

#FreeOmot

Campaign to Free Three Ethiopian Land, Food & Human Rights Defenders

FACT SHEET

Ethiopian authorities have charged three local land, food, and human rights defenders with terrorism after they attempted to travel to a food security workshop in Kenya. The move is part of the Ethiopian government's effort to silence voices perceived as critical of its land grabbing agenda and repression of indigenous peoples.

ABOUT THE CASE:

Omot Agwa Okwoy and his fellow human rights defenders Ashinie Astin and Jamal Oumar Hojele were arrested on March 15, 2015 for trying to attend a food security workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, organized by the international organizations Bread for All, GRAIN, and Anywa Survival Organization (ASO). The three activists were held without charge for over five months before being charged on September 7, 2015 under a draconian anti-terrorism law—alleging that the workshop was linked to terrorist activities. All three detainees were recently moved to Kalinto prison, on the outskirts of the capital, Addis Ababa, after spending several months at Maekelawi police station, where Omot was held in solitary confinement for three weeks. Human Rights Watch has documented torture and other ill treatment at Maekelawi. Both Jamal and Omot are reportedly in poor health.

ABOUT THE DETAINEES:

Omot Agwa Okwoy is a pastor at the evangelical Mekane Yesus church in Ethiopia's Gambela region. Pastor Omot was also an interpreter for the World Bank Inspection Panel during its 2014 investigation of a complaint by Anuak indigenous people alleging widespread forced displacement and other serious human rights violations in relation to a World Bank project in Gambela. Before being arrested, Omot was filmed as part of a forthcoming documentary film about land grabbing in Ethiopia ("Dead Donkeys Fear No Hyenas" WG Films, 2016). In the film, Omot discusses his fear of being detained and tortured because of his activism to protect indigenous rights in his home country. See the film's trailer here: <https://vimeo.com/140086141>. Omot now faces between 20 years and life in prison if convicted. **Jamal Oumar Hojele** works for the Assosa Environmental Protection Association in

defense of the environment and the rights of those who live in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Jamal Oumar is accused of being a participant of a "terrorist group" and of organizing recruits to attend the Nairobi workshop. **Ashinie Astin** is a member of Majangier, an ethnic indigenous minority from the Gambela region. Ashinie is accused of participating in terrorist activities, including preparing a research document entitled "Deforestation, dispossession and displacement of Gambela in general and Majang people in particular."

WHY DOES THIS CASE MATTER?

Ethiopia is emblematic of a global wave of land grabbing led by governments, investors, and financial institutions that is violating human rights, undermining food sovereignty, and worsening climate change. Activists like Omot, Jamal, and Ashinie dare to stand up for and with vulnerable communities on the front lines of this assault. Their work on the following issues is invaluable to building a sustainable, healthy, and resilient planet.



Omot Agwa. *Dead Donkeys Fear No Hyenas* WG Film

LAND GRABBING

Following the global food and financial crisis of 2007-2008, Ethiopia decided to take advantage of the new surge in farmland investment by declaring millions of hectares of land “unutilized” and making them available for long-term lease to domestic and foreign investors. Most of the lands targeted for investment are remote, yet highly fertile, areas such as the Southwestern province of Gambela, which is the ancestral homeland of the Majang and Anywaa (also known as Anuak) indigenous people. At least one million hectares (roughly 2.5 million acres) have been leased to investors in Gambela, although many now lie barren as investors, eager to make a quick profit, grabbed the lands without having the knowledge or capital to develop the farms.

Andreea Cămpăanu - ICIJ



INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

Anuak indigenous people have always had close ties to their environment, but have been marginalized by the government for many years. They sustain themselves mainly through small-scale farming, hunting, and fishing. Beginning in 2010, the Ethiopian government launched a “villagization” program in Gambela and other regions—dispossessing indigenous peoples of their land and settling them into new villages, often to make room for domestic and foreign land investments. While the government claims the program is voluntary, local people report intimidation, beatings, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture in military custody, rape, and extra-judicial killing. A complaint submitted to the World Bank Inspection Panel prepared the Anuak indigenous people, with support from [Inclusive Development International](#), implicates the World Bank in grave human rights abuses perpetrated by the Ethiopian government in its Bank-financed villagization program.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The large-scale industrial agriculture that the government would like to see in Gambella and other parts of Ethiopia will undermine peasant and indigenous livelihoods, robbing communities of their ability to feed themselves. Furthermore, these projects threaten to decimate water supplies and the fertility of the soils, as has

already occurred in other parts of Ethiopia. One of the reasons why Ethiopia suffers from recurrent famines is because of such top-down projects in the past that did not consider long-term soil fertility. Gambela is already seeing a rise in temperatures due to climate change, which—when combined with widespread deforestation largely driven by new land investments—is leading to widespread soil erosion. The large-scale, export-oriented agricultural projects being introduced in Ethiopia are a recipe for famine.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Since 2011, Ethiopia’s anti-terrorism law has been used to prosecute journalists, bloggers, opposition politicians, and peaceful protesters. Human Rights Watch and other organizations have documented numerous incidents in which individuals critical of Ethiopia’s development policies have been detained and harassed, and often mistreated in detention. Journalists have been harassed for writing articles critical of the country’s development policy.

LEARN MORE:

“Ethiopia Targets Former World Bank Translator in Crackdown on Dissent” International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, <http://www.icij.org/blog/2015/09/ethiopia-targets-former-world-bank-translator-crackdown-dissent>

“Land Grab Threatens Anuak” GRAIN <https://www.grain.org/es/article/entries/4064-land-grabs-threaten-anuak>

“Unheard Voices: The Human Rights Impact of Land Investments on Indigenous Communities in Gambella” The Oakland Institute, <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/unheard-voices-human-rights-impact-land-investments-indigenous-communities-gambella>

“Waiting Here for Death: Forced Displacement and “Villagization” in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region” Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/01/16/waiting-here-death/forced-displacement-and-villagization-ethiopia-gambella-region>

“Ethiopia: Forced Villagization and the Promoting Basic Services Project” Inclusive Development International, <http://www.inclusivedevelopment.net/ethiopia-gambella-villagization-program/>

HOW YOU CAN HELP:

Donate to the campaign in support of the detainees and their families at: <http://tinyurl.com/ethiopia-land> and share the campaign with your social media networks. #FreeOmot



#FreeOmot:

CAMPAIGN ACTION GUIDE

Three Ethiopian land, food, and indigenous rights activists—Omot Agwa, Ashinie Astin, and Jamal Oumar Hojele—are facing trial after trying to attend a workshop on food security. The move is part of the Ethiopian government's effort to silence voices critical of its land grabbing agenda and repression of indigenous peoples.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN HELP:

DONATE to the Indiegogo campaign in support of the detainees and their families—and encourage your friends, family, and coworkers to do the same—at: <http://tinyurl.com/ethiopia-land> Contributions in any amount are welcome and contribute to the detainees' legal fund and their families' expenses during this time of hardship.

SHARE the campaign link with your social media networks, using the hashtag #FreeOmot and follow Anywaa Survival Organisation on Facebook and Twitter: @AnywaaSurvival

Suggested tweets:

Plz help support 3 Ethiopian #food & #landrights activists jailed on trumped up charges! #FreeOmot @AnywaaSurvival tinyurl.com/ethiopia-land

Supporting the right to #food & #land is not terrorism! Plz help 3 detained activists in #Ethiopia #FreeOmot tinyurl.com/ethiopia-land

Three #food & #landrights activists falsely accused of terrorism need your help! #FreeOmot #foodsovereignty tinyurl.com/ethiopia-land

PRINT out the Campaign Fact Sheet and distribute it at your local community event, book club, church gathering, student group meeting, classroom, etc. Ask local businesses if you can leave copies for their patrons or post it to their community bulletin board.

ORGANIZE an event in your community to educate people about

the issues and the campaign. Hold the event at a local business, community center, or in your home. Make sure refreshments are provided or make it a potluck! Inform people about the case and hand out the Campaign Fact Sheet. You could also screen a relevant video and/or host a campaign representative to give a presentation to your group, either in person or via teleconference. Collect donations for the detainees' legal expenses and their families. Please contact us if you would like more ideas or help putting together an event: ethiopia.landrights@gmail.com

WRITE a blog post about the case for a blog you know or write an Op Ed piece for your local newspaper. For tips on how to write a strong Op Ed, see: http://newsoffice.duke.edu/duke_resources/oped If you get published, send us the link! ethiopia.landrights@gmail.com

CALL, email, or write to your political representatives to inform them about this case and tell them that it matters to you. Tell them you do not want your tax dollars being used for foreign aid or any other form of support for an Ethiopian government that promotes land grabbing, human rights violations, and the criminalization of dissent.

Find your representative in the US: <https://www.opencongress.org/people/zipcodelookup>

Find your representative in the UK: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Find your representative in the European Union: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/map.html>

Find your representative in Canada: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/ParlInfo/Unavailable.aspx?page=/parlinfo/compilations/houseofcommons/memberbypostalcode.aspx?Menu=HOC>

Have other ideas about how to support the campaign? Please let us know! For suggestions, comments, or questions, contact the campaign team at: ethiopia.landrights@gmail.com

