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PRESS RELEASE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) has called since early 1992 for referendum on self-determination and independence for the OGADEN REGION, which is under Ethiopian occupation.

Since, 20 April 1994, the Ogaden has been a virtually closed military zone, where bloody battles are being fought between Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) forces and combatants of the ONLF.

The ongoing struggle for self-determination and independence in the Ogaden continues to cause more human suffering and threatens peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE OGADEN

The Ogaden has been hit by a severe drought accompanied by lack of food and medical care, which caused a mass starvation and breakout of epidemics related to malnutrition and bad sanitation.

On four consecutive years, the rainy season failed or there was not enough rainfall in the Ogaden. Water is scarce and dear. Whenever there is scarcity of water, the people move with their animals beside water holes, ponds and reservoirs. Many water reservoirs owned by individuals were confiscated by the Ethiopian armed forces. The Owners of those reservoirs were denied the use of their water for their thirsty animals, which are the main source of their livelihood.

So, the people are starving and their animals are perishing in thousands.

In August 1999, the Ethiopian government, which spends more than a million dollars a day on the war with Eritrea, internal wars and its invasions into Southern Somalia, asked the international community for an urgent humanitarian aid to feed five million Ethiopians facing starvation mainly in Northern Ethiopia.

As is usual with Ethiopian governments, the aid donated by the international community to the victims of the drought through the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (ERRC), which is in effect run by the Tigray Relief Society (TRS), never reached its intended beneficiaries in the Ogaden, because the Ethiopian government has misused it by diverting it to the army.

Therefore, the Ogaden Human Rights Committee appeals to the international community to help the Ogaden people directly through international NGOs in order to assure the reach of the food aid to the victims, who are the needy and the vulnerable majority, in the Ogaden. (See Ogaden: Graveyard of Rights ref: OHRC/10/99).

VIOLENCE AGAINST NGOs AND CIVILIANS

The Ogaden Human Rights Committee is alarmed at the rise of attacks against Aid workers, humanitarian organisations' property and the civilian population as well.

On 07 February 2000, an unidentified well armed gunmen attacked Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)- Doctors Without Borders/ Belgium -vehicle travelling between Jijjiga and Dhagaxbuur, Killing the driver and wounding two other persons, who were travelling in the vehicle. The attack took place in broad daylight near Higlaley.

In this regard, the Ogaden Human Rights Committee strongly condemns this terrorist act, which targeted the MSF vehicle and personnel. And expresses its sincere condolences to the family of the killed driver and wishes speedy recovery and good health for the wounded.

The Ogaden Human Rights Committee reiterates its disapproval of imposing restrictions on humanitarian organisations' movements as well as intimidation and abduction of aid workers in the Ogaden.

The Ogaden Human Rights Committee calls upon all humanitarian organisations in the Ogaden, to refrain from any activity, which is not related to their work, and confine themselves only to their humanitarian work, in order to help the needy people in the Ogaden.

The Ogaden Human Rights Committee urges the Ethiopian government, the ONLF and the other parties to the conflict to allow all humanitarian and relief organisations to operate freely in the Ogaden, regardless of nationality or religion.

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Since its foundation, on 13 June 1995, the Ogaden Human Rights Committee, has carried out extensive investigation of the human rights situation throughout the Ogaden, and has documented gross violations, including illegal imprisonments, mass arrests without charges or trials, enforced disappearances, torture, rape, extrajudicial killings, abduction, forced labour, hostage-taking, systematic religious and racial persecution, dispossession and widespread looting by the Ethiopian government army and security forces with impunity. (See Human Rights Violations in the Ogaden by Ethiopia, 1991 to 1996 ref: OHRC/01/96, Deterioration of Human Rights Situation in the Ogaden unabated ref: OHRC/07/96, Mass Killings, Torture and Disappearances in the Ogaden ref: OHRC/08/96, Ogaden: No Rights, No Democracy ref:

OHRC/08/97, Ogaden: An Endless Human Tragedy ref: OHRC/12/98 and Ogaden: Graveyard of Rights ref: OHRC/10/99).

OGADEN ROMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
(OHRC)