

Civil Society Organizations Demand Amnesty for Indigenous Land Rights Leader Okello Akway Ochalla

May 9, 2016

We the undersigned, organizations committed to land, human rights, and development issues, call on the United States Government to take urgent action and demand amnesty for land rights defender Okello Akway Ochalla.

Mr. Okello is an indigenous Anuak leader, a Norwegian citizen, and the former Governor of the Gambella region in Ethiopia, an area that has been a key target for forced relocations and land grabbing by the Ethiopian Government.

In March 2014, Mr. Okello was abducted from South Sudan in complete disregard of the extradition treaty signed between South Sudan and Ethiopia, and international law. Had he been made to go through the proper extradition process, he would have been protected by the “political offence” exception principle, a principle well recognized under international law.

Upon arrival in Ethiopia, Mr. Okello was charged under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation. His crime includes speaking to international media, including the *BBC* and the *Voice of America*, about the 2003 massacre of the Anuak people and the ongoing plight of the people of Gambella.

In 2003, when Mr. Okello was Governor of Gambella, a massacre of indigenous Anuak people took place at the hands of the Ethiopian Security Forces. An Anuak himself, Mr. Okello fled Ethiopia and eventually sought asylum in Norway. In the ensuing years, he continued to advocate for justice and the rights of the Anuaks. It is this activism that is at the heart of his arrest and charges.

After two years in jail and a lengthy trial in which the primary evidence against Mr. Okello was a self-confession signed under solitary confinement and after beatings, his charges were lessened in April 2016 from terrorism to criminal charges. Despite this small glimmer of hope, on April 27, 2016, Mr. Okello was sentenced to nine years in prison.

To say that this sentence is an injustice is an understatement. From the moment Mr. Okello was forcibly taken to Ethiopia in 2014, the courts and criminal system have worked to break him. He has been subjected to beatings and solitary confinement, and his lawyers report that, unsurprisingly, this has affected his mental health. His family – including his wife and children in Norway, and his son and daughter in the US – have likewise been devastated by this news, as they go on without a father, brother, and husband in their lives.

Mr. Okello’s verdict demonstrates the ongoing repression by the Ethiopian regime against marginalized communities and land rights defenders across the country. This repression has threatened the stability of the whole country, as Anuaks, Oromos, Ogadens, Ethiopian Muslims, and others face ongoing persecution at the hands of the government. The verdict is not just a major setback for peace and stability in the Gambella region, but also for human rights in Ethiopia as a whole.

It is clear that an injustice has occurred in Mr. Okello's case. Ethiopia is the United States' closest ally in Africa and the second largest recipient of US overseas development assistance in Africa. Given these unique roles, the United States has the power and the moral responsibility to ensure that basic human rights and the rule of law are upheld in the country.

We call on the United States to urge the Ethiopian Government to grant Mr. Okello amnesty, as it has done in recent years with other political prisoners.

Signed,

[List of Organizations & affiliations here]