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## Ethiopia/UK: Oromo rally in London



Oromo people living in UK staged a rally against human rights violations by the government of Ethiopia. The demonstration was organised jointly by the Oromo Community in UK, the Oromo Relief Association, the Oromo Support Group and the Oromo

Youth Association.

***"Shame on you UK tax payers; you're paying killers in Ethiopia; Shame on you UK government; you're supporting the tyrant of Ethiopia!"***

January has 2013 has been very cold in UK, especially for people like me who have come from Oromia where the sun shines throughout the year. Throughout the last week, every open space has been covered by snow and the weather is below freezing point in all parts of the UK. The weather in London seemed to be the coldest on 25 January 2013. In this snowy, cold weather, a large number of Oromo people gathered in the city of London at the King Charles Street near the UK House of Parliament.

United by generation long cravings for freedom, justice and fundamental human rights, the demonstrators also demanded the release of political prisoners, a stop to land grabbing and harassment of the Oromo people. Standing in the middle, being one of the them, I started to ponder deeply about what the situation is like in the Oromia, thousands of miles away from where I stood as the crowd shouted. I thought of the inhuman actions of the Ethiopian government that have, mysteriously, remained unnoticed by the international community, many of whom manage to see only the tip of the iceberg.

The EPRDF government has made Ethiopia the most terrible home to live in for the Oromo nation. More than twenty thousand Oromo people have been arrested by the government, thousands assaulted every day by the government security forces. This figure accounts for more than 90% of political prisoners in Ethiopia last year. Recently, more than three hundred Oromo youth were mass arrested in severe condition only because they moved to celebrate Irrecha, an Oromo thanks giving ritual on September 29, 2012.

Hundreds of Oromo university students were arrested and torched in January 2013 only because they demanded for basic human dignity while studying in the campus. Many of the students who made non violent demonstration against the injustices have been killed, children harassed, women assaulted and raped. Others,

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**Date:** 14/02/2013

**Countries:**

Ethiopia

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who have had the chance, fled the country to live in exile. People are just arrested and accused of being a member or supporter or sympathiser of the Oromo liberation struggle. To the Ethiopian government authorities, every Oromo appears to be a member of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a political organisation struggling for the socio-economic, cultural and political rights of the Oromo people. One has to prove he/she is not a member or supporter of the OLF in order to live in relative peace. The safest proof is one and only one - to become a member of the EPRDF, the ruling party with only one opposition seat in the parliament.

Failure to prove non affiliation with OLF or any attempt to remain politically indifferent has come to be dangerous in Ethiopia for every ordinary Oromo. It results in severe consequences, the impact of which will remain for generations. These people face a lot of problems in their day to day life. They face discrimination in getting public jobs, denied social services all of which are controlled by the government (even including residence ID). Adults intending to study in public universities are discriminated. Business persons are systematically eliminated from investment and small scale business if they fail to be members of the ruling party in any case. Every student in college or university is required to secure membership of the ruling party at the campus in order for her/him to get job in public institutions or to run private business after completion of the study. The situation is worse for the rural people. Farmers are required to be members of and demonstrate allegiance to the EPRDF in order to get agricultural inputs and/or have their children learn in school without assault by the government security.

Another mysterious torment, perhaps offensive insult to the international community, is that even emergency food and other aid often fails to reach those who have failed to prove they are not supporters or sympathisers of Oromo struggle. As a result of enforcement of the FDRE Proclamation 621/2009 that has been intended to impose superior regulation of charities, the party leaders decide who should receive and who should not receive the emergency support at grassroots level in the respective community. Older people are usually victims of this type of abuse because of their allegiances to the values of the Oromo Gadaa system, that promotes respect and dignity to people in difficult situation. In so doing, technically, the authorities decide who should die from and who should survive the hunger. What a shame is on the international community to uncover this mysterious violation of rights and/or turn deaf ear to deception of the Ethiopian government.

Land grabbing is another abuse that vexed the Oromo in UK. The Ethiopian government considers the Oromo land a personal toy of the authorities. Investments are expanding at the expense of the lives of millions of households evicted from their land, their only source of livelihood.

Millions of hectares of land have been distributed to the so called investors, the majority of whom are from the ruling tribe of Tigray, evicting the local people in Oromia. The families of those evicted households are pulverized into daunting poverty subsequently. This is the tragic history behind the proliferating large scale commercial estate farms, sugar factories, hydroelectric dams, cement factories and large-scale real estate industries and flower farms. These schemes have not only evicted the people from their only sources of livelihood but also caused tremendous depletion of natural resources and environmental pollutions thereby further worsening the social problems to the local people.

For instance, the flower farms covering hundreds of thousands of hectares in the Rift Valley lakes region of Oromia have not only dismantled the livelihood of thousands of smallholder farmers but also spoiled the four big lakes in the province- the Koka, the Batu, the Langano and the Abijata. The flower farms discharge chemical waste directly to the lakes. I have personally witnessed the situation in one of the farms in August 2012 when I went to pay visit to my uncle living in village just next to the farm. It is called the Share Ethiopia. This farm was established couple of years ago by foreign investors and covers thousands of hectares of land by the Lake Batu( Ziway). The land had been protected as a buffer

zone to the Lake before the farm was established. It was shocking for me to find out that there were water tunnels constructed at a distance of about every twenty meters from one another adjacent to the farm to discharge waste chemicals from the farm directly to the lake. Terrestrial and marine animals are affected by these chemicals. Cattle grazing in the peripheries of these farms have been found dead several times, a large number of birds found dead by the lakes, fish found dead on the shores.

The hazards for human have turned out to be unbearable. A large number of people working in the flower farms have developed skin diseases which they never had in generations. A lot of them died from unknown illnesses. Despite all these no government authority questioned or attempted to investigate if the flower farms had been complying with the environmental protection policies, which are only shelf made. Some youth groups protested, but were silenced by arrests and intimidations immediately.

The economic growth fantasised by the Ethiopian government is being made on the necropolis of millions of Oromo people evicted from their land without any reasonable compensation to their loss of livelihood. The evicted people did not get benefit, in any form, from the lucrative profits generated from the schemes in the expense of the livelihood of the evicted families. The incomes from these schemes have simply kept the investors and the authorities richer and richer while aggravating poverty to the victims, the thousands of households evicted. More than 90% of Oromia's wealth is processed by less than 10% of the nation's population, few corrupt and unethical investors and the government authorities who have been getting richer and richer as more than 90% of the population is getting poorer and poorer.

The demonstration and demands of the Oromo people in UK did not, I am sure, get news or programme coverage by international media like the BBC. But I am sure of one fact. If this demonstration had taken place in Ethiopia, it would have attracted the attention of hundreds of the international media giants including the BBC and the Aljazeera. This is not because it could have been attended by millions of people, but because it would have resulted in mass killings, arrests and assault of the public by government security forces.

Thus, thinking of such a demonstration in Ethiopia is a nightmare; even discussing those matters at small group (of friends) level results in horrendous consequences. I had witnessed this couple of weeks before I fled the country. The Oromo people have been protesting against the injustice in various forms, including peaceful protests and political struggle. The Ethiopian government security forces, however, have reacted brutally to the protest. Hundreds of students who made non violent demonstration against the injustices have been killed, tenth of thousands of people arrested, children harassed, women assaulted and raped. Others, including myself, have fled the country to live in exile. Backed by financial support of billions dollars from the western world, the lion's share of which is contributed by the government of UK annually, the Ethiopian government and its security forces have become stiff and stronger to suppress such a public movements for justice and human rights in all aspects.

Despite all this leaders of the western countries keep praising Ethiopia for "achieving remarkable economic growth and progresses in democratisation", simply echoing what the Ethiopian government authorities say. Shame on governments of the western nations. Where is the solidarity for human dignity? Where are the commitments for human rights and freedom? Where is the camaraderie to democratic values? What a shame! . . . What a shame!!

## No Associated files

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