



Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Ethiopian at “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa Conference on Governance, Peace, Security and Development,” Washington, DC

April 10, 2010

Embracing Truth: A Means to End a Culture of Impunity in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa

First, I would like to thank those who organized this meeting—Advocacy for Ethiopia and the Ethiopian National Priorities Consultative Process for their excellent job in creating this historic event. We need more meetings like this and I hope it is beginning to not only talk, but that it will lead to action that will benefit all of us. It has been a wonderful experience so far to come together to listen, to learn and to hear different views on a region of the world about which we all care deeply.

I was asked to talk about the campaign to end impunity. I changed the title just a bit to: *Embracing Truth: A Means to End a Culture of Impunity in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.*

The reason is that impunity is about hiding or denying the truth. Jesus said, “*The truth shall set us free.*” *If this is true, then the lack of truth will enslave us. The lack of truth has been enslaving us for over sixty years and will continue to enslave us until we deal with it head on and begin to embrace truth in every part and sector of our society. Ethiopia has become a culture where lies, deception, cover-up, hidden motives and blatant injustice cover up countless deeds of evil. In such a culture of impunity, the worst actions of the powerful are rewarded and the best, most courageous and most honest of our people are punished for their attempts to expose the truth.*

Impunity is also encouraged where people hold to rigid assumptions about the greater worth and dignity of oneself and one’s own select group, in relation to the lesser worth and dignity of another human being, which may be based on ethnicity, regionalism, political alliances, religion, gender, skin color, education and other superficial distinctives. It makes it easier to exclude, exploit and abuse those you devalue and dehumanize while justifying your own and your group’s self-interests; particularly feeling that you should not have to be held accountable for what you do.

Consider our past:

- Feudalism and crimes of Haile Selassie
- Red Terror
- Meles—pattern of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes:
- 2003 Anuak genocide—no one yet brought to justice
- 2005 election—no one yet brought to justice
- Current genocide, War Crimes and Crimes against humanity in the Ogaden

For the last sixty years, no one has been found accountable in this country. Impunity has reigned under every regime. Our current culture of impunity is founded on history and has become a sign of a deeply dysfunctional system that is destroying us.

Impunity often begins with wanting something. Instead of working for it or accepting that we cannot have it, ***we try to get it in the wrong way and trample on someone else's rights in the process. These desires can be powerful and caving in to them has led many into trouble. Once in trouble, we fear being discovered and being held responsible for what we have done. The best decision is to face up to the truth and accept the consequences of our actions; however, oftentimes, this is not easy.*** Many do not want to pay the penalty for what they have done and if they are in a position of power, they use that power to escape accountability.

Impunity is all about the desire to cover up for one's wrongdoing—to "get away with it!" This can also include covering up for one's family, clan, ethnic group or cronies. This is one of the oldest flaws of human nature; first recorded in the very first chapters of the Biblical book of Genesis. God had told Adam and Eve they could eat of any tree in the garden but one. The serpent tempted them, but they gave in to the desire. Eve ate first and then Adam. When God asked Adam if he had eaten the apple, did he accept responsibility? No, he blamed Eve. When God questioned Eve, did she admit? No, she blamed the serpent.

The first crime—a murder—was committed by Adam and Eve's son, Cain, who killed his brother, Abel. Cain covered up the murder and tried to hide from God but could not. When God asked him about his brother, he became angry and defensive, trying to cover up by not answering the question; instead asked, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" It is called deception. God said his brother's blood cried out and that Cain would be banished. Cain still was not sorry for what he had done, but only expressed self-pity and worry about himself. How far have we come since? Not very far for it is our problem we face today.

The attitude of wanting to cover-up one's own crimes or to blame someone else is part of every human experience, but ***usually, in well functioning, healthy societies, families, communities, one's own conscience, religious institutions and the rule of law hold people accountable.*** The laws are just, fair and equally applied to all members of society, regardless of power, privilege, wealth or position. ***No one is above the law—even those at the top—and it prevents most people from committing crimes because they fear the expected penalties.*** Under these circumstances, societies can flourish with most citizens voluntarily complying. ***Justice is predictable and not dependent on the political calculations of any powerful individual or group.*** Peoples' trust in the institutions increases to the benefit of all.

Now, go to the opposite negative extreme and you get Ethiopia where those on top can do as they please. The guilty are found innocent and the innocent can be found guilty. In Ethiopia, what kind of justice you get depends on whether or not you are a part of the: "inside family of the TPLF," part of the TPLF repressive system of puppets all over the country or simply call yourself a government supporter, if only in name. On the negative side, if you are an outspoken critic, a political opponent, a resistor of something the TPLF wants, or simply a scapegoat for someone else, you can be assured of being treated as an enemy of the state.

Let's go back in history. During the empire, a few elite on top totally escaped being held accountable for any of their crimes, which were many. It was the reason the Ethiopian people rose up in a revolution that brought Haile Selassie down. Then Mengistu came in and again, those at the top who were guilty of committing many crimes against the people, escaped justice. When the oppressed people of Ethiopia rose up against him, he brutally clamped down on the people and his regime became known for the "***Red Terror.***"

Human rights experts estimate that maybe 500,000—half a million people—were killed during his era in power. Now we have Meles and people are again rising up against a system of impunity and terror. It is only a matter of time before history repeats itself as is being done in many other places; for example in Kyrgyzstan, where the people overthrew the government only a few days ago.

In Ethiopia, the rule of law has failed for over sixty years. It affects every sector of society and until it is fixed, Ethiopia will never rise up out of its misery. *It is a systemic problem based on denying the truth, making immoral choices, elitism and dehumanizing everyone but yourself and your particular group.*

What Can Be Done?

We do not have to wait for regime change to hold the guilty responsible for their crimes. Even this conference is a means to break down impunity by exposing what is happening. At some later date, there may be charges, trials, reparations and methods of transitional justice—all of which we should be thinking about—but for now, **I would like to mainly concentrate on the following immediate actions:**

Exposure, Exposure, Exposure: Impunity weakens under exposure!

- A. *Show truth, inconsistencies, illegal practices, vulnerabilities where they exist now and make it public; holding parties accountable where possible*
- B. *Collect info from the ground*—must go to some work to gather ACCURATE information from as many areas/regions as possible and should include: testimonies, reports, facts, pictures, video
- C. *Research*- so have a factual basis for efforts both now and in the future where information will be important. For instance, Genocide watch interviewed victims and witnesses within approximately six weeks of the genocide, making the information much more reliable than trying to do it now.
- D. *Develop teams/ think tanks* to work on specific important areas of their expertise; for example, money laundering, privatization of national monopolies, foreign investment (land, mineral rights, water, oil, etc), environment, transitional justice, security, etc
- E. *Research laws, applications and appropriate legal resources that could be utilized* now within and outside of Ethiopia
- F. *Use Media* to get info out and to provide new facts, research and incidents
- G. *Target strategic groups* (donor govts, NGO's, faith groups, multinational corporations, etc- get info to best groups for actions and ask for specific actions. Some groups already know the truth, but until it is exposed publicly, they won't do anything—find out what that is—there may be a threshold where once it is crossed, this regime becomes a liability rather than an asset
- H. *Hold as many perpetrators and those complicit with them, accountable now*
 - a. *Make it public: list those who are guilty or complicit –name who is who and who is doing what*
 - b. *Make clear to them what can happen as a consequence now or later*
 - c. *See if you can hold those co-conspirators, outside of Ethiopia, accountable by laws of their own country*

Do the Same in all Sectors of Ethiopian Society: The tentacles of impunity reach to every sector of Ethiopian Society; the entire system is broken and should be confronted:

1. Government/parliament
2. Election, election board, voting, observers, etc
3. Business-dealings where Impunity may not last
 - a. *Ethiopia—wide-scale corruption*
 - b. *Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA)-*
 - c. *Ethiopia an at-risk country for money laundering, terroristic funding*
 - d. *Expose bribes, kickbacks, deals, etc*
 - e. *Expose consequences of doing business through impunity*
4. Justice – expose names of judges, prosecutors, practices

5. Banking and finance, national treasure, monopolies
6. Land/mineral/natural resources
7. Development
8. Human rights
9. Educational system
10. Military
11. Religious groups (encouraged to stand against systemic impunity, injustice, oppression, corruption, repression)

Rationale for SMNE: Why I became part of this Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia

- the old Ethiopia is unacceptable
- **Rationale:** Many of my people killed and reason I became involved was because the survival of my people depend on everyone else—a system
- Learned, we Ethiopians are not exception, but instead, like other countries that have hurt others
- Led to form something to speak out about everyone and so created solidarity movement
- Based on moral principles because only way to de-construct impunity is from the inside out!
- Only the healing of a system of oppression and injustice will bring about a New Ethiopia
- Begins with a flawed mindset based on lies; must be replaced with God-given truth

Principles to freedom, justice and to ending impunity

1. **Humanity before ethnicity-----Impunity made us lose our humanity or Ethiopian-ness (some don't like name Ethiopia, but among the marginalized, I am among the most marginalized. To genuinely stop impunity, must start with ourselves, with me first.** Then take it to the grass roots. To me to acknowledge my part of society, is like recognizing that each of us makes up a part of the body of Ethiopia. When wound in the body, the body is not functioning as it should. The killing of my people pushed me to reach out to Ethiopians, not sweeping the problems under the carpet, but to create a healthier society, we must try to change and correct what is creating the wounds. This is why SMNE created. We are willing to work with everybody, but we will never compromise and become part of the fake unity. No unity is better than chameleon unity where walk on others to get what you want. Faking unity is a tool to deceptively carry on impunity and I will never be part of this.
2. **No one is free until all are free**
 - a. **Must break the pattern of Serial exclusion:** One tribe take all or it's 'my group's' time to eat, which means, it's your turn to suffer now (rationale for last regimes' cruelty and selfishness towards others) *For marginalized, it is ALWAYS their turn to suffer.*
 - b. **Inclusion of all citizens only way to break impunity** and bring about sustainable freedom, justice and opportunity.
 - i. *Impunity has always been a part of exclusionary dictatorships—Selassie, Mengistu, Meles*
 - ii. *Must change system—based on flawed thinking—in every sector of the system; this is not just about Meles*
 - iii. *Assumptions of entitled or non-entitled participants in politics and power are rigid, outdated and must be challenged*
 - iv. *Equal opportunity and fair distribution of services, etc based on citizenship; not tribe*
 - c. **Unity in fight is NOT for unity's sake, but FOR principles that will free us!**

- i. *What we think matters—our fight against exclusionary practices starts with replacing flawed thinking*
 - ii. *—the less tolerance we have as a society for exclusion, impunity, deception and lies and, the greater success we will have as a society!*
 - iii. *the more widespread the support for inclusion and equal justice under the law—the more quickly we will overcome impunity and what has kept Ethiopia in the dark ages for too long!*
3. **Greed and Ego are the foundation of wrongdoing.**
- i. *Impunity is about covering up for something after choose the wrong thing. Effective and strong institutions can create an atmosphere of respect and compliance with the law or obligation to adequately resolve wrongdoing when social rules or the law is broken*
 - ii. *Society also has to be ready to confront and hold others accountable.*
 - iii. *Moral restraints and expectations needed to heal past mistakes and offenses; including remorse and efforts to correct the wrongdoing*
4. **Strong Rule of law discourages wrongdoing:** especially for those of little conscience, who would commit crimes if could get away with it. Getting caught and having to pay the penalty is a deterrent and sometimes enough to prevent many from breaking the law in the first place.
5. **High cultural social value on: truth, moral courage, responsibility and humility with accountability, justice and grace and no-tolerance for: impunity, exclusive politics, corruption and deception**—both working together will genuinely break down walls of many years of impunity and repair a broken system
6. **Start with oneself:** If want genuine ending of impunity, each of us must purposely seek it in one's self and in expectations of others.

I am not here for a political motive, but *I am here for a healthy society for when we have a healthy society; then such a society will include my children—where there is not discrimination, but opportunity, where there is no impunity, but equal justice. This can be your goal as well; together we can bring about a healthier society.*

May God help us end our destructive culture of impunity, to find healing from the wounds of our past and to bring about a society that embraces truth, righteous behavior towards others and accountability for our own actions. May the truth truly set us free! Thank

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