



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

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Good afternoon fellow Canadians. I am thankful to be here with you tonight and greatly appreciate your invitation to speak to you about such an important topic as our homeland of Ethiopia and how we as Canadians can contribute to the betterment of our beloved country.

First of all, I want to say that we are all privileged to live in a great country of such great opportunity and beauty. Yet it is hard to describe exactly because of such varying landscapes and more recently, such diverse people. I might be one of them and you might be another. For me, my name, “Obang”, is not Bill or John or Jim. I do not sound very “Canadian,” or look very “Canadian,” but yet, I am fully a Canadian citizen.

If I had to further describe myself, I would tell you I am a 33-three year old male Saskatoonian Canadian of Anuak Ethiopian descent, from the Gog district of the Gambella area of the southwestern region of Ethiopian in the Horn of Africa from the continent of Africa. That is a lot of descriptors, most of which set me apart from many others, but I am still fully a Canadian.

My background is also quite different from most other Canadians, but it might be like yours. I immigrated to this country by myself when I was 18 years old, hoping to get a good education. As a young person on my own, I had to set my own alarm to get up for school, ride by bike to get groceries and cook my own meals. I never really got into trouble because I had to assume responsibility for myself. I even had to attend my own parent/teacher conferences. Being 17, I was flexible and ready to take on new challenges. I did something not very African—I became a hockey player. I never felt so Canadian as when I was on the ice! You see, I went from a climate where the temperatures frequently reach +50 to a climate where the temperatures are described at the opposite end of the thermometer as reaching -50. The real problem is, wherever I go, the mosquitoes are waiting! I guess I would have preferred some other “bridge” between the two cultures!

After I graduated, I worked for an enterprising Pakistani business man who taught me much about how to run a small business. When I reached 23 years of age, he offered to sell one of his stores to me and I could have been financially off to a great start since I had saved so much of my money. However, above most anything, I wanted an education so I passed up this opportunity for another. This is one of those crossroads of life that forever changes your direction. If I had not done this, I would not be standing in front of you today.

Instead I entered the University of Saskatchewan, obtained a political science major and started writing poetry. I applied for law school and was accepted. Before I left for school, I traveled back to Gambella and was shocked with what I saw. I was at another crossroads of my life. I could not believe that people were living like this. I had thought that conditions would have improved, but they had not. I saw that only 14% of the people had access to clean water. There was only one hospital for the entire region. Women had extremely limited educational opportunities. HIV had become a serious problem. I saw people with guinea worms coming out of their skin.

I asked about one of my close female friends I had known and found out she had died at age 18 during childbirth because her baby had been born breech, with one leg sticking out and the other stuck within her. She and the baby had to be buried that way. I knew that a Caesarian, easily available here in Canada, could have saved her life.

I decided that I could not stand by when I could do something about it. I had no idea how to start, but was determined to do my best. I came back a changed person. I put law school on hold, as I could not get the images of Gambella out of my mind. I talked to friends and professors regarding my vision. They encouraged me to start the Gambella Development Agency. I realized that the people of Gambella, not only the Anuak, had to have help with the first steps to improve their lives before they could do it on their own because the government had done nothing to improve their lives. They were not a handout culture and had fertile land and resources. All they needed was a little bit of a push to start the momentum going.

These same people formed the board and I became involved in development work. When the massacre of the Anuak occurred in December of 2003, I was all ready to change directions. I knew most of the massacred Anuak and many of them had been key to the development work. Again, I could not stand by. I started making phone calls. Life has not been the same since.

We are all such complex people, made up of many different parts, experiences, abilities and passions. I tell you my story because I am such a mix of many things. I think you might be able to see that my point is that we Ethiopians are very much a complex mix, yet we are all Ethiopians. Regardless of our ages, genders, ethnicities, colors, professions, or religions we are still Ethiopians. Sadly, the human rights abuses and killings have united us as one.

For example, when the people were shot in Addis Ababa, the Woyane bullets did not have markings on them for certain categories of people. Instead, they struck and killed men and women, young and old, students and uneducated, Tigrayans, Amharas, Oromos, Christians and Muslims. We are now all in the same boat. A dead Ethiopian is a dead Ethiopian. We are united by the name of our country, by the flag of green, red and yellow and by our concern for its future.

The question I am getting from many who email me is about what the individual person can do to make a difference. Just like I told you about the different crossroads that I came to in my life, we as Ethiopians have now come together at such a crossroads and what we do from here, can make all the difference not only for our own future, but also to the future of many others. Take this moment seriously as we reflect together about this journey of life that we are on together. I cannot tell you where you should go, but it is time to think about what is important in our lives that are so short on this earth and I will only venture to give you some examples. Each of us has unique opportunities that are only ours for the taking. No one else has exactly the same sphere of influence so we must start around us.

For instance, if you are a woman, you may know a young girl or woman who needs a helping hand with school or her friendships. She may need wise counsel or encouragement. She may need help with her children as her own mother is back home. Someone may want to help her with her car or understanding some new government form or requirement.

Some of you men might see a young boy whose father is still in Africa or not around who needs someone to teach him about Ethiopia, or about your own culture or language. The boy might want to go for a walk or learn more about what is going on in Ethiopia. The child might want you to go to their basketball or hockey game. Take the time to include others—to value them as people who belong to a larger community.

Do things as families. Spend time with your spouses, support each other, treating each other with appreciation and respect. Become involved in the lives of your children. Love them and supervise them. We are living in a new culture where they may need more guidance than ever as they try to navigate between your culture and the new culture of the west. Do not ignore them because you are so busy with work, school and basic survival.

Encourage the growth of civic groups. If something is going well, join in and help. If the women seem to have a good and effective project, let the men contribute. If the children get an idea, encourage them in anyway you can.

Get your family, community or three friends together to brainstorm about what you could do. Do not wait for the right moment for you may miss it. Live your life to the fullest. Start doing little things and as you succeed, only then form the organization. As you get good ideas, start doing them, little by little and others will want to help. You know your family, friends and community better than do I so I do not know your resources.

The Anuak Justice Council started just like this. Interested people within a church community of Anuak and non-Anuak people, started emailing and calling each other with updates on the massacre of December of 2003. Emails from locals in Ethiopia were passed on. Someone organized a calling program at the church where phones and phone numbers of strategic government officials and others could be called. Information was shared. Meetings of concerned individuals were called. A plan to send a team to interview victims and witnesses to the genocide who were then in the refugee camp in Sudan, was made. Someone told the others about what I was doing from Canada. They then called me and I became involved with a larger group. We found out about other Anuak and non-Anuak doing similar things in a church and through World Relief in Spokane, Washington. Someone from World Relief called and we shared our stories and our efforts. We eventually came together to form this organization.

Many different people have contributed, but it was because of one person talking to another or taking one action step that led to another. As you succeed, organize more. As you succeed in that, form an association, partnership, coalition or task force. It all might lead you to form a non-profit civic organization. Some possible starting ideas might be:

- The Internet provides a new tool that some have said is the new ammunition of change for our day. Learn how to search for information and then use it.
- Make those around you aware of the crisis and related needs. Find other like-minded people and if you succeed in working together on something of shared concern, organize. Create priorities and goals. Then brainstorm about ways to accomplish these goals. Assign tasks based on ability, time and follow-through and make sure you do your part.
- Contact a newspaper for a story or write an article for your school paper.
- Organize a walk for children, teens or adults to raise awareness or to raise money for some other need in your community or in Ethiopia.
- Start a letter-writing campaign or a small group or community forum on a pertinent subject where Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians might take part.

- Get involved in your faith community. Much is accomplished through such people who want to do something, but do not know what to do. Develop relationships with such people. They will learn about Ethiopia and you will each grow from such others friendships. They may become long-time partners in the work and eventually join you in Ethiopia after peace and security are no longer central problems.
- Invite Ethiopians, some from outside your group and some from inside it along with non-Ethiopians to your home for wonderful food or coffee.
- Hold a cultural event.
- Pursue leads where some contact may take you to another and all it means is a phone call or email, perhaps sending them a link to some particularly good article.
- Pray for the political prisoners and those who are suffering. Pray for justice and liberty throughout the country. Pray for opportunities and that you will be a good example.
- Tell your children about what is going on.
- Have them collect change, pencils, pens and supplies to send to children living in Ethiopia.
- Hold fundraisers to send financial assistance.
- Write letters to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and government leaders. Collect the addresses and phone numbers and pass them on to others.
- Write a poem, create music or express yourself in artwork. Share it with others.
- Organize commemorative events.
- Study and equip yourselves to go back to help wherever or whenever there is an opportunity.
- Save money and spend less on yourselves so you can share with organizations, projects, and people here and back home who could do more or better with that assistance.
- Stay informed and search out information. Help others get the information. Set up a website.
- Create social, spiritual and recreational times to feed the soul and spirit so you do not get worn out.
- Develop a strong community and resolve differences in a healthy way as interpersonal problems and dysfunctional ways of communicating and dealing with others, unless curbed, can destroy your efforts. Do not be afraid to directly talk to someone else if this is happening. Do not be afraid to listen if it applies to yourself.

One reason our efforts often fail is because of these kinds of problems of getting along with each other that eventually become divisive. Not everyone can work well together and some people tend to cause problems wherever they go, stirring up the spirit of dissension to the point that people get hurt, frustrated and pull out of the effort.

This is a tragedy. Good rules, by-laws and boundaries, that are expected to be followed, seem to provide the most long-range stability. You must plan ahead for possible problems so that your procedures and guidelines protect the organization from future difficulties. Participants should be expected to play by the rules to remain part of the organization. If the rule does not work, change it by an orderly process. Remain flexible, but know that a lack of good infrastructure (planning, organization, by-laws, direct communication, etc.) can damage the best of ideas and intentions.

Just like individuals need to be mentally and emotionally healthy in their attitudes, behavior and actions to get along in their families and jobs, people in organizations must function in such a way so that their own personal problems do not become the problem of the entire organization. Because some problems of this type are to be expected, organizations should have some expectations of how to function in a healthy manner and if members do not do so, there should be some way to effectively define what is going on and then to deal with it. Unhealthy ways of interacting can be very destructive.

Dysfunction within a system should be carefully examined to better understand the reasons. Sometimes it is no one's fault, but some improvement in the system is needed. If someone is responsible for a problem, again, it may not be intentional, but may be clarified and solved through better communication, awareness and action steps. However, some dysfunctional patterns come from people problems and they should be addressed if the organization is going to move forward. Some of these might include:

- Lack of commitment and follow-through so jobs are not getting completed.
- Lack of communication so no one knows what is going on.
- Need to always be right, not accepting others' ideas, believing yours are always better.
- Stirring up dissension and suspicion within and outside the organization, manipulations of truth, derogatory remarks, presenting slanted and biased views, etc.
- Jealousy, personal ambition, lack of acknowledgement of the contribution of others', etc
- Angry, demeaning or condescending attitudes, remarks, etc. either directly or passively communicated through others or sabotaging the work
- Blaming others rather than having any personal accountability
- A lack of integrity and truth, false pretensions not grounded in truth.

Another problem is resistance to change regardless of whether or not it makes sense. The majority of people in this world can get stuck in what is routine and familiar and never venture out to risk anything. We bring hundreds of years of culture to this country and all of a sudden face new ways. As you examine what is going on, do not give up the important values and principles of our cultures that are based on a universally sound foundation of truth. However, you should be open to examining other ideas. But, you need to be wise as you examine the differences between the two. Then, do not give up before you start. It is very easy to become overwhelmed and do nothing. It is also very easy to blame others and use it as an excuse to stay stuck and to not do anything saying it is no use trying because our opponents are too much for us. If we have this attitude, we are defeated before we start.

We have problems in our communities and ethnic groups. As one person or group tries to do something, others try to sabotage it, usually not openly, but in quiet conversations with others where the truth is twisted and others are misrepresented. It is easy to be critical without offering anything better and under the pretense of some broader vaguely defined goals that do not make sense.

It is a way to stay lazy, to feel superior to someone else and to poison the efforts others are making for one's own dysfunctional purposes. Every plan is not a good one, but we must try to be encouraging of the good things, lifting them up in these areas instead of tearing the entire effort down. Some people say they are team players, but instead just want to control and destroy, attempting to look good to others while deceptively undermining the effort behind peoples' backs.

This happens far too often due to many reasons, among them jealousy, ambition and personal gain of some kind. Under this kind of environment, trusting relationships cannot be built. Team effort disintegrates into hidden division that flourishes with these manipulations of the truth.

Another problem arises when people align too strongly with one's family, community or ethnic group to the point that loyalty takes precedence over revealing or following the truth or the wisest course of action. This includes covering up or siding with someone who is in the wrong. How do you think Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and other corrupt leaders get into power and are able to remain there? It has been strongly based on the problem of widespread acceptance of dishonesty, especially when it applies to you and yours. It is wrong! The truth is suppressed in order to cover up for someone in your group. Loyalty is rewarded and truth and accountability are foreign concepts. God-given principles apply to others, not yourself. Extreme pressure is exerted on anyone who would dare make someone else in your own group

accountable. Excuses are given and accepted for lying and deceit for yourself and others in your group so your group is not embarrassed. With such a slippery concept of truth, human rights abuses, corruption, and oppression can find fertile ground.

Relationships based on such lack of agreement on truth will not succeed. Organizations and civic institutions and even governments do better if the players are honest and trustworthy. Development partners and business partners will work together more effectively and successfully when relationships are based on mutual respect and trust. Our government leaders have grossly betrayed the trust of its most generous donors. Meles was able to establish relationships and policies that were based on pretending. He used others and even his own suffering people to get more for himself. As a professional deceiver, he was suspicious of everyone else. He created exploitive friendships with government sympathizers based on an unspoken agreement to pretend that everything was good. This must change. Truth must rise and deceit must die.

We do not need heroes who are fake. We need real people who are willing to be transparent, accountable and who put the interests of others ahead of their own.

Thank you,