



March 24, 2009

Open Letter to Prime Minister Gordon Brown

The Hon. Gordon Brown
Prime Minister of United Kingdom
10 Downing Street, London
SW1A 2AA

Dear Prime Minister Brown

We are writing to you as members of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, a newly formed non-political movement of Ethiopians who are seeking justice, reconciliation and peace in Ethiopia as well as in the Horn of Africa, a strategic area of importance, yet a region plagued with instability, conflict, violence, corruption and poverty, much of it resulting from the lack of justice, freedom, human rights and good governance.

In light of this, the choice of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia as a representative for the whole of Africa at the upcoming G-20 meeting to be held in London on April 2nd only serves to undercut the efforts of Ethiopians and other Africans in their struggle to free themselves of authoritarian dictators such as Mr. Meles Zenawi, who use repression, intimidation, corruption and brutality to maintain a tyrannical government over the majority of Ethiopians.

We in the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia**, and on behalf of the Ethiopian people, strongly urge you to reconsider the inclusion of Mr. Meles Zenawi as a guest at this very important meeting. By inviting this man to represent the whole of Africa, allowing him to stand side by side with leaders from free countries who have been elected by their people, you are sending a disturbing message to oppressed people that brutal leaders can terrorize their people and still be rewarded with undeserved impunity in such circles of power.

That message also carries with it the implication that members of free countries, who already enjoy their rights and liberties, are unwilling or disinterested in taking a moral stand for others, like Ethiopians, who are still fighting to achieve those same rights and liberties. Unless the conscience of the international community is stirred to recognize how this special treatment and related support continues to empower dictatorships, many in Third World countries will continue to suffer.

A recent source of encouragement was the International Criminal Court issuance of a warrant for the arrest of Omar al-Bashir of the Sudan, related to his complicity in the widespread atrocities being perpetrated in Darfur.

Unfortunately, Mr. Meles was one of the first to defend him and to condemn the warrant, perhaps because his own government has also been implicated in a pattern of widespread perpetration of serious human rights atrocities throughout Ethiopia and into Somalia—including acts documented as crimes against humanity and war crimes by top international human rights organizations that have been justified as “counter-insurgency.”

He and those within his government may be keenly aware of their own vulnerability to similar actions by the ICC in the future that could upend a deeply entrenched system of government-supported impunity that has protected perpetrators from any accountability.

For Ethiopians, Mr. Meles is no different than Omar al-Bashir or Robert Mugabe even though the international community treats them differently. Mr. Meles Zenawi is an individual responsible for the rigging of the Ethiopian National election where he declared himself the winner. He was complicit in the repression and shooting of 193 unarmed election protestors and in the arrest and 20-month imprisonment of opposition leaders. He is responsible for essentially killing the democratic process in Ethiopia.

The one and only remaining legitimate political leader, Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, is now a prisoner of conscience according to Amnesty International and she is serving a life sentence for refusing to recant from a statement made in Sweden that she had not requested the pardon which had led to the release of her and other opposition leaders. A lawyer and former judge, Birtukan is the first woman to ever lead a major political party in Ethiopia.

While PM Meles meets with leaders of free world, Ms. Birtukan remain in solitary confinement for more than three months in a horrible prison infested with bugs and rodents for doing the right thing that might otherwise be honoured were she living in a free society such as United Kingdom. She is in solitary confinement in Addis Ababa for simply attempting to exercise her political rights, the same rights Mr. Meles may disingenuously discuss with other leaders during the G-20 meeting.

Ms. Birtukan left behind her four year old daughter and now is living under terrible conditions. She is in isolation in a small, filthy cell, at times forcibly sleep deprived, denied access to book, newspaper, TV and unable to see anyone except for her elderly mother and her young daughter. No visitors from the International Red Cross have been allowed and her health is reportedly deteriorating. Ms. Birtukan has once identified as her role models Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, the jailed leader of Burma. It is sad that these two women with passion for justice and truth live in countries where the governments have complete contempt for truth and justice.

Although countries like the UK, the US, Canada and other European countries have contributed millions of dollars to promote good governance, an independent judiciary and respect for human rights in Ethiopia, the government of Mr. Meles instead suppresses political activity, detains and harasses the opposition at will, allows no independent media, imprisons more journalists than most any other African country and perpetrates massive atrocities against its own citizens.

A recent law passed by the Ethiopian government, the Societies and Charities Proclamation, restricts NGOs within the country who receive 10% or more from foreign sources from promoting human rights, women's empowerment, children's rights, rights for the disabled and conflict resolution between ethnicities and religions, threatening violators with prison sentences of up to 15 years. This legislation is supported by the same individual, Mr. Meles Zenawi, who is invited to participate in the G-20 meeting. This is a painful insult to the people of Ethiopia and other people struggling for their God-given rights.

In 2008, officials from the UN called the humanitarian disaster in southeastern Ethiopia (Ogaden) and in Somalia, the worst crisis in the world, saying it was a “silent Darfur” in scope and in seriousness. In its investigative reports, Human Rights Watch documented that the Ethiopian government held major responsibility for the perpetration of widespread crimes against humanity and war crimes, in violation of international human rights law.

This included extra-judicial killings, rape, carpet-bombing villages (verified through satellite images), blocking humanitarian aid, pillaging property, killing livestock and displacing many hundreds of thousands of people, a primary causal factor in creating this “greatest humanitarian catastrophe in the world.” Yet, this crisis is “silent” due to being under-reported by the media and being largely ignored by the western Medias and international community.

This current invitation to Mr. Meles is seen as another means to promote a false image of him “as a new breed of African leader” when in fact, he is no different than Robert Mugabe or Omar al-Bashir, further contributing to maintaining the “silence” even though the devastation of life continues in the Ogaden.

Ethiopians are not asking for you or those in the western countries to do the hard work of bringing freedom, justice and democracy to Ethiopia, but instead are asking you to remove those supports that continue to prop up those who are obstacles to our freedom like Mr. Meles Zenawi.

If Mr. Zenawi does attend this meeting, we ask you to use this opportunity to urge him to **immediately release Ms. Birtukan Mideska and all other prisoners of conscience within the country, to cease the perpetration of the ongoing atrocities in the Ogaden**, to open up political space in anticipation of the coming 2010 election and to hold all perpetrators of human rights crimes accountable. We would ask that you encourage action in support of encouraging national reconciliation among Ethiopians that could lead to genuine, sustainable and inclusive peace in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Recommendations:

We are highly concerned about the advancement of reconciliation, justice, peace and democracy in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa and therefore, welcome the opportunity to work with you and any other G-20 countries who support these goals. We hope you take these issues we have raised very seriously as stability of the Horn of Africa, as well as in all of Africa, will raise the prospect of peace and security in the world for “until we all are free, no one will be free.”

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely yours,

This Letter has been cc: to all G-20 leaders



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