



**An Open Letter to President Barack Obama,
Concerning Peace and Stability in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa**

January 12, 2010

The President of the United States of America
The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20501

Dear President Obama:

I am writing this to you on behalf of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), a grassroots social justice movement whose mission is to mobilize Ethiopians in the Diaspora and within Ethiopia to unite across ethnic, regional, political and religious lines to confront the current system of injustice, repression and human rights abuses being carried out by the dictatorial regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and to bring about a more open, free and reconciled society in Ethiopia.

Our foundational principles are **“putting humanity before ethnicity,”** or any other distinctions--valuing all humankind—and standing up for the universal values of freedom, justice and respect for the human rights of others for **“no one will be free until all are free.”**

The looming crisis in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa can no longer be ignored or addressed through “behind-closed-doors” quiet diplomacy. Such diplomacy has essentially covered up the evil actions of one of the most repressive and brutal regimes in Africa. Peace and stability in the Horn will be impossible while he is in power even while millions are spent in its pursuit.

Meles is an “African strongman” and deserves, at least, the same approach as Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. The preferential treatment being given to this dictator, while condemning others for doing the same thing, is wrong. It will only further alienate the Ethiopian people and become a repeat of the mistakes of the past administrations.

The “dreams of our fathers” were for Africans to live in peace, harmony and with better opportunity; but unfortunately, American and Western foreign policies are now blocking Ethiopians from realizing these dreams by propping up this regime through huge amounts of financial and military aid as well as by protecting this regime’s “image” by not exposing their real nature. We do not expect your administration to do the work for us, but we do ask that free countries in the West stop being an obstacle to the democratic struggle of the people of Ethiopia.

Mr. President, you must choose between investing in the people or aligning with a so-called “US partner in our War on Terror” who is stirring up deep problems within Ethiopia. The damage being done by this regime within Ethiopia and the antagonism that most Ethiopians feel towards it and its supporters, may come back to undermine longer-term American national interests in the region.

Will your administration speak out loudly and clearly about the lack of democratic process in Ethiopia, about the pervasive politicization of justice and opportunity or about the gross violations of human rights that led to the referral of the case of Ethiopia to the International Criminal Court for investigation into multiple charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes? Will your administration call PM Meles Zenawi exactly what he is, a dictator who is terrorizing and repressing Ethiopia?

There is a short window of opportunity where such open support would make a dramatic difference to future relationships with the people of Ethiopia and that is now, within the next five months leading up to the Ethiopian National election. This is an opportunity to avert a possible crisis in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa by taking concrete steps to support the spread of freedom in the Horn of Africa, one of the most conflicted regions of the world. A free Ethiopia will make as much difference in bringing peace to this inter-related region as a brutal and conniving dictator has brought unrest to the region through fomenting division, conflict, violence and the radicalization of future terrorists.

Thus far, your administration’s policies, the same as during the Bush administration, have not shown support to this democratic movement of the Ethiopian people; nor has it helped to build democratic institutions like done in Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia and other places where the US empowered and funded them in the past. Even funding decisions made by the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington DC, which are influenced by the US State Department, along with other funders of democracy building, have either ignored Ethiopia or have given their funds to mostly Meles controlled look-alike organizations rather than to genuine democracy building non-governmental organizations and institutions who are truly committed to democratic principles. At the same time, many in the West have justified their alliance with a dictator as resulting from the lack of any other more viable alternative; however, Meles is determined to destroy any such alternatives and the West is unwilling to either condemn him for doing it or to invest in building up any such alternatives.

Instead, we only see a passive approach by your administration and this is the reason we are sending this letter to you. We know you must represent American national interests, but is it not possible to establish a relationship based on mutual respect that does not exploit the freedom, assets or lives of the other? We care about the future of Ethiopian citizens just like you care about the national interests of Americans. Can there not be some kind of mutually beneficial partnerships?

If US support of this TPLF regime is about AFRICOM being built in Ethiopia, the people of Ethiopia need to know. If your administration does this behind the backs of the people and the people are suffering as a result, the foundation will be on sand. If your administration is supporting Meles to root out terrorists while we are victims of internal terrorism, you are in the wrong and such a policy will eventually backfire. You should instead engage the people in this struggle; for we also yearn for peace in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa. It is our home and it matters more to us than to anyone that terrorism be stopped.

How can you hope that the Ethiopian regime you are supporting can actually bring about peace to America and the West through someone like Meles? Is Somalia or the Ogaden in southeastern Ethiopia going to be more free of terrorists or will it end up becoming more radicalized because of the tactics used—the alleged killing of some 20,000 or more civilians, the widespread starvation and displacement of the people, the burning of homes and crops, the widespread rape of women, the killing of livestock and the poisoning of their wells?

How does this build a better future for any of us? Meles' actions, were they to occur here in the United States, could even radicalize farmers in Bismarck, North Dakota, teachers in Chicago, business owners in Dallas, scientists in Nebraska and stay-at-home moms in Oregon.

Our foreign policies in Ethiopia do not reflect the values of most Americans who may end up experiencing more anti-west sentiment because of them; however, few know the real story about what is going on because the press has been mostly silent. Why? Will your administration make a change we can believe in?

The Horn is full of life and people who are extending their hands to you and your administration. Will you reach outward to clasp their hands in yours? If your administration really wants an alliance with partners who can work with you for the improvement of sustainable peace in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, it has to be with the people.

We are speaking as Ethiopian Americans, who desire the same kinds of values, democracy, freedom and rule of law in Ethiopia that many of us have sought by coming to America and other western countries. We want to find peace, safety and security like anyone else and want to be part of the solution of ending terrorism in Ethiopia and the Horn. Most of us want this through peaceful means; using the ballot rather than the bullet; however, our efforts are being sabotaged.

In May of 2005, over a million Ethiopians came out in Addis Ababa to rally for "this change they could believe in." It was one of the most peaceful rallies in Africa; no one was killed and no windows were broken. When the election took place, 26 millions came out to vote, but the election was stolen by Meles. When the people protested for their God-given rights and universal principles of justice, Meles' security forces shot and killed 193 unarmed protesters. Over 50,000 protesters were arrested and detained. Opposition leaders were later imprisoned. All of this hardly made the news in America and the previous administration failed to make any public statement condemning the government's actions. The silence acted as an endorsement, legitimizing and strengthening the unelected prime minister and his TPLF party.

Right now, the first woman to lead a major Ethiopian political party and also one of the most popular opposition leaders in Ethiopia, Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, is a prisoner of conscience. Other opposition leaders are being intimidated and harassed and the media is totally closed to anyone but the government. No one expects this coming election to be free and fair; yet, if Ethiopians are faced with another five years of tyranny, the already simmering anger and tensions may erupt into widespread violence, destabilizing Ethiopia and possibly the entire Horn.

Will your administration or others in the West support a democratic movement in Ethiopia or not? Truthfully, we are not hopeful, as history shows that the strongest countries of this world have repeatedly abused Africa; where they have economically flourished by working through African dictators to secure African resources even if it means trampling on the rights or selling out on the lives and futures of Africans. Some, who believe in the God-given inherent worth of all people, including Africans, have stood against the slavery of the past, but how about new variations of the same?

These are the greatest moral issues of our time. If we use the highest ideals in our rhetoric; yet, in the realpolitik of action, we betray the weaker in our global society simply because we are economically and militarily more powerful and can get away with it, history will judge us. In respect to Ethiopia, this has happened before.

In 1935, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie appealed to the League of Nations to take mandated action against Mussolini's Italy for military aggression carried out against Ethiopians in an obscure desert region of southeastern Ethiopia.

Ironically, both Ethiopia and Italy were members of the League, formed with the explicit mission of protecting its membership against such aggression; first with sanctions and then with military intervention; however, at the first challenge, the League caved in to its ideals, showing that the interests of the most powerful came first.ⁱ

Fearing they would antagonize the Italian dictator when they felt they needed his support against Hitler, they sacrificed Ethiopia; only making superficial and toothless attempts to stop Italy. Their betrayal of the League of Nation's expressed ideals emboldened Hitler to advance against them.

While the international community lost their political will to intervene in Ethiopia, in a Times magazine article from July 22, 1935ⁱⁱ, it was reported that many African-Americans joined in the fight against Mussolini; even boycotting Italian gin in the cities of America, connecting "...every shorty [nip] of gin bought from Italian saloon-keepers" with "bullets bought by Mussolini to slaughter our brothers in Africa!" As the League of Nations chose their own national interests over their commitment to collective security of each other, they lifted even the very weak sanctions from Italy.

In response to this betrayal, Emperor Haile Selassie spoke these words;

"I pray to Almighty God that he shall spare to the nations the terrible sufferings that have just been inflicted on my people...It is international morality that is at stake...should it happen that a strong government finds that it may with impunity destroy a small people, then the hour strikes for that weak people to appeal to the League to give its judgment in all freedom. God and history will remember your judgment...I must still hold on until my tardy allies appear. If they never come, then I say prophetically and without bitterness: "the West will perish."

Mr. President, the "fierce urgency of the now" is a moral crisis which will define the identity of who America is; not only in 2010, but in the future. Ethiopia is one of the arenas where this moral struggle is being played out. Will the US choose to follow the ideals upon which America and the West were founded or will America and the West desert its moral convictions, emboldening new terrorists as the entire world loses some of its strongest proponents for humankind? Weakened convictions make for weakened moral resolve and such resolve is the glue that holds in place a more secure global future.

The betrayal of Ethiopia in 1936 may not have seemed significant at the time, but it helped weaken the forces of good, forces that needed all their strength to face the onslaught of the coming years. Which side will your administration and others in the West choose—dictators or the people? What is at stake now may be more than we realize!

We look forward to your response and hope that we Ethiopians can build a true partnership based on mutual values, trust and respect.

Respectfully yours,



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House of Representatives, Donald Payne, Chairman on Africa.

ⁱ Information provided in the book, Why Europe Fights, by Walter Mills, 1940 (pages 124-152)

ⁱⁱⁱ Time magazine, International: Ethiopia's Week, Monday, July 22, 1935