FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Concerned Citizens Present Petition Denouncing Arrest and Detention of Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders

WASHINGTON DC, December 17, 2015 – A petition denouncing the unjust imprisonment of three Ethiopian human rights defenders and calling on the Ethiopian government to drop all charges against them immediately, is being presented this week to the Ethiopian government as well as its financial backers—governments of the US, Canada, UK, Germany, Switzerland, and the World Bank, which provide a significant amount of international aid to Ethiopia. The petition is signed by 1,229 people from 70 countries.

In March of 2015, Omot Agwa Okwoy, Ashinie Astin, and Jamal Oumar Hojele were arrested on their way to a food security workshop in Nairobi, Kenya. The event was organized by the indigenous rights organization, Anywaa Survival Organisation, with support from international NGOs Bread for All and GRAIN. The three human rights and land rights defenders were detained for nearly six months without charge and denied access to legal representation. On September 7, 2015, they were charged under Ethiopia’s draconian counterterrorism law.

The charges against the detainees claim that they are active in the Gambela Peoples Liberation Movement (GPLM) though they have no ties to the GPLM and there is no evidence linking them to the organization. The food security workshop in Nairobi had no connection to the GPLM either. These charges appear to have been fabricated under Ethiopia’s highly flawed counterterrorism law in order to intimidate and silence the country’s indigenous communities. The Anuak and other indigenous peoples in Ethiopia are struggling to stop the government-led takeover of their lands and resources by large-scale agricultural investors.

Ashinie Astin, from a Majang indigenous community, is a former elected member of the Gambela regional council in southwestern Ethiopia. Jamal Oumar works for Assossa Environmental Protection, an NGO that promotes environmental protection and indigenous rights. Omot Agwa Okwoy, an evangelical pastor, worked as an interpreter for the World Bank during its 2014 investigation of a complaint by Anuak indigenous people alleging widespread forced displacement and human rights violations related to a World Bank project in Gambela. Pastor Omot arranged interviews for the Bank’s Inspection Panel, its internal watchdog, with Anuak who told World Bank investigators about beatings, rapes, and summary executions by Ethiopian soldiers. Soon after, Omot began receiving intimidating messages, leading up to his arrest in March.

The petition denounces the Ethiopian government and its financial backers—the US, Canada, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, and the World Bank—for the unjust imprisonment of Omot Agwa Okwoy, Ashinie Astin, and Jamal Oumar Hojele. It also calls on the government of Ethiopia to drop of all charges against the detainees and ensure their immediate release and safety. Petition signers left numerous comments in support of the detainees (see below). The petition demonstrates growing public outcry against the criminalization of human rights defenders and outrage against the Ethiopian government and its backers concerning ongoing repression of activists, journalists, bloggers, and dissidents in the country.

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COMMENTS FROM PETITION SIGNERS:

“This is a blatant and reprehensible act of political repression. These men are peacekeepers and must be treated as such.” — Terran Giacomini, ON, Canada

“All peoples of the world have the right to control their food resources. These men must be freed immediately.” — Dolores Schaefer, NY, United States

“Your brutal action toward people who didn't commit any violence is very shocking for me.” — Pierre Farron, Switzerland

“I know Omot as a leader of his people, dedicated to peace and reconciliation in this troubled part of the world. For some years we worked together and became friends in the process. The idea that this peace and justice loving man is incarcerated is just outrageous.” — Monika M Sommer, Japan

“I have the privilege of knowing and working with Omot for many years in Gambella. He is one of the well-respected elders in the region across the board and had played an instrumental role in reconciliation and peace-building during the region's violent past. Defending indigenous peoples land rights and food security is in the interest of all stakeholders for a peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia for everybody. Instead of jailing and intimidation, the Ethiopian government should start to radically rethink its development polices in peripheral regions through the eyes, knowledge and experiences of minorities and indigenous peoples themselves.” — Öjot Miru Ojulu, Switzerland

“Free them at once! The fight for their own land and food must never be a criminal act.” — Anton Stoeckli, Switzerland

“Small farms with varied local flora means food security for everyone. Also the people who are displaced become internal refugees and a possible source of extremism and political instability. I am ashamed that the US government is apparently supporting these immoral and destabilizing land grabs, which only help a small wealthy elite at the cost of the citizenry.” — Patricia Bullock, NJ, United States

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“I dream of a world where people could defend their rights without fearing prosecutions of any kind. And food security is a right every human being should have. Good luck to these courageous people.” — Lise Girard, Switzerland

“We condemn the act of Ethiopian Govt. Let human rights be given justice and respected. Ethiopian gov should respect the dignity of peoples.” — Anthony Debbarma, India

“He's an innocent pastor, the only crime he has is his willingness to expose the unspeakable atrocities committed against the Anuak minority people in Gambella by the Ethiopian government security forces. The government of Ethiopia is well-known for jailing human rights activists. Many rights defenders are in prison. Had it not been in Ethiopia, the pastor would have been awarded a peace prize for his godly deeds. He and all rights defenders in jail should be released.” — Fasil yen, Netherlands

“This is just plain wrong. I don't understand how people that are trying to protect the very planet we live on should be punished for it. If this is the law then the law is unjust and it should be changed.” — Emily Leibowitz, SC, United States

“Indigenous people live sustainable, humble lifestyles. We would do well to emulate them instead of persecuting them.” — Jeffrey Koontz, SC, United States

“The right to Food is a universal right. So should the freedom of expression and association. These are essential for development of the peoples. Its important that these friends and food campaigners be granted freedom and not hold them any more.” — Kenya Food Rights Alliance, Kenya

“These activists are heroes of Ethiopia defending their land and unique culture. Let them free!” — Jyoti Fernandes, United Kingdom

“Please be a better example to show Africa in a positive light!” — Aminata Sow, Senegal

“Food and seed sovereignty are fundamental to rights and dignity. They have nothing to do with terrorism! The case against these people is a complete aberration of justice.” — Lawrence Halvey-Goodwin, WV, United States

“Respect the human rights of environmental defenders!” — Simone Lovera, Paraguay

“The state of terror and tyranny of the West-backed Ethiopian government must end now. We demand the immediate release of all Ethiopian food and land activists.” — Duke Tagoe, Ghana

“I am shocked to think that protests about land and food should be interpreted as terrorism. I have worked for many years to protect both and believe these are fundamental rights of peoples everywhere.” — Helena Paul, United Kingdom

“The UK gives aid money to Ethiopia. If Human Rights issues arise like that if Omot then we will bring it to the notice of our local MP.” — Michael Wale, United Kingdom

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“Please immediately release these individuals who have done nothing wrong. Land grabbing by foreign investors must end and is a problem eminently worthy of community activism.” — John Tuxill, WA, United States

“Food security is important for all your people. These campaigners should be honoured not imprisoned.” — Sheila Freeman, United Kingdom

“Having known Omot Agwa Okway in person, I can say with certainty that the charges leveled against him are baseless. All he has done has been to speak the truth and stand for justice. In the interest of development of democratic culture and civil society engagement, I urge the Ethiopian Government to drop all charges against Omot and his co-accuseds immediately.” — Ojulu Didumo, AB, Canada

“Being interested in and advocating for the welfare of others is a commendable act and not terrorism. The government should be discouraged from fabricating fake terrorism charges against innocent citizens.” — Eshete Hailu, ON, Canada

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