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Subject: In Defense of the Latest Amnesty International (AI) report Repression in the Oromia

Dear the Secretary General & the Ministers of the Ethiopian Federal Government:

I am writing this letter to defend the latest Amnesty International (AI) report BECAUSE I AM OROMO' Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia¹ from the attacks and mischaracterizations of the Ethiopian government presented on BBC Radio and other media outlets. I believe I am entitled to do this for four reasons.

¹ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR25/006/2014/en/539616af-0dc6-43dd-8a4f-34e77ffb461c/afr250062014en.pdf>

The first reason is, I was born and raised in Oromia among the followers of the Oromo indigenous religion-- *Waqefaata*. I have witnessed human violations perpetuated by consecutive Ethiopian regimes. During the Haile Selassie regime, I witnessed my family members giving a quarter of their harvests to the Abyssinians and paying taxation without representation in the government. I witnessed many Oromo family members tried not to allow baptizing their children in the Abyssinian Orthodox Church. In the belief that if someone first goes through the Waqefaata ceremony known as *Amachisa*, the person will remain *Waqefaata*, my community members developed strategy to take their children through the indigenous ceremony first. Accordingly, in the Amachisa ceremony I got the name Tolera = things are good. After that, they had me baptized because the Oromo people were *forced* to baptize their children in the Orthodox Church. In the ceremony of baptism they gave me a name Gebre Giyorgis = the slave of George. I leave it to the readers to compare the differences in meaning between the two names.

I heard many stories about many innocent Oromo persons being charged with the crimes they did not commit. In most cases it was to free the Abyssinians from crimes they had committed. There is a case that I well knew- about an Oromo person being penalized for referring to the Supreme Court judge as (አንቸ=anchi) ‘you’, a term used in Amharic in reference to women,-instead of (አርሰዎ=irswo) ‘you’ used in reference to the higher officials. The person did not use the term አንቸ (anchi) to undermine the Supreme Court. The reason was that he did not fully understand the Amharic language. This means that the Oromo people’s cultural rights are regularly violated and such violations are legal. As the UN document clearly states “human rights are indivisible, interrelated and interdependent”; the rights of the Oromo people to social, economic, political and cultural rights are being violated and this is clearly demonstrated in this case of a person being penalized for making a grammar mistake.

Second, during the Dergi regime I witnessed many of my childhood friends involuntarily recruited into the Ethiopian militia. I have heard the mother of my childhood friend call herself “a mother goat” comparing herself to mother goats that have no right to defend their kits. Most militias died in the unnecessary wars and a few have returned physically incapacitated. Only a handful of them returned safely after spending their productive years in the war front. As I have elaborated in my previous works, many of these militias who returned back their village were infected with HIV/AIDS and they have contributed in a major way to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Oromia.

Third, my lived experience clearly taught me that under the Haile Selassie regime most of the Oromo people had to give a quarter to three quarters of their harvest to the Abyssinians. Under the Dergi regime, young Oromo men were involuntarily recruited to the militia. Oromo farmers were forced to subsidize the war by providing food at a fixed price. In my adulthood, I realized that the Oromo cultural, political, social and environmental rights had been violated. In understanding that a population's health is determined by the social, economic, political, cultural and environmental conditions, I chose to make human rights and public health conditions in Oromia my research topic. I have been researching and writing on human rights and public health issues in Oromia for over a decade. My works are published in peer reviewed journals and a book.

Fourth, since 1992 I have been a member of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) and served in different capacities including as the president of the organization. Before and after I joined the OSA, members and invited guests have been investigating the socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental conditions in Oromia from different angles and academic fields. For me it is clear the major causes of the socio-economic problems that manifest as HIV/AIDS epidemic, famine, nutritional deficiency i.e. iodine deficiency and others primarily result from human rights violations. For my Ph.D thesis research and after, I have interviewed more than 55 Oromo nationals from different parts of Oromia, with different levels of education and work experiences. I have had the privilege to collect data in Oromo, Amharic and English languages and make sound intellectual and cultural judgments in interpreting them. This has given me a unique privilege in accessing the collective memory of the Oromo people and the ability to deeply understand the present realities.

The Oromo people constitute the single largest national group in the Ethiopian Empire and in the Greater Horn of Africa. The size of the Oromo population and the geographical location of Oromia makes the Oromia regional state the heart of Ethiopia. Recognizing that Oromia is the richest and largest populous state, the TPLF-led Ethiopian government has been using collective violence to control and exploit Oromia, which is the key in controlling the Ethiopian political economy. The TPLF security forces are preoccupied with incapacitating the Oromo people by killing, imprisoning, torturing them and forcing others to flee their country.

I have carefully read the Report of AI, 'BECAUSE I AM OROMO' Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia² and read and listened to the response of the Ethiopian

² <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR25/006/2014/en/539616af-0dc6-43dd-8a4f-34e77ffb461c/afr250062014en.pdf>

government³. If the Oromo people were empowered on their own affairs, they would have been able to give their own assessment and verdict on whether or not the report of AI reflects the objective reality in Oromia. Unfortunately, only human rights organizations such as AI, the Human Rights Watch, (HRW), Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa, (HRLHA), the Oromo Support Group (OSG) and scholarly organizations such as the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) can expose the social, political and economic crimes in Oromia at this historical moment. I affirm that the AI report clearly represents the objective realities in Oromia. Imprisonments, torture, arbitrary detentions, disappearances, rapes and killings are widespread human rights violations and they are day to day phenomena in Oromia Regional State. However, the report does not tell the whole story, as we shall see below.

First, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) regime implements its political and economic objectives through a variety of strategies and tactics. It is highly militarized and repressive, and it tightly controls information and resources by manipulating foreign aids, domestic financial resources, and political appointments. This makes it difficult to know the exact number of Oromo political prisoners. The Ethiopian government uses formal prison cells as well as informal places to imprison and torture Oromo prisoners. There are registered and unregistered prison cells. For example military camps, police stations, government offices, private homes, hotels, health care centers and even schools are used to imprison Oromos. Many unregistered prisons are also found in remote and lowland areas and several of them are inaccessible to the public. In the estimate of HRLHA the number of Oromo political prisoners is about 30,000 (see HRLHA reports).

Second, the TPLF led government does not allow Oromo independent political, social and human rights organizations to function. For example, the HRLHA is a human rights organization established to defend and promote human rights in the Horn of Africa. Initially it was formed in Ethiopia and registered as the Human Rights League (HRL). However, soon after the HRL was formed, Ethiopian security forces imprisoned the founders for several years and made others flee their country. Some of them- without committing a crime- have been jailed in the notorious Ethiopian prison cell known as Maikelawi for four years. The leaders did not commit any crimes. They were simply serving their community in different capacities i.e. church pastor, teacher, state and private media and human rights activism.

Third, Ethiopia is one of the ethnicized and racialized Empires. In Ethiopia, by virtue of birth and your ethnic background, you get a specific citizenship status. Until 1992, agape citizenship

³ <https://soundcloud.com/bbc-world-service/ethiopia-is-not-governed-by-fear-dissent-is-fact-of-life>

was assigned to the Amharic speakers with numerous privileges attached to it. Although the TPLF fiercely fought against such a discriminatory social stratification, when they took the power sadly they adopted the same principle and allocated to the Tigray nationals to enjoy the agape status. For example, the population of the Tigray nationals constitutes about five percent of the Ethiopian people; military generals took ninety- five percent of the positions. Disproportionately having more Tigray nationals in the military commanding positions tells us several important points. In the mind of the TPLF leadership, political power is determined not at the ballot box, but by the military. The TPLF government uses the Tigrayan-dominated army, police, security networks, and puppet organizations to destabilize independent institutions that are intended to facilitate changes in the social, economic, cultural, political and environmental conditions in Oromia and beyond. This was done to incapacitate, silence and control the Oromo people and deny them an independent leadership. This means the Ethiopian constitution, which is theoretically founded on the principle of federalism, is a sham designed to confuse the world community.

Fourth, from the beginning, the TPLF forces functioned as organized criminals or bandits. To confuse the world community the TPLF- led Ethiopian government presents itself as if the EPRDF is a formal coalition of political organizations. In reality, it was the TPLF who used the prisoners of war (POWs) to form dozen of the so-called PDOs. Theoretically Oromo political prisoners formed the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Amharas formed the Amhara Nation's Democratic Movement ANDM and those from the south people formed the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic movement, SEPDM and with the TPLF they formed the EPRDF in captivity. The political programs of these PDO organizations were assigned them by the TPLF. The formation of PDOs by the POWs in captivity makes the formation of EPRDF a fake.

By conservative estimates, the population of Ethiopia is about 100 million. The population of Tigray is about five million. The Oromos constitute about 45 million and the Amahara constitute about 23 million. The population of Southern Ethiopian People constitutes about 18 million. The other nine million are from the Ogden, Afar, Benshangual and Gambela regions. If the EPRDF is the coalition of several political parties, the decision- making power of these parties should have been distributed according to the number of the people they represent. If that is not the case, then serious human rights violations occurred when the TPLF formed the coalition of EPRDF⁴ and made the decision making power of the TPLF equal to that of the OPDO, ANDM and SEPDM in the executive committee.

⁴ <http://hornaffairs.com/en/2010/10/03/eprdfs-new-leadership/>

Fifth, in the last twenty years the TPLF led government has engaged in systematic evictions of the Oromo people from their homes and farmlands in the name of leasing their lands to investors with no or little compensation. By evicting Oromo farmers from their homelands without or with little compensation, the TPLF regime has leased several millions hectares of Oromo lands to foreign investors such as the Chinese, Arabs, Indians, Malaysians, and European business people and local capitalists (Oakland Institute Reports⁵). The investors are heavily using fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides and by that they polluted soil and rivers. This has resulted in the displacement of millions of Oromo farmers, simultaneously compromising their food security and exposing them to heavy toxic chemical pollutants. The water the Oromo people drink, the air they breathe and the foods they eat are now polluted. Besides that, chemical pollutants have severely harmed the biodiversity of the soil, the fertility of the land and the productivity of farm animals.

Sixth, in the name of expanding the city of Finfine (Addis Ababa) and selling Oromo land to investors, the Ethiopian government has evicted over three hundred thousand Oromos from their homes in the last ten years⁶. Again the eviction was done with little or no compensation. The dispossession of land for lease to investors and the expansion of the city of Finfine have forced millions of Oromos to move to cities. Most of them have become homeless and street beggars.

Seventh, although the Ethiopian government claims that the cultural rights of people are respected, this is only partly true. The Oromo people are denied to use their own language as the language instruction in schools, courts and workplaces in their capital - Finfine. As of today, there are no public schools in Finfine that use Afaan Oromo as the language of instruction. No single court and health care service providers use Afaan Oromo in the Oromia capital. Millions of Oromos have to use Amharic to communicate with health care providers, judges, and prosecutors as well as police and in their daily lives. For this reasons they need the help of translators, because it is a foreign language for most of them. Indeed, one of the demands of the Oromo people is the right to make the Oromo language the official language in their own capital and the second federal official language. What are the impacts of violating such rights? (Ans. Two decades after the Ethiopian government recognized the existence of HIV/AIDS in the country; many Oromos who live in Finfine and do not understand Amharic language, did not heard the existence of the virus (see, my work – Dugassa (2006) Ethiopian Language Policy and Health Promotion in Oromia).

⁵ <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/land-deals-africa-ethiopia>

⁶ ለገሠ ኤፍረ ም (2014) የመለስ ትሩፋቶች- በለቤት አልባ ከተማ

Eighth, the TPLF government policy is driven by a racist mindset and a divide and rule agenda. The TPLF racist mindset clearly manifests when you look at the ways it implements its own policies. For example, although they are a minority in their homeland, the Harari people who constitute about 185,000 are allowed to have their regional state⁷. However, the population of Agaw that constitutes over 700,000 are denied to have their own regional state. There are three possible reasons that explain this discrepancy. The first reason is to make the Harari state viable one has to expand the territory and this requires incorporating the Oromo land and people. Doing this contributes to the fulfillment of the standing agenda of divide and incapacitates the Oromo people. The second reason is although the TPLF led government sees the Amhara- centric political organizations as a threat to its power; the Amahara and the Tigray people are culturally closer to each other than the Agaw people. Therefore, the TPLF chooses to violate the rights of the Agaw people rather than breaking apart the Amahara regional state. The third possible reason is that the TPLF is influenced by the longstanding racist view about the Agaw people and chooses to assign them the lower social status.

Ninth, the TPLF led government promotes inter and intra ethnic and religious conflicts and present itself as a peacemaker. Such conflicts are used to divide and weaken the Oromo people. Examples of such conflicts include the conflicts between Oromo and Gumuz in the West, Oromo and Ogden in the East and the South, between the Oromo-clan Borana and Guji and the Muslim Oromo and Christian Oromo. Conflict usually destabilizes the communities and results in property damage. This further aggravates the poverty level.

Tenth the TPLF rules with arms and has made fear the tool. In 2012, when the late prime minister unexpectedly died, they forced the whole society to mourn. They forced the whole society to go to public squares for the event. At these squares, thousands of heavily armed military stood for hours in silence or slow music and journalists stood to record videos of all the movements. People cried not necessarily for love of the PM but for the fear of the military, an uncertain future and worrying about the consequences of not crying. One of the many heartbreaking cases was organizing homeless men and women and taking them to the square. At one point the journalist asked the team leader who they were and why they were there. One of the team leaders said, “we are

⁷The Harari people are a small minority group. Although a few of them are historically linked to the ancestry of Turkish and Egyptian army, most of them are Oromo nationals. The Oromos constitute 57 percentage of the population in the regional state of Harari.

homeless people” and “we are crying because we hoped that the PM would give us shelter. Now he is gone, no one would help”.

Eleventh, the TPLF developed the culture of misinforming and misguiding the local and global communities and managed successfully hiding its crimes. In 2000, the TPLF security forces killed a young student – Alemeworki Buli, when they fired at student demonstrators- and reported it as if she had died of natural causes. Not only that, they forced the parents of this girl to declare that their daughter died of natural causes (See U.S Department of State Report 2007⁸). This is also true in the case of Biyansa Baysa in 2010. The TPLF security forces badly tortured Biyansa Baysa and this resulted in kidney failure and his eventual death (Smith, 2010⁹). When Biyansa died, the TPLF government reported that he died of natural causes. Simultaneously, they pressured family members to state that he died of natural causes. An interview with the father was twisted and presented as if the father agreed that the cause of death was natural.

Twelfth, the TPLF has been charged for using young Oromo men as minesweepers. In the 1999/2000 Ethio-Eritrean war, over 120,000 people died and the great majority of the deaths occurred from the Ethiopian side. The Eritrean army were dug in and put mines around their borders. To break the border defense line and cross the mines, the TPLF forced young Oromo men to walk over the mines in order to defuse them and clear the paths for the mechanized brigades who are happened to be the Tigray nationals to safely pass the Eritrean defense line (Hirst, 1999¹⁰).

Thirteenth, the TPLF has been also charged with deliberately burning the natural forests of Oromia. The major forest burn occurred when they were preparing for the Ethio-Eritrean war. The need to burn the natural forests of Oromia emerged as a strategy to deny the OLF forces shelter (See the OSG Reports).

Fourteenth, the TPLF came to power by using a Marxist structure of organization known as *Gooti* and *Garee* at the grassroots levels. Under *Gooti* and *Garee*- also referred to as “the fives”- the TPLF made families and friends spy and report on the opinions of family members and friends. This severely damaged cooperation and the community support network (HRW Report¹¹).

Fifteenth, the TPLF regime used state power to allow the duties of government, party, non-profitable organizations, corporations and private industries to be intermingled. For example, fertilizer was imported by a corporation owned by a non-profit organization known as the

⁸ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78734.htm>

⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/22/ethiopia-activist-murdered-election>

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/may/18/ethiopia>

¹¹ <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/ethiopia0505.pdf>

Endowment Fund For the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT). After the fertilizer arrived, the Ministry of Agriculture managed its distribution. This allowed the Ministry of Agriculture employees to freely provide services to corporations and collect their salary from the public purse. By doing that, the TPLF- the political party effectively owned the so-called non-profitable organization - EFFORT, business corporations and redirected the public resources to the party and individuals associated with them.

Sixteenth, the TPLF government made the legal system look like a movie. If the TPLF security forces did not like the opinion of someone, they use the principle of the “carrot and stick” method to design crime, witnesses and court procedures. They bribed or forced someone who has known the targeted person and asked them to give witness. They trained the alleged witness in what to say at the kangaroo court. As it is in the movies, crimes, witnesses and judges are all artistically created by the state.

Seventeenth, the TPLF violated the very constitution that they wrote and failed to separate state and religion. They failed to guarantee religion to be a private matter. Instead, the TPLF government is engaged in making religion a public matter and sponsoring certain sects of Christianity and Islam and condemning and imprisoning the leadership of others.

Eighteenth, based on the information I have collected most of the killings, imprisonments and evictions are attributable to the TPLF leadership. Most of these crimes are kept secret from the current Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn. The reasoning is that the current Prime Minister is from the minority ethnic group known as Wolaita from the South. Indeed, comparing to the late prime minister Meles Zenawi the current one has limited power. In many cases, the TPLF leadership acted as backseat drivers and the Prime Minister was just a spokesperson. The power of the current prime minister is limited not by the constitution but by belonging to an ethnic group other than the Tigray. Indeed, by accepting less power than the former prime minister, the latter is legitimizing racism.

Nineteenth, although the focus of my research works is public health, which is the public good or collective good, I have been interested in genocide studies which is about preventing extreme forms of collective violence. My interest in the theories of genocide emerged out of fear of the conditions in Oromia region. According to the president of Genocide Watch Gregory H. Stanton (Genocide Watch¹²), genocide has eight intermingled stages. These stages include: classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination

¹² Eight Stages of Genocide, <http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/8StagesBriefingpaper.pdf>

and denial. The space does not allow me to go through all these stages, but I will briefly mention about dehumanization. The past and current Ethiopian regimes have been clearly dehumanizing the Oromo people. Even today, the TPLF regime, their scholars and few other Amahara extremists insist on referring to the Oromo people by using of the derogatory name G word given to them – which is equivalent to the N word for African Americans. Dehumanization makes the killing easy, acceptable and even necessary. Some of the Oromos who are killed and currently suffering in the notorious Ethiopian prison are those who opposed accepting such dehumanization. Under the TPLF led government, several books and journal articles have been published by their University professors that deny the Oromo people indigenous status and thereby dehumanized them.

Twentieth, Waqefaata is an indigenous Oromo religion and in the view of others they are seen as “*devil worshippers*”. Hence, they are the most dehumanized group. During Kings Yohanis and Menelik most of the Oromo were Waqefaatas. At that time evicting and killing the Oromo were seen as a religious duty. For example in 2013 the famous artist, Tedros Kassahun, better known as Tedy Afro¹³ characterized the 1880-1900s war that had caused the death of half to three-quarter of the Oromo people as the “*Holy-war*”. To prevent further deterioration of human rights violations in Oromia, I call upon human rights organizations to closely follow and report the presence of all forms of dehumanization and the Ethiopian language policy in Finfinee (Addis Ababa) the capital city of Oromia and the status of Waqefaata.

To conclude, the report that the AI gave reflects the objective realities in today’s Oromia. Contrary to what the TPLF says, during the Derge regime when the TPLF supporters were persecuted and thousands of Tigray farmers were picked from their homes and involuntarily transported to the south, AI clearly spoke out against such a policy. AI is organized to defend human rights. AI would defend the rights of the current prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn and the Ethiopian Information Ministry Redwan Hussein- who categorically deny the validity of the report- if their rights are violated. Clearly the problem with the report is not its objectivity, but its limitations. There are many human rights violations that are not covered in the report.

When the TPLF leaders read the reports of human rights organizations on Ethiopia, they supposed to ask themselves and reflect on their own policies and practices. These leaders need to realize that this century is very different from the past. In this century, all state criminals will be held accountable. Denial of the facts will not free criminals; instead, it makes them more criminal for withholding incriminating evidence.

¹³ <http://hornaffairs.com/en/2013/12/29/dutch-media-facebook-teddy-afro-bedele-beer/>

Finally let me end my long letter written in defense of AI report, BECAUSE I AM OROMO' Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia, with a quote from UNESCO constitution, which states "since wars begin in the mind of men, it is in the minds of men that the defense of peace must be constructed".

Thank you,

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Dugassa is the author of a book, Human Rights and Public Health (2014) and many articles, published on peer reviewed journals. These articles include: The Ethiopian Language Policy and Health Promotion; Women's Rights and Women's Health; Human Rights Violations and Famine in Ethiopia; Powerlessness and the HIV/AIDS Epidemics; Colonial Trauma, Community Resiliency and Community Health Development; Women's Rights and Women's Health, During HIV/AIDS Epidemic; Colonialism of Mind: Deterrent of Social Transformation; Denial of Leadership Development and the Underdevelopment of Public Health; Iodine deficiency and women's health; etc.