Driving on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, it is hard not to notice rows of clear plastic-covered hangar like structures dotting the landscape. From a distance they look like newly built storage places. After a closer look, the propose use and nature of these structures becomes clearer. They are greenhouses built and used to grow flowers for export market, specifically for the European market. The flower industry is one of the areas the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)-led regime in Addis Ababa gloats as a success. According to Ethiopian Horticulture Producers, there are seventy-nine flower farms currently registered and operating in Ethiopia. While the greenhouses are hard to miss because of their shiny visibility, there are also numerous open-field flower farms scattered across the country’s south and central farmlands.

The fact about the regime’s version of this ‘booming’ flower industry in Ethiopia is far from the truth. Its devastating impact on ordinary citizens, the environment and the society in general is an open secret to those who are displaced, their water and land poisoned by the chemicals used on the farms. For the workers who breathe the poisonous chemicals into their lungs and labour long hours without any proper protection the truth is suffering, injustice and exploitation. The suffocating political and economic hegemony that serves the few and marginalizes the vast majority has robbed the dignity and the fundamental rights of citizens. Any economic initiative in a free and democratic society, first and foremost seeks to acquire a social licence from the population. In Ethiopia, the regime doesn’t even respect the will of the people in electoral choices, let alone economic, whether it is at the local, regional or national level. It is this undemocratic and unelected absolute power that determines the political and economic course of the country.

A few miles from one of these flower farms stands a mud shack house with a fading corrugated steel roof. The brown mud on the outside of the wall is still wet and it has a fresh earthly smell. I touched the wet mud and asked the owner when he finished the work. “Five days ago with the help of my son,” he said. “Where were you before coming here?” I asked him. “My family and I used to live not far from here. We had a comfortable house where my wife and I raised our three children.” “Why did you move here?” I followed up. “We were forced to move,” he said. “What do you mean forced, who forced you?” “There is only one body in this country who can force you to do things that you don’t want to do. The government,” he said. “Why would they force you to leave? Wasn’t the land yours?” “It was mine but they wanted to give it to the flower farmers so that they can grow flowers and export it overseas” “Did you get any compensation?” I probed him. “They offered me small change, not even enough to buy a sheep, and I refused to accept it; it is daylight robbery” he said with a tone of anger in his voice. “The collective humiliation of being homeless at this age with my family is more than we can bear. This is our ancestral land; we were uprooted from the land when our umbilical cords were buried. We were homeless for two years, sleeping on the road side, and begging for food. We use to be self-sufficient, now we can barely get a meal a day. This is what they are calling development. The development destroyed our way of life, our communities, and

1 http://tebesa.net/efe/ethiopian-horticulture-producers/
turned us into beggars.” “Who do you think is benefiting from this?” “Members of the government and their friends, who else?” he said showing me the pictures of his old house. As I listen to him I wondered what I would do if this would happen to my family. My internal dialogue moved between sympathy and anger. What I witnessed is in fact being played in millions of households. I wondered if just a sympathy is enough.

“Biruk” is a young woman in her early twenties. She has been working in a greenhouse for close to three years now. I met with her off-site to ask her a few questions about her experience in the greenhouse. “Do you like working in the greenhouse?” She smiled and responded, “What choice do I have? There are no other jobs, this is the only job I can find.” She said stirring the coffee beans she is roasting on a charcoal stove. I can see several fresh and old cuts on her hands. “Is that work related?” I asked pointing at her injuries. She nodded. “Don’t you have protection?” I asked. “No, we don’t,” she said. “No gloves, no other form of protections?” I fired a cluster of questions. “I used to be a very healthy person now I have difficulty breathing. It started six months after I started working in the greenhouse. I went to the clinic and they told me that it might be related to my work.” “What kind of health problems?” “Sometimes I have difficulty breathing. I also have skin rashes and I cough a lot,” she said with a visible sadness on her face.

Hunger flowers of Ethiopia are not that different from the ‘blood diamonds’ of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or Sierra Leone. They are both harvested amid human suffering and destruction of the natural world. They both fuel authoritarian rule and violence against the vast majority of the population. The foreign currency earned from the flower trade are used to sustain one of the most violent and authoritarian regime in Africa if not in the world. Furthermore, the agricultural land that should have been used for food grain production is utilized for flower farming leaving millions facing starvation.

On January 26, 2016 the United Nations described the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia a “slow Onset Disaster” equivalent with the situation in war-ravaged Syria. “We only have two emergencies in the world that we have categorised as category one. Syria is one and Ethiopia is the second. And so we’ve said we need to raise $100m for this response,” said Carolyn Miles, chief executive of Save the Children, US. This ‘category one’ emergency alarm followed the regimes pronounced declaration of ‘food sufficiency’. On May 28th, 2014 during the 23rd lavish anniversary of Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) entry of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn declared, “We are proud to have erased the humiliating image which identified us

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2 The term ‘Hunger Flower’ is coined by this author to describe the devastating social, environmental and economic impact of greenhouse and open field flower farming in Ethiopia. While, the flower farming industry has become a lucrative business to the owners (primarily those who are closely associated with the government) it has become a source of suffering and injustice to many. Small holder farmers, in particular, have been displaced to clear the land for flower farming. In addition, those who work in the flower farms earn a meager wages insufficient to sustain their livelihood. Moreover, the workers do not have workplace safety protection from hazardous chemicals and pesticides used in the farms. The environmental impact of pesticide use has been a major concern to many. It is against this backdrop that the flowers reach the European market. It is critical that all involved in the selling and buying of this hunger flowers know the whole picture of the flower industry in Ethiopia and its overall impact on the society and the natural world.

3 http://tebesa.net/efe/ethiopia-eyes-to-earn-u-s-371-million-from-horticulture-exports/


with hunger and famine,” he said. Well, this declaration would have been a cause for celebration, only if it was true; the fact is it was hollow propaganda.

One of the devastating long-term impacts of colonialism was how it reorganized and reengineered agriculture and farming in Africa. Small holder indigenous farmers were forced off their land to clear the way for large scale production of cash crops such as coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar, tobacco, cotton and rubber for export market that enriched the coffers of the colonials. As a result, millions were pushed out of their ancestral land and with it their way of livelihood, cultures and values were destroyed. Today, the flower industry in countries such as Ethiopia is conducted with the same colonial template of destroying ways of life with devastating impacts on the natural world and communities. In the 21st century, these kinds of business enterprises are not conducted with the old colonial undertone of ‘civilizing the savages’. Instead, it is branded and marketed with neo-liberal slogans of ‘investment’, ‘job creation’ and ‘partnership.’ The outcome, however, is the same: exploitation, displacement, and destruction of way of life. The same old mentality of colonialism wrapped in the new plantations.

Recently, an old friend posed a question to me. She said, “I want you to explain to me, how it is possible that a country capable of exporting large quantity of fresh cut flowers to the European market is unable to feed its own population?” “While at it,” she added “could you also tell me how it is possible that a government repeatedly boosts 10-11% consecutive economic growth for more than a decade is appealing for international aid to feed its own population?” These are important questions any sane person should ask when the talk of famine and drought all of a sudden saturates the media outlets. The real answer to these questions could be found in the agony and pain of the displaced farmer and his family, the young greenhouse worker, and the wider communities across the country. The reality is these so-called ‘development’ and ‘investments’ schemes are changing lives for the worst, not for the better. The badly needed water resources are used to grow flowers instead of sustain peoples’ livelihoods. The natural world and the environment are poisoned by pesticide and fungicide use including DDT, which is widely banned around the world.6

This Valentine’s Day as you plan to express your love with freshly cut roses, please listen to the stories of millions of farmers uprooted from their ancestral land, think about “Biruk” who is working in a chemically saturated environment for meager pay with no health coverage or work place safety. Most importantly, think of more than 10 million people, 400,000 of them children, on the edge of starvation while vast portion of the fertile farmland is used to grow flowers instead of food grains. Ask yourself, how could it be that a country that produces most of the flowers sold in the European markets is unable to feed its own population? Ask yourself is it ethical and moral to buy flowers to enrich the pockets of the elite while millions are not able to have one meal a day? Don’t be complacent and participant in human suffering instead, join the struggle for economic and political justice by saying NO to hunger flowers.

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