



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

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Thank you for inviting me to come to talk about the human rights abuses going on back home. First of all, I would like to thank the two groups who have invited me to talk, each for a different date and without the other knowing. When one of you called to make arrangements to buy the ticket, I suggested you talk to the other group to coordinate doing it at the same time. That created a problem and I apologize for creating this problem, but I am thrilled about the results.

At the beginning, I learned you had never before worked with each other and I asked, “How do you expect me to come to talk about human rights abuses that are affecting all of us and about the division that must be changed to unity if you in Dallas are not willing to first work with each other? I urged you to find a way to cooperate with each other. A couple hours later, I got a phone call from one of you and that has become one of the best phone calls I have ever received. The reason is, that I am taking it as the first step to victory and justice because the caller said, “Obang, we have good news for you. We agree that all of us will work together and co-sponsor the event as you have told us, ‘how do you expect to work together if two groups in one city cannot even work together?’”

I applaud you for this accomplishment and I am very proud of you. All of you who did this and organized this event—you are my heroes—this is what people back home and our country expects of you. I am going to share your accomplishment with others and am hopeful that what you have started, will grow and bear fruit like a tree that grows on fertile land.

Now, let me go to the topic that I have been called to talk about today—that is, human rights. First of all, I would want you to know, I am not standing here as a politician or a political party member. I am here to talk about the injustices committed to all classes and ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Dear brothers and sisters, we are at a critical juncture of our history and it will be us who will make this history. Our country is in such chaos and crisis that if each of us does not embrace the other, working together with great tolerance, we will not get out of this mess we are in—and our failure will cause our families and people who are back home to not have that freedom that we enjoy in this part of the world or that you dream of them having in the future.

I want to start on why I got involved in human rights work. I did get involved because of injustices I saw around me many years ago, but became very real to me after the massacre of the Anuak in December of 2003. Since 2001, I have been involved with a development organization, the Gambella Development Agency, in work back home. Back then, I thought things were bad and needing change because for example, in Gambella, only 14 % of the people had access to clean water, only 25 % had access to health care with only one doctor available in the entire region of Gambella where there was a population of approximately 500,000 people. The main hospital in Gambella did not even have access to clean water, something that is still a problem today. At that time in 2001 I also visited the Oromia region and the Amhara region and saw great deprivation.

Worse than that, in Addis Ababa, I was astonished to see more beggars on the streets than in 1991 when I was last there. I saw more unemployment, more children not attending school and knew of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. This is to name but a few of the problems.

Back then, I starting thinking that we needed a new direction because as long as we continued like it was, that our children would not have a future. As we have been warned in Proverbs 29:18, thousands of years ago, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” That ancient warning also applies to our contemporary condition that the Anuak, the Ethiopians and all of Africa is facing. Without a vision, we indeed will perish.

The real solution requires much deeper understanding of the relationship between structural destruction and self-destruction. Structural destruction is caused by systemic society and economic injustice. The destruction of ourselves comes from the lack of character and moral strength in our families and communities. We have lost something as simple as the respect of each other and valuing each other as a people.

There is an Anuak proverb that says, “We can find the best ground by moving to the higher ground.” To go to the higher ground, you cannot forget that you still must travel the lower ground before finding the higher elevations. We, the Ethiopians and we, as Africans, need to find the higher ground. We may not have to look very far away to find this higher ground. I want to remind you that this ground is placed within you when God gave each of us spiritual value. Without moral values, we can get lost and return to the lower ground as has our prime minister, Meles Zenawi and other leaders in Africa who have lost their way and their vision.

These are the leaders who promised to move their people to the higher ground, but right after they got the power, they quickly degraded their vision and fell into public corruption, a culture of confusion, social injustice and the devaluing of human life. What we need is a new sense of direction that requires a moral compass we can trust. If we do this, I am sure we will have more good African leaders beyond the few we now have like the former Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere and Nelson Mandela of South Africa. Africa requires a new transformation. Until we do this, the human rights abuses will continue—the lack of self-respect will continue and this cycle will live on, affecting our children and our grandchildren and the future of our continent.

I want to remind you of your responsibility to give in whatever way you can—to renew your sense of purpose, direction and meaning to lead the people to where they really want to be going rather than path on which they are being forced. This is what the so-called “new breed of leaders” are doing—the leaders who used to be gorilla fighters in the bush, but who have later risen to national leadership. They had promised to move their people to the higher ground of democracy, holding up human rights and maintaining the rule of law, but right after gaining power, they discarded and degraded their vision, instead substituting a counterfeit replica while secretly tyrannizing their people. They became the new tyrant, replacing the old one only by name. I can name a few of these. I can start with our own Prime Minister Meles Zenawi who went to the jungle and promised to replace the communist government that was terrorizing its own citizens for almost seventeen years with a new democratic government that would uphold the rule of law and provide prosperity and opportunities for Ethiopians. We all know he miserably failed and that is why I am here today. Like his predecessor, Mengistu, Meles Zenawi has now become full circle to become the next leader to terrorize his own people.

Another leader like this is Charles Taylor of Liberia. He promised his people to bring prosperity, peace and freedom, but what he did was in total opposition to what he had promised. Most of you know that he is now sitting in a cell like a parrot in a cage.

These two men have come in and replaced nationalism with ethnic division. They replaced nationalism with ethnic division. They replaced religious tolerance with sectarian violence. They replaced human values with gross human rights abuses. The trail of their accomplishment is easily seen, even by outsiders. For those of you who may not know, I will name a few.

Ethnic cleansing, gross human rights violations, massive poverty, under-development, preventable but rampant diseases, illiteracy, an acute brain drain of the educated from Africa, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, massive debt, and chronic famines coming from mismanagement. The guns these leaders have brought from the bush now have become the guns to use against their own citizens. Instead of following the universal mandate of protecting their own people, they have become the enemy of the people.

Let me go back to the Anuak. The Anuak were killed by the same government forces that were supposed to protect them. They were killed in an unthinkable and horrendous way. Afterwards their deaths were denied has happening. Even today, the government maintains that the number killed was only 57 instead of 424. This does not include the over 1800 others killed since that time. No wonder we are not surprised that in his interview on Hard Talk, Prime Minister Meles claimed that only 26 student protesters were killed in Addis Ababa in June rather than over 40. He devalued the lives of these victims by calling them unemployed youth as if an unemployed youth does not have a mother or father who values them or as if an unemployed youth is not as precious as his own child. No wonder why his advisor, Bereket Simon, is only mentioning the 7 police who lost their lives in Addis Ababa, claiming the protesters had guns when they did not.

These unspeakable horrors that are going on in Ethiopia requires all of us from the region of Gambella, all of us from all the regions of Ethiopia and all of us from Africa, to work together to “de-colonize” Africa from the African leadership who have enslaved us by devaluing our African lives. We must work together to get out of this pervasively violent culture that is ruled by the gun. Most of our African leaders have failed their people, their countries, and their continent. They have failed miserably. They have shattered the dreams of the Africans who hope for peace.

All of us—every African—starting with you Ethiopians in Dallas, who are before me today, start by taking action. Plant a seed. Plant it with yourselves, in your families, in your neighborhoods, churches, and communities—in your country and in your continent. Give these seeds the opportunity to grow. I want you to know that the seed is loving yourself and each other and respecting and accepting each other. If we do it fully, this seed will bloom and will make Ethiopia and Africa stand out like a bright-colored beautiful flower that attracts every bee by its color and sweet nectar.

We can do nothing to bring back our loved ones in Africa who have died, but we can use the pain of their loss to move us to action, giving meaning to their deaths. Let their pain shower our bodies and purify our souls so we can be free from the misery. You are the foundation of change who must make sure that what happened before, does not happen again. You can be the one to promote the moral values and the truth needed to liberate Ethiopia and Africa.

You are the international community and you can make a difference. You have already become a shining example of coming together to build a foundation that will include everybody, even those at the bottom and those at the corners so that we can live in harmony on this earth and participate in the decision-making regarding our futures. Ethiopians voted to do this on May 15, 2005 through their remarkable participation in the process, despite the fact that it failed to meet democratic standards.

Africans are more aware of their political rights than ever before. They have become politically conscious. They know about the rule of law, good governance, and they know about respect for individual and collective rights. We can see this happening all over the continent as the people demonstrate their readiness to challenge the old systems of tyranny and embrace a new model of government that promotes real democracy. Just to name a few African elections as examples let us start with our beloved country of Ethiopia in May of last year, then think of Kenya, South Africa, sierra Leone, Gambia, Senegal, Tanzania, Ghana and Zambia just to name a few.

People are ready; it is the leaders who are not. People are determined to eradicate the old leadership of greed and corruption and to move forward to eradicate poverty, under-development and the looting of our African resources. Africans are willing to change the leadership by using the ballot box rather than the rusted out AK-47!

I challenge you to carry on for peaceful change, even if those in the international community who advocate democracy are not beside you. Do not expect others to carry the burden instead of you. It is your country and your continent. Outsiders will not bring real change to your lives. It is you who can make a real change. Do not live the life of waiting for the right moment; it might not come. Take each minute of your day as that moment of opportunity. Be open and willing to lose something along the way. What has happened in Ethiopia should be a wake up call to be ready to have a dialogue and to sit at the table with others with different needs and views, working together until you find solutions.

Our appetites have been teased and whetted by the taste of democracy. The government tantalized us with the prospect by dangling the promise of freedom in front of us during this last election. Yet, as we reached out for this hope, it was abruptly taken from us. This government did not expect that we would love the taste so much that its flavors would linger in our mouths reminding us of what we could have had. It persists in reminding us of what we now want to claim as our own. It is very dangerous to deceptively offer someone the taste of freedom as it is the most delicious of fruits and we will crave it as part of the essence of being truly human. We are meant to be free.

Now, I challenge you to not lose the sweet taste in your mouths by replacing it with bitterness towards each other. We must teach our children to not hate. Instead, we must forgive, reconcile and unite with each other. We must reach out to actively restore the respect, value, love, confidence and responsibility of each person to another. Walk out of this room today with more confidence and responsibility to make Ethiopia and Africa a better place than when you were born. Remind yourselves that your ethnic group, your country, your continent and your world are part of the rainbow of colors, more beautiful because it is made up of the varied colors of every one of us.

All of us now know we have a life-threatening disease. We, as the patient, have diagnosed our own problem, and now we must find an effective treatment for this disease we share. First of all, we should be proud of those back home. Since the election, because they are so eager for change, some have been sacrificing their own lives, others have gone to prison, still others are engaged in action even though they may face repression. For those of you in the Diaspora who have been a part of the protest, thank you for what you have done to raise the volume of our shared voices. Now we must share in the solution.

The primary ingredient of that solution is working together. The example of success was already seen when two major Ethiopian parties came together before the election. We know what happened as a result. We saw a clear sign of success when twenty-five million people came out to vote, rallying behind a new unity. Unfortunately, the momentum that drove this success was then defeated when the agreement between the two, broke down after the election. As a result of the broken agreement, we became paralyzed—our legs were amputated and we could no longer walk. One reason we are in this difficult spot we are in today is because our political parties are not working together as we wish they would. It has created a vacuum of leadership. Yet, it is critical that the spirit of unity must not just stay in the minds of the leadership, but it must reach to the local people in ways that can be practiced and sustained.

We need not just one or two political parties, but all the political parties to work together in starting a dialogue. They must not abandon their political platforms and the principles that make them unique, but for now, it is critical that we focus on finding the common ground that can give us a foundation of agreement on which to build.

We do not want to abandon our different voices as each can refine us. We do not want a one-party system as we need to be constantly challenged for our thinking and for our positions. Yet, we must find our common ground that makes us Ethiopians who can move ahead.

Our civil communities must influence the discussion, putting pressure on the political parties to consider the issues. But, we must be patient. It took the EPDRF seventeen years to be in power. What most of us want, will not happen overnight. For example, when a farmer plants a crop, it must be watered and cultivated for a long time before harvest. A child, who is conceived, must grow and be nurtured by its mother for nine months before it is ready to enter this world. The Anuak Justice Council has worked for two and a half years and was only recently able to testify at the US Congress Subcommittee Hearing. Do not expect change immediately.

On the other hand, do not sleep too deeply, but keep your thoughts and minds awake. The foundation of ethnic hatred that has been building for fourteen years by the EPDRF has caved in during the test of the six months before the election. As we rally together, it shows that it was not meant to stand at all as it was built on shaky ground to start with.

As we seek firm foundations on which to build, do not let us focus our energy on criticizing those who are working. We can challenge their ideas while still supporting their effort and not sabotaging them along the way. We must remind ourselves that we usually cannot create something of worth without first failing along the way, sometimes, numerous times. For example, the space rocket that took the first man to the moon was not built without many attempts that first failed. Yet, the engineers persevered and it eventually was a success. The minute we start fighting against each other, we create another weapon for the EPDRF to be used to shoot us. We must accept our differences and rally behind those making an effort.

We feel a deep longing for a sense of belonging. The values we hold should shape our direction. We are seeing the signs that point to the problem being one where we must change our thinking about what is important. We have seen the signs of crisis. It is visible to us and each one of us knows the signs of our social and cultural breakdown. We do not speak up against oppression without mentioning how hatred and the breakdown of our families are all interconnected.

We are all on this journey together and must struggle to reshape the values that we want for our future. Bear in mind that there will be some casualties along the way. This journey is one to find truth, compassion, humility, insight, hope and more humanity. All of us should join it for the sake of our children and our future. It is time to start talking with one another rather than at one another. It is time to stop fighting with one another and to start working together. Instead of fighting for political power and resources, it is time to fight for justice and righteousness. It is time to make a "ceasefire" amongst ourselves for the sake of society. It is time for the renewal of our hearts. It is time for our conversion to God's ways rather than the way of hate and evil. It is time to now feel the winds of change. It is impossible to stop this wind of change now that it is tearing apart the hatred of ethnic division. This is good. It is the time to genuinely care for our people.

Let me give you an example. In the lowlands of Ethiopia where the Anuak live, during the rainy season the area floods and becomes swampy. During this time, everything is looking for higher ground, even the little ants. When the ants find a tiny twig of a tree, still above water, all the ants will start climbing on that twig, one on top of each other and over the other. Finally, the twig becomes so heavy with the collective weight of these tiny insects, that the twig sometimes breaks, throwing them all into the water.

It is time to not all be stepping on and over each other to the death of us all. We cannot all be leaders, neither should we be misusing each other to reach the highest point of the tree for our own selfish ambitions; instead, it is about time we all became the servants of the other. Who will be led if we all want to be leaders—there is not enough room at the top and we will defeat ourselves. Be more willing to serve and to divide up the jobs according to who can best do it. We are all equipped with different skills and need each other to be complete. It is time to move out of our own small camps and be part of the bigger camps where we can begin the needed discussions and the fresh dialogue that will lead us to the safer higher ground. Let the public debate begin and let it bring us together in an attitude of respect and openness.

What I am saying, some of you may understand very well, even better than I. Many of you are more educated than I am and have far more political or life maturity, expertise and experience; however, I believe you will agree that we need a new vision to provide us with a sense of purpose, an assurance of meaning, a sense of direction and a new bonding together. This vision should connect us to our past and point us to our future. For the Anuak, the connection between the past and the future began on December 13, 2003.

The massacre of the Anuak was a horrendously painful loss to the Anuak, yet their lives need not be sacrificed in vain. The Anuak who had been slowly suffering the loss of their loved ones, one by one, were unable to raise their voices loudly enough to be heard in the international community until we Anuak were shocked out of our silence and the sounds of our crying reached to all of you. We learned that you also have been living in pain, fear and trauma. We need not suffer alone. May we join our voices together and may the loss of Anuak lives and that of many more throughout Ethiopia, awaken us to action and this new vision.

We cannot afford to wander aimlessly like sheep that cannot find their way back home. Instead, we must seek wise guidance and leadership. We must seek healing and restoration of what we have lost of ourselves, our families, our neighborhoods, our communities, our country, our continent and our world. We need a vision that requires nothing less than a new agreement and promise. We need to return to our identity—to our value—to our humanity—and to our innocence as people of God, only possible through the God who brings the hopeless to Him through his mercy and then restores those who truly seek Him in humility.

This new vision is possible only if you include those who have been excluded from our tables. This new vision needs to be put in to practice. We need more than new ideas. We need to build relationships at the local level. We need to rediscover that our local lives can make a difference. We need to remind ourselves that Ethiopia will not change until we change. We are part of the problem. We need a personal transformation—a transformation of our mind, of our souls and of our hearts.

I want to remind you that all of us are standing at the crossroads and have a critical choice to make and this choice is a spiritual choice that will reveal our fundamental values. This choice will be made one way or another. This choice will be what road we are going to take. The road you take will determine what kind of an Ethiopia we will become. The decision we make will shape our society and the quality of our lives, the lives of our families and the lives of our communities.

We have a choice before us as was stated clearly in the Bible in Deuteronomy 30:19 when God says, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live.”

The decision cannot be left to the elite or the politically minded; instead, the decision must be shared by all, as is the pain and suffering being shared by all Ethiopians. We cannot sit back and wait for someone else to choose or that will be our choice. We are in a crisis that is threatening the very fabric of our lives. We cannot hope for the best while fearing for the worst while we stand still. We need a transformation of thinking. We are a traumatized people, but yet we have someone who is more powerful than we, and that is God. We have been awakened to this opportunity to choose life. I call you to make this choice that you and your descendents may live!

May God bless all of you and our beloved Ethiopia?

Thank you