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## Solidarity Movement Calls for New Actions:

SMNE Endorses January 14th Rallies Throughout the World to Free Birtukan, Teddy Afro, Bekele Jirata and All Ethiopian Political Prisoners!

Solidarity Movement for New Ethiopia | January 11, 2009

We in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) are pleased with the very positive responses we have received from numerous diverse Ethiopian groups who indicate a willingness to sign a collective letter calling for an end to tyranny in Ethiopia. Such a letter would be addressed to policymakers in key donor countries, to the media and to other strategic leaders asking them to stand with the Ethiopian people against the oppressive policies of the current government of Meles Zenawi.

More specifically, we would be calling for their action-based support for the release of Birtukan Mideksa, (UDJ Chairperson) Teddy Afro, (Ethiopian popular musician) Bekele Jirata, (General Secretary of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) party) Jumma Rufaai, (Human rights activist from Beni-shangul-Gumuz) Sabeel Aldakheet (former Vice President of the Beni-shangul-Gumuz region) and all other political prisoners, **for the rescinding of the recently passed Society and Charities Proclamation law, for the halting of all human rights abuses in the Ogaden and throughout Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, for the restoration of the full and equal rights of all citizens under the Ethiopian Constitution and for the opening up of genuine political space. This letter will be published next week.**

The Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) groups of North America, Europe and in other countries, led by imprisoned leader, Birtukan Mideksa, are examples of some of those who have told us of their intent to be signatories of this letter. **They have also pledged their support of the 100,000 person, “March for Freedom and Justice,” to take place in Washington D.C. in September of this year.**

As mentioned before, the SMNE is not a political group, but it does represent the interests of all political groups in being able to freely carry out rightful political activities within the country—something that is currently not tolerated at any level within Ethiopia.

The imprisonment of Birtukan is a shocking example of the blatant politically based manipulation of Ethiopian law, under the flimsiest of reasons, in stark contrast to the “culture of impunity” that has been put in place to protect government-supported perpetrators of serious crimes.

Birtukan is not alone—there are many more political prisoners like Teddy Afro; thousands detained/tortured Oromo Prisoners like Mr. Bekele Jirata, General Secretary of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) party;

Asefa Tefera Dibaba, university lecturer at Addis Ababa University; Bekele Negeri, businessman; Dejene Dhaba, businessman; Fiqadu Jalqaba, college student; Eshetu Kitil, owner of the Hawi Hotel and Desta Kitili, his brother; Kebede Borena, assistant manager of the Hilton Hotel in Addis Ababa; Leslie Wodajo (f), a journalist.

Thousands detained and tortured Gumuz prisoners in Beni-shangul-Gumuz region like Sabeel Albakheet, former vice president of Benishangul region; Anazeer Ibrahim, Benishangul regional government employee; Mustaffa Mussa, khumasha warda employee; Abdel-Raheem Alshafee, Asossa zone head; Mudawee Abdelraheem, Khamusha warada employee. All of them are currently detained in Asossa military prison. There are also thousands detained and tortured Afras and Ogadenis prisoners.

*The Ethiopian people, themselves, have become prisoners within their own country and it will require unified and widespread calls for justice for them to be heard. Birtukan's own example demonstrates her desire to raise the volume of those cries as she is not carrying on a hunger strike for her own personal release, but for the freeing of the country from tyranny.*

### **SMNE Calls for All Ethiopians from Diverse Groups to Rally on January 14**

In this spirit of unity, the UDJ has scheduled rallies to take place in ten cities on January 14, 2009. This is an opportunity to bring worldwide attention not just to Birtukan, but also to the tyranny that exists in Ethiopia—not just against one leader, one group or one political party, but against all who dare dissent against this regime!

That is why we in the Solidarity Movement are calling on other political groups, including those from resistance groups, to participate. In other words, we want both those advocating for a peaceful struggle and those advocating for an armed struggle to join because both groups are united in wanting freedom and justice in Ethiopia. Needless to say, if freedom and justice can be accomplished without an armed struggle, who would not support that? However, it is hard to blame some who are discouraged with the progress of the past few years, particularly as the situation worsens; yet, together, we might be more effective in shaking the foundations of this regime than was possible in the past with competing factions.

We also call all on Ethiopians of every ethnicity, region, viewpoint, gender, age and religion who can rally without being shot, to join with their fellow Ethiopians in calling for the release of Birtukan Mideksa, Teddy, Bekele, Jumma, Sabeel and all other political prisoners. Also, bring other names of those you know from other regions and groups throughout the country who are languishing in prison.

Condemn the new draconian “**Society and Charities Proclamation law**”, explaining its impact on some of the most vulnerable in our society. Condemn the killing in the Ogaden or in other places of which you know. Call for courage, strength and conviction among the people to stand up together against brutality. Call for international condemnation of such injustice!

We in the Solidarity Movement are also continuing to work behind the scenes to advance the goals of the SMNE. **Call Your Legislators to Arrange Meetings This Week!**

A rally is a great step, but more is required of each of you and it must be done immediately! Meles's recent actions show that things cannot get much worse in Ethiopia. As Meles reveals his “real colors”, it becomes more convincing to outsiders to join with united Ethiopians in confronting this government. US legislators have told us that only five or ten letters or calls from people from within their districts can make a difference.

Already some of you or us have taken great action to contact key people. As a result of that, we can see the statements coming out from Donald Payne, from Swedish International Development Cooperation Minister, from German Development Minister, from Amnesty International, International Federation for Human Rights in Paris, France, from World Organization Against Torture in Genève Switzerland, from Human Rights Watch and there are more to come next week. Good job!

Don't be discouraged for we can do much more! If Ethiopians work to get another bill like HR #2003 before the House after Obama comes into office, there seems to be good indication that he will sign it, but still, Ethiopians must be the ones to do the work.

This week, Ethiopians—individually, in small groups or as teams in representation of a large group—should call their senators and congressional representatives to schedule meetings with their staff.

***Ethiopians who live in Washington D.C. should attempt to schedule urgent meetings with top policymakers like Chris Smith, Donald Payne, Russell Feingold, Patrick Leahy, John McCain and others to let these people know how urgent this situation is, telling of Birtukan's hunger strike, about other political prisoners, the crisis in the Ogaden and the new law, then encouraging them to take immediate action.***

***Ethiopians from California should schedule a meeting with Nancy Pelosi (or her staff) to tell her about the condition of Birtukan and others. As a political leader, a woman and mother herself, she should understand.***

***This model of approaching key decision makers or special interest groups should apply to all Ethiopians throughout the world. Start arranging such face-to-face meetings this coming Monday or Tuesday.***

***Tell your local newspaper about what is going on and ask them to cover the issues. Give them copies of articles from the Internet, all of which could add explanation and documentation to your case. We have to be the voice that brings Ethiopia to the local newspaper. Tell them that our tax money (over \$900 million) is being given to a country whose leaders are committing unthinkable human rights abuses against your fellow Ethiopians and denying citizens their most basic rights. Ask them to take a moral stand against supporting such dictators and extending their regimes.***

By virtue of Meles's actions, it will also be easier to engage new non-Ethiopian people to join. Seek help from people within your religious groups, communities and social justice groups. This new Charities law will raise the anger of women's groups, groups for the disabled, political action groups, musicians and artists (Teddy Afro) and many others.

Tell them how it has become illegal for NGO's—including religious groups—receiving more than 10% funding from outside the country (estimated to be over 95% of the 3800 registered groups) to promote human rights, democracy, equality among women, ethnic groups or religious groups, conflict resolution and rights for children or the disabled.

In other words, one could be sentenced to up to fifteen years in prison for promoting reconciliation between ethnic groups, women's equality in business and the rights of the disabled for increased accessibility to services for the handicapped. Most people will not be able to believe it! If we do this right, we can free our country.

## **Give Up the Past Failing Models If You Want a New Ethiopia**

As we have been saying all along, this is beyond one political party. If Meles can put Birtukan in jail, he can put anyone in jail. If you want a “New Ethiopia,” you and I must stop swallowing, regurgitating and then again swallowing the same rotted food we have consumed for the last 50 years. It has led to our perpetual shame, tyranny, poverty and hardship. Think about our thinking and our attitudes! That is where our problem begins! We have excluded many, elevated our own and when we suffered, we blamed everyone else but ourselves.

Go back to the student movement in the nineteen-seventies. It was a movement that became immoral movement right after it was formed because it was based on killing, division, exclusion and power-grabbing. It divided us at home and in the West. As a result of this, countless Ethiopians lives were lost and it destroyed the nation. It was a movement that firmly planted the seeds for the unhealthy society we live in today. The worst part of it is that the devastating results of this movement have never been addressed, even today. There was never any accountability or attempt to bring justice or reconciliation. It was swept under the carpet where it remains. Meles was the result of never “cleaning up” after our last tragedy.

The TPLF was born out of the previous injustice. Oppressed Tigrayans fought to liberate themselves. However, they did not deal with it properly, using terror and violence to achieve their goal. Just like those of Mengistu, they focused on themselves rather than including all oppressed people, using others when needed and discarding them when not. By luck, they overthrew Mengistu, not by their numbers or by the power of their guns, because Mengistu had more of each, but by aligning with the West. Unfortunately, when they came into power, they became worse than Mengistu! They brought in this system of ethnic preference, which is essentially an apartheid-based system supportive to the members of this minority party, which did not include many Tigrayans or others who had helped them get into power.

This apartheid Ethiopia has caused many oppressed and marginalized Ethiopians to not want to be part of this country anymore because of how far this minority party has gone in grabbing the benefits made possible through ruling with a powerful iron hand. The TPLF uses the threat that they will destroy Ethiopia if we “push them too much.” Now, because of their actions against the majority, it has gotten to the level where many Ethiopians are saying that the reason they are denied education, cannot feed their children and are denied their rights is because of the Tigrayans, wrongly putting them all in the same box.

Anyone who denies the fact that there is hatred towards Tigrayans would be lying. It is critically important that these feelings be addressed so that the rational parts can be dealt with in a civil and just manner and the irrational parts confronted and corrected.

If we are to become a healthy society, there must be widespread acknowledgement of how our society (made up of individual Ethiopians) has contributed to the creation of serial dictators, cronyism, division and the marginalization of our minorities—all going back 50 years. This favoring of one group over all others is the reason why so many want to run away from Ethiopia and why some of our darker skinned people feel that they are not Ethiopian while at the same time, others stoke the fires of that alienation by considering themselves to be “the pure Ethiopians.”

If we are going to deal with the problem of Ethiopia in the same ways we have done for all of these years of failure, all we will get is more of the same only with different names and a different tribe controlling Menelik Palace.

***Now is the time to change this and is a fundamental reason we created the SMNE. The goal of the SMNE is to go back to***

1) respecting the basic value found within every human being that supersedes ethnicity—humanity before ethnicity—and

2) working towards becoming a society that values justice, freedom and opportunity for all—no one is free until we all are free. Many of our societal problems would be resolved with the adoption of these two simple principles. Widespread practice of these principles would break the cycle of our self-perpetuated misery.

### **Action Need is Urgent**

The need for united action right now is very urgent, especially knowing that Birtukan is on a hunger strike and that she is in poor condition; something that the International Red Cross has told me they will check out. Yet, her own mother says she can hardly recognize her daughter who continues to refuse to eat in protest to this regime—may God protect her life and accomplish far more than we can imagine through her actions.

In response, I am calling for every Ethiopian to put yourself in Birtukan’s position. She is young and a mother. No one would have blamed her if she would have stayed in Europe or North America when she was there, but instead, she returned to Ethiopia and did not back down to Woyanne threats. ***She did not go to prison for herself, but is telling Ethiopians and those who value freedom for others, to do something about the lack of every freedom in Ethiopia. She is saying, do not let a moment go by without thinking about the countless millions of people within Ethiopia who are suffering and dying every day because of tyranny and deliberate mismanagement. She is speaking for everyone and the action we take will tell us what kind of people we are.***

### **Will We Just Pass By?**

So many have told me that I should do more, but that they are afraid to do so themselves because they want to go back to Ethiopia to see family or friends. I have heard this comment not hundreds of times, but thousands of times, from Ethiopians of every distinction in the Diaspora. They live outside the country, but are still afraid to publicly join against killing, imprisonment and the destruction of our country! What would happen if all of us in the Diaspora said we would postpone our visits until our country was freed from tyranny?

God calls us to be fearless in standing up for what is right and that true believers would show it in loving actions towards others—in loosening the cords of injustice. What if everyone was too afraid to take a position? Meles would probably stay in power and continue to brutalize the people with your passive support like he is doing it now. If you find this morally intolerable and feel guilty for not doing what is right yourself or urging others to do so, ***now is the time to make that change. It is not about politics, it is about morality and about being a responsible human being. If we don’t do this, no one else will. Think about if all of the thousands of you would do something!***

A few months ago, a young Ethiopian woman, only in her mid-twenties, forced to beg for food for herself and her young child, died on the streets of Addis Ababa. She must have died at night because in the morning, as people were walking by, her small, two and half year old daughter could be seen pushing on her mother, repeatedly saying, “Mommy, get up. Mommy, get up.” A stranger sensed something was wrong and discovered that the woman was not breathing and had died. The man called the authorities and later, the police came and took the young child.

I tell you this story because how many Ethiopians out there have been calling, “Mommy get up, Mommy get up?” All of us should put ourselves in the shoes of that child. Did her mother die from something preventable that could have saved her life if someone had intervened? Did her mother give up her own food so that her daughter could live? We will never know, but we do know that Ethiopia is on the brink of death and destruction and many are already crying out to us, “Mommy, mommy.”

We may try to cover our ears to it, not wanting to hear it, because we—some within Ethiopia and some in the Diaspora—may be personally benefitting from it or some outside the country might want to go back, visit and invest in this “stolen” country. Because of that, they do not want to get involved in “politics.” However, this is not about politics but about saving lives.

Ethiopia, as the country we were born in, is dying and most Ethiopians are simply “passing by” like those passing by the crying child who is desperately seeking any sign of life from her mother, but does anyone care?

We need to pay attention to this dying nation and to those sacrificing to revive it before it is too late. They are at the front lines, some whose names we will never know, but some we already do. Their names are Birtukan, Teddy, Bekele, Jumma, Sabeel and many more.

***So get up from where you have become comfortable. Stop blaming; stop accusing; stop attacking; and stop denying the voices of suffering crying out for help! Stop begging someone else for your own freedom or the freedom of your family and loved ones. America, the UK, the European Union and all other outsiders will not do it.***

***It is we the people, the average Ethiopians, who must do it with the help of our Almighty God, the Creator of the heavens and the nations and the Creator of our hearts and our souls.***

***May God give us the strength, wisdom, courage and depth to rediscover our own gift of humanity, known in relationship to God and then to uphold the moral requirements that flow out of that relationship that must be reflected in our attitudes and actions towards others.***

May God bless Ethiopia!

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