

# Book Review: The Great Land Giveaway

Book Review:- By Ayal-Sew Dessye:

Author: Dr. Aklog Birara; Title: "Ethiopia: The Great Land Giveaway - Yemeret neteka ena kirit", 486 pages; Printed by: Signature Book Printing; Price: \$30.00.

Dr. Aklog Birara's recent book titled "Ethiopia: The Great Land Giveaway - የመሬት ነጠቃና ቅርጫት - Yemeret Neteka Ena Kirimit " is a voluminous (486 pages), very well researched and clearly articulated magnificent piece of work that Ethiopians and anyone interested to know and understand the reasons behind the Land Grab phenomenon, the major players behind it and the impending consequences, why so many Ethiopians, as people in other countries where the issue is in evidence, are not only alarmed but also adamantly opposed to, and why it should be challenged more effectively.

By using his educational and professional background, his progressive convictions and his decades-long expertise as an economist with the World Bank, Dr. Aklog in this book critically examines and objectively analyses the burning issue commonly referred to as 'Land Grab' that he

calls 'የመሬት ነጠቃና ቅርጫት'. His careful and comprehensive analysis of the subject matter is so replete with a wealth of concrete data and detailed information that anyone interested to have full knowledge of or study the issue much better could greatly benefit from.

'Yemeret Neteka Ena Kirimit' is a comprehensive analysis of how and why the current government in Ethiopia headed by Meles Zenawi connived with foreign investors the author calls "New Landlords" to giveaway Ethiopian fertile farmlands for the express purpose of exporting the products at a time when Ethiopians are faced with recurring famine and starvation. Although the phenomenon is widespread in other countries (mainly in Africa) where people have no say and are under dictatorial rules, his focus is, as the title indicates and understandably, on Ethiopia. By so doing, he presents to his readers a full account of the travesty being perpetrated by and the on-going deceptive practices of none other than those entrusted with the welfare and wellbeing of the people.

In the first and second of the ten chapters of the book, the reader finds the author's general political outlook and his overall assessment of the social, economic and political realities of Ethiopia under



**TPLF/EPRDF tyrannical rule, with particular emphasis on the vices of ethnic politics, the serious challenges Ethiopians as a diverse people face and the fallacies and the destructive nature of the current regime's policies. In Chapters Three through Eight, Dr. Aklog thoroughly discusses Meret Neteka and its ramifications. In Chapter Nine, under “Ethiopia's Aid and Remittance mystery”, he examines the confounding issue of foreign aid in general with particular focus on the amount of foreign aid the regime of Meles Zenawi received, the misconceptions surrounding its effectiveness to alleviate poverty, its misuse by dictators and its role in supporting and perpetuating dictatorships, and its ineffectiveness to improve the lives of the people and why. In Chapter Ten, under the heading “The Ethiopia I Envisage: Options and Recommendations”, Dr. Aklog, who sees opportunities beyond the prevailing dire situations, presents his vision for his country of birth and proposes 20 possible areas that he recommends should be looked into in order to reverse course.**

**Through documentation of various sources (over 147 references) and well established data, Dr. Aklog has presented a compelling argument against this tragic but brazen underhanded deal between the government of Meles Zenawi and foreign interests represented by more than 36 countries. The book, 'Ethiopia: The Great Land Giveaway - የመሬት ነጠቃና ቅርጫት', illustrates the reasons behind the deal and the major players, depicts the affected areas and the treacherous nature of the regime's propaganda, and portrays in great detail the economic, political and environmental impacts and the toll on local populations, describes the detrimental consequences on the very sovereignty of Ethiopians as a people, the role of foreign aid, etc. He systematically refutes the fallacies of TPLF/EPRDF policies and debunks the hallow arguments of its leaders and their henchmen that the land giveaway is meant to benefit the country and would help to alleviate poverty. Dr. Aklog in this book categorically disproves the notion of development through expropriation of fertile lands by foreigners for dirt cheap prices that would inevitably lead to the subjugation of our citizens to dehumanizing and demeaning servitude in the name of employment opportunity.**

**The Meles regime is reported to have concluded an estimated 8,400 to 9,000 land give away transactions. Dr. Aklog unveils staggering facts about this “deal of the century” including the total known farmland giveaway to date to being equivalent to Singapore, Bahrain, Luxemburg, Puerto Rico, Cyprus, Qatar, Tonga combined, and it is reported that a planned giveaway the size of Lebanon is in the works.**

**Following food shortages that triggered riots in many parts of the world, concerned governments, wary of similar fate in their own countries had to look elsewhere to guarantee food security. So too were entrepreneurs and businesses who saw an irresistible lucrative opportunity in the food market. Both governments and businesses wasted no time in rushing to get farmlands elsewhere. In this rush for farmland, Africa once again became the target for a modern era scramble. And to that end, they had no problem finding perfect company in corrupt and unaccountable regimes there that have no qualms with giving away as much land as those “investors” wished for insignificant amounts. Naturally, and given the nature of government currently in power, Ethiopia became a perfect candidate for the new scramble. This new phenomenon came to being known as Land Grab.**

**Ever since the practice that Dr. Aklog calls 'Yemeret Neteka Ena Kirit' became evident, a lot has been written and said about it. Although the issue has been consistently raised, discussed, debated and extensively written about by individuals, both Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians and organizations like, for example, The Oakland Institute that was and continues to be in the forefront of the campaign against this injustice against impoverished populations around the globe, to date, Dr. Aklog's book, 'Ethiopia: The Great Land Giveaway - የመሬት ነጠቃና ቅርጫት', is the only comprehensive study on the subject as it pertains to Ethiopia.**

**Whereas colonialists in the past used the Bible, under the preposterous pretext of “civilizing backward societies” or in many instances had no qualms with using military power to occupy sovereign countries in Africa and elsewhere, subjugate their people and plunder the natural resources, today's intrusion by foreigners that similarly relegates local populations to a dehumanizing second class status is done in the name of “investment” and is done by invitation. And this, what Dr. Aklog refers to as “colonialism by invitation”, is perpetrated by reckless**

dictators who care more about staying in power by all means and amass wealth every which way they could than the welfare of the people they rule over. These greedy dictators and their henchmen, along with their colluding partners, the foreign “investors” in question, are the sole beneficiaries of such shadowy deals.

The scope and magnitude of the ongoing land grab phenomenon can be daunting. Although this shadowy deal by all accounts favors the new foreign landlords greatly, it cannot simply be measured by the apparent lopsided economic benefits those foreign interests or their agents or their partners in TPLF/EPRDF ruling clique get. The resultant disadvantages to local populations and society at large is incalculable and the impending environmental impact staggering. Because it directly affects local populations where acquisitions are taking place in particular and the people of the country in general in many, many ways, this “deal of the century” is more than an economic issue. In short, this scramble for farmlands expropriates the natural assets of the people that the author refers to as “.. potentially the most substantial source of comparative advantage...”, displaces and uproots families and communities, relegates the very owners of the land to serfdom, and because the practice is unregulated and these foreign landlords are free to do whatever they want with their new acquisitions, the environmental hazards and the ecological impacts would be incalculable. Moreover, in addition to the obvious financial benefits dictators like Meles Zenawi & Co. get as a result of the Yemeret Neteka Ena Kiriti deal, the new landlords would prove to be a source of vital diplomatic and political support to sustain their tyrannical rule. Those foreign land lords are equally aware of the fact that most, if not all, of their 9-page “contracts” they entered into with the regime that gave them this exploitative and unfair deal would depend on the longevity of those currently in political power. Therefore, doing all they can to keep them in power would prove to be an irresistible enterprise. It is safe to assume that this aspect is part of the calculation of Meles Zenawi's and his regime's decision to giveaway Ethiopian fertile farmlands to foreign investors so easily and at will.

Thence, to add insult to injury, in addition to all the hardships and impacts hereinabove mentioned that result from this pernicious “deal of the century”, the new landlords would be another flank that Ethiopian patriots and democrat will have to resist in their fight to end tyranny in their country.

What makes this land giveaway that one may call “Land to the Higher Bidder” more insane and incomprehensible is the irony that it is being done by the same generation that struggled to end serfdom and for equality and justice for all Ethiopians under the progressive slogan of “Land to the Tiller”.

Of course, the bogus claim by the regime that by colluding with these foreign investors and giving away fertile farmlands, Ethiopia can reduce poverty and their audacity to aver that this would help to end the perennial problem of famine and food shortages in the country is ludicrous. How on earth and in what way would landless Ethiopians who cannot afford to cop-up with the ever increasing local food prices benefit from this deal knowing too well that the foreign landlords' express desire and whole purpose of having the farmlands in the first place is to export the farm products primarily to their respective countries and secondarily to world markets for profit?

Dr. Aklog reminds TPLF/EPRDF leaders and their supporters that “development is all about people” after all. And by stating that, “The regime expropriates and gives farmlands away to the highest bidder without any open competition. The reason is simple. It is to ensure single party dominance over the national economy...”, “ that these permanent transfers of one of the pillars of the economy to a privileged few domestic investors and to governments, firms and individuals from 36 countries contradict the governing party's commitment to the Ethiopian people that land is a common property that is bound by specific norms, values and Constitutional parameters..”, further exposes their deceitful practices and hallow arguments. He reminds the regime and its supporters that, as has been proven in the late Sixties and early Seventies, Ethiopian domestic investors are capable of transforming fertile farmlands into mechanized and large scale commercial farms if they are given the opportunity and have the freedom.

These are some of the many points 'The Great Land Giveaway - የመሬት ነጠቃና ቅርጫት' raises and discusses in depth.

Although this farcical deal definitely enriches those foreign “investors” and their greedy and spineless domestic agents in governmental power, it comes at heavy cost to Ethiopia and Ethiopians. The book demonstrates not only the uselessness of the Meret Neteka enterprise to the Ethiopian masses, but clearly shows the multi-faceted dangers it entails and presents compelling reasons as to why Ethiopians of all walks of life ought to stand up together and oppose it in every possible way.

It is clear that this shadowy enterprise deprives Ethiopians not only of their rightful ownership of their



ancestral land, but more fundamentally rob them of their very honor and dignity as human beings and their sovereignty as Ethiopian citizens. By all accounts, this sinister collusion and underhanded deal between Meles Zenawi's regime and foreign investors is nothing short of a fundamental sovereignty issue. It, in fact, is a basic human rights issue that every well meaning Ethiopian should clearly understand and fight against.

The author does not reserve his criticism to TPLF/EPRDF leaders. He expresses his understandable dismay at the democratic opposition's apparent dismal failure to mount a systematic and sustainable campaign to stop this deplorable and treasonous act of the regime. As such, he states that "...The duality in poor governance--single party hegemony on the one hand and fractured opposition on the other--is that the regime is able to squander natural resources such as fertile farmlands. It gives away the country's major source of current and future comparative advantage to foreign investors free. This is because there is no one to challenge it. The regime is free to promote yemeret neteka ena kirit (land grab and giveaway) without substantial challenge from opposition parties and civic organizations".

The very corrupt system of government under Meles Zenawi is the kernel of the narrative that is repeatedly discussed by the author in 'Ethiopia: The Great Land Giveaway - የመሬት ነጠቃና ቅርጫት'. As in the case of other similar sinister and irresponsible policies and actions of the regime of Meles Zenawi, Dr. Aklog rightfully ties this malicious deal to give away Ethiopian fertile farmlands to foreigners to the very bankrupt system of the TPLF/EPRDF; a system that is evidently dictatorial but also one that is devoid of any sense of accountability and decency, and led by people lacking in Ethiopian values and patriotism. As such, and because of that, no amount of condemnation short of total reversal of such policies could alter the situation on the ground. And that, in my humble opinion, can only be realized with the removal from power of the regime.

Dr. Aklog does not only amply show the travesty surrounding the issue and reminds us about the impending dangers to Ethiopia and its people, but also puts forward concrete suggestions to successfully challenge this land giveaway enterprise and build an equitable and non-discriminatory, pluralistic and democratic society.

As passionate as he has been on this land grab issue as early as it became evident, Dr. Aklog, by writing Yemeret Neteka Ena Kirit, has given Ethiopians a comprehensive document to base their argument against this farcical deal and related criminal behavior of the Meles Zenawi regime. I am only hoping that Ethiopians on both sides of the political spectrum - both opposed to or supportive of this politically charged issue of national import – would take time to read it and discuss the very issue soberly.

My only suggestion to the author would be that when the time comes for a reprint of the book, please consider issuing it in a smaller size to make it easier to carry and handle.

*I would just conclude this review by quoting a paragraph on page 129 of the book. "The massive transfer of fertile farmlands from Ethiopian families, communities and the entire society to foreign investors is the last ominous indicator of a regime that is determined to rob the country and its people of their most critical natural resource assets, their honor, dignity and sovereignty - all done in the name of development and transformation". Emphasis is mine.*