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SMNE Press Release:

## HRW's New Report Confirms Land Grabs, Abuses and Forced Displacement in the Lower Omo Valley

*“There will be a problem during the dry season. Now there is water, but when there isn't, if we do not go back to Omo, we will need government to bring water. If they do not, [we] and our cattle will die. We will go to Omo anyway, if not, we will die, they can kill us there if they want.” Mursi villager (Quoted from the HRW report, “What Will Happen if Hunger Comes?”)*

(Washington Dc, June 18, 2012) The **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** calls on all Ethiopians, international aid organizations and nations providing key support to Ethiopia, members of the United Nation, World Bank, IMF and other international decision makers, foreign investors, financial institutions and the business community, civic organizations, social justice groups and the religious community to do its share in addressing the international violations of the rights of indigenous people to their land as documented in the new report by Human Rights Watch regarding the people of the Lower Omo Valley.

The SMNE is a non-violent, non-political grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians which seeks to hold the one-party, ethnic-based, authoritarian regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi accountable for rampant violations of Ethiopian and international laws; in this case, for the contravention of indigenous land rights, the accompanying human rights abuses and the illegal expropriation of land.

The injustice being perpetrated by our own government against the people of the Omo Valley cannot be ignored. When other people are affected, we are all affected. When they are deprived of their land, we are deprived. They are not alone; nor are others throughout the country who are experiencing the same. This is why the SMNE puts our shared humanity before our differences of ethnicity, culture, region, religion, viewpoint or any other part of our identity that has caused us to ignore the suffering of other Ethiopians in the past. If we are to build a New Ethiopia, our worldview must broaden to include people outside our own “tribe.”

In a newly released 73-page report by **Human Rights Watch**, “**What Will Happen if Hunger Comes?**”, **HRW** provides extensive documentation regarding the Ethiopian government's plans to forcibly displace over 200,000 indigenous people from the Lower Omo Valley from their land—the Mursi, Bodi (Mekan), Muguji (Kwegu), Kara (Karo), Hamer, Bashada, Nyangatom and Daasanach—without consultation, consent or compensation; all violations of the Ethiopian Constitution and international laws. Resistance is already being met with intimidation, harassment and human rights abuses by government security forces.

If plans go accordingly, the Omo River will soon become the site of the highest dam in all of Africa, the Gibe III Dam, which will soon redirect its water into irrigation canals to provide water for huge new Ethiopian-government owned and water-thirsty sugar plantations as well as for the 100,000 hectares of land earmarked for other commercial development. India's Exim Bank is financing and providing technical advice to Ethiopia's sugar industry.

Across the border into Kenya, massive downstream impacts are predicted for Lake Turkana, which receives 90% of its water flow from the Omo River and where 300,000 indigenous and similarly marginalized people of Kenya live. HRW estimates that the water volume and quality will be so cut off or deeply compromised that these people will be effectively eliminated unless they find an immediate alternative means of survival—probably an impossible task.

HRW reports that the World Bank is considering the funding of a transmission line from an associated hydro-electric plant on the Omo River that will bring power from Gibe III to Kenya. Kenya would be buying the power, but ignoring the dire impacts that Gibe III and other Omo projects are having; not only to those on the Ethiopian side but also to 300,000 of their own indigenous who face the same discriminatory practices as do the people of the Lower Omo Valley. As the lights are turned on for some, the people of the Omo Valley and Lake Turkana are facing a dark future.

SMNE's Executive Director, Obang Metho states, *"The people of the Lower Omo Valley in Ethiopia's Southern Regional State are some of the most remote, marginalized and culturally diverse people on earth. The Meles regime is forcing them off their land in total disregard to their vulnerability. They know no other way of life and now they are being thrust overnight from their pastoral ways, which have literally remained unchanged for millennium ages, into the harsh realities of the 21st century. They are totally unprepared to survive in such a world. It is unconscionable."*

Mr. Metho asks, *"What will happen to these indigenous people if they are forced from their homes, land, water sources and way of life?"*

He asks, *"If they are forced to leave, where will 200,000 Omo refugees go—to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya? This would not be well-accepted in Kenya as Kenyans do not want to support more refugee populations, especially after the problems they have had in Dadaab with the large influx of famine-stricken Somalis." "Would they be accepted in the new Republic of South Sudan? There are already enough ethnic problems there and this influx of people would further exacerbate the situation." "Would these people go to the highlands of Ethiopia—doubtfully, for a number of reasons. In truth, the options for these displaced indigenous people are few. They have nowhere to go."*

Mr. Metho warns, *"It is far more likely they will fight to survive. The potential for large-scale conflict amongst indigenous groups over access to water and land is a life and death matter if the Ethiopian and Kenyan governments fail to protect these people. The 300,000 agro-pastoralists around Lake Turkana and the 200,000 indigenous communities in the Lower Omo Valley are heavily armed. As the regime pushes against these people, significant conflict could erupt in this already sensitive border region between Ethiopia and Kenya. The Ilemi Triangle area—an area where land ownership has been under dispute by Sudan and Kenya for years—is also right there, adding another geo-political dimension that now includes South Sudan."*

Another contributing risk factor affecting the region is the current oil exploration being carried out, on both the Kenyan and Ethiopian side of the border. While 500,000 heavily armed agro-pastoralists are competing over increasingly scarce resources, Mr. Metho thinks the oil exploration simply adds *to “a recipe for disaster.”*

Guns are now being registered with the eventual plan, seemingly, to disarm the tribal populations; however, guns are part of the pastoral culture and if disarmament is attempted, in combination with all the other pressures, the government is going to sow seeds for more conflict. Part of this might be by plan as has been the case in other places in Ethiopia where disarmament has changed the power balances between groups to the advantage of the regime. By disarming some tribes and not others, *“more cooperative” groups are empowered, incited and “used” to “punish” more incorrigible groups by proxy; eliminating any real opposition to the government’s security forces. This was a ploy often used in Gambella between various ethnic groups; however, it did not always “work” according to plan. Months prior to the Meles regime’s massacre of Anuak leaders in December 2003, the Anuak were disarmed while the ethnic group most in conflict with the Anuak in the past, the Nuer, were not; yet the Nuer never participated in the massacre. When word of the massacre leaked out, Meles blamed the mass killings on “inter-tribal conflict” between the Anuak and the Nuer which later evidence failed to confirm. These covert schemes are examples of why Meles has earned the reputation of being the “silent killer.”*

Evidence from testimonies refutes government denials that no one has been forcibly displaced from their land; instead, HRW found no cases where Ethiopia recognized any tenure security or indigenous rights over the land and instead found a total disregard for consulting with the people. According to Mr. Metho, these are people with scant education, who do not know their rights and who have no representative voice within or outside of Ethiopia. Mr. Metho explained, *“There are some 300,000 Ethiopians in Washington D.C. and from 1.25 or 1.5 million Ethiopians living outside of Ethiopia, but I only know of one person among all of those in the Diaspora who comes from the Lower Omo Valley.”*

This grim report from HRW marks the Lower Omo Valley as another location on the map of Ethiopia where the Ethiopian government has violated the human rights of its citizens. Obang states, *“Land grabs and human rights crimes are being committed throughout the country. Last week it was in Gambella, yesterday in Afar and today in the Lower Omo Valley. Where will it be tomorrow? When will it stop? Meles and his regime are committing serial human rights crimes throughout the country and getting away with it. They should not be legitimized by donor groups.”*

The government claims that their actions are meant to “modernize” the people of the Lower Omo Valley, but these people are among the most discriminated and neglected people in Ethiopia and are ill-equipped to enter into modern society without a more structured and supportive transition. For years, the people of the Lower Omo Valley have been used by the government as “income-generators” for the tourism industry. You see their pictures on billboards around Addis Ababa and as “tourist attractions.” Instead of educating them, giving them access to clean water, health services or other opportunities, they have been blocked from entering the modern world. Their backwardness has been maintained, marketed and exploited. The way these people have been treated is shocking and embarrassing to Ethiopia. Now Meles says he wants to “civilize them” by pushing them out of their ancestral land as he and his government prepare to take over their most precious possessions—the land, river, minerals and natural resources.

The Ethiopia of Meles Zenawi has become the epicenter of land grabs in all of Africa while at the same time it is both known for its extreme poverty and its huge illicit flow of capital out of the country—mostly from corruption, kickbacks and bribery. The sugar plantation being planned may be called a government-owned enterprise; however, in real life, all business opportunities, profits and transactions are controlled by Meles, his family, his cronies and foreign investors who play by his rules. In a country where there is no transparency and where heavy criminal penalties discourage any exposure, there is no accountability. “Government-owned” business operations ensure profits and benefits for those who support the regime while everyone else is left out. This is the new economic growth of Ethiopia—all of which lands in the hands of the powerful.

***“What is being perpetrated on these vulnerable people will be catastrophic and possibly lead to deadly conflict—a manmade crisis that could be prevented,”*** according to Obang Metho.

He stated, ***“A government should be judged by how it treats its people and neither Ethiopia nor Kenya are taking steps to look out for this vulnerable population. If these people are wiped out of existence, would Meles care? This is a moral issue for Ethiopians, donors, international policy makers, religious groups and our global society.”***

The HRW report suggests that donors to programs such as the Protection of Basic Services (PBS), which provides hundreds of millions of dollars to support health, education and the salaries of district government officials across Ethiopia, including in this region, should take on a much larger monitoring role. These donors, which include the World Bank, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the Netherlands and Germany, have a moral obligation to exert pressure for reforms and accountability. They have clout but appear to be reluctant to use it.

Mr. Metho concludes, ***“The failure of the Meles regime to bring shared development, to unify the country, to teach the people, to care about the indigenous, to promote a free market, to give freedom of expression, to create an inclusive economy, to bring participatory democracy, to bring one meal a day to Ethiopians, to bring clean water, to bring justice to the courts and to improve child mortality is not by accident. It is by calculated plan and purposeful neglect.”***

No matter whether or not the Meles regime or the Kenyan government listens to this call on behalf of these indigenous people; the SMNE’s mission is to speak for them. If their lives are not considered, valued or wanted our job will continue until their humanity is acknowledged not only because it is the right thing to do but because it is our God-given duty to protect each other, especially those who are most weak, vulnerable and in jeopardy. Let us open the paths to modernity by first acknowledging these people as our brothers and sisters as together we build a New Ethiopia.

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