnessed the horrible results. We do not want this kind of outcome in Ethiopia.

The only way out is to have a society where its people can truly flourish. This means upholding universal principles such as love, compassion, truth, justice, generosity, civility and diligence; given to us by our Creator as the best way to live in vibrant community with each other.

This call to universal values is a call for all of us as human beings to care, protect and value the well being of each other because our humanity has no boundaries. This is why our organization was established. We believe a better future for the people of Ethiopia is ahead of us as Ethiopians work to create a New Ethiopia through reconciliation, meaningful reforms and the restoration of justice. It must start with us. We also hope that our vision will be supported not hindered. I leave this with you, as fellow brothers and sisters of this world, I ask you simply to do your part to help. We will do the same.

May God bless Norway, its beautiful people and its land. May God bring freedom, justice, peace and reconciliation to Ethiopia so that we may rise up to bless those like you who have given us sanctuary during our most difficult times! Thank you!

For media enquiries, more information including interview requests, contact Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE. Email: [Obang@solidaritymovement.org](mailto:Obang@solidaritymovement.org)

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<sup>i</sup> <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/21922>

<sup>ii</sup> This does not mean the TPLF speaks for many Tigrayans who have become disillusioned with the TPLF/ERPDP.