



## ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

*Justice, Peace and Freedom*

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### **A Message of Hope for the New Year from the Anuak Justice Council**

**January, 20, 2008**

In the year 2007, the Anuak Justice Council has come closer to many Ethiopians from all over the country. This was not by accident. Despite the great marginalization and discrimination of the people of Gambella and despite the massacre of the Anuak people who have never really recovered from the losses from one of the worst atrocities planned and carried out by the EPRDF government and despite the indifference that kept most Ethiopians silent following these acts, we were convinced that we must reach out to other Ethiopians.

Our perspective on the crisis convinced us that national solutions are needed and that these cannot be accomplished by focusing on isolated sections of our people, no matter the degree of their suffering and misery at this point. Added work may not produce added benefits, especially added sustainable benefits. Even though it is very hard to take our focus away from this to the larger picture, we believe there is no other way. Ethiopians must join together in strong solidarity of purpose if we are going to overcome our individually experienced pain.

Before we can ever come together in solidarity, we first need to get to know, respect and trust each other, just like we in the AJC have gotten to know so many other Ethiopians during 2007. It has been a year where we have reached out to others and what we have discovered from our fellow Ethiopians, gives us hope and expectation for the coming year. It all started with openness and the belief that we cannot win this battle for freedom alone—Ethiopians need each other.

A recent best selling book about Ethiopia sums it up in its title, “**There is No Me Without You.**” There is no question that this is the direction in which we must go; however, we did not anticipate what a grand journey it would be simply because of the Ethiopians we met along the way. This is the joy we found in 2007 and the joy we anticipate in 2008 as we look forward to deepening these relationships and still building new ones. Come along with us now, so we can travel this rough road together, sharing with each other the invaluable silver lining of an otherwise difficult struggle. A rough road, filled with obstacles, is always easier with others at your side.

Over four years ago, when the massacre of the Anuak occurred in December 2003, Anuak felt alone and isolated. We Anuak did not really know other Ethiopians; neither did they know us. But as the AJC became convinced that the root problems of the Anuak could not be overcome by only Anuak, we reached out to other Ethiopians, even though some Anuak among us, disagreed. However, as we did, we were touched and inspired by the Ethiopians we met—by their courage, their determination, their love, their care—by you name it!

Now we have met with so many remarkable Ethiopians from many different ethnic groups that we are overwhelmed with the beauty and variety of our fellow-Ethiopians. All of them have touched us and taught us so much more about our shared humanity. These friendships have broken down many of the negative stereotypes that have been promoted and exaggerated in the past. Hopefully, the same applies to us.

Before going on, it must be further clarified as to who is Ethiopian. In the past under Haile Selassie, Hailemariam Mengistu and now under Meles Zenawi, a lot of us were left out, but times have changed for many thinking Ethiopians. When we now speak of Ethiopians, this means anyone who lives within the borders of Ethiopia. All of these people are 100% Ethiopian, 100% African and 100% human! This is a great unifier that God gave to us when He created us—all of humankind—in His image, making us all of equal value, regardless of the superficial differences between us.

Because of this truth, we have a vision for a new Ethiopia, one that would be very changed from what we have had in the past. If we consider how our Creator God has instructed us humans to behave towards each other: it is with love, concern and respect. It is clear, if we do this, we all will benefit from it. In carrying this out in real life, God calls us to love others before they love us, just like He loved us first before we loved Him.

**“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.....Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”(I John 4:19-21)**

In the past, even today some of us have too often done the opposite—in hating, mistreating or ignoring other Ethiopians, resulting in our all-encompassing misery. **“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. (I John 3:15)** However, as we open up to each other, those new relationships will give fertile ground for a different kind of outcome—one that is absolutely needed for a new and better Ethiopia.

We have seen many examples of this in the past year and as a result, we are seeing the creation of a new kind of Ethiopian family—one of brotherhood and sisterhood—something that has only happened through reaching out to each other. We have realized that we are more alike than different. God certainly intended people to reach out in these ways: **to show care, love, support and respect to one another.** This is one of those truths God has given us that is reliable in practice. When tried, it does not come back empty.

The AJC was created because of the suffering of the Anuak people who felt singled out by the EPRDF, but as we talked to so many other Ethiopians we learned about the same kind of suffering and deprivation. We heard the similar stories of how others in different groups and areas throughout the country had also faced death by execution, arbitrary detentions, torture, starvation, lack of education for their children, death from malaria, typhoid or cholera—their men, women and children dying just like the Anuak.

Some might have thought that because the TPLF is controlling the government that Tigrayans have not faced such problems, but that is an illusion for the many Tigrayans who are not part of the elite or who are not “pro-government.” We have come to know that some Tigrayans are just as bad off or even worse off than some of the others in ethnic groups without power. We only really found this out after we started meeting and knowing Tigrayans. Our preconceived stereotypes were again broken.

Once we learned these things about them and others, we could no longer only think of the Anuak who died, but saw and heard about the grief of other mothers who had lost their husbands, sons or daughters in Addis, in the Southern Nations or in Benishangul-Gumuz. We heard testimony of the thousands of young men and women, imprisoned for nothing more than speaking out for their rights—the Amhara, the Tigray or Harari, others were shot or imprisoned only because they were suspected of being from some separatist group like the OLF or the ONLF. We heard about the lack of development, medical care and educational opportunities from most everyone. Their suffering has become ours. It doesn't matter which ethnicity or region someone comes from anymore, they all have left a big hole in our hearts because they are our family. They are Ethiopians, Africans, human beings—they are us.

We think of the refugees who left the country, fearing they would be persecuted; however, many died as they were trying to escape for a better opportunity elsewhere. We think of the thousands of young children near death, with swollen stomachs, dirty faces, no clothes, with flies hovering around their infected, oozing eyes, who do not have any understanding how their hunger and neglect is directly related to governance ruled by greed, corruption and exploitation of the people they are supposed to care about.

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We think of the millions of our children who continue to be in rags, picking through garbage, carrying heavy loads, working as young prostitutes, while those at the top of Ethiopian government struggle to enrich themselves, their foreign corporations, governments and aid agencies. We think of Ethiopians who are born and who die before ever seeing any opportunity. We think of all of these and hold these people in our thoughts and hearts. They are our people and **being “our people” does not only include our siblings, relatives or tribes.**

What we have learned through this is that they are all equal members of our Ethiopian family, but the government or elite has tried to destroy any possible unity by drumming up fear between each other. When is the last time you heard Meles call for real unity? He uses the term only for pressuring conformity to his agenda. Truthfully, has there been any worse regime than this for creating division? We have failed to be human towards each other. When we have listened to Meles it has only hardened our hearts further.

In 2008, if we start reaching out to others, we will form relationships that matter to us. It is only natural then to not be so hard-hearted or indifferent when our fellow-Ethiopians are in danger. We need compassion for each other more than anything else including democracy.

**“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:16-19)**

We see that more Ethiopian are starting to change because there is a lot more talk than ever before about the suffering of others, but there still is not much follow through—at least, yet. For instance, when Ogadenis are being massacred, why are not other Ethiopians coming out to publicly protest or cry with them? When the Oromo are killed, persecuted, detained and tortured, this is an opportunity to speak out against it, but it is Oromos speaking for Oromos, Tigrayans speaking for Tigrayans, Afar for the Afar, Amhara for Amhara and Anuak for Anuak.

This is not God’s way because in His eyes, superficial differences like ethnicity, region, skin color, gender or culture, do not matter. God has not set the regional borders of Oromo, Afar and of the Southern Nations. What other well-functioning country in the world is divided into ethnic states like in Ethiopia? Can you imagine the United States of America having states named after all its largest ethnic groups, influencing where they live? We have to stop for a minute and think about putting humanity before ethnicity. This is our hope for the New Year.

As I traveled to many cities in Europe and North America, Ethiopians from many different backgrounds, ethnicities and regions have welcomed me so warmly. They may not have connections between each other, but what I have found to be true is that they have much in terms of being beautiful people with the same hopes, dreams and challenges.

Suspicion, stereotypes, propaganda and simply not knowing each other as people, have kept them apart. For instance, some Ethiopians believe the only way to talk to liberation fronts whose agenda is to break away from Ethiopia is to demand that they drop this separation idea before they are willing to dialogue with them. This is wrong.

What happens with this more rigid stance is the opportunity to understand the reasons for why these people created a liberation front in the first place will never occur. In other words, we need to look at the root cause of the problem rather than dictating to them what is best for them.

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Additionally, by restricting dialogue, it fails to acknowledge their suffering, pain and oppression, especially since they have been living under regimes that have withheld from them any political representation, equal opportunity to education or development and has failed to respect their peoples' rights. We cannot resolve our differences by placing limitations on what we can or cannot discuss! We have been among them and know that they have many legitimate concerns, which should not be swept under the carpet.

The time has come for Ethiopians to discover for themselves these bonds that could build new relationships—a first step to solidarity. I have heard many speak about wanting to be unified with other Ethiopians in this worthy struggle. This desire is being spoken and echoed back throughout the world. I have met Ethiopians of every sort—men, women, young, old, Muslim, Christian and of any other breakdown that one might think of and they have almost universally, shared a willingness to become more open and cooperative with others.

They share the goal of having a peaceful Ethiopia where their children could live and work side by side with other Ethiopians without fear. They all want a country where they would have the opportunity to pursue their goals. They are thirsty for righteousness, justice, freedom and equality. These are the people who are the hope for a new Ethiopia. In each one of them, I am seeing a light of promise that is ready to be ignited so as to bring new light to a country in the shadows.

I have also met with Ethiopian Muslims at their mosque and with Christian Ethiopian Orthodox, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, mainline Protestants in their churches as well as non-believers and even Communist Ethiopians. They are all saying that they are ready to work with one another. This is so refreshing and encouraging! In fact, I have repeatedly been told by Ethiopians that they and other Ethiopians, more than every before, are ready to fight tribalism, marginalization, discrimination—and you name it. They are willing to fight the things that have kept Ethiopia backward for so many centuries!

Their support for such a new Ethiopia has been shown in so many ways such as thousands of emails, telephone calls and some have also financially contributed to the AJC, which now has a national focus. You know who you are and we are so grateful for your financial support because without such help, it would be impossible to accomplish what we have done thus far or what we hope to accomplish in the future to make this new Ethiopia.

So, if there is something I have learned it is that every one of these Ethiopian people I have met, has touched me in my life. I have learned how the EPRDF government has tried to prevent us from seeing this beauty in each other—to blind us from seeing the beauty of our own garden of Ethiopian people, created by our God Almighty who delights in the complexities and uniqueness in His creation. We have not realized or appreciated what we have in each other.

I have learned that the present and the future are shaped by those living today and that to create a better Ethiopia will require a commitment from each and every Ethiopian, as we all have been given a shared responsible to create a better Ethiopia where we can live together in a country of which we are proud rather than ashamed.

May this year of 2008 be the year you do your share, making a difference not only to yourself, your loved ones and to your ethnic group, but also to all the other Ethiopians in our garden. This is the reason the AJC brought together Ethiopians from seven different regions on November 17, 2007 in Washington DC, to explore ways to get to know each other better so as to create a atmosphere where Ethiopians could work together in solidarity. These participants are preparing themselves for a larger movement where all Ethiopians will work side by side.

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The strategic goal of the movement is to reclaim Ethiopia from its tyrannical rulers and their associates. These tyrannical rulers are deceivers, capitulators, ethnic gadflies ready to sacrifice all Ethiopians in favour of their few ethnic comrades. These dictators grab for themselves and their friends and robbed all of us of our present and our children's future.

It is sickening to travel through Ethiopia or Africa and see people suffering while those in the government struggle to enrich themselves while foreign corporations and governments, aid agencies and NGOs preach about poverty yet entertain and bribe the leaders for Africa's riches. The African dictators and their supporters from abroad live in a social cocoon oblivious to our suffering. These autocrats and their supporters are leeches on the soil and soul of Ethiopia and Africa.

We seek is a movement of Ethiopians or Africans to reclaim the essence of Africa. We are not pursuing State sovereignty here but rather people sovereignty, to set our people free from oppressive rule. Our path is not about politics, it is about life enhancement for all not matter their ethnic identity for in the end we are all Ethiopians and Africans.

Our message consists of three core pillars. The first is to promote Ethiopian-ness, or African – ness, to reassert the traditional African values which have been abandoned over time-the central place of community and caring, the significance of the land or mother earth to our very being, respect and reverence for our ancestors, and, the deep spirituality of Africa as the cradle of the human race.

The second pillar draws on our religious faith be it Christian or Muslim which assert the dignity and worth of each human being and, for example, a commitment to a non-violent path.

The third pillar asserts the pre-eminence of fundamental human rights including the right to life; the core freedoms such as freedom of speech, association and assembly; the essential equality of all, male and female; and, critically, the right to a just life within a just society.

We must see every Ethiopian as a valued member in the family of Ethiopia if we are to survive as a nation. This is something that has been overlooked by the previous and some of the current political parties who claim they are for unity when their actions show less than what is desired. An example of this is why we do not have any national Ethiopian political party with strong representatives from all regions or ethnic groups of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia or Africa must move away from the politicization of ethnicity. Celebrate the ethnic and cultural mosaic of Ethiopia and Africa but at the same time create an `a – ethnic` or non-ethnic politics. Ethiopians or Africans must surrender their ethnic clothes when they move into the political arena and assume positions of power.

It is time for a movement, one shorn of ethnic chauvinism in the world of politics. Unless this happens then political leaders will play one ethnic group off against another for political advantage parallel to the past colonial practice of `divide and rule` and the current neo-colonial practice of foreign intervention in ethically-based strife; mounting the war on terror; and, driving for control over valued resources.

Africans have been divided for too long and separated from their common heritage by artificial boundaries and the ethnic and regional and religious divides. Africa must re-discover its soul and celebrate its African-ness. The soil of Ethiopia and Africa continues to be stained by the blood of its sons and daughters all in the name of mindless ethnic power struggles.

A politics of collaboration and consensus must be re-asserted drawing on African tradition within the local community. That community must be expanded to become inclusive of all Africans. Otherwise, Africa will continue to be in disarray, in decline, and incur more death and suffering.

In this weakened condition, rapacious leaders can prey on their people and foreign interests can continue to exploit and manipulate for both profit and power. The time has come for a new Ethiopia or Africa, one where its people can see each other as one, as sharing the soul and soil of the continent for their mutual benefit and development. The cloak of ethnicity must be removed in the realm of African politics. Until that day arrives, Africans all suffer for their loss of humanity.

May this be the year we become a people who put our humanity before our ethnicity. May this be the year that we tell Meles and other African dictators we no longer will play his game of dividing and devaluing our fellow Ethiopians or Africans.

May this be the year we stop worshipping our heroes and then quickly discarding them when they do not succeed the way we want them to. May this be the year that we stop following a leader, just because that person is from your region or ethnic group.

May this year be the year of reconciliation! May we fear nothing but the Almighty God who created us. May this be the year we all turn back to God and may He guide us and help us to create an Ethiopia or Africa of which we are not ashamed!

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For additional information, please contact: Obang O. Metho, Director of International Advocacy:  
E-mail: [advocacy@anuakjustice.org](mailto:advocacy@anuakjustice.org)