



WE SAY THE LAND IS NOT YOURS

BREAKING THE SILENCE AGAINST FORCED
DISPLACEMENT IN ETHIOPIA

APRIL 2015



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The Oakland Institute

Acknowledgements

The testimonies presented in this report are based on interviews conducted by Anuradha Mittal of the Oakland Institute with members of the Anuak community from Gambella, Ethiopia and those living in refugee camps in Kenya; members of the Suri, Hammer, and Nyongtham tribes from Lower Omo; and members of the Benishangul community. These interviews were conducted in 2014 and 2015.

Names and images and details that could reveal the identity of those interviewed have been withheld to ensure their safety. The interviewees, some of whom are refugees or are seeking refugee status, have not been named because of the fear of retaliation.

This fear, which is silencing communities in Ethiopia, makes this report all the more timely and relevant. We are grateful to all who spoke and shared their experiences despite the obvious risks to their own safety and security.

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Glossary of Terms

- **Anuak:** An ethnic group from East Africa, mostly located in South Sudan and the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Commonly identified as “low-landers” in Ethiopia.
- **Bodi:** A pastoralist ethnic group based in southwestern Ethiopia, often also known as the Mekan people.
- **Dadaab:** A town in northeastern Kenya that is home to three large UNHCR refugee camps, including the IFO camp.
- **Dassanech:** An ethnic, predominantly pastoral group found in the nations of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan. The Dassanech primarily inhabit a region stretching from northern Kenya (Turkana) to southern Ethiopia (Omo).
- **Derg:** The common name for the dictatorship that ruled Ethiopia between 1974 and 1989 under the command of Colonel Mengistu. The Derg’s rule was characterized by civil war, human rights abuses, the 1984-86 famine, and the “Red Terror” during which tens—and possibly hundreds—of thousands of people lost their lives.
- **Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF):** The entity that has ruled Ethiopia since the fall of the Derg in 1991. Before that time, the EPRDF was a rebel group that opposed the Derg.
- **Gambella:** A region in southwestern Ethiopia. Its capital is also called Gambella.
- **Hammer:** An ethnic pastoralist community inhabiting parts of southern Ethiopia, especially along the banks of the Omo River.
- **Highlanders:** A term commonly used to refer to Ethiopian peoples from the highland regions, including Amhara and Tigray. Many “highlanders” were relocated from the northern regions to the south of Ethiopia under the Derg regime.
- **IFO:** One of three refugee camps in the Kenyan town of Dadaab.
- **Karuturi:** An India-based flower and agribusiness company. Karuturi leased 100,000 hectares in the Gambella region of Ethiopia for commercial export-oriented agriculture.
- **Kebele:** The Amharic word for a small administrative unit. The closest approximation by North American standards is a neighborhood or council ward.
- **Konso:** A largely agriculture-based ethnic group predominantly found in south-central Ethiopia. Konso is also the name of a town in southwestern Ethiopia.
- **Maasai:** A nomadic ethnic group found in northern Tanzania and southern Kenya. Maasai culture has a strong focus on cattle.
- **Majang:** An ethnic group found in southwestern Ethiopia. Traditionally, the Majang lived in small groups and moved to new locations as the soil became less fertile.
- **Mursi:** A pastoralist ethnic group inhabiting southwestern Ethiopia, located close to the South Sudanese border.
- **Nuer:** An ethnic group found around the Nile River Valley. The Nuer predominantly inhabit South Sudan, with some living in southwestern Ethiopia.
- **Nyangatom:** A nomadic agropastoralist ethnic group residing in southwestern Ethiopia and southeastern Sudan.
- **Pastoral Community Development Project (PCDP):** A World Bank project that claims to seek to “improve the livelihoods of the pastoral groups of the arid, and semi-arid Ethiopian lowlands, by fostering income growth, access to public services, and by facilitating better institutional, social, and environmental conditions.”
- **Sala Mago:** A *woreda* in southern Ethiopia in the Omo province, where Mursi and Bodi peoples are found.
- **Saudi Star Agriculture Development PLC:** An agribusiness owned by Saudi-Ethiopian billionaire Mohammed Al-Amoudi.
- **Villagization (*sefara*):** The Ethiopian government policy of resettling peoples into specific villages, typically carried out by government and military officials.
- **South Omo:** An administrative zone in southern Ethiopia. The region is home to many of the ethnic groups mentioned in this report, including the Daasanach, Hammer, and Nyangatom.
- **Tukuls:** Traditional round, mud huts that often have thatched roofs and no windows.
- **Woreda:** Administrative units in Ethiopia that are one level higher than *kebeles*. They are the third-level administrative unit in the country, after regions and zones. *Woredas* are governed by elected councilors.
- **United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR):** the UN agency responsible for protecting and supporting refugees around the world.



Introduction

Over the past six years, the Oakland Institute has been at the forefront of exposing the social, economic, and environmental impacts of foreign land grabs in Ethiopia. This work has been based on extensive fieldwork and research on human rights abuses against and forced evictions of indigenous populations in the Lower Omo and Gambella regions; detailed briefs on the impacts of specific land development projects, such as the Saudi Star Rice Farm¹ and the Malaysian Koka plantation in Lower Omo;² studies on the intersection between forced evictions and foreign aid by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and the World Bank;³ and more. These reports have led to numerous media articles, galvanizing public attention towards these issues, and legislative “wins” in the US, including specific language in the 2014 and 2015 Appropriations Bill that ensures US development funds to Ethiopia are not used to support activities that directly or indirectly involve forced evictions in Gambella and lower Omo.

However, human rights abuses resulting from a faulty development strategy adopted by the Ethiopian government with support of the donor countries continue despite these efforts.

This report brings forward the voices of those directly impacted by land grabbing and the Ethiopian government’s villagization program. Over the past few years, free speech in Ethiopia has been systematically withdrawn. In 2010, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that journalists and governmental critics were being arrested and tortured in the lead-up to the national election, simply because they were being vocally critical of the government.⁴ A 2015 report from Human Rights Watch (HRW) details severe threats to free expression ahead of the May 2015 general elections. HRW reports that in 2014, six privately owned publications closed after government harassment; at least 22 journalists, bloggers, and publishers were criminally charged; and more than 30 journalists fled the country in fear of being arrested under repressive laws.⁵

Indeed, reports detailing the arbitrary detention, beatings, and torture of governmental opponents are widespread, including Ethiopia’s use of surveillance equipment to monitor the speech and interactions of the Ethiopian diaspora in Europe.⁶ Also in 2014, two Ethiopian nationals who had fled the country and become citizens in Britain and Norway were both extradited to Ethiopia while traveling in Yemen and South Sudan, respectively.⁷ Both are being tried by the Ethiopian government on terrorism charges.⁸

This is the context—torture, oppression, and silencing—in which this report is released. The testimonies below were transcribed from direct interviews with people from diverse regions of Ethiopia and Ethiopian refugees living in neighboring countries. The stories have been lightly edited for coherence, with the goal of providing the reader with the authentic voices of those most impacted by land grabs and forced evictions in the country.

These are but a few of the tens of thousands of people who have fled, been killed, or continue to live under threat in Ethiopia. The rest live in silence.

Breaking the Silence

I say it before I breathe to speak freely.

■■■■■, GAMBELLA

My village refused to move. So they forced us with gunshots. Even though they intimidated us, we did not move—this is our land, how do we move?

They wanted our land because our land is the most fertile and has access to water. So the land was promised to a national investor. So, they came to me. I was told to go and tell the people to accept.

Instead, I shared the Derg history. Even then, villagization took place and ended with loss of life. I told them that villagization will bring disaster to our land. Our livelihood depends on the forests.

Last year, the program moved to a closer area. We had to move, so the people built *tukuls*. The promises of food and other social services made by the government have not been fulfilled. So people go back to their former farms. Money that was promised for schools and clinics has not come through. No medicine is provided in old clinics. The government gets money from donors but it is not transferred to the communities.

This land grab is not just for agriculture. We see minerals and gold being mined and exported. We have no power to resist. We need support. In the villages, they promised us tractors to help us cultivate. If money is given to the government for this purpose, we don't know how it is used. But we did not get the money or the tractors.

The Anuaks have a folk tale. A man came and took the best part of bush meat while the people were sleeping. He left them a bone in their hand before running away. When they woke up, not realizing what happened, they blamed each other.

The government receives money from donors, but they fill their pockets and farmers die of hunger.

I say it before I breathe to speak freely.

I will never stop talking about our land. Under the new villagization program, the land given is too small. It is not enough for the family and does not compare to the large farms we had. In the lands where our farms were, we had many fruit trees—we had bananas and mangoes. It is hard to plant again in a new place and wait until they produce. We face hunger. People are intimidated—we are forced to say positive things about villagization, but really refuse to accept the program.

If you challenge, the government calls you the mastermind of conflict. I am told, “your finger is in it.” One of the government officials was opposed to the government. They wanted to put him in prison. He escaped and is now in Kenya, living as a political refugee.



We say the land is not yours.

— SOUTH OMO PASTORALIST

In Hammer, a *woreda* in South Omo, there are 38 *kebeles*. Of those, 10 *kebeles* have been targeted for resettlement (*sefara*).

The plan was to move 10 *kebeles* 78 km away from where we were. It was a complete failure. No one lives where they are villagized. Grinding stone mills have been left behind—empty villages remain.

The experience of moving people from their own land to Bodiland offers lessons. There is now conflict between the Bodi and Konso. The Hammer refused to go. If they go, there would be the same conflicts, like the conflict between the Nyongtham and the Mursi in Sala Mago. The Hammer only use water and pasture for cattle, not for cultivation.

There was no open consultation between the community and the government. If there was a common agreement based on joint consultations, perhaps the community might accept. But, the government dictates. Most people who are living there are pastoralists using the land for grazing. The government tried to put in a sugar plantation. There is already one in Sala Mago. They also came to the Dassanech, and then went to Hammer.

We are scared that the highlanders will come and destroy our way of life, culture, and pasture land. What will we do? The government says we can keep two to three cattle, but this is a challenge. Our life is based on cattle, and we cannot change overnight. I keep cattle—cows, oxen, sheep, goats—where do we go?

Even recently, the government provided land to investors from Addis in the area the Hammer use for cattle. When the local administrators gave the land, they asked for more and then expanded, blocking the passage of the Hammer to water. We say the land is not yours. You give land to the investor to develop you, help you. The reason they give us is “we are here to change you, we will send your boys to school to help change you”—but all are lies.

The investors take land in the Omo Valley. They clear all land, choose the best place where trees are, leaving the area open. They say it is for development, but they are clearing the forests. I wonder how to reconcile development with forest destruction.

With PCDP [the Pastoral Community Development Program], locals have been asked to put lactating lambs and cattle in enclosures. There was no grass. When asked “why do you cut forests when there is no grass?” you are told that you will be rejected and kicked out of meetings if you report anything negative.

The pastoralists face hard times with less resources. They fight over resources. I remember traditional leaders came to Kenya and visited the Maasai. One was convinced by the people who brought him to accept what the government says. Government then says the traditional leader accepted, so all should accept. This is a big problem. How can we challenge this and make our people free and give them access to their land?





When people are free,
they talk. When they are
afraid of repercussion,
they stop.

—■■■■■■ GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE

I was born in a farming community in a little village near ■■■■■■

I worked with the government as an ■■■■■■ after college. I was working at a state farm. Then I went to Gambella. I got married.

■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■

During the 2003 massacre, I was one of the victims. I counted 19 bodies in my hood. I was beaten. It seems very far, but the memory lives with me. I am not sure how I escaped. I was a bit cowardly, terrified. If it was five years ago, I would have joined the guerilla. But now I made up my mind—to be a survivor. Nonviolent, but not stop telling our story. I have the courage to tell the story.

I want the world to know that the government system at the federal level does not give attention to the local community.

Second, there are some visible and invisible hands that assist the federal interest. The invisible hands are those of the security—the way they monitor, the way decisions are taken. The visible hands are those of the locals who are used to carry out the federal plans.

There are three dynamics that linger in my mind that explain today's Ethiopia: villagization, violent conflict, and investment. They are intertwined and interrelated. It is hard for outsiders to know what leads to what.

When people are free, they talk. When they are afraid of repercussion, they stop.

The violent conflicts are dying down as militants are being hunted. The government labels them as Anuaks. The government of South Sudan is a friend of Ethiopia. They hand over those trying to flee. There are arbitrary arrests. The government accused those arrested of challenging the Saudi Star in 2012.

The Saudi Star issue is the issue of land. Before talking about land investment, there has to be talk of who uses the land. Common people were there. Today, customary land laws are not consulted or incorporated by the government. In Anuak culture, all land is owned by the chieftain. No

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land is free. Landlords in Ethiopia are not like Western land rights. They are the protectors of community rights. The mother of my father, her relatives had lots of land. So they used customary land laws to give land use rights to the others.

When the government ignored customary land rights during the Derg regime, they started villagization. Today, intimidation and villagization are related to land investment. Lack of consultation, lands are given to the investors . . . this is a new phenomenon. It is new to Gambella.

I used to fear, when a person was arrested and questioned, from fear they give names of others to the police . . . people like me, human rights defenders. I am not violent. I just exercise my political right to speak freely.





The Karuturi staff call the locals “non-people” ...

— [REDACTED] GAMBELLA

I was born in Gambella. Almost five years ago, Karuturi came. [REDACTED], my village, is in the poorest part of Gambella. Behind our huts were forests that provided fruits, medicines, and oil. The shea tree has fruit that is good for oil and/or eating. When Karuturi came, we lost the benefit from the forest because they took the land beside the village and cleared all the land.

The first time they came, they made relations with federal authorities, then regional. We were told “We are coming to live with you. We have agreed with the federal and regional authorities and they give us land.”

We said, “This land is useful for us—for our homes, cultivation. How can you take this?”

Disagreement erupted between the two sides. Regional authorities came to tell us that we must give in. The community asked again, what are we going to do for resources like tree [or] grass for houses, etc.? So, they told us that Karuturi will only take the demarcated area, not all of our lands.

But when they started, they cleared all areas because there was no sign for demarcation. The community complained to regional authorities. The vice president of the region came to the village and explained to us that now this land has been given to Karuturi. They paid much money to the regional government, so it won't stop. Now villagers fear since the word came from the VP, and they might go to jail if they protest.

Before Karuturi, people used the cultivated area near River Baro on both sides. If there was a flood, the people went to the forest. After Karuturi arrived, only the riverbank is left. There is no way out when there is a flood.

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Karuturi give jobs to locals and also to highlanders. Highlanders earn 3,000 birr per month (approximately \$149). The locals—the Karuturi staff call the locals “non-people”—earn 1,000 birr per month (approximately \$50). The highlanders are paid more.

At Karuturi, the work is hard and the salaries little. People begin working at 8am and go until late with only a one-hour break. My friend works there. Sometimes they pay salaries a month later. People have complained and asked to increase salary. But there is no change.

I cannot say whether people of Ethiopia feel good for Karuturi. At the school, the children have left. Karuturi recruits under 18-year-olds to work on their fields.

Today [as of 2014], Karuturi is still there, but there are money problems between Karuturi and the villagers because they do not support the villages. They told us “Now we will do more things—build schools, provide healthcare, and more, and what you ask for.” It has been five years, but nothing is done that was promised. They do nothing. But we were told by the former VP “if someone complains about them, we will put him/her in jail.”

Karuturi made a nursery for biofuels for palm oil. They cleared an area of land near the village, but did not move the seedlings from the nursery. Instead, they planted maize, which they sell to the Ethiopian market. But our people cannot buy—we cannot buy 1 kg (2.2 lbs) or 100 kg (220 lbs) of maize because Karuturi only allow wholesalers, who come from the highlands.

After they collect the harvest, instead of letting the villagers collect what remains, they burn it. Their farms are protected by the Ethiopian Defense Forces.

The cattle go there, but are not allowed to graze. The cattle would still graze, so they used chemicals on the crops. Over 20 cattle (cows, oxen, goat, sheep) were killed.

We know our cattle will die, but we have no alternative. A cattle owner complained, but the regional authorities say Karuturi is within its rights.

Now many other investors come, foreign and from the highlands. We have no information on them, but, as the investors increase, our problems increase. They take away our land and forests that we depend upon.



The people are in deep sorrow but they have no power to resist, given our political situation . . .

—■■■■■■ GAMBELLA

I come from Gambella. I was born there in ■■■■■ village. I have been a ■■■■■ for ■■■■■, and I work in the government ■■■■■ sector as an expert ■■■■■, ■■■■■, ■■■■■.

In my area, historically important forests are being destroyed by foreign investors. I have no power. Even if I share information on how to protect the forest, the investor does not need to study or protect the environment. The investor gets information from the Regional Investment Bureau. Others get permission from Rural Land Administration Bureau. They come and meet with the District Administrator after they have the permission.

I hear and see for myself bad destruction. Starting from ■■■■■, all land was cleared by the investors. The people are in deep sorrow but they have no power to resist, given our political situation. If you raise your voice, you are put in jail, imprisoned. There is a lot of fear. Even in church, we cannot talk. But we pray that God will change our lives. Our hope is only God. We do not believe in the government.

There are 56 people from Gambella, all Anuaks, in prison. Some have been in jail since the 2003 massacre, and some since last year. They were captured and transferred from South Sudan. Those who resist land grabbing and challenged Saudi Star have been captured. All are political prisoners. The government made false accusations calling them terrorists. Three out of the 56 have been sentenced to death, others sentenced up to 19 years. They are all in federal prisons in Mikalawi, Kaleti, Kelinto, Zeway, and Shewarobe. Their family cannot visit because it is very far away. In ■■■■■, when I came to Addis, I went to see and visit them.

When I went to visit, I gave my advice and encouraged them to put their heart to God to believe. There is a time for all things. Change will come.

My hope is that things always change. Even the government will change. Governments cannot stay forever. There is no president, or government, or party that has ruled forever. Only God is unchangeable.

I do have fears. The government suspects me. At the time of Saudi Star conflict, a person told the government officials, "Those who support resisters of land grabs have support for ■■■■■ [me]."

The *woreda* administrators called me. I told them that I am a ■■■■■. I am not here to kill. You have false information. They had been told, "■■■■■ is one of them—those who buy bullets and resist land grabs."

I worry about the children. Starting in 2003, the government has not stopped killing people. The government can claim peace, but in my observation there is no peace. People are dying.

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There is fear. People know in our area. Before investor arrived, the community used forests for fruits, food, medicines, tuber roots, for building *tukuls*, hunting, and shelter for animals. Now it is all cleared by the investors. But it is difficult to resist. If you talk for land, against deforestation, you will be in prison.

Local people don't work on the plantations. Most investors bring highlanders to work on the farms. They have no concerns for the local people.

Even if locals work on the plantation, this is not good for our future. Our fathers used this land for agriculture. If all land taken for agriculture, it is not good for our livelihoods in the long run. If there is a forest, there is rain. If there are trees, there is forest. But, clearing the forests, my fear is in the long run there will be drought. The future is dark for the community in Gambella.

According to the government, investment is good. For me, I ask, Who benefits from the land? Only the investors. They did not start development, but destroyed the forests. One thing I know—they came as investors. Once they got permission, and have the map, then they get their money from banks. They can then stop, clear forests, then start another scheme and business. In Gambella, you cannot see any development—just cleared forest. Some convert wood to charcoal to sell.

The government claims peace, but the situation in Gambella is not good. There is no peace. With fighting in South Sudan, the Nuers are in Gambella. The situation is very bad, I fear. There are a lot of mercenary soldiers. Investors from Turkey expanded their farm to Chac where there is gold. They brought many machines, and cleared the forest for gold. Other investors destroy the shea trees. It has a good price in the world market, and is found in Gambella. People would collect the oil for use in cooking. It's all gone.



They will take me to prison for being the opposition, for being anti-development.

— [REDACTED], BENISHANGUL

I am from the Benishangul region. I work in the [REDACTED] Bureau as the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for X years now.

From the farmers and development agents, I know firsthand that farmers don't accept villagization. The government is taking their farms with mangoes, oranges, and other fruit trees and moving these farmers elsewhere. The place they are moved to is not good. They have to start plowing again, make the land good again. They have left fertile good lands, and must again plant fruit trees while productive trees were left behind.

The government policy of villagization started from the Derg. The EPRDF challenged it, and then they brought it back. "The Derg's villagization was forced but ours is voluntary," they say. But it is not voluntary. Like the Derg, it is forced. Police are destroying homes and forcing people to move. But we cannot speak. They will take me to prison for being the opposition—for being anti-development.

Most of the workers on the plantations are not indigenous. The indigenous cannot work in this economy. But that does not mean that they are lazy.

This is not development. Investors are destroying our lands and environment. There is no school, [no] food security, and they destroy wild fruits. Bamboo is the life of people. It is used for food, as feed for cattle, for our beds, homes, firewood, everything. But the investors destroy it. They destroy our forests. Today, all is destroyed by the investors.

This is not the way for development. They do not cultivate the land for the people. They grow sorghum, maize, sesame, but all is exported, leaving none for the people.

I am an indigenous person from the [REDACTED] group. The [REDACTED] cannot feed ourselves. The [REDACTED] people and others are the same. We are working back to back. The political powers care for their own stomachs. The president of the [REDACTED] region and the vice president are Gumuz. But they are under control. They are remotely controlled by the central government.

If I am free, I can do my profession and assist the local people instead of farmers. Villagization comes through the political people and not through the people and community. It is claimed that villagization will bring health care, schools, etc. But the way it is carried out is a problem. They destroy a village and move it to a new area. That is not the proper way. They give farmers 3 to 5 hectares and make a certificate on them, so they cannot go back to their land, which is then put into the land bank. Indigenous people had more land than 3 hectares, even up to 10 hectares. According to land regulation, a farmer cannot have 10 hectares. If they have more, they are called an investor and then they have to pay a higher tax.

We don't know what happens to the old land. We have no rights. If a person is talking, if someone heard I am talking, I will be in prison.

My hope is with God. The Derg was so powerful and was overthrown. So yes, I have hope. But I cannot trust neighbors or anyone or else . . . I will be reported as a terrorist. The media is not free, it cannot talk. Most are afraid to tell the truth.



Challenging the government for an illiterate community like ours is a big challenge. We keep quiet...

— [REDACTED], NYANGATOM PASTORALIST

I am based in the [REDACTED] border between Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan. The place where I live is very arid. There is no water, no roads, no phone, no school, no community services. I have to cross an international border to access pastures. When we cross into Kenya, the Turkana people steal and raid our cattle, kill the children taking care of cattle, and threaten them not to use the water or pasture.

People used to dig deep holes just for water. We even lack people who can dig and find water. Maybe 10 to 15 years ago, we had abundant cattle. But today, poor animal health and raids by Turkana make the numbers dwindle. Even as I sit here speaking to you, I don't know how many cattle have been raided while I have been away.

The government is telling us development will bring security and stability. They tell us that when the sugar farm is started, it will stop conflict. Now we the community do not see that. There is nothing practical on the ground. As I came here to speak to you, Turkana raided goats and sheep and killed one boy. There were people mourning. I went to the *woreda* administration with a complaint, but no action was taken by the government.

There will be challenges for us when the sugar farm starts, as there is limited pasture area, and the area is degraded. We might be forced to cross border and have the same conflict as now. Also, Turkana might ambush us.

We have no connection with the people coming from central authorities. All our information is from local *woreda* authorities. They tell us that the government is taking the land and we must welcome them as this will bring development.

The community raised the issue of pasture. The local authorities say they will provide us with a particular area with pasture and apart from that each household will get a plot of 1.5 hectares to graze their animals.

They always refer to the Sala Mago experience because pastoralists have been given land and they are grazing their animals. But they are far from us, so we don't know how the Sala Mago do. But this is all a theoretical conversation.

People in [REDACTED] want a project manager to come and see us and explain. Actually, as of now we don't know if there will be an agreement since he is a government agent. We want to meet, share our feelings and our thoughts, and share our current experience with Turkana. The issue of Turkana is also a challenge for them.

But what if there is no agreement between the people and the government?

Challenging the government for an illiterate community like ours is a big challenge. We keep quiet but they are deceiving people and take our land and water for sugarcane and cotton.





The issue of land grabbing is not clear for the UNHCR and most refugees are rejected and not granted asylum.

- [REDACTED], REFUGEE IN KENYA

I came to Kenya on February 15, 2004, after the December 2003 killings in Gambella. I came with my siblings. Currently, I am volunteering with [REDACTED] and the UNHCR.

After arriving, I worked on a community structure in 2004 so each and every refugee does not have to approach organizations individually. Since 2010, we have witnessed a larger number of people arriving from Gambella. When we ask the reason, we are told that the government is taking over the land and they have to move to another location. When people refused, they went missing, were arrested, and tortured. When they arrive here in Kenya, they are not allowed to be urban refugees. So they go to refugee camps like the Dadaab/IFO, located in northeast Kenya.

Upon arriving, there are problems. The issue of land grabbing is not clear for the UNHCR and most refugees are rejected and not granted asylum. The first group was rejected but they have appealed. But there is no guarantee that they will be awarded the refugee status.

In 2011, we had big numbers come who crossed into South Sudan and then to Kenya. Accessing the border is a problem since Kenya has sealed the borders for security reasons. There are reports of extortion and abuse from the South Sudanese side.

The refugees are comprised mainly of women and children. Men stay to work to raise money to send their family over the border. We supported 56 families in 2012 through the help of a pastor to pay for their travel from Kakuma to Dadaab/IFO. They are currently in Dadaab.

Determination of refugee status takes 6 to 12 months. Most of the group from last year were rejected but are still in the camp waiting for revision of claims.

In IFO refugee camp, security is a concern. This is a Muslim area and because the locals are not happy with churches in the camp, it leads to religious conflict. The Al-Shabab militants always carry out attacks and target police. The police are supposed to protect the UNHCR—so then the UNHCR staff doesn't come out, and services for refugees are affected. A month and a few weeks ago, they tried to kidnap the UNHCR staff, and shot the driver.

There are 500 to 600 people—close to 20 to 25 families (some 100 people) are from 2010. The most recent ones arrived on August 3, 2013. I received phone calls from the camps. They are scared and worried about the UNHCR decision [of awarding or not refugee status]. There is an urgent need for advocacy for the UNHCR in Kenya to understand the plight of the refugees from Ethiopia.





So many like me, and
whenever we speak—
people don't listen.

- [REDACTED], REFUGEE IN KENYA

During the relocation, I was given a piece of land. I moved because I was forced. We had to build the *tukul*, our new home, ourselves. This does not mean we are content with it.

According to our Anuak customs, we share everything. Our home country treats us as if we have no use, even though we were born and raised here. Our great-great-grandparents were there. We have suffered so much at the hands of the Ethiopian regime. After the villagization program, I was moved to [REDACTED] and was sent for training.

The main purpose of our training was to show us what the investors are doing and how they are cultivating our lands. We have seen only help for the investors. We were taken early morning and were brought back in the afternoon. Thirty minutes were given to eat lunch and we were not even provided water. We saw our lands worked by the others.

There are so many like me and whenever we speak, people don't listen.

The Ethiopian government uses us and our land. I'm not the only one. My brother and husband were killed by Ethiopian forces. When you move deep down in Gambella, life is hard. So we fled to Kenya for safety.

I was in the camp 2 to 3 weeks ago, when 50 families seeking refuge were rejected. I don't know what awaits us. We need help. We need our voices heard.





Why would I leave my home? What interest do I have in foreign land?

— [REDACTED], AN EIGHTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD REFUGEE IN KENYA

Gambella is our land and home. See my age? Why would I leave my home? What interest do I have in foreign land?

If your refugee application is rejected, you can appeal within 30 days. You can appeal twice and then go to the Department of Refugee Affairs and then go to court. After three appeals, your basic amenities are denied and this includes housing, medical, rations, and services.

To emphasize, for those who came after 2010, I don't know one case that was accepted. It would seem that UNHCR Kenya and UNHCR Ethiopia have an agreement and they work together. The name of our tribe, Anuak, means "to share." Rejection of refugee status means we have to share food and resources. So even the people with resources and refugee status are then affected. We share when we have nothing.

Food and health care are the most important issues for the refugees. The reality is that people are running away from Gambella. But refugee status determination depends on if we were displaced from our land. When the Ethiopian government says that all land belongs to the government, the UNHCR in Kenya rejects our application and we are sent back.

A family I know was told that they had reached the final stage and were told to go back home. The wife refused. Her husband said that they should go to Uganda and try again for refugee status from another country. The wife was tired of moving and stayed. She has nothing. She sold her gold earrings to go back to the refugee camp. She tried to register with a new name, but the biometric gadget reflected her earlier record. They said she was trying to commit fraud and arrested her.

She is now with us and has threatened to commit suicide if not granted the refugee status. The UNHCR decision broke up the family. We try to watch over her. The pastor goes to see her to advise her.





We are from fertile land.
We used to live next to
rivers with fish. Now
we are thrown into the
desert...

— [REDACTED] REFUGEE, KENYA

The Anuak left in 2003–04 following the massacre. Some were left behind to protect land so it was not deserted. When villagization started, there was a problem. Relocation is difficult. I am moved from where my ancestors lived. I was moved to a new place, which is not fertile. The reason given for relocation is to provide better access to social services. But that has not happened.

People are dying from diseases. In the process of relocation, backed by the military, there were killings. People were tortured and beaten. When young people see the police, they run away with fear. So people decided to leave and join their refugee relatives in Kenya. But after all this, they are not considered a refugee.

We are out of our country, not going to school. Our land is used by investors and the government. But our children have no land and no education. There are people who had an education and now do not work in Kenya. There are no jobs for them. With the stance UNHCR has taken, we are hurting from all sides. We are from fertile land. We used to live next to rivers with fish. Now we are thrown into the desert while people from foreign land reap our lands.



I am in Kenya waiting for refugee status.
Still waiting, struggling to pay rent or buy food.

— [REDACTED], REFUGEE, KENYA

I arrived here 2 months ago from Gambella. I was a [REDACTED] Gambella and was made to work with the army for relocation of people from their places. I was in total disagreement with the way this was done with beating and harassment. While I was living with the military, they would sneak out at night to go to the villages and attack, beat, and torture residents. They were doing this to intimidate the villagers so they will accept relocation. When they returned, we would have disagreements. When they would come back we ask them about the nature of operations they did in isolation.

There was an incident at the Saudi Star plantation in 2012 where a police officer was killed. Then they blackmailed us. The others alleged that I was involved in the violence at the Saudi Star plantation. I complained to the police commissioner who redeployed me. While I was moved to the new place, my family was not paid my salary. Then I was sent for 4 months to the South Sudan–Ethiopia border. But again, no salary. The military then influenced the police force to get me arrested. So I fled with family.

It was a hard and difficult journey through South Sudan. I had to hide in the jungle for many days and nights. Afraid of being caught by the army. And now I am in Kenya waiting for refugee status. Still waiting, struggling to pay rent or buy food.





Outside the Journalism School at Bahir Dar University

Where There Are No Journalists or Free Media

In 2013, Ethiopia's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index dropped to 137 from 127 in 2011–12.⁹

Today I am talking to you but tomorrow I may not be here . . .
—Betre Yacob, journalist living in exile

I have a degree in journalism from the Bahir Dar University. I was the editor in chief of *Hulachin/Together*, a publication in the Amhara Regional State of Ethiopia between 2008–12; worked as a columnist at the Ethiopian magazine, *Ebony* (now closed down); an Italian magazine *Assaman* (now closed down); *Daily Journalist*; several Ethiopian online media outlets; and had my own blog.

In Ethiopia, journalists are not allowed to cover human rights and sensitive political issues. Journalists are also deprived of the right to establish an association and work together. This prohibition is enforced through a broad anti-terrorism law. Any time you touch such issues you face harassment, warnings, and, if you continue, you end up in jail and labeled a terrorist.

In 2012, I began to receive warnings from national Intelligence and security service agents. My phone and computer were monitored and I was being followed. On June 14, 2013, I received a phone call from the Criminal Investigation Unit and they accused me of being a terrorist and acting against the public good. I was told that if I didn't stop they would kill me.

In 2014, with 40 other journalists, I started the Ethiopian Journalists Forum (EJF) with the objective to protect the rights of journalists and to challenge the deteriorating press freedom in Ethiopia. Since its inception, the association has been viewed as an enemy by the Ethiopian government. Beyond denying registration and the legal certificate, the government accused EJF of working with human rights organizations and Ethiopian opposition groups operating abroad with the intent of overthrowing the government. The association is now officially banned.



Things worsened for me when I became the president of the EJF. I have been under surveillance and constantly monitored and threatened. I have been accused of conspiring with organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Oakland Institute, and Human Rights Watch to elicit violence and commit terrorism in the country. There were several phone calls warning. Once a high-profile government official called me and told me that they would jail me soon.

In April 2014, I traveled to Angola to represent the Forum at an African Union conference on human rights. While I was there, several colleagues reported that the government had begun another crackdown and EJF was a target. To avoid jail and possible torture I decided to flee to another country. On April 30, 2014, my house was searched by the police and my documents were taken.

For now I am forced to live in exile with my wife. Three other leaders of the Association, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED], are in exile as well. Life is very challenging . . . I live with fear. The Ethiopian government has spread rumors that we are trying to run the association from another country. This is a serious threat and I am afraid of deportation. We are scared to go out of the house and leave only to buy food and other essential commodities. The Ethiopian government security agents are everywhere. So it is not easy to move around.

It has been more than 8 months but UNHCR hasn't given me a refugee status. I need quick relocation because of the dangers around me. Today I am talking to you but tomorrow I may not be here . . . [REDACTED] is a free place for the regime in Ethiopia to do whatever it wants. Okello Ochalla was arrested in South Sudan and extradited the same day to Ethiopia and face charges of terrorism.¹⁰ The same might happen to me.

Let me share with you my day-to-day life in exile. I live in a house shared with my colleagues. My wife and I don't have communication with our respective families in Ethiopia. They were visited by the security officials, who asked them if they know what I am doing and who I am working for. They told my family that I work for the terrorists and foreign powers and thus I am a criminal.

Additionally, we sometimes have problems from the local people as well. Once when we went out to purchase some basic things, we were robbed by a group of young people. This happened in front of our house and the passersby just watched instead of helping us. So we were forced to change our house.

Life is hard here . . . even affording basic expenses is challenging.

I would love to keep writing as a journalist, but I cannot do it now. I sometimes feel as if I am useless. My communication with my friends in Ethiopia is broken. Most of them are not willing to communicate with me since they are afraid of getting into trouble with the government. I am officially labeled as a terrorist and called a criminal, and communicating with me is viewed as a crime. Only those who have already been targeted by the government respond to my emails.

I am so worried. It would be better if I was alone. But my wife is here and I worry about her safety as well. . .

Appendix: A Look at the History of Land Reform and Villagization in Ethiopia

Today, Ethiopia is home to almost 90 million people, making it Africa's second most populous country after Nigeria.¹¹ Its economy centers on agriculture, which comprises nearly 50 percent of the country's GDP, 60 percent of its exports, and 80 percent of its employment.¹² The majority of its population—approximately 83 percent—live in rural areas.¹³

Amid these statistics and these contrasts is the issue of **land**.

Until the mid-1970s, Ethiopia's land was governed by a feudal system. A small number of elites held ownership over the vast majority of land.¹⁴ This created a highly unequal system, with the majority of the population operating as landless peasant laborers who were highly vulnerable to economic shocks and did not have livelihood security.

In the early 1970s, when a drought hit the northern provinces of Ethiopia, these landless peasants had few assets to protect themselves from its effects. The drought quickly became a famine, and it is thought that between 40,000 and 250,000 died as a result.¹⁵

The controversy over land ownership and its role in the famine were key factors in the 1974 overthrow of then-Emperor Haile Selassie's regime.¹⁶ On the night before Selassie was deposed, viewing stations were erected throughout Addis Ababa, and a documentary about the 1970s famine was shown to incite rage against Selassie, and in particular the issues with land ownership.¹⁷

After Selassie was overthrown, one of the first actions undertaken by the new leadership in 1975 was the full nationalization of land.¹⁸ The principle was to ensure equal access to land for all Ethiopians.

By the early 1980s, the military regime that replaced Haile Selassie had become the brutal military dictatorship known as the "Derg," and land nationalization had not unfolded as expected. The Derg put in place several damaging land-based policies. One example was the creation of state farms and the centralization of grain marketing.¹⁹ This set of policies consolidated significant amounts of food production within the country and distributed their products at significantly lower-than-market prices to military officials and urban elites.²⁰ Again, peasants were left vulnerable to economic or climatic shocks, with little ability to earn a decent living.

A second set of important land-based policies enacted by the Derg were those of resettlement and villagization, or *sefara*. A key element of the famine of 1983–86 was Derg's plan to forcibly resettle more than one million peasants from the northern regions of Ethiopia to regions in the south.²¹ The stated rationale was to distribute the population from fragile, famine-prone lands to more fertile areas. However, it was well known that conflict was underway between the Derg and revolutionary forces in the north. Several scholars have suggested, "the main aim [of villagization] was to depopulate Tigray and Wollo [provinces], thereby freeing the Derg to commit genocide against those that remained."²² Indeed, of those who were forcibly resettled, many died in the process.²³

Like resettlement, the villagization program aimed to consolidate rural peasants into distinct, more densely populated villages. Once again, the stated rationale was to "improve the access of rural residents to social services, and to strengthen their ability to defend themselves against rebels."²⁴ However, this relocation often upset traditional practices of nomadic and pastoralist peoples, and resulted in greater cultural and social upheavals and abuses.

After 15 years of oppression, famine, and conflict, the Derg regime fell in 1989. In the years since, various political transitions have taken place and significant amounts of international aid and development assistance have been offered to Ethiopia. However, land still remains central to debates about the development fate of the country.



Ethiopia's new government has maintained its commitment to the principles of nationalized land. Stephen Devereux and Bruce Guenther explain the rationale behind this decision, writing:

“allowing smallholders to sell their farmland converts this essential livelihood input into a liquid asset that would inevitably be monetized through ‘distress sales’ for food during crises such as drought, forcing millions of small farmers off the land, concentrating farmland in the hands of a minority of rich landowners, reviving quasi-feudal labour relations in agriculture, and displacing rural poverty into urban slums.”²⁵

However, an examination of Ethiopia's foreign investment decisions regarding land paints a very different picture of the government's beliefs and intentions. Since the mid-2000s, the Ethiopian government has awarded millions of hectares of land to foreign investors.²⁶ The government's Guide for Investors states, “there is nearly 11.55 million hectares of land readily available for farming. The rental price of rural land is generally low. There is strong commitment from the government to avail the country's fertile land for investment.”²⁷ The government's rationale is that these investments will allow foreign currency to enter the economy, improve infrastructure in the region, create employment opportunities, and have beneficial trickle-down effects through technology and knowledge transfer to smallholder farmers.

In reality, these large-scale land deals have had disastrous effects on local populations, as they have often gone hand-in-hand with the continuation of the villagization program (*sefara*) that was started under the Derg. The land offered to investors has typically been land slated for villagization. While the villagization program is said to be voluntary, our field work and research suggest that local, often pastoral, populations are being forcibly removed from their lands and resettled in ways that neglect their traditional ways of life and livelihoods. These forced evictions have been accompanied by gross human rights abuses, including the rape, killing, torture, and arbitrary detention of local populations.²⁸

Although the Ethiopian government promotes the continued nationalization of land as a way to protect against gross inequalities and abuses related to land ownership, their policy decisions regarding land lead to these very conditions.

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THIS LAND IS
NOT FOR SALE