

Ethiopia: A Nation on the Brinks

Forced Eviction and Resettlement, the Jawar Factor and the Absence of International Scrutiny

By Dawit W Giorgis

I was able to go back to my country after 33 years in exile in Dec of last year. I have thanked the government and the people of Ethiopia for creating the condition that enabled me to go back home. I am an old man by any standard. My purpose in continuing to write about Africa and Ethiopia is to share the wisdom that can only be gained only through age and experience. I have both. I have no other motives. I know some people would not like some of the contents in this article. I have no right or capacity to prescribe any solution but I have certainly the obligation to present and critically analyze the situation.

In 1984 during the great famine, the international community viciously condemned the Ethiopian government (dergue) for the resettlement program it conducted. It accused the regime for gross human rights violation. The case was discussed in the UN Human Rights Council and in the US Congress several times. Though the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) I headed, was not in charge of the resettlement program, it was responsible for the provision of food to the settlers. The program was condemned for its political motivation and for moving the people against their will, though the stated goal of the project was humanitarian. It was to move people from drought affected, highly congested and degraded lands to a more productive areas of Ethiopia, to Wolegga, to Gambela and some to Bale. Looking back, it was indeed amazing how these settlers, mostly from Tigray, Wollo and Northern Showa regions were received. People mostly Oromos were lined up on the streets to cheer and welcome the new settlers. They later helped in the construction of their new homes, invited them to their own homes until they adjusted and helped them in every possible way without any coercion from the government. There was no doubt in anybody's mind that the welcoming was sincere and in the best tradition of Ethiopians. Those living, remember those days as the best of 'Ethipiaiwinet' and indeed it was.

Some members of the international community reported that the program had political motives particularly for those who were moved from Tigray. I have discussed the resettlement in general and this particular project in detail in my book 'Red Tears page 281 to 308'. There were many such experiments on resettlement in Ethiopia but none were done to change the demography of a given area.

The last one was the brainchild of Mengistu: moving 300,000 families (1.5 million people) from Wollo and Tigray to South Western Ethiopia, in nine months. The stated objectives were then purely humanitarian though Mengistu included his own political agenda in this project. The international community was merciless and consistently and strongly condemned these as human rights violations and placed

sanctions on the Ethiopian regime. It created an uproar within the international community.

Human Rights Watch states: “ The details of the implementation of the program varied from place to place; at its worst, it was a brutal form of counter-insurgency, at its best, a fierce attack on the independence of the peasantry...In addition to the direct human cost of the resettlement program, it involved enormous indirect human costs, by the diversion of resources. Resettlement sites and transit camps received priority allocations of relief food from the RRC.”¹

The Paradox

There was a very close scrutiny of the activities of the government then, partly because it was the times of the cold war and partly because the government’s (dergue) policies were brutal in many aspects. Fast-forward, and Ethiopia went through a 27-year ordeal that included not only forced eviction and resettlement but also ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, suppression of freedom of speech corruption and torture unprecedented in Ethiopian history. And yet the world kept silent. Instead it went on talking tirelessly of the fake economic growth of the nation. Meles was the darling of the West and East and there were little told about what went on behind the prison walls and the booming constructions across urban Ethiopia. It was not because the West did not know because there were several witnesses and independent sources which confirmed the crimes committed by the Ethiopian regime.

In 2017 Forbes Magazine wrote about the UN Secretary General Guterres, speaking from Addis at the 28th Summit of the African Union, described Ethiopia as a “pillar of stability” in the tumultuous Horn of Africa, praised the government of Ethiopia and asked the world to show “total solidarity” with the regime. This was being said as the economy of Ethiopia was collapsing under the weight of its own corruption and the wide spread anger and rebellion of the people.

Forbes (the global media company) asks: “Why, despite ever-increasing amounts of foreign support, can’t this nation of 100 million clever, enterprising people feed itself? Other resource-poor countries facing difficult environmental challenges manage to do so. Two numbers tell the story in a nutshell:

1. The amount of American financial aid received by Ethiopia’s government since it took power: \$30 billion.
2. The amount stolen by Ethiopia’s leaders since it took power: \$30 billion

The West, including the so-called global financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF kept on hammering on the myth that that Ethiopia’s economy was the fastest growing economy.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/Ethiopia919.pdf>

This government, under the previous PM, had conducted forced resettlements and the international community did not give it serious attention. Human Rights Watch reports: “Ethiopia's government has been accused of forcing tens of thousands of people off their land so it can be leased to foreign investors. People are being forcibly relocated to new villages that lack adequate food, farmland and facilities. Ethiopia has already leased out more than 3.6 million hectares (8.8m acres) of land - an area the size of The Netherlands “² Somehow the Ethiopian government escaped the harsh scrutiny of the UN, the US and the international community despite the obvious corruptions, oppression and human rights violations that they now shamelessly condemn while keeping silent while Ethiopian people suffered for 27 years.

Forced Eviction and Resettlement

This year, when Ethiopia and the world were expecting improved governance under PM Abiy and the Lemma Team, the world is once again witnessing gross human rights violations, approved and told publicly by the most senior people in the government. Some of the incidents are happening right in front of the doorsteps of the international community in Addis. These are the forced evictions of thousands of people from the homes they have lived in for over a decade and the demolition of their homes reminiscent of the destruction of houses in the occupied territories of Palestine.

People also witnessed the forced resettlement of Oromo farmers and villagers from their ancestral lands to places they have never been, without their consent. The President of the Oromo region Lemma Megersa revealed publicly, boldly and arrogantly that the forced resettlement of 500,000 Oromos was necessary. It was stated that the idea of moving people without their consent to Addis and surrounding areas was to change the demography of Addis Abeba, in favor of the Oromo tribe. It outraged and shocked people particularly because it came from Lemma, the man who was in the forefront of unity and human rights in Ethiopia. The shock reverberated across the nation putting in doubt the agenda of the leaders whom Ethiopians were quick to reward with a saintly image. Besides creating a wave of discontent this action was also a clear and gross human rights violation.

The AU, whose head quarter is in Addis Abeba, the international community, the UN and the US have not condemned this blatant violation of human rights of evicting people from their homes and moving people to remote parts of Ethiopia for political reasons. Forced evictions and forced resettlements are human rights violations under international law.

United nations Human Rights Commission states:

“ Forced evictions commonly result in people being pushed into extreme poverty and as such pose a risk to the right of life itself. They have also been found to be

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16590416>

tantamount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, particularly when carried out with violence or with discriminatory intent. During forced evictions, people are frequently harassed or beaten and occasionally subjected to inhumane treatment or killed. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to violence, including sexual violence, before, during and after an eviction. Forced evictions may also result in indirect violations of political rights, such as the right to vote, if persons are rendered homeless. They can also have a profound detrimental psychological impact on evictees, in particular children, who have been found to suffer both short- and long-term effects.”³

The silence of the PM while thousands of people were being evicted and illegally resettled, put people’s mind in doubt as to whether he was really the head of the country. International law is clearly against this

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There are numerous UN resolutions and declarations that make forced evictions and resettlement a human rights violation. The Expert Seminar on the Practice of Forced Evictions (Geneva, 11-13 June 1997) establishes guidelines for the practice of forced evictions under the international human rights provisions and instruments. The guidelines state:

“Forced evictions constitute prima facie violations of a wide range of internationally recognized human rights and can only be carried out under exceptional circumstances and in full accordance with the present Guidelines and relevant provisions of international human rights law.”

Forced and violent evictions and displacements are taking place throughout Ethiopia, and the demolishing of houses by the regional authority in Legetafo is just the latest example. The dispute over the ownership of Addis Abeba, the attempt to change the demography of the capital city and the forced evictions are the most serious problems that can trigger a countrywide unrest. The international community has

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS25.Rev.1.pdf>

⁴ (<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS25.Rev.1.pdf>).

been largely silent. It is possible that the silence of the international community can be perceived by the Ethiopian government as a green light. PM Abiy is not a man deserving a Nobel Prize for peace unless he comes out clean from these crimes. There could either be tacit or explicit agreement. But certainly it happened on his watch. It must be remembered hundreds of thousands of people have signed a petition calling for Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi to be stripped of her Nobel Prize because of her country's persecution of its Rohingya Muslim minority.

For the sake of political stability, the Ethiopian government should rescind the policy of forced evictions, resettlement and land grabbing without due process of law. If forced evictions continue unabated, Ethiopia can plunge into a civil war a political tensions rise

Hate Speech and Radicalization: The Jawar Factor.

The government has allowed extremists like Jawar Mohamed, the CEO of the Oromo Media Network (OMN), legally registered in Ethiopia to spread ethnic and religiously motivated hate speech. PM Abiy's tolerance of Jawar is perplexing. Giving unchecked political power to extremists like Jawar can only further exacerbate the already tense political environment. Some political observers suspect that there is either an explicit or implicit understanding between the PM and Jawar. If that is the case, PM Abiy is allowing Jawar's extreme voice to influence the youth, particularly in the Oromo region. In any other country Jawar would have ended up in prison and prosecuted for crimes of incitements and possibly for terrorism.

OMN reminds one of Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), the hate radio that was instrumental in the Rwandan Genocide. "It's stated aim was "to create harmonious development in Rwandese society" but nothing could have been further from the truth, It was set up and financed by Hutu extremists to prepare the people of Rwanda for genocide by demonizing the Tutsi and encouraging hate and violence. Some people –including the Belgian ambassador and staff of several aid agencies – recognized the danger and asked for international help in shutting down the broadcast, but it was impossible to persuade Western diplomats to take it seriously. They dismissed the station as a joke"⁵

General Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian commander of the UN peacekeeping operation in Rwanda at the time of the genocide, said: "**Simply jamming [the] broadcasts and replacing them with messages of peace and reconciliation would have had a significant impact on the course of events.**" His advise was ignored and the UN and the international community regrets with great humility and embarrassment that, had it acted earlier the genocide would probably have not taken place. There is a red line between freedom of expression and hate speech, oratory and incitement. It is well established in the international legal instruments.

Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966, guarantees the right to freedom of expression as follows:

⁵ http://www.rwandanstories.org/genocide/hate_radio.html

“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of his choice. Article 19(3) of the ICCPR permits limited restrictions on freedom of expression where these are

a) provided by law; b) for the protection of one of the legitimate interests listed; and c) necessary to protect that interest.

All of the three regional human rights treaties—: the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR)— guarantee the right to freedom of expression, respectively Article 10, Article 9 and Article 13. These guarantees are largely similar to those found in the ICCPR. ACHR however specifically provides for the banning of hate speech, at Article 13(5), as follows:

Any propaganda for war and any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitute incitements to lawless violence or to any other similar illegal action against any person or group of persons on any grounds including those of race, color, religion, language, or national origin shall be considered as offenses punishable by law”

Security Council resolution 1624 (2005) further

“1. Calls upon all States to adopt such measures as may be necessary and appropriate and in accordance with their obligations under international law to:

- (a) Prohibit by law incitement to commit a terrorist act or acts
- (b) Prevent incitement to commit a terrorist act or acts
- (c) Deny safe haven to any persons with respect to whom there is credible and relevant information giving serious reasons for considering that they have been guilty of incitement to commit a terrorist act or act

The UN resolution clearly leaves the responsibility to governments what to define what constitutes a terrorist act. Many governments have defined it to use it

Based on these general guidelines the AU defines terrorism as follows

Terrorist act means:

- (a) Any act which is a violation of the criminal laws of a State Party and which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom of, or cause serious injury or death to, any person, any number or group of persons or causes or may cause damage to public or private property, natural resources, environmental or cultural heritage and is calculated or intended to:
- (b) 3 (i) intimidate, put in fear, force, coerce or induce any government, body, institution, the general public or any segment thereof, to do or abstain from doing any act, or to adopt or abandon a particular standpoint, or to act according to certain principles; or

(ii) disrupt any public service, the delivery of any essential service to the public or to create a public emergency; or

(iii) create general insurrection in a State.

(b) any promotion, sponsoring, contribution to, command, aid, incitement, encouragement, attempt, threat, conspiracy, organizing, or procurement of any person, with the intent to commit any act referred to in paragraph (a) (i) to(iii). “

Though the previous regime in Ethiopia defined terrorism to stifle dissent and freedom of expression, there are ways for democratic governments to define it in the genuine interest of the people. The implications of the absence of a universal definition of terrorism for legal purposes are wide-ranging. I believe that Ethiopian government is conducting a study to replace the revamped pervious anti terrorism law. In doing so care will be taken so that the new law does not define terrorism in a manner that can restrict the freedom of people and violate the individual rights of expression, movement and actions. A suitable universal definition is elusive because different governments have different definitions to suit their own particular politics and agenda. The UN and the AU, as indicated above, have established the parameters and for now that should be sufficient to investigate people like Jawar Mohamed for terrorism or crime under the criminal law of the country or deport him to face the law in the US if he is a US citizen.

A reasonable government should investigate all the activities, speeches, source of funds, affiliations and their effects on current and future peace and stability and make him accountable through due process of law. Not doing so makes the government itself an accessory or a silent collaborator in what are believed to be serious crimes.

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