

## Tuso Fights for Human Rights, Understanding in Ethiopia

*By Dennis Bates*

Dr. Hamdesa Tuso is a man on a mission.

Tuso, an Oromo from Ethiopia and international student advisor at George Mason University for nearly five years, is fighting for a cause he deeply believes in: human rights.

Millions are dying in Ethiopia not due to drought, says Tuso, but from a famine induced by a Soviet-backed regime.

Tuso explains that there are two Ethiopias, the real and the mythical: the real Ethiopia divided with oppression and the mythical Ethiopia united in its internal fight against the natural cause of drought. "Whenever you have an empire," he says, "you get two groups, the victor and the victim. And there is always conflict."

There are four major nationalities in Ethiopia: the Amharas, Oromos, Eritreans, and Tigres. Although the Oromos are the majority in population, comprising about 60 percent, says Tuso, the Amharas control the militaristic government and power base in the country. Efforts by the Amharas to control the larger group, he says, have resulted in a tragedy of moral and human rights. "The control of the Oromos is the focus of concern of the Amhara government. This forces a refugee situation and people flock out," Tuso says.

In addition, the government is forcing a resettlement plan in which millions of Ethiopians are being "denationalized." Tuso says the Oromos, the largest ethnic group in the entire Horn of Africa area including the countries of Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Djibouti, "is the most oppressed and deprived and least exposed to modernity." Their power, he says, is being circumvented by their "forced revillagization."

Tuso points to the resettlement issue in an essay written by Jason W. Clay, who explains that "the evidence suggests that the Ethiopian government played a significant role in the creation, maintenance and expansion of the present famine. The famine [as an end result of resettlement] is being used by the government to undermine the traditional

agricultural production systems in the north and southwest, thereby destroying the social cohesion of ethnic groups."

"The recent drought was exacerbated by the military government which was more interested in the process of trading food, etc. for weapons, thus creating a famine condition," Tuso says.

The attention to the drought conditions in Ethiopia by Live Aid and USA for Africa is actually worsening the situation, continues Tuso. "The money goes to the military government," Tuso says. "Live Aid maybe did more damage than good. So all the money goes to suppress and control."

Dr. Claude Malhuret, head of the relief agency Doctors Without Borders, has said, "Western governments and humanitarian groups like Live Aid are fueling an operation that will be described with hindsight in a few years time as one of the greatest slaughters in the history of the twentieth century."

The Amhara government originally came into power through European intervention in the late nineteenth century, says Tuso. "The supply of militaristic power from Europe to the Amharas completely changed the power structure in Ethiopia," Tuso says. "And between 1950 to 1974, the United States was a major supplier of weapons to the Amharas. But the Carter administration stopped sending weapons to protest the killing. In the modern age of superpowers, the Soviet Union came into the picture only after the United States withdrew its military support in the mid-1970s," he adds. "The Amhara military government, in turn, went to the Soviets, and the Soviets, who love to challenge the United States anywhere, jumped into it," Tuso said.

In his part to help the oppressed and starving people of his homeland, Tuso plays an integral role in a number of committees and groups committed to making the people in the United States and around the world aware of the problems in Ethiopia today.

Tuso estimates there are now more than 40,000 Ethiopians in the United States.

about 500 of those, Oromos, and nearly 20,000 Ethiopians in the Washington, D.C. area, of those 150 are Oromos.

Deciding not to return home after Ethiopia's revolution in 1974, Tusso continued in school and received his Ph.D. at Michigan State University. Later, he purposely sought a job in the Washington, D.C. area so he could actively voice his concern about the Horn of Africa. At MSU, he studied the synthesis of culture or Third Culture, conducting a case study on the progress of African students in the United States.

"That's what brought me to GMU. I was interested in working with students, and with the University's proximity to Washington I realized I could work with the University and work with national agencies," Tusso says.

One of those agencies is the National Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Forum. With the aid of other Oromos in the metropolitan area, he has helped to organize the 11-member Oromo Committee on Immigration and Refugees.

Tusso has also worked with other governmental agencies in the area and nationwide. "More and more organizations know about the Oromo refugees and the complexities involved with the government there and in the Horn of Africa," Tusso says. "Also we're trying to help the Oromos develop a professional approach, like speaking to international groups."

Tusso is also trying to organize a refugee consortium at the international, national and local levels. The consortium tries to organize people who have come back from developing countries and are aware of the problems back home. "Basically, we try and get these people to come out and speak," Tusso says. "They are a source of moral authority on refugee situations all over the world, such as the Horn of Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan."

The United Nations High Commission on Refugees estimates there are more than 10 million refugees in the world. "Some people



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think there are twice as many," Tusso says. "and half of them may be in Africa—and 70 percent of that may be in the Horn of Africa."

Tusso has worked with some of the refugees from South Africa and believes U.S. sanctions against apartheid are somewhat successful. "I think the same type of sanctions against South Africa should be raised against the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia should be condemned by the rest of Africa and the free world," Tusso says.

Tusso has worked with the media to raise public awareness of the conflict in the Horn of Africa, and he talks constantly with relief groups to see if the needy are getting relief and if there are alternative channels for relief. His efforts extend to academia as well. "I organize panels and conferences on Oromo society. Primarily, it's education, these are the things we can do on this side," he says. "Our struggle is to bring peace to the Horn of Africa. That may be too far off but at least we're off to a start."