
Ethiopians Respond to the Call to help with the Starvation at home but Many More are Needed!

October, 1, 2008

This is a follow up to report on progress since I sent the open letter to Ethiopians concerning the widespread starvation of our people last Friday, September 26th. At that time I was very upset with the lack of compassion on the part of Ethiopians, particularly on the part of Ethiopian organizations who were not speaking out regarding the urgent crisis of hunger and starvation in the country.

The lack of response by Ethiopians to this crisis was all the more noticeable in that outsiders—non-Ethiopians—were taking a more active role in pleading for emergency food assistance than were we Ethiopians.

In that letter, I called on all Ethiopians, especially those in the Diaspora, to start helping immediately, even if it was simply helping one person at a time. The response I am now getting from Ethiopians is encouraging enough that I want to give you a report that might inspire many more of you to join in with these people. However, please know, we need far more people to catch this vision if we are to achieve the goal of helping the large numbers of people who are struggling, especially those unlikely to survive without our assistance.

First of all, let me tell you what happened. The letter went out at 2:30 AM on Friday morning on September 26, to Ethiopians on my email list. Later in the day it was posted on the various Ethiopian websites. By 3:30 AM, I began receiving call after call from Ethiopians who wanted to do something! By the end of the first day—Friday—at least six groups had formed that had already sent their first \$100 to Ethiopia—a total of \$600.

Four days later, I personally knew of twenty-three groups that formed, each with about five members. They had committed to contributing \$100 per month (\$20 each). Another woman said she would contribute \$500 on her own. These funds would be sent to trusted relatives or friends in Ethiopia who would then distribute the \$100 or (1000 birr) to the most desperate in their communities.

Those who received this unexpected gift would be advised to use the money for food or whatever they needed to survive, but also, if possible, to use part of it to start a small business so they could sustain themselves in future. This model provides an example of an easy, but effective, way to help.

As I mentioned in the letter, this idea had come from a good friend I know in Washington D.C. who has been doing this with four other friends for ten years! These are the quiet Ethiopian heroes that we need in a “new Ethiopia!” **If we do the math and these Ethiopians are good on their word for the long-term, these twenty-three groups will contribute \$27,600 over a one-year period and if they hang in for ten years, it will mean \$276,000 that would never have gotten to the poorest of poor without their generosity!**

None of these funds go through organizations, so there are no administrative costs. Instead, they go directly from the funding teams to the appointed friend or relative in Ethiopia who gives it to the neediest individuals or families in the country. If you conservatively estimate the number of people these groups might be helping—if each recipient group averaged three people—these funds from twenty-three groups **over a one-year period would reach approximately 728 people! Over a ten-year period it would total 7,280 Ethiopians!** What an impact—but it is only a start because I want you, the reader, to join too!

In fact, I would like to see a thousand groups form, who could send \$100 per month. That would require a total participation of only about 5000 Ethiopians. This is only a very small percentage of Ethiopians in the Diaspora; yet it would mean \$1.2 million dollars within the first year or \$12 million over ten years! This is why coming together is so effective—we can make a much larger impact!

Remember, this should not take the place of helping one's own family, but some families do not need help and in the cases where they do, you may be able to help both your own family and others in the greater family of Ethiopians. If you want to change Ethiopia, this assistance can become part of a long-term solution.

The way it is being done is in three steps.

- 1) **Identify five people in the Diaspora who are willing to contribute \$20 each, every month—like your wife, your adult children, your work friends, your neighbor, members of your mosque or church or those in your favorite political or civic organization.** These people do not have to meet regularly, but can set up a system that makes it easy to continue. Do not let arguments or disagreements interfere, but do everything possible to continue your commitment together.
- 2) **Identify people in Ethiopia who you really trust, like your relatives, friends, neighbors, previous community members or any others you can rely on to responsibly and honestly distribute the funds. Accountability is very important!** They can be in different cities and regions, representative of the various members of your group, but keep it to a small number of committed people who are all accountable to each other.
- 3) **Direct them to find an individual or family who is in the most desperate of circumstances to receive the \$100 or 1000 birr on a one-time basis.**
 - a. Their ethnicity, cultural background or any other differences should be overlooked because this is about putting humanity above ethnicity.
 - b. The designated giver of the money should tell the receiver that there are people outside the country who are sending 1000 birr and that they appointed you to locate the right person or family to give it to on a one-time basis. They could ask the recipient to write a small thank you note in return so it could be sent back to the people who sent the money. They should also be asked to keep the gift a secret because there are so many in need that it will be impossible to help everyone. The next month the process will be repeated with a new individual or family being the recipient.
 - c. This is the commitment that you are taking on that should go on for as long as you live, but you can start by committing to doing this for one year or until things substantially improve in the country.
- 4) **Report back to the Solidarity Movement any special stories, results or difficulties so others can be mobilized, informed and inspired by real life experiences.**

For those of you who do not know what the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia** is, it is a non-political movement that is attempting to bring diverse Ethiopians together to advocate for the well being of Ethiopians and to bring political parties, religious groups, ethnic groups, civic groups and other organizations to work together to prepare the environment for sustainable justice, freedom, equality, human rights, prosperity and opportunity for all where democracy can take root.

This call to help our people is part of the value system of this **Solidarity Movement** because it is about saving lives and empowering people, helping them to survive. Imagine if we had 1000 groups like this who would help people back in Ethiopia. Through this simple structure, we do not have to worry about politicians or government creating obstacles like might happen with a large organization doing the same thing but on a larger scale.

If you raise enough money and are able to provide larger amounts, you can enable more people or provide larger amounts. It is up to you and your group to decide. You can teach this value to your children to be carried on inter-generationally. The group in Washington D.C. has already turned over two memberships to a daughter when her father died and to a wife when her husband died. It has become a family commitment.

Most of the Ethiopians outside the country are the lifeblood of our families back home. What we are doing now is extending this a little bit to people who are not our relatives that will contribute to creating a better society. Those of us who have made it to free countries where there is greater opportunity are lucky and we should be grateful for that. However, the majority of Ethiopians were not as lucky and do not have family here to send back money for their support through Western Union. Those of us here need to help, especially during this time of great difficulty when even Ethiopians who have jobs in the country cannot afford to buy food due to the skyrocketing inflation.

This is what the **Solidarity Movement** is about. Parts of it are theoretical and parts are practical. The theoretical part of it is based on the underlying principles that call **us to accept others because we are human beings first above any other distinctions**. We are born with no knowledge or preference for tribe or language. We could be adopted into any cultural group in the world and their language and culture would be what we first learned.

We come into the world with nothing but our souls and leave the world the same. Every one of us, from the second we enter this world, are in someone else's hands and when we die, people we leave behind will take care of our remains and bury us. While we are here, others help us and we are to do the same because every one of us needs others. We are created in the image of God to be in relationship, not only with God, but also with others and that means having a heart of compassion that the well-being, justice and freedom of others besides only ourselves.

Tyranny—a form of heartlessness—destabilizes families, organizations, communities, societies and nations. Unfortunately, it most often results in warring groups taking sides to compete to be on top so they can turn around and tyrannize others. This is the cycle in which we Ethiopians have been ensnared. Are we Ethiopians guilty of dehumanizing others outside our chosen groups who are less fortunate than ourselves by ignoring their pain and by refusing to sacrifice on their behalf when they are suffering?

We cannot help everyone, but like these Ethiopians who have already committed to taking action, we can take on a small share, not only because it will help our country, but because it is the right thing to do. Sharing creates unity and solidarity with others in the same way that tyranny creates resistance and anger.

Tyranny will ultimately lead people to rise up against it, but too often we simply become the next power-grabbing oppressor who gets in bed with greed, corruption, lies, hatred and selfishness at the expense of others. Eventually you will never sleep because your actions will cause others to rise up against you.

Look at Meles right now. He must be constantly watchful for those who will rise up to challenge him because they simply have **had enough of this misery!** He must know that this increasing hunger and starvation creates a volatile atmosphere that could erupt at any time. Even while his emissaries at the United Nations present a false picture of economic advances, the reality of the millions of hungry children makes such claims all the more upsetting to the mothers and fathers who are burying their children. Because of this, **Mr. Meles is one of the most “unfree” persons in all of Ethiopia.**

Tyrannizing others does not come without great costs. For one, it leads to the deadening of the heart to the worth and the pain of others and an alienation of the soul from God so that one is blocked from receiving the love and peace that God gives to his children.

It is replaced with shame, depression, paranoia, loneliness, hyper-vigilance and fear that can drive a person to become obsessed with self-protection. God can provide a way out even now and we genuinely hope that Meles and others holding up this system will take that path and become free!

Yet, what is our part in stopping this cycle of tyranny and oppression? The answer is in upholding the freedom, rights and value of others and caring about their hunger and suffering. This is the only way to free a society because **no one is truly free until we all are free**. This is the theoretical foundation upon which this **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia** is grounded.

The next aspect of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia** is of equal importance because it puts flesh on these values. The best of values and principles do nothing if not applied in real life situations and this is what I am calling Ethiopians to do. Eventually, this regime will fall, but what will replace it and how can we people who desire to see a more loving and humane society take action towards that end right now at this great time of need?

An example of the practical part of this **Solidarity Movement** is forming your own group of five and faithfully committing to sending monthly help back to the country for those most in need—giving to the diversity of Ethiopians who will create the beautiful garden of Ethiopians. I want to see the formation of a hundred or a thousand more groups. As I have already said, this is only a tiny percentage of Ethiopians in the Diaspora and is a very modest goal that I would hope would be overwhelmingly exceeded.

I call on leaders of all of the Ethiopian political groups, armed groups, civic groups, community groups and especially the religious leaders in the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities to step up to be advocates and to empower your people to help. Communicate your support to your people about joining in with this effort. Help them form groups and help coordinate the efforts in whatever ways you can. Work with resources and connections you might have in Ethiopia.

A future goal of the **Solidarity Movement** would be to help make the connections between the 100 or 1000 groups that eventually form, but the longer term goal is: **to establish a viable alliance—a united front composed of all dissatisfied groups, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations and political tilts, with the common goal of installing genuine democracy and social justice in the spirit of a united Ethiopia.** In other word it is to really bring everyone from diverse groups together to see if we would be able to create a peaceful solution to the crisis in the country and a strategy to bring about a healthier society. It will never be perfect as long as each of us is part of it, but it can be improved!

In conclusion, this movement is about the restoration of the roots of humanity that God has given to us when He created us to be his ambassadors of love, caring and sharing in this world. In the Qur'an, the Torah and the Bible, we can see how much God cares about the poor and vulnerable.

*Here is a verse from the Qur'an that calls those who desire righteousness to give benevolently:
By no means shall you attain to righteousness until you spend (benevolently) out of what you love; and whatever thing you spend, Allah surely knows it. (III: 92)*

Look at these passages from the Bible, one from the New Testament and one from the Old Testament where believers are called to show generosity and love towards each other:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.... There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:32, 34-35)

“Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.” (Deuteronomy 15: 10-11)

Some of the harshest statements are warnings to those who oppress, exploit and ignore the plight of the poor, to change their ways. God does not only call us to help our own families, but also those wounded on the side of the road—the wayfarers. He calls us to help before we ask about their ethnic group, political views, religion or cultural background. We are to be Good Samaritans.

We Ethiopians have been disconnected from these roots that are grounded in the value of others—something that we should pass on to our children and grandchildren so they can live in a more humane society. Can you imagine how rewarding this would be? **Imagine if each of us could join together and help by relieving the hunger of our people until kindness and generosity were restored to be a primary value and a description of what it meant to be a good Ethiopian?**

It could be a model to revive not only Ethiopia, but also Africa and even the western countries where many people have become so individualistic that they are only concerned about their own comfort, losing touch with the bigger community. It could be a gift to the world, especially if it came from the people known for always begging from others to feed their own people! What if some of the poorest of the poor were the ones to revive the principles of sharing and caring back to this troubled world?

What we are saying is that most every Ethiopian can put this into practice. You do not need permission or a license to do this. Just go ahead and do it like these others I have mentioned from six different regions of the country. This is only a beginning! Most everyone has a connection back home and can afford \$20. Don't brag about it and don't expect to get credit for it. Do it because it is the right thing to do.

Don't be worried about keeping it to your own region or ethnic group. Be a dog that barks at trouble instead of a dog that rolls over. **You can do something meaningful and lasting. Give back the God-given dignity to the people created by God. We are giving back the worth to these people because they are not discardable people. They are precious human beings. We are saying to them, no way will we forget you, neglect you, or abandon you. God did not forget you and will never forget you because He created you in the first place. Be the arms and feet that God uses to restore his people.**

Imagine if people would start doing this all over the country! **It will be such a powerful force for good and would break down prejudice, hostility, suspicion, division and hatred.** Can the government stop people from sending money to their families in Ethiopia? No, especially as hundreds or thousands of Ethiopians individually take action. It will even help the Ethiopian economy. We in the Diaspora will be doing more than the Ethiopian government.

Remember, we need new people to become involved because we cannot depend on the few who have taken most of the burden. These in this minority are the ones who usually contribute, who attend meetings and who help the most in our struggle; however, this is too small a group of Ethiopians to do this size of task alone. They have already been paying the heavy price, more than anyone else, contributing all the time when it comes to anything in the community—they are the first ones to help, whether with a funeral, a community meeting, a donation and so on.

I want to really appreciate these people who make up maybe .1% of the Ethiopians in the Diaspora because I know many of them who are sacrificing much for others. Now, some of these people are facing greater difficulty due to the American economy because they are involved in work that has been affected by this troubled economic situation—like those in real estate, restaurant workers, taxi drivers and so forth.

Because many of us may now be having greater difficulty making ends meet (and are already sending money home for our families), it will take many of us to step forward to help if we are to measurably help those dying back home. It is time for all of us to share with them if we truly want to see a new Ethiopia emerge from the ashes of destruction.

Our disappointment with our leaders is no excuse because our people are dying. As one Ethiopian friend recently told me, Ethiopians follow leaders like ants that join together to devour a meaty bone on the ground, piling up on top of each other to get their share. However, if someone picks up that bone and shakes off the ants, they fall off and are aimless and in total disarray, forgetting their purpose.

This friend compared many Ethiopians to the ants, which have fallen off of the bone; but we do not have to be. We have minds and hearts that should direct and inspire us to go beyond individual leaders to the people who need our help so that we take responsibility for doing what is right. That means overlooking the failings of human leaders and carrying on with the bigger purposes.

I am talking directly to you, the reader. You are the ones I am asking to step up to help. Please call others to form your groups until we can become a blessing to our own people and a model for other nations. Think about what would happen if the million of Ethiopians in the Diaspora gave only \$1 every day, that would be \$365 a year each and together, \$365 million in one year! Imagine what kind of Ethiopia we would have if Ethiopians took such action!

Out of this million, there are already people doing remarkable work like some Ethiopians in Washington D.C. who are paying for the education of a child, one at a time. In California, ten Ethiopian formed a group called “**Ethio-Village**” with the purpose of helping and uplifting other Ethiopians in their city by helping them find jobs. They are also sending money to Ethiopians who are in need who are not part of their families.

There is an Ethiopian woman in Addis Ababa, Abebech Gobena, who many Ethiopians call the “Mother Teresa of Ethiopia,” who searches the streets for abandoned children and brings them to her home. She has created a compound for them and gets the funding for their support from individual Ethiopians like Teddy Afro who awarded her for the excellent work she was doing. By ethnicity she is Oromo, but the ethnicity of the children she takes home does not matter to her. What an example she provides of reaching out in compassion.

There are many Ethiopians who are, one at a time, making a difference in the lives of others. Will you be one of them? **Compassion that leads to kindness and generosity will heal some of the deepest wounds in our society.**

Will you do your part or **Dirsha**? Will you be an ambassador to others, encouraging them to do theirs? If you do and many others follow, the blessings that will come from it will be too great to be contained in Ethiopia and will overflow to like the waters flowing into the Nile.

May God soften our hearts and give us a passion for others!

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