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The Famine in Oromia: the Dry Season is Not the Only Culprit

Statement of the Oromo Liberation Front

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is prompted to issue this statement in response to the statement by the UN's News release, dated March 28, 2008. The News Release reports, among others, that, "The deteriorating situation with regard to human health, food security, livelihoods, and livestock health, initially reported in Borne zone has spread to Bale, East Hararge, Guji and Liben zones of Oromia Region. Poorly performing rains for upcoming rainy season forecast by National Meteorological Agency are likely to exacerbate the exiting situation in lowland agropastoral areas of Oromia Region." The report predicts that, "An estimated 88, 000 people in affected woredas [districts] in Borana zone require emergency assistance from government, humanitarian partners and UN agencies." The News Release also warns of similar "emergence of hotspots in the SNNPR."

The OLF applauds the UN's news release for bringing to the attention of the World Community the grim situation that Oromo people are facing at this difficult time and for calling for emergency assistance for those affected in Oromia and other parts of Ethiopia. The OLF leadership believes that no responsibility is greater and no calling nobler than saving the lives of our pastoralists and farmers who are victimized by forces beyond their control.

At the same time, the OLF would like to point out that the cause that the UN Report gives to the calamitous situation of the Oromo people as "poorly performing rain" is only a part of the truth. The other part of the truth is bad governance of the Ethiopian regime, which has made the lives of the Oromo truly miserable. What is more, the current Ethiopian regime, which is dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), follows discriminatory and lopsided economic development policy in Oromia and other regional states in southern Ethiopia.

It is imperative to remember that since the Meles regime came to power in 1991 "the effects of the dry season", the usual cause for famine in Ethiopia has shifted from Northern Ethiopia, in general, and Tigrai, in particular, to the Southern Ethiopia, in general, and Oromia, in particular. The Tigrai region, the home base of the Meles and the regime's ruling elites, that used to be known for drought and famine for several decades, is now boasting for unheard of all round economic progress. These days there are no warnings of famine concerning Tigrai. It is good news that Tigrai economy is progressing and the people of Tigrai are no longer subjected to starvation like the Oromo.

At this point it is pertinent to ask why Oromia is starving while Tigrai is prospering? Since the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire in the 1880s Oromia has been known as the breadbasket of Ethiopia. More than sixty percent of Ethiopian government revenue comes from Oromia. Most of Ethiopian cash crops come from Oromia. Oromia, the Oromo regional state, is the most fertile part of Ethiopia, which enjoys abundant rainfall and has numerous rivers and lakes. With its hardworking farmers and abundant animal population Oromia always prided itself not only on its self-sufficiency in food production, but also produced surplus for the rest of Ethiopia and for international market.

Why is the same land now starving and needs humanitarian assistance of food? The answer is very clear. The root cause of the famine in Oromia is the TPLF regime's policy towards Oromo people. Because the Oromo constitute almost forty-five percent of the population of Ethiopia, the TPLF, which represents less than seven percent of the

population of Ethiopia, fears Oromo numerical strength. As a result the TPLF dominated Ethiopian regime follows the policies of destroying all independent Oromo organizations and impoverishing the Oromo people.

How does the TPLF regime impoverish the Oromo people? The regime follows well documented discriminatory economic policies. It provides disproportionate and unfair budget allocation to Oromia. It is this regime that has classified the educated and the entrepreneurial classes of the Oromo as enemies of its 'revolutionary democracy' ideology. What is more, the regime has imposed gross human rights violations in Oromia, which forced tens of thousands of Oromo farmers to seek refuge in the neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa and beyond. Since it came to power in 1991, the current Ethiopian regime has dispossessed, displaced, and disenfranchised tens of thousands of the Oromo people, which is the real root cause for the underdevelopment and starvation in Oromia today.

As if its gross human rights violations in Oromia are not enough, the irresponsible and myopic TPLF regime has been engaged in an intentional deforestation of Oromia since it came to power. On the pretext of flushing out the OLF guerrilla fighters, the current Ethiopian authorities, intentionally set fire to Oromia's natural forest that is a cause for the fast degradation of Oromia's ecological system. It is worthy of note that the most recent intentionally set fire to Oromia's natural forest is that of the Shakiso forest of Bale zone destroying huge forests.

The OLF would like the UN and the world community to know that the TPLF regime is punishing the Oromo people for demanding their fundamental human rights. The regime deprived the supply of fertilizer to Oromo farmers for their alleged support of the OLF. It was with the intention of depriving the Oromo people a relief and development assistance that the TPLF regime banned the Oromo Relief Association (ORA) from legally functioning in the country. The regime also illegally confiscated ORA's assets and properties, including a ready for distribution relief and humanitarian aid. The TPLF regime has either withheld the humanitarian and development assistance provided by the Western World from the Oromo people or diverted it to the Tigray region or used it for a provision of its armed and security forces.

Therefore, the OLF calls on the UN and other humanitarian agencies to directly help the needy Oromo and other people in Ethiopia. We also request that the UN and other humanitarian agencies make sure that the humanitarian aid that they provide reaches the needy people. The TPLF regime is totally discredited to be entrusted with the task of distributing humanitarian aid.

The OLF would like the UN and the world community to know that so long as the tyrannical regime of Meles Zenawi is in power, the World Community would continue to hear more alarming reports about the famine in Oromia and other parts of Ethiopia. What will end famine and gross human rights violations in Ethiopia will be the replacement of the current regime by a government that does not discriminate among its citizens, a government that does not pursue discriminatory economic development policies, a government that is accountable to the people, a government that honors the rule of law and human rights.

Finally, the Oromo people are struggling for their freedom and basic democratic rights- to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. We call upon the Western World and all concerned governments and organizations to impress upon the Ethiopian government to immediately stop its gross human rights violations in Oromia and other parts of Ethiopia and to end without delay its discriminatory economic development policies, which are the main cause of famine in Oromia.

Victory to the Oromo People!

Daawud Ibsaa

Chairman, National Council of the OLF

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