



Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Ethiopian-Eritrean in San Jose, California: The Beginning of Regional Integration in the Horn: Extending the Hand of Friendship

March 13, 2010

Thank you to the Ethiopian-Eritrean Friendship Committee and its organizers for bringing us together in this great city of San Jose to begin talking together about how to lay the groundwork for a better future together. Many people have good and noble ideas, but it is those who make them into reality through their hard work, cooperation, resources and sacrifice who succeed in creating an event like this!

When I was first invited to this meeting, I had no idea what to talk about, but then they asked me to talk about humanity as our common bond. I thank the four speakers before me, who are my elders, for opening my eyes to many details about the history of our problems. I am glad I am last to speak for I have learned a great deal from them about what is going on and it makes me more convinced that rediscovering what connects us is critical to our shared future.

So, when I ask the question, **“Why are we here today,”** I can say that it is because our political experiment of the last thirty years did not work. It did not work for Ethiopians and it did not work for Eritreans. The second question before us today is, **“So, what do we do now?”** We have an idea of what we want our success to look like, but the difficult part is how do we get from here to there?

Many of us in and from the Horn of Africa together yearn for a better future. We who are here today are here because each of us has hopes and dreams that a more integrated, harmonious and peaceful Horn of Africa is possible. It will not be easy nor will there be any quick solutions, but I am here, as are many of you, because we are convinced that we can make a difference!

To do so, we must face our problems head on. I must speak honestly as my conscience dictates because the problems we are most afraid to confront are those most likely to undermine our success. Fortunately, I am not bound by being a politician who is hoping to run for office, subconsciously trying to please and not offend anyone so I can get your vote. Instead, I want to make sure that I do not skirt the important issues just because some might not want it said or because there is fear about admitting the truth. **Truth is what frees us.**

The question before us today is how we can move from the broken, sometimes hostile relationship that Ethiopians and Eritreans as people and as nations have today to a more harmonious and mutually productive relationship in the future; hopefully eventually doing the same with our other neighbors in the Horn of Africa.

Right now, we all know that something is very wrong and we must figure out what it is so we can fix it. I would suggest that there are four steps in the process that are all critically important.

The first step is: Awareness

We must become aware that we have a problem; both within ourselves and between us. We cannot pretend differently or cover-up the reality of life in either Eritrea or Ethiopia. We must start by recognizing and admitting the symptoms within our society that has made us unhealthy, dysfunctional and destructive to self and each other. It is far easier to point the fingers of blame at someone else, but this will not cure our own illness and both of our societies need healing. This is why being open is so necessary. **If you are sick, but deny your symptoms, you will never go to the doctor to seek treatment. Without that treatment; you may never get better or you might even die.**

We both know we are not well. We know we are not well when we make ethnicity or nationality a reason to oppress and fight with others. We know we are not well when we view the Ethiopian national language as a language of oppression. We know we are sick when we call the national identify as Ethiopians as oppression. We know we are ill when you are excluded, mistreated or marginalized because of your nationality, your ethnicity, your religion, your skin color or your region. This is why so many want to break away from the country. Someone else may tell you that you have no reason to feel the way you do; yet the evidence is to the contrary. It is like when you are sick—instead of helping treat your illness—you are told to pretend that everything is okay when in truth, you are in acute pain.

Today is a day to begin to find a cure for what ails us. The cure cannot happen overnight, but will be a process. Once we become aware of our problem and/or admit to it, is when we first have the opportunity to really do something to make it better. Awareness must come first. Once we are aware, it will lead to change. Without awareness, no one seeks change.

We are wounded people. Many have suffered trauma or have been affected by what others have had to go through. We have had to make adjustments to cope with living under a dictatorship or fearing for our families and friends doing so. We have years of fighting and animosity where wrongs have been committed against each other. We have lost our willingness to trust or accept others. However, if we cannot recognize the source of our pain, the suffering will continue. When finally we admit it, we will only then be more ready to say we have had enough! That is when you will start to protest, resist, and seek healing or transformation. By coming here, we are saying we are aware and want something different. **Now there is a possibility or potential for change.**

The truth is—both the Ethiopian people and the Eritrean people are living under dictators and we are all suffering! There are people who want to use Isaias to help get rid of Meles, using Eritrea as a base and there are some who want to use Meles to get rid of Isaias. In the process, some from either side will not admit what is going on in the other country to the detriment of the people living there. We are lying to ourselves if say one country is truly better than another. Such repression of the truth—these secrets that no one will speak out about—will only destroy us. Who knows, perhaps Meles and Isaias are working together to control and divide all of us so they can both stay in power!

Look at the people. Now that we have had different countries, are we better off? We cannot undo the history of the past; we have to live in the present, but how might we prepare for a better mutual future? Today is a beginning. Change will not take place overnight, but many of us here believe that **regional integration is our only salvation for the future.** If we go back a hundred or thousand years; when we lived together in the cradle of human civilization, we were really no different from each other.

Our national boundary lines today mean little if we consider the past. Why are we settling for something less than our ancestors? We can blame others, but that is not useful. We are all the same people—Ethiopians and Eritreans. Even though a line separates us, we share the same blood. Some of this attitude was adopted due to influence from the outside, but it was often our own leaders who failed to see it or chose not to see it for reasons of their own.

Right now, both Isaias and Meles seem to thrive on our division, which makes us weaker, but also causes war, death and suffering to the people. Why do we accept it? Our division—seeing ourselves as “that” other tribe, “that” other region, “that” other religion—is the reason why Africa is in peril like it is. It is no more truer than in the Horn of Africa! Meles and other African leaders have followed this path of division, promoting the tribal thinking by which Africa is being defeated. These are attitudes like: “your own group is better or more deserving”; “your own group is more entitled to power, privilege or opportunity than others,” or “it is our turn to eat now.” Outsiders have made it more pronounced, dividing us like chess pieces during the Cold War, even if the leaders themselves differed little from another. Divide and conquer was easily accomplished when you have people of different tribes and languages and a lack of awareness of how they were being manipulated.

Meles went to the bush saying he would bring change. He fought for the liberation of his own group; but to win, he had to adopt the national interests of the EPRDF, but after winning, he quickly abandoned any national, and even ethnic, interests for his own interests and those of his cronies.

Eritreans fought for their independence so they could be better off. Are Eritreans better off than they were? Some Eritreans will not speak about it. They believe that because Isaias “liberated them,” that they cannot say anything critical about what has truly become a tyranny. Isaias had promised that without Mengistu, and the oppression of that Derg, that Eritrean would become the Taiwan of East Africa; but instead, Eritrea has become the North Korea of Horn of Africa. Ethiopians are not better off either under Meles and his ethnic politics than they were under Mengistu. Many on both sides believed they were fighting for something better, but they got nothing quite different. The battle for independence ended up to be oppression under a different name. Neither Eritreans nor Ethiopians are truly better off. This is the reason we are here today, now both searching for freedom.

The second step is: Transformation

It begins by deciding that I must do my best, with God’s help, to find a solution. We have been dominated by leaders whose intent was to divide and disempower the people in order to advance their own self-interest. We are told, and have erroneously accepted it as truth, that “those tribes not good,” “don’t work with those people,” “take care of your own regardless of anything,” “they are not as deserving” and so on. In other words, we are told what to think and how to act towards others. We have been “domesticated” like animals, told when and where to roll over, bark or play dead and when to fight until death.” We have adopted a “victim mentality” which has made us un-free. We must take back our responsibility to free our minds first if we are to be free in other ways. Victim thinking does not free a society for it is always someone else’s fault or someone else’s responsibility, paralyzing those who could otherwise make a difference.

If we want to prosper, we cannot live as enemies. We must find a way to live together. We need to break away from old patterns and mistakes to find relief from the pain, suffering, emotional baggage, anger and fear that taints our relationships. We need to discard our tendency to dehumanize others, or even ourselves, so we can choose the path of survival that comes through mutual respect, equality, justice and reconciling our past. This is what will begin the process of recovery from our illness.

If those in the past would have this, imagine what a different life would exist for those living in the Horn of Africa today. How many lives would not have been lost in the 20 years of fighting? We know some 70,000 were lost in the war in 1998. Acceptance and respect for others was determined by where we drew the line between us. Those on one side were our brothers and those on the other side our enemies! For how long will we continue to accept these definitions of who we are and who we are not?

These artificially drawn lines are what separate people all over Africa even though many groups have migrated all over the continent, intermingling with others. In other cases, national borders are drawn right down the middle of ethnic indigenous land. In my case, some Anuak are living in Sudan and some are in Ethiopia. It is the same with Eritreans and Ethiopians. Look at the Somalis who share the same culture with Somalis in Somalia, the Ogaden and Afar. Do we go by physical boundaries or by the people; by our shared humanity or ethnicity or nationality? This is the kind of transformation of our thinking that will provide the seeds for a better future rather than seeds of suffering for the next generation.

The pain and suffering through which we have endured is unbelievable. We cannot change that, but to heal, we have to acknowledge it and then seek to find new bonds and connections; something that will only happen if our thinking is transformed. The biggest thing we have in common is our humanity. Our blood does not have a different color. People fail to see the humanity of others and this is why there is chaos and why people believe the Horn will explode.

- The failure to see others as humans is the reason for killing in Armenia, in Germany, in Cambodia, in Rwanda, Yugoslavia and in Sierra Leone. More lives are lost when people overlook the humanity of others.
- The two European wars that became World War I and World War II were not “world wars” to start with because they were between European countries, but because of the failure for some in Europe to recognize others as truly human, a war of aggression began that enveloped many in the world, including us. Yet, now, European countries have succeeded in building a different future together, even sharing the same money and values. People who used to fight and kill each other, now have no check points at their borders for each other. Many had to work hard to heal the wounds of the past and this is what we must do.

The third step: Healing the wounds

We must find way to become a family of the Horn of Africa, including the people of Somalia and Djibouti. For those talking about making Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, Djibouti into one country, we must first set the foundation of a society that believes in the humanity of others. This must be done in each country and then we can sit down together and discuss both our commonalities and our differences, figuring out how we can use both to strengthen our region.

Unfortunately, there are people and leaders who will thrive on the division of others. We must keep this in mind and rise above it; something much more easily done when we appreciate the humanity of each other. Outsiders and repressive groups can undermine these goals unless we create a strong partnership and safeguards. It could be a Meles, an Isaias, another country, some corrupt or opportunistic multinational company or some other entity who had something to gain by keeping us separate, while regional integration could be the salvation of the Horn. The only way we can move forward towards that goal will be to acknowledge that we are family. We do not need one group dominating over another anymore!

Some people say Africans cannot live together without violence, but I disagree. We have lived together for many more years than we have not, but in order to re-establish a more peaceful relationship, one thing we will have to do is to sit down and listen to the pain and grievances of others—like our ancestors used to do. We cannot move ahead by overlooking the anger, pain and suspicion on both sides or by fixating on it so we never risk entering into new relationships. Right now we talk about each other but not to each other.

To find healing, we must be able to talk about what has happened to us and where such suffering as gotten us. Just take one example. Consider how the wars between Eritrea and Ethiopia have impacted your family, your community or your life. By saying what happened, we can see the fruitlessness of fighting over these last almost thirty years. Who really won? Did any of us?

For Ethiopians, these wars were not our own; yet they reached all the way to the mostly ignored regions like Gambella, where I lived during many of these years. My uncle came back from fighting against Eritrea with no limbs. Why? My cousins were taken and never came back. What did the loss of their lives accomplish?

I personally remember when Mengistu’s soldiers came to my school and took the tallest boys in our class. They never had a chance to say goodbye to us or even to their families. They were simply escorted to the back of a military army truck and disappeared, leaving only the unsettled dirt behind. Most of them we never heard from again.

We did not know why our young people had to go and die. What did they die for? We in Gambella were marginalized, without any opportunity for education, but the government was harvesting our future and people. We were good enough to die for Ethiopia, but Ethiopia never really gave us anything in return. Our children were taken; yet we failed to see what we were fighting for. If one asks why some do not feel part of this country, or why we do not feel Ethiopian, it is because some of us are still being called 'baria' or must prove we are Ethiopian. As we begin to acknowledge the humanity of others, where one comes from or the color of their skin no longer matters. When this happens, we will know that our society is becoming healthy and well-functioning.

Ethiopia under Meles right now has not improved through this fighting with each other, but has worsened. If someone asked me or those who lost children or loved ones what they died for, it would not be easy to find an answer. Eritrea has become a country and now, but what would those Eritreans say who lost family members? Eritreans may say that the loss of their loved one was for the cause of freedom, but what did they seriously get? Maybe Eritrea is a country of your own, but whether or not young Eritreans have a better opportunity now might depend on who you ask. If it is better, why have some 8000 people a year out of two million people, sought asylum? This is a sign that nothing may have been accomplished.

Could this problem have been solved without a bloodbath? It could have, but because people did not see the humanity of others; **all of us, Ethiopians and Eritreans, have lost our freedom. Forgiveness of others who have done us wrong is the beginning of finding freedom from pain and release from the chains of our past. This does not mean there will be no justice for the worst abuses or that you will forget lessons needed for the future, but it will take the consuming power of anger and hate away so that you can move on.**

All of us have been wronged and have wronged others at different times. When you hold on to anger, it affects you and you can become bitter and enslaved by it. When you forgive, you are sometimes more freed than the person you forgive. You can let go of resentment. You can say, I will no longer do this to myself. I will no longer allow the past to dictate or embitter my future. We have to free our minds, accepting ourselves and then reach out to others with grace and forgiveness.

This process will not be pain free, for it will open the wounds. There is no question about this, but the healing of our society demands both forgiveness by many as well as remorse; accompanied by a genuine desire to set things right in the future. Such change starts in each person, one by one and moves at the grassroots level. Good leadership, modeling the same, can impact from the top down as well. Much fear, pride or overall resistance often exists within most of us about admitting one's own wrongdoing or about reaching out to someone who has grieved you; however, if our society is to be healed, we must humbly recognize our own flaws and then move on to love others beyond our fears and beyond what is easy.

The fourth step: Embrace each other

Breaking away from our fears and negativity towards each other, especially against those we have hated, feared or rejected in the past is when we will rise up to become a healthier, more well-functioning and more productive society. We will start looking healthy again, just like the change that comes after neglected flowers or plants, wilted from a lack of sun, water or nutrient-rich soil finally get what they need and stand up in strength and abundance. It will be visible for everyone to see.

It will be the same with us. Ethiopians and Eritreans will see themselves and each other as all equal in the image of God, created equally and deserving of rights, dignity and respect. If we seek God's grace and forgiveness for ourselves, we must admit our own flaws, injustices, and wrongful actions and show grace and forgiveness to others. This is when harmony will come in.

We are the same people and have lived together for many years. We have wounds, but it is time to acknowledge those wounds and to seek healing for we all have suffered too much already. Let us be among those who pass on a different legacy to our children and grandchildren.

In conclusion, we are a family with a serious problem. There is a way we can live together and for the sake of the future, we must take this opportunity to do it. Not everyone will agree with us, but those of us who understand these principles on both side of the borders, must stick together, be humble and work diligently until we obtain greater harmony. It should start by Ethiopians cleaning up the mess in their areas and Eritreans cleaning their mess in their areas.

Once this progress is made, it will be easier to come together. To people on both sides, have to create institutions of the people, based on shared values and goals that will hold us all accountable as we seek to solve our problems and improve our future. Today is the beginning. Let each of us become catalysts for peace-making change that will turn the deserts of our lives into bountiful fruitful that can be shared beyond our borders into the Horn and into Africa! Thank you.

May God help us admit our own flaws, injustices, and wrongful actions and show grace and forgiveness to others.

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Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: Obang@solidaritymovement.org
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