



**An open letter to the Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates,
Concerning Peace and Stability in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa**

March 29, 2010

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Robert Gates,

I am contacting you on behalf of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, a social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians committed to bringing sustainable freedom, justice, human rights, equality and the rule of law to Ethiopia. The objectives of the **SMNE** are empowered through the foundational principles of **“putting humanity before ethnicity,”** or any other distinctions, and that **“no one will be free until all are free!”** **Affirming such principles between nations can also build a more peaceful and secure global society.**

As the Pentagon seeks a new US approach to involvement in Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and Africa as a whole, we ask you, Mr. Secretary, to consider new ways to more closely align with the freedom movement of the Ethiopian people as the best means of ensuring a strong and productive relationship in the future.

At a recent address by Ambassador Daniel Benjamin, the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the US Department of State titled, “International Counterterrorism Policy in the Obama Administration: Developing a Strategy for the Future,” Mr. Benjamin summed up the US position by saying, **“Our approach recognizes finally that our counterterrorism efforts can best succeed when they make central respect for human rights and the rule of law.”** He asserted that “as President Obama has said from the outset, there should be no trade-off between our security and our values. **Indeed, in light of what we know about radicalization, it is absolutely clear that navigating by our values is an essential part of a successful counterterrorism effort.”**ⁱ

The Horn of Africa, a region of conflict, poverty and failed, failing or fragile states in a strategic area of the world has been identified as a priority region in the world for US counterterrorism efforts. The lack of peace and security, along with fears that areas like Somalia will become a hotbed of terroristic activity; have resulted in large investments in counterterrorism efforts and resources in the region with mixed or even disturbing results.

Part of that investment has been in Ethiopia, a country of strategic importance in the Horn; however, it is our position that counterterrorism efforts in the region are, in fact, being undermined by aligning with an authoritarian government who is known for widespread human rights violations and the suppression of the rule of law.

If the ‘Freedom Agenda’—democracy building—is one of the key strategies in U.S. counterterrorism; particularly geared to preventing the emergence of radicalized populations; than conversely, supporting governments known to tyrannize their citizens and to suppress democratic movements is not only counter-productive but dangerous. Secondly, when U.S. democracy building rhetoric is combined with actions that support authoritarian governments, the toll on American credibility only increases the disillusionment and anger that fosters such radicalization.

In fact, today, instead of increased peace and security in the region, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa are at greater risk than ever of radicalization, chaos and disintegration. You have expressed concerns that the potential problems emanating from failing states are, “in many ways the ideological and security challenge of our time.” We concur with you; believing that only a **substantial change of direction in US policy could help avert the worst fears of many Ethiopians—that Ethiopia could explode into violence and destabilization. Ethiopians realize they must bring freedom themselves, but ask that the US not be an obstacle to bringing democracy.**

We are aware that the Pentagon and the State Department are endorsing a paradigm shift in the US approach to potentially failing states, particularly in Africa, hoping to prevent their collapse through using defense contractors to launch “smart power” initiatives.ⁱⁱ Such civilian efforts would use economic and political efforts to align these countries with US interests. **Already, Lockheed Martin is said to have a contract in Ethiopia. As they proceed and as the Obama administration requests funding of some \$39.4 billion in 2011 for such “soft power” initiatives, Ethiopians are highly concerned that these funds are not used to further entrench an illiberal regime in Ethiopia that the people no longer want. The time to win back the hearts and minds of the Ethiopian people is now; not after the Meles regime falls on its own.**

You may ask why we question US administration motives in Ethiopia; it is because despite the increasing tyranny and oppression, the US has not only turned a blind eye, but has provided huge amounts of US military training support, humanitarian aid and development assistance that has shored up the power of a brutal regime led by a former Marxist-Leninist guerilla-style terrorist group, who has taken over Ethiopia and ruled it without mercy for 19 years—Meles Zenawi and the Tigrayan Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF). Continuation of such support may actually become the catalyst to unnecessary violence and the disintegration of the country due to the increasing anger and frustration of the people.

To change the downward course towards a disintegrated Ethiopia, a new paradigm of leadership will be required to win back this country and this volatile region of the world; one with authentic autonomy, but one predisposed to shared values and goals of free countries like the US. **If the US truly wants to align with the security and economic interests of both Americans and Ethiopians for the long-term, it is imperative that the following concerns of the Ethiopian people, who will outlast the present regime, directly impact the development of any current and future US strategic plans for Ethiopia:**

1. U.S. policy of supporting the one-party dictatorial rule of the Meles regime during Bush’s administration is continuing under President Obama, creating a rift between the Ethiopian people as US support to Ethiopia for the War on Terror is propping up a regime that continues to terrorize its own people as it clamps down on their rights. Putting all US counter-terrorism efforts into one authoritarian regime, while turning a blind eye to the regime’s many egregious offenses, de-legitimizes the rightful protests of the people.

U.S. public affirmations to Ethiopia of democratic progress are “salt on the wounds” of those striving for genuine democracy; particularly because any such movements are immediately suppressed as being a threat to the current regime.

2. Building durable democratic institutions is a stated US goal, but in actuality, very few resources have been given to non-TPLF controlled organizations. Conversely, resources given to the TPLF-controlled regime have been used to block the efforts or to take over control of any independent democracy-building institutions and to replace them with government-controlled look-alike organizations. These “look-alike” organizations are then used to convince Westerners that they are building up institutions.
3. Political pressure to liberalize, without docking Ethiopia of U.S. aid, has failed to achieve its goals. Instead, Meles has been emboldened to become more blatantly authoritarian. For example, instead of repealing repressive laws, he has pushed the parliament to pass laws that further curb political rights, freedom of the media and create vaguely defined laws against terrorism that can be used to clamp down on legitimate and peaceful political expression. Unlike in the past when Meles vigilantly covered up his regime’s actions, in a new wave of open defiance, he is promising to jam the VOA, to possibly arrest more top opposition leaders and has attacked the US State Department’s new human rights report. We may be seeing a new move towards open disregard for democratic principles that may unleash new levels of defiance, repression and human rights violations.
4. U.S. funding of programs that promote democracy, conflict resolution or citizen rights within Ethiopia are now illegal; punishable by up to 15 years resulting in closing off normal avenues to peaceful regime change.
5. Lack of commitment on the part of the U. S. government to a “freedom agenda” for Ethiopia, compromises U.S. values, integrity and credibility while alienating broad political populations and radicalizing some to look to more extreme solutions to rid Ethiopia of a one-party dictatorship.
6. Using Meles to fight the War on Terror in the Horn of Africa has back-fired. He is a destabilizing influence in Ethiopia and now also in Somalia. Somalia, already considered a failed state, is worse off now—and more radicalized, than prior to the Ethiopian invasion.
7. New awareness and inner struggles of Tigray, Oromo and separatist groups’ are making it more likely that they will increasingly seek to join a united effort to bring regime change; numbering the days of this dictatorial regime.
8. Threats of “ethnic violence” and “destabilization of Ethiopia” are used by the Meles regime in order to prove to the U.S. and other Westerners that they are the only ones capable of holding back such an explosion; convincing outsiders that repression is the lesser of two evils. As the current Meles government manipulates both insiders and outsiders—like the US and China—by playing one against the other, we must ask, can the US afford to alienate the Ethiopians of today by investing in an uncertain regime where the whims and opportunities of tomorrow may put us all in deeper jeopardy?
9. **A recent report from Financial Action Task Force (FATF), as the global standard setting body for anti-money laundering (AML) and combating the financing of terrorism (CFT), identified Ethiopia as being among the world’s top five worst countries (along with Iran, North Korea, Angola and Ecuador) in the world for strategic AML/CFT deficiencies and called on its members “to consider the risks to the international financial system arising from such deficiencies.”**

Such an atmosphere is both challenging and dangerous for businesses with integrity who seek to comply with the **Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPC)** and other ethical business practices—exactly the kind of partnerships now needed in Ethiopia. **Instead, because of a well-calculated lack of safeguards, protections and transparency, opportunists with the least integrity now have open access to exploit the people and the country. It is those in power who stand to profit through potential investments, opportunities, kickbacks and bribes; shoring up for themselves increasing amounts in their overseas bank accounts.**

In conclusion, these factors are incompatible with American values and US national security interests. Under the right circumstances and in-country leadership, this new “smart power” approach of combining diplomacy, defense and development to building up a potentially failing state might be extremely well warranted; however, in the case of Ethiopia—and other states like it—what is at the root of the instability is the natural outcome of its own corrupt and repressive leadership.

Ignoring that central fact will undermine the potential success of this new approach. Instead of advancing freedom and democracy, these authoritarian leaders will exploit such “smart power” initiatives; subverting what was meant for good into new ways to tyrannize the people into silence while robbing the country of its national assets. Methods that simply shore up illiberal leaders of 21st century Stalinist states are short-sighted and are not the answer for Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, Africa or the United States!

Africa has become a battleground as everyone wants its resources but not its people. While many African leaders have become obscenely wealthy, often colluding with outsiders in pillaging their nations; Africa itself is poor, disenfranchised and vulnerable—exactly the way many want it to remain. **Africa has neither the military might nor the financial wealth to overcome those who seek to possess it. All that Africans have to overcome this threat to their very survival is God and the moral power that convicts the human conscience of wrong.**

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

Sincerely yours,



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Senator Richard G. Lugar, Ranking Member on Foreign Relations
Senator Russ Feingold, Chairman of the Subcommittee on African Affairs
Congressman Donald Payne, Chairman of the Subcommittee on African Affairs
Congressman Chris Smith, Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on African Affairs
United Kingdom Secretary of State for Defense, Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth MP

ⁱ http://www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/transcript_dan_benjamin.pdf International Peace Institute Speaker Series, March 3, 2010

ⁱⁱ “Defense Industry Pursues Gold in ‘Smart Power’ Deals,” by August Cole, Wall Street Journal, March 23, 2010