

Testimony of Felix Horne
Researcher, Africa division, Human Rights Watch
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
“Human Rights Dilemmas in Ethiopia”
Briefing on November 14, 2014

Mr. Chairmen and members of the committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to speak today about the human rights situation in Ethiopia.

The other panelists have articulated some of the critical issues that are facing Ethiopia ahead of the May 2015 elections. I would like to elaborate on human rights concerns associated with Ethiopia’s many development challenges.

Ethiopia is the one of the largest recipients of development assistance in the world, including more than \$800 million in 2014 from the US government. Many of Ethiopia’s 94 million people live in extreme poverty, and poverty reduction is rightly one of both the US and Ethiopian government’s core goals. Improving economic and human development is fundamental to ensuring that Ethiopians are able to enjoy their rights to health care, education, shelter, food and water, and Ethiopia’s government, civil society, international donors and private investors all have important roles contributing to the realization of these rights.

But sustainable development also requires a commitment to the full range of human rights, not just higher incomes, access to education and health care, but the ability for people to express their views freely, participate in public policy decision-making, join associations of their choice, have recourse to a fair and accessible justice system, and live free of abuse and discrimination.

Moreover, development that is not rooted in respect for human rights can be counter-productive, associated with abusive practices and further impoverishment of people already living in situations of extreme poverty. In Ethiopia, over the past few years Human Rights Watch has documented disturbing cases where international donors providing development assistance are turning a blind eye to government practices that fail to respect the rights of all beneficiaries. Instead of improving life in local communities, these projects are proving harmful to them. And given the repression of independent voices, media and associations, there are no realistic mechanisms for many local communities to express their views to their government. Instead, those who object or critique the government’s approach to development projects face the prospect of intimidation, harassment and even serious abuse.

In 2011 in Ethiopia’s western region, Gambella, Human Rights Watch documented such abuses during the implementation of the first year of the government’s “villagization” program. Gambella is a region populated by indigenous groups who have suffered from political marginalization and lack of development for decades. In theory the villagization program aimed to address some of these concerns. This program required all indigenous households in the region to move from their widely separated homes into larger villages - ostensibly to provide improved basic services including much-needed schools, health clinics and roads.

I was in Gambella for several weeks in 2011 and travelled to 16 different villages in five different districts. I met with people who had not yet moved from their homes and others who had been resettled. I interviewed dozens of people who said they did not wish to move but were forced by the government, by police, and by Ethiopia’s army if necessary. People described widespread human rights

violations, including forced displacement, arbitrary arrest and detention, beatings, and rape and other sexual violence. Thousands of villagers fled into neighboring countries where they became refugees. At the same time, in the new villages, many of the promised services were not available and the food security situation was dire.

The villagization program has also been implemented in other marginalized regions in Ethiopia. These regions are the same areas where government is leasing large pieces of land to foreign investors, often from India, China and the Gulf states, without meaningful consultation with local communities, without any compensation being paid to local communities, and with no benefits for local communities other than low-paying labor jobs on the plantations.

In the Omo valley in southern Ethiopia, Human Rights Watch found that the combination of sugar and cotton plantations and hydroelectric development is causing the displacement of up to 200,000 indigenous people from their lands. Massive amounts of water are being used for these projects which will have devastating impacts for Lake Turkana across the border in Kenya and the 300,000 indigenous people who live in the vicinity of the lake and depend upon it. The displacement of communities in the Omo valley is well underway. As in Gambella, communities in the Omo valley told Human Rights Watch about coercion, beatings, arrests and threats from military and police to force people to move to new settlements.

Human Rights Watch also found politically motivated abuse in development programs. In 2010, we documented discrimination and “political capture” in the distribution of the benefits of development programs especially prior to the 2010 elections. Opposition party supporters and others who did not support the ruling party were denied access to some of resources provided by donor-funded programs, including food aid, micro credit, seeds, fertilizers, and other critical agricultural inputs needed for food security, and even employment opportunities. Schools, funded as part of education programs by the US and other development partners, were used to indoctrinate school children in ruling party ideology and teachers were required to report youth perceived to support the opposition to the local authorities. These government practices, many of which continue today, show the intense pressure put on Ethiopian citizens to support the ruling party, and the way in which development aid is manipulated to discriminate against certain communities.

All of these cases have several common features. First, the Ethiopian government routinely denies the allegations without investigation, claiming they are politically motivated, while simultaneously restricting access for independent media and investigators. Second, these programs are directly and indirectly funded by Western donors, who seem unwilling to acknowledge, much less address human rights concerns in Ethiopia.

Monitoring and evaluation of these programs for human rights abuses is inadequate. Even when donors carry out assessments to look into the allegations, as has happened in Gambella, they are not conducted rigorously and do not ensure victims of abuses can speak freely and safely. In the current environment in Ethiopia, it is essential for anyone seeking to investigate human rights violations to go to locations where victims can speak openly, to understand the dynamics of the local communities, and recognize the depths of the fear they are experiencing.

All of these problems are exacerbated by the ongoing government crackdown on the media and civil society. The independent press has been ravaged since the 2010 election, with the vast majority of journalists terrified to report anything that is remotely critical of the government. In October I was in a

country neighboring Ethiopia where over 30 journalists have fled in the past few months alone. I spoke to many of them: their papers were closed, their families were threatened, and many had been charged under repressive laws merely because they criticized and questioned the Ethiopian government's policies on development and other issues. I spoke with someone who was forced to seek asylum abroad because he had questioned in writing whether the development of Africa's largest dam on the Nile River was the best use of money in a country where poverty is pervasive.

As for Ethiopian civil society, it has been decimated by another law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation. It has made obtaining foreign funding nearly impossible for groups working on human rights, good governance, and advocacy. Leading members of the human rights movement have been forced to flee abroad.

Some people take to the streets to peacefully protest. Throughout 2014 there were various protests throughout Ethiopia. In many of these protests, including during the student protests in the Oromia region in April and May of this year, the security forces used excessive force, including the use of live ammunition against the students. We don't even know how many Oromo students are still detained because the government publicizes no information, there is no comprehensive human rights monitoring and reporting, and family members are terrified of reporting the cases. Members of the Muslim community who organized protests in 2012 against what they saw as government interference in religious affairs have also paid an enormous price for those demonstrations, with many beaten or arrested and most of the protest organizers now imprisoned on terrorism charges.

Finally, bringing about change through the ballot box is not really an option. Given that 99.6 percent of the parliamentary seats in the 2010 election went to the ruling party and that the political space has shrunk dramatically since then, there is little in the way of a viable opposition that can raise questions about government policy, including development plans, or other sensitive topics.

This situation leaves Ethiopians no real means to express concerns over the policies and development strategies imposed by the government. They either accept it, they face threats and imprisonment for speaking out, or they flee their country as thousands have done. The refugee communities in countries neighboring Ethiopia are full of individuals who have tried to raise concerns in all of these ways, and are now in exile.

To conclude, we all recognize that Ethiopia needs and requires development. The problem is how development is being undertaken. Development projects need to respect the rights of the local communities and improve their quality of life, regardless of ethnicity or political perspective. The United States and Ethiopia's other major partners can and should play a leading role in supporting sustainable, rights-respecting development. The US should not accept arguments that protecting human rights is in contradiction to development goals and implementation.

In 2014, the appropriations bill required the US to scrutinize and suspend funding for development programs in Ethiopia that might contribute to forced evictions in Ethiopia, including in Gambella and Omo. This was an important signal that the abuses taking place were unacceptable, and this should be maintained in the upcoming FY15 appropriations bill, whether it is a stand-alone bill or a continuing resolution.

As one of Ethiopia's key partners and supporters of Ethiopia's development, the US needs to do more to ensure it is rigorously monitoring and consistently responding to human rights abuses in Ethiopia, both

bilaterally and multilaterally. The US should be pressing the Ethiopian government to ensure that there is genuine consultation on development initiatives with affected communities, that more robust monitoring is put in place to monitor for potential abuses within programs, and that independent civil society, both domestic and foreign, are able to monitor and report on rights abuses. Respect for human rights is first and foremost a concern of all Ethiopians, but it is also central to all US interests in Ethiopia, from security to good governance to sustainable development.

Thank you.