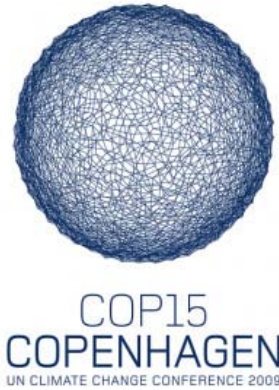


Ethiopia: Meles Zenawi's Ploy for Copenhagen Conference

By Selam Beyene, November 23, 2009 |



Ethiopia's dictator Meles Zenawi, who has no respect for fundamental human rights and who has one of the worst environmental records in the history of Ethiopia, has no moral authority to rear his head as a champion of climate change for the people of Africa.

As the rest of the world awaits a successful outcome of the Climate Conference in Copenhagen, Ethiopia's tyrant Meles Zenawi has been honing a Machiavellian gambit to exploit his hard-earned role as a representative of Africa to advance his vicious political and economic agenda.

It is hard to disagree with the notion that industrialized countries have much to atone for with regard to their contribution to the environmental catastrophe in countries like Ethiopia. However, these countries should not exacerbate the hardship their actions have wreaked on the people by handing over in haste compensatory money to dictators who would only use it to buttress their oppressive machinery and to fatten their foreign bank accounts.

Indeed, the environmental and humanitarian damage caused by Meles Zenawi's autocratic and corrupt regime in Ethiopia is incalculable. Below are a few examples that give a glimpse of the relentless onslaught of the dictator against the fragile environment of the country in his tragic crusade to oppress the people and plunder the wealth of that poor nation.

Massive deforestation, thanks to Zenawi's insatiable desire to amass hard-currency, has contributed to continued environmental degradation, poverty and famine in the country. [According to one report](#), in the first few years of Zenawi's repressive rule, "... between 1990 and 2005, Ethiopia lost 14.0% of its forest cover, or around 2,114,000 hectares." A case in point is his recent campaign to sell the more fertile parts of the country to multinational farmers without regard to the ecological consequences. As reported in the November 22, 2009 issue of the New York Times Magazine [2]:

"Zenawi, a former Marxist rebel who has turned into a champion of private capital, has publicly said he is very eager to attract foreign farm investors by offering them what the government describes as virgin land. An Ethiopian agriculture ministry official recently told Reuters that he has identified more than seven million acres. The government plans to lease half of it before the next harvest, at the dirt-cheap annual rate of around 50 cents per acre."

The dictator has banned private ownership of land and used it as a tool for the subjugation of the rural population. As a consequence, he has encouraged unsustainable land utilization and inevitable environmental degradation, as affirmed by the aforementioned [New York Times Magazine report](#).

"This land-tenure policy has made it possible for a one-party state to hand over huge tracts to investors at nominal rents, in secrecy, without the bother of a condemnation process."

The problem was summed up in the October 26, 2009 issue of the Herald Scotland, which stated:

"Ethiopia's land, post-Mengistu, still belongs to the state and cannot be sold. One consequence is that state land gets divided and sub-divided among the families who sit on it. Plots become so tiny and the soil so exhausted that it cannot feed the families who work it – even in times of normal rainfall."

Utilizing famine as a weapon of mass repression, Zenawi has systematically instituted policies that contributed in major ways to the recurrent drought and human tragedy in that country. According to a recent UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) report, 35 million Ethiopians or about 44% of the total population are malnourished, and that the country has the largest proportion of malnourished people in the world!

The dictator has instituted draconian laws to restrict the activities of NGOs who work in the field of human rights and other areas that are incompatible with the corrupt and repressive policies of the regime. In particular, the law has severely curbed the ability of environmental NGOs to educate the public at large on climate change issues and to expose the destructive environmental policy of Zenawi's deceitful government.

Why has Zenawi desperately campaigned to secure invitation at the Copenhagen Climate Conference?

The dictator's resourcefulness when it comes to hoodwinking donor nations through appearances at major summits has been well [documented](#). At G8 and G20 summits, he has insolently and callously exploited the famine and poverty that he has inflicted on the people as means of shaming wealthy nations into giving him billions of dollars in aid.

Predictably, he has now seen even greater opportunity in the Copenhagen Conference, and has assiduously lobbied corrupt African diplomats to nominate him as an African Union's chief negotiator. As reported in the November 20, 2009 issue of

the Daily Nation, Zenawi, true to form, was [quick to ask](#) "...the rich industrialized nations to compensate the less developed Africa for the impact of global warming."

Having been rejected by the people of Ethiopia in successive elections, another even more sinister motive for his obsession about invitation to major meetings is the desire to earn legitimacy and to divert attention from his appalling human rights records and crimes against humanity. The timing of the upcoming Climate Conference is particularly opportune as the venue is expected to provide much needed visibility at home and abroad while he intensifies his blatant attacks to cripple any potential opposition in the May 2010 elections.

Just a few weeks before the Climate Conference, the dictator gave a deceiving gesture of rapprochement by orchestrating a highly publicized and theatrical ceremony of reconciliation with a prominent leader of one of the opposition groups. He quickly used the occasion to silence international critiques and to appease those donor nations who only needed a pretext to prop up his repressive regime. After an intensive barrage of propaganda to publicize the event to gullible international observers, he has now embarked on an even more terrifying campaign of sniffing out any viable opposition and squashing it ruthlessly. As acknowledged by Karl Wycoff, deputy assistant secretary of state for East African Affairs, after a recent visit to the country, even the US is concerned by the "... reduction in political space and the ability of opposition parties to operate and do what opposition parties should do."

Thus, in view of the proven crimes of Zenawi and his regime against humanity, his continued assault on the environment and his contempt for good governance and rule of law, the presence of the dictator at a conference of considerable significance to mankind is not only a trivialization of the noble cause for which those concerned with climate change stand, but also an affront to human decency.

We, therefore, call upon industrialized nations not to rush to reward dictators with compensatory money knowing that the money would be used to cause even graver hardship on the people who must be helped.

We also call upon the hosts of the Climate Conference to take extra measures so that the venue would not be exploited by unscrupulous dictators as a cover for their crimes and as a platform to gain visibility.

Ethiopians in the Diaspora are asked to heighten their vigilance and expose the tyrant, as they have admirably done so in Gleneagles, Scotland, in 2005; Pittsburgh, PA, in 2009; and in numerous other places over the years. Through effective demonstrations, well-researched publications, and constructive engagement of the Conference organizers, they should expose the depravity of the tyrant and ensure that the dictator does not use the august occasion as a forum to strengthen his repressive machinery and to divert attention from the crimes he is committing against the people.

Albert Camus wrote: "The welfare of the people in particular has always been the alibi of tyrants, and it provides the further advantage of giving the servants of tyranny a good conscience." For almost two decades, Zenawi has used the predicament of the people of Ethiopia to bolster his repressive machinery and to plunder the wealth of the nation. This time, the world must awaken to the vile ruse

of the dictator, and stop him before he inflicts more devastating human suffering in the name of development, democracy, and now climate change.

(Selam Beyene, Ph.D., can be reached at Beyene50@gmail.com)