



An Open Letter to the UDJ Leaders; Particularly Professor Mesfin Woldemariam and Engineer Gizachew Shiferaw, and Leaders of Medrek

April 28, 2010

Dear respected leaders of the UDJ; Professor Mesfin Woldemariam and Engineer Gizachew Shiferaw

Ethiopians are again at a critical crossroads in our struggle for freedom, justice, the rule of law and the respect of human and civil rights in Ethiopia. A conflict has arisen between Professor Mesfin and Engineer Gizachew Shiferaw creating two different factions of the UDJ, one working in coalition with Medrek and the other, independent of Medrek.

This conflict threatens not only you, the UDJ and Medrek, but it threatens the collective future of millions of Ethiopians who have put their hope in you. This conflict has become extremely serious and could inflict a damaging blow to the progress Medrek has accomplished through great effort and sacrifice within the closed and repressive political environment that exists today in Ethiopia. In order to prevent this from happening I urge you to make every effort to resolve this conflict quickly so the best interests of the Ethiopian people are not endangered.

The Ethiopian peoples' hope for the future has been struck a serious blow many times, but this may prove to be the fatal blow that kills our dreams and expectations for a new and better Ethiopia. This is why I cannot sit by, pretending there is not a serious problem. I want to share my thoughts not only with you; but also, with the public who can either make the problem worse by dividing into emotionally reactive, warring factions or who can help the situation improve by supporting urgently needed conflict resolution.

I recognize that I am an outsider to the inner workings of both groups within the UDJ and Medrek as well. If I am in error about any of what I will be saying, I ask you to forgive me. I do not want to take sides, but in order to resolve this, I feel compelled to confront this issue openly as the public is unfortunately being drawn into this and it is taking a serious toll on all of us!

I am pleading with you to come together to find a solution to this problem; not giving up until it is fully resolved. I ask that you consider this and then clearly and publicly express your decision to the public. If you are willing to work out these differences, I would hope you would enter into such a discussion with humility, openness and a spirit of cooperation; not giving up until some workable consensus can be achieved. The fine points can be worked out later, but some of this cannot wait!

You have heard the African saying, "When two elephants fight, it is the grass that pays the price." Divisions like this reach to the people and this case is no different. One Ethiopian man sadly remarked to me, "There is already blood on the street from this." Unfortunately, I also see casualties everywhere as the numbers of those affected by conflict continue to mount throughout the world. If it is not handled properly, there will be more to come.

What is at stake? Literally, if you avoid dealing with this conflict or if you add fuel to the fire, more Ethiopians will die, more will needlessly suffer and more will be imprisoned. These Ethiopians have names, families, mothers and fathers. They have futures that they may never see or opportunities that will be snatched from them because of this conflict.

Our leader Birtukan Mideksa is one of them. Everyone says they support gaining freedom for Birtukan and other political prisoners, but you can be assured that if you fail to do all you can to come together to resolve this conflict in an exemplary way, you might as well be the judge that sentences her and others to longer terms. Will you tell Birtukan this yourself? If you do nothing, stop saying you support her!

I am not saying that there are not legitimate issues on all sides of the table that are worthy of consideration, but are they impossible to resolve? I think not! Third party mediators should be called upon to facilitate and/or arbitrate a process that includes careful listening and consideration of the views of others as well as differentiating between the “negotiable” and the “non-negotiable” issues at stake.

Let me make a careful distinction between what is negotiable and what is not. I am not asking for compromises of principles, values and rights. These make up the foundation of a healthy, well-functioning and inclusive society and these must be carefully nurtured, protected and defended for the benefit of all of us. For instance, I believe in putting “humanity before ethnicity,” so any actions, laws or policies that conflict with this, would be a “non-negotiable” and worth defending, even if it antagonized others. Compromise is not the solution when it comes to conflicts over key principles.

Another example of a “non-negotiable” would include anything that undermined or violated the upholding of the human, civil or organization rights of others. Within an organization, this includes violations of one’s accepted organizational rules, process, statutes and procedures, unless agreed upon by the members. When these are violated, it will undermine the legitimacy of any resulting actions, even when what results is worthwhile and honorable. In other words, the “end does not justify the means.” This is extremely important in a country like Ethiopia where ignoring established laws, rules, statutes and procedures, originally established to ensure fairness, transparency and an agreed-upon method, are regularly violated, manipulated and ignored. If the “process” is wrongly done, there is a justifiable call for correction.

A third example of a non-negotiable would be in the way we treat each other. When we disagree, let us still be respectful. No one of us is perfect. We will all need forgiveness and grace at times in our lives. Let us also assume that others care about what happens in our country; even if we differ in how to bring it about. Again, I am not asking that everyone will have the same opinion on every matter for there are legitimate differences of opinion, but I am asking that a respectful and fair atmosphere be followed and that we treat each other with civility.

In doing so, let us not be distracted from the core of the problem by simply discrediting another as having a big ego, of being a power-monger or an obstructionist. In doing so, you may be blinded from what is at the core of the problem and may antagonize each other to the point you cannot even talk. Too often, when a difference of opinion arises between friends, colleagues or members of the same organization, all who shared the same goals at one time, what results is the demonizing of the other, followed by descending into name-calling, anger and discrediting the entire person rather than keeping with the issues at the root of the problem. Such methods will never lead to problem solving and peace.

From what I understand about the present conflict, some of it pertains to difficulty in trust levels between various key players like Siye Abraha and Negasso Gidada; some based on past actions. This is an area where discussion, information-sharing, relationship building and the creation of guidelines and safeguards can be very important; particularly when entering new relationships where past actions create barriers to trust. However, we must make a way for people who are genuinely attempting to correct past mistakes to find redemption and opportunity to re-integrate into society and to become contributors to that society.

This is not always easy, particularly for those people who stood up for the rights of the victims, like Professor Mesfin, whose passion for the defense of the people is certainly an understandable obstacle to easy acceptance now. Making new alliances between those one previously opposed will require some degree of risk-taking that some are unwilling to take; yet, at some point, we must give people a chance to prove themselves. This is an area where we must expect there to be opposing opinions; with both sides having some justifiable reasons. However, we Ethiopians must find ways to integrate players from our sordid past as contributors to a brighter future. If we cannot find a way to do this, we will never forgive and as the Reverend Desmond Tutu has said, “Without forgiveness, there is no future.”

This does not mean that we should not put safeguards into place to maintain good accountability and to protect each other from each other for we all share a flawed human nature. As a society and as individuals, we must figure out how to balance judgment, justice and accountability with forgiveness, grace, reconciliation and redemption of one's past. These are very difficult issues and balancing them will not be easy. This will take time and that is what we do not have right now.

For now, I believe we must do "damage control" by making sure we follow a civil, fair and legitimate process; however, from what I have heard, this is a part of the problem as some are saying that the decision-making process was not appropriately followed from the very beginning of the split of UDJ. If this is the case, it must be addressed honestly and thoroughly if we are to ever resolve this conflict. I am sure there are other issues as well, but we must prevent ourselves from spinning out of control while dealing with them or it will make us all crazy, paranoid and emotionally reactionary! If we allow this to happen, we will dig a hole that is big enough for all of us to fall into!

This kind of conflict happened once before with Kinijit. At that time, in an open letter and through personal phone conversations, I also pleaded with the leaders to seek a mediated agreement that would lead to either reconciliation or to a more amicable parting of the ways—in strength rather than in defeat. Everyone knows the outcome and the despair that followed. History is not on our side, but it is up to those of you involved to stop this problem from spreading in its impact and from deepening in its destruction. We must start to genuinely listen to each other. Even if you begrudge your opponent such a courtesy, please do it anyway because you are doing it for the people of Ethiopia.

What is certain is that if those of you who are involved in this conflict do not at least come to the table to face those with whom you are quarreling, we all stand to lose! What you do will either contribute to our shared defeat; prolonging our pain and ensuring a dark and gloomy future; or, your openness to genuinely seek answers will become a model of what we want Ethiopia to become; giving us the hope, inspiration and empowerment we need to carry on in this struggle towards a new and better Ethiopia; not a beggar Ethiopia.

I have taken the initiative to talk with some of you and some of you have already agreed to meet face to face, but we need all the key players to participate! We are now hearing reports of the violence at the headquarters of the UDJ and that the situation is disintegrating. People were wounded and some were arrested. This brings shame to an entire movement and must be stopped! If you genuinely seek to work with Ethiopians, we must seek ways to work out our differences without such outbreaks of hate and violence. In the past, efforts to reconcile were avoided and as a result tensions grew into greater problems; often erupting into such displays of violence as just happened. The Ethiopian politics of yesterday and today must be ended.

The Ethiopian public is watching. Our expectations of those in leadership are high and we do not want to be disappointed again! We all have way too much at stake! If leaders refuse to do their best to seek a satisfactory resolution, you are basically telling the public to get used to decades more of ethnic division, apartheid politics, genocide and dictatorship because you are unwilling to come together in humility, sincerity and courage; putting the best interests of the country ahead of your own.

There must be compromises and concessions to be made, even while making sure we uphold the greater principles. May God help us see the difference between the two. Some of us must be "losers" for a higher cause so that we all can win. Some are delighted with our division and relish our conflict. To the current Meles regime, it is a gift. Our inability to resolve our differences is also a source of great opportunity for others foreign countries who want to exploit us and our national resources such as land and the Nile waters. While we fight, they can move in on Ethiopia, capitalizing on the fact that no one is watching or caring about the people, our land and our assets, making it easy to exploit. While we fight, our land is being given away. What difference will some of these arguments make when Ethiopia no longer belongs to Ethiopians? How we will regret this when we are people without a country?

Our nation is crying out while we are fighting like children without discipline. We have to think beyond ourselves and do it fast! It is like our home being on fire. Instead of getting the bucket of water to douse the flames, we are arguing about which bucket is ours! Let us save our home first so we have a home to call our own!

The grim signs of danger are all over. We must find a way to listen and to talk with each other. Ask yourselves some of the key questions. Was the process done correctly? Are the highest principles being followed? Are there safeguards for our future? Are we contributing in a positive way to a free Ethiopia? If we kill this effort with our own inner conflict, I am afraid for our future. Are we a people who cannot learn how to get along with others? When will we have another opportunity like this? Every day of my life I look forward to the time when justice and freedom will finally come to Ethiopia so I can go back. If you refuse to work this out, my dream and the dream of many of us who yearn to return home someday, will perish.

In 2005, I said some of these same things to the Kinijit and no one listened. Right now, we need extra portions of humility, patience, perseverance, respect and a careful eagerness to seek solutions that will lead to some sense of consensus so we can gather strength and increase the momentum of our struggle. Who of you is willing? This is the choice before you: will you agree to come together to earnestly seek a solution or would you rather bring down the country with you? The time to make your choice is now!

We, the Ethiopian public are waiting for your answer. So are people like Ms. Birtukan and thousands of other prisoners of conscience like the 81-year-old father of Mr. Andargachew Tsige, or the recent Oromo journalists who have been locked up in jail for many years for speaking the truth, or the Anuak man, Kwot and Omot, who were both sentenced today to four years in prison for refusing to blame the Anuak genocide on the Anuak, or those Anuak, Oromo or Benishangul- Gumuz farmers who have been displaced from their land because their land has been given to foreign investors, or the suffering Ogadenis who are going through a silent genocide, or the innocent Tigrayan victims of the bomb that recently went off in a café' in the Tigray region—what will you tell these people?

I want to end this with an Amharic story, which most of you know, which speaks of the profound grief of a woman. She says, “የገደለው ባሌ፣

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ከቤቴም አልወጣ።

In English translation “*The one who killed my husband was my brother. As a result of the death of my husband at the hands of my brother, my brother has also died and now both have been taken from me. There are no words to express the depth of my grief. My loss is so unbearable I cannot even leave my home.*”

Whatever you all do, consider that the peace-loving people of Ethiopia, including myself, who are hungering for relief from their pain, injustice and oppression, will be affected like this woman if you fail to take meaningful action. If the brother had been told about the loss he was inflicting on his sister and family as a result of his action, we know that he may never have done it. Now, I am warning you, do not inflict more grief on us. We have suffered enough and for far too long!

May God soften your hearts towards each other in order for you to see you are brothers and sisters and always will be. May God reward you as you stand firm with the humility, love, respect and wisdom that will help restore life to a darkened land! May you and we seek God’s higher ways at this critical crossroads; helping all of us to choose the right road on which to travel!

Respectfully your brother in this struggle to help bring truth, justice, reconciliation, healing and peace to our beautiful people and land,



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Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love... (Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi)