



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Ethiopia in the Third Millennium—Where Do We Go From Here?

October 4, 2007.

The celebrations of the Ethiopian Third Millennium going on all over the world have ended, but we still have reason to celebrate! Why? Just this past month, the recently released Kinijit leaders began a tour of the United States, Australia, Africa, Canada and Europe, speaking to thousands of excited Ethiopians in the Diaspora who are hoping that there will now be strong guidance towards stopping the oppression of the people in Ethiopia and instead bringing true freedom, justice, equality and peace to the nation.

Just this week, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed the bill HR#2003 which will directly connect the receipt of financial aid and diplomatic privileges with the upholding of human rights and democracy within the country. This was accomplished despite the alleged huge financial investment Meles and the EPRDF made to the lobbying firm, D.L. Piper, to block the bill's passage.

More cause for celebration was given when on the same day and close to the same time of the vote on HR#2003, Kinijit leaders and an Ogadeni human rights representative were given the opportunity to testify before The House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health, "The Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation in the Horn of Africa: The Cases of Somalia and the Ogaden Region of Ethiopia"

All of these successes can be seen as a great advancement in the struggle, but it is not a time to sit back and rest. There is major work still to be done and we cannot stand by and be spectators, waiting for others to do it for us. Instead, we all must get ready for what may be the most difficult part of our battle for a new Ethiopia—a movement of united people—representative of all Ethiopians—that will bring about the Ethiopia we want for tomorrow. Right now, the celebrations must be quieted and the difficult work of transformation must begin. May God be our leader, guide and protector as each of us humbly carries out whatever our part might be.

Our success, if we are to achieve it, is about all of us doing our share, contributing to the whole, if we are to find our way out of the "valley of the shadow of death" that now encompasses all of Ethiopia. That valley is like a maze that brings us into unknown regions. If we Ethiopians are currently going to find our way out of such dark confusion, it will require the eyes of the Afar, the ears of the Ogadeni, the legs of the Gurage, the hands of the Tigray, the shoulders of Oromo, the head of the Berta, the feet of the Amhara, the arms of the Sidamo, the mouth of the Anuak.....and the hearts of each of us to make it safely and completely to the other side. Then we will have cause to celebrate. Until then, our people remain in jeopardy.

Tremendous atrocities—what some now call a genocide—are being perpetrated against the Ogadenis. This is going on today and is a silent Darfur that we must do more than our best to stop before the lives and livelihood of these fellow Ethiopians are destroyed. This should be cause for outrage for all of us. This government's poison has crossed the border into Somalia and the people there are suffering similarly at the hands of Meles and those under his command. We must speak up for them as well as people of moral courage who are against such evil or we may be found culpable at some later date.

Besides the ongoing human rights abuses and the suppression of the people by Meles, many areas of our country have been victims of natural disasters. Reportedly, 200,000 Ethiopians, from Gambella to Amhara have been affected by the recent flooding—many being displaced or losing their homes, crops and property. To add to this cause of misery, the rate of inflation has been climbing at record speed, causing such hardship that more and more people cannot afford the basics to survive. We have seen recent reports that more and more educated Ethiopians, in particular, those in the medical and health professions, are leaving the country for better opportunity elsewhere, leaving an already crippled health system, even worse off than before even though Mr. Meles Zenawi, says Ethiopia does not need doctors!

Now, with all of these realities, we should know that if this bill, HR#2003, goes to the Senate and becomes law, we can be thankful for what it will accomplish and should heartily congratulate those who worked so hard on this, but please know that the struggle is not over. More importantly, it is critical to recognize that we need the average Ethiopian, not only the politicians, to make themselves available to contribute to creating a better Ethiopia for those who follow us. Ethiopians need to regroup and reorganize. Like when nature struck, it affected seven regions of the country, making it important to work together because what is happening is affecting many of us. Ethiopians on the ground must do the work because we know outsiders have their own interests.

For instance, with Burma, as the monks courageously stood up this past week and said enough to a tyrannical government, it is Ethiopians who must do the same in our own country. If there is a message to the people of Ethiopia it is to be ready to not be a spectator but instead to become an active participant. The Ethiopian problem cannot be solved by one political party, but will require all of us. They deserve our gratefulness for starting this struggle, but now, it will require all groups to come together because one group cannot do it by themselves. Yet, the Kinijit can take a strong stand by reaching out to all Ethiopian organizations. In fact, the most effective way to go forward is with unity, even more than democracy.

For Ethiopians to succeed, problems within organizations, not only within the Kinijit, should be quickly resolved and then each should start by reaching out to others to be coalition builders. Insulting each other, infighting, backbiting and rumormongering will only hold back the new millennium hopes for a new Ethiopia. Instead, it will be through tolerance, putting aside one's personal interests, agendas and resentments that we will be able to move on. In the meantime, let us remain calm, but persevering in our goals and reflect on some of our strengths as well as the obstacles we must overcome.

Our country is unique and gifted with an ancient history dating back over 3000 years. We are the second largest country in Africa in terms of population, now around 80 million. We host the headquarters of the African Union. We have a reputation for being able to live in peace and harmony with Christians, Muslims, Jews and Animists. Yet, unfortunately, when many people of the world think of Ethiopia, they are still reminded of images of famine, beggars and starving children. Someone on American radio has even referred to one of the poorest states in America, Louisiana—after Hurricane Katrina, as being “the Ethiopia of the United States.” What an embarrassing comparison.

Our standing on most every survey of how we are doing as a society, rates us near to the bottom in the world, thanks to the EPRDF who cannot even admit our dire situation. Instead, they perpetually exaggerate progress by boasting that things are improving in the country when we know how bad things really are. Where there is development, huge debts are being incurred, robbing the future away from our Ethiopian youth of tomorrow who will be expected to pay it off. As we face the advent of the Third Ethiopian Millennium, it is high time to soberly consider where we are today and what we must do to give our descendents increased freedom, justice, equality, opportunity and prosperity in the future.

Yet, it is hard not to be excited about the recent release of the Kinijit Opposition Party leaders, journalists, human rights activists and now 18, 000 more Ethiopians (still not all) from all over the country who have been detained for months or years even though Meles had previously denied there were any political prisoners in the country. One might wonder where these 18, 000 or more prisoners came from!

As some of them are now visiting Ethiopians in the Diaspora, we can be extremely grateful to them for so quickly organizing a political movement before the May 2005 National Election that brought together so many different groups under one umbrella of the CUDP. It was in many ways, a miracle that no one, even them, expected! Even though most of us knew that Meles was a repressive dictator, we were surprised when he risked his reputation as “a new breed of African leader,” to become “one of the most vicious dictators” according to both Congressman Chris Smith and Congressman Donald Payne, made public in recent statements, by openly hijacking the election, killing 197 Ethiopian protestors and forcing the Opposition leaders and countless others to be detained in the prisons of our country.

We should all be very thankful for the sacrifices they made for us during their imprisonment. They, as Ethiopians of courage, stood up for the principles of freedom, justice and democracy. They endured rat-infested prison cells, unhealthy conditions, separation from their families and one of our Ethiopian heroines of justice even gave birth to a child while under confinement. Some endured torture and health problems as a result. Some died. After the celebrations die down now, we must be prepared for some certain obstacles and disappointments that are inevitable in a struggle of such magnitude.

The expectations we have placed on these leaders will not be realistic for sure for a number of reasons. We must consider these so that we are better prepared for what we must do to bring to life a new Ethiopia where our people do not just struggle to exist, but where, with God’s help, Ethiopians can flourish and live! These next days, weeks and months will be difficult if we do not face up to a few important things.

First of all, we must be ready to experience the ups and downs of joy and disappointment, of excitement and despair, of confusion and new understanding, of fear and courage, of progress and setbacks, of anger and acceptance and of apathy and passion. We must be prepared to see people as not just heroes or enemies, but as real people with a mixture of attributes and flaws. Be prepared for emotional reactions to all the events that will inevitably occur if we want to be transformed into a more humane, just and free society. There will be tension between those who want such change and those who want to maintain the status quo. We must remember that we cannot throw everything out just because it is not new, nor preserve everything just because it is so deeply ingrained in us and in our culture.

This will be tricky and we will make some mistakes, but let us be filled with God’s grace and guidance as we attempt to determine one from the other. Let us place our faith not in people, but in an Almighty God or we will be disappointed and will surely fail. Instead, we should remember that we are all flawed which means that there is no leader who can always please us. No one will be able to do a perfect job. Some may end up going in a completely opposite direction than what we want or others may even sabotage this struggle. But others, may more closely reflect the higher principles of this struggle. We are talking about a new and better Ethiopia. But remember, a perfect Ethiopia is not possible in this world. It could only come from perfect people, and that we are not. That is why we all must simply do our best, be held accountable for our actions and beyond that, ask God for His divine help.

What this means is important to clearly understand. Just like we were disappointed because we expected the US or Europe to save us Ethiopians, we will certainly be disappointed if we expect the Kinijit leaders to do the work for us and to do it perfectly. Right now they are heroes and heroines, some of you might have chosen which one represents you the best. However, our struggle can no longer be only a political struggle anymore based on a certain political platform or leader—it must broaden to a greater movement.

Some of them or all of them may see this and leave behind the political agenda until a better time. There is no hope of a fair election until the entire system is changed. Such a systemic change will require Ethiopians to work together in unity for principles of freedom. To do so effectively such a new movement must create a larger umbrella where diverse political parties, civic organizations, separatist groups, religious groups and ethnic groups are all included.

Yet, it is certainly okay if some of these and other political leaders continue with a more specific political agenda in preparation for a future time when they may have the opportunity to govern Ethiopia. They should be ready—thinking and preparing for how to achieve such success and how to best represent the needs of Ethiopians in the future. They may choose to focus on sub-group interests or larger group interests. This is not new in politics. Politicians sometimes carefully plan and calculate such a strategy for many years prior to the actual election, believing they have something of value to give back to the people.

On the other hand, some of the Kinijit leaders may decide to focus on the larger struggle for freedom, equality, justice and democracy for all of Ethiopia. Both choices are valid choices and each person must decide what is right for himself or herself at this time. We cannot assume that the Kinijit or other leaders of other groups will remain fixed. The political landscape has greatly changed since the Ethiopian election of 2005 and just because these leaders worked together for the same political goals at that time, does not mean that those goals should remain the same now. In fact, as I am saying, individual political movements will have less and less of an impact on changing the root problems of our system. What we need is a greater, united movement.

Much has changed since 2005. Think about the Anuak Justice Council. In 2005, there was no CUDP office in Gambella and most Ethiopians hardly knew of the existence of the Anuak or other indigenous groups in Gambella. Since then, we have broadened our work to include not only the Anuak, but have spoken up on behalf of all Ethiopians because we do not believe justice will come to the Anuak until it comes to Ethiopia through systemic change. However, we know there will and should be Anuak who might want to focus more directly on the Anuak or on all the people of Gambella.

In the same light, we believe it is actually highly probable that some Ethiopian leaders from every group, including the Kinijit, might branch off in different directions, taking on different roles and responsibilities from what they had assumed in the past. They will find supporters and followers who believe in one or the others' goals or perhaps in a different one entirely, but hopefully, they will all come together at some level in unity and support regarding the greater fight for Ethiopian freedom and justice.

Such a movement requires people who are passionate about bringing to an end ethnic hatred, ethnic favoritism, revenge, oppression and opportunism at the expense of others. Such a movement for NEW ETHIOPIA must be representative of the most vulnerable and voiceless in our society. We want to see change where one's ethnic clothes are left at the door so Ethiopians of any tribe, region, sex, religion and background can have equal access to opportunity. Most Ethiopians are extremely hardworking, but have been held back by tremendous obstacles blocking their path to education, health care and economic opportunity, some of these have been ethnic obstacles. Never will we be able to be a perfect society where everyone has as much opportunity as we would like, but we can make huge advancements from what we have now.

Right now, there may be rearrangements of leadership structures within many groups—something that may even include some decisions to go in different directions. Let us remain calm during this process and promote reconciliation where possible or amiable restructuring where it makes sense. If the Kinijit or Hebrat or the OLF or any other group splits into different groups with different purposes, they all may be in a better position to succeed.

Throughout this process, let us all try to focus on resolving our differences so that our energy is not drained away by internal problems. Differences of purposes, personal goals and vision can be discussed so as to make better, more informed decisions.

If there is disagreement, we still can be part of the greater Ethiopian family. This is not a competition. Let all genuine efforts succeed if their goals are for the betterment of the people. If they are not for the betterment of the people, let them fail. Let Ethiopians think about what they want for the future and support those groups that best advance such goals.

For instance, we in the Anuak Justice Council embrace all the people and groups in Ethiopia because they are all, our people. This includes not only political groups like the Kinijit or Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP), the Hebrat or United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) and but also resistance groups like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front (EPPF), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Gambella People's Liberation Front (GPLF), the Ethiopian National United Front (ENUF) and the Afar Liberation Front because they are our people.

Even though we in the AJC promote non-violence, many of these groups formed in order to defend their own people from Woyanne forces and oppression. In fact, the Woyane are using double-standards when they claim that those using violence are terrorists because Woyane are acting as terrorists against their own people who are rising up to defend themselves.

All should be held accountable if they go too far and break international law, but Woyanne have led the way, killing thousands of Ethiopians over a thirty-year period and it is absurd for them to point fingers when even now, they are doing the same thing in the Ogaden. Yet, even those in the Ethiopian National Defense Forces are Ethiopians who must be incorporated back into our civil society. How will we do this? We must start to think about these things and will need help from many fellow Ethiopians to do it effectively.

We must place hope and expectations on our civic groups to be at the grass-roots of bringing about the change we want, groups like women's groups, religious groups, youth groups, journalists, educators and human rights groups who all can greatly help in improving Ethiopian society and government. We need the religious leaders—from the mosques, the churches and average people of faith to give us the moral underpinnings and courage to stand up for right and the fear of God. Different approaches will be taken and their work will be best judged by the results; yet, none will be perfectly done, without any mistakes.

This will be a turbulent time, but remember, it is only when we are in crisis, that most of us are motivated enough to actually change our ways. Otherwise, most people continue to make the same kinds of choices, even if those choices lead to their own destruction. Let us Ethiopians learn from the mistakes of the past millennium so our descendents can look back with gratitude and respect for what we have accomplished through the help of God at such a time as this. Will we be willing to change before the next millennium, that is, if we as Ethiopians make it to the next millennium as a country or will we disintegrate into pieces like Yugoslavia?

If we are to remain a nation, we must break free from our bondage of societal dysfunction marked by our ethnic hatred, selfishness, inequality, greed and injustice. Some will represent the side of change and others will fight against such change—some for all the wrong reasons—an insatiable thirst for power, privilege and more money. The clash will begin and let us pray that God will help the majority of Ethiopians to choose those things that will lead to a better future for all Ethiopians in the Third Millennium.

During these difficult times, you never know from where your help will come. It might not be from where you expect it. The forgotten, disposable people of Ethiopia may be those who are critically needed in our transformation—like the beggars who were recently forced off the streets of Addis Ababa to prevent tainting the “image” of Ethiopia. Consider this Biblical account of how Christianity was introduced to Africa, not through the powerful and the rich, but through the marginalized and the oppressed.

In Acts 8:26-39, an Ethiopian was the first known African to accept Christianity. In this passage, an angel of the LORD tells the disciple of Jesus, Phillip, to take a certain road where he met an Ethiopian eunuch, on his way home from worshiping God in Jerusalem, who was reading a prophetic passage about Jesus from the Biblical book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. This Ethiopian eunuch had questions as to who was being talked about in that passage and unexpectedly, Philip was there to answer those questions by telling him about Jesus. The eunuch reportedly enthusiastically accepted the explanation because he asked to be baptized and became the first recorded believer in Jesus in Africa.

Now, Ethiopians take pride in being the first African country to receive Christianity, but interestingly, it came through a eunuch, the servant or slave to Queen Candace of Ethiopia, rather than through a person of royalty or of high esteem in that society. Slaves were most often taken from the oppressed classes of society—frequently a minority group—and this was probably no exception even though he was obviously highly educated and trusted to oversee the entire national treasury.

Now, when we hear Meles talk about the “golden people of Tigray,” or when we hear of the Amhara being “the chosen people,” as mentioned by Ethiopian professor Dr. Messai Kebede, from the University of Dayton during the Ethiopian millennium symposium at Howard University in Washington D.C., we may be seeing things too much through our own human perspective. This is exclusive language that leaves out many of us. Instead, we should be including all people along with the beautiful people of Tigray and Amhara as God loves all of us. Yet, the Biblical account gives us good reason to believe that this eunuch was from the “lower classes” of that society. This unexpected emissary is the one God first entrusted with Christianity on the continent.

What does this have to say to us about not overlooking the present-day eunuchs of our society who have been “cut-off” from the mainstream power-holders, but who have things of great value to contribute? Who are the eunuchs of today? Could they be the beggars, the homeless children, the prostitutes, our housemaids, the guard at our doors, our disabled, our women, our minorities and the other marginalized of our society? Any movement that does not include such people is one that will never bring about the Ethiopia that God may have in mind for us.

Some of us have had more access to privilege, education, opportunities, wisdom, health and power. Such assets should benefit others as well as ourselves as we openly share them with others. This Ethiopian eunuch who was serving those around him, passed this gift on to other Ethiopians, something we now have as part of our past.

When Muhammad’s wife and followers came to Ethiopia as refugees, they were welcomed and protected by Christian Ethiopia. Allegedly, Muhammad had told his followers to leave for Ethiopia, where “a king rules without injustice, a land of truthfulness-until God leads us to a way out of our difficulty.” (Wikipedia) Their welcome was not conditioned on having to have the same beliefs, but instead, they were embraced as fellow human beings and shown such great hospitality and care that Muhammad instructed his followers to never declare Jihad against Ethiopia.

Now, we must be thankful for the mostly peaceful and harmonious relationships that exist today between Muslims, Christians and Jews in Ethiopia, perhaps partly because of the humane and respectful relationship between these early Christians and Muslims, who accepted each other regardless of differences of background, language and faith. This is unique in this world and something worth saving from our past.

In fact, this is an attribute about us that we can share with others so we must consider how can we continue to uphold this wonderful legacy passed on to us by the early Ethiopian Christians and Muhammad and his followers? In other words, our day-to-day attitudes and actions to those around us must reflect the basic truth that we are all equal and valuable as children created in God's image. This must be reflected in every area of our society if we are to flourish.

For instance, do we as a society and as individuals look down at the beggars, prostitutes and children of the streets as you pass them by or do you see them as equal to you, perhaps needing an opportunity and help to rise above their plight? We know the vast majority of our country's poor are not poor due to laziness. Ethiopians are hard-working people who want a future for themselves and for their children.

Why is it that there are so many university-educated beggars asking for money in English? Instead, many at the top of our society, want ethnic, economic or political dominance at the expense of others. Life is much more than this and some day we will be held responsible for how we treated those with less in our society when we could do much more. These are those who sit in their mansions, houses and huts with the doors closed to their family members and neighbors as well as to those who cooked the food, while they eat an entire chicken themselves.

We need to tell these elites next time you are sitting down to eat, invite your housemaid to eat with you and send some leftovers home with her for her family. Take practical action. Do the same to your bodyguard or the young girl doing your laundry who makes only 100 birr a month for doing the laundry of ten families. She works like a slave in our society. Invite her or others to share a drink of cool refreshment or a cup of hot Ethiopian coffee with lots of sugar. We as the family of Ethiopia cannot shut the doors of our homes to the poor, underprivileged, the oppressed and the neglected. Just like it is hard to build a home with no tools, it is hard for them to build a life in this society without basic opportunities. Many of us could do much more to help them.

This could create an unbelievable revolution in our country that would tear down the walls held up by ethnic hatred, cronyism, prejudice, arrogance, selfishness, fear, ignorance and moral flabbiness. This is not about politics. It is much bigger than politics, which is too frequently about personal ambition or advancing goals for one's own family, friends and ethnic group. Instead, I appeal to you to take action in giving hope to this dying country, dying because of the inaction of so many of us. Take a little of your time and resources to make a difference in one person's life who is outside your immediate circle.

Life is short and we have multiple opportunities to fill up the empty vessel of our lives with things that will fulfill all our authentic needs. Remember, we are only refugees on this earth, seeking for a homeland for eternity where we will totally be complete. We, therefore, should choose the correct path now or we will never find that place of satisfaction and rest.

People think they can control their futures, but there are countless, daily examples of how we cannot do so and our deadline comes before we are ready to face it and then we have eternal consequences that we will not like. Instead, before it comes, we need to build bridges and roads beyond our own huts and villages—beyond our tribes, regions, ethnicity, sex, education, economic levels and religion.

Some may think this is just wishful thinking, but it can be done much better than we are doing it today. One way to do this is to rekindle our fear of a holy God who will judge us if we refuse Him by going our own way. But if we repent, He will show us the path to Him and those around us will benefit as we live out our faith in good deeds.

There are many Ethiopians who have died in the last few years, months and days of hardship and killing who have not made it to celebrate the Third Ethiopian Millennium. In honor of these worthy Ethiopians and those to come, let us claim the best of our past and combine it with the best of Ethiopia now so that those Ethiopians in the future will have reason to thank us.

As we face many hundreds of separate groups within Ethiopia, all with their own agendas, let us not discount the reason for their formation. They came together for a reason and if we refuse to listen, we will miss the messages for the next millennium that may bring peace, harmony and well being to our nation.

If we refuse to listen, we will only increase our alienation, yet, we cannot force everyone to believe the same or to listen to our stories. If that is the case, let those go their own way, but I am confident that many Ethiopians will get it. Ethiopia is changing and those changes are painful.

Some understand before others do and that means we must be patient and loving with those who are not able to see the bigger picture. We also must understand that some will not “want” to get it because they do not want to change. In this case, the struggle for a more humane, just, equal and free Ethiopia must continue anyway.

As divisions come, and they will, keep your focus on the bigger picture and reach out to others and listen! This is a process and will not happen overnight. This struggle is about the landscape of our society being transformed from scrub grass, desert and barrenness, where we can barely subsist, to a society filled with the beauty and fullness of life.

It will not happen without disagreement and conflict. It will not happen without hard work and sacrifice. It will not happen if we are afraid to speak the truth to our friends as well as to our perceived enemies— with civility and respect to their faces instead of behind their backs.

The road we take will be full of obstacles and disappointments. It is not for the weak, the ones who easily give up or to those who cave in to fear. We need God leading us and helping us for ours is not an easy struggle, but it is a worthy one.

Let us not focus on human heroes or villains for we overestimate the power of both and it will lead us to failure. Instead, let us remember our Creator and He who will ultimately judge us for He will help us if we turn to Him!

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In my anguish I cried to the LORD, and he answered by setting me free. The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Psalm 118: 5- 6, 8, 13-14

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