



May 16, 2012  
President Barack Obama  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

The Advocates for Human Rights is deeply disturbed that Ethiopian President Meles Zenawi will on Friday be a guest of the United States at the G8 Summit to discuss food security issues. While food insecurity in the Horn of Africa clearly is among the most dire global crises, it must be recognized that this crisis has resulted not from falling market prices or from unavoidable weather catastrophes. Instead, the Government of Ethiopia, led by President Zenawi, has used food as a tool of political repression, particularly against disadvantaged ethnic groups perceived as political opponents. The Advocates for Human Rights is concerned about the continued human rights violations against disadvantaged ethnic groups committed by the Government of Ethiopia, as reported by human rights organizations monitoring conditions in Ethiopia, by the news media, and by members of the Ethiopian diaspora living in the United States. We urge you to raise with President Zenawi questions about his government's calculated policies, targeting disadvantaged ethnic groups and political opponents, which exacerbate food insecurity in the region.

The Advocates for Human Rights ("The Advocates" or "AHR") is a volunteer-based nongovernmental organization committed to the impartial promotion and protection of international human rights standards and the rule of law. AHR conducts a range of programs to promote human rights in the United States and around the world, including monitoring and fact finding, direct legal representation, education and training, and publications.

The Advocates has worked extensively with members of the Ethiopian diaspora, both in the context of asylum and other immigration proceedings, and for purposes of documenting human rights conditions in Ethiopia. Since 2004, The Advocates has documented reports from members of the Oromo ethnic group living in the United States of human rights abuses they and their friends and family have experienced in Ethiopia. The Advocates conducted over 65 interviews of Ethiopians, including Oromo and other ethnic group members; scholars; immigration attorneys; medical professionals; and other service providers working with Ethiopians in the United States. In addition, The Advocates monitored news and human rights reporting on events in Ethiopia.

The Government of Ethiopia actively discriminates and retaliates against members of

disadvantaged ethnic groups as part of its political strategies, violating disadvantaged ethnic group members' rights to self-determination, to work and to enjoy just and favorable conditions of work, to protection and assistance for the family, and to food and water security.

In practice, the Government of Ethiopia has engaged in extreme violations of the right to adequate food and housing. The deliberate policies of the Government of Ethiopia, including the recent "villagization" (forced relocation) program, interfere with the rights of disadvantaged ethnic groups to adequate food and housing. Far from neutral development programs designed for the betterment of all Ethiopians, these programs deliberately target populations which the Government of Ethiopia perceives as not supporting the ruling government of President Zenawi.

These practices discriminate especially against disadvantaged ethnic groups. In rural areas, disadvantaged ethnic groups, particularly pastoralists and groups that practice shifting cultivation, are being forced to relocate to areas with less desirable agricultural land. The forced relocations impair food and water security. Relocated individuals are not compensated for the loss of use of their land, and upon relocation these individuals are not provided with adequate support—including temporary food support and technical assistance for establishing a new form of livelihood. Moreover, the villages to which they are relocated often lack basic infrastructure, including health clinics, clean water supplies, and schools.

This program appears designed to accommodate domestic and foreign corporations seeking to establish commercial, export-oriented agri-business operations in those rural areas. Contracts with the commercial agri-business entities impose few if any restrictions on water usage, heightening food insecurity for individuals relocated to agricultural lands located downstream.

In Gambella and Benishangul, respectively, 45,000 and 90,000 households are slated for relocation due to villagization and land investment displacements, resulting in a loss of livelihood for over 650,000 people. The total number of people affected is estimated to exceed one million considering those affected by villagization or land investment in SNNPR, Oromia, Afar, and other regions." Oromos reported being relocated from fertile to infertile areas.

In addition to the villagization program, the Government of Ethiopia routinely violates the right to adequate food and housing by systematically and insidiously discriminating against disadvantaged ethnic groups and people supporting opposition political parties. The Government of Ethiopia uses rural administrative councils to control local communities. These councils, typically under the control of the ruling party, control access to food assistance and other state distributed resources. In areas populated by disadvantaged ethnic groups perceived not to support the ruling party, these councils use this access to coerce allegiance to the ruling party and to punish dissent.

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognized that

“[p]olitical and other opinions are often grounds for discriminatory treatment and include both the holding and not-holding of opinions . . . . Access to food assistance schemes, for example, must not be made conditional on an expression of allegiance to a particular party.” Human Rights Watch reports that kebeles, which are rural villages or neighborhoods usually containing several hundred households and make up 85 percent of Ethiopia’s population, are administered by councils and officials from the EPRDF party that exert crucial control over rural communities. Human Rights Watch reports that kebele officials “determine eligibility for food assistance, recommend referrals to secondary health care and schools, and help provide access to state-distributed resources such as seeds, fertilizers, credit, and other essential agricultural inputs.”

The government of Ethiopia, led by President Zenawi, has continually engaged in human rights violations against Ethiopia’s disadvantaged ethnic groups. Its politically motivated programs and policies create and exacerbate food insecurity for hundreds of thousands of disadvantaged ethnic groups. Again, we urge you to raise with President Zenawi questions about his government’s calculated policies, targeting disadvantaged ethnic groups and political opponents, which exacerbate food insecurity in the region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robin Phillips". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Robin" and last name "Phillips" clearly distinguishable.

Robin Phillips  
Executive Director