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**OGADEN NATIONAL
LIBERATION FRONT
(O.N.L.F.)**

European Parliament Conference:

Cartoon Democracy – Authoritarian Rule and Elections in Ethiopia

**Altiero Spinelli Building, Room 3G3
European Parliament, Brussels
Thursday 23 April 2015
09:00 – 12:30**

Madam Chair, Honourable Julie Ward MEP (S&D),

Honourable Soraya Post MEP (S&D),

Honourable Ana Gomes MEP (S&D),

Honourable Jordi Sebastià MEP (G/EFA),

Honourable Bodil Ceballos MEP (G/EFA)

Mr. Betana Hamano, Sidama Liberation Front

Dr Shigut Geleta, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)

Mr Abebe Bogale, Ginbot 7

Mr Graham Peebles, the Create Trust

Dr Trevor Trueman, Oromia Support Group

Madam Juweira Ahmed, Ogaden Women and Youth advocate

Dr Alemayehu Kumsa, Charles University Prague

Mr Dan Dolan, Reprieve

Mr Martin Schibbye, Swedish Journalist (video statement)

Dr Getachew Jigi Demekssa, Former Member of the Ethiopian Federal Parliament

Mr Abdullahi Mohammed, African Rights Monitor

Dr Baro Keno Deressa, Oromo activist

Mr Antony Otieno Ong'ayo, PhD candidate, University of Utrecht

And Madam Johanna Green and the great UNPO team

Ogaden and other community members

And last but not least

All esteemed participants

It is a great honour for me to address such a distinguished audience. I convey the best wishes and deeply felt appreciation from the Ogaden people and the ONLF leadership to those who made this conference possible, those who are taking part and those who took their valuable time to attend this meeting. In particular, I thank the Honourable Members of the European Parliament who are hosting this conference for the sake of democracy and the rights of all in Ethiopia.

This conference is held at a historic moment when the Ethiopian authoritarian regime is preparing to stage a bogus election in order to get another mandate to continue its authoritarian and abusive rule for another five years, whilst posturing as a democratic state and getting legitimacy to continue to receive international aid and support. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands in Ethiopia are languishing in prisons, tortured, raped, detained arbitrarily, starved and dehumanized beyond description.

In Ogaden, the Ethiopian regime has gone beyond all acceptable conduct expected from a government that claims that its sovereignty is based on the will of the people in its constitution. The Ogaden people are under-going a well-planned and systematically carried out genocide.

The Ethiopian army and the associated Liyu Police killing squads routinely collect and extra-judicially massacre groups and individual civilians in the Ogaden. The Army and the militia use gang rape of Ogaden women and occasionally children of both sexes over extended periods as a weapon of war, creating serious bodily and mental harm to both the victim and their relatives. The Ethiopian government imposed trade and aid embargos in particular regions in Ogaden that have deprived civilians of all basic necessities, causing starvation; the humiliation of having to supply their own boys and girls to fight for their oppressor for crumbs of food from international aid; migration to distant lands, where some are raped, butchered and their body parts sold as is happening in Libya today; or

having to be subjected to further abuses and conditions of life unsuitable for a human being during migration. All this satisfies the conditions set by the international community for classifying cases of genocide.

However, Ethiopia has very powerful sponsors in the international arena and despite both UN and Human Rights groups' reports and investigations, the Ethiopian regime is getting away with it this genocide. Furthermore, in order to hide its Crimes against Humanity in Ogaden, the Ethiopian regime banned international media from the Ogaden. And in order to enforce its ban it deliberately harmed and detained independent observers- Jeffrey Gettleman and his wife from US were detained and their equipment confiscated. Martin Schibbye and Johann Persson, were shot, detained, mentally tortured and humiliated in front of Ethiopian TV and forced to confess to a crime they did not commit and branded as terrorists. Even UN rapporteurs and ICRC who safeguard international Human rights and Humanitarian conventions were banned and the international community looked the other way and no one held the Ethiopian regime to account. And Ethiopia was rewarded with more aid and international accolade as a bastion of stability and a role model for development in Africa!

The basic tenets of modern society in the 21 century is the ability of people to form associations or a government that takes care of their physical, moral and material well-being. Moreover, the pillar democratic society is the ability to choose or change those who manage and lead such a government. In other words, a democratic political order, based on the will of the people that include genuine representation, separation of powers, and, perhaps most importantly, a guarantee of freedom and equality of all citizens, i.e. a government run for the people and by the people.

The Ethiopian government and its apologists are following Hobbesian philosophy (Leviathan), which is implying that African people in the Horn of Africa are brutes in a state of nature and war, who will tear themselves apart and therefore need political society, that is governed by an undivided and absolute tyranny (EPRDF regime), which usurps and maintain its power through absolute terror and relentless and reprehensible, malicious propaganda. A tyrannical system where the rulers can take property, life, and freedom, create uncertainty and fear, with no recourse to justice, remedy or ability to a higher authority. The people in Ethiopia have even now despaired of the possibility of justice from the international community as a last resort, by the continual ignoring of their pleas for help.

All the peoples in Ethiopia regardless of belief, ethnicity or political views desire a democratic governance that is genuinely representative, that has a real separation of powers, and, which guarantees freedom, equality and the rights of choice for every nation and citizen. In 1991, after the majority of nations in Ethiopia fought the dictatorial and tyrannical rule of Mengistu Haile Marian and ousted him from power, the main party, Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), together with other major organizations in Ethiopia, including the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and others, signed a charter that set a democratic path that guaranteed the democratic rights of self-determination of all nations, Free and fair election, freedom of expression, religion, the rule of law, the right of women, minorities and children. The ONLF, OLF and the Sidama

Liberation Front participated in the first and last democratic election in Ethiopian history. Each nation in Ethiopia elected its own state parliament and started rebuilding its own shattered communities.

Within a short period, the TPLF appropriated all weapons, gained power in the capital and after recognition from the international community as the government of Ethiopia, its behaviour changed. It OLF banned it at the end of 1992. In 1994, the Ethiopian army attempted to assassinate ONLF Chairman in Wardheer during a rally; instead the Army shot 84 civilians dead during the scuffle. Then ONLF headquarters was attacked, members of the Ogaden parliament killed and the Organization was banned.

In general its tactic of consolidating absolute power was to attack elected members of a particular target nation, and then, the leadership of the political parties, labeling them terrorists and then ban them. In the case of ONLF it was branded as separatist and enemy of the Ethiopian people. The very concept of separatism was instigated and manufactured, since both the charter and subsequent constitution clearly and unequivocally stated that nations had the right to secede. Therefore labeling an organization as a secessionist was not contrary to Ethiopian law and thus not a crime. It just showed the demagoguery of the regime by claiming on one hand that all nations had a right to self-determination up to cessation in the Ethiopian constitution, while labeling organisations as secessionist and instigating conflict and fighting them.

After ousting the major parties from the liberation struggle era, the regime started consolidating power by creating satellite parties in all the regions and engaging in the exercise of conducting the so called elections every five years. After the second election, the regime became over confident and was surprised to be out-voted in the 2005 election, losing the seats of the capital and other constituencies in the country to Gimbot 7 and other parties.

After the vote of no confidence from the electorate in 2005, the regime panicked and embarked on the most draconian measures ever taken against a people under Ethiopian rule. This challenge was coupled with an ONLF blockade of its quest for oil in Ogaden in 2007. In turn, the regime lost its head and promulgated the so-called anti-terrorism law, closing all avenues for any chance of democratic change and rational dialogue in the politics of Ethiopia.

Today, the Horn of Africa is at a crossroads. The Ethiopian regime, which is receiving billions in external funds from China, as well as some countries in the West, and emerging third world powers, has embarked on total suppression of the Ethiopian people in general and to those who dare to challenge its policies in particular. It has changed the democratic agenda, which used to be its call card for during the last decade for deceiving the international community to a development agenda. And every once a while, a well-placed statement from its spin doctors declares double digit figure development in Ethiopia, while the average Ethiopian goes bare footed, hungry and abused. Well-financed TV stations in local vernacular splash pictures of irrigation projects, new tarmac roads, high rises in Addis Ababa or few selected pumps in the drier parts of the empire. Just few days ago, the deputy prime minister opened a university in a town in Ogaden, called Qabri-daharre. This is the second University in a territory that has no proper primary schools and in which 90 % of the rural population have no permanent water, who are

at the mercy of the seasonal rains for survival. 85% of the students in Jigjiga University come from other parts of Ethiopia.

Underneath all this hype are the silent multitudes in jails- lawyers, journalists, nomads, mothers, dispossessed peasants, and internally displaced rural population whose traditional pastoral lands had been leased to the Chinese, the Saudis, the Indians or Brazilians for quick profit and ‘ effective use of fallow land’ as claimed by the new breed of technocrats from the ministry of agriculture.

Ethiopia is a country sitting on a volcano, in an unstable region, created and being manipulated by the regime in power and the people in Ethiopia are fed-up the regime’s false rhetoric, hungry, and abused. Sooner or later Ethiopia will implode and the very argument presented today by those who advocate for the denial of the democratic rights of the people in Ethiopia on the basis of security and civil war are actually laying the ground work for a complete and total anarchy in the region.

Just a few days ago, the US state department political undersecretary, Madam Wendy Sherman stated that “Ethiopia is a democracy that is moving forward in an election that we expect to be free, fair, credible and open and inclusive...” She further added that “the world is facing a lot these days and Ethiopia is a very strong and growing country and we want to make sure the peace, the stability, the security and growing prosperity continue and we look forward to our very strong partnership, building all the platforms that we need to meet these threats, meet these concerns with all the seriousness it deserves”.

Madam Sherman’s take on the Ethiopian regime is far from the reality and experience of the people in Ethiopia. Bolstering a decadent, authoritarian and abusive regime is a recipe for disaster. By keeping the status quo and supporting this ruthless, undemocratic and unrepresentative regime, the US government is sending the wrong message to the people in Ethiopia, specially the Youth, who are already questioning the false hopes their leaders have been feeding them- ***that there is justice in this world, and there are those who care about democracy and human rights and the rule of law; that there are international norms and rules and that the international community will make the Ethiopian regime accountable for its crimes. Today, What will prevent the youth from opting to join those who have unlimited resources and promise a better alternative to the empty words of their leaders, after seeing how the Ethiopian regime is getting away with authoritarian rule and crimes against humanity.***

So what will the international community gain when it shows the oppressed peoples in Ethiopia that there is no hope for a democratic process? Then, the only alternative open for them will be to blame you and join anybody who calls for your demise.

However, regardless of these misguided and often well-wishing outsiders, the peoples in Ethiopia must accept that ultimately the responsibility of their fate is in their hands and waiting for others to decide your destiny is a sure recipe for disaster.

Having seen the cynical nature of external forces, ONLF calls upon all peoples in Ethiopia to set aside their differences and to start working together to bring a just democratic order in Ethiopia.

The divisive arguments about non-existent Federalism or the reestablishment and maintenance of a fictitious unitary state, has enabled the regime to play us against each other. Both group and individual rights models have worked well in the world. Switzerland is a federal state based on group rights and individual rights. Britain has fully recognised the right of self-determination of the Scottish people and held a free and fair referendum to decide the future of the Scottish people and Armageddon did not happen; all the different nations in Britain including us refugees live in peace and prosperity. Therefore, the real issue is not which rights were accepted, but rather how what was accepted is practiced and respected.

We need to make paradigm changes in our attitudes and thinking in order to bring back the rights of all peoples in Ethiopia usurped by this regime through our failures.

We propose that, all the major political parties and liberation fronts create a common platform that will enable all of us to cooperate and be able to convince genuine democrats in the international community to support us.

Finally ONLF request the EU and the free world:

1. To support the establishment of a genuine democratic order that is based on genuine representation of the will of the people in Ethiopia, regardless of belief or political views
2. To pressure the Ethiopian government to lift the aid and trade embargo and stop using rape as a weapon of war in Ogaden; and desist from all acts that violate the democratic and human rights of all peoples in Ethiopia.
3. To support the liberation fronts and opposition parties in forming a viable democratic alternative to the authoritarian regime in Addis Ababa in order to prevent the impending catastrophe whereby all the peoples in Ethiopia opt to seek help from violent extremists after despairing from any help or remedy from the international order and community
4. To support the peoples in Ethiopia instead of the tyrannical regime that is using international aid to further its control and hegemony in the whole Horn of Africa.
5. To raise the issue of land grabbing in both the agricultural lands and the pastures in Ogaden for oil exploration, corporate agriculture, environmentally unfriendly mega-projects such as dams or pipelines with appropriate bodies that help end such practices

Postscript

We would like to draw your attention to the unfolding calamities in Yemen that refugees from Ethiopia are facing, especially from Ogaden and Oromia. There are thousands of refugees, who are now isolated, lacking food and waterless in the camps and in the urban areas. They cannot go back to Ethiopia because most of them are victims of torture and other degrading treatments. The UNCHR has so far remained silent and we kindly request the EU and MEPs to raise the alarm regarding this issue.

Thank you

Abdirahman Mahdi, ONLF foreign Secretary

April 23, 2015, Brussels