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### **Introduction**

Chairman Chris Smith, Ranking Member Karen Bass, Members of Congress, Ambassador Tibor Nagy, fellow panelists, distinguished guests. I offer my gratitude to my Congressman from Colorado's Congressional 6th district in Colorado, Representative Mike Coffman, staunch ally of all the Ethiopians in the district, for the opportunity to represent not only the Oromo Community of Denver in Colorado but to speak to concerns shared by Oromo and other communities across the US and Ethiopia.

On their behalf, I would like to express our sincere appreciation for your support in recognizing the sacrifices of Oromo youth, who are known as *Qeerroo*, and other Ethiopian youth who demanded deep reform in Ethiopia from early on and in working closely with us, the diaspora. You have acknowledged the sustained nonviolent resistance of youth – first across Oromia and then joined by Konso people and people from Amhara region. As early as September 2016 this body responded to that youth groundswell by introducing a house resolution (861) on Ethiopia. Then, the next year, in the new 115<sup>th</sup> Congress you updated it, made it stronger and reintroduced it as House Resolution 128 on “respecting human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia.” It was kicked off with a hearing on March 9, 2017 titled “Democracy Under Threat in Ethiopia.” With massive support from the diaspora the well-honed H Res 128 passed the House on April 10, 2018.

The passage of H Res 128 was born out of collaborative work of your Subcommittee with the diaspora communities like ours and the other Ethiopian American and human rights groups – including my fellow panelists here who all worked to bring us to this time of historic transition and potential transformation in Ethiopia. You stood with us and with those who persisted through suffering. You continue to stand with us. I personally have to tell you that you both hold a special place in the hearts of Ethiopians who longed for change.

When we brought the *Qeerroo's* demands to you, we in the diaspora stepped up to speak for them because their voice was not heard in the international community. Now with many of the reforms, those once-silenced voices are finding expression and can be heard.

We continue to listen and take our lead from them. And we are grateful that you, Chairman Chris Smith and Ranking Member Karen Bass, are listening also. You have followed up with a Congressional Delegation to Ethiopia on August 23. You both met with a range of Ethiopian groups and have received the emotional outpouring of gratitude from Oromo and other

Ethiopians in many walks of life, recognizing you, greeting you with tears, thanking you for your role in their release from prison and their right to express themselves without reprisal. Thank you for attending with Ambassador Raynor a Town Hall meeting in Addis Ababa with Oromo civic association members and some *Qeerroo* (Oromo youth) to hear their concerns. Your trip underscored that US policy toward Ethiopia really mattered during the transition to a new Prime Minister, and it continues to matter now on the ground in Ethiopia. The effects and the impact of H Res 128 have been to support the transformation underway. Certainly, in my community your efforts have been praised.

I have been asked to provide insights into developments since the passage of the resolution, so in the short time I have, I will raise the key ongoing demands of the people that are linked to their eventual prosperity.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's broad-sweeping democratic electoral, judicial, media and human rights reforms are certainly to be celebrated. He has released tens of thousands of political prisoners, activists, and journalists, lifted the State of Emergency, brought peace with Eritrea through rapprochement, engaged opposition political parties, unblocked access by formerly restricted media companies, removed banned parties from legal designation as "terrorist" organizations and visited Ethiopia's neighboring countries.

The *Qeerroo* celebrate Prime Minister Abiy's success, his innovation, his courage for a special reason. They know that he was unknown a year ago when they were resisting daily the obstacles that suppressed their own potential. They see that when the political opening came that they fought for, he got the opportunity to exercise his capacity and express himself, revealing his deep-seated values. He outperformed everyone's expectations. For many Oromo, Prime Minister Abiy symbolizes the potential that each Oromo and each person has to exceed expectations to live into a different future when obstacles are lifted.

**Key Issues to be addressed:**

Now it is necessary to consolidate and build on the Prime Minister's powerful reforms in order to bring opportunity and prosperity to the country. I want to remind you of the need to ensure that the benefits and the opportunities reach the Oromo, Amhara and other youth who took the greatest risk and made the greatest sacrifice to bring the openings that all the country now enjoys. It should not be allowed for them to be forgotten again, marginalized again.

The original demands of the #OromoProtests were to stop land grab, free all political prisoners, make Afaan Oromo a Federal working language alongside Amharic, repeal the anti-terrorism proclamation and the restrictive charities and societies laws and lay the groundwork for inclusive governance. The House Resolution 128 called upon the Ethiopian government to meet these demands. Ultimately providing prosperity will require deep institutional reform. At this point in the process most of the Oromo protesters demands have not yet been met, but they have hope, and we have hope. That is why we are here, continuing to advocate and work with you productively into a new secure, peaceful and prosperous reality. What will that require? The people at the grassroots are clear about what is required.

## **Land Rights**

First is land rights. The first line of resistance was over the dispossession of ancestral land. This matter has yet to be addressed. The lands of indigenous Oromo, Anuak, Sidama and many other peoples were turned to a commodity for sale and lease without their knowledge or consent. Their lands were used as magnets to attract foreign investors and diaspora population as well as to illegally enrich relatives, use it to make friends and sometimes even sold off casually to pay debts or make payroll. The *Qeerroo* assert that the Oromo and other peoples have a right to live on their ancestral land without fear of displacement. They demand that development policies be formulated and carried out with full participation of and for the benefit of communities. Thus, we ask the Congress to urge the Ethiopian government to introduce land reform and otherwise engage in open and transparent consultations about its development strategy. We urge the Ethiopian government to end the practice of displacing local communities from ancestral lands in the name of development and to offer those already displaced from their lands the right to seek remedy or redress in courts. Dispossessed and displaced people need to be repatriated to the lands from which they have been violently removed.

## **Language Rights**

The other major demand of Oromo youth (shared with youth across the country and the continent) is to gain access to opportunity and share in prosperity. This is where one full-throated call of Oromo youth needs to be understood in context – the need to **adopt afaan Oromo as a federal working language in Ethiopia alongside Amharic**. In day-to-day reality, access to a vast array of opportunities is currently blocked to those who do not speak the Amharic language, the current Federal language. Yet a majority of the people in Ethiopia speak Oromo as their first language. This needs to be clear to anyone seeking to remove obstacles to economic, social, political participation. So, the matter of the youth calling for access to business, administrative, educational, health, media and all services in their own language is a matter of leveling the playing field, eliminating the biggest hurdle to providing opportunity for millions. With this single policy change, now-closed doors will open for a huge sector who are now excluded from the marketplace, the government services, the courts, the hospitals, etc.

## **Justice and Accountability**

Justice is the foundation for building public trust. Public accountability for persons who have violated and continue to violate rights is the first step to building reliable public institutions. You should be aware that, despite the release of prisoners in Ethiopia, the killing and the displacement of Oromo and other people in some areas has intensified, particularly along the borders of Oromia with neighboring regional states including in East Hararghe, West Hararghe, Bale, Guji and Borana. The Liyu police forces that were led by security units loyal to the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) have committed many mass killings since Abiy attained the Prime Minister position, e.g., in Calango Town, in Moyale, Miyu Muluqe and Mieso. So far, none of these criminals have faced reprisals. Over two million people are now displaced across the country, destitute, in urgent need of international assistance and placing a heavy burden on those who care about their survival.

Sadly, Ethiopia is full of stories of anguish and injustice fueled by decades of authoritarian governance. These stories touch everyone in Oromia and reveal why it is important that PM Ahmed's administration make pursuing justice an urgent priority.

Also, the nation mourns the unresolved disappearances of many well-loved personages. For example Yosef Bati, a former schoolteacher snatched by security forces in Addis Ababa, Nadhi Gammadaa, head of a bureau was detained by Ethiopian armed forces and never seen again; Lamessa Boru, detained by TPLF forces while undergoing treatment at the Police Hospital in Addis Ababa; Bekele Dawano disappeared while in detention in Agarfa prison. Dabasa Guyo, an Oromo wisdom keeper, beloved oral historian and spiritual leader was kidnapped from Kenya by unidentified security forces and taken across the border into Ethiopia. He has been missing since September 2015. The whereabouts of these persons and hundreds of others remains unknown. The Abiy administration should be encouraged to bring closure by providing families with information or assistance to locate their missing family members. We urge the Ethiopian government to make pursuing justice in these – and the cases of over 200 unexplained disappearances — a priority.

Reps Smith and Bass, when you were in Ethiopia, you heard the heartbreaking story of Kefaluw Tefari, a young Oromo man who was snatched from the street and hauled off to prison without explanation or cause. He lost both his legs as a result of torture in detention and named his perpetrator. You encouraged victims of this kind of abuse to address this matter of justice and accountability by creating a list of those who have been responsible. Thank you for supporting justice and rehabilitation for the many persons like him who have been left without recourse.

His case and many like it highlight the need for an independent commission created to conduct a full, credible, and transparent investigation into the conduct of gross human rights violations and the public release of its full written findings and recommendations. We also call for systems of accountability to be put in place that provide justice for the survivors of torture, violence and other atrocities, to hold responsible persons who carried out deaths, cruelty, dispossession and displacement. Further, we support the U.S. Congress in seeking that provisions of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act be applied to the cases of Ethiopian government officials who have carried out or ordered gross violations of the human rights of individuals and business entities.

### **Opportunity for Youth**

The *Qeerroo* in Ethiopia are a prime example of the youth bulge across Africa. The young Prime Minister exemplifies in his person the great potential of the youth. The youth have already demonstrated that without armaments, without violence, they achieved their goals through the concerted discipline required to conduct a sustained nonviolent protest against one of the most heavily armed regimes in Africa. Their courageous collective action brought the opening for reform that PM Abiy stepped into. We think that prosperity can be built on the youthful enthusiasm that is overwhelming the country

Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Bass, during the Congressional Delegation trip, you wanted to know how you can help further. You pointed out that it is appropriate for Congress and US agencies to play a supportive role as the people on the ground propose solutions. Now that the youth have a voice, our role in the diaspora shifts to supporting what they identify as their needs and help communicate those to you who are seeking to build up the continent. We believe that solutions found for the Oromo *qeerroo* and for the youth countrywide in Ethiopia will be applicable to addressing the African youth rising across the continent. We commit to continue to serve as a bridge to point to obstacles – as I have pointed to earlier in my remarks – as they are revealed so that former protesters can gain access to opportunities and actively move forward to build a prosperous future.

### **Inclusive Governance**

Above all, Oromo seek democracy and peace. They are not alone in this. Ethiopia is home to multiple communities who historically and presently suffer from political, economic and cultural marginalization. The Oromo, along with the rest of the peoples of Ethiopia, believe in mutual recognition, equality and co-existence. A democratic federal system where power is not monopolized at the center can ensure that the diversity of views and interests in Ethiopia are served. Federalism with democracy can empower people to solve their problems and develop the means to address the social, political and economic challenges they face.

To attain a transition to democracy from authoritarian rule, the peoples' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression must be respected, and free and fair elections must be carried out in the context of a robust civil society. Thankfully Ambassador Raynor has publicly stated that the U.S. supports free and fair elections in Ethiopia. We call for a non-partisan and independent Electoral Board, whose members are approved by both the ruling party and the opposition parties, to oversee elections at the local, zonal, regional and federal level. Internationally-recognized election observers should assist in election-related preparations and monitor election proceedings. The diaspora may be called upon to play a role in connecting programs that support elections and inclusive governance to the grassroots where these policies must take root. For this to happen some legislative change is necessary.

The Oromo *qeerroo* community constantly looks for ways to connect with other peoples who have been marginalized in Ethiopia, the Konso, the Anuak, the Sidama, the Afar, the Beni-Shangul, the Somali, the Amhara in Welkait, the Wolayita, and many others. Remedies that unleash energy and potential for the Oromo also resonate for peoples in Ethiopia who have not benefited from the repressive structures that enriched only a small minority of the country's population.

I can summarize my remarks by saying that the daily lives of the *Qeerroo* (Oromo youth) and the lives of the ordinary Oromo and Ethiopian people have not yet improved following the Prime Minister's rise to the position. But the people have hope and they have appreciated the opening offered by Abiy's reforms. Even the *qeerroo* from the most deprived areas will point out, marginalization of the Oromo and other people occurred over centuries and became deeply institutionalized. To undo these arrangements will take time and vision and the

patience to see the political, economic and social process through to deep institutional reform. The *qeerroo* are eagerly committed to joining in the task. They see the US Congress has been an ally in this journey who stood with them at the darkest point. We are pleased to continue to play a supportive role in this journey toward respect for human rights and encouraging inclusive governance in Ethiopia.

Finally, I would like to conclude my testimony by summarizing my recommendations to this Subcommittee which I believe will help Ethiopia transition to a democracy.

I recommend that:

- 1.) The U.S. government apply to Ethiopian government officials, individuals, and business entities the Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which is a provision of H Res 128. The Act applies globally and authorizes U.S. government to sanction human rights offenders, freeze their assets, and ban them from entering the U.S., among other terms.
- 2.) The U.S. government call for the Ethiopian government to repeal the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and the 2009 Charities and Societies Act; the former has been used to stifle dissent and prosecute opposition leaders, journalists and bloggers; the latter to curtail the activities of human rights and democracy civic groups.
- 3.) The Ethiopian government form an independent Election Board that both the governing party and opposition parties can agree upon to prevent post-election disputes and crises, and amend election laws.
- 4.) To better transition from post-conflict authoritarian regime to democracy, systems of accountability by put in place such as the formation of a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' similar to the one assembled in South Africa to transition from apartheid.
- 5.) The Ethiopian government adopt Afaan Oromo as a Federal working language alongside Amharic to provide access to services in the public sphere for tens of millions of speakers of the Oromo language.
- 6.) The Ethiopian government conduct land reform and ensure the security of the people living on their ancestral land without fear of displacement.

I thank you for this opportunity.