



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

In a historic meeting, representatives from diverse regions of Ethiopia came together to share their concern for the dismal state of human rights in the country.

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The Ethiopian Human Rights in the Next Millennium event, sponsored by the Anuak Justice Council on Saturday, November 17, 2007, in Washington D.C. was greeted with great enthusiasm by participants and attendees. In a historic meeting, representatives from diverse regions of Ethiopia came together to share their concern for the dismal state of human rights in the country, hoping to work together for the first time for comprehensive solutions.

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.

In the past, there was little communication between segments of the population that were divided linguistically, geographically, culturally and by widespread categorization of each group that alienated one from the other—calling others separatists, terrorists, barias, privileged and so forth. But after coming together and sharing stories, participants learned they had much in common.

Addressing the audience, a representative of the Ogaden said it well. "Let me dispel a few myths. I don't know if you guys have heard, but Ogaden people are supposed to be fanatics, they are supposed to be terrorists. They are supposed to be some scary Islamic fundamentalists; I am Ogaden Somali, and I am neither of those things. I am Muslim, and I just want to show you that as a Muslim man I am standing here at a church discussing Human Rights on the Sabbath. So that makes a big circle."

As each representative spoke of similar repression and human rights violations, what emerged was that the human rights abuses were affecting everyone; that the oppression was widespread and the lack of development, opportunity and political representation was the same, they realized that they had more reasons to come together than to separate.

A participant from Benishangul-Gumuz summed it up, "Alone we are weak and helpless, but now I see that in creating an umbrella movement where the people on the ground come together, is the only way we can be strong."

Participants were excited as this new dialogue between each other brought not only new friendships, but with it, a renewed hope that Ethiopia may remain as a country where humanity comes before ethnicity, country before region, and region before village. As stories were told of the suffering and oppression of the people, bridges of compassion were built between those who had never talked before.

We all know very well that most of our political organizations and civic and religious institutions who should be the ones that should be guiding us to a better future, but instead they are fighting and divided, resulting in the continued suffering of all Ethiopians at the hands of the EPDRF that is founded on hatred and division. However, the emphasis of this meeting was on establishing commonalities and feeling the pain of others so that new partnerships could begin. Participants voiced their support of this goal and indicated that the spirit of unity had already begun by seeing their fellow Ethiopians across the table—that table being covered with the flag of Ethiopia.

Mr. Obang Metho said he was disappointed that more Ethiopians did not show their support for a more inclusive Ethiopia by attending this meeting; especially knowing that what Ethiopia needs today is unity even more than it needs democracy. This is not just the unity of the past where other Ethiopians are mentioned only when they are in the room or are otherwise visible.

The unity we need now is based on mutual respect and trust where we listen to and interact with other Ethiopians rather than just talking about them. Yet, despite the poor attendance, especially in a city where more Ethiopians live than anywhere else in North America, it did not suppress the excitement of those at the meeting who saw it as a new beginning and as the only way to restore life into a dying nation.

- – You can get in touch with Obang O. Metho by email at: advocacy@anuakjustice.org

Mr. Metho stated that some Ethiopians might be afraid that by including these new groups it will mean others will be excluded. He said, “Don’t worry. This would be morally wrong and is “old thinking.” He said, “No one should be excluded in an Ethiopia where the people are valued as equally created in the image of God—this definitely includes Woyanne supporters.”

However, many might not yet understand how human rights is not simply stopping human rights abuses; instead, the failure to respect such rights of all people, affect every part of our society—government, law, civil society, education, health care and the economy. Even government policies regarding land ownership, laws regarding business development and the provision of credit at reasonable interest rates for small and medium sized private enterprise along with micro-enterprise are affected by how we view the human rights of our fellow Ethiopian.

Division, repression, suspicion and human rights abuses are a natural outgrowth of failing to regard one’s fellow Ethiopian as equally human and equally Ethiopian. It takes great force to repress the thirst for freedom in the human soul, yet where such humanity is embraced, all can benefit.

The participants at the meeting all embraced the concept of setting up an umbrella organization to advance the interests of human rights of all Ethiopians. Plans are underway to organize a strategic meeting to begin a movement for a new Ethiopia.

If you missed this opportunity to attend the meeting, it was filmed and recorded for the benefit of those who did not attend. Please check back for further details when they become available.

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