



## Solidarity Movement Calls for Names of All Political Prisoners

Solidarity Movement for New Ethiopia | January 23, 2009

A hearty **THANK YOU** to the **Ethiopians International Committee** who organized the January 14<sup>th</sup> demonstrations and to the countless individuals who helped them make it a success!

I want to name some of the key individuals who should be considered heroes for organizing this event. Just like Birtukan, Teddy Afro and all other prisoners who have paid their share, those who put together this great event are the silent heroes outside the cells of Ethiopia, a country imprisoned by its leaders.

I wish I could personally thank every person who contributed, but there would be too many to name and some of you, I still have not met. Yet, I want to mention a few of the key organizers like: Dawit Kebede, from Atlanta; Wondimu Mekonnen, from London; Dereje Habtewold, from Brussels; Ahmed Ali, from Stockholm; Demelash Likum/Lishan Gizaw, from Frankfurt; Mistre/ Meseret; Hailu Ourgessa, from Geneva; Tamagne Beyene, from Washington and Yilma Bekele, from Oakland.

Let all of us Ethiopians join together in also thanking those who selflessly rallied in London, Brussels, Washington D.C., Stockholm, Oslo, Frankfurt, Geneva, Oakland, Dallas, Calgary, Seattle, Rome, Copenhagen—the list could go on! Ethiopians came with posters, flyers, pictures, slogans, Ethiopian flags and more than anything, with their thirst for freedom in Ethiopia.

You put spirit and fight back into the hearts of the people on January 14<sup>th</sup> when you rallied in cities all over the world for the release of Ms. Birtukan, Mr. Teddy Afro, Mr. Bekele Jirata, Mr. Jumma Rufaai, Mr. Sabeel Albakheet; Mr. Abera Yemaneab; Ms Aberash Berta; Major Adugna and all our fellow Ethiopians who remain locked up in prisons, jails and detention centers around the country.

These are the kind of people who give me hope that Ethiopia will someday be free. I also consider the individual Ethiopians who have contributed to the struggle through different means. Just this past week, an Ethiopian who I had met in London called to tell me that the work of the Solidarity Movement required not only moral support, but financial support and said he was sending 50 pounds, telling me to please use it in any way that would help.

This week I was in Washington D.C. for Obama's inauguration and four different taxi drivers in the city, refused to let me pay for my fare, wanting to contribute it to the struggle.

Another Ethiopian phoned today to just check in to make sure I was alright.

Last week I received an email from an Ethiopian in China saying how saddened he has been because he has lost so many of his school friends because of tribal politics that alienated one group from another, but now sees hope in the principles of the Solidarity Movement.

Another Ethiopian, whom I had never met, called from Toronto, Canada and said he had fifty dollars to support the struggle and asked me how he could send it.

An email came to me from an Ethiopian man from within the country, telling me that he was praying for God to give me strength and wisdom to carry on the struggle because that was the only thing he has to contribute, but in my opinion, it is the best of all possible contributions.

People like these—who are organizing, rallying, contributing, encouraging, advising, constructively criticizing, challenging and praying—are only some of the examples of Ethiopians who are the soldiers who will help win the hearts and minds of Ethiopians, leading to the transformation of a sick society to one where there is justice and the rule of law for all. They are the soul of our struggle for truth, reconciliation and equality. ***They are the troops that will free us and make us acknowledge our humanity beyond our ethnicity and recognize that unless we all are free, none of us is free.***

Each one of these people I see as the rays from the rising sun over Ethiopia. One ray would not have been noticed, but as each separate ray combines together with others, they will become the powerful source of light that cracks through the darkness to bring the dawn. They are people “rallying” for a NEW and better Ethiopia that goes beyond their own interests.

This was also the best thing about the rallies. The participants were not only for one person, but were speaking out for all Ethiopian political prisoners. Birtukan is an excellent example of someone who has done her share by speaking the truth and refusing to back down. It is the reason she is in prison; however, others have done the same and hopefully, someday, we will better know their stories.

Do you know what a political statement that makes to those who want us divided! Do you know what a statement that makes to Western governments who have seen far too little solidarity between various groups? This is the only way we will be heard. This is the only way we will be effective. This is the only way we will be able to finally bring sustainable freedom, justice and the rule of law to Ethiopia. The rally was a success, but now some are asking, “Now what?”

I say, this must only be the beginning of more public demonstrations and overall efforts to gain freedom for our fellow Ethiopians imprisoned across the country. Some may be freed from time to time for political reasons, but we must not stop until all those unjustly imprisoned by this present regime are freed and that will not happen until Ethiopia is freed from the tyranny of the past, of the present and of the future!

***That means we must replace the ingredients that are poisoning our society—the tribalism, deceit, blaming, sabotage, destructive competition, victim mentality and moral weakness that results in us failing to stand together in joint opposition to systemic evil. Part of standing up against such evil requires that we expose the depth, height and breadth of political repression within Ethiopia.*** One way to do that is to gather better documentation on the names and circumstances of all our Ethiopian political prisoners.

This is a work that is already being done by a superb Ethiopian organization, the Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners (SOCEPP) that I greatly admire and respect because of their excellent work that has not discriminated against any political prisoners but have included all.

They have also been speaking out against the injustice of all Ethiopians. They are an example of an Ethiopian organization that has risen above ethnic politics. The SOCEPP leaders were the ones who reached out to me and told me that when I talked about political prisoners, that it should be for all political prisoners. I cannot agree with them more on this important principle and I appreciated their advice. They were right! The SMNE has already been in contact with them and want to collaborate on this project and on many other issues where we have shared goals. There are more Ethiopian groups like this who are the champions against injustice such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, the Oromo American Citizens' Council, the Ogaden Human Rights Committee, Southern Ethiopia Peoples action group; Gasha for Ethiopia, Beni-shangul-Gumuz Human Rights Council and the Afar Human Rights Organization.

This will require the cooperation of these and other organizations, groups and individuals at the grassroots level from all over the country. ***If you genuinely want to work together to bring an end to political imprisonment, this is your opportunity to make a strong case against political repression by collecting names of those you know and sending them to be used in a comprehensive report.***

Up to now, we have been able to bring international awareness about our political prisoners through Birtukan and Teddy, but we need to strengthen our advocacy efforts by determining—person by person—the incidence of political imprisonment in Ethiopia.

We ask that all political leaders, in particular, provide names of those they know because they may end up being the best source of information. For example, the OLF, ONLF, the Afar Liberation Front, the Sidamo Liberation Front, the EPRP-D, the All Ethiopian Unity Party, the ENUF, the EPPF, the EPRP, Ginbot-7, UDJ, UDEF and all political groups may already have compiled such lists of their own people, all of whom should be included. We do not care if political parties are divided because all of the prisoners have suffered for the cause of Ethiopia, meaning for the cause of all of us.

We also extend this invitation to civic organizations, religious groups, human rights organizations and individuals who might have information on specific prisoners of conscience or those imprisoned on alleged false pretenses, to submit those names. ***We must be a people who care about the freedom of everyone. This sums up both of the most basic principles of the Solidarity Movement for anew Ethiopia; that humanity comes before ethnicity—or any other distinction—and that no one is free until we all are free.***

We will provide an email address that will be a central collection point for information on political prisoners. Please include as much of the following as you have access to regarding each person:

- 1) their full name,
- 2) a picture if you have one,
- 3) a short statement about their background,
- 4) what happened leading to their arrest or disappearance,
- 5) where they are being held if you know, and,
- 6) if pertinent, under what kind of conditions they are living; for example, if there are health problems, crowding, lack of basic necessities, etc.

If you do not have all the information, just send what you have. You can keep the information simple and straightforward unless you believe that a fuller story might be helpful. We will not make the names of those who provide information public without their agreement.

No one should be left out, including those who have been in prison since 1991 when the TPLF took power. For example, one of those men is Mr. Tsegaye Gerbremedhin who was arrested in 1991 is a well-respected poet who has been imprisoned for the last 18 years.

Others prisoners of conscience are Mr. Abera Yemaneab; Ms Aberash Berta; Major Adugna and others Ethiopians from America who returned to Ethiopia in 1993 for a National Reconciliation Conference, but instead of being a genuine reconciliation effort, the government rounded them up and put them in jail where they remain. ***We cannot forget these people. They are our people. As long as they are in prison, we are in prison as well. We will not be free until they are free.***

Lack of having a viable institution or body that represents all of us is the reason that the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia has been formed. Joining a solidarity movement is a way dedicates oneself to the larger cause of Ethiopia! One does not have to disband or resign one's political organization, it means we put aside the partisan politics aside for now and rescue Ethiopia. The task of competing with each other politically will come when there is a secure democratic playing field for that!

For that reason, when we ask for the names of political prisoners of conscience, we are asking for all Ethiopians throughout every region of the country, from every city and every village. This is why we are also appealing to the people at the grassroots level for the names of those you know. They may be names of your grandparents, fathers, husbands, mothers, wives, brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, uncles, aunts or cousins. They might be your classmates, teachers, community members, work colleagues, public servants, journalists or religious leaders. We want them all.

We are asking for the people from Afar to submit the names of all their political prisoners. We ask for the same from the people of the Ogaden, from Oromia, from Harere, from the Southern Nations, from Amhara, from Tigray, those from Beni-shangul-Gumuz and from Gambella. Please do not leave anyone out, even if you disagree with their views. We are asking for widespread cooperation in giving all the names regardless of any differences. If groups can get together to collaborate on this, so much the better!

***In conclusion, we cannot free our country unless we work together in unity of purpose rather than in competition and destroying the work of others. If we are to succeed, it cannot be done by one person, but will require more established leaders as well as people at the grassroots level, all doing their share. Come and join us—there is room for you. Let us free our people together!***

Put yourself in the shoes of those who are in prison or in the shoes of the family members who may have been waiting for years for the release of their family member. Put yourself in the shoes of those whose loved ones have simply disappeared and they are still waiting to find out if they will ever be coming home. Put yourself in the shoes of Birtukan's daughter who goes to bed with no goodnight kiss from her mommy because her mommy is behind the bars of a prison. But, her mother has gone to prison to correct the wrong so that other children will have their daddy's and mommy's at home.

Therefore I ask you, the reader, to always put yourself in the shoes of those suffering. Their suffering is our suffering. Their pain is our pain. Their horror is our horror. Their tears are our tears. Let us embrace them in our thoughts, in our actions and in our prayers.

May God give us the strength to be the humans that He intended us to be—human beings with emotions of love, sympathy and care for those needing help that drives us to take responsibility, not only for ourselves or our loved ones, not only for our tribe or our regions, but also for the suffering humanity around us. May God purify our souls and hearts. Let us fear only Him. Let us not desire the praise of men or leaders, but the praise of God! May God overcome evil with good!

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