



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

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Good evening brothers and sisters. My name is Obang Metho. I am glad to be here tonight. I thank those of you who invited me to this event sponsored by Advocacy Ethiopia, whose purpose is to promote democratic freedoms and human rights in Ethiopia. I am not part of any political party. I am a human rights defender. I came this week to testify for my people, and what I mean by my people, please do not think I only mean the Anuak who died on December 13, 2003, but instead I am here for all Ethiopians who have suffered from oppression throughout Ethiopia.

People in this ancient land have shared the same soil with each other for hundreds and thousands of years. I cannot pick and choose who is my fellow Ethiopian and who is not. Our land joins us all together as one. Until we see ourselves in this way, we will never be free. Our problem of ethnic division will never go away. Oppression, anger, despair and misery will become our national identity. We need to rediscover who we are as Ethiopians! We have a long road ahead of us to justice and freedom!

I am thrilled to stand before you because I thought the chance for an Anuak to speak, as an Ethiopian would never come. The Anuak have been wanting this invitation for a long time, and with excitement, I accept it!

I will not talk about the turmoil going on back home that is affecting every ethnic group in Ethiopia. I will be talking about accepting each other. Most of you know that I grew up in Ethiopia and am an Anuak. Because I grew up there, I am an Ethiopian. For many years I have wanted to be accepted as an Ethiopian, but what happened to the Anuak people on December 13, at the hands of their own government, has really made most of the Anuak, including me, believe that we will never be accepted in a country where, as everyone knows, skin color matters. Being dark skinned in Ethiopia excludes us from being an Ethiopian and we have been trying to prove we belong for many, many years.

I experienced this in Ethiopia during the summer of 2003 when I was in Addis. An older Ethiopian man called me a *baria* or *shankalla*. It did not really upset me like it used to when I was a child because I realized something very important---what this man needed was not a retaliatory insult, but a new awareness. This gentleman needed to be reminded that the world is full of different people and that even he had become different from the young man he once was, becoming an elder who needed a cane to walk. This man needed to know that each of us needs each other---that we are all human beings and need to respect each other simply as that.

I experienced the same thing in Washington DC in 2004. I met an Ethiopian taxi driver and we started talking. He asked me where I came from. I told him to guess. He named most every county in Africa except Ethiopia. Then I told him I was an Ethiopian. He laughed and said to me, “No you are not! Ethiopians don’t look like you and don’t talk like you!” He challenged me to prove it to him. I had to greet him in the language of Amharic, Oromo and Tigrayan and told him I was from Gambella. That was when he finally said, “Now, I believe you!”

I was in Washington DC to advocate for the Anuak following the massacre, but when I left his taxi, I realized I did not only have to advocate for the deaths of the Anuak, but I also had to advocate for the unity of Ethiopians as a whole. I realized that until Ethiopians could accept each other as a family, there

would always be those amongst us who would need to advocate for the oppressed, marginalized and discriminated against within our Ethiopian society. It hurts me to say I must also convince my own people, the Anuak, to reach out to Ethiopians----to not respond negatively based on a reaction to exclusion. Instead, we all must be reminded that a flower with one color is not as beautiful as a garden filled with flowers of many colors and hues.

As I would want to educate others about the Anuak who died, I will also raise up the issue of unity and acceptance, as it is key to the future of a free and thriving Ethiopia where the value of human life is respected as a God given characteristic of every human being.

It was before the election when I met this taxi driver who changed my thinking, but I was more compelled to bring this message following the killing of protesters in Addis after the 2005 election. At that time, Ethiopians came out to demonstrate against those killings in almost every capital city in the world. They were protesting and crying for the loss of their loved ones and I thought, we Anuak must tell the Ethiopians that we share this pain with them.

When the Anuak in the Diaspora came out crying on December 13th, our brothers and sisters born in the highlands of Ethiopia may have grieved for us, but not with us. Instead, many felt that the Anuak were against the highlanders and that the highlanders were against the Anuak. It became a barrier between the two of us. Do not think that the government did not play an immense part in promoting this conflict. It is one they seem to thoroughly enjoy.

In fact it is a favorite tactic and they have become expert in its implementation. They specialize in the dehumanization of “unfavored groups” as a means to gain control. As long as others go along with this, their tactics succeed. If other human beings do not become outraged when others suffer at the hands of hate-filled perpetrators of injustice, it only worsens our plight as a people and country. An example of that is from some of the email going around today where pro-government supporters are saying that Obang is advocating only for the Anuak, again trying to succeed in separating the Anuak from being seen first as citizens of Ethiopia.

We Anuak have finally been able to tell other Ethiopians that the same monster that you are now facing, is the same one that almost destroyed us. We must stand hand-to-hand to make a better Ethiopia for our children for what happened in July of 2002 when 200 innocent people were killed in Awassa, in December of 2003 with the Anuak and in June and November of 2005 to student protesters in Addis Ababa, all showing what has become a pattern for this government. We still may not have heard all the stories coming from our brothers and sisters in the remote and silenced places of our country. Everyday we hear about more killing in some area of the country. We must learn what is happening to our neighbors—grieve with them and speak out for them. For every loss, we should all come out and cry together.

Many people did not know that this kind of killing has been going on in our own country until the cry of the blood of the young victims in Addis finally spoke out loudly and clearly to us as a nation. It warns that what happened in these places, could happen in yours. If we stand by and do nothing, the future we leave for our children will become a curse, not a blessing.

We must not be deceived anymore. A government that devalues life may look like others for a while, but its true nature will ultimately be exposed. A chameleon can change its colors to look like a blade of grass but still will remain a chameleon. If a killer commits a murder and is never punished, there is a likelihood that they will kill again. If a child plays with a lighter in the hut and is never told to stop, one day that

lighter may demolish the entire hut. If our own government gets away with the fires it has set throughout the country, one day all of Ethiopia may be reduced to ashes. There is still time for you to act.

Two months ago an 11 year old who was in school in Addis and this girl was protesting the imprisonment of the CUD leaders. Others joined her before police beat her. She went home and wrote in her journal, "I will remember today as the day I joined the struggle." How old do we have to be to join the struggle?

Our real struggle is between those who value human life and those who do not. Ideas matter. If we believe that God has endowed each human being with worth and dignity, equal to our own, our actions are profoundly affected for good. If we believe that we possess worth and dignity in greater amounts than others, we will trample on the rights of those devalued, not considering them truly human. If we believe in the rule of law for everyone, justice will be upheld. If we believe we are above the law, we will exploit and harm the weak and vulnerable to our own greedy advantage. However, the arrogant, while plotting against others, invariably end up destroying themselves by falling into the pits they prepared for others.

I have heard that the testimony I gave about the atrocities committed against the Anuak was excluded from some radio and website coverage, not only by the pro-government groups, which was to be expected, but by other pro-democratic groups. I call on these groups to come forward and understand that we need not hide the facts. If we face this difficult chapter in our Ethiopian history, standing side by side with the Anuak and others, we will be freed from it. It is true that we experience a shared guilt even if we never shared in the crimes, just because we are citizens of the country---- like in a tragedy, everyone questions what more could I have done?

Do not be paralyzed by the shame, embarrassment or regret of what our government has done to our people. Do not cover it up so the world cannot see the truth or our secrets will take away our power and self-respect. This government does not stand for who we are as Ethiopians. Instead, we as Ethiopians, stand against injustice and for the value of each human being. We are not our government! Some people will say I am here because I belong to a political party, but I am not. What I am here for is justice and equality in a free Ethiopia where there is opportunity for every Ethiopian.

The Anuak are not totally innocent. I am ashamed of the killing of some innocent highlander civilians by Anuak perpetrators following the loss of their Anuak families in 2003. Some Anuak lashed out in angry revenge against innocent victims. I apologize to the remaining family members of those victims. We must grieve with them. No loss of innocent life is justified. I cannot hide these crimes from the public eye because I would be inconsistent to what I stand for and although I might keep it from you, the God who knows all, knows this.

We must turn away from the violence we have perpetrated against each other coming from our ignorance, rage or from being brain washed. Let us work hand in hand to not lose another life. Getting the truth out begins the process of reconciliation. To do so, we cannot be part of hiding the truth---good or bad.

The shame of being part of a family where one of our members has perpetrated such crimes against other members must be faced and embraced. If your hand is wounded, you don't cut it off. Your hand is important as part of your body. You will try to take care of it until it heals. In the same way, we must take care of the injured within our own society.

We must not run away from the truth that could free us---that could empower massive growth to us as a people. It is an opportunity to face the darkness of our own monsters within. If we lack the courage to honestly look at ourselves individually and as a country, we will never turn around to seek the bright light of redemption found only by traveling a different path. Without this light, we Ethiopians will never find our way out of this mess. We will become a failed people and a failed nation.

The problem we are facing is not a new one. Neither is it new to others in this human race of ours. Speak out for right. Rally behind leaders who value life, liberty and the rule of law equally applied to everyone. Reconcile to God who will fill you with more than you need. Let your extra help your neighbor.

When people don't have leadership, they circle in a purposeless cycles of ignorance and frustration. We know that little tiny ants need leaders to follow and sometimes when the leader turns, the others do as well, as the blood in our veins goes from the heart to the body, it follows a channel and it is that channel that keeps us functioning. We see geese that fly in a V-shaped formation, more protected together than apart.

We need such a formation in Ethiopia based on the highest principles of freedom, democracy and the value of human life. Getting that leadership now will be a challenge.

Few of us respect the leadership in other groups, but for our own safety and well being, we must be fully committed to pursue good governance for Ethiopia. It will require compromise and tolerance. Because the CUD leaders are standing for democracy, we should give them a chance and see what they have.

Fortunately, we also have immense resources in each other. We must learn from the different political parties and political views. We must embrace members from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. We must bring all the "flowers of various colors and hues" to the public square where their complexities will enhance the beauty of our garden.

Like the water entering the Blue Nile, it does not come from one source, but from all over Ethiopia, from its small ravines, from the hills and from the mountains, joining together as a powerful river that nourishes those even outside of Ethiopia as it makes its way to the sea; like the numerous veins in our bodies that carry our blood to our hearts. We need to remind ourselves that all of us have the same goal and need to work together to achieve it. We may need to give up something that may be important to us. We must also have to accept something that once was unimportant to us.

We need to leave behind the exclusion of people from the political process. One example is the exclusion of some because of their previous political links. For example, there are people who were under Mengistu or Haile Selassie who are excluded for views and alliances they held years ago. It is time to include those who are ready to advance the cause of freedom and democracy, warm-heartedly welcoming them and not holding any grudges. If we exclude them, it will create another camp that will make our job more difficult.

In 1983, after the big drought, the government of Mengistu resettled thousands of Tigrayans in the unfamiliar climate and culture of Gambella. He claimed it was to remove them from the parched land in the north, but many knew it was to remove the disgruntled and repressed Tigrayans from the chance to join with the TPLF in its fight against the Dergue.

When the Tigrayans arrived, the Anuak were told to cut wood and to build huts for them. They worked for three months. The adjustment for the Tigrayans was very difficult. This was a new place and culture. The climate was very hot and filled with mosquitoes carrying malaria. Before long, these malnourished people starting dying, losing many children.

I remember my grandfather telling these resettlers to go to his farm field and to take pumpkins, potatoes, mangoes from the mangoe trees and anything else that would help them. We did not know their language, but we talked the language of humans, with our smiles, our expressions and with our hands. I remember the elders telling me that because we had suffered, we knew how difficult it was for the Tigrayans and the grief that they felt for their dying children. Because of that, I was told that these people were our guests—

our responsibility now that they were with us---that they needed more than just food. They needed our emotional support and our welcome. Many of these Tigrayans have not forgotten the help they received from the Anuak. Perhaps this is why some stood up for the Anuak that otherwise dark day of December 13, 2003.

As God teaches us, if there is anyone who has done something wrong, has changed and now wants forgiveness, you should forgive them and embrace them as your brother and sister. This does not mean we must always agree. For example, what I am telling you tonight you may think is wrong. Come to me and let us learn from each other as we continue to be part of the greater family of Ethiopians. As we do within our families, if there is disagreement, we do not kill or abandon that person---they are still family members. Instead we challenge, we confront, we encourage and we show our loved one a different way to act, think or live.

For those Anuak who died on December 13th, their deaths would not be without purpose if they resulted in reconciling Ethiopians together so they could live and work in harmony, respect and acceptance.

We must ask who we are as Ethiopians. We have lost our identity. Our sense of who we are has been hijacked as we have been exploited, dehumanized and as our pain has been so great we have become numb to it. Ethiopia has become a traumatized society and culture. How can we recover?

Our consciences demand that we acknowledge the wrongs we have committed, both privately and corporately. We must be able to speak out against injustice everywhere. We must seek to be reconciled to a God who desires justice, but who also loves us and is merciful---who lifts up those who are humbled, breathing fresh life into decayed flesh. If we do, Ethiopia may become a model for all. We can use our past mistakes to change our direction, launching us to what we never believed was possible. Start today and start with the simple things.

Think about how we Ethiopians used to have coffee together. We would brew many cups of coffee and place them in a circle. Neighbors and friends would be invited to share. Men and women would sit down together. Strangers would be invited to join your circle. Light skinned and dark skinned would be sitting next to each other. The coffee cups did not have assigned names of Oromo, Amhara, Tigrayan, Nuer or Gondare; anyone could be included in the circle.

Now, Meles is taking your coffee away from you. He has closed your circles from outsiders. No longer do you invite your neighbor to sit down with you because your neighbor is Anuak, Amhara or Oromo. Oromo will only drink with other Oromo. Amharas will drink only with Amharas. Worse than this, even within the same ethnic groups there is division. Pro-government Tigrayans will not drink coffee with Tigrayans opposed to it.

Something that was a unique part of Ethiopian culture has now been taken away. We have become isolated from each other. We have lost the vital relationships that have made the Ethiopian people known for their warmth and joy. We have broken our circles and hurt ourselves, our neighbors and our beloved Ethiopia. We must restore our circle!

Start with this small change. Go home, brew that coffee and start reaching out!

Thank you,