



**ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL**  
*Justice, Peace and Freedom*

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**Take courage, get involved and work together as Ethiopians.**

**Calgary, Alberta, Canada,**  
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Good Afternoon to my fellow Ethiopian Canadians. Thank you for inviting me to this excellent event. It is with great pleasure that I accepted your invitation to speak to you in this beautiful city of Calgary. Since 1994, I have been visiting your city, even obtaining a summer job here when I was a university student. I am glad to be back.

Your organization, the Ethiopian-Canadian Citizens League whose mission is to advocate for democracy, human rights, the rule of law, peace and development in Ethiopia and at the same time fully participating in Canadian society, is a most worthy goal and is an example of how Ethiopians should organize. Unfortunately, on this occasion of coming together, we recognize that we share much grief over the grave situation facing our people. As we continue to receive reports of serious human rights abuses from our brothers and sisters in all corners of our beloved country, we must all contribute in any way we can to correct the situation.

Because you are here today, I can see you are already stepping out to do exactly that. By being here amongst many of diverse backgrounds, I see we are able to share a commitment that goes beyond our familiar groups. We have much to contribute due to the richness of our individual backgrounds, talents and experiences. We do not only have people from one ethnic group here, but from many. We have some even from different countries outside of Ethiopia like our Sudanese friends who are with us today. We come with different beliefs and faith practices. We have men and women, young and old, educated and uneducated.

Yet, we do not have assigned seats depending on our ethnic group, religion, sex or age to which we belong, but we are intermingling as Ethiopians, Africans and human beings who value truth, liberty and human life. We share a deep concern about what happens in the country of our birth, to our friends, relatives and communities who still live there and continue to live in fear of the terroristic tactics of our own government. By coming here today, you have demonstrated a willingness to work together to give the children of Ethiopia a better future.

It is easy to say what I am saying to do, but the real question is how to do it. How to do it is very difficult. Even myself, I find that I am among those who are questioning the best way to proceed with this task along with finding the right people to make it happen. Our politicians might be in a better position to define some ways as it is their job to carefully consider the future of Ethiopia. As you may know, I am not a member of any political party. I do not have ambition to hold a political office; instead, I am one individual whose mind is filled with the pregnant promise of justice, freedom, reconciliation, peace and the rule of law. I see myself as a member of those Ethiopians who are eager to break the yoke of oppression while offering healing balm to the deep wounds that have cut into our flesh, making the spirit and body of every living Ethiopian to continue to live in pain. Yet, we should not focus on the wounds, but instead, we need to see the possibilities for the future days ahead that will give us hope as a people to move forward.

Hope is the engine of change, opening the next door as you close the one behind. Who we put our hope in is crucial. Not everyone can see the door of hope. Most people cannot imagine anything on the other side of this door. But in order to walk through this door, you first have to see it and then must believe that there is something worthy enough on the other side to make you get up and walk. Those who walk through the door should know that it is always a risk and therefore; those people willing to do it, must prepare to sacrifice, suffer, and maybe even to die. History tells us that you cannot go from one place to another without pain and difficulty. Yet, what we have now will steal the lives, joy and future from our people. It has been building up to this intolerable point for a long time.

Some must take the first steps, which may be the most difficult. However, as these few lead the way, others can follow more easily. Mandela went to prison for 27 years. Those who later joined him found the road easier to travel. These steps created a new history for the people of South Africa. It has become so easy now for South Africans that people are forgetting how hard those first steps were to those few out in front and to those who did not make it.

We as Canadians take for granted the difficulty faced by those first venturing forth into this land. In the same way, I would be thrilled if our children and grandchildren of Ethiopia could be in such a position. I started my journey for the human rights of the Anuak without knowing exactly where it would lead, but I felt I had no choice as I heard of the horrific acts perpetrated against them. Because of that, I am here before you and I would like to share my thoughts on what we can do not only for the Anuak, but also for all Ethiopians.

I was asked by the organizers of this event to tell you something about the Anuak of the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Before I tell you about the difficult journey which they have been on since December 13, 2003 when we experienced one of the darkest days in our history, I want to tell you a bit about the Anuak as a people and as a culture. I hope their culture can enrich you as your cultures can also enrich others. Let me start with my name.

As you know, my name is Obang Metho. Amongst the over 77 million people of Ethiopia, my name is not very common, but amongst the Anuak, you will hear of many Obangs. It means third born son. If I had been a girl, my parents would have named me, Abang, with an A. First borns are named Omot if a boy and Ariet if a girl. Second borns are named Ojullu if a boy and Ajullu if a girl. After three children, you can do what you want! If you are twin boys, your names are Opiew and Ochan or if girls, Apiew and Achan. After twins, your name will be Okello or Akello. If you are the only boy amongst older sisters, your name will be Oman. If you are the only girl, your name will be Awelli. Your children then take their father's first name as their last and their grandfather's name as their middle name. Someone could essentially be called Obang Obang Obang. Besides that, we have many nicknames. I can be called any of these. I could be also called Otwier.

The Anuak people are called people of the river as they are of Nilotic background and have lived in the area of the Upper Nile for many years. The Gambella area is unlike most other areas of Ethiopia and is very tropical. We have more than enough water and according to a Russian study done in the 80'ties, nearly 2/3rds of the water flowing into the Nile comes from this area. Gebre-Ab, the former Minister of Federal Affairs, called the Gambella region the potential breadbasket of Ethiopia, if not of the whole Horn of Africa and extending into the Middle East.

We have three planting seasons due to our very fertile soil and plentiful water. We also have abundant gold and other minerals. When Anuak men wanted to find money to get married or for some other special occasion, the men would dig pits, six or more feet deep, to find a nice-sized gold nugget to sell in exchange for birr to pay the dowry to the family of their favorite Anuak woman.

Indigenous Anuak land also sits on large deposits of petroleum. Unfortunately, these resources have catapulted us out of our quiet lives into the chaos and hardship caused when others seek to exploit such natural resources for their own selfish interests, excluding the local people from any benefits. In the Anuak culture, one of the worst things you can be called is "greedy." Anuak may have been willing to share their rich resources with others if they could have been part of the decision-making. It is in their nature as a people and as a culture to share. Even their name, Nuak, means sharing and Anuak means people who share. It is very traditional in Anuak culture to freely share with others and to even eat together so that no one goes without food and so no one is embarrassed by not having enough to eat. Because of this, children on their long walks to school are thrown mangoes and bananas by the farmers as they go by so they have stamina for the miles they must walk.

Anuak from Ethiopia used to walk many miles with water, food, clothing and supplies to meet weakened refugees coming from war-torn Sudan after being alerted by runners carrying the message from town to town that they were on their way. Anuak greeted newcomers as one of them and accepted not only Anuak, but anyone willing to come together in mutual respect—the Nuer, the Tigrayan resettlers, the Europeans and the Sudanese refugees. They intermarried with others from different ethnic groups and their children were accepted and loved by all. However, some of this openness has changed with the deceptive EPRDF policy of ethnic federalism. This policy has not only deeply divided the Anuak from other ethnic groups, but has divided the Anuak amongst themselves. It has wreaked havoc on their culture and the spirit of acceptance and trust. It has dismantled the traditional means for resolving conflicts between themselves and other groups.

The Anuak have been singled out as the ethnic group in the Gambella region most challenging to the EPRDF in the government's attempt to control the decisions in the area. This includes the EPRDF's plan to control the use of its natural resources, especially the oil. Because of this, the Anuak are targeted. You do not have to kill every member to disempower an ethnic group. You can attempt to accomplish it by killing and imprisoning all of its leaders, by preventing a generation of children from getting an education and by making everyday life so harsh that the people must put all their energy into basic survival. On top of that, you can call anyone who is found alone, "suspicious," and kill them as a possible insurgent.

Recently, I received an email from an Ethiopian man from Gonder, currently studying abroad. He told me he was a researcher who was finishing his PhD project on "Peace and Violence" in the area of southwestern Ethiopia and had studied the Anuak and other indigenous groups after conducting field study for ten years. His conclusion supports the fact that there have been state-sponsored plans of inciting others to do the dirty work of the EPRDF against "anti-government elements" whenever possible so the EPRDF could maintain their image as being a true democracy while calling the human rights crimes just another incident of "ethnic fighting or rivalry." In response to these tactics, as it is to be expected, a group of armed Anuak insurgents rose up to defend themselves, sometimes going beyond that and becoming like the aggressors in order to avenge the actions of the EPRDF.

The man states:

“I believe that I know the deep-rooted problems hovering over the societies, which is in the main, ‘state – violence’ against its own people and cultures..... the problems of the region (*Gambella region*) have been instigated by incompetent state policies and force measurements... The rebel groups nursed and helped by the Ethiopian governments were and are victimizing the Anuak. The Anuak were encircled like a game animal in all directions. The state attacks them. Neighbors attack them. Refugees settling in a large numbers at their heartland hate them. People from other parts of Ethiopia and government bodies, even some writers and researchers, see them as aggressive and violent. I am not telling you this because you are an Anuak, but am sharing my opinion with you as both of us are concerned with the complex problems prevailing over the region.”

What this man speaks of has happened as routine practice to the Anuak and others throughout Ethiopia since the EPRDF came into power 16 years ago. In the case of the Anuak, as the government provided weapons to “the other side”, the Anuak were disarmed. They eventually procured weapons and defended themselves, giving them a reputation for aggression, one that they sometimes deserved when they went to far, while at most times, it was another means for the government to dehumanize an entire ethnic group and justify further oppression and the use of brutal force against them.

The force was used indiscriminately against even innocent Anuak with no or limited attempts to find the real perpetrators. This kind of brutal control is used against many ethnic groups in Ethiopia such as the Oromo and the Somali of Ogaden. Because of such widespread harassment, it is understandable why some ethnic groups have wanted to secede from Ethiopia, not seeing any other way out of such horrific oppression and suffering. Yet, if changes were made, Ethiopia could be a like a joy-filled peaceful home once an abusive person has left the premises.

In 1984, the Anuak were classified by the organization, Cultural Survival, as an endangered people group. We number less than about 100,000 worldwide, with most living in the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia and Pochalla County of southeastern Sudan. We have had little opportunity in the past to gain access to education, health care and other basic services that would advance our prospects of entering as players in the marketplace. The Anuak value education, but very few have had the opportunity. Now, after the massacre, many of those who have been lucky enough to be educated, are gone. Many of those leaders who escaped being killed are in prison or exile. This has caused a great demoralization of the Anuak. As Anuak are killed, one by one, day by day, the crisis of extinction of the Anuak increases. When will peace return?

The answer to this question is what I ask myself daily. When will the Anuak be freed from the daily terror surrounding every action and step they take every day? When I first heard of the massacre of December 13, 2003, I wanted to do something. I knew most of the victims by name and knew that had I been there, I would have been targeted for this killing. Because of that I started calling whoever I could think to alert them and to call them to take action. It was good that I was born talking because over the last few years, I have not stopped talking about the Anuak. And now, after learning of the widespread hardship and human rights crimes against people in most every ethnic group in Ethiopia, I have not stopped talking about all Ethiopians.

Day and night my phone rings or I am making calls. I never expected to be here, talking to you, but God had a different plan for my life. Only in taking the first steps, only in picking up the phone and making that first and second call or sending that email, did I find out that I was on a journey that never would have happened without trying to do a little something to make a difference for someone else.

I have been asked to tell you something about the Anuak Justice Council, an organization of which I hold the position of Director of International Advocacy. However, before I ever held the position, I felt called to listen to the cries coming from across the ocean from my people. At first I asked why others could not do it? I then asked why I had to live through such difficulty and whether it was worth it? Yet, as I persevered, I found a new and deeper faith in God who I had not really known before except superficially. I saw that the fruits of my efforts and the joint efforts of others, including some non-Anuak from churches in Minnesota who were now working together with me, were multiplied beyond for what we could take credit. On almost no budget we had been able to go to the UN in Geneva and New York, to the government officials in Canada, the US, and Europe and complete two human rights investigations.

After nine months of struggle, the Anuak Justice Council, or the AJC, was born in Spokane, Washington when Anuak and our non-Anuak friends from churches where Anuak were attending, came together to form an umbrella organization for the Anuak whose mission was to protect the rights of the Anuak wherever they were found. We Anuak have received much support from non-Anuak who believe we do not have to belong to a certain ethnic group to have compassion on another fellow human being. We can share in another's joy or grief. We can understand because our humanity joins us together as one. They believe God calls us to help the oppressed and stands mightily for justice.

My dream is to live in Africa with the simple people where I have grown up, but not until peace and stability returns. I think this might apply to most of my fellow Ethiopians as well as to most Africans. Although most of us in exile feel comfortable in our new countries where we live in a free society, where our individual rights are protected, where we are free to do whatever we want and where we are free to pursue our goals and dreams, our hearts remain in Africa. But we ask—when will Africa offer the opportunity to pursue an education to advance yourself or allow you to start a business without government harassment, interference, corruption and politically motivated bureaucratic red tape? When will our African children be able to get a good education and adequate health care? When will Africans be able to speak out against the government without being beaten, tortured, imprisoned or killed? The lack of these things is why most everyone in Africa wants to come to the West because these opportunities do not exist in the Africa of today. If they did, most Africans would go back and others would never come. What needs to happen?

I have spoken elsewhere about the need to de-colonize Africa of our corrupt leaders who are there for their own self-interests, but we need even more than that. We need to organize and work together towards common goals and follow God-given principles that uphold the value of each human being and the rule of law. I cannot name all those who have helped the AJC in some way like paying for my air ticket on their credit card or helping me to pay by rent or by praying for this work. Many others in government positions or who are part of non-governmental organizations have gone out of their way to do what they could for the Anuak. Together we have worked towards peace and security for the Anuak and for other Ethiopians. Most of this could not have happened without some kind of organization that brought people together to work on common goals, offering their varied contributions of time, money, abilities, experience and knowledge.

One of the reasons western countries have succeeded where African countries have not is because of their organization. Without it, you will get nothing done. I know it is different back home where there is more acceptance of whatever has been the culture and tradition for years as being the way it should remain in families, communities and ethnic groups. Sometimes we have rejected wonderful advancements because of this kind of thinking. Coordinating larger change at any level may be unwelcome. When we come to the West, we bring these views along with us, failing sometimes to see the bigger picture and lacking the organizational motivation necessary to launch the changes we desire.

If we try, we encounter some who are threatened by our efforts, especially if they are successful. Sometimes because we have done something in a certain way for years or even perhaps centuries, some believe it is good enough for the next generation. But we must use wisdom in knowing what to hang on to of value and what things can and should be given up. If we refuse to give up anything, simply because it is familiar, even if it no longer makes sense or is even destructive, we will stagnate like sitting water that is running nowhere. It is because of this mindset and because we have not had to practice these skills, that we fall short in working together in an organized manner.

We do not need to be politicians to become organized. Even a child can write a letter and make his or her teacher aware of what is going on in Ethiopia. Even when this government finally leaves, we need organization to plan and implement a durable government able to function and carry out its duties. In our communities, we need to make connections and organize around those connections.

Start at the family or community level. Come together and brainstorm. Take a simple idea—make one or two phone calls—you never know where it will lead. I never thought my phone calls would lead to speaking before you. But in addition to working towards a free and democratic Ethiopia, help the Ethiopian person nearby. Just like the civic organizations in Canada, that organize around needs regarding health, youth, marriages, sports, church, and other such needs, these groups bring about more for the people they target than people would be able to do individually. Stop blaming anyone else for the problems and do something for yourself and then give to others. Do not wait for others to rescue you, your family, your community or your country. Take the first step, you never know the journey you will start—it might be a real adventure.

The task is great, but we must not stop even though we will get tired. We must keep on walking like the child of the African mother who sits down under a tree, crying to its mother that he or she does not have the energy to go on, but when the mother takes the child's hand, the child gets up and completes the journey. We must complete the journey we are on. We must strive for the freedom and democracy that the children of Ethiopia deserve. We must take their hands and help them to go forward. God will strengthen us as we walk if we trust in Him.

Stand up and start walking! As you do, you will find others in front of you, behind you and at your side. Do not look back—keep your eyes ahead! Long live Ethiopia! May God bless you as you take this walk!