



Rt Hon Douglas Alexander MP
UK Secretary of State for International Development
1 Palace Street,
London,
SW1E 5HE

November 6, 2009

Dear Secretary of State,

RE: Open Letter to the UK Secretary of State and Donor Countries to Ethiopia
The “Untold Story” of Never-Ending Starvation in Ethiopia:
Do Donors in the West Really Want a Strong, Independent, Unified and Democratic Ethiopia?

As Ethiopians who care about the future of the people of Ethiopia, we want to share with you the “untold story” about hunger in Ethiopia as you examine strategies to intervene in the current food crisis in the country. First of all, we deeply thank you for your recent compassionate plea before the UK House of Commons for food aid to Ethiopia due to the current risk of starvation to many millions. Many Ethiopians face certain starvation without such aid; however, unless the root reasons are examined and long-term solutions sought, Ethiopia will remain a country in constant crisis.

We represent Ethiopians who believe Ethiopia should be capable of feeding itself, even during periods of drought and famine. Unfortunately, Ethiopia has become a “culture of poverty,” with numerous “locks” in place that ensure the continuation of chronic failure and never-ending dependence on others for our basic survival. Without fundamental changes to those mechanisms, attitudes and actions that perpetuate such dependence, huge amounts of food aid will neither meet our immense and ongoing need nor will it bring about a sustainable solution.

The image of famine, hunger, poverty and dependency on outsiders for our basic survival has not always been synonymous with “Ethiopia.” In the 1950ties, most Ethiopians fed themselves and were better off than they are now despite global technological advances, most of which have not reached Ethiopia. Climate change and population increases certainly play a role, but are only part of the problem, much of which has at its core, the authoritarian government under the control of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

I am writing to you as a representative of the *Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)* , a grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians which seeks to mobilize Ethiopians in the Diaspora and within Ethiopia to unite in a coalition across ethnic, regional, political, cultural and religious lines to work together in bringing about and sustaining a more reconciled Ethiopia where robust freedoms, the rule of law, respect for human rights, equal opportunity and good governance undergird a societal structure conducive to the enhancement of life and well-being for all its citizens.

The food crisis is an area of great concern to us. We seek to do all we can to help reduce the scope and impact of this looming crisis by focusing on long-term solutions can be found.

First we must acknowledge that Ethiopia has greatly benefited from friendships with other countries, organizations and notable individuals, which have provided a great deal of support over the years, particularly during times of crisis such as in 1984-1985 during the last major famine, when the UK and others in the world rallied to support the suffering people of Ethiopia.

Now, twenty five years later, Ethiopians are unfortunately in the same position. It is not by accident. Any investigation of the previous famine will reveal a close association with the repressive regime of Mengistu who was responsible for the large-scale destruction of food, animals, homes and crops, all accompanied with widespread human rights atrocities, only exacerbated by the drought.

Opponents were targeted and Meles was among them. He is now repeating that cycle so when one asks why Ethiopia is not better prepared for recurrent droughts, one may see that with one hand his regime is destroying the peoples' means to sustain their lives while with the other hand, begging for food aid. As long as there is need, his regime has been financially benefiting. The problem now is that with the drought, the need has mushroomed beyond what is "manageable."

Closer investigation will reveal longstanding and deeply entrenched corruption, mismanagement and the use of aid, development and agricultural policies as a means to exert political control. In such a system, some are rewarded and others punished, even with starvation, based on party membership, ethnicity or compliance. The disparities between regions can be seen by the map predicting which regions will be most affected.

During the last drought, the very arid region of Tigray was hard hit, but as you can see, development resources have reduced the threat in 2009. Yet, on November 6th, the government-controlled website, Walta, reported that 486,000 quintals of food was distributed in the Tigrayan region, along with seed for farmers. What about the need in the southern sections of the country?

What is the purpose of such favouritism except to create a greater divide and deeper ethnic tensions between Tigrayans, many who want this regime to fall, and the rest of Ethiopians?

It is hard to believe that Meles truly cares about the Tigrayans, but instead it is more likely a ploy to shore up more support for himself by unfairly lumping Tigrayans together with him, making them feel more vulnerable without him.

You maybe saw a hint of a bigger problem when you visited south-eastern Ethiopian a year ago to assess the condition of the people in the Ogaden; however, instead of seeing an accurate picture, you later learned that what you saw was a "staged version" as the most malnourished children were removed from their dying beds just prior to your visit in order to minimize the seriousness of the problem.

Here is a country that cares more about its image than its dying people; one where the numbers of those at risk have been covered up. What you may have seen if allowed full access was how the Meles regime has targeted the people of the Ogaden, using human rights crimes, starvation and deprivation of humanitarian aid as tools of oppression and blanket punishment of an ethnicity for any resistance.



Since that time, forty-two NGO's have been kicked out of the region; allegedly, because of providing reports of the serious human rights violations being committed by the Ethiopian military. When the walls blocking access to the Ogaden region finally fall, the world may not be prepared for what they will see—something that may radicalize parts of this population.

It is no surprise that there is little pre-planning to help avoid starvation in a country that regularly wants more money to put into its military to suppress the people or that is now allegedly nearly “giving away some of Ethiopia's most fertile land to investors or foreign countries rather than removing agricultural development obstacles to Ethiopians.

Even more outrageous is evidence regarding the level of corruption in Ethiopia that prevents the food and humanitarian aid from reaching many of the people for which it was intended; instead, ending up in overseas bank accounts of those in the Ethiopian government or their crony supporters who dominate most every sector of society. Research conducted on this issue revealed that the amount of money being deposited in UK bank accounts from Ethiopia exceeded or nearly exceeded what it received in financial aid. As the people of Ethiopia suffer and starve, tolerance of such corruption becomes morally reprehensible.

Why is the Meles regime allowed to repeatedly break the rules of accountability required by donor countries? This is wrong. Right now, the excuse is being given, by Meles too, that there is no viable alternative to Meles so he is better than a failed state, but the tensions rising in Ethiopia may become too great for Meles to handle and it may all end up exploding into violence and chaos. ***Why are donors not more concerned about empowering a viable alternative—an opposition movement—that could bring greater justice and freedom rather than empowering a dictator now accused of genocide and crimes against humanity? Where is the pressure to release such legitimate leaders such as Birtukan Mideksa who was imprisoned only because she was a threat?***

Right now, no one is protecting the people or their interests and many opportunists like it that way, but this comes at a cost as the perfect storm is brewing in Ethiopia for disaster. The world of truly compassionate decision makers can now make a difference in taking a moral stand. ***Real solutions must be demanded, rather than ones contrived to appear humane while supporting the exploitation of a nation and people behind their backs.***

The conception of Ethiopians as being incapable of supporting themselves is insulting to Ethiopians who cannot even buy fertilizer or good quality seeds without political affiliation. Ethiopia is a rich country that has ample resources and areas of richly fertile land that could feed the country. This is what donor countries should be emphasizing rather than giving food aid year after year and supporting a regime that after 19 years has instead killed the democratic voice and the God-given valuing of human life and dignity. No wonder why there is no viable alternative.

With the election coming up in 2010, the people of Ethiopia are watching carefully to see if the donor countries like the USA and UK will change or will continue with the same game plan. If they continue as is, that will be telling. ***Do the donor countries like the UK, US, Canada and the EU really care about a free and fair election or only about the appearance of a free and fair election because they are afraid of what kind of regime might come after Meles?***

The truth is, the longer the investment is made in a dictator over the people, the deeper the resentment of the people will be and the tighter the control will have to become to limit the voice of the people. This is why many fear that Ethiopia may implode. To avoid this result, only a deep change of course, not just pretence, will bear the desired fruit for both sides.

Ethiopia has become a fragile state that could erupt and destabilize the entire Horn of Africa unless there is structural change that deals head on with the high level of corruption, serial dictators, divide and conquer policies, cronyism and the free reign given to internal and external opportunists. Emergency food aid is only the beginning of the problem. Eventually, Ethiopians will win their freedom; it is just a matter of time.

Let morality be the guide rather than economic or national interests. Ethiopians can see that some in the West really do not want a viable, more democratic alternative to Meles as long as everything is for sale in Ethiopia at “bargain” prices, but if the West loses its soul, what a tragedy for the rest of the world! Please take a stand for the moral right to be done in terms of Ethiopia.

No amount of democratic and humane rhetoric or financial aid will ease the conscience or guilt of those who gain from the plight of others. Like the brilliant and courageous Wilbur Wilberforce, who fought against the economic entrenchments that held slavery in place, we call on you, as someone who is a voice of compassion and justice, to open those locks that will otherwise condemn millions to continuing starvation, suffering, poverty and human rights crimes.

Thank you for listening and caring about the people of Ethiopia. ***I hope you will use your influence to urge other leaders to put morality first because “none of us are free until all are free.” Our humanity has no national interests or boundaries.***

We look forward to hearing how the UK government plans to address the concerns raised in this letter. We will be sending this to other donors and mainstream media as well in hopes that it will facilitate discussion at every level.

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Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Obang Metho', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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