



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Senator Inhofe Reports Ethiopia's Great Progress in Democracy Building and Human Rights?

Who better to respond to these false statements than all the Kinijit leaders who have just spent 21 months in prison!

October 24, 2007.

On October 17, 2007, Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, in a speech before the U.S. Senate, promised to defeat HR#2003 and to deliver it on a silver platter to Meles. The Coalition for HR#2003 and many other Ethiopians here in the United States have worked extremely hard to get this bill to the House floor. When it passed unanimously less than a month ago, Ethiopians were elated, but that elation may be short-lived. It now looks like the bill may face strong opposition in the Senate from the likes of Senator Inhofe.

Many Ethiopians have expressed their frustration regarding his Senate testimony as he claimed to be the senatorial expert on Ethiopia despite using countless inaccurate facts to support his position, typical of an outsider who accepts as truth the kind of propaganda readily promoted by Meles, his lobbying firm and other pro-Meles forces.

If he and other senators are open to listening, we know that these inaccuracies could easily be dispelled with all the evidence we have from reputable sources from the ground. However, unfortunately, most of us are painfully aware that some of our best advocates to do so—the Kinijit leaders now in the U.S., who have been locked up for the last 21 months in Kaliti prison—are embroiled in their own internal battle that has essentially disempowered not only them, but all of us at the same time. It has left many of us confused at either their reluctance or inability to settle this conflict by active unity or by clearly separating. Instead, it continues, and as it does, it daily takes on new casualties.

Many Ethiopians are talking with each other about what to do. The Anuak Justice Council is receiving numerous calls from some of these who express their disappointment, anger, confusion and despair over the situation. They want to know which side we are supporting and which side is right, but after these weeks of trying to sort things out and offering to mediate, it is obvious to us that we probably will never know all the facts. Just like Senator Imhofe, who claims to know so much about Ethiopia, we realize that he is an outsider and that he probably will never understand the country and what is going on like we do. The same may be true regarding Kinijit.

We are outsiders to the “ins and outs” of this conflict and will instead need to judge these leaders by how each of them now handles this crisis. What we want to see is how they reach out to each other in a genuine attempt at reconciliation and compromise—meaning—all parties may have to give something up. What we want to see is how the needs of the people come first, if they genuinely welcome the marginalized people in our society into the political process and how they rally behind suffering Ethiopians, like those in the Ogaden who are being heavily targeted by Meles' troops. How will they react to Senator Inhofe's gross minimization of the terrorism being committed by such an ally in the War on Terror? Will they do it together, one by one or not at all?

Instead of reserving judgment until some of these responses can be observed, many have already aligned themselves with “a side” despite the lack of information available to the public. As factions have emerged, the division has become contagious, extending to increasingly more people. It has been spread more readily where the media has also taken sides. Do we really have the time or energy to get pulled into this distracting secondary struggle when ironically; we are trying to bring about a more united Ethiopia? It appears that we may be taking a step backwards instead of forwards if we get fixated on this internal problem of the Kinijit. In the midst of this, Senator Inhofe presents this entirely false picture of what is going on in Ethiopia. The question is, who is ready to confront him about his misguided information? The painful reality is that this leadership crisis could not have happened at a worse time.

In the meantime, the image of Ethiopia has further deteriorated as Senator Inhofe told us that he intervened to save a newborn infant—his future granddaughter—from the dogs on the streets of Addis Ababa that would have eaten the baby. If he really has that kind of compassion, who will explain that the infant is the newly born movement of the Ethiopian people for true democracy in Ethiopia? Who will explain that the dogs ready to eat this infant movement are none other than the current dictator, Meles Zenawi? Ethiopians from all over the country know about this government’s obsession with trying to “kill” any opposition movement before it gains greater momentum and threatens this authoritarian government. Division within the opposition, unfortunately, simply aids in this destructive process.

On the other hand, if Kinijit’s inner battles are resolved, these leaders could go together to speak to Senator Inhofe and other senators in a united front. Those leaders who spent many months in the filthy cells of Kaliti Prison may be able to give a more realistic view of Ethiopia than what the senator may have gotten from the lavish rooms of the Addis Sheraton. They might tell leaders like the senator that if he had run for election in Ethiopia rather than in Oklahoma, that he might have ended up sharing those cells with them for simply challenging an autocratic government by representing the interests of the people of Oklahoma and of this nation. If he really has the compassion for humanity that he has expressed on the floor of the United States Senate, he may end up dramatically changing his position.

He may also be able to recognize that the eight points of the Kinijit are nearly identical to the same rights we enjoy in the United States such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech and an independent judiciary. But why would he and others in the Senate reduce their expectations for this country’s adherence to human rights to almost zero just because he happens to be an ally in the War on Terror? Who should make them all aware that Meles Zenawi appears to be making the most of this opportunity by reporting “imaginary terrorists” whenever it suits his purposes such as in the Ogaden.

A recent example is the burning the village of Caado that was home to thousands Ogadenis. The people were told to leave and when they did not, Meles’ troops burned down the village, reportedly as he was searching for terrorists. However, most Ogadenis realize that it was simply a ploy to control the area that just happened to be very close to where the Chinese oil company was going to drill their next bore hole. The same thing happened in Gambella, just ask the Anuak! In Gambella, the only criteria for being suspected of being a terrorist was being found in the vicinity of the oil development work.

Such information has to be made public and our leaders need to act as advocates and protectors of the people. Right now, the people of the Ogaden and other Muslims in the country become easy targets in the post 9-11 War on Terror culture where drumming up fear of new Islamic extremists is easily accomplished in a fear-driven political world. It can provide an effective cover for all sorts of other less acceptable goals such as taking over control of natural resources, grabbing power or diverting the public from condemning him for the subversion of democracy and the peoples’ human rights.

It may be hard for Ethiopian and Somalian Muslims to speak up on this issue without support from others. These Ethiopians, like with any other groups within Ethiopia, are mostly all good, hardworking people who are trying to survive under dire conditions and to improve the future for their children. However, when they try to make their voices heard in the international community during the “era of the War on Terror,” they are lumped together with more radical extremists in other parts of the world and the actual terrorization of their people at the hands of Meles is ignored. This is not morally right, but because Meles is happy to scapegoat them in order to gain power and financial support—among other things—they may need the help of others from other faith backgrounds who know the truth about what is going on. Who among these leaders will bring the urgent attention to this crisis that it deserves?

More specifically, who could better shed light on this emergency than those leaders who personally experienced deep injustice, false accusations, suffering and imprisonment at the hands of the same perpetrators? They could reveal how the EPRDF government repeatedly denies the truth and exchanges it for lies so others are blamed when it really is the EPRDF that should be held accountable for crimes. They could give testimony to how Ethiopians of varying faiths and beliefs have lived together in peace, respect and harmony for centuries. They could share their knowledge that very few Ogadenis, if any, are Islamic extremists and that we Ethiopians know it through our own experience as citizens of this country.

As Ethiopian leaders, they could explain how the EPRDF’s exaggerated claims of “insurgents” or “radical extremists” are being used to justify the targeting of innocent civilians. They could describe similar tactics of the EPRDF that have been used in Gambella, Afar, Oromia and other places within the country as a ruse to gain control of the natural resources or other coveted sources of economic gain or power. They could explain how pro-Meles sympathizers have repeatedly been used to mask their own involvement like when the local EPRDF incited militia groups in the massacre of the Anuak that were at the forefront of the onslaught, but were backed up by government troops. The same thing occurred according to confidential reports we received from eyewitnesses during the Muslim-Christian violence that occurred in Oromia last year. As the AJC reported in previous documents, these eye-witnesses reported that pro-government groups posed as Islamic radical extremists, but were identified by locals as Woyane—some not even Muslim, but of Christian background—backed up by the ENDF.

This is critical information pertinent in the War on Terror so that real terrorists are stopped while at the same time, Meles does not stir up violence against the innocent to his own advantage. As Ethiopians, our leaders need to remind us of our history where Ethiopia has been a place of peace between Muslims, Christians and Jews ever since Muhammad’s followers were received with warm hospitality after being instructed by him to go to Ethiopia for refuge. Ethiopian Muslims and Christians could be models for demonstrating how to live in peace and respect with each other despite differing faiths, yet most westerners do not know about this and assume the opposite.

Who will inform them about how Muslims and Christians have respected the rights of the others to their own beliefs so much that sometimes they even have shared the same buildings for their worship, with all that divided them being the thin wall in-between? They have been able to hold their own differing beliefs and yet cooperate in practical areas like these. Even when they have inter-married, they have most often been able to maintain their separate religious beliefs and practices. This is very well documented in Ethiopian culture. Ethiopians may have had countless ethnically-based conflicts, but nearly no history of religious conflicts. Thus, when the senator speaks of such radical extremists being present in Ethiopia, most of us would question their existence, if not deny it totally as being another ploy of Meles’ to advance his own interests.

The senator Inhofe revealed a lot in his talk; that is, if it is factual. He reported more than the US State Department has been willing to publicly admit. For instance, he talked about how 100,000 Ethiopian troops are carrying out this “side-by-side” war with the US in Somalia with assistance from the US. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, he may not realize how many innocent civilians—men, women and children—are bearing the heavy costs of it as they are killed, raped or impoverished to the point they may not survive due to the reckless destruction of cattle, homes, property and their livelihood. Certainly, if true God-fearing people in the west knew the whole story, they would be outraged with this silent Darfur like they have been at the Sudanese Darfur. However, instead, they are hearing propaganda from people like the senator who is actually contributing to the continuation of these atrocities by aligning with the source of their terror—Meles. Does he want their blood on his hands?

The senator then started talking about Eritrea as if Eritrea was much worse than Ethiopia! Both countries need freedom and justice, but our leaders could explain how Meles is not providing more stability in the Horn of Africa as Senator Inhofe asserts; instead, Meles is deeply involved in its destabilization. Who has the credibility to correct these misperceptions that continue to hold Ethiopia captive to such propaganda? Unless the Kinijit leadership can regain cohesion, vision and authority, our hopes for a better, more free and just Ethiopia, may not come to fruition.

How can we assure partners in free societies like the US that we Ethiopians can bring about a sustainable democracy that will be far more reliable and advantageous than this current hated regime? Right now, who would lead should Meles fall? Would it be the Kinijit chairman, Hailu Shawel, the Vice Chairperson, Bertukan Mideksa, the Mayor of Addis Ababa, Berhanu Nega, the Hebrat, the OLF, the AFD or someone from one of the many other Ethiopian groups? Are we really ready?

When we are, one of our many tasks will be to convince such politicians as Senator Inhofe that by aligning the US with the Meles regime will only sabotage their own long-term goals. Yet, if our leaders who led the movement to Kaliti prison, gain their personal freedom but leave behind the movement in the dark cells of Meles’ prison, what can we do to convince the US and others that a change of government will really be better?

Unless we have greater unity and a clearer vision for the future, we will not succeed. As a movement for freedom breaks into splinters, who says that outside groups will not attempt to decide who will come next after Meles? This should be a choice of the Ethiopian people from the grassroots level in every region of the country rather than of outsiders or western countries. We want the support of the international community and are willing to partner with them on important and strategic issues such as preserving our global civil society from terrorists and tyranny. However, we also do not want terrorists or tyranny within our own country and therefore want to be able to choose leaders who will uphold the rights of all people.

This must be entrenched in the thinking of Ethiopians from the bottom up so that we can authentically and effectively unify in transforming Ethiopia into a society that embraces not heroes or rulers, but sustainable principles of freedom, justice and democracy that apply to all equally. Who will help lead us in freeing us from the thinking of the past that has led to the ethnic hatred, selfishness and division of the past? Instead, we need an Ethiopia where the worth of each citizen is affirmed as equally precious in the sight of our Creator and therefore should be to us as well! These are the critical issues we should be focusing on rather than the internal battles within an organization that will simply encumber our forward movement.

Right now, strangely enough, we can almost thank the senator for triggering such a response from Ethiopians that we momentarily forgot about the division of the Kinijit. In fact, it served to bring out some new voices of protest. As time elapses, if the Kinijit does not effectively regroup to show us a way out of this mess, other new voices may emerge in the same way as they have been doing this past week since the senator made these outrageous comments.

They have risen up to tell the senator that we are working to protect the children in the streets from being eaten by the dogs of Ethiopia because each child, not only in Ethiopia, but all over the world, is equally precious in God's eyes. However, most Ethiopians are saying that they have never heard or seen such a thing and have no idea where he heard this story. If the senator unknowingly is passing on a made up story like this to persuade other senators to kill a bill meant to uphold the human rights and lives of people, it is a shame to whomever told him. Yet, if by some chance it is true, he should be questioning his friend Meles and his wife at their meeting at the Sheraton Hotel in Addis about why they are not doing anything to make sure more babies are not eaten by dogs on the streets of Ethiopia! If Meles has not thought of it himself, Senator Inhofe should exhort him to do more.

Many Ethiopians would not be surprised if the person who told him the story was either exaggerating or covering up for a lack of required proper documentation. In fact, I have heard the identical story from seven different Canadians who have adopted Ethiopian children. Out of interest, I had asked these parents about whether when their child turned 18, he or she would be able to return to Ethiopia to find their next of kin or to gather information regarding their ethnicity or the region from where they had come. All of them said no and then explained why. They surprisingly repeated the same story about how their child had been found in an alley with the umbilical cord still attached. This seems like quite a coincidence if it is actually true because I, in all my lifetime, have never heard of it. What do you, the reader, make of this story about our people? Is this a new trend among Ethiopian mothers? If so, what has happened to our society to cause such a thing? If it is not true, what is the motivation behind passing on such stories?

Right now, we Ethiopians should get to the bottom of what is happening either to protect our children and their families or if it is a lie, to provide legitimate documentation to the many wonderful adoptive parents who genuinely want to provide a loving home to these precious children. In the meantime, the image of our people is being demeaned. Again, if it is true, it will require action. If it is untrue, it will require a different action. We must rise up and do something about it. However, if those leaders who went to prison for standing up for such Ethiopians as these children spoke up, it would come across all the more powerfully.

What is standing in the way of such restoration of the Kinijit leadership may be the problem we Ethiopians have had in admitting in the first place to even having a problem. It has been part of our culture to cover up such things with rhetoric, but not action. In the past, those who were willing to speak to what was being seen rather than what was being said were sometimes ostracized, demeaned or punished in some other way. For a new Ethiopia to emerge, we can no longer keep the whole country silent about what they all see. If we cannot say it, we become powerless to do anything about it because it is not supposed to exist! It is like an alcoholic who gets angry if you suggest he drinks too much. He will not change as long as others support his distorted view of reality. Think about how Ethiopia has such a tradition of being a "mysterious nation of secrets." The Kinijit chairman is claiming there is one Kinijit, yet what is the reality? He is never seen at any of the meetings or gatherings of others in the Kinijit. The other Kinijit leaders are saying, "Hailu is our chairman." However, there is no evidence of it. Hailu calls a meeting and the word gets out from supporters of the "other side" that it should be boycotted. Why did they not at least show up to calmly and respectfully sit through Hailu's meeting?

In the meantime, Ethiopians are left alone like orphans to fight it out regarding which “side” is right, sometimes in an aggressive, “dog eat dog” fashion. The leaders have so far failed to handle this problem properly by either coming together or by frankly and honestly calling an end to their coalition.

Both options would mean each side would have to give up power, but it still might be the best outcome for the people. This is because the problem will not simply disappear by pretending it does not exist. In the meantime, the media should stop attacking one side or the other. People can disagree without disowning each other. We Ethiopians need to learn better how to do this. We need each other. We should be like a family who when they fight, they still maintain a strong incentive to find a way to reconcile for the overarching reason that they are family.

Professor Mesfin Woldemariam confronted the leaders of Kinijit by calling the division a personal power struggle rather than about any ideological differences. I cannot say if he is right or not because unlike him, I am not on the inside of the Kinijit. Yet, he has been attacked by both sides for simply stating what he believes. We do not have to agree with him, but let us respect his right to say it. It is an important part of any democracy. Consider what we have now in Ethiopia. Meles is so sensitive about any anti-government criticism that the media has been suppressed, Internet sites such as ours <http://www.anuakjustice.org/> have been blocked and anyone who speaks out can end up in prison for simply expressing their opinion.

Criticism can be constructive, destructive or simply considered and discarded as not applicable so let us be careful in our response to it. For instance, in a divorce, the friends of the husband usually take his side and the friends of the wife, hear her perspective and take her side. Someone else who knows both sides may try to stay neutral and speak from that perspective. Again, we can disagree with that person’s opinion and in fact, both the husband and the wife may disagree with it also, but when the person is attempting to speak for “the family,” we should certainly not condemn him for what he believes is in the best interests of all. Sometimes the truth more easily emerges under such conditions. Sometimes those who criticize us can free us up to be better people. In this case, let both parties Professor Mesfin confronted carefully consider what he has said and respond with wisdom and character. If one or both of them prove him wrong by their future actions, he very well might be the one most pleased by such a response.

I, Obang, did not know any of these leaders prior to their imprisonment other than speaking with Chairman Hailu Shawel on few occasions by phone. Therefore, I do not know whether they are engaged in a personal power struggle that could undermine where the rest of us want to go as a country. It is critical to their future leadership that if they are in this power struggle, that they disengage and be willing to simply serve the people with integrity, humility, vision and generosity of spirit, leaving any personal agendas behind. There will be a time for political competition based on platforms and the votes of the people. Until then, we ask all these leaders to take the high road towards freedom or they will block the path to a new and better Ethiopia. Those of us following behind cannot easily move ahead since the path right now is a narrow one and they are in it by virtue of the support of many, even those outside of the Kinijit.

Regardless, they should all understand that even though the focus of Ethiopians is on Kinijit, many, like me, have not been members of it. In fact, I ask you to think about how many Anuak, Oromo, Afar, Ogadenis, and others outside of the mainstream ethnic groups have been part of Kinijit? For the people of Gambella, Kinijit was never even an option because they never had an office there. This is the same in many other regions of the country. Others remain part of other organizations. Regardless, many outside of the Kinijit rallied behind them and continue to place hope in the leaders that they will share a vision of how to bring about a better Ethiopia. We should all be very grateful to Kinijit because most Ethiopians readily acknowledge that they have benefited from it.

However, many rallied for the release of Kinijit leaders so upon that release, these leaders could create a movement that encompasses all Ethiopians. When these leaders came to the US, most of us hoped that such a vision would be articulated and built into a Kinijit for all people, not just for one political party. The public is waiting for this, but is becoming increasingly disillusioned as the reality of the continuing division and lack of direction is witnessed by those watching and hoping.

This movement must be transformed into something bigger, broader and more inclusive than any one political party. The political landscape of Ethiopia has changed and it is hard to foresee it ever being the same again. Ethiopians are unwilling to accept the old kind of dictatorships, one tribe dominated political parties and a general lack of interaction with the people. However, we reached such a point in the 70ties when there was a student-led movement, but division led to infighting and the movement got off track before coming to a halt. Hatred towards the other sides increased as family members and friends became embroiled in conflict. They were diverted from their main goals. When some spoke out about it honestly, they became actual casualties to it. Conflicted Ethiopians in charge at the time, fought against each other and instead of advancing the struggle for freedom, they defeated it themselves along with the Ethiopian people. Out of that failure, came Meles. His violent takeover of the government ended up enriching his small group of family and loyalists. Can we Ethiopians learn from our mistakes? Are we ready to listen to these lessons from the past?

One expectation we Ethiopians in North America should place on the Kinijit leaders is to go back to Ethiopia with resolution to this problem. They may have come to the US divided, but when they return to Ethiopia, they should go back either as a united group in reality instead of only in words. However, if this is not possible, they should go back with some clear decision to separate so that the Ethiopian public at home does not fall victim to it as we have here in the Diaspora.

We Ethiopians must articulate the kind of leaders we want. Do we want leaders like Mengistu and Meles or leaders who are dictators or rulers. Instead, we want people who will work for us; leaders who will listen, cry, eat, talk, live and suffer with us. We do not need leaders who are heroes today and tomorrow oppressors like Meles. We do not need leaders who are hand-picked by some unknown groups or by some outside foreign country. We need leaders who will represent all of us.

Last week, Bertukan and another member of the Kinijit went to court with our sister Lishan who had been arrested for protesting here in the United States for the Kinijit leaders. She was acquitted. This kind of support is what is needed. It is impossible to continue to do it person by person because there are 79 million of us, but it can be displayed in other ways. For instance, a strong and involved leadership could do much to speak out in some of the areas already mentioned. Such leadership cannot be only lip service, but should be followed up with actions. It might mean “going to court or rally” with Ogadenis to tell the world that the so-called ally of the US, Meles Zenawi, is the real terrorist and that the Ethiopian people want it to stop.

If the Kinijit leaders say Ethiopia is now one and that Kinijit represents the majority of Ethiopians, they must demonstrate it as never done before. They must speak out about the suffering of others ethnic groups not only when the representative of those ethnic groups are present. Any movement that does not speak or include all the ethnic groups is doomed to fail in this new climate of change. It used to be that what mattered was only what affected Addis Ababa or few regions. No more! Now, the only kind of leaders needed in Ethiopia are those who are ready to open up their arms to a movement that embraces minorities, women, the disabled, those with HIV and other disenfranchised citizens of Ethiopia.

These previously excluded Ethiopians are now waking up and will refuse to be used only for the crises in the country and ignored at all other times. Those marginalized are watching those leading right now to see how they handle their own problems as an indication of how they will handle the sensitive issues within the country that have been dividing us. How can we be brought together? If they do not resolve their own problem soon, people may lose confidence that they would be able to resolve the more serious crises that have divided Ethiopians into factions with legitimate complaints about our political system. For the sake of the people, let the leaders choose to lose in the smaller, less important battles so the more important battle of the Ethiopian people for freedom, justice, peace, equality and reconciliation is not lost for another fifty or a hundred years. We have lost our opportunities many times in the past. Will we do it again when we are so close to crossing the river to a better Ethiopia?

In summary, we hope that these leaders will embrace the larger concept of a movement based on principles rather than based on one individual or another. Their effectiveness in providing such a vision and leading Ethiopians in such a healthy and unifying way will give us far more information as to who should actually be leading us on the path. If they block the path or impede the progress of a non-political movement for freedom, they may need to step aside so that we Ethiopians do not lose what may be a fleeting opportunity for freedom and national reconciliation.

Right now, Senator Inhofe seems to be ready to send the movement for freedom and justice to the “dogs” and we should be ready to protect this newly born movement as Ethiopian mothers have always protected their young. In our judgments, we must focus on how these leaders are handling this conflict and if they are willing to work for the good of all Ethiopians. If they have to wait to confer with other Kinijit leadership in Ethiopia, let those decisions come quickly before more damage is done.

Right now lots of Ethiopians are confused not only because of this problem, but also because there is no vision being articulated that is broader than simply raising money and reiterating the eight points that we all already know. We know these eight points are good, but why in the world would Meles change now and give in to these eight points at this time? We need a clear vision and a strategic plan that gives guidance as to short and long-term goals that must be accomplished to achieve freedom, equality, peace and justice. We need to know where we are going with this struggle, how to get there and who will do it. Next year is a regional election. If we do not come up with a grassroots movement, what weight will we have in providing a change in the political environment that would allow genuine political choices to the people? There is then another national election in 2010—do the Ethiopian political parties have a plan? These are the kinds of things in which Ethiopians are interested rather than in the infighting.

How will this leadership bring out the voices of those who have never before been heard? The truth must be heard from Ethiopians throughout the streets, homes, towns and regions of the country who can tell what they have experienced rather than pretending that the “emperor is wearing clothes,” as the old child’s story talks about in “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” In this story, as the king rode through the streets with no clothes on, the king’s subjects were too afraid to say he had none. It took a small child to blurt out the truth. The misinformed senator is misrepresenting almost every fact about Meles and the current dismal state of life in Ethiopia. Who is able to stand up for all the people and blurt out the truth? If the leaders cannot come together themselves so they can lead, the less empowered must rise up and do so with a unified voice.

May God help Ethiopians to understand God’s presence, love and almighty power that can extend to not only each person, but to their neighbor. May humble people demonstrate love, forgiveness, integrity and generosity to others and as they do, may God protect the people and help them in the struggle to preserve the emerging freedom that is being born all over Ethiopia. We call on people of faith to pray for the kind of leadership we need at such a time as this.