



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Ethiopian Community at the Human Rights for Ethiopians in the Next Millennium in Washington DC.

November 17, 2007

My beloved fellow Ethiopians and other honored guests, thank you so much for coming tonight. This is a thrilling day that I have looked forward to for a long time, yet it is only a beginning. Let me explain, it is exciting for me to be here with other Ethiopians from all over our country who will contribute in their unique way in creating something much greater and grander—an Ethiopia that is not in pieces, but is one.

My hope is that out of hearing these voices arise up from all over our country, that we will begin to understand what it means to be a truly human first and then truly Ethiopian. May God bless this time together.

As we mention the regions from where these guests have come, you will notice that our regions are named after some of our ethnic groups. As you may know, Ethiopia is one of the only countries in the world that has named the states of its country after ethnic groups. Because we respect the diversity, language and culture of everyone, we do want to promote our common humanity above our ethnicity; however, we have little choice but to call these regions by their names.

Our goal is simply to broaden the sharing of information to include more of us, even though all of our regions are not represented. A representative from Afar was unable to get a visa and I did not yet have a contact from Harari National Regional State, but hope to do so in the near future. In addition, we did not have a representative from the Amhara region to report what was happening on the ground involving human rights issues in that area. We look forward to future opportunities to hear such information from these Ethiopian brothers and sisters.

In addition to representing regional human rights issues, that can vary even within regions between various ethnic groups, communities and villages, it was the intent of this meeting to hear about more broad based issues as well, such as our Ethiopian justice system. The agenda reflects that our Ethiopian brother, Mr. Alemayehu Zemedkun was supposedly representing the Amhara region, but that was an error on my part because we did not have a representative from Amhara region, I thought he could provide more information because he was working within the justice system across the country. However, it was his desire to speak up for justice for the whole country.

He was not representing a specific organization or ethnic group, but instead sharing from his experience and knowledge as a former Deputy Attorney General. I have great respect for him due to his ability, commitment to justice, his integrity and his moral courage in standing up against our flawed system of justice to the point he had to leave the country. As he said, “The justice system in Ethiopia is used as a weapon to suppress everybody and to keep the current politicians in power. It is affecting everyone.”

Another group we need to hear from is that of our women. Unfortunately, our invited guest was unable to come, but I strongly believe we need to hear from our Ethiopian sisters some time in the future. Those of us who are men, need to listen closely to the voice that can represent our mothers, our wives, our daughters and our sisters. They are us and at the heart of our family of Ethiopia. When they are doing well, so are we.

This is not a political meeting, but I hope all people of varying political views will feel welcome. To all of you political party members who are here, thank you for coming. I have heard that EPRDF supporters will be here also. You are so welcome. You are part of our family of Ethiopia and the Ethiopia of the next millennium. God loves you just like he loves each of us. You are equally part of that beautiful garden of Ethiopia I have so dreamed about where all the varieties of people within our borders, like flowers of every size, color, hue and shape, can come together to create a better Ethiopia for all the people.

I may not agree with you on many points, but an Ethiopia without you, is not an Ethiopia. Instead, what I will attempt to challenge you and others with tonight is to discard any ideas that devalue others as less than Ethiopian. You may not realize it, but as you devalue others, you end up devalued as well. Devalued people lead to a devalued culture that self-destructs. That is what is happening to our beloved country right now.

Human rights abuses towards others are based on the dehumanization of those we target with such actions. It is such thinking that is leading Ethiopia on a downward spiral to darkness. Instead of having bright hopes for the future, many are confused or even despairing as we start our journey into the next millennium. I am here to tell you that there is hope, but until the rays of light shine on the hidden and suffering people in the dark corners of our society, we will remain unfree and hungry for more than food can satisfy.

Remember, real freedom is the freedom in one's soul. Real peace and satisfaction has never come from dehumanizing others, accumulating material goods or possessing abundant power. Instead, if we are honest, we all are seeking deeper meaning to our existence. If we can come together and admit the commonality of our human yearning for such deeper meaning in our lives, it will help us begin to understand how to live humanly among each other—this will mark the beginning of a new Ethiopia.

I welcome all of you to this meeting regarding “Human Rights for Ethiopians in the Next Millennium.” Most of you have come here because you are people who are concerned about human rights and the future of our country. We need to start rethinking how to build a society that respects the rights of others where humanity is put before ethnicity and where the people are listened to instead of spoken for with no input from them.

For many years, many of our politicians have stood on the shoulders of the people at the grassroots level, not to represent them, but in order to advance their own interests. This is like climbing a tree where others give you a boost upwards, but when you reach the top, you eat the fruit yourself and don't share it with the people below. How can this go on? Most of our people are so poor that they have almost nothing more to give.

I start by asking each of you—will you be satisfied if nothing changes for the next 10, 20 or even 100 years? If not, let us consider together what we mean by human rights and who we are talking about. First of all, some may ask—human rights for which Ethiopians? If you asked different Ethiopians and they were truly honest, you might receive a variety of answers.

For instance, what would Meles say if he were totally honest? He might admit that human rights as he saw it, should be for himself, his wife, his children, his extended family members and those who would support him. How about if you went back to Mengistu, when he ruled Ethiopia as “the red terrorist?” He might include the same kinds of people as Meles.

Another question is—what is meant by human rights. We must even be careful to define what is meant as with both Meles and Mengistu, it seems to mean the right of a selected few to an education—like one in the western world for their own family members. Or, it might mean the right of one’s supporters to get a good job or a lucrative business opportunity, to wear nice clothes, to own a car or to live a life of similar privilege.

Under this definition, it is the privilege of a small minority of elite out of a population numbering nearly 80 million. This is the way Ethiopia has been for a long time—those in power and favor are entitled to privileges and opportunity way beyond the definition most of us have for basic human rights. These perks can then be used as enticements to persuade the reluctant to swear unswerving allegiance to whoever is on top.

However, what kind of answers would we receive if we asked an Anuak, an Oromo, an Amhara, an Ogadeni, a Tigrayan, a person from Benishangul-Gamuz, Afar or from the Southern Nations to define human rights? What did some of these representatives tell us tonight? They want equal opportunity to education, health care, clean water and jobs. They want to be able to enjoy the basic God-given rights of free speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, an independent judiciary and other such freedoms for all, not just for their own groups.

Others might admit that they are advocates for human rights mainly for their own ethnic group rather than for those outside of it. What would you say? What would God say? The answers we give are critical to us and will determine our success or failure in the next millennium.

Our brother Ibrahim from Benishangul-Gamuz has given us the example of the mirror of Ethiopia. He has looked into it and has not seen his reflection mirrored back. One man from his ethnic group—Berta—called me and told me that until we had mentioned the Berta in a recent AJC article, he had never seen their ethnic group’s name in print. Our great mirror of Ethiopia has never reflected their image or that of many other Ethiopians and look what we have been missing!

We have learned much from listening to these voices of our people tonight and this is just a start as there are many more such Ethiopian brothers and sisters out there for us to listen to and meet. Should they be considered Ethiopians deserving of human rights? This is why you may be here tonight as people who care about human rights in Ethiopia for the next millennium. There is the promise of abundant water if we dig deeply at the right location. Which location is this? It is where Ethiopians show genuine caring about others in our society. It will not be a dry well. This well should not be surrounded by a fence with a gatekeeper who asks one’s ethnic group before being allowed to pump out the water. We can appreciate ethnic differences while not making it a barrier.

The Anuak Justice Council started its work nearly four years ago. Before that, I never would have imagined being here myself, but then I never expected what happened on December 13th, 2003. Thanks and glory to God who made the work of the AJC emerge out of the ashes of despair following the genocide of my fellow Anuak and somewhere along the way, to broaden its focus into a work for the human rights of my fellow Ethiopians. It is only because of God, that I am standing here before you today and I give Him all the credit.

As I said, when the AJC was created, it was for the Anuak and its mission was to protect the rights of the Anuak wherever they were found. The Anuak deserve protection as their very survival is threatened and we continue to be concerned about them; yet, as you know by our work, our concern has now broadened to include all of Ethiopia.

Today I have a chance to thank Ethiopians that I did not know before December 13th for how you have changed my life. It all began since that day when over 400 of my fellow Anuak people were killed. It was out of that grief that I became a human rights advocate. God has worked in an amazing way to replace the ones I lost with more than 400 loving, caring, generous Ethiopians who I have met as a result of my loss. These Anuak who died can really never be replaced, but their deaths have been used by God to bring me together with all of you—something that never would have happened otherwise.

As we come together in new relationships, I see hope for our future that we will become a nation of people who not only protects one another from killing each other, but who can live in peaceful harmony with each other. In the past, Ethiopia has been neglected by none other than our own people and our leaders who did not fear God and devalued each other.

Human rights is not really grounded on human philosophies and manmade systems, it is instead grounded on the fact that God is our creator, who governs the universe. Secondly, He created human kind in His own image. He did not create some of us in His image and not others. That is why the new baby, the old man, the dark-skinned and the light-skinned, the most beautiful and the most humble of people, the rich, the poor, the evil, the righteous, the person in the mansion, in the bush or on the streets, the beggar, the prostitute, those who speak Oromo or Amharic or those who speak Anuak, English or Chinese, the head of a multi-national corporations, the head of governments, the illiterate, the most brilliant and those whose parents must care for them into adulthood, are all created in God's image and are equally important to Him. There is nothing we can do to be more created in God's image than what we presently are. Others, or even we ourselves, can try to take our humanity away, devaluing others or ourselves, but really, no one can really do so because it is a fact of creation.

However, another fact complicates this and that is we don't live perfectly in this world due to our flawed natures. We all know that and one of the first things we do is to devalue others by calling them not quite as human as ourselves. This is why we need laws that will hold us more accountable, but it will work better if it comes out of our hearts and souls as we can never totally legislate love and kindness.

We can pretend we agree with all of this, but not genuinely follow through. This is the heart of our problem in Ethiopia. We are pretending to be a democracy and pretending to be respect different ethnic groups in such things as our policy of ethnic federalism, but it is not working because it is only a cover. Yet, we all know it should be this way, even Meles knows this. Look at Meles and the TPLF. He understood that to gain power in Ethiopia, he had to be more inclusive and that he could not be an ethnically-based liberation front to the exclusion of others.

Meles left the TPLF for the EPRDF. This looked very good, at least at the onset, but we see it now much differently. It was for pretense only. He did not mean what he said. It looked as if Meles left a smaller ethnic organization for the larger, more inclusive one, which was supposed to have been a "revolutionary, democratic front" for the "Ethiopian people." But, we have learned that most of us must not be considered "true Ethiopians" because most of us have missed out on the benefits. Even more regrettably, instead of the EPRDF becoming more inclusive than the TPLF, it became less so, even leaving out many Tigrayans.

We know that instead of using our differences to make us stronger, the EPRDF has used our differences to keep us apart even in deceptive policies like I already mentioned, ethnic federalism which includes maintaining our own languages. These policies have not ensured that regions or ethnic groups would have better representation. Instead we are split up into controllable groups and are given incentives to stay that way.

Look at something like language. It has been used as leverage against each other. We can love and cherish our languages, but language is simply a tool meant to bring people together for good, not to divide us. Whether we speak in Amharic, English, Oromo or Somali should not be as important as whether we can effectively communicate with each other.

How can we bring about a culture within Ethiopia where there is encouragement to see everyone as equally valuable? What the EPRDF failed to do except in name only, we must now do. If Meles and other Woyane want to take part in this, they can join us even now as they are now controlling the government of our country. Even though the “language” of the EPRDF is force and domination, people can change so, who knows? But it must start by calling an immediate halt to the horrendous atrocities being committed against the Ethiopian people.

It is not too late to help usher in real democratic process and real empowerment of the people. However, if Meles refuses to change, he eventually will fail by following such small-minded, one ethnic-group politics. Most of us are no longer willing to tolerate this, especially as the vast majority of Ethiopians wake up to their basic human rights. If Meles was clever enough to foresee how important it is to be inclusive in order to win the power back in 1991, he should be shrewd enough now, to pro-actively choose to be good to his word in reversing the harm he has done in the last years to instead now contribute to bringing about good for all of the Ethiopian people. However, since it is unlikely to happen, we must consider how to plan concrete steps to achieve our goal of human rights for all the people of Ethiopia.

Instead of being victims of the actions of others, how can we develop a grand strategy to bring about human rights that would define specific achievable goals for the short and long term along with methods to get there? If we are not thoughtful, we will not know if the road we are on will lead us to success or defeat. If we endeavor to do this in a narrow-minded compartmentalized fashion, fighting against each other instead of for each other, our country will continue to disintegrate.

For instance, one of the reasons we are failing is because Meles’ grand strategy plan was for a few select elite. This approach will not succeed over time as evidenced by nearly every region in the country having human rights organizations based on serious abuses of citizens. Yet, we can continue to work separately as ethnically or regionally based organizations, each doing the work separately from each other or we can create a broader, more powerful organization made up of all of us.

This is an organization for men and women, of every age, of every ethnicity, of any region, of any political affiliation, of any economic or educational level and from any faith or non-faith background. It should be a founded on people who desire to free our beloved Ethiopia from the shackles that have enslaved it for years so our nation of diverse people can join together, with the help of God, to meet its potential.

We Ethiopians have enormous assets, but have been weighed down not only by bad government, but by the worst aspects of our own tribalistic thinking—ethnic hate, division, revenge politics, exclusionary politics and entitlement thinking for one’s own group. A grand plan must be based on a foundation, not on individuals, ethnic groups or regions. Otherwise, once the power and privilege is passed on to others, our own groups and regions are repeatedly left out.

For instance, if Meles left power, should those in the EPRDF be left behind? Absolutely not! They deserve equal human rights as do all Ethiopians, including minorities who otherwise would be permanently left out. Human rights should not change at every election or we will end up in constant deadly competition between each other and never want to give up power. This requires us to stand up for our brother and sister Ethiopians.

From what we have seen and heard today, we have heard the sad stories of the human rights abuses of our people in different regions of Ethiopia and among women. We all need to feel the pain of another more—the Oromo to the Afar, the Ogadeni to the Benishangul, the Gambellan to the Tigrayan, the Amhara to the Southern Nations, and we need to seek out the stories of others because we care about them. We men must listen to our women.

We have been brainwashed and hardened into thinking that the suffering of others is different from that of our own and so we do not care. This is not just immoral, but it is directly opposite to what God calls us to do, especially as in God’s eyes, we are all equal. Instead, we have dehumanized entire groups of people so that when we see their suffering, we ignore it. It is because we are only seeing the “little picture” and as long as we do, we Ethiopians will suffer alone in our isolation.

How can we break out of this kind of thinking? If we ask which Ethiopian we are talking about who is entitled to human rights in the next millennium, we will continue to exclude. If you look at humans the way God does, we will recognize His **“Royal Law”** rather than manmade laws for one’s own self-interest. Under such law, mercy will surpass judgment. The royal law does not oppress, devalue or play favorites. We will be humans first, Ethiopians second and then we can identify with our regions, villages, families and names. As these representatives of Ethiopia have stood before us today, they have stood as human beings first, all created in God’s image. This is what should shape all of our society.

How do we proceed from here?

We need to:

- Hold a strategic planning meeting
- Develop leaders who can understand this worldview based on God and humanity
- Reconciliation
- Form special interest sub-groups who can strategize about how to achieve certain goals: business/private enterprise, law, post trauma reintegration of military, and other traumatized by losses, not hand out society/ help in recovery, compensation/ land ownership/ youth/social problems like alcohol abuse/women/

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (II Chronicles 7:14)

May God plant the seeds of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and generosity that will grow into a great tree that shades our country.

Thank you.