

# March in Washington DC Launches New Campaign for Change!

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On Sunday, September 13, 2009, many Ethiopians and others gathered in front of the US Capitol building to bring attention to the ongoing genocide and other human rights crimes being perpetrated against the people of Ethiopia by the repressive authoritarian government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The event was a success and we believe it will lead to many new opportunities. One of these will be the possibility of working together in collaboration to map out a strategic plan for the future

It was a historic event in that so many different groups, who have never come together before, were present. The crowd reflected the enthusiasm of this milestone as they came together not only from one group or one ethnicity, but as a mix of many, all with the same goal of bringing about an inclusive civil society in Ethiopia where justice, individual rights, the rule of law and opportunity would be based on being a citizen of Ethiopia rather than on tribalism, cronyism or elitism.

Many comments were made that this unity will re-ignite energy into the movement. Some new faces have emerged on the scene who say that if nothing is done, violence could erupt in Ethiopia and they want to help prevent it. They do not want to sit by while their country disintegrates. Some of these are emerging from the diverse religious community—both Christian and Muslim who believe they have a role to play to save the country.

The commitment to this new paradigm of putting “humanity before ethnicity” and that “no one will be free until all are free” was clearly demonstrated in the efforts of some Ethiopians who traveled from 18 different cities in the US or Canada and from nine different countries, all of whom joined with others from the region.

We recognize those who came out in support for this event. One of our respected leaders, who has sacrificed under this regime came to show his support in solidarity with his people. This leader was Berhanu Nega, Chairman of Ginbot-7. He took time from his busy schedule to come from another city to be with Ethiopians. We really appreciated that kind of support that reaches beyond one’s own group or one’s own approach to a shared vision for Ethiopia because the government is killing all of us; not distinguishing between ethnicities, region, religion, gender, political differences or ages, like the arrest and detention of the 87-year-old father of Ginbot-7 leader, Andargachew Tsige.

We also recognized the sacrifice of another leader, UDJ Chairman, Birtukan Mideksa, who is imprisoned, as everyone knows, as part of the Meles regime’s repression of any possible political opposition. Birtukan stood up to challenge this government’s manipulation and has paid dearly for it. She was presented a plaque by the March committee and the SMNE, honoring her contribution to this struggle for freedom and justice. The person awarding it to her was a well-respected African America leader, Gerald LeMelle, the executive director of Africa Action, a renowned social justice organization that has been fighting for the African for over fifty-six years.

The following was inscribed on the plaque:

***To Birtukan Mideksa, a true heroine of Ethiopia,  
who rose to the challenge at our time of need:***

*This plaque is given to you, Birtukan Mideksa, in honor of your exceptional sacrifice for the people of Ethiopia, given on the frontlines of our battle against tyranny in Ethiopia and for your exemplary strength and moral courage in unselfishly standing up for truth, justice, freedom, human rights and the rule of law; choosing imprisonment, with long periods of solitary confinement, rather than compromising your values and convictions, modeling what is required of us to build a free, healthy, and well-functioning society. We deeply thank you for your significant contribution to our future.*

*September 13, 2009*

*March for Freedom and S.M.N.E*

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In addition, we also want to recognize the sacrifices of all the political prisoners, including those who worked under the Dergue, who have been in jail for almost twenty years.

We also think of others, all over the country who are imprisoned for their dissent and courage or for politically contrived reasons like Bashir Mahktal, an Ogadeni, whose picture on a poster that read, “Free Makhtal,” was held up by those from different ethnic groups. This is the kind of Ethiopia we want where every Ethiopian should fight for the rights of all Ethiopians regardless of any distinctions!

#### **What next?**

The impact of the March for Freedom will be measured by what happens next. The event gave Ethiopians a vehicle to advance a new campaign to influence US and other donor country foreign policies towards Ethiopia. Connections made prior to the march, in raising awareness of this event, can now be pursued and multiplied. A larger network of committed Ethiopians, joining under common goals, has emerged and is strengthening. Through the media—Paltalk coverage, televised coverage throughout Ethiopia through the VOA and radio coverage through German radio to Ethiopia, has enabled the impact of the march and its message to reach far more people than otherwise possible.

Now, we hope that many struggling Ethiopians in the country will be encouraged and that many outside of the country will become re-charged to step up their efforts in solidarity with others. We also hope that many new Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians will become engaged. We thank those involved in the media for such a significant contribution to making the voice of Ethiopians heard and hope that such an effort continues and expands.

Now, we want to capitalize on this momentum by reaching out to decision makers. In the US, it is a critical time as the new Obama administration is in the process of forming its foreign policy direction with Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and Africa as a whole. It is imperative that the African Affairs Bureau at the US State Department critically rethinks its policies in the Horn of Africa that have failed to produce; instead, contributing to the disintegration of Ethiopia and to the increased oppression in the Horn of Africa. This new administration cannot continue with status quo policies without dire consequences of worsening the prospects for stability. Past policies that ignored the human rights abuses, the increasing ethnic tensions and the lack of democratic space that is crushing the development of legitimate alternatives to this regime, must be quickly addressed and remedied. This is a high risk situation. At the very least, donor countries would be wise to support the emergence of an Ethiopian-driven crisis intervention plan, in the event that the situation exploded or in the event that this regime unexpectedly toppled.

Fortunately, isolated, competing or alienated groups are beginning to see a more shared vision for the future that would benefit all rather than one group which in the past was a winner “take all” “Meles-style-approach” that would simply recycle the whole problem all over again. A Pakistani cab driver here in Washington DC basically told us that what people get comes out of who they are; in other words, if the people continue to hold hatred, greed and self-interest in their hearts and minds, they will advance only those with the same qualities and then those leaders who come to power will carry out actions and policies in line with that thinking. In other words, the people get the leader they deserve.

What kind of leaders will Ethiopians choose? The divisions among Ethiopians have sabotaged the development of a viable alternative to the current regime, creating an obstacle equal to the non-existent democratic space in Ethiopia. The Obama administration may be reluctant to press a fragile Ethiopian government with the withdrawal of support—which will surely cause their collapse—if they believe there is no viable alternative within Ethiopia that would be compatible with US interests in the region and could actually cause greater disaster to the people of Ethiopia. They may prefer the current dictatorship over a failed or hostile state.

Therefore, Ethiopians must assume personal responsibility in bringing about a viable alternative, made more possible through reconciliation. A formal national reconciliation effort is critical, but must be preceded with interpersonal grassroots reconciliation in one’s own sphere of influence. This can be done by every person. Take responsibility yourself. If you hear someone lumping all Tigrayans, Oromos, Amharas, Ogadeni or people from any other groups into one box, do not remain silent. With civility, grace and conviction, confront what is being said. Do not condone it. This is the task of all of us. As we become a people of moral convictions who accept and care about the humanity of others, we may “get the leader we deserve,” leaders who also have moral convictions and who accept and care about the humanity of others! Would that not be the beginning of a better Ethiopia? Let it begin with you!

May God empower Ethiopians to become ambassadors of reconciliation who, one-by-one, will bring healing and support leaders who will uphold truth, justice, the rule of law, equality and the respect of human and civil rights.

May God cause the decision-makers among donor countries to listen to the voices of those suffering in Ethiopia and remove obstacles to our freedom! However, even if they do not, may God help Ethiopians create the huge movement of the people and by the people and for the people needed to free Ethiopia!

May God cause Ethiopia to become like the Abbay River that finds its way around obstacles, even mountains, giving life to all the millions of people and living things that depend on it for survival. The Almighty God created this river to nurture life in Ethiopia and beyond where we can never imagine. In the same way, let God help heal the Ethiopian heart and make us a river that nurtures and blesses as it flows from its origin in Ethiopia to places beyond!

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For more information, visit March 4 Freedom website: <http://www.march4freedom.org>. You can also contact Mr. Obang Metho by e-mail: [Obang@solidaritymovement.org](mailto:Obang@solidaritymovement.org)

