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Horn of Africa Conference Could Shake Foundation of Flawed System of Exclusionary Dictatorships

This coming weekend, from April 9-11, a historic gathering, the *“Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa Conference on Governance, Peace, Security and Development,”* will be held at the Double Tree Hotel in Washington D.C., organized by **Advocacy for Ethiopia (AFE)** and the **Ethiopian National Priorities Consultative Process (ENPCP)**.

Many Ethiopians and other interested persons are expected to attend the conference where numerous speakers, both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian, will be addressing a multitude of topics pertinent to seeking solutions to the current crisis in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The keynote speaker will be Ana Gomes, a member of the European Parliament and the former head of the EU’s 2005 Ethiopian election observation team as well as speakers from the US State Department, the US Congress, think tanks, non-governmental organizations involved in Africa and notable members of the Horn of Africa Diaspora.

I would like to give appreciation to **AFE** and **ENPCP** who have been working night and day to organize this major event that will bring a wide variety of speakers together with Ethiopians and others from the Horn of Africa to talk about the crisis of leadership in this region. This is great! I support any efforts that bring people together to seek shared and mutually beneficial solutions to this troubled region of the world—solutions that will transform a region known for years of self-defeating tribal and ethnic politics into a region that genuinely seeks to equally respect, embrace and empower its diverse people in order to create a more free, peaceful, prosperous and regionally integrated Horn of Africa.

As to be expected, this kind of gathering is frightening to Meles and his supporters whose only means to stay on top is by keeping the rest of us from talking! They are not in control of what might happen when we all come together. It could have an outcome that is far greater than could be expected—even by the organizers—and they know it! In fact, they are going somewhat wild in their many attempts to undermine its success by demeaning the organizers, their objectives and the possible outcomes. Through name-calling and attempts to instigate suspicion and to create division, they hope to discourage participation. It is ironic that they are using the uncensored and unblocked Internet media in the US to accomplish their purposes—the same media that they are doing their best to block within Ethiopia!

Ethiopians and people of the Horn must take charge of their future. We should counter these efforts to sabotage this conference. These organizers have put together the framework and now it is up to Ethiopians and people of the Horn, from all different points of view, to come together to listen, learn, think, debate and discuss how we all might better work together to bring about an inclusive society where **“humanity comes before ethnicity,”** or any other distinctions and where the solutions we seek are not for one chosen group to the disadvantage of others, but for all of us, for **“no one will be free until all are free.”**

To me, anything we do to bring the people of the Horn of Africa together is something to endorse and appreciate! To the extent we promote genuine dialogue between previously alienated people or to the extent we promote genuine inclusion of those who never have had a voice, will become the marks of whether this conference is a success. I encourage people who typically would not *“crossover”* their own ethnic, political, regional, gender or religious lines to attend this event, even if you perceive that it is sponsored by those outside your own. Otherwise, your voice will not be heard and any results will not be as balanced and ultimately successful in bringing real solutions!

Together, we must challenge a system that has been built on an entirely different set of principles—ones that advance an apartheid society where one group's own selfish interests reign supreme over everyone else's; a society where power, deception, hidden motives, censorship, sabotage, corruption, exploitation and violence are tools used to gain and maintain dominance over the majority, while pretending to espouse more politically acceptable values.

Ethiopia has become a 21st Stalinist state just when inter-connections between people and nations are increasing; thanks to technologies like the Internet and to integrative efforts like the UN, the African Union, the European Union, G-20 and other such partnerships between nations as well as cooperating partnerships between members of various sectors of society like science, health, music, sports, religion and economics. The global village leaves the model of the TPLF—where one small group takes all—in the dark ages of feudalism.

The truth of the matter is, Ethiopia must catch up and become part of the global village, not just speaking the rhetoric of democracy while killing our own people; or, talking about freedom of expression with all the media censored and the journalists in prison or exile; or, holding an election when those who are viable political alternatives are killed, intimidated or locked up, like Birtukan; or arresting people who never are charged; or holding trials when the judicial outcomes are politically decided beforehand; or bragging about double digit economic growth when some nine million people depend on foreign food aid; or touting a good business environment when electricity, even in the nation's capital, is sometimes out for multiple days every week; or bragging about development when the Ethiopian military has to use the well at a church in Gambella, that the government did not pay for, because they destroyed the majority of the few wells in the region in 2003-2006 and now find they have no other reliable source of clean water.

Meles wants to be part of the global system only by words, not action and Ethiopians know this. Meles controls the land; giving it away to foreigners while the people starve. The salvation of Ethiopia and the Horn is regional integration based on principles that authentically respect the dignity, rights and freedom of all the people.

For these reasons, I really support the work done by **AFE** and **ENPCP** in creating a venue where these discussions can take place. It has taken commitment, financial resources and a sustained effort over months for the planning of such a large-scale event. Who knows what might happen this weekend as a result of the synergy created when people come together?

Many of the people who should come have been parts of a myriad of disparate groups who talk about each other but not with each other. Some come with personal agendas, self-interest or past unresolved biases, hostilities and grievances based on ethnicity, regionalism, political competitions, varying viewpoints, religious intolerance or other such differences while others have never met. I say, anything that brings us together to know each other better, to listen to another's point of view—even if we disagree—and to work towards shared solutions can become a step forward towards a more reconciled society where we are valued by our humanity rather than segmented into pieces as we are now.

If this kind of dialogue were allowed in Ethiopia, Ethiopia would be a different place. We must realize that those in power right now would hardly pay attention to this conference if they did not fear it would make us into a stronger force. This is truly a backhanded compliment! It should be an incentive that we are on the right track, encouraging us to work all the harder to make it a monumental success. The Meles regime has been thriving on our division, using us and pretending they care, but only to advance themselves. We can “use” our common complaints against this regime to bring us together initially, but we need much more than a common enemy to bring integrated and productive life to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Furthermore, our real ‘*enemy*’ is not a person or a certain political party; but instead, is a systemic problem rooted in many years of flawed thinking that must change if we are to succeed. For example we must discard antiquated and rigid assumptions of who should and who should not be in power. We should also discard models of leadership where leadership is seen as an opportunity to exploit others and their possessions, while inflating our egos. A better Ethiopia and Horn of Africa will require ‘*servant leaders*’ who are held accountable to advance the best interests of the people; equipping and empowering them for a better future. It is about inclusion and representation of and by the people.

This conference should not focus only on *'regime change'* but on changing the *'flawed mindset'* of a nation that continuously perpetuates destruction on someone else, regardless of who comes into power. What a mess we are in! Simply uniting to get rid of Meles and his cronies will not change this systemic problem that *'gives birth'* to serial dictators! When Mengistu Hailemariam overthrew the feudal system of Haile Selassie, he brought only more terror, death and destruction to the Ethiopian people. When Meles overthrew Mengistu, he brought genocide, repression and the ethnic apartheid system that could lead to the disintegration of our country. We need large-scale transformation of our collective thinking that has zero tolerance for continuing such a dysfunctional and abusive system; that once Meles is defeated, will only put some other group into power for the next 10-20 years to oppress the rest.

As a person from a marginalized ethnic group, I know first-hand that the most marginalized people of Ethiopia have equally suffered and have been equally excluded from the *'table'* whether under feudalism, a military dictatorship or under a Marxist-Leninist guerilla-style dictator, masquerading as a democratic leader. Any who have hidden motives of wanting to rid ourselves of this regime, but not the system, must be confronted. Ethiopians have had enough of *'backroom dealings'* at the expense of the Ethiopian people. This conference should mark the beginning of saying no to the entire system of exclusionary and repressive politics.

Meles has faked inclusive politics in the past; reaching out to other ethnicities, but not for their benefit but in order to use them to advance his power and control. What kind of Ethiopia would we have now had it been genuine? He is not alone. Others, both inside and outside of Ethiopia, want to reach out only to empower their own hidden agendas. When groups take steps to bring unity—like what could result from this conference—it is a threat to those who thrive through our division. Wherever such motives and actions exist, they must be thoroughly confronted and exposed because hatred and divisions will never free us.

Ethiopia and the Horn are like any other country or region where many of the people hold on to grievances based on past offenses by others. We must face them and resolve them, starting by reaching out to the east and to the west and from the north to the south; extending our hands to the angry, the marginalized, the Muslims, the Christians, the disenfranchised and to the ostracized. No longer can we climb on top of someone else to try to reach all the fruit at the top of the tree for ourselves or for our tribe or clan; instead, we should be giving each other a boost and helping to plant more fruit trees that we can all enjoy. This is the kind of change Ethiopians and people of the Horn need!

This kind of conference would never be allowed in Ethiopia! Let us come together as a collective force, pushing ahead for the creation of a healthier society built on **“putting humanity before ethnicity”** and helping our brothers and sisters in the Horn of Africa and Africa as a whole, for **“none of us will be free until we all are free!”**

May the God who reaches out to people of every tribe, language and nation, lead us to do the same to each other. As we embrace others as human beings first, we will not only enrich our lives, but we will shake the very foundational cornerstone of an evil system. What an opportunity we have this weekend to join together with others! Let us use it for the good of the country and the region! Many thanks again to the commendable effort by **AFE** and **ENPCP**!

May God bless Ethiopia and the beautiful and precious people of Ethiopia!

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