



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

What's Wrong with Ethiopia?

Anuak Justice Council (AJC)

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What is wrong with Ethiopia? What is becoming very obvious is that it all depends who you ask. We speak to many Ethiopians every day who tell us about the desperate conditions of the people within Ethiopia. From Ogadenis and reporters like Jeffrey Gettleman of the New York Times, we hear of the horrific human rights abuses and an increasingly worsening humanitarian crisis surpassing that of Darfur in the Ogaden.

We hear stories of widespread suffering, death and hardship of thousands of civilian Ogadenis caused not only by this manmade crisis, but also as the direct result of the killings, rape and torture of civilian Ogadenis at the hands of Meles Zenawi's military. Additional casualties are among the military themselves, some of whom are doctors, government workers and other civilians who have been forced against their will into military service and sent to the frontlines—frequently without training, uniforms, guns, equipment or supplies. They become easy targets.¹

In other parts of Ethiopia, in addition to the increasing repression of the people, we hear of the skyrocketing inflation, widespread malnourishment, homelessness, unemployment and the overall increasing poverty of the people. On most all the major indexes that assess countries as they compare to others, Ethiopia is nearly always found close to the bottom of the list, even in comparison to other African countries. Yet, if you listen to Meles, his government spokespeople and a good number of respected Western government representatives, their statements almost completely deny the reports of the Ethiopian people; particularly in regards to the human rights abuses within the country and the suppression of the democratic process.

However, these reports are authenticated by human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and some non-governmental organizations like the International Red Cross, despite the fact that most of these reports do not find their way to the mainstream media. However, most concerning of all is not these sources who deny the stories of the people, but the sudden silence of Ethiopians, especially following the split of the Kinijit! This must be addressed and remedied. Foremost, it must be understood that the Kinijit is not, and in fact, was never, the only way out of our dilemma. In fact, they have contributed greatly to our movement and all that work is not lost regardless of the problems they face today. Please keep that in mind as we move on to more specifics.

Ethiopians regularly, on a one-to-one basis, call us at the AJC and ask for answers to critical questions as they face the harsh realities of daily life. These questions do not come from outsiders or people distant from the situation, but from our family members, friends and close contacts within Ethiopia who best know what life is like at the grass-roots level.

There are three basic questions that are being asked regularly: **how long will this struggle continue, what will bring it to a stop and who will do it?** The focus of this article will be on the last question, as it will influence the answers to the first two.

Some Ethiopians say that ever since the Kinijit leaders were released, the reality of their division has killed the spirit of the movement so much so that some Kinijit supporters or workers in the country and

¹ See Jeffrey Gettleman's article....

abroad have now aligned with Meles, replacing the struggle for freedom and democracy with what they consider “practical opportunism.”

These same people seem ready to give up because they see no resolution of the conflict within the Kinijit. The disillusionment with these leaders is made worse because the Kinijit leaders were elevated to the level of heroes, a level of expectation no one can meet. Yet, because of this, they were seen as the only ones who could bring about needed change in Ethiopia. We do not agree!

Some are becoming discouraged, saying that the challenges are too great—that Ethiopians are too weak to overpower a dictator supported by strong allies such as the United States who is providing half a billion US dollars every year to the current government. We do not agree!

Another major group has been the “bystander group.” They think that there are people who should do the work of fighting for freedom, justice and democracy for them while they sit by, doing little or nothing. Many of these are filled with fear, believing that others should make all the sacrifices and that they do not have the skills, resources or gifts to contribute. We do not agree.

However, neither do we want to underestimate the difficulty of the battle that must be won to free Ethiopia. It will not be easy, but with God’s help, it is not impossible. Please remember this as we consider our identified opponent, Meles Zenawi and the government of the EPRDF. First of all, Meles is an Ethiopian. He thinks like an Ethiopian, lives among Ethiopians and knows very well the strengths and weaknesses of Ethiopians. Because of this, he knows very well how to use the weaknesses of our people to accomplish his purposes. He has two main weapons. The first is his divide and conquer policies. This has proven to be a favorite tool of Meles’. He has found it quite easy to manipulate Ethiopians to his advantage by using this approach. However, it is within our grasp to stop this death and life game—we can refuse to play.

For Meles to stay in power, all others must fight with each other so they do not unite to fight against him. In this way, his minority government can repress everyone else, who otherwise could much more easily overcome him. Right now, many Ethiopians are falling for this. In fact, our whole society seems to be totally captive to this mindset of fighting each other. Even if it is non-violent in form, we see infighting as a destructive force among all sorts of groups and organizations in Ethiopian society. Kinijit is only one example. This kind of dysfunction is tearing apart our society. Are we capable of changing this? Of course, especially with God’s help!

Meles’ second means of using divide and conquer tactics to stay in power might surprise you. Meles would rather have individual ethnic or regional separatist insurgency groups fight against him, one by one, rather than have many come together in a united front against him. As long as Meles can ensure that one’s identity is never nationalistic or “Ethiopian,” but instead, is totally “ethnic” or “regional,” he can succeed in maintaining his power. It is also to Meles’ advantage if these various groups keep their own languages so they find it difficult, if not impossible, to effectively communicate with others. (By the way, think how hard it would be in the United States if everyone spoke different languages. This might be the reason that Ethiopians quickly enter ESL classes when they arrive in America or likewise in other countries.)

By understanding that Meles is seeking division in order to stay in power, it is easy to comprehend what his worst fear would be—unity. Unity is a powerful threat to the very foundation of this regime. Yet, it appears to be very hard for many Ethiopians. However, we believe Ethiopians are smart and capable of understanding and changing even if it has not happened yet. However, when we finally unite behind a common goal, it will be a powerful force for change. You should have been at the Anuak Justice Council’s meeting in Washington D.C. on November 17, 2007 when our people from all over Ethiopia

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came to share their stories and to work together to the benefit of all—it was an exciting moment with much more to come!

We must remember, our task is so much more than merely replacing Meles with a Bereket Simon or the likes of another Mengistu. It must mean a transforming fundamental change of thinking where “me-only” or “my turn to eat” types of leaders are replaced with leaders who uphold the God-given human rights of the people. What we need are leaders who value and empower the people-- promoting the best interests of the people and the nation rather than form another authoritarian dictatorship.

Such a “me-only” government, by its very nature, is built on the repression and oppression of the “have-nots” underneath them. In order to keep everything for themselves, they must abuse the rights of the people and corrupt the system of justice when those who are excluded start to complain; otherwise they will lose control.

The second weapon of Meles’ is lying to outsiders about what is actually happening—telling them the exact opposite of the truth. For instance, he will eloquently talk about decentralization while secretly controlling every level of government down to the village level. If anyone dares tell the truth or complain, they are “destroying the good image of the country.” If they do not stop, there are many ways to punish the truth-teller. Yet, many will fail to really test this due to fear. This is because he knows that Ethiopians are held back by fear and thus he does his best to promote a fear-based culture, again, in order to exercise more control.

For instance, fear is a driving force that can affect Ethiopians both inside and outside of Ethiopia. Those inside the country face the threats of imprisonment, torture, loss of opportunity and even loss of life. Many of those outside of Ethiopia still have family members inside. They are afraid that speaking up against the Meles regime will result in reprisals for their family members inside the country. Such an incident occurred to a family member of mine, my uncle, after the first Anuak Memorial Service on the first anniversary of the genocide of the Anuak that was observed in December of 2004. The very next morning following the service, my uncle in Gambella was thrown into prison and tortured while those torturing him made snide comments about the service that had taken place in Minnesota. Amnesty International intervened and my uncle was treated.

Other intimidation might take different forms. Meles has offered easy-entry land and business opportunities to those in the Diaspora who quickly understand that if they speak out, they may lose their investments—a type of “**purchased silence.**” Such fear sustains Meles’ control. In utilizing fear in this way, Meles has gained voluntary cooperation from Ethiopians. In this way, Ethiopians, both in and out of the country, have erected their own prison bars around themselves. However, keep in mind that Meles is also Ethiopian and appears to also be very sensitive to fear—especially fear of our unity. Keep this in mind as we seek reconciliation between our people.

A third problem to Ethiopians is not necessarily a calculated weapon of Meles’, but all the same, it is destroying us. It is our identity as people who need caretakers. We have become dependent on others and on their hand-outs. As we are in a perpetual state of dependence, we think it is up to others to take care of us, even handing us our freedom like they do bags of corn and wheat from an aid agency that replace what we should be growing ourselves, especially if we could own land. Instead, what we have become is a “**hand-out**” culture where we believe we are incapable of doing it ourselves.

We also disagree with this, but because many Ethiopians have lived under this kind of hand-out culture for too long, we have gotten used to waiting for others to give us what we need until we forget about our own abilities and give up. In terms of our freedom, we have become bystanders, waiting for the United

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States, the European Union, Canada or Kinijit leaders to do it for us without our help, getting angry with them when it is not delivered to us in short order.

Along with this kind of thinking comes a fourth serious problem for many Ethiopians—hero worship, where we expect our leaders, like the Kinijit, to single-handedly bring all that we need to us without any effort on our own, thinking that everyone else, including oneself, is incapable. It is like waiting hungrily at the side of the table for someone else to bring us something to eat when we simply might have to learn how to cook for ourselves or help someone else who is already doing it. Before the Kinijit leaders were released, there was more activity going on than now. What has happened to our own creativity, our resourcefulness and our initiative?

We cannot stand by, waiting for someone else to bring our food, our freedom, our peace or to solve the problems for us without any effort of our own. Some even expect to live comfortably, waiting for all the benefits while expecting others do all the sacrificing, even if it means their lives. Consider how you spend your time or your money. When it comes to attending a meeting on social justice, a few Ethiopian people will come, but when a popular Ethiopian musician comes to town, thousands show up and pay for it.

Another phenomenon in Ethiopia is when comfort, entertainment or a need for direction, leads some to simply follow the strong rather than the admirable, the courageous or the righteous. In other words, self-interest, fear and opportunism can too easily overcome one's moral principles, convincing some to take the side of the Ethiopian bully until a new stronger alternative emerges. Once that new choice presents himself or herself, one quickly changes positions once again. In the meantime, such flip-flops of allegiances cause death and misery to many others. However, if those who benefited in the short-term, opened their eyes and consciences to their own blame in furthering the suffering of others, change could come one person at a time.

Self-interest, escape and daily survival can be replaced by deciding to contribute to the well-being of others, including one's own children and grandchildren. We need to rethink our choices or the way they are out of balance. If Ethiopians do not do the work now to free themselves, freedom might not come until there is a generation willing to do so. We should not wait for them to do it. It is our responsibility.

Look at Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf who is under extreme pressure by a strong and united opposition group in his country. He is really no different than Meles and Ethiopia is similar to Pakistan in being a strategic country in the War on Terror. However, the Pakistanis saw themselves as the only ones to free themselves. Their action led Musharraf to take off his army uniform. When the people united and came out in large numbers, it left the United States with no other option than to accept some of these changes, all due to the power of the people.

Musharraf has now even started talking about holding an election in January. All this happened because the people invested in freeing themselves. There is still much to be done and he is likely to find new ways to cling to power, but it is an excellent start. However, it is clear that if Pakistanis on the inside had not risen up, these kinds of responses would never have been given by Musharraf nor would they have been forced upon him by outsiders like his Western allies in the War on Terror. Ethiopians can do the same.

In other words, if Ethiopians rise up with a united voice, outsiders will have to respond to such a strong opposition, but the outsiders would never have initiated it on their own. The bill, HR#2003, is the result of much work from the committee and the Ethiopian people, with the great support of many in the House of Representatives. If it successfully passes the Senate and is not vetoed by President Bush, it can produce leverage, but it still cannot replace the united, but peaceful action of Ethiopians.

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Yet, instead of Ethiopians increasing the level of their action, we are hearing that many Ethiopians are doing the opposite—they are giving up. This is not an option! Each person should see themselves as one soldier of action who helps create the united front of a thousand or a million, who together can win the victory. Individual people are what make up every part of our society—like the government, the police force, the educational system, the military, the justice system and so forth. It is through individual people that groups are made—no other way. Without individuals participating in this struggle, we will not find the necessary group solution. If we fail to unite to help, we may later share increasing misery until others who come after us gather the courage, conviction and strength to complete what we should be doing now.

Ethiopian people must not see themselves as observers, wishing that someone else would set them free. We must stop worshiping leaders, stop being controlled by fear, stop being opportunistic and instead join in as active participants, each one of us actively contributing to a much greater whole. If we isolate ourselves from being part of the tree of Ethiopia, it will wither and die for lack of care. Each one Ethiopian is part of the count that adds up to over 80 million Ethiopians.

What would have happened when the Italians invaded Ethiopia with their more sophisticated weapons if our ancestors had given up without a fight? What would have happened if Martin Luther King had preferred music and dancing to civil rights marches and sacrifice? What would South Africa be like today if the African National Congress or Nelson Mandela had signed an agreement with the Apartheid government to go into exile to live his own life rather than serving 27 years in prison? What would have happened if the people of Yugoslavia had not risen up against Milosovich in Belgrade when even the police and army joined against him, the people of the country would never have been freed and he would have never ended up in the International Criminal Court? What would have happened if the people of Ukraine had not risen up in the Orange Revolution, where they stayed in front of the Parliament for days, demanding the peoples' rights?

What we can learn from this history is that those who are oppressed are always the first to rise up to challenge and sacrifice and then the outsiders will support them because it is their moral obligation when it comes to this point. Therefore, giving up is not an option for us! If we trust in God and follow His lead, we will not be alone, but as the expression goes, it is easier to guide a moving boat than one stuck in the sand. Let us be willing to pray, listen and act. Let us not become distracted with selfish pursuits.

Think about the parable in the Bible Jesus told of the Good Samaritan. The person who was the “good neighbor” was the one who took action to care for the needs of another who was wounded by robbers at the side of the road. Opportunism, greed, selfishness, giving up and fanaticism—meaning, investing in Meles right now while he is in power, thinking our investments and he will last forever—will not bring what you think.

Forget Meles for the moment and look what has happened to leaders and their “kingdoms” of the past—they are all gone now, despite the arrogance of most of them. Think about the Pharaohs of Egypt and the Caesars of the Roman Empire—they are defeated and dead. King Nebuchanezzar of Babylon bragged about what his hands had made and he ended up having a mental breakdown, eating grass like an animal of the field. Jeremiah warned King Zedekiah who refused to listen. He was led to Babylon as a slave. Think about the fall of Hitler, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the overthrow of Mengistu who had more guns than EPLF and TPLF combined! The list can go on and on. **If they all can collapse, so can Meles!** Some Ethiopians have made investments that are only assured if Meles continues in power. Some are choosing such investments over the lives of the oppressed of Ethiopia. Investing in something that will not last—where there are such devastating human costs—is not God's way. An example is Ethiopian

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Meles supporters who deny the existence of human rights abuses so that they can carry on with their personal affairs. This is morally wrong!

Think twice about what you do. Just because there are no strong leaders right now, giving up or caving in to Meles should not be a moral option! Do not expect others to do your share just like you cannot expect others to breathe for you.

Death, the lack of prosperity and an overwhelming lack of well-being among most Ethiopians has resulted from a lack of action—particularly, a lack of united action that demonstrates empathy for others outside one's own group. Our children and our people are starving, homeless, dying from lack of clean water and health care. Our Ethiopian sisters and brothers are being killed by our own government, yet so many who could help are acting as bystanders, showing little heart for the misery of others. This is morally wrong!

Meles is only part of our problem—we are the other part. We must humanize our fellow Ethiopians, reconcile with them and then unite. Only then can we tell Meles to take off his uniform like the Pakistanis told Musharraf to do. Only if we become united, strong and principled, will we be able to offer something better than what we have with Meles. **Please remember, the problem is not only with him, but also with us.**

If we realize that, we will know that we have to ready ourselves before we will be able to change Ethiopia. **For us to do it well, our tribal thinking must be eradicated.** While we ignore the plight of other Ethiopians, fighting with each other with guns supplied by outsiders, we kill each other like dogs while these same or different outsiders like Chinese come in to take our natural resources. While this is going on, we are so distracted with our divisions and competitions that we hardly notice.

Ethiopians in the Diaspora live in neighborhoods and shop in grocery stores with Koreans, Chinese, Mexicans, Russians, Somalis and Ghanaians but in Ethiopia we look down or have hatred toward other Ethiopians ethnic groups. In doing so, we violate God's laws! We must wake up and change our ways as we realize that we are responsible for much of our own misery. Our crisis has solutions to it. It is not hopeless, but neither will it be easy! If we do not persevere, we will lose.

Can you imagine what America would be if George Washington had given up against the British? Can you imagine what Europe would be like today if Hitler and Mussolini had not been defeated? It took people to rise up in a united effort to defeat these formidable opponents. It took persistence and sacrifice. It requires the same from us.

We must leave behind our victim mentality that we have accepted for so long, paralyzing us from taking action. We must leave behind our dependency on foreign aid and on outsiders that give us excuses to blame others rather than to take independent action. **We must leave behind our dependency on “heroes” no matter who they are.** We have made such human people, with human failings, into false gods that we worship rather than placing our faith in the one and only true God, the Creator of all things, God Almighty and God All Merciful.

What will Ethiopia be like in the future? It is up to us, with God's help, to bring about a more humane Ethiopia, not only for ourselves, but for our descendants. Living one's life “well” is one of the most peace-giving, joy-giving satisfactions to experience at our deaths. We will all die at our appointed time. The only thing to truly fear is wasting our lives and wishing we had not done so, only after it is too late. It is not late for us now. It will not be easy, but we must call on God to give us the strength, the wisdom, the empathy and the courage to do the right thing!

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On the other hand, many are expecting a prolonged battle, but one never knows what God has planned and therefore we should be prepared. For example, what will happen if Meles and his government suddenly collapsed?

The horrible crimes being committed by Meles' troops in the Ogaden or the impending war with Eritrea could lead to unexpected consequences for Meles. It could also happen in ways we never anticipated—in God's own timing and in God's own way.

If it does, will we be ready as a people? Will the many years of hardship harden or soften our hearts and attitudes towards other Ethiopians whom we have not previously known or appreciated? Will we follow the rule of law and our consciences or the rule of the jungle? What will control us—love or hate, anger or forgiveness, vengeance or justice, chaos or order?

Who are we Ethiopians? These are difficult times. The next time you are asked, 'who will free us,' consider saying, "I will do my **"Dirsha"** share. With God's help, I am part of the solution." We have spent much time pointing out what is wrong with Ethiopia, but in conclusion, the most important point is this: what is wrong with Ethiopia can only be made right by Ethiopians, with God's help and guidance. It is only when Ethiopians are united in genuine unity, not a unity only of those in the elite or of those in power. What we are talking about is not the false unity of Meles, {Ethnic Federalism} only accomplished through force, bribes or manipulation, but true unity based on mutual respect, trust, shared power, tolerance and acceptance.

We witnessed such unity this last month when Ethiopians from seven different Ethiopian regions came together at the Anuak Justice Council's meeting in Washington D.C. and sat side by side, wanting to find ways to work together to create an Ethiopia where humanity is put before ethnicity. These people shared stories and concerns with each other for the first time and found many commonalities. We are determined to carry on in advancing these commonalities and other new friendships between Ethiopians, which are based on increasing our understanding and acceptance of each other. We are in the process of talking about what we can do to accelerate the coming together of all Ethiopians to create a more united Ethiopia.

The cry for democracy has been stifled both by the incumbent regime and its opponents. In a telling parable of the African condition, we have been walking on a single well-worn path where a select and privileged few lead, some follow blindly hoping for small rewards, some are pushed off the path to lives of misery and some are beaten into submission.

We need to define a new path one which is wide and smooth where we can march together, side by side, choosing our direction through consensus. On our path no one group dominates, no one has a special claim to power, we are all-inclusive and we all share in the fruits of our cooperation whatever region it may be, whatever ethnic group, whatever religion, whatever gender, whatever age we may be.

We seek a new path where we stress our Ethiopian-ness or African-ness, where we seek life enhancement for all our Ethiopian people. Instead of a quest for power, we seek empowerment for all, instead of grasping for wealth, we seek opportunity for all, instead of prestige, we seek dignity for all, instead of privilege, we seek justice for all.

None of this will be easy to be sure. We cannot change the past, but we can create the future in a way which confirms our African heritage and traditions instead of trying to impose a system of values and institutions imported from elsewhere. Our call is to all Ethiopians regardless of our differences to join together and celebrate our common link to the land and move as one on a wider path to a more enlightened future.

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More on this Movement for New Ethiopia will be forthcoming after the beginning of the New Year. For now, do not give up on this struggle. We must persevere together in this work until peace, equality, justice, prosperity and life returns to our beloved land.

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