



The Struggle of the Ethiopian People for a Voice in Our Own Future Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia: Report from London

November 30, 2008

Ethiopians who came to the meeting of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** held in London, UK on November 23, 2008 have much in common with those Ethiopians who met earlier in Oakland and Minneapolis—they were all seeking an Ethiopia where their families, friends and fellow citizens could live in freedom. As their bodies were physically outside of Ethiopia, their minds and thoughts remained consumed with the difficult conditions under which their loved ones lived within the country.

I want to summarize the events of the meeting and the principles behind the Solidarity Movement so that the greater Ethiopian public remains informed.

First of all, I want to thank all of the people who helped make the SMNE meeting in London possible—the Ethiopian Civic group called "Ethiopian Civic Consortium, in the UK" who organized it and some of the individuals who were part of that effort such as Wondimu Mekonnen, Ermias and Endalemahu.

I want to especially thank my friend, Achame Shana, a great Ethiopian from the Southern Nations who has been driving me to various destinations during my visit in London. He is like the thousands of wonderful Ethiopians whom I have met on my journey towards bringing justice to Ethiopia, but whose faces I have never seen. I finally met Achame face to face this past week when he picked me up at the airport in London and accompanied me to my lecture at the University of Reading.

In July of 2007 I had received an email from him, thanking me for including his ethnic group by name in one of our articles. He explained to me how meaningful it was to him because he had never before seen the name of his ethnic group in print within an article, particularly one addressing the pain and the misery of his own ethnic group. Usually they were only included in the category of "others." I responded back and we have become great friends. I recently was privileged to meet his wonderful wife and two daughters.

Mr. Achame is an example of the many, many Ethiopians God has brought into my life that I would never have met except for the tragic deaths of those I loved in Gambella. Their deaths have made me realize how wonderful the Ethiopian people are—how caring, loving and generous—and it has given me hope that Ethiopians can love one another and find a way to live and thrive together.

Hatred is what has led to our misery

As I looked at the Ethiopians attending the meeting, even though I did not know their names, their tribes, their religion, their regional background, their political association, their native language or any other particulars about them, I did know that they were there because they cared about what happens in Ethiopia. I also told them that I would be speaking with honesty and without any hatred towards anyone, including Woyanne or TPLF with whom I might disagree, because hatred is what has led to our misery.

Instead, our common humanity must bind us together as human beings and our common roots within the map of Ethiopia must give each of us have a place in a future Ethiopia, even those who have committed a crime. Yes, we want justice, but we must find ways to balance judgment, accountability and reconciliation so that we can be freed to move on as a society.

Part of being freed to move on begins in the consciences of the people. For example, if you are a Woyanne supporter, deep in your heart you surely know that something is not right with this government that you are supporting and the fact that you are supporting it, helps lengthen its duration. You might not want to admit it because Woyanne money and privilege are sustaining your family, but you may already realize there is a high price attached to this that is being extracted of you and others as a result.

Others of you may not care because you are gaining some short-term pleasure for yourselves, exploiting others to do it; however, most Ethiopians who are Woyanne or even nominal EPRDF members, are people who are struggling within themselves because as they try to survive within such a society, they must constantly deal with a combination of fear and guilt.

We on the outside must remember how difficult life is for our brothers and sisters who remain inside Ethiopia. They need our prayer, love and support to stand up against evil as it constantly wars against Ethiopians who are trying to live rightly in such an oppressive environment—look at one example—Teddy Afro.

The greatest progress within the Solidarity Movement can begin within oneself because the change of thinking always begins the process of change. Look at the mission statement.

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.

It focuses on uniting around principles and ideas that must replace worn-out, destructive ones that have failed. People do not unite around principles unless they accept those principles as being honorable and right. Neither will Ethiopians unite unless they are willing to consider others as equally human and equally Ethiopian.

Moral strength that upholds the humanity, the rights and the privileges of all people

If we begin change in our day-to-day attitudes and dealings with each other, more historically oppressed groups that want to break away may reconsider. In turn, these alienated groups may make new attempts to bridge broken relationships between Ethiopians. A genuine transformation of thinking is critical to the success of the Solidarity Movement and begins with a moral transformation such as what led to the laws first established in the UK against slavery in the early 1800's by abolitionist, Wilbur Wilberforce who fought against the dehumanization of humankind that was being perpetrated against Africans.

On Saturday, November 22, I had spoken at the University of Reading regarding the current discussion about trade agreements with African countries, called Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA's) and trade liberalization. I emphasized the illegitimacy of those agreements when they were negotiated and signed on behalf of African people by African dictators who were oppressing them. I called for outside players to follow moral principles in not taking advantage of the poor in Africa by exploiting them when they had no voice.

The British were the first to enact laws outlawing slavery in 1833 but it was not easy because Wilberforce had to persuade those with economic interests to uphold higher moral principles. This is what we need in Ethiopia—the same kind of moral strength that upholds the humanity, the rights and the privileges of all people as equal under the law, particularly those who are weak and without a voice.

Meles uses the beauty of Ethiopia—our differences—to divide, dehumanize, alienate and destroy us, but we must not so easily fall for it and instead come together to talk about those issues we have been avoiding for years. It is a goal of the Solidarity Movement to create new dialogues that can teach, empower and bring us together around common goals and values. It is not a political movement and not a movement for anyone, including me, to run for political office. We are not here to compete with any political party. We support all political parties and encourage them to work together to bring about the kind of government that values human life, freedom and opportunity for all citizens.

I got involved because the Anuak people I knew were dehumanized and killed. Their killers are walking free and no one has been brought to justice. We need to work together to bring justice to the country. This movement is about freeing the country and then letting the people decide who they want as their leaders and then bringing the people who committed the crimes to justice, including Meles.

We are here to serve the people and the right to their own political choices. This applies to the separatists who want to break away from the country who have never had a choice to choose their own leaders. Other Ethiopians are in the same position so let's join hands, free the country, assemble the right government chosen by the people, including the separatists and then decide if any of us want our independence.

Numerous comments and questions came up following the talk, I will cover a few.



From left to right Mr. Wondimu Mekonnen and Mr. Obang Metho

One man asked for my view on religion and on whether the Solidarity Movement was going to include working with the various religious groups because, as most people know, Ethiopians are not only divided by Christian and Muslim faiths, but even within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and within other sub-groups of all faiths, divisions exist. He wanted to know if there was a plan to reach out to these people to try to bring them together?

I explained that we are interested in bringing people of varying beliefs together in solidarity, respecting each other's doctrinal differences; yet, standing up together for principles upon which they could agree—the respect of human rights, freedom, equality and justice. I explained that personally, I was Christian and a believer in Jesus Christ, but that I was more than willing to work with Muslims, non-believers and Christians of any denomination. I told them that in fact, we already have representation within the Solidarity Movement from those of differing religious backgrounds, including people of the Muslim faith who have endorsed coming together to stand up for the human rights of all Ethiopians.

A young man who recently came from Ethiopia told the audience that he was in Ethiopia following the killings related to the 2005 election. He explained how the response of Ethiopians in the Diaspora made a huge difference to the morale of Ethiopians within the country. He reported that every time he heard of a rally in London, America or elsewhere, it gave him and others hope.

He challenged the audience to imagine how difficult it is for people back home now because of the divisions. He emphasized that solidarity was the only way. He reported that the conditions in the country were worsening on a daily basis and hoped that a plan would be developed so Ethiopians would know that we are not sleeping or forgetting the pain and suffering they are in.

I told him that the main reason that the Solidarity Movement was formed was the crisis in the country that was worsening. We realized there was no one common voice speaking for all Ethiopians and there was a need to create an organization to speak on behalf of Ethiopians and report the misery under which Ethiopians live.

Another comment was made regarding the depth of division between people, asking what we could do about it.

In response I asked, “Do we really have a choice?” For the sake of the survival of all of us, we have no choice but to come together. There is no place in Ethiopia where people are not affected and repressed. When you talk about the price of food being doubled or tripled and inflation jumping from 10% to 37% throughout the entire country, it is no longer a matter of one group. Because we are all affected, it makes sense to act collectively.

Be aware that it is not only Meles who can advance his agenda through our divisions, but it is also some outside our country who seek the same. When we have strong and protective leadership, they can negotiate on our behalf, but when we do not, these leaders negotiate on their own behalf, sometimes appearing to become puppets, but in reality, they are only loyal to their own interests, which are subject to change, depending on the opportunities that come their way. Some countries, multi-national corporations and individuals also come with their own agendas, each taking advantage of the situation and of self-interested leaders. The only ones continually left out are the people.

Also be alert to those who stir up division such as some foreign scholars who I call “terrorist thinkers” because they preach hatred and destruction. They pretend to side with one group or minority who have been oppressed or marginalized, making it appear that they are being supported, but oftentimes such people are opportunists whose goal may be the disintegration or disempowerment of Ethiopia as a nation.

While encouraging separatists—pretending to care about their oppression—and by calling Ethiopia a **“fake country”** controlled by **“neo-Nazi racists,”** they can prey on the weak and accomplish their agenda of ensuring a weakened state of divided, alienated victims, something that most likely will cost lives rather than save lives. **Do not listen to voices, even if they are intellectuals, who are saying, “Kill!” These kinds of people can breed hatred, spreading it by the Internet while they themselves live in safe places in foreign countries.**

Let us refuse to make ourselves enemies of each other.

Ethiopians, let us refuse to make ourselves enemies of each other. No one will benefit from us killing ourselves. I am not saying that we do not have a problem or I would not be calling for a **“new Ethiopia”** where humanity comes before ethnicity and freedom will only come when we are all free, but these attitudes will not be corrected by violence but through acknowledging God-given principles regarding the value of every person and our failure in the past to live up to these principles.

If we acknowledge our responsibility for the negative things of the past, we will be more able to move on to a different future. Look at what has happened in America. Americans have moved from being a nation where half lived free to a nation where all are free, even choosing a black minority to be the president and commander in chief of their nation.

If you wish for something better for your family, do not be manipulated by anyone preaching hate. Think for yourselves and then get out and do what is right. Do not believe in a leader—not in “Obang” or in anyone else, but believe in God and what we can do together to advance peace, security and reconciliation. Get out right now and work in solidarity. The time is running out.

We can work together or we can sit by and let the country disintegrate.

We have two choices, to act or to not act. We will be judged regardless of what we do. We can work together or we can sit by and let the country disintegrate. Both choices will affect us.

Look at the former Yugoslavia. The people did not work hard enough to prevent the killing when they could have and now the country is broken into pieces. The same happened in Rwanda when people sat by, listening to the hate language coming across the radio that was stirring up people for at least two years before the genocide. They did not see that it was their responsibility to do something to stop it, but yet when the deaths occurred, it affected everyone, including all of those who did nothing. Many lost loved ones and others are living with guilt, shame and regret. How do you restore a society after this?

One man spoke up and said that this was the first time since the division of the Kinijit that he had attended a meeting. He said he had come because it was about putting all people forward as human beings first and he wanted to learn more about it. He said he understood and agreed now that it would be solidarity around common principles that could topple Meles as no one group could free the country alone.

I agreed. This is not a movement of one group, but it is a movement to save the lives of all of us and this is why I am inviting you to join with me in this effort. For me, I am doing this because I believe God wants me to do so because He cares more deeply than I could ever understand about the suffering of the people. I cannot say it has been easy. I don't have money in the bank. I don't own a car. Sometimes I don't know where to find the money for my expenses; however, if by living a simple life, it enables someone else to not be killed, tortured or raped, what more could I ask for?

Someone may think this guy, Obang is crazy for living like this, but I chose to do this myself. I do not want others to receive the kind of email I did following the Anuak massacre that tells me to please view the attachment for the list of all of those killed. If we really want a new Ethiopia that is free and in peace, all of us must commit to sacrifice something to this effort, the substance of which will vary from person to person.

We do not have to be a “beggar nation.”

As Dr Ermias was driving me here today, he introduced me to his seven year old son, Nathaniel and nine year old daughter, Hannah, both of whom had recently visited Ethiopia with their mother. I asked them about their experience and both of them said, they have seen different kind of animals, but Nathaniel quietly said, “We saw so many poor children everywhere we went. Many of them were begging on the streets and it seems like no one is doing anything about it.”

This beautiful and innocent Ethiopian boy is right. A recent index showed that Ethiopia was the “**most unfriendly government towards children.**” We can do something about the poor children in Ethiopia. They do not have to suffer like this. We do not have to be a “beggar nation.” We can do something about the homeless, the unemployed and the starving. We can be the answer to this child’s question. With God’s help, we can do it. Giving up is not an option. We can work to create an Ethiopia where people will be born and have an opportunity to live there rather than to run away from it.

To all Ethiopians living in exile, we can do it like the Jews have done it in their land. They suffered, but out of misery, they combined collectively and created their nation. We also can work collectively, not just as one tribe, but as a people and go back and build this country and pass it on to the unborn.

The money, guns and power that Meles has are not more powerful than what we can accomplish if we unite around the God-given principles of morality, love, justice and respect towards others. We do not have to believe in one person, one leader, one political party, one tribe, one religion or one organization in order to plant that beautiful garden of which I dream.

I have already met many of the people who will be the foundation of the new Ethiopia where the sanctity of human life is valued as God intended. These are the kind of Ethiopians who will bring this kind of Ethiopia into being, where we are really one people who uphold the place of all in the greater family of Ethiopians. May God equip us to be that kind of people.

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