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Forum on Minority Issues, Third Session

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Statement of Mr. Hunde Dhugassa, from Oromia Support Group (OSG)

Agenda Item: Sustainable Livelihoods

Dear Chair and distinguished delegates,

I am honoured to get this opportunity to air the unparalleled suffering of indigenous peoples like Oromo, Gambella and other nationalities in Ethiopia as a result of inequitable land acquisitions, better called by many researchers as “neo-colonial land grabbing”, by foreign investors in the name of lease by the Ethiopian regime. This act is worsening the already broken food security situation as the peasants are losing their farming and grazing land, in a matter of months. This new form of agrarian neo-colonialism is launched under the pretext of utilizing “Wastelands”. The Ethiopian government officials already acknowledged that 8420 foreign investors have received licence for commercial farms.

Contemporary Ethiopia assumed its current territorial definition at the end of the nineteenth century by conquest. The conquest of the peoples of the south, namely, the Oromo, Sidama, Walayita, Kambata, Hadiya, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Anuak, Nuer, and others undoubtedly resulted, among other things, in the confiscation of their lands. The confiscated lands were given new name so as to reflect the new system.

Oromo people are the third largest nationality in Africa. They have inhabited a separate and well defined territory in the Horn of Africa for many centuries. Their country is called Oromia. The Oromo predominately follow three major religions: Islam, Christianity and Indigenous Oromo religion: Waaqefanna. The Oromo are a fiercely egalitarian people that have lived under a remarkable and complex indigenous democratic system of Gadaa: in which political, military and other leaders including legal experts are elected for non-renewable eight-year term.

Dear delegates

The federal government of Ethiopia has taken over millions of hectares of farmland from the States of Benishangul, Gambella and Oromia to distribute it to the so-called investors. By an interview on December 1, 2009, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia claimed that his government’s land grab policy

will bring new 'technology' and 'development' into Ethiopia. However, as witnessed in many places of Oromia and Gambella, the mega-farms use rudimentary methods of farming similar to the typical Ethiopian farming. The new thing is that, the farmers turned labourers and have lost their dignity and become slaves in their own country. Shamelessly, Mr. Zenawi said that this land giving policy works only in the south, revealing its racist policy of governance. It is the same government that has closed down multi million hectares of mechanized state farms in few years after it seized a power in almost all part of Ethiopia, mainly in Wollega, Arsi and Bale. These farms used to employ high tech-machines including airplanes. The tractors, the combiners, and all the multibillion dollar investment of the farms properties were ignored as if it is nothing and forced to collapse with its thousands of employees.

In Gambella, the fertile south-western region of Ethiopia, most of the land is forcibly taken from the indigenous subsistence farmers; not for the development of a needed infrastructure, but for lease to private foreign companies mostly from India, where neither the profits nor the majority of the produce will be shared with the communities. In all cases, the farmers and indigenous people receive little or no compensation for their land.

More than 13 million Ethiopians are badly in need of food aid. But their government is offering at least 3m hectares of its most fertile land to rich countries and some of the world's most wealthy individuals to export food for their own populations. This fact clearly indicates that the minority PM Meles regime has no consideration or accountability to the Ethiopian people but only to its corrupted will and interests. A closer look at how this government is handling the land issue shows that the reason behind its decision to lease fertile farm lands to foreign investors for an indefinite or century old contract is neither a quest for technology nor is utilizing the excess land. The fact is that, the TPLF dominated EPRDF officials are busy building their business empire for the last 20 years they are in power. TPLF officials own $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total business in the country, majority of them in decisive government positions and military ranks. As popular discontent is growing, the TPLF leaders are worried about the future of their personal and group wealth and their Business Empire, which stretched to all corners of Ethiopia and dominates from small biscuits to large truck industry. The idea they came up with is that, to call up on foreign investors to cover them in the big scam they are involved. That is precisely the reason why land confiscation is so heated, foreign hands are lined up and the name of investors and the agenda of investment are flown full over the air of Ethiopia.

Dear delegates

Several governments have come and gone in Ethiopia. However, the land issue has never been addressed satisfactorily to redress the injustices committed following the conquest. In a country where 85% of its population rely as a means of subsistence on what is obtained from agriculture, the relation of land to man is crucial in a manner similar to the need of air to breath, sunshine and water to live. To deprive anyone of any of these vital resources is equal to rendering a death sentence on him or her and to their extended family members. Consequently the current land grabbing will fuel conflict, create political instability, uproots the indigenous peoples and results in food insecurity.

The land question in Ethiopia is a potential time bombs waiting to explode. The land issue was the major factor for the demise of all Meles's predecessor in the history and has also already consumed a government in Madagascar. However the impact on health, Soil, water, food security, ownership right and the environment will remain an expensive price for the next generation to pay.

Hence I call upon the participants of the Forum on Indigenous issues:

- ❖ To pressure the Ethiopian government to stop selling the nation's fertile land and begging for food aid.
- ❖ Ask this forum to adopt the principle that farmers in Ethiopia have natural right to plough their land and get their livelihood.
- ❖ Ask the UN and its concerned agencies to call special investigation on this serious matter before it is too late and issues immediate resolution against the continued suffering of farmers due to eviction and to undo the unfair law measures.
- ❖ Inquire Ethiopia's regime for its failure to protect human, labour, land, and the environmental right and the right to food and development.

Together we can end the injustice in Ethiopia and end the sufferings anywhere in the world, and hence build a better world!!!

Thank you very much!!