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Monday, March 16, 2020

Open Letter

The Ethiopian Government should be part of the World Community Against Coronavirus by Respecting Human Rights of the Citizens

We, the Oromo Civic, Professional and Faith-based organizations in Diaspora write this open letter calling upon the Ethiopian government to restore all communication services immediately i.e. phones, cellphones, and internet services in all Oromia and release all political prisoners as the means to reduce the risk of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Releasing prisoners is part of the steps countries are taking in the fight against this pandemic.

COVID-19 is a contagious respiratory virus previously unknown. Our knowledge about this virus is limited, and the only tool public health has is educating its prevention, such as social distancing, hand-hygiene, travel restrictions, limiting flights to and from hot spots of the virus, and advising the public to avoid large public gatherings of more than 50 people and to keep at least 6 feet between people at any time.

Communication is a vital public health tool during pandemic outbreaks. However, at this critical moment, the Ethiopian government is denying Western Oromia and Southern Oromia telephone service, cellphone service, and internet service creating communication crises. At the same time, the Ethiopian government is mass arresting supporters of political oppositions and holding hundreds of them in small overcrowded prison cells putting them at a greater risk of COVID-19 virus.

To make the situation worse, the Ethiopian government is engaged in harassing and finally closing down independent mass media in Oromia including the Oromia Media Network and Oromia News Network that broadcast in *Afaan Oromoo* to deny the Oromo people any information on the Coronavirus. It is imminent that the Oromo people who constitute about 50% of the Ethiopian population, will be exposed to unchecked transmission of the coronavirus due to lack of timely information and education, if intimidation and harassment of the independent mass media in Oromia continues. The impact will not be limited to the Oromo people but will have a

multiplier effect in Ethiopia and the whole world that is grappling with the Coronavirus war. Therefore, the world should be no more indifferent to the ongoing crimes committed by the Ethiopian government against the Oromo people.

Social distancing is one of the key recommendations by health professionals and the World Health Organization (WHO). Ethiopian prisons are overcrowded by Oromo political prisoners and this calls for an immediate release of the thousands of Oromo political prisoners if we are to spare their lives. Keeping these political prisoners locked up, knowing well the risk of COVID-19, is a genocide. They did not deserve to be in jail in the first place let alone to die of the government's making. Therefore, we call on Dr. Abiy Ahmed and his administration to immediately order the release of all political prisoners.

Human Right groups have been calling on the Ethiopian government to immediately restore communication to Oromia and this pandemic has made it more urgent. We believe, it is in the interest of the international community to stop the spread of Coronavirus anywhere in the world. Therefore, we call upon all Human Rights Defenders, Global Health Institutions, international organizations and concerned governments to engage the Ethiopian government to take the following measures immediately:

1. Restore internet and telephone communications in the Regional State of Oromia to facilitate information dissemination to mitigate and stop the spread of coronavirus
2. Release political prisoners from the unhygienic overcrowded jails to contain and mitigate the spread of the pandemic Coronavirus
3. Lift the martial law in the Oromia Regional State to enable the citizens to lead stable life and fight against Coronavirus
4. Stop harassing and threatening independent mass media in Oromia including Oromia Media Network and Oromia News Network to enable information flow in Oromia on coronavirus.

Sincerely,

Signatories: Oromo Civic, Professional and Faith-based Organizations

1. Advocacy for Oromia
2. Bilal Oromo Dawa Center
3. Canaan Oromo Evangelical Church
4. Global Gumii Oromia
5. Global Oromo Advocacy Group
6. Gumii Waaqeffannaa Addunyaa
7. Horn of Africa Genocide Watch

8. Human Rights League of the Horn of Africa
9. International Oromo Women's Organization
10. International Queer Support Group
11. Mana Kiristaanaa Fayyisaa Addunyaa
12. Oromia Support Group
13. Oromo Communities' Association of North America
14. Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Church of Washington DC Metropolitan Area
15. Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society
16. Oromo Human Rights and Relief Organization
17. Oromo Legacy, Leadership and Advocacy Association
18. Oromo Lutheran Church of Baltimore
19. Oromo Parliamentarians Council
20. Oromo Political Prisoners Association
21. Oromo Studies Association
22. Spring of Life Pentecostal Oromo Church
23. Tawfiq Islamic Center
24. United Oromo Evangelical Church

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GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The US Department of State (USA)

Minister of Foreign Affairs (Canada)

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (UK) Minister for

Foreign Affairs (Sweden)

Minister of Foreign Affairs (Norway)

Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France)

Federal Foreign Office (Germany)

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS

UN Human Rights Council

Africa Union (AU)

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Council of Europe,

UN Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights

Amnesty International

Human Rights Watch

MEDIA AND NEWS GROUPS

Oromia News Network

Oromia Media Network

Hegeree News Network

Radio Sagalee Walabummaa Oromiyaa

VOA Afaan Oromoo Program

BBC Afaan Oromo Program

Addis Standard

Aljazeera English

DW-Amharic

The Washington Post

New York Times

The Guardian

Reuters