



August 3, 2009

BY HAND AND BY EMAIL

Hon. Prime Minister S. Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa
K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Stephen Harper:

I am contacting you to urge your government to take swift and urgent action regarding the recent sentencing of **Bashir Ahmed Makhtal**, a Canadian citizen, to life imprisonment by the Ethiopian government.

My name is Obang Metho. I am the Executive Director of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** a grassroots, non-violent and non-political social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians, many of whom are also citizens of Canada, who are seeking justice, the protection of life and liberty, reconciliation and peace in Ethiopia as well as in the Horn of Africa because “no one is free until all are free!”

I have been working with the **Ogaden Human Rights Committee** as well as with other human rights groups throughout Ethiopia and am well acquainted with the issues. It is outrageous that Mr. Makhtal has just received three charges related to membership in the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) despite the lack of credible witnesses, as noted by human rights organizations following the trial. **Mr. Makhtal’s main offense was “guilt by relationship,”** a common offense in a country under authoritarian rule where there are thousands of political prisoners and where a perverted system of justice prevails—giving pervasive impunity to real perpetrators and harsh punishments to the innocent.

It matters not a whit to this regime if the person they use is innocent if it suits their purposes. In this case, Makhtal was a “treasure of opportunity” for them. Why? It not because of his guilt, but is because Mahtal is related to the founder of the ONLF—his grandfather! This carries a lot of weight in creating fear in the hearts of Ogadenis in Ethiopia who could capriciously be killed for only “looking” like someone who might be from the ONLF or charged for being a family member of an ONLF member that cannot be found.

The truth is that within the Ogadeni community in Canada and abroad, it is well known that Makhtal has not been involved in politics. Instead, he was a businessman, buying and selling second-hand clothes; however, to this regime, he was a “prized tool” to use against the ONLF. Another such person is **Birtukan Mideksa**, the opposition leader of the peaceful UDJ opposition party who was given a life sentence on a trumped up charge. **Musician Teddy Afro** was imprisoned under what most believe were false charges so as to silence the message in his music about freedom, unity and justice in Ethiopia.

As an advocate for human rights in Ethiopia, I am not alone in knowing the duplicitous nature of the Meles regime. The same Ethiopian military that brutally massacred 424 leaders from my own ethnic group in the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia in 2003, imprisoning many more on drummed up charges, while denying their complicity, is unfortunately continuing to be carried out in large scale in the Ogaden.

Meles Zenawi has cleverly dubbed his own military's well-documented (by Human Rights Watch and others) crimes against humanity, war crimes, massive atrocities, destruction of livelihood and possible genocide in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia, as "countering the insurgency." A representative from UNHCR has in the past called it "a silent Darfur;" however, **while Meles claims to be a partner with the West in the War on Terror, Ethiopians know him very well to be the most radical, "al Qaeda-like" terrorist to his own people.**

No wonder that so many have formed opposition groups against this government. As long as Meles calls those opposing him "terrorists," the world seems to ignore the travesty they are carrying out. But when we Canadian Ethiopians speak of the innocent civilians who were killed, raped, tortured or imprisoned, we are not talking about numbers, we are talking about people and situations we know. One of those is Makhtal. He is not a terrorist. He is a productive Canadian citizen with a family. He has lived in Canada since he was only 11 years old. He has attended Canadian schools and has voted.

Canadians should play a primary role in confronting this double-talk and demanding good governance, the respect of human rights, a free press, freedom of speech, a strong parliament, an independent judiciary, the release of the countless political prisoners and the opening up of the political space. What has been hidden about the true nature of this regime is now impossible to hide. Canadians should expect far more in Ethiopia. **Even the "baby steps" of past progress towards democracy have disappeared. We call on Canada to stop supporting this regime!** We have all had enough of dictatorship in Ethiopia. **Until our Ogadeni brothers and sisters are free, none of us is free!** No longer will region, ethnicity, religion, language or culture divide us for we will **"put humanity before ethnicity!"**

Canadian Ethiopians know best what is happening on the ground because we still have many connections there, including families. **Canada should not be siding with a dictator, but should be on the side of people who are simply seeking the same rights they value in Canada.** Ethiopians are not asking Canada to do the hard work, but instead they are asking you to remove those supports that continue to prop up this government. That support was intended to support genuine democracy, but democratic freedom is nowhere to be found in Ethiopia. **Let Canadian taxpayer's dollars be part of the solution, not a means to prolong a despot!**

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has been in power in Ethiopia for 18 years and will not give up power easily. **He led an armed struggle prior to assuming power, during which he and his cronies were accused of committing many violent acts of terrorism; including kidnapping foreign humanitarian workers.** Yet, because he was replacing a communist leader, he was able to win support from democratic countries because he cleverly adopted the "democratic language" of the West, while covering up a **pattern of "Stalin-like" systematic abuse** against any who challenged him and the ruling party or any who would deny him access to natural resources.

During the last 18 years, **he has fomented many ethnic conflicts within Ethiopia** and has also become embroiled in multiple violent conflicts with neighboring countries, at times, allegedly aiding and abetting violence between ethnic groups in other countries like Sudan, with the **cooperation of Sudanese president, Omar al-Bashir. His contribution to the destabilization and impoverishment of the Horn of Africa, a strategic area of geo-political importance, cannot be denied or ignored** without grave consequences.

Meles was one of the first to publicly defend al-Bashir and to speak out in condemnation of the warrant issued by the ICC. He also stood with others in the African Union in joint defiance of the ICC's indictment. Why? Most believe it is because he and his own government have also been implicated in a pattern of widespread perpetration of serious human rights atrocities throughout Ethiopia and into Somalia.

On July 23, 2009, **Genocide Watch requested the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights to initiate an investigation regarding the widespread incidence of gross human rights abuses in Ethiopia, including in the Ogaden as well as the massacre of the Anuak, which he said met the stringent definition of genocide.** These violations must be stopped; not given the green light through financial aid from free countries like Canada.

Should not Canada defend its own citizens from known terroristic governments?

Why is the US working with the Swiss to release the three Americans in Iran; why has former President Bill Clinton worked to gain successful release of the journalists jailed in North Korea and why were the Swedes, Americans and Kenyans arrested in 2006 at the same time as Makhtal, released to their respective governments, when Makhtal is and was not?

Could Canada have not done more to gain the release of one of their own citizens? We are disappointed by this lack of action, but it is not too late to move ahead and to take a much stronger negotiating position with this corrupt government, using the multiple leverages available to exert pressure on this regime to release Makhtal to Canadian custody.

As a citizen of Canada and as the executive director of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia**, I strongly urge you to re-examine Canadian support of this government. The Meles regime should be treated in the same way as Robert Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe and Omar al-Bashir of the Sudan, not catering to terroristic governments and dictators. Can we count on you to help us?

We ask you to initiate negotiations immediately for Makhtal's release. Additionally, we request that you and our parliamentary members call for a hearing on Ethiopia so those re-examining Canadian policies towards Ethiopia can hear from the voices of Ethiopians rather than listen to the propaganda promulgated by this regime. We Ethiopians know what is going on. I and many others would be more than happy to assist in any way possible.

More specifically, we hope that these actions lead to pressing the Ethiopian government:

- to release Mr. Bashir Makhtal, opposition leader, Ms. Birtukan Mideska and all other prisoners of conscience within Ethiopia,
- to bring to a halt the perpetration of human rights violations in the Ogaden and anywhere else such abuses are being committed in Ethiopia and the Horn,
- to open up the society to basic freedom and civil rights,
- to open up political space in anticipation of the coming 2010 election,
- to hold all perpetrators of human rights crimes accountable, and
- to support national and regional reconciliation among Ethiopians and other willing parties in the Horn that could lead to genuine, sustainable and inclusive peace for **“until we all are free, no one will be free.”**

Thank you so very much for your hard work, dedication and commitment to the people of Canada. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely yours,



Obang Metho;

Executive Director,

Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia

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Phone: (306) 933 4346 Email: obang@solidaritymovement.org. If you would be interested in further information regarding the (SMNE) you may visit our website: www.solidaritymovement.org

This letter has been cc or sent to Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Official Opposition, Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois, Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party, asking them to do more to gain the release of one of their own citizen.