

# The Criminalization of Environmental and Human Rights Activists: Free Ethiopian Political Prisoners!

By [Grain](#)

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*Bread for All, Anywaa Survival Organisation, Inclusive Development International, Oakland Institute, GRAIN*

*One year after their arrest on March 15, 2015, three food, land, and human rights defenders continue to languish in an Ethiopian jail. After several court hearings, the prosecution has yet to present any evidence to support the spurious charge of “terrorism” under Ethiopia’s controversial counterterrorism law. A March 1 hearing was once again adjourned and rescheduled for March 15, due to the failure of witnesses to appear in court.*

On March 15, 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 NGO Bread for All, with support from GRAIN and Anywaa Survival Organisation (ASO). The three food, land and human 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.

According to Anuradha Mittal, Executive Director of the Oakland Institute, Ethiopia’s counterterrorism law is a tool used to silence its critics: “It criminalizes basic human rights, like the freedom of speech and assembly; its definition of ‘terrorist act,’ does not conform with international standards and defines terrorism in an extremely broad and vague way, providing the ruling party with an iron fist to punish words and acts that would be legal in a democracy.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the past few years, Ethiopian government repression against journalists, bloggers, activists, political opposition members, students, and indigenous people has reached crisis proportions. The government has leased millions of hectares of land nationwide to international and national investors—much of it in indigenous areas such as Gambella and the Lower Omo Valley, which many have termed a massive “land grab.” A 2013 complaint to the World Bank’s Inspection Panel documented widespread human rights abuses and forced displacement as part of the country’s “villagization” program and large-scale industrial agriculture projects in Gambella.<sup>2</sup> Under these conditions, it is clear that Ethiopia’s rapid economic growth has come at the cost of increasing repression and the erosion of democratic freedoms. While the Ethiopian economy is praised by some as “Africa’s lion,” its new wealth has not benefitted the majority.<sup>3</sup> And those such as Omot, Ashinie, and Jamal, who dare to criticize the development model that has been supported by foreign governments and international financial institutions are silenced and criminalized.

From March 14 to 18 the World Bank is holding its annual conference on “Land and Poverty: Scaling up Responsible Land Governance.” The World Bank has yet to take responsibility and actively engage in the protection of people affected by World Bank- funded projects as well as the groups and individuals working to protect the food, land and human rights of their communities, such as Omot, Ashinie, and Jamal.

We demand that the Ethiopian government drop all charges against the detainees and ensure their immediate release and safety. We urge the governments of the US, Canada, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, EU, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank—all of which financially support the government of Ethiopia—to speak out against the Ethiopian government’s jailing of human rights defenders, including Omot Agwa Okwoy, Ashinie Astin, and Jamal Oumar Hojele. Defending human rights and protecting the environment is not a crime!

Free Omot, Jamal, Ashinie and all political prisoners in Ethiopia! #FreeOmot

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anuradha Mittal, “Time to Repeal Anti-Terrorism Law in Ethiopia,” Oakland Institute, January 26, 2016, <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/time-repeal-anti-terrorism-law>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2015: Ethiopia” <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/ethiopia>

<sup>3</sup> David Smith, “Ethiopia hailed as ‘African lion’ with fastest creation of millionaires” The Guardian, December 4, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/04/ethiopia-faster-rate-millionaires--michael-buerk>

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