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**OGADEN
HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMITTEE
OHRC**

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House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on African and Global Health

**“Ethiopia and the State of Democracy: Effects on Human Rights and
Humanitarian Conditions in the Ogaden and Somalia”**
Tuesday October 2, 2007

Chairman Payne, ranking member Smith and the distinguished members of this committee – Thank you for holding this very important hearing that puts a spotlight on Ethiopia and the documented human rights abuses in the Ogaden and elsewhere in Ethiopia. Mr. Chairman I am honored to be given the opportunity to come and speak today on a subject that I hold dear, the plight of the people of Ogaden, also known as the Somali region in Ethiopia.

Mr. Chairman, at this time I would like to ask that my full testimony be submitted into the record, consisting of the paper I am reading and the 2007 annual report of Ogaden Human Rights Committee, released on August 8th, 2007.

I represent a human rights advocacy organization. The Ogaden Human Rights Committee, (OHRC) is an independent, voluntary, non-profit community-based human rights advocacy organization. OHRC was founded on June 13th, 1995, in Godey, Ogaden, to monitor and promote the observance of internationally accepted human rights standards in the Ogaden. The OHRC researches, documents and reports human rights violations in the Ogaden.

The Ogaden Human Rights Committee has branches across the globe. As a volunteer and an independent researcher, I chair the Board of Directors of OHRC Canada.

Background

The Ogaden also known as the Somali Region of Ethiopia is located in the south-eastern part of Ethiopia; bordering the Afar region and the Republic of Djibouti in the North, the Oromia region in the south and west; and Somalia in the east, it is 250,000 SQK area.

The Ogaden is a place many of us hold dear. Partly because it is a place where Somalis have been historically marginalized by successive Ethiopian regimes; and it is laced with history of refugees and

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internally displaced persons; but most importantly it is a place dear to our hearts because it's our homeland. My parents fled from the Ogaden in the early 50s, and became refugees in Somalia, where I was born. My mother died in 1988 in Mogadishu not fulfilling her life long dream of going back home to Wardheer, Ogaden in her lifetime.

Like my mother, too many Ogadenis have died in exile as refugees, and in their memory I would like to share with you a quote from David Turton's article titled "*the Meaning of place in a World of Movement: lessons from long-term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia*".

He states: "...to understand how a sense of place becomes bound up with a person's social and individual identity, we must treat place, not as stage for social activity but as a 'product' of it. Such an understanding of the link between people and place helps us to appreciate that displacement is not just about the loss of place but also about the struggle to make a place in the world, where meaningful action and shared understanding is possible" (Turton 2005: 258)^{1[1]}

The dislocation and displacement of the people of Ogaden

Today, because of state sponsored violence, and a century long protracted ethnic-based conflict, the people of Ogaden are internally displaced and are forced to flee from their homes. It is important to note, unfortunately, this has happened too many times. Just like what is happening right now, massive displacement of civilian population, there were a number of crisis in this region, which resulted in massive displacement of people and mass exodus from the Ogaden. I have compiled in my research several such historical dates when the people of this region where internally and externally displaced over the years; here are two examples:

- The 1977 Somali – Ethiopian war reeked havoc in this region.

After this war, there was a mass exodus from this region into neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa. And there were thousands of people who ended up in refugee camps in Somalia. For instance, there were no less than ten refugee camps in Northern Somalia, and five refugee camps in Central Somalia.

- In 1991 when the Somali state totally collapsed, and the Somali civil war erupted, these refugees were once again forced to repatriate into the Ogaden^{2[2]}.

Through all these upheavals, women from this region were giving birth to children and raising them under such uncertainties, enduring the challenges that come with life as refugees. Although I was not born there, I grew up with the stories of these refugees who like my mother, their dreams of one day returning to their homeland overwhelmed the imagination.

The current state of Ethiopia under the current regime

Currently the present regime has engaged in what can be described as a war on the civilian population and as the case is always women and children are bearing the brunt of the pain. As you know Mr. Chairman, when the current regime came into power it promised a new beginning for all the people of Ethiopia including the people of Ogaden. A new constitution was written, chapter three of which enshrines the fundamental human rights principle. The new Ethiopian constitution is notably

^{1[1]} Journal of Refugee Studies Vol. 18, No. 3 David Turton (2005) "The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement: Lessons from long-term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia". Published by Oxford University Press
^{2[2]} F. Abdulkadir unpublished research, 2007

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comprehensive and its human rights provisions are clearly stated. But so far, they remain only on paper^{3[3]}.

Unfortunately, and to the disappointment of Ethiopian citizens and the international community the current regime failed to respect human rights it vowed to protect. Local and international human rights organization (such as Ogaden Human Rights Committee, Oromo Support Group and Sidama Concern, as well as Amnesty International and Human Right Watch) widely report on the violations of basic constitutional rights.

In the Ogaden recently, American journalists were harassed and jailed for some days. It is important to note that, according to *the Washington Post* (April 13, 1998), during the three-year period, from 1995 to 1998, this current Ethiopian regime has arrested and detained more journalists than any other government on the continent of Africa^{4[4]}. The people of the Somali region and many other regions of Ethiopia have witnessed and suffered under this violent and aggressive state machinery.

Human rights abuses by Ethiopian armed forces in the Ogaden

Under successive regimes, the entire Ethiopian population suffered, my testimony today focuses on the Ogaden. The people of Ogaden have been subjected to harassment, unlawful detentions, rape and torture.

“Human rights violations reports are body counts, torture practices, an endless list of horrors; the violations seem beyond comprehension, mad men acting without reason. And the reports seem to be written by someone with stomach of a physician and the mind of a statistician” (David Matas, 1994:3)^{5[5]}.

David Mata argues that human rights violations do not occur in an ideological vacuum, to the contrary, in many instances these acts are manifestations of an ideology^{6[6]}.

Mr. Chairman, in researching human rights violations in the Ogaden, we have documented the rape of innocent young girls, the hijacking of privately owned vehicles, publicly shooting innocent people to instill fear in the communities, looting people’s properties and general dehumanizing acts by the Ethiopian military. Human rights violations are defined as “torture, disappearances, killings, detentions and unfair trails” these acts occur continuously in the Ogaden in a blatant manner. This regime deals with the people of Ogaden with impunity in some instance going so far as to leave the murdered innocent civilians out in the public square. The local community is then instructed that no one can bury the dead, and so carcass is left to rot in full public view.

There are countless instances where it seems, that rape is being used as a weapon. In 2003, the Ethiopian troops’ commander, in Qabridaharre, told a gathering in the township, *“Any women suspected of harboring or being a relative of an ONLF member would be raped and then killed”* (OHRC Report, 2007:29).

^{3[3]} Journal of Oromo Studies Vol. 13, No. 1&2, Fowsia Abdulkadir (2006) “Human Rights Predicament: Analysis of the Somali Region (Ogaden) in Ethiopia.

^{4[4]} Review of African Political Economy, No. 91: 73-94; Khalif, Mohamud H. & Doornbos, Martin “The Somali in Ethiopia: Neglected Human Rights”.

^{5[5]} David Matas, 1994:3; “No More: The Battle Against Human Rights Violations”; Dundurn Press Ltd. Toronto, Canada

^{6[6]} *ibid*

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Women from the Ogaden (the Somali region) have recounted horror stories of rape:

- Rape in detention centers.
- Rape in their homes while their children watch.
- They have been raped in their villages and were put under house arrest to prevent them from sharing their stories.

According to the OHRC 2007 report, on March 27th, 2007, Fathi Moalim Khalif, who is a former rape victim, was detained with other four civilians, in Dhagahabur. Prior to this arrest, members of the Ethiopian armed forces have gang raped her in January 2007. Fathi is pregnant as a result of that rape. Speaking to OHRC's researchers her younger brother said: "They think they can hide their heinous crime by putting her behind bars. Everyone knows what happened to her. No jail or detention camp can cover their crime. We will never forget what they have done to her". (OHRC, 2007:29)

Mr. Chairman, and distinguished committee members, you might be aware, almost the entire Ogaden population is Muslim; and as such they raise their daughters in a very traditional environments. It is with tremendous sadness that I report to you these women are not only living with the socio-cultural stigma that comes with rape in such traditional communities; but they are also contracting HIV/AIDS and other STDs at an alarming rate. This is one of the rare communities that HIV/AIDS has not been detected until recently.

In addition to these women getting STDs, they oftentimes get pregnant and bear children because of these rapes. It is important to imagine the magnitude of the suffering these women endure.

Since the current Ethiopian government came to power, a large number of women have been detained, tortured, raped, and some have disappeared or been killed. Women are the most vulnerable groups to suffer abuse and violence in the Ogaden, simply because they are the relatives of, or suspected sympathizers with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF).

It is important to note that the abovementioned actions are in direct violation of the international convention on the protection of women.

Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVW) states that: "for the purposes of this Declaration, the term "violence against women" means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life".

Similarities to the Darfur situation

Mr. Chairman, the Somali region in Ethiopia is heavily militarized zone, and it has not known a stable and peaceful period. It is a military outpost and the people of this region have suffered immensely. In the spirit of time, I would encourage the distinguished members of this committee to please consult the Ogaden Human Rights Committee report of 2007; more reports can be found in www.ogadenrights.org

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Mr. Chairman, It is no secret that Somalis in Ethiopia have been historically marginalized by successive Ethiopian regimes. I would argue they have been particularly persecuted by this current regime.

Mr. Chairman, many have compared what is happening in Ogaden to Darfur, We all know what has happened in Darfur amounted to genocide. I would submit to you that, the actions of the Zenawi regime placed upon the Ogaden, could be defined as genocide. And to that end, it is morally imperative that action be taken to mend broken lives.

Furthermore, my presentation would be incomplete if I did not mention the one big difference between Ogaden and Darfur. And that is, the government is doing the very acts of terrorizing the communities.

The currently accepted definition of genocide is the one contained in the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide:

“In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national ethnical, or religious groups, as such: 1) Killing members of the group; 2) Causing serious bodily harm to members of the group; 3) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; 4) Imposing measures intended to prevent birth within the group; 5) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”.

Actions by the Ethiopian military such as these listed below are to genocide.

- On July 22nd, 2007, in Qoriile, Ethiopian armed forces came in with a list of names, and then arrested a number of civilians. They transferred them to their barracks, where they were subjected to extensive torture. On July 24th, 2007, the Ethiopian armed forces killed the detainees in their custody, in Babaase. Most of the victims were hanged from acacia trees and then shot to ascertain their death. Ridwan Hassan Rage survived, and told about this massacre.
- Mr. Chairman, in November 20th, 2005, Ethiopian forces razed to the ground the village of Fooljeex, which is located 44 Km east of Qabridaharre. Before torching the residences, they looted personal properties and burned all the things they could not carry with them including the village’s barns, which contained more than 6000 Quintals of sorghum and maize. Pastoral development and Relief Association’s educational project in the area has also been damaged. (OHRC report 2007:18)
- Earlier in 2005, Ethiopian armed forces committed mass killings in Qabridaharre, Farmadow, Shilaabo, Madax-Maroodi, Karin-Bilicle and Gurdumi. (OHRC report 2007:18)

Mr. Chairman, I would submit to you that these acts fit very well within Article I and II of the current UN definition of genocide.

Mr. Chairman, it was clearly stated in the US State Department’s Human Rights report on Ethiopia that there is the existence of:

1. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life.
2. Disappearance.
3. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
4. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention.
5. Police detained journalists during the year.
6. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence.
7. Denial of Fair Public Trial.

Mr. Chairman, the current regime has recently released some prisoner, however in the Ogaden the jails in major cities, such as Jigjiga, Dhagaxbuur, Qabridahare, Godey and Fiiq, are full of

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victims of unlawful arrests. And the resulting overcrowding in these un-kept below human standard prisons is further causing a health risk.

Mr. Chairman, the Ogden community as a whole is experiencing the brutality of the Addis regime. Collective punishment is the order of the day in the Ogaden. The communities of Dhagaxbuur; Qabridahare, Godey and Fiiq have been subjected to:

- Severe physical and emotional torture, constant danger of rape that looms over all women to include girls as young as early teens.
- Random indiscriminate open air shooting, and killing.
- Open-ended intimidation of Community and Business leaders.
- The current military blockage, as documented in the UN report, of villages, towns and cities is making man-made disaster exponentially worse.

Ethiopia and the State of Democracy

Mr. Chairman, on August 3, 2007 - Senator Leahy made a passionate statement on the floor of the US Senate. After sighting election fraud, illegal imprisoning of civilians, documented Human rights abuses, the government's role of inciting violence, he finished in part:

“It is no excuse that the Ethiopian military has impeded access to the Ogaden, as it has done. In fact, this should give rise to a sense of urgency. If we cannot properly investigate these reports, and if the Leahy Law, which prohibits U.S. assistance to units of foreign security forces that violate human rights is not being applied because the U.S. Embassy cannot determine the facts, then we should not be supporting these forces.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, there isn't anything complex about what the people of Ogaden want. The people of Ogaden want what is due to them under the current Ethiopian constitution. The Ethiopian constitution explicitly states that human rights, civil and political rights, economic and cultural rights and the essential tenants of living with basic human dignity must be honored.

Mr. Chairman, the current regime failed miserably to adhere to its own constitution. And when questioned about its actions, this regime gets into defensive obfuscations to conceal the unpleasant realities on the ground. To that end, we are encouraged by the recent UN fact-finding mission into Ogaden. We look forward to the day when the Ogaden is open to international aid agencies and can begin to repair and rebuild where the current regime has destroyed and depleted.

Mr. Chairman the people of Ogaden are hopeful of the day they can participate in fair and democratic elections, enjoy freedom of the press, and access to development and investments from the outside world.

Mr. Chairman, being minority is not a reason to be killed and tortured, being Somali is not a reason to be raped and beaten; and certainly being a Muslim is not a crime punishable with indignity.

Mr. Chairman, Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world, the Somali region, even by Ethiopian standards, is the poorest and least developed region of the country. As it is stated

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in the UN report that came out last week, the people of Ogaden urgently need the basics to live decently.

While we, the Ogaden community, in the Diaspora, applaud this very important hearing, we want you to know that this is only the beginning. We are going to hold you accountable as well. You have now taken on the task of researching what is happening on the ground, therefore, you have no choice but to take action.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I applaud you for your leadership but I implore you to live up to the standards of Human Dignity that your constituents here at home live by.

The Ethiopian regime needs to be challenged by the United States to demand that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Doctors without Borders and other aid groups be allowed to help the people and Ogaden. And that their efforts and access to this region be unrestricted.

Concluding remarks.

Mr. Chairman, having highlighted the difficulties the people of Ogaden are dealing with, I would like to point out that it is not only the Somali region that has suffered under the brutalities of the current regime of Ethiopia. The people of Oromia region, Gambella region, Amhara region and Sidama region have also been subjected to human rights abuses. We need to ask ourselves; where do we go from here?

Mr. Chairman, Ethiopia and the Ethiopian masses need the international community and particularly the United States to intervene, and put pressure on the current regime to allow substantive democratic processes to be put in place.

Setting the context for democracy and the process of democratization in Ethiopia is very important. Furthermore, Mr. Chairman, it is important to underline the facts about democracy as a universal principle of governance, it is a moral imperative, a social process, and particular kind of political system, which can apply to all societies including Ethiopia^{7[7]}. I would submit to you that internal weak leadership and narrow-minded dictatorship have derailed democratic process in Ethiopia.

Mr. Chairman, Ethiopia is a country with great ethnic, linguistic diversity as well as religious diversity. Ethiopians need to be very careful not fall into the trap of narrowly defined nation-building ideologies; which many African countries pursued at the dawn of independence to their detriment. These ideologies are summarized in Womb's formula, as cited by Shivji, "*One people, one nation, one political party and one supreme leader*" (Shivji, 2000:30)^{8[8]}.

Mr. Chairman, the United States and the international community can facilitate a dialogue among the different Ethnic groups in Ethiopian; a dialogue I hope would lead to conflict

^{7[7]} "The State and Democracy in Africa" edited by George Nzongloa-Ntalaja & Margaret C. Lee; published by Africa World Press Inc; 1998 – Chapter 1

^{8[8]} "Reflections on Leadership in Africa: Forty Years After Independence" edited by Haroub Othman; published by VUB University Press, 2000; chapter three; p. 30

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resolution processes and substantive gender equity; and help the Ethiopian masses to heal after the abuses of successive regimes

I thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak regarding this life and death issue and I thank you on behalf of the many whose lives your action will touch. I look forward to your questions and I hope I can shed additional light on this issue.

Ogaden Human Rights Committee

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