



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

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Speech to Ethiopian community at Tsehai Conferences

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Good Afternoon my fellow Ethiopian brothers and sisters. I am thrilled to be with you in this great city of Los Angeles, a city well known for its movies and media. First of all, I want to especially thank all the organizers of this event, the Tsehai Conference, for their efforts in making this happen. I am happy that one of the stated goals of this conference is to start the conversation about the state of Ethiopian affairs and the Diaspora. I cannot agree more with this goal. I have been waiting for this kind of conversation for a long time.

As most of you know, I was with Ana Gomes here in LA a couple of days ago when she and I talked about where to begin in bringing to an end, the injustice in Ethiopia. We talked about what Ethiopians could do to free themselves, their leaders and all political prisoners from tyranny. We agreed that this could not happen without the mobilization of every Ethiopian in every walk of life. This requires everyone's effort regardless of our education, sex, age, religion and ethnic background.

Now, the conversation can truly begin because of the efforts of the organizers of this conference who brought us all together at this critical time. I also want to especially thank Elias Wandimu, who called me in Canada as he was organizing the conference. When Elias first called me three weeks ago, I thought he was an older man. Now, I realize he is around the same age as I am. I thank him and all the others for what you have done. This reminds me that age does not matter. We can all fight injustice regardless of our age and other factors.

Elias asked me to talk about the state of Ethiopia and ethnic relations, but I was not sure I should do this because I was not an expert in ethnic relations, so he then told me I could speak on human rights and unity. I was then delighted to accept the invitation. I hope I can contribute at least a small bit to this discussion. However, after learning something about ethnic relations since that time of our discussion, I now would now like to include some thoughts on this.

For instance, just an hour ago during lunch, as I was in line to get the injera, I met an Ethiopian sister who asked me if I ate injera and I said I did. She then asked if I had eaten it before and I said, "Yes, I have been eating it for a long time." She then asked if I had been in Addis and I told her yes, not only that, but I told her I was an Ethiopian—that I had grown up in Ethiopia. Then I started talking to her in Amharic and she looked at others around her in astonishment and said, "**Amarigna Yichalal ende???**" meaning "Unh-h-h, he speak Amharic???" Then another man responded to her and said I was Ethiopian. She said she thought I looked like a Kenyan, a Ugandan, a Nigerian or perhaps a Sudanese, but not an Ethiopian! She had never even heard of Gambella where I came from and from where most of my ethnic group, the Anuak, come.

The truth is, we sometimes know more about people in other countries than our own people. In fact, there are many more Ethiopians just like me, who live in our beloved country, yet who do not look like the stereotypical Ethiopian! These Ethiopians come from one of the many different ethnic groups and areas of our country.

My point is that to be an Ethiopian, you do not have to belong to one of the larger ethnic groups or come from certain regions of the country. Instead, we must remember that Ethiopia is a rich country of great diversity. Regardless of our differences, our country unites us as Ethiopians. Even more importantly, shared values of human life; peace, liberty and justice unite us as human beings.

Brothers and sisters in this room, I am thrilled to stand in front of you today. I assure you I am here first and foremost as a fellow human being. I am also an Anuak and my name is Obang Metho. Additionally, I am an Ethiopian and an African who is trying to contribute even a small bit to make sure that the world of the gun, corruption, discrimination and injustice becomes a better place not only for us, but also for our children in generations to come.

I am standing here not as an expert or as a member of a political party. In fact, I am not even here as someone who is much more mature or more well educated than most of the panelists who are sitting next to me. For as you can tell, most are a lot older and already have gray hair, proving their maturity and life experience whereas if I did not have a baldhead, you would know that I still am not gray haired. Regardless, I am privileged to be here with the more politically mature guests so as to share what I know and to learn more from them.

Brothers and sisters, most of us know about what is going on in Ethiopia. I will not focus on what has happened, but instead on what we can do. To me, what is going on in Ethiopia is a crisis. A crisis, by its definition, demands urgent action. As you know, action should have been started a long time ago. This crisis became full blown to the Anuak people on December 13, 2003 when 424 Anuak leaders were massacred in an attempt to eliminate a whole group of people—the educated leaders of the Anuak community of Ethiopia.

As you may also know, I got involved in human rights work when the EPRDF Defense Forces killed these Ethiopian Anuak citizens who they were supposed to protect. Since that time, our own government has been killing its own people. Four more Anuak were killed this week by EPRDF troops in Gambella. When people attempt to protest it, the government denies their involvement. Instead of admitting any responsibility, they cover up the incident or blame somebody else.

The Anuak and witnesses will never forget that bloody day when the Anuak were killed in the massacre. It was not done in any ordinary way. In fact, the way people were killed was so gruesome and brutal that those who witnessed it were horrified and traumatized at the inhumanity of the perpetrators. Now, three years after this horrifying massacre, nothing has happened. Those who killed are still walking around terrorizing others. Those who ordered the killings, continue to order more killing today and will do so tomorrow as well. Unfortunately, like some victims of violence, a small group of Anuak young men have become like some of those who have terrorized them, seeking revenge against innocent civilians including their Anuak family member who have sided with the government.

This appalling state of affairs is why I got involved in human rights work and why I am here today; however, because of lack of time, I will not go into further details, but if you are interested in knowing more, visit the website of the Anuak Justice Council at www.anuakjustice.org for more information, including an investigation by Human Rights Watch.

I will go on to another crisis which most of you know about which occurred in the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, in June and November of 2005. This is when most Ethiopians learned what kind of brutal government was controlling Ethiopia. That is also when most in the Diaspora learned what was really going on back home. That crisis is still going on and over a year later, no serious action has yet been taken in response.

It seems like there is a lot of talking, but no action. This is why I want to change the focus from talking to taking action. I encourage you to do the same. That is also why I am grateful to the organizers of this conference who are bringing us together to start doing something or our people will suffer the consequences of our inaction. Action is already long overdue, but now we know much more about the opponent we face.

One thing we have learned is that the government is killing, arresting, torturing, and imprisoning every one of us regardless of our ethnic group or the region from which we come. Your only option for some degree of safety is to say nothing, to do nothing or to actively side with the government against your own people. We have come to realize that our government is especially preying on the educated, the human rights activists, the politicians and anyone who is asking for God-given rights for Ethiopians. Instead, our government is taking these God-given rights from our people every day, even as I speak to you, someone will be arrested, tortured and killed.

EPRDF does not have the support of the people anymore. They do not have the power of the people behind them, only the power of the gun—but the gun power will come to an end one way or another. EPRDF is saying they came into power by the gun and anyone who wants to take them out of power must also do it by the barrel of the gun! What a self-revealing and violence inciting statement by our government leaders, leaders who are pretending to stand for democracy!

For me, as a human rights activist, I will not go for the choice of losing more lives of our fellow Ethiopians. Our people are dying already from HIV, malaria, starvation and water-borne diseases. We do not want any more wasted human lives taken from us before their rightful time. Every Ethiopian life is precious. When I say this, I am not only defending the lives and the rights of the Anuak, but I am standing up for the lives of every human being, even those who have killed the Anuak as well as Prime Minister Meles Zenawi himself. Let the rule of law bring justice to the victims of these crimes and to their perpetrators!

This conference is where the conversation begins, but it should also be where the action starts! I call you to that. We know that many of the politicians and people are doing lots of talking, but are not taking action. Let us be catalysts to that action by starting to work together in the effort.

The formation of the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy is an example of taking action and working together. They are new, but I urge them to quickly move forward with a plan of action and involve the people so they can see movement. Do not lose hope in our task ahead, but let it spur us on to action.

Right now, the democratically elected political opposition leaders are in prison. The defense troops are killing people in Gambella, Ogaden, Sidamo, Oromia and other places, but it seems that there is no real momentum working up that will impact these urgent situations. In fact, to be honest, Meles may be more advanced in thinking of how to defeat our weak efforts than we are in confronting the tragedy in our country. He is smart enough to come up with a 52-page strategy of how to silence the Diaspora whereas we cannot come up with one voice and action.

Despite the fact that he has no support of the people, we people have not come up with a united plan to bring freedom, peace and prosperity to our country. Instead, we are fighting amongst ourselves and sabotaging the efforts of others. This is a shame when we put our own self-interests and competition ahead of this cause. This is a crisis and we who believe in freedom and democracy should keep our focus on these values, not on our own ambitions.

We must take action that is meaningful. For instance, many of you or US policy makers on behalf of you, may have written letters to Prime Minister Meles, but he has not listened. Instead, he continues to advance his own effort to hang on to power by any means. He is hoping the Ethiopian people and their international advocates in positions of power will become discouraged, lose interest and give up the effort. The evidence of this is obvious now. As you may know, many Ethiopians have accepted defeat along the way without really persisting in their efforts, many times because they are refusing to join in with the efforts of other fellow Ethiopians from a different background or group.

People are losing hope. This is the worst thing that could happen to an individual or a society. When you lose hope, you become paralyzed, accepting that you cannot move from one place to a better place. This is what I do not want Ethiopians to do. For instance today, the Anuak in Gambella are losing hope that they will ever live in a free society. The refugees who are stuck in Pochalla, Sudan are losing hope that they will ever return to Gambella to rebuild their lives because they think Meles will crush them as a superpower. However, God says in His Holy Scriptures that he cares about those who are oppressed who call on Him and do not go their own way. This applies to all of us who are suffering. He warns unjust leaders in Ezekiel 34:

“Woe to the shepherds...who only take care of themselves! ...You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they (my people) were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals...Now, I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. ...They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them.”

Remember these promises. Others may abandon us for many different reasons, or we may feel overpowered by our oppressor, but we are not. Have confidence that God can overcome anything!

As we trust in God, we must still do our part, no matter how little it is. We need a movement of many people that has a very strong organization at its foundation and good leadership—like the building we are in today is made up with countless steel girders, cement and other materials, all of which are important to the final structure. Each of us must be like the steel girders, the cement or even the soft cushions upon which you sit. We are all needed to make the building that is called Ethiopia, a country where its citizens enjoy freedom, the rule of law, peace, prosperity and justice. As we do this, we must campaign and rally for the release of the political prisoners and to bring to a halt the human rights abuses going on in every corner of our country.

The EPRDF government is relaxing, thinking that they have a grasp on power. We must sound the alarm and let them know we are not sleeping, but are waking up and becoming active. We must organize or the alarms we are sounding will become meaningless groans that disappear into nowhere. It is not the time to be politically ambitious for yourself, your own political party or your own ethnic group, vying for power to be the next ruler of Ethiopia. Now is the time to put one’s self interests aside and to concentrate on the people who are being killed, those persons languishing in prison and those persons losing hope in the future. Now is the time to work towards peace, freedom and democracy.

Start reaching out to fellow Ethiopians. Start reaching out to non-Ethiopians in your community, in your places of worship, to your politicians and co-workers. For example, if you never hang out with the Chinese, you may never learn how to eat with two sticks. If the Chinese do not hang out with you, they will never learn how to break injera into pieces and hold it with five fingers so the food does not fall between your fingers. You will learn from them and others about what they have gone through and may find that others will become engaged in the concerns of Ethiopians.

Do not lose hope. Think of May 7th when a sea of Ethiopian people came out from all over Addis Ababa to rally together. These people are still there. They have not died or disappeared. Think of the 25 million who voted on Election Day. Neither did they die or disappear. They are still there, hoping for a miracle and by the power of God, that miracle could start with you. The longer you wait the sooner hope will die.

In this country, you and I can speak out without fear of being shot. Speak out for those who cannot. Use your gifts and skills to organize. It is not only for the politicians to act. We may find that we will end up guiding and influencing our politicians. We may convince them that they also must be willing to give up things—hidden agendas, ambitions and ulterior motives—for the sake of freedom and democracy.

Close your eyes and think of what you might do. You Ethiopian women might form a women's organization and lead us men to a new vision and plan. The youth might come together and with your energy and creativity, you may become an example for those of us who are older and have a harder time seeing a new way. The elders may offer the gift of their wisdom and persistence, grounded in years of experience. However, none of this will happen without some organizational structure supporting it.

Establish your groups, your vision, how to implement that vision and then find some mechanism that can support it happening. Find a way to communicate and inform others. Give feedback to politicians and other groups who are working. Do not only criticize, but also include some ways to do whatever it is better. Do not just attend the meetings, as these meetings are not vehicles for change unless some action steps result from them.

Do not create artificial organizations that do not really exist without any legitimacy. Register your organizations under the rules and laws of your states. Account for the way you use funds that you collect. Be sure the way you are doing it is legal.

Do not promise what you cannot deliver. Keep your word and follow up with what you say.

Do not pretend to be somebody just to look good to others. The more I get involved with our people, the more I learn that this is a deeply entrenched problem in our community. In fact, it is one of the reasons more action is not taken, as some people want to be in charge, but never follow through with the actual responsibilities of the job.

Some people say they are organizing an event and name co-sponsors, but some of these organizations do not really exist or have never been consulted before publishing their names. This may be a crime and is not ethically right. Certainly, it is not professional and if we continue to do such things in this way, we will not go anywhere and will burn our bridges with those non-Ethiopians who may have otherwise helped us but hold to different standards.

The pretending to be somebody must stop. We must become highly ethical and professional about all we do. We must speak from our hearts, not just from our lips. We must be honest to ourselves and to others on all occasions. Many are not speaking honestly and this must change. I am not an expert, but this is what I have been experiencing in the last few months when I have been working with our people.

I realize it is difficult and frustrating and that we cannot be perfect, but we should hold to higher standards. We should be quick to admit our mistakes and to forgive others. We should try to learn from each other and keep trying to do whatever it is, better next time. Do not just criticize, but find something better to replace it. As we do this, we may become better human beings who can truly work together effectively.

As human beings, one of our God-given purposes is to love God and to respect and love others as we do ourselves. God gave each of us a life that gives us years, months, days and hours with which to do something. Our choices make all the difference. We can live for our own selfish purposes or we can choose God-given purposes that are unique to each of us. God wants our days to be meaningful. Let us not waste our lives on things that eternally will be worthless, but instead, let us live our lives to the fullest or we may miss our best opportunities. If we do not take advantage of these, we will be no different than the child who is born dead, going to the grave without ever fully living and contributing.

In conclusion, I want to be more specific about what action I believe must be taken. Some of you may agree with me, but others may not. If you do not agree, I hope you come up with something better to replace it and the reasons for doing so. This is a process and one person will not have all the answers; instead, my ideas should be perfected by your ideas as we stimulate each other to think more deeply about solutions. But because ideas cannot change the course of history unless they are tried, I am going to suggest a possible plan to forge a different path for Ethiopia, one of action, not just talking.

Before the elections of May 2005, we had good leadership, but now, they have been silenced, shut away in the overcrowded prisons of Ethiopia. The foundation of that leadership was situated in Addis Ababa. Those outside Ethiopia just mobilized the movement by raising financial support for those leaders inside the country. Now, that leadership is locked up with many others.

However, Meles had studied his opponent and knew that if the leaders were removed, he would have more breathing time to regroup and to regain his control of the country. He succeeded in creating a vacuum of leadership as he rounded up leaders, like cutting off the head of the snake so to speak. This is the predicament we now are in—we have no real leaders.

Meles caught the leadership and us by surprise. We underestimated him and we did not prepare properly. If a leader is removed, another leader should be ready to take over immediately. But in Ethiopia, we have become like cattle with no one to guide us—like a river which has been blocked with no where to flow except to back up in a huge pool of stagnant water.

It has been nine months since our leaders were imprisoned and we still have no plan for how we can free them. Almost every day, we hear of more people being killed by EPRDF troops. We have no strategy for how to bring the perpetrators to justice. We have no vision of how we can bring freedom and prosperity to the country because we have no strong leaders working through a strong organization to speak up for all the Ethiopian people. The people are waiting, but for how long?

For example, if CNN asked the Ethiopians to send someone to speak for Ethiopia, who would that be? We do not even have one person who can speak on behalf of all Ethiopians! During the American Civil Rights movement, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr was that person. During the Black resistance movement, it was Malcolm X. In South Africa, the African National Congress had Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Most movements in the world were empowered by a very strong leadership backed up by a strong organization! In Ethiopia, we have nothing right now! We are in a crisis and our legs have been amputated.

The solution will require resources and money. A strong and effective organization cannot be run by volunteers, working after hours and in their spare time with no financial means to implement anything, no matter how good. We must invest in supporting leaders who will devote themselves to this as their major focus. We must provide the resources needed to execute the plans. There will be travel costs, meeting costs, public awareness costs, administrative cost and other typical expenses of such organizations.

I will use my own situation as an example. If I did not have support from others from the Anuak Justice Council or from those who have generously contributed to the Anuak and now to the Ethiopian effort, I could not be here before you. I could not afford my own living expenses and would have to take another job. I would not be dedicating most every moment of my day to this work. I would not be able to afford travel costs or the cost of hundreds of phone calls every week. We could not have funded human rights investigations and the documentaries we are producing.

As it is, we continue to struggle to find the funds to continue this work. Many times we did not know where our support would come from, but God graciously provided funds from some, many of whom are non-Ethiopians, but who had soft hearts for the oppressed and suffering. Without their help and without organizing, persisting and oftentimes sacrificing, the Anuak Justice Council would not have formed into a non-profit organization and would not exist. Yet, as the demands expand, so does the need for greater infrastructure and that costs money. It is the same with many other developing organizations that require a significant commitment and investment in order to achieve any substantial goals. We as Ethiopians have a substantial task ahead of us and this is some of what is necessary to accomplish this task. It will require much from many!

The Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD) is in such a position now. The AFD needs to have such a structure that will enable the leaders to develop a vision and then to implement it. It takes time, resources and commitment to become a strong institution capable of uniting Ethiopians around the goal of bringing peace, prosperity and the rule of law to our country.

The organizations that are legitimate and capable of contributing money, should call a meeting on how to address this crisis. Individuals should contribute funds to support this effort. The goal of the meeting would be to establish short-term, mid-term and long-term goals.

The short-term goal on the top of the list should be the release of the leaders and the Anuak and other Ethiopian political prisoners throughout the country. Up until now, these people have been leading the movement. What they have sacrificed should not be taken away. A **second short-term goal** should be to stop the killing going on in throughout the country, but especially in the rural areas like in Gambella, Oromia and Ogaden. A **third short-term goal** is to mobilize Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians everywhere to action.

Mid-term goals should include bringing about a dialogue where all parties are included, even the current ruling party. The purpose of the dialogue would be to re-establish stability and the rule of law in the country.

The **long-term goals** would involve the development and implementation of a durable and legitimate democratic process where the people would be free to elect their leaders. In addition, we need a plan to address the issues of development, women's empowerment, human rights, health and HIV/AIDS, education, chronic famine and hunger, infrastructure needs, economic development, ethnic tolerance and the improvement of our Constitution.

It will take a long process to accomplish these short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. To do so, I suggest that political and non-political groups join together to form a very strong institution that would be an umbrella organization, such as the AFD, that would represent all Ethiopians. In fact, I would support the AFD going ahead and pursuing this task, as it seems that they are already pursuing this idea that I am proposing to you. I urge them to continue.

This institution should then call a meeting. Trusted advisors could help, like Ana Gomes who said she would be willing to do so. Trusted leaders, who would be willing to sacrifice their own self-interests, are crucial to the success of the effort.

If we fail, those in prison may die there, the Anuak children going without an education will be left behind, the Oromo, the Somali, the Sidamo and the many others suffering from endless persecution and repression may see their children and grandchildren endure the same. We cannot just keep talking for another year or two. It is time to make a move.

I am willing to contribute to this effort in whatever way I can. I hope all those with a vision for the future will come forward with their ideas. It is not about whose ideas we follow or about who leads. It is about Ethiopia. It is about now, not later. Let us not stand still, but let us move ahead to create a better tomorrow. Pray for God's help and direction that your words and actions may be the right ones and that your human efforts may be multiplied and effective.

I hope when you go home today, you go as changed people, willing to pray, to call a meeting, to contribute money, to organize an effort or that you are more willing to join someone else's efforts if those efforts are going in the right direction. Remember that nothing gets done if all we do is talk. We must follow it up with action. Hold to the highest standards.

I am committed to doing the same.

May God bless you as you do start!

May God bring justice and peace to Ethiopia.

Thank you.