



## **Ethiopia: Deadly, Religiously Outrageous, and Socially Destructive Consequences of Land Grab in Western Ethiopia**

### **HRLHA – Press Release**

**June 7, 2012**

Apart from displacements and dispossessions without consents and compensations, more and more negative consequences of land grab in the name of development are surfacing from time to time in different parts of Ethiopia; all outcries, criticisms and demands for corrective measures falling on deaf ears.

According to information obtained by HRLHA from Wixate locality in Yayyo District of Ilubabor Zone in western Oromia, a teenager called Zerihun Girma has died after being buried alive in a man-made landslide created from a mountain of soil dumped along a small river in a residential area. The soil was coming from the digging into the ground for a coal mine project underway in the area. Zerihun, a grade eight student of age 14, was playing with his fellow



Teenager Zerihun Girma

Teenagers when this happened to him without any awareness and doubt about the deadly nature of the dump. Not only that the soil and other excavations from the digging were being dumped in a residential neighborhood, but also there were no signs of warning posted to keeping people and animals away from the area. The teenager's body could not have been located had it not been for his mates who were playing with him at the moment.

The local people told HRLHA's agent that the operators of bulldozers, when Zerihun's body was retrieved, were not even cooperative to remove the hill of soil to reach the teenager's remains.

The other outrageous act that has angered the local people was the digging up of a cemetery that has been there for over a century without the slightest respect for the human remains lying underneath. According to eyewitnesses, a lot of human remains, some of them still wrapped up in burial clothes, were coming out on to the surface when the bulldozer operators continued to dig the area despite the strong opposition from the local residents. More inhumane and shocking was that no attempts were made to allow and help the local people to even collect and re-bury the remains somewhere else.

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Personalized complaints in relation to this particular land grab are that the displaced farmers, some of whom have up to seven family members on average, were neither consulted nor given their consents, and that was everything directly or indirectly imposed from above. They add that some of them received no or very minimal compensations their properties including homes, land, fruits and coffee plantations. A displaced farmer who was interviewed by HRLHA's local agent mentioned that he was paid 1.4 million Ethiopian Birr for his overall properties that were originally estimated at 4.4 million. Another interviewee, who claimed to have been offered the lowest estimation for his properties, said that he was paid 4,400 (four thousand four hundred) Ethiopian only; instead of the original estimate which was 248,000 (two



Obbo Zeinu Ibrahim

hundred forty eight thousand) Ethiopian. This particular interviewee, whose name was Zeinu Ibrahim, told HRLHA local agent that he was summoned to the district police headquarters and administration office, and threatened with losing everything and go bear-handed if he were not accepting what he was offered.

The HRLHA has learnt through its correspondent that the operated by two TPLF/EPRDF affiliated Para-party companies known as EFORT (*Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray*) and Mekelakeya Engineering. Contrary to the rhetoric that with land grabs in the name of development - job opportunity, economic growth, etc - this coal mine project in Yayyo, Witate in particular comes with hardly any benefit for the local people. This is because there is nothing to be done in the area, apart from digging the coal out and taking it up to the Tigray Region, where the processing of the mine takes place. Asked by the local people at the initial stage of the mining project as to why the processing was not planned to be done here at the mining site or in nearby areas, the politician answered that the processing machinery was too big and too heavy to be transported down to this western part of the country – an explanation deemed a pretext that is aimed at discriminately benefitting the ruling party and its region of origin (Tigray).

The project is said to be affecting six *kebeles* (the lowest and smallest administrative territory); and so far 13 (thirteen) households have been displaced and made almost homeless with no alternatives given to them for livelihoods. Mr. Zeinu (*mentioned above*) from Witate kebele, whose wife is expecting in addition to five other family members, said that he and his wife are waiting for the arrival of the new baby in the middle of nowhere. What is more, this coal- mine



Partial view of the mining site with tropical rainforest in the background from afar

project is taking place at the heart of a big geographical area designated by UNESCO to be preserved for the diverse wildlife, forestry, and other natural resources, posing a huge threat of environmental catastrophe.

In general, all that have been demonstrated around this coal mine project are disregard, lack of care and precautions for both human and other lives and the environment, contempt and disrespect for the local

people and their social, cultural, and religious values, biases, irresponsibility and lack of accountability particularly in facilitating means of rehabilitation for the people who are being dispossessed and displaced. In countries like Ethiopia where the majority leads a hand-to-mouth life, depriving peoples off their means of existence without replacements or alternative is condemning them to absolute destitution, and risking human lives.

The HRLHA calls up on the Ethiopian Government to interfere in this and other similar situations in which the local people are victimized socially and economically by become preys of the greedy that pursue group interest. We request that the Government discharge Its responsibility as a legitimate ruling body by ensuring that there is a leveled playing field for all stakeholders, and that such development projects are free from political favoritism and regional biases, and that the local people are the prime beneficiaries, not victims, of development activities. We also call up on all local, regional and/or global development agencies that have partnered with the Government and are directly or indirectly engaged in development activities in the Country that they play a watchdog role of monitoring that there are fair treatments of the ordinary citizens and equal benefits of resource exploitations and management.