
A Daylight Robbery in Ethiopia

by Obang Metho

If it is unacceptable for Ethiopians to go to India, China or Saudi Arabia and clear their land without consulting the people, it is unacceptable here. We are human too and we care about the future of our children like everyone else... My message to the foreign investors is, listen to the owners of the land!

—Anuak man from southwestern Ethiopia

Dear People of India:

I greet you in peace and hope that the good people of India, who have yourselves thrown off the shackles of colonialism only 63 years ago, will join with Ethiopians and other Africans in confronting the hundreds of Indian companies who are now at the forefront of colluding with African dictators in robbing the people of their land, resources, lives and future! As either prospective buyers or simply as justice-loving Indians, you deserve to have full disclosure regarding the nature of these Ethiopian

“business deals,” the impact it is having on “real people” on the ground, and the risks of “doing business” in

Ethiopia with the current dictator of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi.

On June 8, 2011, Oakland Institute (OI) and the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) released a joint investigative report on Ethiopia, “Understanding Land Investments in Ethiopia,” part

of a larger study of nine African countries affected by the new phenomenon called land grabs. In Ethiopia, these “land grabs” are being carried out as foreign investors make deals to lease some of the most fertile agricultural land for up to 99 years at negligible prices. Because private land ownership is prohibited in Ethiopia, “land deals” are being negotiated in secret agreements between these foreign investors and the Ethiopian government, without any consultation with the people.

My name is Obang Metho and I am writing this to you on behalf of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), a non-violent, grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality and the respect for human and civil rights to the people of Ethiopia and beyond. Our guiding principles are based on putting “humanity before ethnicity,” or any other distinctive that dehumanizes other human beings; and secondly, that “no one is truly free until all are free,” meaning that ignoring or contributing to the injustice, exploitation and oppression of our neighbors, near or

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far, creates greater insecurity and disharmony for all of us in this global world.

I come to you first and foremost as a fellow human as I call you to join our effort to stop the plundering of Ethiopia and Africa by African dictators, their cronies and their foreign partners—some of whom are Indian—who are hungry for our resources but care little for our people.

An indigenous Ethiopian man described it this way: “This regime is one of the most hated regimes in Ethiopian history... they kill the people like they are nothing and with no remorse.” In light of this, I

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must warn you that those who are “doing business” in Ethiopia, are partnering with an illegitimately elected dictator and his authoritarian regime built on the brutal suppression of the rights of its citizens. The intent of my open letter is to expose the dark underside of these “deals” with the hope of joining forces with those in India who demand justice and human rights for all.

Ethiopia is controlled by a repressive regime, posing as a democracy, which maintains its power not by the ballot, but by the bullet, clearly shown by its 99.6% claim to victory in the 2010 election and complete closing off of any political space. All sectors of society are tightly controlled by a one-party minority government, which politicizes all benefits—including business opportunities, education, jobs, agricultural supports and even food aid (see recent Human Rights Watch report)—and punishes any dissent, creating a silenced Ethiopian society.

Ethiopians are pro-business and pro-investment, particularly as Ethiopia is reported to be the second poorest country in the world with 90% of the people living under the poverty level. What we oppose is the daylight robbery of Ethiopia by modern day bandits who are willing to make secret deals with a corrupt government that would be illegal in India and other more developed countries. Abundant resources, combined with a disenfranchised public, few protective regulatory mechanisms, a lack of transparency, duty-free deals and government promises of cheap labor have brought opportunists from all over the world—from India, China, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Egypt, Turkey and beyond—all hungry to eat off the weakened carcass of the future hopes of the Ethiopian people.

Into this environment, have come over 500 Indian companies—more than from any other country in the world—to capitalize on this “goldmine of opportunity.” One Ethiopian from the Oromia region protested: “Our land is being given to the Indian companies, and anyone who speaks out against it is labeled as a terrorist who is not supposed to have

any rights or question any actions by the government.”

Why would any Indians be part of this? Any who resent the colonial past of your own country should know that it began through the British East India Trading Company, where some of the more unscrupulous often colluded with corrupt indigenous government officials. What would Gandhi say today were he to know that Indians, who were only freed from the shackles of colonialism in recent history, were now at the forefront of this “land grabbing” as part of the race for foreign control over African land and resources, currently being called the Neo-Colonialism of Africa?

Karuturi Global Ltd, (KGL), the largest investor, has now leased 300,000 hectares in Gambella for 99 years, allegedly paying only \$1.19 US per hectare, starting 6 years from now. This is the equivalent of 55 rupees per hectare! The local people have not been consulted nor compensated and are now being forced from ancestral land and told to build their own homes in resettlement villages.

The Karuturi contract, as well as others that have been seen, show no benefits to the local people despite what was said publicly. Instead, the regime promises foreign investors that the land will be handed over to them as “vacant” land, free of any impediments. Because villages of people have been living on this newly leased land for centuries, their resettlement elsewhere is being assured in these contracts. Anticipating resistance from the displaced, the regime also promises to provide “security” to these companies.

No one is representing the people or refuting government claims. One indigenous Anuak man in the highly fertile Gambella region complained, “This land is not just “nobody’s land” as the government claims; it is our life! Without it, we could have never existed as a people. I don’t think we will accept our land being given away to foreigners without resisting.” Many Anuak have already been displaced and many more have been warned to leave their homes so Karuturi Global Ltd, can take possession of their land, but the people have refused. In response, Ethiopian troops have arrived in Gambella, arresting increasing numbers of Anuak. Some have disappeared; others have been killed. Whenever the troops come, human rights violations increase. This is not new.

In 2003, 424 Anuak leaders who were opposed to the exploration of oil—due to lack of input from the people and adequate measures to prevent environmental destruction—were brutally massacred in three days. Extra-judicial killings, arrests, rape and destruction of property continued for two years. Investigations by Genocide Watch called these acts of genocide and crimes against humanity, linking cul-

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pability to top Ethiopian leadership. The case is now referred to the International Criminal Court.

As Ethiopians are threatening to rise up against the large-scale robbery of land and resources — accompanied by the widespread perpetration of human rights abuses — the Meles regime has just purchased 200 new tanks for \$100 million US rather than meet the growing food needs of the 13–16 million Ethiopians who must rely on falling levels of food aid from donor countries in the coming months. Who will these tanks be used against if not Ethiopian citizens who are only wanting to survive in their own land?

Companies like Karuturi, Ruchi Soya Industries Limited, Enami Biotech, Supra Floritech, Sharpoorji Pallonji and Co, Praj Industries and others doing business in Ethiopia should be warned of the risks of complicity in human rights violations or corrupt practices—including bribes and kickbacks—when partnering with a regime known for both, particularly as the government attempts to evict citizens from their land.

Additionally, once this TPLF/EPRDF regime ends—something inevitable considering the rising outrage surrounding these deals—a whole new set of laws will be put in place and any prior agreements will not be binding. Instead, companies seeking to do long-term business in Ethiopia should put pressure on this regime to ensure that no unethical business practices were followed and that the civil and human rights of the people were upheld. As Gandhi warned, “There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always.”

My fellow Indian people, from far away, you may not hear the cries of the Ethiopian mothers, see the tears flowing on the cheeks of the children, feel the pain in the hearts of

the elders or know the desperation of the fathers as they lose hope in providing for their families. You may not see the increasing numbers of Ethiopian children with swollen bellies, the emaciated people dying in the streets or the homeless children searching for food, for Ethiopia is already widely known for these images of suffering; however, to Ethiopians, the level and depth of poverty have tragically deepened despite claims of double digit economic growth—the profits of which all must be ending up in the pockets of those in power who have sold out the people. Only good leadership, accompanied by good governance, will change the image of Ethiopia. As the people of Ethiopia engage in a fervent struggle for such change, will the people of India support or hinder them?

What would you do if an Ethiopian company came to India and evicted citizens from millions of hectares of their own land in order to grow food for export, affecting food security for generations? Would you stand for it? As Indians anticipate the vote on the National Right to Food, does that same right apply to Ethiopians?

In 1947, the Brits did not offer independence to the Indian people, but liberation only came when the Indian people rose up to peaceably demand their God-given rights—something that has made India a shining example to the world. Will you deny us the same? Gandhi’s fight for Indian independence was undergirded with a deep belief in the worth and dignity of every human being. It inspired the greatest movements for freedom and rights in the 20th century, including the Civil Rights Movement of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

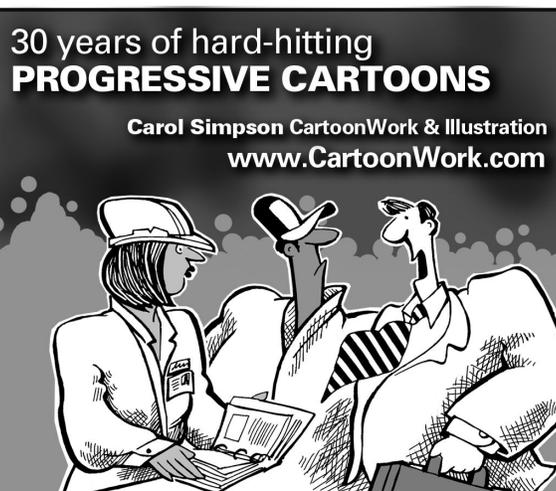
We Africans have been the target of colonialization, slavery and exploitation in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and a target of African dictators and their foreign cronies in the 20th century. We have had enough and will not tolerate this new onslaught of exploitation and dehumanization in the

21st century! Many want to keep us Africans poor, disenfranchised and vulnerable only to more easily take advantage of the pillaging of our continent.

Will you help work with in India to bring greater transparency and compliance with whatever protective laws and safeguards are in place in India? Will Indian individuals, social justice groups, the media, policy making groups, religious groups and all other stakeholders join us in our struggle for freedom from a dictatorial regime robbing us of our future?

Ethiopians are ready for their liberation, and they will slowly but surely claim it, but

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we ask you not to be a roadblock. Africans know that when two elephants fight, the grass in the middle is trampled. Right now, the people of Ethiopia and Africa are in the middle of a giant struggle for African resources. Many who are profiting want Africans to stay just as they are—struggling for survival so they “do not get in their way.” Yet, behind the scenes of these business deals, real people are suffering.

Gandhi said, “Non-cooperation with evil is a sacred duty.” What does this mean today? As investors, companies and nations seek opportunity, let none of us forget the shared humanity of our brothers and sisters both near and far and our God-given responsibility to live “humanely” among each other. Only then will we have reason to hope for greater peace, harmony and cooperation among peoples and nations, for “no one will be free until all are free!”

Your African brother,
Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE