

## **Marching Toward Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia**

*Press Release: May 25, 2008*

The Worldwide March Committee for Freedom and Justice, held from May 15-18 was a great effort by hundreds of organizers and participants in Ethiopian cities and communities throughout the world. We want to thank all of those organizers who worked so hard and devoted countless hours to bring it all together in a relatively short period of time!

Many Ethiopians rose up from the silence of the last many months to show that they have not forgotten those back home. More importantly, we have learned that we Ethiopians can successfully work together across many lines of differences that have separated us in the past.

We have learned that we can accomplish exponentially more together than in separate factions—the biggest obstacle to our success in the past. In fact, we would never be where we are today if we had been a more united people. In actuality, even a core group of united people who are willing to work intensely for the greater good, representing the diversity of Ethiopian citizenry can be more effective because of that unity than groups with more resources or members.

Instead, we have learned that we do not necessarily come closer to freeing the country by creating more political parties or civic groups, but instead what is of utmost importance is having a core group of people with commitment, vision, organization and who trust each other.

A major intent of the Worldwide March was to remember our fellow Ethiopians who died back home since TPLF came to power. That mission was accomplished. Most of the people within the executive committee were overwhelmed and touched by the stories reported to them of how people commemorated this day in many different ways—through candlelight vigils, prayer, community gatherings, marches and public meetings.

In eleven countries, Ethiopians presented a petition asking these donor countries to stop supporting this repressive regime and to instead, to start encouraging a democratic process and the opening up of freedoms within Ethiopia. By these actions, Ethiopians showed that our people who died for freedom, did not die in vain and that many of us will not rest until justice and reform comes to Ethiopia.

In Geneva at the United Nations, two letters were presented to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to urge them to take action on Ethiopia and on behalf of Ethiopians refugees who are suffering in Libya, Egypt, Israel, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and many countries.

A second accomplishment was that we Ethiopians demonstrated that we have not forgotten those who are still suffering intense hardships back home. We know of the extraordinarily high inflation in the country that makes food aid essential for the survival of millions, only worsened by the heartbreaking news that a drought is coming to Ethiopia from which 6 million Ethiopians may die.

Neither have we forgotten how many Ethiopians are continuing to face torture, threats and intimidation. We know of the many thousands who are still imprisoned, people like Teddy Afro who was detained for what strongly appears to be a bogus crime. He has been punished like many of his fellow Ethiopians for simply speaking the truth about the oppression found in the country.

In the midst of all this, the phony election last month has left Ethiopians with only one choice of a political party, the same party of the ruling government that is repressing the media, taking away their freedom of expression, giving away their land to Sudan and committing the ongoing genocide in the Ogaden—the EPRDF government of Mr. Meles Zenawi!

Thirdly, our grief over the many deaths and continued suffering of our loved ones has reminded us that shared grief can find greater relief when connected together as one. Some people may have been disappointed by the division within the political parties and the failure of our political leaders to guide us, but despite this, we have found that there are people who will never give up.

Those people are men and women, young and old, from all parts of Ethiopia—from the east to the west to the south to the north. They are from all of the many different ethnic groups, religions, political parties and civic groups. These people came out from many different countries in the world, agreeing to work together because they knew it was the only way to free their country. They knew they could not wait for another foreign country to free them, but that they had to take on the responsibility themselves.

The Worldwide March Committee is developing a next step action plan which would involve the creation of a Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia—like we have been suggesting for over a year. An important step in this initiative would be to bring together political parties, civic organizations and religious organizations so as to develop a vision and strategy of how to free Ethiopia and how to build the foundation for a new Ethiopia where justice, freedom and harmony could be sustainable.

What we need to do is to have a national conference—with political, civic, religious and other groups involved—in order to discuss and develop a plan for the country's political future, one based on consensus. This national conference would have two goals: (a) to address the demand for political freedom; in other words, what do we want for Ethiopia and how can we best resolve our differences so we can work together to accomplish it, and (b) what is a viable plan, with all its components and steps, for bringing about the changes we want?

Right now, things look very grim and dark in Ethiopia and everyone knows it. One of the biggest fears many have is that the discontent, division, frustration and anger could boil over and erupt. Many fear that we might be sitting on a time bomb that could explode before we have been able to put into place a strong, multi-ethnic body that could guide the people through such difficulties. None of us want a disaster to unfold. Because of that, we must think ahead and strategize as to how we can avert that kind of disaster, yet not compromise on the push towards the changes we need.

Right now, Meles is using repression and control, but this will not work forever. It is in the interest of every single living Ethiopian to really think of the seriousness of this situation as a motivation to come together with the genuine intention of making some concessions for the good of everyone. If people refuse to do so, all of us will suffer for our joint failure.

The Worldwide March Committee has learned that there is still a way to forge a future, as long as we place our faith and hope in God that even when it looks to be impossible, God can help us find a way through this dark valley, especially if we travel this road together.

During these last weeks, we have built new friendships with people throughout the world who we only met through the phone and Internet. We are now enjoying the richness of new relationships and after many intense meetings and discussions with a shared purpose in mind, we feel we know each other despite many of us never meeting in person. This is part of the new family of Ethiopia, but we are still looking for our other family members. If you want to be part of this, please feel free to contact us.

The problem of Ethiopia cannot be solved by one ethnic group, one political party or by one religion. All of us are needed. We are asking Ethiopians to join with us in seeking a new political culture in Ethiopia. In this new political culture, the self-seeking politics of ethnic power barons is replaced by a de-ethnicized, inclusive politics drawing on African traditions of consensus, respect, integrity and participation. The existing repressive politics where leaders grasp for power to ensure their accumulation and that of their followers ignores the ordinary Ethiopian who must suffer government rather than being served by it.

In the existing house of politics where elites rule for themselves, changing the political leadership, only changes the participants who `eat`. The ordinary Ethiopian can only stare in wonder at the rapaciousness of the ruling clique. Currently, human rights are proclaimed to satisfy the national and international community but when human rights clash with the interests of the powerful, then they wither and die. Our rights and lives are exceedingly fragile subject to the whims of the powerful.

The Worldwide March Committee has a vision of a new house. The house we have right now in Ethiopia has become the house of the elite that pushes out the vulnerable and the weak from its protection. Ethiopians are not brought within the house but rather left to languish in the undeveloped bush outside. While the leaders are sheltered and feasting within, the ordinary person is wet and starving beyond the bright lights of the exclusive house.

Now it is time for all of us to build a new house where we will invite everyone to come back in to the hut to live, but it cannot be built by one person. It will require many hands. We want to build a new house where all can enjoy their rights and acquire meaningful opportunities to enhance their lives and those of their children.

All Ethiopians, whether male or female, old or young, whatever one's ethnic identity or religious affiliation, no matter what region of the country, are invited to participate in this national endeavour of transformation under the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia.

We call on donor countries and international institutions to respect our goals and to join with us in the creation of this new Ethiopia under a new political culture of respect, participation and life enhancement.

Keep posted for the next events. We have only begun our march ahead to freedom and justice for Ethiopia. The way before us may be difficult, but with God, nothing is impossible!

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