



Finding New Tools to Fight Genocide, Dictatorship and Corruption in Ethiopia: A Summary of Obang's Talk in Dallas (Part One)

On Sunday, May 31, 2009, I had the great pleasure of meeting with Ethiopians in Dallas, Texas. I will summarize my talk in two parts; however, before I start my summary, I would like to thank the individuals from the **Dejen Le Democracy (Constituency for Democracy)** who organized this meeting. Dejen Le Democracy is a human rights organization, located in Dallas, Texas whose members have done a remarkable job in promoting democracy, human rights, justice and equality.

I would like to thank the chairman of Dejen Le Democracy, Ato Tefe Assefa, the vice chairman, Dr. Betru Gebregziabher, and the planning committee, Ato Zewge Kagnew, Ato Girma Negussie; Ato Dejen Asaye; Ato Solomon Abate; Ato Fikre Deresse and Ato Yirga Ansyé who not only made this event possible, but also were extremely gracious hosts, providing warm hospitality to me during my visit.

I also want to thank the three wonderful Ethiopians who love their mother country so much that they drove all the way from Houston, an eight-hour drive, to attend this meeting. One of these men, my friend Ato Dula Abdu, is one of the many Ethiopians whom I have only met via email or phone, but who I have never seen face-to-face until this time. What a great opportunity!

Along with brother Dula, was a young Ethiopian man, Bezabeh Gezahegn. He is someone who expressed great interest in the principles of the solidarity movement, endorsing the needed solution as having to come from people at the grassroots level, especially young Ethiopians who are right now are an untapped resource, needing to be brought into the struggle. He explained that the young people do not like politics, but that the Solidarity Movement, with the principles of “humanity before ethnicity” and that “no one is free until all are free,” present another option that will more easily engage the silent majority of the youth because ‘the future belongs to them.’

Another great Ethiopian, Ato Youssef, was the one who drove, driving through the night to reach home in order to work the next morning. He is someone I just met for the first time, but who had kept informed about the work of the SMNE and wanted to be part of it because he loves his country. After Dr. Ato Betru gave me a wonderful introduction, he encouraged the audience by recognizing that they represented the unity we desired because there were people present at the meeting from all the different political groups.

I began my talk with the following question: **Why are you and I here today? Is it because of what is going on within the borders of Ethiopia? Is it because of one or more of the following:** genocide, massacres, extra-judicial killings, disappearances, torture, systematic rapes, destruction or confiscation of property and livelihood, arbitrary arrests, politicized courts, thousands of political prisoners, land “give- aways” to outsiders (Sudan, Djibouti, etc) while grabbing land from indigenous Ethiopians, the exploitation of natural resources, widespread governmental corruption, oppression and injustice, environmental destruction or one-party control of every sector of society—government, military, communications (Internet, mobile phones, TV, radio, press,

etc), economy (contracts, trade agreements, give-away leases of Ethiopian land to non-Ethiopians, banking and finance, private enterprise and investment opportunities, development, education, the arts (music, etc), civic organizations (including high positions in religious organizations), lack of land ownership, agricultural development or available fertilizers unless one is a member of the EPRDF and the domination of most every opportunity for advancement within Ethiopia unless one supported Meles and the EPRDF, causing a huge exodus from Ethiopia?

I could go on and on and I believe the majority of Ethiopians would agree with me—the list of “what is wrong” with Ethiopia is endless. The important question then is—if so many Ethiopians are against this brutal and oppressive regime, how can so many be held captive by so few? Some might say it is because “they” have the “guns” and control the “mighty institutions” of Ethiopia. Others might blame international outsiders whom they see as “propping up” this dictatorship through financial aid, but I would challenge both of these views as being insufficient in explaining what prevents nearly 80 million Ethiopians, in a country that prides itself in never being colonized, from stopping such abuses perpetrated by their own government? Perhaps we need to find some “new tools” and approaches to bring peace, justice, security, civility and opportunity to Ethiopia.

Pulling Out the Supporting Legs of a Dictatorship

I was in Washington DC only two weeks ago when I met with the renowned and outspoken advocate for Africa, George Ayittey, Professor of Economics at American University in Washington DC, and founder of **Free Africa Foundation**, an organization dedicated to free Africans from “vampire” dictators who exploit the people. He told me, “Most Africans do not realize that dictators are standing on a table in order to pretend they are stronger and more powerful than they are in reality. The mistake made by most Africans who are fighting against dictatorships is that they attempt to fight these dictators at that level, while they are propped up by these tables. They will never succeed this way; instead, to overcome such regimes, Africans must pull down the table, leg by leg, by confronting the specific weaknesses and vulnerabilities of these dictatorships. One leg of the Meles regime is already wobbling!

Exposing Meles and the TPLF as Genocidaires, Destined for the ICC

One of those legs that has been effectively supporting this dictatorship was the portrayal of Meles Zenawi as a “new breed of African leader,” a reliable partner in the War on Terror and a legitimate representative to the G-20 meeting in the UK this past April. To prevent the collapse of this particular leg of the table, the Meles regime fervently has to “protect its image” by covering up a pattern of systematic perpetration of Ethiopian government sponsored incidents of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other gross human rights abuses. Opposition groups could talk about injustice, lack of democratic process, suppression of rights and generic human rights abuses without fear of affecting the strength of the table leg, but it becomes a different matter when an internationally respected human rights expert in genocide defines the Anuak massacre as meeting the stringent definition of genocide, when he relates responsibility for it to Meles and his cronies and then requests a formal investigation by the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights! Meles has now suddenly been associated with the likes of Omar al Bashir, Charles Taylor and Slobodan Milosevic, becoming a “genocidair,” destined for the International Criminal Court!

It must have struck a major nerve in this regime for Meles even cancelled his press conference following the G-20 and one month later, Meles supporters, from the government-sponsored website, AigaForum, are trying to do “damage control.” In an effort to free themselves from any responsibility, they are blaming another ethnic group from Gambella, the Nuer and then also blaming the Anuak for committing “genocide” against each other or attributing it to “ethnic conflict.” Interestingly, to do so, they must negate the results of their own Commission of Inquiry done a year after the genocide where they blamed six Oromo soldiers for the massacre of December 13-15, 2003. Instead, in this article, they call it an example of “ethnic conflict.”

Let me show you a video that we in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia will be sending to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that was just recently completed.(This video will be posted in the future along with the letter. Following the video presentation, the talk continued.)

The Next Leg of the Table is our own “Village” thinking!

Today, I want to talk about pulling down one of the strongest legs supporting the deception of power and might that is holding up the Meles regime—our own “village”, “tribal” or “regional” thinking which stands in the way of creating a “New Ethiopia”, hospitable for all Ethiopians. This is not something Meles has to do, but it requires our own action! All by itself, it may not be enough to bring Meles down, but without it, we will never succeed in accomplishing our ultimate goals, even if we overcome Meles and the TPLF by other means. *So I ask those of you who are involved in this struggle, “Are you fighting for a “village,” a “tribe,” a “region” or for a country?” I would propose that the reason for our past failure in this struggle is because we have been fighting only for our own “villages!”*

As you may see, when I use the word “village”, I mean it to be interchangeable with region, ethnicity, political group, religious group, civic organization or any other subsection of our society whose individual goals are for ego, power, greed and domination over everyone else rather than for strengthening our nation as a whole. A healthy society is one where all who live within its borders can find a hospitable home, rather than whoever is strongest taking all for itself without any care for others who might be weaker or less ruthless. It is similar to the Anuak only fighting to advance the Anuak without caring about their Gambella neighbors—the Nuer, the Mazangir, the Opo, the highlanders, the Komo and so forth. It is like the people of Gambella fighting only for themselves without regard to those in Benishangul-Gumuz, in Oromia, in the Southern Nations, in Afar and so forth. It is like the TPLF supporters of Meles, fighting only for other TPLF Meles supporters rather than for all Tigrayans. It is like Tigrayans fighting only for themselves, forgetting about all other Ethiopians in their villages, region or in the country.

This is small-minded, self-destructive and selfish thinking that will never bring down a leg of the table; neither will it bring about a healthy Ethiopian society after Meles goes. Once we have a better-functioning society, we must broaden our worldview further by caring not only for Ethiopians, but caring about our nation’s neighbors—Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya. We must seek ways to live in peace, harmony and productive collaboration with them as well as with our global neighbors. Therefore, when I use the term “village,” it refers to all our smaller subsections that are focused on gaining dominance over others rather than on contributing to building a stronger nation that would benefit all Ethiopians.

Fighting for a Village

When we fight for a village what results?

Culture of division with five stages of disintegration

1. **Disagree and split:** Previous partners fight, disagree or have a falling out and instead of attempting to directly deal with the problem and find solutions, they split, often bad-mouthing the other.
2. **Offer no apologies and hold on to resentments:** Parties to the conflict take no accountability for the problem or no responsibility in resolving it.
3. **Develop parallel structures:** In “anti-collaboration,” one or both sides of the split group, starts a new organization with the same goals, duplicating efforts and losing energy and focus on primary objectives by competing with the previous organization, decreasing the probability of collaboration.
4. **Suspension of reality:** Act as if no problem had occurred, pretending there is no reason to apologize and denying what is in fact, the sabotaging of the efforts of others.
5. **Refuse to talk with previous friends, colleagues and supporters:** Instead of bringing cohesion and reconciliation, energy is expended in developing “opposition camps” of followers who will “agree” to hold grudges and resentments against those in “enemy” camps. Previous friends stop working together and get caught up in petty battles, causing both groups to lose focus on the greater objectives, allowing Meles to advance his hold, laughing and gloating at the infighting.

How can we proceed in light of this?

Disagreement is part of our human experience and we must find ways to deal with such disagreements in a productive rather than destructive way. So many groups have been created by people wanting to accomplish noble goals; but then, common to our human experience; there is a disagreement or an ego that gets in the way.

Instead of working hard towards respecting each other, listening to valid arguments and finding solutions or consensus, those involved become defensive, angry and split. **When ego is involved, disagreements simply are a cover for power seeking or stroking one's ego by having to get credit, attention, power, prestige or simply, "your own way."**

Disclaimer: I am not talking about setting boundaries, which sometimes lead to splits, over important principles. These might be for philosophical, strategic, ethical, moral, practical, logistical or other valid reasons. At these times, such dividing, if done correctly, honestly and civilly, may be exactly the right thing to do; however, within our Ethiopian culture, we have far too many splits and divisions for what appear to be avoidable reasons.

This has made our job very difficult. Following these divisions, people who used to talk to one another and work together, no longer do so. Hatred, competition and the sabotage of each others' efforts begin and soon, both become greater enemies of each other than of the evil system of the Woyane that they are trying to fight. People problems, differences of opinion and disagreements are part of any human effort. Turf battles can begin, mistakes can be made, tempers can flare, insulting words can be said in the heat of the battle that are later regretted and feelings can be hurt. When parties cannot admit their part, humble themselves and apologize, the seeds of division begin. When secret motives are not openly admitted, but run contrary to the stated goals, inevitably there will be misunderstandings, questions and conflict. Sometimes two or more sides develop competing personally ambitious agendas that are not openly admitted, but undermine the entire organization. Instead of openly discussing the problem, parties deny the existence of such agendas; continuing to advance them—others start their own parallel organization and still others, simply become disenchanted and leave the struggle entirely. Those who have become divided, pretend as if nothing ever happened, making resolution of the differences impossible without a change of attitude.

There will be battles to fight, but we must take care in picking which ones are the important ones—like justice and freedom for all; but instead, our civic, political and religious organizations are broken into two, four or five and spend so much energy fighting that our entire struggle is de-energized. This is one of our core problems. It is as big of an obstacle to overcome as any other and is demonstrated in the way that people do not talk to one another. I can give not just one example, but can come up with a list of countless groups who are divided. Why is it that we can create countless organizations that simply continue to break into pieces? It is a way to avoid the hard work of listening to each other, considering another's point of view, giving up our own agenda for self-advancement and working to meet our larger goals. Why is it that a minor disagreement can break up an entire organization? The hurt feelings that make people not talk to each other and only to the people of your own village, has become a leg that is supporting the table on which is standing Meles Zenawi. We can pull out this leg from underneath him or continue a harmless fight against him by fighting for our own small goals, acting as if we are contributing to the betterment of our country, but sadly, the truth is that we are contributing to its disintegration.

To me, bringing Meles down is not something I am worrying about. It will eventually happen for he is like someone standing on a table with four weak legs; however, if that table collapses when we are not talking to one another or cooperating with each other, we will not be ready to find a lasting peace. Finding a lasting peace is something that depends on everybody within the boundaries of Ethiopia; requiring us to reach out and work with diverse groups beyond our own. This is why I am saying we should be fighting for a country, not for a village, a tribe or a region, like Meles is doing. The TPLF was created to liberate a region and a tribe, but if we want to create a lasting peace where none of us will be free until we all are free, then we have to fight for a country and for humanity. "Fighting for a Country" will be covered in Part Two.

May God change our hearts and make us to be people who care about our fellow human beings, fearing Him and obeying His life-giving principles. May God help us to not be selfish in being opportunists or in fighting for only our own tribes, villages and regions, but instead may He help us to stand up for the justice and protection of all his precious people of Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and all of human kind.

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