

**EOTC Holy Synod  
4127 Redwood  
Oakland, CA 94610  
  
(510) 530-3681**



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To: Ban ki-Moon  
United Nations Secretary General  
760 United Nations Plaza  
New York, 10017, USA  
Fax: +2129637055

Open letter concerning "Waldeba Monastery in Ethiopia"

Your Excellency,

We, members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Holy Synod in Exile, and followers of The Ethiopian Orthodox faith who live in the Diaspora, are gravely concerned about the dire threat posed against Waldeba Monastery in Ethiopia. This prestigious monastery, found in the fifth century, is one of the oldest in Christendom. Instead of enjoying a status deserving to a sacred site or to a pride jewel of the nation, it is being subjected to the chaos that entailed large scale construction and farming projects recently launched by the approval of the Government of Ethiopia. To make way for the road and to clear land for the sugar factory, irrigation dam, sugarcane plantation, burial grounds have been and are being desecrated. Residents are being uprooted without consent from the land their ancestors occupied for generations.

We are certain it is known to you that the government of Ethiopia has been and is leasing sizeable tracts of land to foreign companies and to Ethiopians who support its oppressive regime. These large farms are intended to grow crops for the purpose of exporting food while hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians suffer from lack of food every year. Ethiopians in the Diaspora have expressed their protest against this scheme that forcefully dislodges poor Ethiopian peasants from their homeland. We, in general, are not against development projects that benefit the people of Ethiopia and that do not disrupt the peace and harmony that exists among its peoples.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, rich in tradition, is one of the first churches that embraced monastic life. The monasteries were not only spiritual communities that offered a life of prayer, but they were also sources of literature, arts, music, and culture. As a result, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is credited for providing and preserving the alphabet, calendar, music, and many other elements of everyday life that are unique to Ethiopia.

The Waldeba Monastery, founded around year 490, located in one of the remote regions in the country and is regarded among the Holiest places in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It has been a place that produced many of the Church scholars and it is still actively accepting aspiring priests and monks. Like many monasteries, it is also a refuge to those fleeing imminent danger. It is a customary for members of the monastic communities of Waldeba, pray for world peace, and for the well being of all human kind.

With the exception of three brief disruptions, caused by internal and foreign invaders, the peaceful monastic life (living, working, praying, and learning together) has been treasured by all rulers in the past and governments in recent history of Ethiopia. Government decree in the 15<sup>th</sup> century officially expanded the land of the monastery and marked its boundary to be within the four rivers and streams that surround the monastery. In subsequent years, the sovereignty of the monastery was further asserted to protect the monastery from possible invaders and settlers. Since then, governments throughout history, including the communist Derg, honored the sovereignty of the monastery and in no way interfered in its affairs.

Given its record, Ethiopians are not surprised such an honored tradition is disregarded by their current government. This place of contemplation and prayer deserves additional protection and attention from international organizations and individuals who understand the negative impact of industrialization brings to protected regions. The peace and tranquility of this prestigious monastery and surrounding area could forever be altered by the infrastructure being built to accommodate the number of people that will be brought in to work directly or indirectly with the farm, the factory, and the dam.

Monks from the communities of the Monastery have been trying in vain to express their concerns to government authorities. Prior to the start of the projects, hearings were not held and leaders from the monastic communities were never consulted. After the news broke recently, as a public relation effort, mock meeting were held in which government officials dominated the discussions and overwhelmed the soft-spoken monks who are familiar with silence not debate or argument. Those who are raising their voices against the impact of the project are being targeted and systematically silenced. Many monks and residents of the region have protested the project, but the media (only government-controlled ones exist in Ethiopia), declare as if the Monastic community has support the project and that the Waldeba Monastery is not affected by the project activity. This is far from the truth and the people of Ethiopia recognize that their oppressive government cannot be trusted to come forth honestly. Church leaders in Ethiopia seems unable/unwilling to express their apprehension or to support the monastic communities of Waldeba be given proper forum to voice their concerns.

Followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are tracking the recent developments closely and are praying that Almighty God bring an end to the chaos. Ethiopians are



God-fearing people and will not resort to any violent actions in order to assert their rights or protect the integrity of their church. However, if demands to assure the preservation of Waldeba Monastery are not considered, it is anyone's guess to what level distressed people could resort. At the moment, the people of Ethiopia are attempting to involve international organizations and civic groups to promote their cause. That is why The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Holy Synod in Exile is appealing to your office on behalf of the people of Ethiopia so your office may influence the government of Ethiopia.

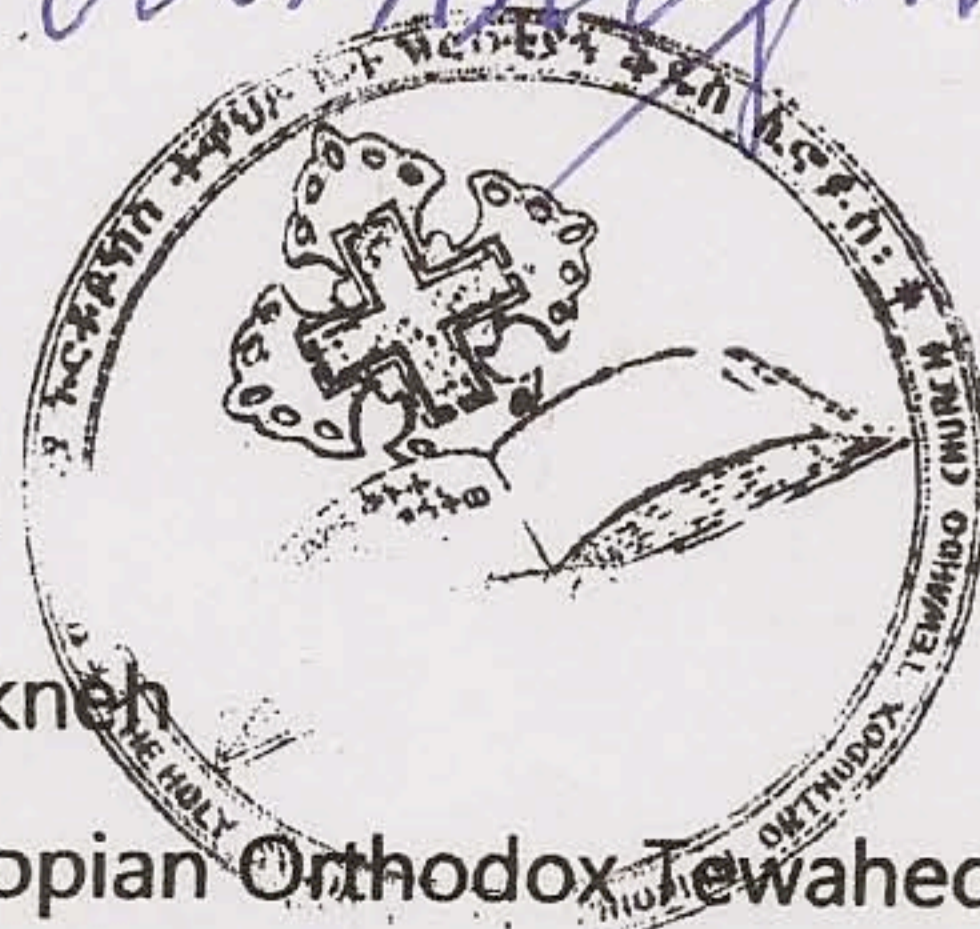
We call on the Ethiopian government to:

1. freeze any activity that will directly impact the Waldeba Monastery and people in the region
2. conduct environmental, social, and cultural impacts of the project to the monastery
3. respect freedom of religion and worship: that includes restraining from violating properties of the Church, its religious learning centers, and its sacred sites of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church
4. engage in direct dialog with the representatives of the monastic communities of Waldeba to resolve current issues and avoid further instigations
5. place value on historical, cultural, and intellectual contributions of Waldeba Monastery to the people of Ethiopia and preserve its prestige for the generations to come

We hope that the United Nations, along with the rest of the international community, do not miss an opportunity to stand by the people of Ethiopia in their effort to preserve Waldeba Monastery, one of its oldest treasures, from eventual destruction.

May God be with us all.

*H. Abba Melkisedek Workneh*



Aba Melkisedek Workneh

Archbishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church &  
General Secretary of the Holy Synod in Exile.