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## Report on Solidarity Movement Meeting in Minnesota: Building Bridges of Solidarity to a New Ethiopia

**November 18, 2008**

Can Ethiopians come together in solidarity to build a bridge to a new Ethiopia or are we doomed to suffering, division and eternal failure? It all depends on how we build it was the consensus of the meeting held on November 16, 2008 at the University of Minnesota called by the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia and sponsored by some local Ethiopian organizations.

To get to the meeting, many had to drive across the newly constructed I-35 Bridge linking St. Paul with Minneapolis. This is the same bridge that collapsed in August of 2007, killing and injuring many Minnesotans traveling across the main bridge connecting the Twin Cities. The reports explaining the reasons for the collapse were just released this past week citing fundamental design problems in the structure that doomed it to failure from the beginning.

Now the new bridge is up, sooner than anyone expected, and engineers designing the new bridge made sure that those same flaws were not repeated. This seems like an obvious assumption, but if you apply the same thinking to the legacy of repressive governments in Ethiopia and Africa, one might come to the conclusion that we need new engineers.

### **Those engineers of a “new Ethiopia” came together for an “Ethiopian Dialogue”**

Those engineers of a “new Ethiopia” came together for an “Ethiopian Dialogue” between diverse Ethiopians in Minnesota, with the purpose of helping to design a new model for Ethiopia that would be based on the principles of “humanity before ethnicity” and that “no one will be free until we all are free.” These are the principles espoused by the Solidarity Movement that we believe are foundational to building the kind of bridge that can hold up all of the diverse people of Ethiopia as they cross to a new Ethiopia.

There at the meeting, I could see the beginnings of that beautiful “garden of Ethiopia” of which I dream as Ethiopians from many various ethnic groups, regions, religions, political groups and of varied thinking—like separatists and unionists-- came together as individuals to see if they could form a shared vision for a better future. At first, people were guarded and suspicious of each other, but by the end of the meeting, people were shaking hands, introducing themselves, hugging each other and sharing ideas.

Controversial topics were not avoided and disagreements were straightforwardly discussed; yet, the respect and civility of those present towards each other’s views was the greatest success of the meeting! In fact, we discovered much in common. It was a great indication that Ethiopians can successfully come together to genuinely address the very real problems of Ethiopia. We will never build a better bridge unless we understand what went wrong and how to fix it.

Some of those attending volunteered to form a working team to continue building solidarity in Minnesota. It was emphasized that the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia was not a political group intending to run for political office, but a grassroots movement of the Ethiopian people to promote human rights, justice, freedom and good government for all people.

As one representative from the Ogaden stated, “Free-minded people must come together to create a free Ethiopia.” What this means in concrete terms is that to join the Solidarity Movement does not mean you must leave your differences or political views behind. For example, Ethiopians can remain supporters of Andinet, Ginbot7, OLF, SLF, ONLF, EPRP, Kinijit, ENUF, UEDF or none of the above because our goal is to create an atmosphere conducive to political organizations to run for office, God-willing, by the next election.

The meeting was opened up by Mr. Robsan Itana, the head of the Oromo American Citizen Council, who endorsed the concept of the Solidarity Movement as a means to join together over common issues and went on to name examples of the oppression directed against various groups of Ethiopians that could all be addressed more powerfully by one organization that could advocate on behalf of all.

The Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) is a newly formed grassroots movement whose mission *is to mobilize Ethiopians in the Diaspora and within Ethiopia to unite in a coalition across ethnic, regional, political, cultural, and religious lines around principles of truth, justice, freedom, the protection of human rights, equality and civility in order to bring about a more open, free and reconciled society in Ethiopia where humanity comes before ethnicity and where the same rights, opportunities and privileges are available to all because no one will be free until all are free.*

The second speaker, Miss Hodan, was from the Ogadeni community and spoke of her support for a grassroots movement for human rights and democracy which she described as flourishing when citizens are involved, where there is tolerance towards others and where everyone is held accountable. She explained how Ogadenis had been free until colonial powers equipped Abyssinia who then committed crimes against the people of the Ogaden while the international community failed to take note.

The third speaker, Mr. Berhane Worku, explained that he was speaking as an individual and went on to tell his own personal story. He began by saying that Ethiopia’s problems could not be solved by any one group and told about his own ethnic background as being an example of the mixed backgrounds of many Ethiopians that blurs distinctions and confuses identity.

He said he was 3/8<sup>th</sup>s Gurage, 2/8<sup>th</sup>s Sidamo, 2/8<sup>th</sup>s Oromo and 1/8<sup>th</sup> Amhara. He said that Ethiopians must fight together for a democratic culture rather than one based on blood and gore. While admitting he did not know the solutions, he affirmed the need to start with a dialogue and to join together across ethnic, political and religious lines in condemning the gross human rights crimes going on in the Ogaden right now.

### **What broke the bridge between Ethiopians in the first place and what we can do to bring about the “New Ethiopia”**

I will also summarize my own comments that were focused on what broke the bridge between Ethiopians in the first place and what we can do to bring about the “New Ethiopia” that would include all Ethiopians.

First of all, I am not proposing a “united” Ethiopia for the mere purpose of uniting Ethiopians because that could mean uniting around Mengistu, uniting around Meles or uniting around some other yet to be named oppressive dictator. The kind of unity that calls one group “more Ethiopian” than another group is not the kind of unity that I would want. I would actively oppose it because it is based on principles that have kept Ethiopians oppressed, divided and dehumanized.

A united Ethiopia that calls people who look like me a “Baria” is not the kind of Ethiopia I want. An Ethiopia that marginalizes or oppresses you simply because you are considered 99.9% Ethiopian is not the kind of Ethiopia I want. I want to unite to create an Ethiopian where each of us is 100% Ethiopian! To do so, we must discard the flawed systems of the present and past.

A bridge to a new Ethiopia will not be built in the same way anymore than the I-35 bridge will be reconstructed with the same mistakes and flaws or we would simply be re-creating a system that is doomed from the start. None of the leaders of the past put “humanity before ethnicity,” even though they each promised a new “society,” for one simple reason—when you keep using the same old toxic chemicals, no wonder they produce the same toxic society that is poisoning us.

A true leader never puts ethnicity first, but always puts humanity first. Jesus never put his ethnicity first. He died for all humanity. Mohammed did not put ethnicity first and is the reason there are Muslims from many ethnicities.

Right now, there are reasons why some run away from the “old” Ethiopia for it has been an Ethiopia that has had no room for them. The “New Ethiopia” will only be accomplished if both separatists, unionists, and everyone else—including Tigrayans—are all involved at the grassroots in creating a nation where the people have a choice, where members respect and value each other regardless of skin color, education, culture, religion, political view or gender and where there is room at the table of Ethiopia for all Ethiopians.

As Hodan said, we must also look to our neighbors surrounding Ethiopia because all of us in the Horn of Africa need each other. In America, people worked to make it a place where differences were accepted, but also blended together to create something much stronger. It is a place now where people from all over the world run to—not away! As Berhane said, what we need are leaders who are humble and willing to work across ethnic, political and religious divides, not seeking to dominate like different groups have done in the past—something that even creates painful internal pressure on individual families, like his own, due to the diversity within one’s own heritage.

### **The mixed blood of Ethiopians is all one blood—the blood of humankind**

Yet, the mixed blood of Ethiopians is all one blood—the blood of humankind. This is what went wrong with the old bridge—we could not see that the mixed up blood of Ethiopians was really all one blood—the blood of humankind. This is what will build the structural strength of a new bridge to a “New Ethiopia.” Our hut is burning and we are all in it and in jeopardy of dying. We must join together in not just saving our hut, but in breaking down the invisible fences that divide us!

When I ended the talk, I was impressed with the questions and discussion that followed. One of the first questions was how to accomplish the task, particularly now that a new administration will be coming into office. There was agreement that it must start by identifying a team that would go to Obama that would represent all of the varied cases and proposing a better alternative to what we now have that includes all Ethiopians.

In the past, one government official told me that five different Ethiopian groups had sought a meeting within the same week. This merely overwhelms such officials who are confused by what sometimes are contradictory and factional requests. Such a team was identified at the meeting as a high priority of the Solidarity Movement because if Ethiopians could come together with one common goal and voice, it will be something much easier for President-elect Obama to support and thereby, for Ethiopians to define their own destiny.

Others brought up the need for reconciliation in order to “break down the suspicion and animosity between us.” One man from a Tigrayan background decried the alienation between Tigray and other Ethiopians even though the same government was killing and detaining his brothers back in Ethiopia.

I personally was very glad that this question was presented and proud that this man had the courage of saying, “I am a Tigrayan and not part of this government,” because Tigrayans such as this are screaming in silence with no support, or worse, feeling animosity from their fellow Ethiopians.

We must join together to support a different kind of society. This is the beginning of reconciliation, one of the key components of this Solidarity Movement. It can start at the grassroots level at meetings such as this so that we can gain understanding and build relationships with real people with real stories.

As Ethiopians, we have a huge wound that needs healing where pain can and has been inflicted against each other. All Tigrayans cannot be put into one box and identified as Woyanne. In fact, “Woyanne-ism” can be attached to some people from every region and group within Ethiopia.

We have Woyane Anuak, Woyane Oromo, Woyane Ogadeni and you name it. In fact, as Berhane said, we must stand up and condemn the gross human rights crimes in the Ogaden, but it is a Woyane Ogadeni who is governor of the region. This is not about ethnicity, it is a struggle between those who choose to commit evil—who should be held accountable-- and those who stand up against evil.

On December 13, 2003, when the Anuak were being massacred, there were Tigrayan heroes and heroines of righteousness that protected the Anuak. These were the true brothers and sisters of the Anuak who were more protective of them than were Woyane Anuak.

### **“Our bridge to a “New Ethiopia”**

In a “New Ethiopia,” there must be a separation of those who commit crimes from those who do not. It must be a system based on authentic justice against perpetrators, not against ethnicity or we will be the new “genocidalists” and the next “oppressors.” Our bridge will not lead to freedom but instead be a trap set to kill and capture new victims. I will never be part of such an Ethiopia. Any who choose this path will soon discover that those who perpetrate against the innocent will never be free, just like Meles is the most unfree of all people.

In the same light, an Anuak man expressed his concern regarding coming together if it simply meant another “experiment” that would result in the same kind of failure as in the last regimes.

These are real concerns that must be fully examined because groups like the Anuak and the Oromo initially supported the changes promised by the Meles regime, only to later be betrayed, repressed and targeted by them. Questions such as these create heightened responsibility and accountability of all involved to plan safeguards within the Solidarity Movement to better guarantee a check and balance system, especially for minority groups who most often have little voice.

At first, some people did not want the name of Ethiopia linked to this movement, but later understood that we cannot blame the name of Ethiopia nor the flag as they never killed or oppressed any people—it was the leaders who did so.

The issue that was most important was that people who lived within the geographical map of Ethiopia were suffering, had been killed, denied a voice, oppressed and were “unfree.” It was agreed that the goal of the movement was to bring justice, opportunity, and freedom for all so that the people could live together in harmony and that the name Ethiopia was secondary.

## **Our moral attitudes and actions must overflow to our neighbors as well in order to bring greater peace to the Horn,**

Some from separatist groups endorsed the idea of coming together around the protection of human rights, but were not sure they would want to be part of an Ethiopia where they had never had any choice, dating back to when colonialists decided for them to include them as part of Ethiopia.

As we know, this is a government that has viewed its people as enemies. For example, Oromo can be targeted for only being Oromo as the government operates on the belief that if you scratch the skin of any Oromo man, you will see OLF.

One Ogadeni woman emotionally testified to the horrible atrocities going on in the Ogaden, citing examples of 80 and 90 year old women being raped by troops, of the burning down of crops and poisoning of water wells while the world watches. This is the same battalion that committed such crimes in Gambella and elsewhere in the country.

Another Ogadeni woman responded by saying that we need to come together around human rights, even if we eventually separate because we will be neighbors for freedom means not being afraid of others, particularly of those close by.

An Anuak man concluded by saying that he was Ethiopian geographically and that his people were oppressed. Because of this, he said just using the name of Ethiopia was not an important issue to him. He said that he is going to be part of uniting with other Ethiopians to solve this problem and then later on, when the fight for freedom is accomplished, people can decide on whether or not they still want independence from Ethiopia.

A number of others agreed with him that until the society was freed, they should work together to create a society where there would be self-determination. In such a society, they could actually then choose for themselves, even if it meant separating later or adopting a model like Canada has with Quebec.

Most everyone seemed to agree that freedom would never come to Ethiopia unless we all joined together in this struggle. Success will be measured by whether Ethiopians and Ethiopian leaders can put humanity before ethnicity and uphold the freedom of all people.

These attitudes and actions must overflow to our neighbors as well in order to bring greater peace to the Horn, but it all starts by uniting around these principles. Our bridge to a “New Ethiopia” will not be possible if we do not revamp the design from the flawed and doomed models of the past; otherwise, we will repeat our mistakes and the people will suffer.

### **What took place in this room was proof that it can also be done in Ethiopia.**

After the meeting, some told me that they or others had been worried about mixing people with different viewpoints and with a history of alienation towards each other, especially if the discussion became very heated and people started walking out—like mixing oil and water together—but that did not happen.

People were able to talk civilly about subjects that had been taboo before and arrive at some consensus. One Tigrayan man referred to a leader from the Oromo community saying that had they met in public, he would not have greeted him, but now they will be working together.

What took place in this room was proof that it can also be done in Ethiopia. The healing process was started. The man who spoke of his multi-ethnic heritage called for a team to carry on the work to make sure that it did not stop after the meeting ended. People committed themselves and as it turned out, they represented diverse groups.

The feedback I am receiving is that what was feared, turned out to be a beautiful thing, but now, the concepts must be repeated so that other Ethiopians in other cities can witness for themselves how Ethiopians can come together. The volunteer committee is now planning to reach out in their respective communities so as to build on what has begun.

In closing, I shared some personal experiences and convictions. The one I will end with here is the confidence I have that despite the enormous challenges that lie ahead, I am convinced that nothing is impossible if we fear God, if we show love and respect to each other and if we work together in solidarity for a new and more humane Ethiopia. Please pass this on and challenge others to join in this movement to free and transform Ethiopia.

May God guide, enable and empower us, giving us soft hearts towards each other and strong hearts for truth and justice as we carry out this task that is beyond our ability and resources to accomplish without God's divine help.

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