Waldaa Qoranoo Oromoo

Oromo Studies Association

P.O Box 32391, Fridley, MN 55432
www.oromosudies.org

President Lee C. Bollinger
Office of the President
Columbia University
202 Low Library
535 West 116th Street
New York, NY10027
Email: officeofthepresident@columbia.edu

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Dear president Bollinger,

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA), a scholarly, multi-disciplinary, non-profit international organization, established to promote studies on issues relevant to the Oromo who not only constitute over 40% of the Ethiopian population but also resides in other East African countries with a total of over 50 million people. OSA has studied & has produced scholarly works on Oromo people for the last twenty-five years. OSA has conducted annual & bi-annual international scholarly conferences, produced its proceedings and peer reviewed journals and books that you can find in major University libraries and library of Congress. We have historical evidences that the Euro-American racist social Darwinian theory has provided theoretical reasoning for the Abyssinian king Menilik to kill, enslave and colonize the Oromo people. Recently several academic institutions are providing forum to the Ethiopian Prime Minster Meles Zenawi –who is charged for Genocide. Because theories guide practice and in turn practices inform theories, we are very worried about this trend.

We the executive committee members of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) are dismayed when we have learned that Columbia University's, World Committee on Global Thought has invited Mr. Meles Zenawi to be a keynote speaker. We expected the committee would maintain the reputation of the university high if it had made a close look at Mr. Zenawis leadership style, human rights records, and ask if he has some thing positive to offer to the world community before they invite him. We expected the committee would analyse whether or not providing such a forum to dictators and criminals discourages or encourages tyrants leaders like Mr. Zenawi to tighten the grip on the peoples they rule.

Here are some of troubling facts about the Ethiopia Prime Minster Mr. Zenawi.

> Before he became the head of his guerrilla force – The Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) -- he was the head of Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) and at that time he promoted the Albanian style of rigid communism. Zenawi came to power using the MLLT structure of organization known as GOOTI and he maintained the power for nearly two decades with this organizational structure. Under Zenawi all the fellow villagers and the dwellers of towns and cities are organized in a small group known as Gooti and they are forced to spy and report the activity of their family and community members. (Human Rights Watch, Vol. 17, No. 7 (A), May 2005)

To divide, incapacitate and rule the Zenawi regime has created ethnic and interethnic conflicts among the groups whom he sees as a threat. The Oromo people have repeatedly witnessed that their neighbouring ethnic groups with whom they have peacefully coexisted, armed by Mr. Zenawi forces burn properties and indiscriminately kill the young, old, men and women. Then hear from the state media as if it was an ethnic conflict. The Oromo people also witnessed when the Zenawi security forces armed one Oromo clan in order to kill another Oromo clan. In several occasions the Zenawi security forces deny the Oromo farmers access to fertilizers and selected seeds and in doing so deliberately starved them to death. ("One Hundred Ways of Putting Pressure" Human Rights watch, March 24, 2010)

The Zenawi regime used Oromo farmers as minesweepers and deliberately burned the natural forests of Oromia. For example, in the 1999/2000 war with Eritrea in which over hundred thousands people have died many of these forces were used as minesweepers. To deny shelter and foods to the Oromo National Movement forces, the natural forests of Oromia had been burnt and several student protesters who condemned the action and volunteered to put out the fire were killed by the Ethiopian government security forces. (OSA's Open Letter to the United Nations Climate Change Conference December 12, 2009)

Mr. Zenawi security forces killed several school children and then declared that they died from natural causes. For example, Alemeworki Buli died of gunshot by the Ethiopian security forces and then presented to the world community as if she has died of a natural cause. Not only that, the security forced the family members to lie and tell on media that the cause of their daughter's death was a natural. (US State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2004 Ethiopia)

Zenawi regime allowed Alemayehu Garba, a handicapped student from Finfine University and many others to be jailed for their political view and killed Mr. Garba in a prison cell and then reported as if he was killed when he tried to escape from the prison (Oromia Support Group, Press Release No 42, July 2005 - 2006). In the 2010 election campaign the Ethiopian security forces killed Biyyansa Dhibba and declared that he died of cancer.

In one of the official documents (HIZBAWI ADERA) Mr. Zenawi made it known that he is intended to eliminate or incapacitate Oromo intellectuals and deny the Oromo people a leadership. The list of crimes committed by Zenawi regime and his deceptions goes on and on.

Under Zenawi rule poverty level is farther deepen and the gaps between the poor and the rich have dramatically increased. Although Ethiopia gets the largest development aid in Sub-Saharan Africa amounting over $1 billion dollars each year, it remains the poorest country in the world (see, http://www.ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/) The poverty level is a clear indication of the social and economic policy of the regime.

Mr. Bollinger,
I am not alone to charge Zenawi for crimes. Genocide Watch is charging him for Genocide he committed against the Annuaks, Oromos, Ogdens and Sidamas, Amaharas and other people. Human Right Watch, Amnesty International and US State Departments have recorded that under the Zenawi regime human rights violations are widespread. It is believed that currently over twenty thousand Oromo political prisoners are languishing in Ethiopian jails. I ask you to reflect on the massage you are passing to children who have lost their mothers and fathers to the regime and beg on the street for piece of bread. What is your answer if the voiceless parents who have lost their children to the regime and men and women who are languishing in the prison ask what are you trying to teach to the young minds by inviting a dictator and a criminal as your keynote speaker?

Mr. Bollinger,
I am aware that the issue of academic freedom and social responsibility is a longstanding debate in academia. However, I see the invitation of Mr. Zenawi to speak on academic forum neither corresponds to the ideas of academic freedom or free speech. I see it as creating a forum for dictators to propagate their ill motives and encouraging more of such leaders to emerge. You need to realise that this is one of the ways the Euro-America policy makers and institutions encouraged dictators to flourish. Your invitation to Mr. Zenawi is no different than legitimizing his evil actions.

Let me end my points with the words of a man who played a great role in shaping the American racial history and who challenged the American racist education - Martin Luther King who said` "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education."

If you agree with the Kings words mentioned above, Columbia University should be an academic institution where the ideas and ideologies that promote justice, equity, democracy and peace are flourished. Therefore, I urge you on behalf of those voiceless, dehumanized & impoverished people living under Mr. Zenawi 's rule to withdraw your invitation and to make sure that your institution is engaged in producing knowledge that promotes freedom, justice and human dignity.

Thank you

Begna F. Dugassa, PhD

OSA President