



## **UK Parliamentarians' Advice Regarding Ethiopia:** **"Let Us Hear the Voices of Our Constituents!"**

July 1, 2009

On June 16, 2009 something significant happened. For the first time, the Parliament of the United Kingdom opened up the doors to the House of Commons and gave the stage to Ethiopians in order to learn more from them about the grave human rights violations, including genocide, the pervasive injustice and the rampant corruption going on in Ethiopia under the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

This is a sign of progress for which we can be thankful. In the past, Ethiopians have rallied in front of the U.K Parliament building; delivering letters to public officials who may or may not have responded, but this time, Ethiopians themselves have been given the opportunity to give details about what is going on back home.

Thanks to Third World Solidarity, an organization made up of parliamentary members interested in issues affecting the Third World, we were given this opportunity. A special thanks to Mr. Mushtaq Lasharie, Honorable David Anderson and for being "fighters for justice" whose focus goes beyond their borders to those who have little political clout in this increasingly complex, and sometimes exploitive, world.

I give much appreciation to my fellow Ethiopians in the UK who organized this event, preparing far in advance by making the strategic contacts that made this event possible. Many worked very hard to make this as successful as it turned out to be. I thank those Ethiopians who invited me, those of you who attended the event and those Ethiopians who did their share by contributing money for most of my air ticket—friends in Canada, Denmark, Norway, England and the US—making it possible to participate in this strategic opportunity.

It had an impact which can be seen from the quick reaction from the EPRDF government's Ethiopian Ambassador to Britain who was heard on Voice of America denying that any such meeting took place; later explaining that it was simply a fundraising banquet with no parliament members present; and still later, admitting that there were some members present. However, I am not worried about what the ambassador says as such disclaimers are predictable from a government grounded on lies and immorality.

### **The main highlights of the meeting**

Let me quickly summarize some of the main highlights of the meeting followed later by personal comments from elected officials in the UK, Canada and the US. The meeting was opened by Chairman of the Third World Solidarity, MP David Anderson, who greeted the people with graciousness and warmth.

He said he hoped that by the end of the meeting, we all could come up with a concrete plan to ease the suffering of the Ethiopian people. For me, as he spoke in his deep voice about his passion for the common good and justice, it fed my hope that Ethiopians are not alone.

After he finished his talk, Third World Solidarity Councilor Mr. Lasharie, explained their mission and the role they might take in working with Ethiopians. He said that their organization was formed to work on these kinds of issues—like human rights, injustice, equality, democracy and fair elections—and that this House of Commons was now being opened to Ethiopians in order for to tell the Parliament what was going on in their country. He finished his talk with the same warm appeal to Ethiopians. He addressed Ethiopians, ***“We are here to work with you and don’t think this is the end. It is just the beginning!”***

He was followed up by Mr. Satterlee, the same person who had produced a documentary on the Ethiopian drought of 1984. Mr. Satterlee’s main point emphasized that many of the problems facing Ethiopians would be corrected were there good government in the country. He stated, ***“The Ethiopia of today is the same place it was in 1980, but with good governance, the very hardworking and capable people of Ethiopia could feed themselves. The lack of good leaders and government today is the reason why Ethiopians are still starving today.”***

Mr. Kefale Alemu, an Ethiopian and a member of Third World Solidarity, spoke next. He gave an eloquent introduction to the presentation from Ethiopians, sharing the purpose of the meeting and explaining that the things people take for granted in the UK, do not exist in Ethiopia—like good government, equality under the rule of law, the opportunity to vote and the most basic of civil rights such as freedom to express oneself. He said he hoped that the meeting would expose the kinds of oppressive conditions under which Ethiopians are currently living.

I spoke next on the agenda and then showed the video that provided documentation of the genocide and other gross human rights crimes going on in Ethiopia that is now available online.

After me, a wonderful Ethiopian man presented, Mr. Zelalem Tessema. This is my first time meeting with him, but as he spoke, his sense of humor and the way he expressed himself, grabbed everyone’s attention. He spoke of the lack of democratic rights, giving specific examples from the past Ethiopian National Election of 2005 and documentation of the efforts being made by the current regime to close off any political space before the next election in May of 2010.

He utilized an illustration of a child’s game where *“the elephant always won”* because he kept changing the rules to fit his interests. This man really exposed the regime, citing many examples of its aggressive attacks against democracy. I was so proud of him. He spoke about why the previous election did not work and why the next one will not work either. Despite all of these negative things, he ended up giving a message of hope by saying, ***“If Ethiopians can really stand and work together and if the UK and other donor countries can stand on the side of the people, things can be changed.”***

He was inspiring as he gave hope to all of us that if we could work together, Ethiopia could be lifted up to become a more prosperous nation. I learned that he has multiple language, speaking Oromo, Amharic and English. He is also a humble man who during the middle of the rally in the UK, called on the people to pray to God for divine help. He told them that God would not forget them. He is a true Ethiopian.

Mr. Wondmu Mekonnen spoke next about the misuse of aid money to Ethiopia and about the rampant corruption going on in the country under this regime. I already knew Wondmu. He is one of the wonderful people I have met through working on this struggle and I count him as an example of one of the many Ethiopians who has enriched my life. To me, he is a brother, a mentor, a friend and a fellow countryman. People like brother Wondmu are the reason why I strongly believe that a new Ethiopia is not only probable, but very possible.

People like him have the intellect, the compassion for others, the generosity and the love of their country that is necessary for Ethiopia to be transformed from a country of pain to one of peace and from one of misery to one of prosperity.

Mr. Wondmu has worked with the SMNE from the very beginning and he has become one of the key leaders of the SMNE in London. He does not belong to any one group, but to the whole of Ethiopia. His love for his people and his country is something you can see through his talk, his voice, his smile and his body language. He used to be a professor of economics at Addis Ababa University and now that he is in London, he is a professor at the University of Birmingham—as he says, going from “A” to “B.” Yet, he said that were peace to come to Ethiopia peace, he would be in Ethiopia because there is much greater need there, but that the lack of security, hope and good government is the reason he is in London.

He knew his material, exposing the corruption in Ethiopia from the inside out. Using projectors and documentation uncovered in extensive research, he showed extensive financial information regarding aid and what happened to it. He visually showed in detail how this regime “is sucking the resources and depleting the country.” Mr. Wondmu ended up encouraging both Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians to never turn their backs on this country and to not lose hope. As a good professor always does, he had control of the room and some of the parliamentarians later commented on the impact of his presentation.

The last person to speak was Ms. Sabra Mohammed. Her topic was human rights violations against women and children. She is not Ethiopian born, but was born in Russia; however, when she had gone to Ethiopia many years ago as a music teacher, she was so won over by the hospitality of the Ethiopian people, that she fell in love not only with the people but also the country. She now calls herself a proud Ethiopian. Her love of Ethiopia was the reason she was deported out of Ethiopia not one time, but five times.

In her presentation, she described in detail how horribly the TPLF had treated her; dehumanizing her and separating her from her children and family and treating her like a criminal despite not being guilty of anything except loving Ethiopia. She said the TPLF government has violated many women’s rights; an recent example being that of imprisoned opposition leader, Birtukan Mideksa. She ended her presentation by fervently calling all Ethiopian people to join together, regardless of ethnicity, skin color or religion, to fight this “terrorist regime” and “to free the Ethiopian people from the prison they are now in.”

She called on the British parliament to stand together with the Ethiopian people and to stop funding the regime that was acting in opposite ways to all those principles on which Britain had been founded. She affirmed that she would always be wherever Ethiopians were fighting for justice and she hoped that Ethiopians would know that they could always count on her to be with them.

## **We Ethiopians are more than capable—with God’s help—of transforming Ethiopia from being a “beggar nation” to a “better nation.”**

I was so proud of the Ethiopian presenters who delivered their message with such articulation and professionalism; giving me reason for believing that we Ethiopians are more than capable—with God’s help—of transforming Ethiopia from being a “beggar nation” to a “better nation.” If these kinds of people would be in Ethiopia, running the country, instead of in exile throughout the world, most of us would go back home and those in Ethiopia, would not be searching for ways to leave.

The room was packed with Ethiopians who came, showing their concern and support. All these things are sources of hope. Beyond that, a brother from the Ogaden stood up during the question and answer period and said, ***“We are all being killed the same; we need each other and we must united and stand together against this regime!”*** This audience gave him a standing ovation and enthusiastically applauded the acknowledgement that we Ethiopians have more in common with each other than what separates us.

This is a beautiful vision of what a “*New Ethiopia*” might be like; that is, if increasingly more Ethiopians decide to value *“humanity before ethnicity!”* This part is up to us, but there is more we need to do as well. Outsiders can help us, but they will not and should not be expected *“to do it for us.”* In other words, we cannot sit back and wait for someone else to free us. Too many Africans go to free countries and plead, *“...please free us,”* but fail to recognize their own responsibility. Let us not make that same mistake!

UK MP George Bruce ended the meeting by saying, ***“Africa is a wonderful place but failed to produce good leaders who were cared for the people. The root cause could be blamed on the colonizers, but in the case of Ethiopia, you were not colonized so you cannot blame the British, like others who were colonized in Africa can do. I know that Ethiopians are good people and from what I learned today, I can see that you are ready to create a good government and to determine your own destiny. I will advocate for you. This means I will go to all of the elected parliament members I know to educate them to be on the side of the Ethiopian people.”***

This ended a highly successful meeting, marking the beginning of a shared effort between these elected officials, representatives from Third World Solidarity and the people of Ethiopia. **In a companion article, Part Two, I will share what I learned in my follow-up with some of these MP’s, as well as with other elected officials and key people in Canada and the US. They have some very good advice for us to further our partnership and our effectiveness.**

**May God bring new partners together in effective ways!**

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Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: [Obang@solidaritymovement.org](mailto:Obang@solidaritymovement.org),  
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