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From the Minister of State

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(by email: obang@solidaritymovement.org)

15 December 2009

Dear Mr Metho

Thank you for your letter of 6 November to Douglas Alexander, Secretary of State for International Development, about your concerns on governance issues in Ethiopia, and the management of humanitarian and development assistance. I am replying as the Minister who leads on these matters. I visited Ethiopia recently myself and discussed a number of these issues with the Ethiopian Government and civil society.

As you acknowledge, the British Government has a long established partnership with the people of Ethiopia. We work closely with the Government of Ethiopia because we believe that the Government has a strong and genuine commitment to poverty reduction. The significant expansion of health, education and water services in recent years is evidence of this, and I encourage you to verify for yourself these improvements in service delivery.

Ethiopia has come a long way since 1984 to improve its handling of humanitarian issues. Stronger systems are in place to address periodic food crises, including programmes such as the Productive Safety Net Programme which helps poor Ethiopians protect their assets in times of hardship. I am confident that these improvements will prevent a return to the famine situation witnessed in the 1980s.

However, where we feel particular humanitarian governance issues could be better addressed, we are firm in our views with the Ethiopian

Government, and in applying conditions to ensure our aid reaches the right people. For example, last year Douglas Alexander did not agree to multi-year funding of our large programmes until particular humanitarian aid issues were addressed by the Government.

I am aware of allegations that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and Government of Ethiopia make political support a condition of access to aid at the local level - including allegations relating to access to fertiliser and food aid. All our programmes include robust safeguards and provisions for detailed independent audit where required.

We take all such allegations very seriously. I raised this issue with the Government of Ethiopia recently, and Prime Minister Meles promised to take tough measures where evidence can be produced. We will conduct further studies as necessary to ensure our aid reaches the people it needs to without political bias.

You raise the issue of corruption. Positive action has been taken in setting up the Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission, and studies repeatedly demonstrate the effectiveness of the Government's public financial management system. But there is room for improvement and we will continue to monitor this carefully. If we have evidence of aid funds being transferred to foreign bank accounts we will ensure they are investigated thoroughly.

You also refer to the issues of democratisation and elections. We expect Ethiopia to ensure free, fair and peaceful elections next year in line with their Constitutional commitments. As part of a joint international community effort, we are supporting Ethiopian institutions to ensure this happens. This was also an issue raised in discussions with Prime Minister Meles and other ministers in the Government.

I hope this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gareth Thomas'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'G'.

GARETH THOMAS