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Joint Report from Oakland Institute and SMNE Sounds Alarm on Foreign Agri-Investments in Food Insecure Ethiopia

The **Oakland Institute (OI)** and the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** announce the June 8, 2011 release of their joint report on Ethiopia; part of the OI's more comprehensive report on *"Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa."* The report on Ethiopia is the outcome of an extensive in-country study in Ethiopia of what is commonly called "land-grabs"—government executed land investment deals with foreign investors that give them the rights to some of the most fertile, water-accessible land in Ethiopia for up to 99 years at prices as low as \$1.19 (USD) per hectare; all done without consulting the people.

Mr. Obang Metho, the Executive Director of the SMNE compared the report's evidence of the total exclusion of the people from involvement in these illegal land agreements as reminiscent of the Berlin Conference of 1884, **"These illegal land agreements do not represent the interests of the local people; but instead, represent the interests of the current regime TPLF/EPRDF and investors; yet, the indigenous people will be impacted forever, just like those decisions made by past colonialists at the Berlin Conference to divvy up Africa without the African people present; decisions which have continued to incite conflict and instability on the continent ever since."**

The Land Rent Contractual Agreements for land leases between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and twenty-four companies or individuals; now available for downloading from the SMNE's website: <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/110510EthiopianAgriculturalPortal.php> You can read about the major loopholes in land lease contracts: <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/110511MajorLoopholesInLandLeaseContracts.php>. You can also read SMNE's independent comments and recommendations based on this report which will include observations regarding the political impact and specific recommendations to address concerns. And watch 12 minutes video on Ethiopia's land rush: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/21/ethiopia-centre-global-farmland-rush?CMP=tw_t_gu.

These deals are being carried out behind closed doors by the one-party government (EPRDF) of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, a regime regarded as illegitimate following the elections of both 2005 and 2010; neither of which met international standards. In the 2005 election, 194 peaceful post-election protestors were killed, some 50,000 were detained and opposition leaders were imprisoned. In the 2010 election, all political space was closed and the EPRDF claimed a 99.6% victory. Repressive laws have been created to criminalize dissent, peaceful protest, assembly of more than three people in public and restrict civil society; including advocating for human rights. Those who resist have faced punitive measures including threats, intimidation, loss of jobs or opportunities, arrest, detention or death.

Mr. Metho states, **"This is the Neo-colonization of Africa. If what is going on in Gambella, Ethiopia was happening in New Delhi, India; in Oxford, England; in Bismarck, U.S.A; or in Saskatoon, Canada, this would create outrage! If some Ethiopian company went to India or any of these places and took over this much land without consultation with those impacted, would the people of these nations be silent? If it is not allowed in these places, why is it justified in Ethiopia?"**

Ethiopian citizens are denied the right of private land ownership, but what is essentially "lifetime land ownership" through these long-term lease agreements are now being given to foreign investors by this cash-strapped government; now being accused of laundering 8.2 billion dollars. As this land is leased, hundreds of thousands of some of the most vulnerable and marginalized Ethiopians are being forced from their indigenous land and told to build new homes within designated areas provided by the regime; purportedly to give them greater access to services; however, these services have failed to materialize. Although the TPLF/EPRDF regime claims there is no connection between these forced evictions and the government's new "villagization projects;" recently released contracts between the government and these investors promise to provide "vacant land free of any impediments," which appears to mean those currently living on the land.

The TPLF/EPRDF regime, known as a serial perpetrator of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other gross human rights violations, has promised to provide “security” to ensure “peace” to these investors, which in this case, appears to mean military force. Mr. Metho, who comes from the Gambella region where the most land has already been leased and where much information was gathered for this report, shared his fear that serious human rights abuses may be committed to protect the investments of these foreign companies. He stated, **“Ethiopian defense forces have already become more prevalent in these areas in anticipation of resistance from the people to these planned resettlements. If force is used, more people will die.”**

Ethiopians are in favor of foreign investment, agricultural development and economic expansion, but not under these conditions where the opportunity is only available to regime cronies and foreign investors willing to work with this corrupt regime. As these subsistence farmers become impoverished and lose the means to sustain themselves and their families, many of these displaced people may have no other option than to work as a cheap labor force on their own ancestral land. Even if they could afford to pay for the food, most is unashamedly said to be destined for export to places like Saudi Arabia, India, China and beyond. Other land will be used for non-food production such as for flowers and bio-fuels.

The official statement by Mr. Abera Deressa, Ethiopian Minister of State for Agriculture reflects that when he said *“The government is advising American, Canadian, Chinese and Indian investors to grow “high value” crops including soya beans, palm oil and bio-fuels, rather than cereals, to help feed the approximately 13 million Ethiopians that require some form of food aid. If we get money we can buy food anywhere,” “Then we can solve the food problem.”* In a country that is nearly synonymous with the image of famine and hunger and where over thirteen million people are now depending on food aid; this plan to “give away” up to seven million hectares of land is both outrageous and immoral.

The findings of the report also indicate the alarming lack of oversight in protecting the environment and wildlife in the area; particularly as most of the land being leased is the ecologically fragile area of the headwaters of the Upper Nile. Deforestation is rapidly being carried out as virgin forests are being destroyed. Yet, the TPLF/EPRDF government shows little concern for either the well being of the people or the future environmental impact in Ethiopia or downstream in Sudan, Egypt or beyond.

Ethiopia does not have to be one of the poorest countries in the world for it is rich in natural resources, fertile land, abundant water and hardworking people; however, it has been plagued with governments of the past who did not care about the people; but never before have Ethiopians faced the crisis of losing their own land right from underneath their feet like is now being done by Meles Zenawi. Despite receiving billions of dollars of aid over the last decade, why has there been such little investment into the agricultural development for Ethiopians who still largely use antiquated farming methods? Why has this regime refused to budge on private land ownership and instead, held a tight grip on a medieval land tenure system that has not changed since the time of Haile Selassie? This new trend is simply a continuation of the feudal system that makes landowners of a few while all others remain in poverty. The only difference is the landowners are now foreigners or cronies who have a vested interest in this unpopular regime.

As the report indicates, most of the people will be excluded from the benefits despite the increasing hunger in the country; only deepened in seriousness due to a growing population. When Meles took over nearly twenty years ago; reportedly, he claimed a goal in ten years would be for Ethiopians to eat three meals a day. But today, hunger and starvation, typically found most in the rural areas and in the dryer regions in the north, are now also affecting those in the urban centers. Many Ethiopian families eat in shifts and are surviving on only one meal or less a day. Children are fainting in school for lack of food. Those with adequate means are finding it increasingly difficult to find some of the most basic staples such as oil, sugar and teff—used to make the national dish of Ethiopians—injera.

Witnesses within the report speak to the widespread anger over these land grabs; only silenced due to fear of retaliation from this brutal regime; however, when it is combined with the desperate conditions of hungry Ethiopians, it is only a matter of time before diverse people will come together to demand change. Ethiopians seek the freedom that will enable them to take responsibility to feed themselves rather than to depend on outsiders for food aid; however, the alarming explosion of these land deals threatens the future of the entire country in ever accomplishing that goal.

TPLF/EPRDF is a Marxist-Leninist government that tries to hide under the cloak of democracy; yet, donor countries such as the U.S., the U.K, Canada, Germany, Norway, France and others have prolonged its rule by providing huge amounts of foreign aid while turning a blind eye to its human rights abuses, repression of civil rights, the perversion of the rule of law and now the large-scale robbery of the peoples' land and assets.

On the other hand, support for this dictatorship is undermining investment opportunities from these same and other countries that care about advancing democratic principles and a market-based economy as opposed to those who place no demands on dictatorial regimes. Laws such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act of 2000 (US) and the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (US) erect much-needed ethical barriers to doing business with a corrupt regime; however, it makes it easier for countries without such ethically-based restrictions to forge ahead in Ethiopia. Ethiopians want to do business in an open global market, but want agreements that will benefit all parties and be sustainable.

The lack of transparency in these deals is clearly calculated; particularly in light of the February 18, 2010 report from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) that found Ethiopia to be one of the five most at risk countries in the world for money laundering (AML) and the financing of terrorism (CFT); stating that the lack of such compliance made not only Ethiopia, but also others involved with them, whether inside or outside their borders, extremely vulnerable to illicit activities. (<http://www.fatf-gafi.org/dataoecd/34/29/44636171.pdf>).

Undoubtedly, the TPLF/EPRDF will attempt to discredit this joint report; as they have done with reports from groups such as Human Rights Watch, the European Union and the U.S. State Department's yearly human rights reports; however, the people on the ground, from different regions and towns throughout Ethiopia speak a consistent testimony. Some of these witnesses have already been threatened; forcing them to seek safety outside of Ethiopia along with thousands of Ethiopians scattered throughout the world—a strong testimony of the oppressive nature of this regime that has made life unbearable for its citizens. This is a regime that wants the resources, but not the people. Ethiopians people have been robbed of their land and their dignity with nothing with which to replace it.

Recently, one of the pro-regime newspapers (Ethio-channel) reported Meles Zenawi's brazen response to the criticisms of these land giveaways as he said, *"If we have to cry, we should not be crying for the hundred thousand (100, 000) hectares of farmland we have already given away to the Indians, but for the 3 million hectares of farmland we are about to give away."* (English translation from Amharic).

In response to this Mr. Metho warns, **"We, the people of Ethiopia, are even now working through various available mechanisms to make sure those who are involved in corruption, human rights violations and in the accumulation of ill-gained wealth will be held accountable. Free countries no longer are the safe-havens of the past."**

To the current and potential investors in Ethiopia Mr. Metho advises extreme caution. He asks, **"Are you aware of the "unspoken" dark side of these land investment deals; particularly the devastating impact on the lives of the people? Whose side will you be on? Investors should understand that you will be doing business with an unelected government that took power by force, manipulation and corruption and therefore does not possess the legitimate authority to negotiate in the name of the Ethiopian people. It is risky to partner with a government whose right to govern is being challenged by the majority of the people. Once this regime falls or implodes, these agreements will not be binding!"**

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The SMNE is a *non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians; committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability and respect for human and civil rights to the people of Ethiopia and beyond. The SMNE has branches in the United States, Canada and United Kingdom and chapters in various cities and countries throughout the world, including within Ethiopia.*

You can find more about the SMNE through its website at: www.solidaritymovement.org. Or OI through its website at <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/>