



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

**Mr. Obang O. Metho,
Director of International Advocacy, for the Anuak Justice Council (AJC),
Speech at Martin Luther King, Jr. 4th Annual Human Rights Symposium,
sponsored by
Martin Luther King, Africa-African American Renaissance March Committee,
At the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, January 11, 2007**

Good afternoon brothers and sisters. Thank you for inviting me to this historic event. First of all, I would like to thank the Martin Luther King Africa-African American Renaissance March Committee, for inviting me to the 2007 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday 4th Annual Human Rights Symposium, specifically on the subject, “Moving Forward Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, Peace on Trial in Ethiopia.”

I would not have time to thank everyone, but would like to thank a few key people: the Reverend James Orange, from Martin Luther King African American Renaissance March Committee, Ms Helen Butler, the Coordinator for the Peoples’ Agenda, Mr. Charles Steele, the President of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), the Reverend Charles White, the Field Coordinator for the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Ms. Juanita Jones Abernathy, Civil Rights Activist, State Representative Mr. Tyrone Brooks, from the Georgia Association of Black Elected Officials, Ms. Janice Mathis, the Coordinator of the Rainbow Coalition, Assim Kassim, from Ogaden Human Rights Committee and many, many more who helped organize this symposium and commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I would tell you it is an honor to be with you in this room. In fact, no words can express how I feel standing on this stage before you—the reason being, I am standing with you today, not only to speak of human rights, but also to honor one of the greatest heroes of human rights—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I am overjoyed to walk on the same streets of Atlanta that he walked on and to enter the same door he has entered to this holy room—to take the same steps he has taken to this stage and to also speak to people about love, peace, faith and respect. Standing here before you in this same sacred place he stood when he was alive is something I never would have imagined or thought possible, but now I can say it was made possible not by me or by anyone, but only by God. For this, I would like to thank our Almighty God who gave me the life to be part of this world and reminds me that I have a purpose and that my purpose is to help serve others, protect and care for those who are around me and for those I do not know. It is God who showed me the way to come to this Country, city, church and to this platform. It will also be He who I will trust to give me the words I will tell you today.

As the moderator Mr. Guled Kassim, who introduced me said, my name is Obang Metho and I represent a small organization called the Anuak Justice Council. The Anuak, the ethnic group I came from, are a tiny minority group found in Ethiopia and Sudan. They are ignored by the country in which they live. Most have not had the opportunity to get an education and have been neglected in most every other area as well. With that, I would like to say that even though governments or systems deny people access to opportunities, God has room for everybody, from the minority to the majority. It is because of God’s power, that even though I have been denied many opportunities, yet it is He that has made it possible for me to here.

It is He that took me from that place of isolation and marginalization to come to this place where I would never have envisioned; neither would those who denied me basic opportunities. God can overcome any obstacles man has created. Instead, I am here to talk about the human rights crisis in Ethiopia. I will include the crisis of all in Ethiopia because I cannot talk regarding the death of the Anuak and not mention the deaths of the other Ethiopians of other ethnic groups. If I fail to mention them, I will be doing injustice to the families of those who were killed in other places. This is especially true as I am speaking on this stage where Dr. King spoke regarding injustice.

When he was alive and spoke about injustice, he did not preach about one tribe, one ethnic group, one race or one color, but he spoke for the whole human race. He did not belong to one tribe and if he had a tribe, it would be the tribe of human kind! That is what he died for and that is what he would have wanted those to do who have come after him. Again, I appreciate everybody in this room and when I look at everybody here, I see all of us are equal human beings who are seeking justice and peace for all, not only in Ethiopia and Africa, but also in the United States and around the world.

I first got involved in human rights because of the atrocities that were committed by Ethiopian National Defense forces against the Anuak. This happened three years ago and since then, I have been advocating not for the rights of the dead, but for the rights of the living. I cannot do anything to bring back the lives of those who died, but I can do something to protect those who are still living or who are still to be born, from being killed and this is the reason why we are in this sacred place today. As you can see us today, we all look different because we are from different ethnic groups, but we are the same people and are here representing different organizations and political groups, but what joins us is our desire and commitment to finding a solution to the crisis in Ethiopia that will bring the peace and freedom for which we long.

To my African American brothers and sisters, it means a lot to be invited to this symposium. It tells us you are willing to work with us to find a solution to injustice, not only in Ethiopia, but also around the continent. Your invitation is more than welcome. The African has been waiting for such an opportunity for a long time. Thank you for making this happen, but I would also want to tell you that you are coming to this struggle late as you all know.

Our mother continent of Africa remains the poorest continent in the world in terms of education, health care, income level and overall well-being, despite being one of the richest continents in terms of natural resources. In the age we are in, all we know of today's Africa is misery, pain, suffering, death, killing, rape and of many, many more critical problems. Many people do not want to hear about it or are even ashamed of being from Africa after seeing what is going on there.

One has to ask why this is all happening and when it will end, if ever! To me, it will not end without all Africans joining together and finding a meaningful ways to discover who we are. We are now in an age where Africans are killing other Africans. Why is this happening more than it did a hundred years ago? We are in an age where people go from home to home, pulling out fellow human beings, killing them without any remorse. We are in an age where women have been raped in front of their children and husband. We have lost touch with a sense of our humanity. Many will suggest various reasons for this, but I believe it is because we have lost our spiritual connection with God and in losing that connection, we have lost our morality with it.

People have become mechanical. They have lost the fear that there is someone bigger than themselves that will hold them accountable for their actions. They think they can do anything and get away with it. They may have forgotten that God will find them accountable even if they can circumvent the laws of men. This attitude prevails with the elite leaders at the top positions in Africa, but it also reaches to many of the people at the bottom. It has become part of our society. This is why you now hear of a soldier raping a child and not feeling guilty—or of the leader of a country or a commander of the army, ordering someone to be shot dead. Neither the person who pulled the trigger nor the person who gave the order shows any remorse.

We think we can be fulfilled by short-lived pleasures such as money, luxuries, cars, bank accounts or power. Outsiders from multi-corporations or countries, many with strong self-interests, can easily create partnerships with such leaders. Because neither they nor the leaders fear God, they will exploit their own citizens and to maintain their power and profit, they will divide the people or the tribe to weaken any possibility of united resistance.

In Africa today, lots of wars and human rights abuses cause many people to die while at the same time, someone is making money from it. To change such injustice, it will require a spiritual and moral transformation. The people of Africa must take back responsibility, yet Africans cannot do it alone. The African American has to join. The peace-loving human beings of any race or ethnic group must join—like Caucasians, Asians, Arabs, Hispanics and all human kind who value fellow human beings. We have to recover our humanity. We must recover our morality, regardless of what our religion is. We must recover or discover the God who created us.

I urge you, my fellow African Americans, to join with us as we struggle to find a way to transform Africa. The Africans need you. They need you right now. If Dr. Martin Luther King Jr would come here today, he would ask so many questions. He would ask not only the African Americans, but also all human kind, what is going on? He would ask—where were you when the genocide was taking place in Rwanda, in Darfur and in many, many places? He would ask the African American—what have you done for the poor black people in America, for the people in the Sudan and so on. He would urge you to help and to become part of the struggle he started and died for.

So my appeal to you, my African American brothers and sisters, is to come and join the Africans who are trying to ease the pain for other Africans who are suffering and who cannot speak for themselves.

To conclude my points, we were called here to talk about the human rights issues of Ethiopia and how we can resolve it. The problem of Ethiopia, to give some background, is a problem created by the ruling government. The government of Ethiopia has stayed in power by the power of guns for 17 years. Within these 17 years, they have not brought what they had promised—freedom, democracy and development. What they have brought to their people instead is disaster, misery and death.

My own people, the Anuak, were victims of such deaths at the hands of the government of Ethiopia. On December 13, 2003, 424 innocent civilians were killed by the government's own security forces, accompanied by some civilian militia groups that they had incited. At the time, many Anuak fled to Sudan for safety.

Over 4000 Anuak remain in Sudan as refugees even now. One thousand more were imprisoned and remain so today. The condition of the people has not improved, yet, to make matters worse, no one has been found accountable for these killings.

The year of 2005 was a historic year for the Ethiopian people. It was the year of a national election where an actual alternative to the ruling party was running in opposition, giving the people a choice. Many were excited as international observers came to observe the election to ensure its legitimacy. The leaders of the Opposition Party were educated Ethiopians who had lived in America and had gone back to Ethiopia to run for election by first establishing a new political party, seriously challenging the ruling party for the first time.

During the election, 26 million people, or 95% of all eligible voters, went to vote. When the election finished, the ballots were first counted in the capital city of Addis Ababa and out of 24 seats, 23 of them went to the Opposition Party. When the ruling party realized they were losing, they declared themselves winners of the election before all the votes were counted from different regions. The Opposition party protested and when many young students and others protested in a demonstration, the government's security forces shot and killed 193 of them in June and November. The election observers, including the Carter Center in Atlanta and observers from the European Union, had concluded that the election failed to meet international standards. The Opposition leaders, actually elected as parliamentarians, were arrested in November of 2005 and charged with fabricated charges of genocide.

Now, over a year has passed since the elected parliamentarians were imprisoned and the international community is not doing a lot about it. The country has now deteriorated into a police state. The Ethiopian public does not support their government, yet the government is staying in power because they have the guns and the military under their control—at least for now.

What is happening in Ethiopia today is the apartheid of 2007. Most of the US and other western government policy makers know exactly what is going on in Ethiopia, but most have not taken meaningful action. This is why we are here to tell you exactly what is going on in Ethiopia.

When Nelson Mandela was in prison, the civil rights groups in the US rallied. Some of you who rallied then might include some of you who are sitting here today. You rallied for the release of Mandela even though the US government's administration at the time was supporting the apartheid government in South Africa. This is very similar to what is going on now in Ethiopia today.

The current Ethiopian ruling government is supported by the US government because they are partners in the War on Terror. But the African Americans have not been supporting the human rights activists—the Mandelas of Ethiopia—who are fighting for the lives and freedom of the people. This is why I am asking you to take on this case like you did the case of the people of South Africa. There are so many similarities to it. The Ethiopian public wants their leaders to be released and they would want peace-loving people to come to their aid to help them.

You need to remember what Dr. King said about this. He inspired many to action when he said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." If he were here today, I am convinced he would want all the peace loving people to be on the side of the Ethiopians wanting peace, freedom and justice.

My message to African American brothers and sisters is this—let us not only celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., but let us celebrate his message. Furthermore, let us not only celebrate this message, but let us pass it on. We need to take more action and make fewer speeches. We need to build more concrete roads and bridges that will take us to villages of love, peace, caring and harmony instead of using old and failing bridges and highways that would take us to destruction and killing.

We need to build and name a school after Dr. King that teaches peace and love instead of one that teaches hate and division. He would want us to be in a circle of love that would create a circle of unity. Such unity should not be for just one group, but it should be spread around the globe. Then, let these circles symbolize the globe that holds all human beings together in one world.

To the Ethiopian brothers and sisters—we need peace-loving people to work together with us. We need to stop name-calling and whining. Instead, we need to take action.

To my African Americans sisters and brothers—Africans need you and you need the Africans. A world without Africa would not be a perfect world.

Let what we do here today be like the flame from a candle that illuminates the dark room. Let these flames from our actions that illuminate that dark room, spread its brightness over the entirety of the dark continent of Africa making it glow with the warm light that reaches the dark corners of our universe.

Right now, it is our hope and vision to lift our heavy burdens from us. We have a massive rock put on top of our continent, weighing us down. Everyone in that continent is feeling the weight of this heavy rock, but I want to remind you that there is a spot on that rock where each of us can place our individual hands, slowly pushing this rock off of us before it crushes us all. Together, as we take hold to remove this rock, we will find our strength, persistence and ability to do it if we look to God for guidance and help. With God's help, we can remove this rock.

Then, from under the rock, we will plant a new seed and see a healthy tree rise up. Soon that tree will produce many branches and on those branches will come abundant fruit that will be relished by not only those who have planted it, but by those who see it, pass by or eat from it. All human kind will be part of that. May you reach out to that rock right now and take a firm hold and not stop until we can enjoy that fruit of love, peace and justice together as we feast as one family around the table.

Stand up and start walking for freedom, peace, justice and equality! 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! Keep on talking! Keep on walking! May God bless you as you take this walk! May God bless you all and may the march of Dr. King live on as long as we live on this globe. May his message of love, peace and caring continue to illuminate an internal light that never dies.

Thank you