



April 9, 2013

Mr. Antonio Guterres
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
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Subject: OSA's Appeal Letter about Oromo Refugees in North Africa and the Middle East

Dear Mr. Guterres,

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA), a scholarly, multi-disciplinary, and non-profit international organization established to promote studies relevant to the Oromo people. We are gravely concerned over the situation of Oromo refugees in North Africa and the Middle East. The Oromo people are the single largest ethno/national group in the Ethiopian empire and in the Horn of Africa. Oromia, homeland of the Oromos in Ethiopia, covers a large geographical area, and the Oromo people have the ability to stabilize the Ethiopian Empire and the region at large. The current government in Ethiopia is controlled by the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a group originating from the Tigrayi regional state in the north that comprises only about 6% of the Ethiopian population.

The Oromo people constitute more than 40% of the Ethiopian population. Because the Oromos are the single largest group in the empire, the TPLF government sees them as a threat to its political power. For this reason, the TPLF government is intent on weakening the human, economic, and intellectual capacity of the Oromo people. Political killings, abductions and disappearances, unlawful imprisonments and torture against the Oromo people are widespread. This has been going on for over

two decades. To escape from such gross human rights violations, many Oromo refugees have been forced to flee from their homeland and are dispersed all over Africa and the world. Oromo Refugees are experiencing a multitude of human right violations including violent attacks, torture and rape; as well, they are targeted by human traffickers – whose aim is the harvesting of body organs. On the one hand, the Ethiopian government is hunting them in the refugee camps to kill them, or forcefully take them back to Ethiopia by pressuring the hosting countries or bribing security forces. On the other hand, in several hosting countries the people see these refugees as job stealers or competing for their food and they are hostile to these refugees. According to the Oromia Support Group (OSG), the Human Rights League of Horn of Africa (HRLHA), and the Human Rights Watch (HRW), in neighboring countries surrounding Ethiopia, several Oromo refugees with UNHCR mandates have been raped, abducted, tortured and killed and forcefully returned back to Ethiopia.

Human rights violations, such as the forced migrations of Oromo people by consecutive Ethiopian regimes, have been going on for over a century. The widespread human rights violations are destabilizing the Oromo people and keeping them in poverty and misery. Under the TPLF regime, it is the Oromo elites (business men and women, well-educated and knowledgeable individuals) who are targeted for the imprisonment and killing and they are the ones that are forced to flee. As described below, the reports we get from Oromo refugees, research reports and several media suggest that they are experiencing inhuman treatment. On the one hand, the Ethiopian government security forces are hunting them down and even crossing the international border to take them back to Ethiopia and locking them in prison for the rest of their lives- or killing them. On the other hand, human traffickers target the Oromo refugees to abduct for forced labor and harvest their body organs for sale. Young girls and women are raped. Most Oromo refugees are not getting proper protection and care and many of them have no adequate food, water, shelter and clothing. These deplorable problems are widespread in countries in Africa and the Middle East where the refugees are stranded.

Refugees in Somaliland

There are thousands of Oromo refugees in Somalia. In Somaliland, Oromo refugees and asylum seekers are often abducted and sent back to Ethiopia. This has been documented by the OSG and HRW reports. The OSG's well researched document provides details on the conditions of Oromo refugees and asylum seekers. The document reveals widespread human rights violations such as torture, killings and abductions perpetuated by the Ethiopian government and the Somaliland security forces. HRW also

documented widespread human rights violations against Oromo refugees and asylum seekers. For example, on December 28, 2011 the HRW published details of human rights violations by the Somaliland Government. In March 2012, another incident was documented by HRW which involved the destruction of the belongings of refugees and asylum seekers in Hargeisa. On August 30, 2012, Somaliland police and the local people attacked Oromo refugees and asylum seekers. Oromo refugees were attacked at the Social Welfare Center in Hargeisa on August 31, 2012. After the attack, Somaliland security forces took 33 men and a number of women and children to the Ethiopian border town of Wajale and handed them to Ethiopian security forces. On another incident in 2012, 72 registered Oromo refugees were taken to the border town of Wajale to be sent to Ethiopia. Among them, there were four men, 28 women and 40 children. The UNHCR negotiated with the Somaliland authorities, and were able to return these refugees back to Hargeisa. Among them 56 Oromo refugees were taken to prison by Somaliland Authorities. One Oromo man was shot in the leg. Since the incident on September 24th, 2012 at least 24 men, one woman with her baby are still in Somaliland custody.

Refugees in Djibouti

In Djibouti, Oromo refugees and asylum seekers are abducted and involuntarily sent back to Ethiopia. A press release of the HRLHA revealed the re-occurring incidents of forced repatriations of Oromo refugees. As was the case in Somaliland, field research was conducted by Dr. Trevor Trueman of Oromia Support Group. The research finding reveals widespread human rights violations such as: torture, rape, imprisonment, killings and involuntarily repatriation.

Refugees in Yemen

The largest number of Oromo refugees is in Yemen and is estimated to be about 60,000 people. In Yemen the situation of refugees is dire. They are hunted by the Ethiopian government and the Yemen security forces. A recent Danish Refugee Council and Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (DRCRMMS) report revealed widespread human rights violations including attacks and rape. The DRCRMMS researchers interviewed several Oromo refugees in Yemen. One Oromo refugee stated:

Some [refugees] are returned back to Ethiopia by force. The regime had made alliances with neighboring countries. Djibouti, Somalia, Yemen, Kenya committed crime on refugees and also immigrants. The refugees, even those who are living with [the protection of the UNHCR] mandate are not safe.

Three Oromo refugees who have lived in Yemen since 2003 reported their experience as follows:

We have been tortured and detained by the regime. Even in neighboring countries immigrants are kidnapped, tortured and killed. Women refugees are raped by Yemenis in the houses where they are working. They are even raped on the street. Even our children are kidnapped and raped by the Yemenis. In the work areas they don't give us our wages. Our women refugees are being insulted by the Yemenis and stones being thrown by them showing their dislike towards us.

Refugees in Libya

The cases of Oromo refugees in Libya are not that different from those in Tunisia. In Libya, an estimated 160 Oromo refugees who were detained during the conflict in Libya are presently at a Red Crescent camp in Benghazi. Some of them are waiting to be registered by UNHCR. The registered and the unregistered refugees are at risk of being arrested and deported to Ethiopia

In May, 2011 at least 63 Oromo refugees (men, women and children) who had been in Tripoli for several years attempted to escape from the war and racist violence by paying whatever they had to human traffickers to be taken to Italy. The boat they boarded was not equipped with a compass and the trip took them many more days than they had planned. The boat ran out of fuel and water and food; most of the refugees died of dehydration and starvation in the Mediterranean sea; only a handful survived and the winds and the waves returned the boat- and them- back to the coast of Tripoli. One of the Oromo refugees who survived the tragedy resettled in the USA and the other in Norway.

Oromo refugees in Benghazi had an initial visit by the UNHCR personal, but have not had follow-up visits. We are deeply concerned about many of the refugees registered under the UNHCR in Benghazi. Some of the Oromo refugees reported that they did not know the whereabouts of their friends. The refugees suspect that their friends might have been taken by human traffickers—who are targeting refugees and selling them as slaves so that their organs can be harvested. For example, the International Commission on Eritrean Refugees has followed the situation of refugees in Benghazi. According to Estifanos, an Eritrean journalist, human traffickers torture and kill Oromo captives. At one point she got a phone call from an Oromo captive who called from the Sinai desert and pleaded for help. Human traffickers targeted vulnerable Eritreans, Oromos and Ethiopians in refugee camps in Libya, Sudan and Yemen.

Refugees in Tunisia

Oromo refugees in Tunisia are at risk to be deported. For example, in Ras Ajder and Shousha camp, Tunisia, there are Oromo refugees who are told that once the refugee camp closes in June 2013, they would be forced to return back to Ethiopia or move into nearby Tunisian towns or cities. Refugees in Ras Ajder Tunisia and Shousha Camp are told that they will be forced back to Ethiopia. We are very concerned that the Tunisian authorities are planning to deport all Oromo refugees. The cases of many genuine Oromo refugees, due to the language barrier, are rejected by the UNHCR and they are at risk of being deported.

Refugees in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia there are thousands of Oromo refugees. In this resource rich country thousands of law-abiding Oromo refugees are mistakenly categorized with the few criminals. According to Oromo

refugees those who are involved in illegal activities are those who have link to the Ethiopian government. As a result of such categorization the innocent Oromo refugees are harassed, tortured, bitten on the streets and deported back to Ethiopia by the Saudi Arabian security forces.

OSA believes that widespread human rights violations perpetuated against the Oromo people are one of the major contributing factors that have been destabilizing the Horn of African region. Ethiopian government security forces cross the international border and perpetuate human rights violations against Oromo refugees; this is a sign of their long-term intent to harm the Oromo people and their intent to widen the conflict in the other regions. On behalf of Oromo refugees dispersed all over the world, I would like to appeal to the UNHCR to provide appropriate protection and care to these refugees. I appeal to the UNHCR to be proactive and make efforts to pressure the Ethiopian government to respect human rights and stop forcing people to flee from their homes.

Most Oromo refugees are forced to flee their homeland due to persecution by the Ethiopian government. I appeal to the governments of Libya, Somaliland, Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Djibouti, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and other governments and people to protect Oromo refugees.

Also, I appeal to countries like Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, Norway and other countries to settle these refugees. I urge that the applications of stranded refugees are expedited so that they can become self-sufficient and become productive members of society wherever they settle.

Sincerely,

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OSA President

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