



May 15, 2016

Open Letter To Her Excellency Park Geun-hye, President, Republic of Korea

Park Geun-Hye
President of the Republic of Korea
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Re: *Ethiopian Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Korea*

Dear Madame President,

We in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) are writing to you **on behalf of Ethiopian refugees presently seeking asylum in South Korea**. The SMNE is a social justice organization of diverse Ethiopians, committed to advancing the freedom, rights and well being of Ethiopians within Ethiopia as well as those living abroad.

ETHIOPIAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN SOUTH KOREA

As the SMNE's Executive Director, I recently visited South Korea at the request of Ethiopians living in your country as well as several South Korean civil society organizations who were working with them. I met with these asylum seekers to hear more about the difficulties they faced in obtaining permanent status; including, finding a means of support for their basic needs while waiting for a decision on their cases. Following these meetings with Ethiopians, I met with South Korean officials, members of Korea civil society, UNHCR officials and journalists so as to raise up the concerns and difficulties affecting these Ethiopian refugees as well as to share more about the reasons these Ethiopians had left their homes in the first place.

I was impressed and encouraged by the reaction of your government officials and members of the local organizations to these asylum seekers, especially Refuge pNan, an NGO which protects and assists North Korean and international refugees seeking asylum in Korea and abroad. They appeared to genuinely want to help.

Unfortunately, I was unable to meet with you or your government officials in the Ministry of Justice and Korea Immigration Service (KIS) but do want to clarify some of the issues and questions you and others might have related to these asylum seekers. In particular, you might be interested in knowing more background surrounding the basis for the applications; particularly in light of your upcoming trip to Ethiopia and meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn; where you are sure to hear a profoundly different point of view.

Knowing that upfront may be helpful as you consider how to strengthen economic ties and developmental partnerships between Ethiopia and the Republic of Korea. The narratives of these Ethiopian refugees can reveal the stories of untold suffering that would otherwise be altered or covered up in the public sphere.

ETHIOPIANS SHARE A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND WITH SOUTH KOREA IN YOUR OWN FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

Dear Madame President,

First, I would like to thank your government for your willingness to consider these cases for asylum. **The relationship between the Republic of Korea and Ethiopia is not new, but dates back at least six decades to the Korean war when Ethiopia, under Emperor Haile Selassie, was one of 16 nations who sent troops to aid in your own struggle for freedom.** Many Ethiopians fought with you against the invading communist forces from the North. Exactly 121 Ethiopians were killed and 536 wounded in that war; yet, **more than that number are being killed, wounded, imprisoned and tortured by the current Government of Ethiopia under the increasingly oppressive leadership of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in power for over 24 years.**

As that oppression has deepened; the numbers of Ethiopian refugees flooding to other parts of the world, like South Korea, have increased. Despite the life-threatening risks these refugees face— from human, sexual and organ traffickers to drowning linked to overloaded ships that capsize, as well as to hunger, illness and difficult living conditions— the intolerable conditions within Ethiopia are the reason many of Ethiopia's finest, most out-spoken citizens have left the country, often to the relief of authorities.

SOUTH KOREA: AN INSPIRATIONAL MODEL OF DEMOCRATIC AND ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENT TO OTHERS

Dear Madame President,

To Ethiopians, your country is a source of hope to us, especially in regard to the degree of transformational change evidenced in your country over the last years and decades. In particular, **we see your great strides forward in the areas of democratic governance, an effective rule of law, peace-building, the strengthening of civil society, strong economic policies and the increased prosperity and well being of South Koreans in general— all an inspiration to others. It is surely one of the reasons why Ethiopians have come to your country. In fact, Ethiopians would not leave their own country were they to have the kind of government South Koreans now enjoy, where there is greater equality of opportunity for all rather than restricted to a few based on ethnicity and party affiliation.**

ETHIOPIA: A HOSTILE HOME FOR ITS PEOPLE—BOTH POLITICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY

Dear Madame President,

The most frequent question being asked of the Ethiopian asylum seekers is whether the basis of their asylum case is political or economic. The most frequent answer is 'yes' to both. Please permit me to briefly explain why the two are so highly correlated to each other. The political party controlling the government of Ethiopia has been in power since 1991 when the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), with the help of others, overthrew the communist government of the Derg.

Since that time, the Central Committee of the TPLF has been in control of the coalition party established at the time: the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). **The EPRDF is based on an ethnic-apartheid model of ethnic federalism where one's ethnicity has been used to include or exclude others who are not part of this one ethnicity represented by the TPLF (only 6% of the population). Favoritism is also based on political party affiliation. The opposite is also true: those who are not members of the ruling political party, the EPRDF, are excluded. In other words, the majority of Ethiopians, especially those who disagree with the ruling party, are often blocked from participation in the economy, government jobs, civil society, educational opportunities, and access to loans, resources and land leases. Additionally, in a highly agrarian economy, access to food aid, seed and related agricultural resources is largely denied to those who fail to support the regime. Political space is nonexistent; yet, the EPRDF claimed to win the 2015 national election by 100%. Countless human rights crimes, including killings, arrests, imprisonments, torture and intimidation, continue in this highly restrictive environment.**

Dear Madame President,

EPRDF has used vague laws to decimate civil society, resulting in the closure of over 2,600 organizations and the start-up of many government controlled organizations in their place. An anti-terrorism law has criminalized dissent, leading to the imprisonment of many prisoners of conscience. Divide and conquer tactics along ethnic lines have been used to disempower the people and reward government supporters. In order to survive, one must tow the party line or face harsh consequences. Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians have been evicted from their land; land that is later leased to government cronies or foreign investors. Those who object to it face human rights abuses, forced resettlement in inferior locations or must leave the country. Displacement has been a major manmade reason for greater food insecurity. To worsen the situation, many Ethiopians now face the worst drought in fifty years; yet, people and advocates have faced harassment for speaking out about it. Some humanitarian organizations say fifteen million people are at risk; yet the government has downplayed the seriousness of the problem, allegedly believing it would damage their image.

EPRDF claims of record economic growth are not supported by the reality faced by the local people; who instead, remain impoverished while record amounts of illicit capital flow out of the country. Tensions are increasing dramatically, leading many to rise up in protests. In the past six months, reports allege over 600 student protestors have been killed and thousands more wounded and/or imprisoned for peacefully demonstrating against the confiscation of their land near the capital, Addis Ababa. Many fear there could be an explosion of ethnic-violence that could destabilize Ethiopia.

People are fleeing the country, but we in the SMNE believe the only way to stop the flow of refugees is to bring about meaningful reforms that could bring deep transformation to Ethiopia.

SOME INVESTMENT RISKS FOR THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA IN DOING BUSINESS WITH THE EPRDF

Business development, foreign investment and involvement in Ethiopia by countries like the Republic of Korea would be embraced under the right conditions by most Ethiopians; however, under the EPRDF regime, we fear that it may involve risks to you and not mutually benefit the people as intended.

Robust economies are grounded on democratic freedoms, equal opportunity, good education, a strong civil society, open access to information and technology, and an independent judicial system—all lacking in Ethiopia, despite superficial appearances of such.

Dear Madame President,

Ethiopia is a country where democratic rhetoric is a favorite tool of the EPRDF and is only reserved for image-building, diplomacy, and marketing. The implementation of working democracy is non-existent and seen as a threat in this patronage system where opportunity is doled out according to ethnicity, influence, party membership and overall cronyism. Self-interest of the elite goes unchecked. The rule of law is manipulated to benefit the entrenched power-holder. This includes overriding agreements made with foreign entities—governments or businesses— should a better option or deal surface.

Vaguely written laws or contracts ensure their manipulation should the need arise. Courts are always on the side of the favored elite in power, leaving multinational corporations— like Karuturi Global, some Saudi Arabian companies and others who fall out of favor— subject to the arbitrary decisions of a flawed justice system. Their experiences have resulted in significant financial loss. Others have found themselves charged with various crimes.

Another risk is complicity with a regime known for its widespread human rights violations, often accompanying the eviction of hundreds of thousands of indigenous people from their land, which then is made available to crony or foreign investors. Local reactions to such evictions, injustices and abuses have included violent acts perpetrated by some groups, like in the case of the attack on Saudi Star in the Gambella region several years ago. **Tensions in the country are increasing, causing pressure on the ruling one ethnic based party; however, instead of considering meaningful reforms and greater inclusion in opportunities for all citizens, the regime is tightening its grip, only requiring greater resistance to loosen it; something very worrisome should the frustration of the people explode.**

Dear Madame President,

I am providing this information as a precaution to you. **You will be shown an Ethiopia of the elite, like new buildings without anyone in them. You will not be shown Ethiopia's wounded underbelly— where the majority of her people and her broken institutions remain. These refugees at your doorsteps are evidence of that; their presence revealing what otherwise would be left in the dark. Ethiopians are running away from their country to places like your own. May South Korea stand firm for the best interests of these people.**

THANK YOU FOR YOUR WILLINGNESS TO HEAR THESE CASES AND TO CONSIDER THESE PRECAUTIONS WHEN EVALUATING FUTURE PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE EPRDF

Dear Madame President,

In conclusion, based on this information, **we hope you will consider these precautions as you meet with Ethiopian leaders and visit a country waiting to emerge from authoritarian rule and poverty to embrace a better future. Until then, we hope the Republic of Korea will grant these asylum seekers permission to stay in your country; or at least, to reunite with their families in other free countries where their families live.**

Giving them temporary papers to be able to work, at least during the period of time they are waiting for a final decision, could greatly assist them in supporting themselves.

Once again, thank you for being an example of a country that has made such tremendous advancement in so many areas. We believe we have much we could learn from your example.

Please feel free to contact me for additional questions or assistance.

Sincerely yours,



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Lee Sung-Ho, Chairperson, National Human Rights Commission of Korea
South Korean Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
The Refuge pNan

Filippo Grandi, Head of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, Switzerland.

This letter has also been Cc to major news media outlets such as

The Korea Herald
Dong-A ILBO
Africa Confidential
Al Jazeera
BBC World News
The Guardian
New York Times
Washington Post,
Wall Street Journal
REUTERS AFRICA
VOA Amharic
The East Africa
Business Daily
Deutsche Welle Radio
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