



Promoting Basic Services Program



Ethiopia



Budgetary support



WB

The arrest of Pastor Omot Agwa

On March 15, 2015 Pastor Omot Agwa of the evangelical Mekane Yesus church in Ethiopia was arrested together with seven colleagues while en route to attend a workshop on land and food security. Omot and his colleagues were taken to the notorious Maekelawi police station, where torture is routine.¹

After nearly six months in police custody, on September 7, Omot and two colleagues were finally charged under a counterterrorism law which has repeatedly been used to prosecute journalists, bloggers, opposition politicians, and peaceful protesters.² The state charged him with being the leader of an outlawed liberation movement and referred to the workshop he planned to attend as a “terrorist group meeting.”³ Penalties under the law carry a prison sentence of 20 years to life.

Advocates contend that Pastor Omot’s arrest was likely connected to his work helping the Anuak indigenous people. Omot had been an interpreter for the World Bank’s Inspection Panel during a 2014 complaint made by the Anuak, alleging that World Bank loans were funding forced evictions across their native Gambella region.

Between early 2011 and late 2012, the World Bank approved funding for *two phases of a sector-wide project* with the Ethiopian government, called Promoting Basic Services Program (PBS), totaling US \$1.02 billion.⁴ The program was implemented nationwide through block grants to different districts to decentralize service delivery. The program was implemented concurrently with the Ethiopian government’s “Commune Development Program” in Gambella and four other lowland regions, which sought to cluster dispersed populations “into commune centers to enable more efficient provision of basic services,” through a process known as “villagization.”⁵

In 2012, representatives of the Anuak submitted a complaint to the Inspection Panel alleging that the Bank’s investment in the PBS program was directly and

substantially contributing to the serious human rights abuses that were part and parcel of the villagization process.⁶ The program forcibly evicted indigenous and other marginalized peoples from their traditional lands and relocated them to new villages under the argument that this would ensure more efficient provision of services - the same services funded by the World Bank’s PBS program.⁷

In February 2014, the Inspection Panel visited Ethiopia to investigate the case and hired Pastor Omot as an interpreter to facilitate meetings with the Anuak community.

The investigation concluded that the World Bank had violated some of its own policies in Ethiopia, including failing to apply the Bank’s Indigenous Peoples Policy.⁸

Pastor Omot Agwa



Dead Donkeys Fear No Hyenas - WG Film



Joe Athialy

Ethiopian diaspora protests outside World Bank.

In December 2014, the Panel submitted its report to the World Bank Board for discussion, and the report was leaked to the media.⁹ The leaked version of the report, while appropriately not disclosing Pastor Omot's identity, did include his photo with other community members.¹⁰ In February 2015, the World Bank Board considered the Panel's report. Soon after, as reported to Human Rights Watch, various individuals told Omot that a well-known security official was looking for him.¹¹ Omot told a colleague *"I feel like [I am] living in a fire. I am being burnt alive. But what can I do? I do not fear. I will do what I [am] supposed to do."*¹² A few days after Omot's detention, police officers seized his computers, cameras, and other materials, raising concern about the safety of all the community members who met with the Inspection Panel.¹³

Within days of Omot's arrest, Human Rights Watch and other organizations alerted World Bank Group president, Jim Yong Kim, and the European Union, United States, and Swiss missions in Addis Ababa. Several groups wrote formally to the World Bank president and board of executive directors a week later, urging the Bank to delay board consideration of any new projects in the country until Omot was released and safely out of the country, and all others associated with the Inspection Panel investigation were confirmed safe.¹⁴ Yet on March 31, the World Bank board approved a new US \$350 million agriculture project with the government of Ethiopia.¹⁵ On September 15, the World

Bank approved another \$600 million services project replacing one of the subprograms of the PBS program.¹⁶

In a May 2015 meeting with nongovernmental organizations in Washington, DC, World Bank staff reported that the government had informed them that Omot's arrest was in accordance with Ethiopian law and unrelated to the Bank's accountability process.¹⁷ According to a senior World Bank official, the Bank's country director asked government officials, both in the Finance Ministry and in the Prime Minister's office, about the interpreter's arrest soon after he was detained.¹⁸

The Chair of the Inspection Panel emphasized the Panel's concern privately and asked senior Bank staff for their assistance to inquire with the government about the arrest of Omot and to press the government to ensure his well-being and prompt release.¹⁹ On September 25, 2015, the Panel published a statement calling "on the Government of Ethiopia to ensure that Pastor Omot's rights to due process and other protections under the rule of law are respected."²⁰

On 17 January 2017, after 21 months in prison, Pastor Omot was released on bail.²¹ On April 3, 2018, he was finally acquitted.²² During the three years between Omot's arrest and his acquittal, there is no evidence that the World Bank ever spoke out publicly in his defense. In that time, the World Bank approved 30 projects with the Ethiopian government, totaling more than US \$6 billion.²³

Endnotes

- 1 “Ethiopia: Political Detainees Tortured,” Human Rights Watch, October 18, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/10/18/ethiopia-political-detainees-tortured>.
- 2 Three persons were released without charge on April 24th and a fourth on June 26th, 2015, “Ethiopia: World Bank Translator, Activists Face Trial,” Human Rights Watch, September 21, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/ethiopia-world-bank-translator-activists-face-trial>; “Ethiopia: Amend Draft Terror Law,” Human Rights Watch, June 30, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/06/30/ethiopia-amend-draft-terror-law>.
- 3 “Ethiopia: World Bank Translator, Activists Face Trial,” Human Rights Watch, September 21, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/ethiopia-world-bank-translator-activists-face-trial>.
- 4 Protection of Basic Services Program Phase II Project, Project No. P121727, The World Bank, Approved: February 22, 2011, <http://projects.worldbank.org/P121727/ethiopia-protection-basic-services-phase-2-project-additional-financing?lang=en>; Promoting Basic Services Program Phase III Project, Project No. P128891, The World Bank, Approved: September 25, 2012, <http://projects.worldbank.org/P128891/ethiopia-protection-basic-services-program-phase-iii-project?lang=en&tab=overview>.
- 5 “Management Response to Request for Inspection Panel Review of The Ethiopia: Protection of Basic Services Program Phase II Additional Financing (P121727) and Promoting Basic Services Phase III Project (P128891),” p.vii, The World Bank (2012), [http://ewebapps.worldbank.org/apps/ip/PanelCases/82-Management%20Response%20\(English\).pdf](http://ewebapps.worldbank.org/apps/ip/PanelCases/82-Management%20Response%20(English).pdf).
- 6 Request for Inspection by the World Bank Inspection Panel submitted on behalf of Local Anuak Representatives, The World Bank Inspection Panel, September 24, 2012, available at https://www.inclusivedevelopment.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Anuak-Request-for-Inspection_FINAL.pdf.
- 7 “‘Waiting Here for Death:’ Forced Displacement and ‘Villagization’ in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region,” Human Rights Watch, January 16, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/01/16/waiting-here-death/forced-displacement-and-villagization-ethiopia-gambella-region>.
- 8 Investigation Report, Ethiopia: Promoting Basic Services Phase III Project (P128891), The World Bank Inspection Panel (2014), <http://ewebapps.worldbank.org/apps/ip/PanelCases/82-%20Inspection%20Panel%20Investigation%20Report%20Ethiopia%20PBS%20Phase%20III%20Project.pdf>.
- 9 “Ethiopia: World Bank Translator, Activists Face Trial,” Human Rights Watch, September 21, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/ethiopia-world-bank-translator-activists-face-trial>.
- 10 The photo was removed in subsequent versions of the report. “Ethiopia: World Bank Translator, Activists Face Trial,” Human Rights Watch, September 21, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/ethiopia-world-bank-translator-activists-face-trial>.
- 11 “Ethiopia: World Bank Translator, Activists Face Trial,” Human Rights Watch, September 21, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/ethiopia-world-bank-translator-activists-face-trial>.
- 12 Email from Omot’s colleague and friend, name withheld, to Human Rights Watch, date withheld, on file with Human Rights Watch; “At Your Own Risk: Reprisals against Critics of World Bank Group Projects,” p.53, Human Rights Watch (2015), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/22/your-own-risk/reprisals-against-critics-world-bank-group-projects>.
- 13 “Ethiopia: World Bank Translator, Activists Face Trial,” Human Rights Watch. September 21, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/21/ethiopia-world-bank-translator-activists-face-trial>.
- 14 Joint letter to Jim Yong Kim, president of the World Bank, copying senior World Bank officials, “Re: Arrest of Inspection Panel Translator,” date withheld, on file with Human Rights Watch.
- 15 Second Agricultural Growth Project, Project No. P148591, The World Bank, Approved: March 31, 2015, <http://projects.worldbank.org/P148591?lang=en>.
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- 17 NGO meeting and telephone conference with World Bank officials, date withheld.
- 18 Human Rights Watch telephone conversation with senior World Bank employee, name and date withheld.
- 19 “At Your Own Risk: Reprisals against Critics of World

Bank Group Projects,” p.55, Human Rights Watch (2015), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/22/your-own-risk/reprisals-against-critics-world-bank-group-projects>.

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21 “Case History: Omot Agwa Okwoy,” Front Line Defenders, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-omot-agwa-okwoy>.

22 “Free at Last: Charges Against Indigenous Land Rights Defender & Former World Bank Inspection Panel Translator Dropped,” Oakland Institute, April 3, 2018, <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/free-last-charges-against-indigenous-land-rights-defender-former-world-bank-inspection-panel>.

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