



In Recognition of My Fellow Ethiopians: We are Becoming the People of a New Ethiopia

May 23, 2009

Thankfully, in May of 2009, we Ethiopians are not the same as we were in December of 2003. One of the lowest points in my own life was on December 13, 2003 after learning of the brutal massacre of relatives, friends, work colleagues, former classmates and other Anuak in Gambella, Ethiopia. Despite the wailing and the tears from the Anuak, the silence that followed in Ethiopia and in the international community was overwhelming.

It was the same silence and indifference that followed many other “December 13th’s” for diverse Ethiopians in many other locations in our country where alone—one by one—Ethiopians suffered horrible onslaughts to their loved ones and communities at the hands of the Meles-controlled predatory government of the EPRDF. Today, I want to give recognition to my fellow Ethiopians for already becoming part of the change that will help create the foundation of that new Ethiopia for which we hope and dream.

Change does not come quickly to any society

Change does not come quickly to any society, especially when it is built on years of dysfunction, seen in the devaluation of other human beings and in a total disregard for accountability before our Creator. Such societies—in chronic pain—are often impenetrable because they are solidly “fixed” into place by thinking that refuses to budge despite its inevitable downward decline to destruction; however, I believe the foundation for a healthy, more humane society is strengthening more quickly than I ever believed possible.

I am seeing it displayed in the minds, thoughts and actions of many individual Ethiopians, not from just one group, but among many diverse groups of Ethiopians. As this momentum increases, let us push ahead, all the more enthusiastically, to create a society that values and respects the rights of all people and one which upholds the principles of truth, justice, freedom, equality and civility.

As I have met with so many wonderful Ethiopians, I have lived in this healthier society that I envision for the future. I have spoken at community events with such groups as Tigrayans, Oromos, Ogadeni, Amhara and a blend of many. Our Solidarity Steering Committee is made up of friends and co-workers in this struggle that I have met along the way. I must thank them for their hard work, willing attitude and perseverance. Recently, one of these great Ethiopians on our committee, Mr. Yassim Kassim, invited me on behalf of the Free-Makhtal Working Committee to meet with Ogadeni and Somali in Edmonton. I realized we are all the same.

Last weekend, when I was in Washington D.C. I had the privilege of joining a meeting organized by the All Amhara Peoples’ Organization, who were honoring the memory of an Ethiopian professor Asrat Woldeyes who died ten years ago on May 14th. When I heard this, I wanted to attend because this was about remembering an Ethiopian I consider a hero. It was also about us Ethiopians coming together in respect of all of our people because I do not belong to one group, but to all of Ethiopia. I went and was touched and impressed from what I learned about this highly respected man. I appreciate the work these people have done to make this event possible.

I will not settle for fake reaching out.

I am ready and willing to work with everybody. The only way I would resist is when people are trying to play a game of politics to sabotage the work of others or because of their own self-interest rather than for working together for justice in Ethiopia. I refuse to do that because honestly between people is the only way to breakdown our old patterns. If one's agenda is to become the next Meles, their agenda is different from mine because I want healing of the broken relationships among our people. I will not settle for fake reaching out because it is such fake reaching out that has made us not to be a family. It is that fake reaching out that makes us betray one another. It is that which makes our country vulnerable and in danger of breaking into pieces. It is that fake reaching out that is the Meles-style reaching out. It does not matter who does it, it uses people to advance their self-interests and ego.

Instead, I have seen so many Ethiopians becoming people who are more willing than ever before to embrace others. It requires a willingness to give oneself to others; being mindful that we are not here in this world by accident and that our short lives should be lived in recognition of this fact. We begin as strangers to others, but this strangeness can be broken if we take that first step. Remember, most everyone who marries, marries someone who was at first a stranger. Well, for the first time, many of us are meeting strangers from outside our groups who have begun to enrich our lives and our futures. So many positive things are happening and there is more to do—not for credit or for one's ego, but because God wants us to do what is right and to become His arms and legs in our society, showing His love freely to others. If we all did this, Ethiopia would emerge from the shadows and become a beacon of humanity to others, creating relationships that could transform our society and nation.

When I started this human rights work, I was in a small Anuak hut, not very aware of the woundedness being experienced in other huts in the bigger wilderness beyond my own. When I first presented the case of the Anuak to the United Nations, a former Anuak parliamentarian from Gambella, Peter Opiti, who was with me at the time, encouraged me to include references to the many other oppressed groups in Ethiopia in my formal statement. At first I resisted, but then began to understand why it was better to step out of my small hut to hear about the pain of others; and in so doing, discover the vast and beautiful world of so many different kinds of flowers and vegetation—like meeting so many Ethiopians who have treated me like a friend and as a brother, some from groups of which I had never known before. With all this, my experience has been like the child who saw something that they never knew existed.

The beauty of Ethiopian people

I thank God I am alive to be able to look at the beauty of these people, despite the fact that we have come from a country known for its misery, destruction and death. I also believe it was God who urged me to make that decision to reach out to other Ethiopians for I could not have imagined how wonderful it has been to become part of the greater family of Ethiopians. I now see many Ethiopians reaching outside of their own huts as well to invite others to join them. If we could all do this, without expecting credit or something in return, what a great world we would be in. What a great future we would be able to pass on to our children, very different from what we ourselves have experienced.

The Ethiopian problem will never be solved unless we look at every Ethiopian and see them as God sees them and as God created them. Until more recently, we have not even come close to being this kind of society. We have ethnic groups in our country today who are still walking naked and no one cares. Our beggars and homeless in the streets become invisible, struggling and dying without notice, as we excuse ourselves from helping because “it” is too overwhelming; but God says, do your best and I will help you do it. Thinking these people are “destined” to suffer is contrary to God's call to help the poor, the struggling and the oppressed.

Ethiopians seek freedom and opportunity or they would not run to the free world

Ethiopians seek freedom and opportunity or they would not run to the free world; yet, why not create the “free world” in Ethiopia? We will never be perfect, but I have been to 30 or 40 cities where I have been with many different Ethiopians who have shown the warm-hearted, caring and generous qualities needed for such a society as ours to flourish. If each of us pass on such strength, courage and kindness, we would not allow one dictator or a gang of men with guns to control us like cattle in a cage, holding a whole country hostage and depriving the future from our children.

If your belief system does not value human life and standing up for justice for the people, you better look again and take seriously what you are practicing. If your belief system only applies when it is convenient or when you are under a short-lived crisis, one better re-examine one's own commitment. Much of what we are facing in our society results from a collapse of values and the moral willpower to uphold them making our country inhospitable to life.

Think about those Ethiopians who are compelled to leave Ethiopia for a better life not found in the country due to the pervasive poverty, poor governance, inequality, oppression and the lack of opportunity. **Recently, you may have read the story of a young Ethiopian woman who took a job in an Arab country.** When she arrived, her passport was taken away and she ended up working like a household slave, with little compensation and no rights. Not only that, but her employer, an older, depraved man, both emotionally and sexually abused her, raping her at will. She ran away, but the man found her and forced her to return. Her spirit and will to live deteriorated along with her body until she tried to hang herself, but did not succeed. Her life worsened as the man punished her for this attempt to end her own life. There were no authorities to help leading her to run away again. She ended up in prison when the old man falsely accused her of trying to kill him and only finally got out through help given by some non-Ethiopian westerners. She is still traumatized and depressed from her experience she was willing to take because of the lack of good government and opportunity in Ethiopia.

Her experience is not unique. **A young man—Hailu—from a rural community in the north provides another heartbreaking example.** Hailu was an only child and his parents did their best to provide him with everything they could. He was very bright. After finishing high school with top grades, he went on to the university in Addis Ababa and was in his second year of studies. Following the election of 2005, life and opportunity for the young, deteriorated even further until in 2008, Hailu and his friends decided to look for opportunity outside of Ethiopia. Their plans were to go through Djibouti to Yemen, but their boat capsized in the Red Sea and most everyone died. He and his two friends were rescued and returned to Djibouti, but their lives were so difficult that Hailu became very ill with acute diarrhea. He had no money and no one to provide for his medical care. His friends felt hopeless, having nothing of their own to contribute. His condition quickly deteriorated and he died. All his friends could offer him were their tears, their consoling stares and their words that spoke of them wishing they all had drowned in the Red Sea. After he died, his friends had to find some way to bury him. For two days, his body remained with them until authorities finally took his body and buried him.

This is someone who would have had a bright future, who had been dreaming of becoming a doctor and who was the pride and joy of his parents. Who do we blame for his death? For Ethiopians, this could be your son, your brother, your friend or your future doctor, but now his family, who gave so much, is left with nothing but memories. They did not see his body nor his grave. Had there been an opportunity in Ethiopia, would this man have had to face what he did and lose his life for it?

Another Ethiopian whose story I must tell is an Anuak young man who worked hard in school in Gambella, finally becoming a nurse. In order to succeed, he had to walk one hour, barefoot, to go to school. He lived in a hut without electricity and it was not easy to study, but yet, through hard work and commitment, he reached his goal. After the genocide of December 13, 2003, he was one of those educated Anuak who was more likely to be targeted and so he fled to Pochalla, Sudan where he became a refugee, living under extremely difficult conditions leading him to seek a better life in Sudan.

On his way to Juba, he was attacked and killed by another ethnic group. Some of his Anuak friends looked for him and found his body, but it was too late, his body had been devoured by wild animals and with it, all of his passion to help others, his longstanding commitment to learning and his specialized nursing training was gone forever. What a tragedy. Who do you blame for this?

The exodus of our people

This exodus of our people is not only from one group, but includes the Oromo, the Ogadeni, the Amhara,.....from all over Ethiopia. Could we Ethiopians create a home for ourselves within our own country that could be hospitable to youth, our children and future generations? Is this possible? If we do not want our people to lose their lives or suffer terrific abuses simply because they are looking for opportunity not available in Ethiopia, we must break this cycle of destruction now.

In a recent statement to the Voice of America, made by Chris Albin-Lackey, Human Rights Watch Africa head on 4/24/2009, he reports that their organization has authored “no less than seven major reports about East Africa and the Horn, most of them documenting what they say is a worrisome trend toward governments tightening their grip on power through repression, violence and human rights abuses,” particularly pointing to the Ethiopian government’s repeated commission of atrocities and war crimes in Ethiopia and in Somalia. He indicated that Ethiopia has become more repressive and violent than ever before.

We live in a country where people kill with impunity and no morality. It is obvious to all of us that in Ethiopia, we have a government that does not fear God or value the lives of its people. Those who are supposed to be representing the message of God are not speaking up, some because of fear and others because the materialistic world has consumed them, making them become silent; but this is not true of many others, many whose names we do not know.

With God’s help, the unthinkable is possible

With God’s help, the unthinkable is possible, especially as I see the signs that something profoundly positive has already started to emerge among Ethiopians. We Ethiopians are not the same people in 2009 that we were only a few years ago. Many divisions are being mended, new relationships are being formed and people are catching a vision for a society built on the principles of humanity before ethnicity and that no one will be free until all are free. We are stepping out of our small isolated huts and seeing the beauty around us.

As I see this greater openness spread, I have already experienced part of the realization of my dream for a more caring, loving and protecting Ethiopian society. As each of us has taken small, incremental steps to alleviate the suffering of other human beings near and far, a different kind of Ethiopia is being formed.

I thank my fellow Ethiopians for becoming the means to bring about an Ethiopia that is such a “hospitable home” that Ethiopians will not be driven to leave. In fact, in such an Ethiopia, we may even see “a reverse exodus!” May God bless our people and our land as we become people who revere Him and follow His principles of loving others!

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Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: Obang@solidaritymovement.org,
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