



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

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Thank you for inviting me to talk to you about human rights abuses in Ethiopia. I am thrilled to be with you as brothers and sisters. I am speaking to you in this city where one of my heroes is buried—Martin Luther King. What we are talking about today, ties us to that for which he stood for when he was alive. Some of you asked me to talk about what happened to the Anuak on December 13, 2003, to explain why I think the Anuak were targeted and what needs to happen now. However, even though I am happy to do this, our time is too short to go into it deeply and I think there might be something of even greater importance to talk to you about today. Therefore, instead of focusing on December 13th, I will focus on why it happened in the first place.

As most of you know, there is a crisis in our motherland. It is not only the crisis of the Anuak in December of 2003, but it is a profound crisis of great dimensions that is going on in every day in most every place throughout Ethiopia. The only reason we do not know more about it is because there is no active organization or way for people to get out the information to others. That is why I am not speaking only for the Anuak and other Gambellans, but I must also include those people suffering in other parts of Ethiopia.

I want all of you to know, that the pain the Anuak mother feels at the birth of her child or when her child dies, is the same pain that the Somali woman feels. It is the same pain felt by the Amhara, the Tigrayan, the Oromo, the Surma and the Gurage. The pain of these people I feel and when I feel it, it is no different than the pain I feel for the Anuak. That is why we must include all Ethiopians. I want to cry, not only for the Anuak, but also for those in the East, the West, the South and the North.

Unless all of us cry for all Ethiopians and cry equally for those in other ethnic groups, there will always be people invited to come and talk about human rights abuses. Unless the Anuak see the problems of the Amhara, as their problems—until the people of Gambella see the problems of the Somali as theirs—until the Oromo see the pain of the Tigrayan people as their pain, we will never get out of this crisis we are in. Unless our leaders want to give a better education and life to other children and see these other children as worthy of it as their own, we will never get out of this mess. As long as some people are left behind without an education, we should not be content. Unless the leaders of the country, the regions, the district the communities and the church see themselves as caretakers of all Ethiopians, not only his own ethnic or other group, we will not move out of this downward spiral as a people.

Think about how your young children in North America are taken on field trips by their teachers. When they return, their teacher must look after the little ones to make sure that all of them are on the bus before they leave. Each one must be counted to make sure no one is left behind. Until every child is on the bus, the good teacher will not get on the bus to leave. Our leaders should not be like this—standing outside the door of the bus, choosing their own families, ethnic groups, regions and friends to be first on the bus, but instead, making sure that the young, the old, the disabled and those from every ethnic group, religion and organization are equally included. The leader must make sure that those who have previously been forgotten, marginalized or discriminated against are not left behind. Only then, should our leader get onto the bus. They must be the last ones to enter.

Our political parties and our civic and religious organizations must recognize that Ethiopia and Africa will never change if we do not make sure everyone is on the bus before we climb in ourselves. All of us know that Ethiopia and Africa is in a mess because we do not have leaders who would stand back to make sure others are first before entering themselves.

We might ask how this happened to us. As I attempt to give you my viewpoint on this, I want you to know that I am not an expert. I am not talking to you as a politician, a member of a political party or as someone who wants any political office. Instead, I am talking to you as someone who is passionate about human rights because I do not want such a world for the yet to be born children of the future.

As planners of any project, like a highway or a bridge, we must think ahead about what will work and what we need to complete the project. We must consider what the completion of this project will accomplish. I propose we become builders who connect the people in our villages and tribes together by building strong bridges and highways that will connect us to each other. We must develop a plan to break through the obstacles in the way and keep in mind that we are doing it for all of our children. We all must contribute. As we work, we can challenge the plans of each other, refining our own as we go, but do not sabotage the work of others or disown them, they are part of our family. We must expect others to fail, as we ourselves will fail, as we cut out the highways to a better future. For instance, you may disagree with me in what I am saying, but your words of disagreement may help me to learn from you and to do a better job where we can benefit from each others' successes.

We may be like the two Anuak men who were going to cut down a tree to get the wood. One was carrying an ax over his shoulder as the two looked for a big tree. After they found the biggest tree, the man with the ax began looking around. The other asked him what he was doing. He said, "I'm looking for an ax." The other man replied, "You have it on your shoulder!"

We have become like those not knowing we have the tools for change with us. Sometimes it takes someone else to remind us and to get us going on the task before us. Sometimes we rediscover that we already possess something of great value for work ahead. Think of in our Ethiopian culture. We have many axes on our shoulders and may not remember.

Let me remind you of what many Ethiopians from many different ethnic groups do when someone dies. The friends and neighbors work together set up a tent to come together so we can talk about the life of the person who died. We can celebrate his or her life while that person was with us. Everyone will come and sit down next to each other and drink coffee and eat popcorn while they talk about the good things regarding the person. This is something that we know how to do already. We can apply it as a tool to take down the big tree of division in Ethiopia.

We must encourage our leaders to set up the tent so we Ethiopians can talk about the death of the Anuak, about the death of the student protesters and about all the other innocent Ethiopians killed throughout our land, many of whom we still have not heard about. Go to mourn their deaths. Go to mourn our spiritual condition. Go before God to find forgiveness for your sins and to be purified from them. Ask for peace and God's help out of this crisis. Be people whose changed actions reflect their changed hearts.

Let everyone in through the front door of this tent where there is lots of room. There are no reserved seats but all the benches are available to people of any age, sex, religion, ethnic group, class and region. We are all the neighbors of the one who died—it is our common child. As you mourn and worship, know that God wants to make Himself known to you. Just like when you lay on the ground at night and look up at the stars in the sky, it becomes a huge dome showing the greatness of God.

Let the ceiling of the tent become like the universe of God above us, showing our way as we, as pilgrims, seek love, acceptance, peace and reconciliation, first with God and then with our brothers and sisters of Ethiopia. As we raise our hands to God, our feet remain on the ground of humanity. It does not matter what our color, our ethnic group, our age or our talent, we all walk on the same ground. Like the earth, there is room for everyone to walk and to worship. The problem is with us. We must pay attention to the God who created the universe.

The word for God exists in most every language because we live under the starry dome of his universe. We know it is not made by us. While we are under this tent, consider it like the dome of the sky and know that we can use the tents of our culture to restore our relationships with our Creator and with those who mourn beside us. As we reflect in these tents, let us consider the spiritual crisis of Ethiopia and of its leadership and seek wise solutions. What is this crisis of leadership about? We should first attempt to better understand it so we can find a better solution to it.

The Crisis of Leadership—Is it a Spiritual Problem?

George Ayittey, a highly respected African economist from American University in Washington DC, convincingly points out that the corruption by governmental leaders of what he calls “vampire states”, has created a climate where investment and development cannot take place because their leaders’ own objectives, of exploiting the people and resources for their own power and gain, lead to taking over and subverting every key institution of government in order to serve their own interests. He states in his article, “Down and Out! Who Broke Africa?” that they have their hands so steeped in blood and their pockets so full of booty that they are afraid that all their past gory misdeeds will be exposed if they are removed from office, so they cling to power at all costs, implementing only the barest minimum cosmetic reforms that would ensure continued flow of Western aid.”

If you talk to some of the Anuak who have lost most every worldly thing of value, their family members, their homes, possessions and future, and ask them how they keep going, you may find that despite their great losses, they are not empty people. Despite knowing they may never find justice for the killing of their loved ones, they are filled with the hope for eternity that only God can give. They recognize that they are only strangers in this world of suffering, but not strangers to God. They know it will finally end and that they can look forward to being a child in the kingdom of God.

Surprisingly, as victims of repression they, and others like them, may truly be the ones most free. Instead, it is the oppressors who may bear the heaviest chains. As Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 10:28, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Who are these oppressors? They are the leaders in Ethiopia, Africa and elsewhere, who feed on the blood of their own people, yet never get enough to satisfy their needs. They chase after promises of fulfillment through power, status and wealth, but find them to be empty promises when they get them, yet still owe the debt that can cost them their souls. They are in slavery to the enemy of all mankind—the promise-breaker who entices you to follow your ambition, your greed and your anger that only leads to greater emptiness. Unfortunately, it is not only the leaders who can succumb to such deception, but all of us so we must be cautioned to beware of falling into such traps.

You can have liberty of soul, heart and mind when you have no liberty of body. But conversely, liberty of your body can be meaningless if there is no real liberty of our souls—until our consciences are cleared before God and man. Why is it then that we run the other direction, choosing to be tormented and enslaved by our hate towards ourselves and others on our own way to destruction? We run in fear of finding a mirror of truth that will expose our emptiness.

Starting when we are young, we may experience hurt, abuse and lack of acceptance that turns our hearts to stone as we believe the world's lies about us. Out of fear, we seek control, thinking there is no one to trust as much as ourselves. We become angry and seek to hurt others as we have been hurt—to kick the dogs in our life so as to release our own pain. We take on armor to defend ourselves.

The more armor we take on, the more we harden our hearts—the more we lose a sense of who we are as human beings—the more we become like those who hurt us. We swallow the lies about our lack of worth and value. Instead, we desperately and angrily search for something to fill the hole in our hearts. We end up creating a road to our own destruction rather refusing to believe these lies. Entire ethnic groups and even countries can fall into this kind of dangerous thinking. This thinking about who we are must be challenged.

As Ethiopians and Africans, we must reject the lies that cause us to become our own enemies, hating ourselves and then others. We must reject the fear that gives birth to these lies. We must reject the lie that we are able to control our world so we become our own gods. The most controlling individuals in our world are fear-based, believing they cannot trust anyone but themselves. An example of that is our Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, who takes innocent lives to hold on to his power while becoming suspicious of the people he is supposed to lead. What made him so angry? Frequently, it is a deep seeded wound in their heart, making them insecure, fearful and vulnerable.

Those people who are wounded often try to protect themselves by any means they can, including attempting to control their worlds as they feel so out of control. They say, I will hurt others so I will not be hurt—I will kill so I am not killed—I will hate, so I will not recognize my own self-hate—I will take from others because I need to fill the emptiness of my own heart with something, finding out that it is a huge black hole of need where no amount is enough. However, the emptiness can make us angry and can drive us to engage in a vicious cycle of self-hate, self-alienation, hating others and finally, alienation from our own humanity and the humanity of others. I become the monster in my own life. I become the destroyer in the lives of others. I tell myself I can get away with this because I am in control. I can break the rules of God with no consequences.

But God confronts our lie and our lives start downwards towards destruction. As we start downward he calls us to Him, telling us He will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death; that we need Him to find our way through to this cycle of hate to experience real life. If we listen, we will find the true liberation our souls seek. It will turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. We can find freedom from fear as we find the truth that sets us free.

Although the search for freedom is universal—we all desire it, yet we are confused as to whom to believe. Do we believe our oppressors when they tell us we will never be accepted and are so worthless that we can be killed and abused or do we believe God who tells us that we are so precious that he sent his son to die for us, so that He can enjoy us as one of His children? Where will we get our identity? Who will tell us who we are? To whom shall we listen? It is only God who reveals truth from lie. He is our defender. He is bigger than our oppressor.

The Anuak were called slaves and worthless by this government. Should we Anuak accept this definition of who we are or should we let the light of God reveal our true identity? We are in a spiritual battle for truth. If the Anuak seek their acceptance from God, He will show that the basis for not being accepted by others is based on lies and is rubbish that should be discarded with delight!

Do not get used to the smell of the rubbish in your life or you will not even notice that it still smells of rotting garbage. But once we get rid of it, we will notice the difference when it is replaced with fresh air as the soft, gentle winds of God's Spirit bring the sweet aroma of His presence to our lives. As our lungs breathe deeply of the life-giving air, we realize there is abundant air for others also, in fact—more than enough to share with others gasping for breath. Start sharing this fresh air.

People of faith must put pressure on the leadership in Ethiopia and Africa to loosen the cords of oppression and stop the corruption. Instead these leaders should be challenged to seek the real truth that is found in a God who created each person to be of value—who seeks each of us, including them, and wants us to be in relationship with Him, a relationship based on freedom—true freedom of our hearts and souls, as exemplified by external freedom. This kind of acceptance set us free to accept others. This kind of acceptance and liberty is a universal yearning of every human being that God has set in our hearts. Do your best to help your brothers and sisters under either kind of bondage to experience true freedom.

Building the Bridges and Highways to our Future

The civil rights movement in the US was started by just a little thing, but it marked the beginning of great upheaval of the cultural acceptance of discrimination based on skin color. It started with the quiet heroism of Rosa Parks when she refused to give up seat on the bus. She may or may not have known that she that by remaining in that seat, she used God's principles of truth of the equality of all people, to break down powerful and deeply entrenched injustice.

Now, the people of Ethiopian men and women have ignited a flame of change in refusing to give up their seats to corruption. They have become the Rosa Parks of Ethiopia. How long it will take to make significant change is unknown, but I will propose some ideas to make us more ready for that change when it comes. Again, I want to remind you that I am articulating this idea that will need to be refined and improved through dialogue and reflection.

I suggest that we establish not every priority, but priorities that are most important to our survival to our endangered Ethiopia. Although many issues are of great importance, at this particular time, we cannot focus on them as they are not most paramount to our struggle. The highest priority is to keep our country intact. Many groups want to break away because they have been marginalized for so long. They have had no voice or representation amongst decision makers. Those excluded will want to leave because they have had no place and must take it upon themselves to find a better future for themselves and their children. This is a natural reaction to exclusion. However, if Ethiopia breaks into pieces, we will all find ourselves much weaker. Instead, we must find a way to include those on the outside.

Leaders must go to them and listen. We need representatives from every group and region in order to benefit. How does the US function with fifty states and many different ethnicities? Why is the European Union coming together, but to find greater strength and more benefits from the group as a whole? How can Ethiopia do a better job of this? We know it can never be perfect, but how can we substantially and permanently change our lop-sided favoring of only certain groups of Ethiopians?

I believe we need to start planning a National Conference on Reconciliation as a beginning. It would be best if it could be organized and driven by the leadership in Ethiopia; however, under the current situation, this may not be possible. Instead, it might need to occur elsewhere. A primary goal of that conference, would be to include representatives who might be able to speak for the diverse political groups, ethnic groups, civic organizations, faith organizations, and other groups in Ethiopia whose voices will be essential in working for a better, freer Ethiopia. We must begin our dialogues and discussions in anticipation of the time when implementation is possible.

We have a momentum started and we cannot stop. Each one of us is needed to plan for a better future for our children. Last year the elections signaled a new beginning to this journey of ours. Think of it as when we all got into the great canoe that is to take us from the shore of oppression, injustice and division, to the Promised Land on the other side where there is fertile ground for freedom, democracy and unity.

We are in the middle of the river; paddling upstream and where the water is fastest, yet we have gone far and now can clearly see the riverbank on the other side. If we stop paddling, we may find ourselves further downstream than from where we started. Worse yet, we could fall into the water only to be eaten as food for the crocodiles, lurking in the slower parts of the current, waiting for an opportunity should we capsize and fall into the river. The crocodiles are the EPDRF and others who devalue humanity and freedom. Our descendents then will remember us as those who were eaten by the crocodiles because they did not paddle the canoe properly. Instead, we must keep going, each helping to go the distance.

We are not asking for only certain people to put their paddle in the river, we need everyone's effort. We cannot paddle in our own direction. Instead, please, I ask you to sit still, pay attention and paddle forward together, keeping our eyes on the other riverbank, which is not far away. It is only a matter of time before we will arrive and set our feet on the rich, ancient land from where we all come—the land that gave us birth—the land that unites us and will be here for generations to come. Pray for a safe journey to the other side!

May God bless all of you and our beloved Ethiopia?

Thank you