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## **An Open Letter to Columbia University students and faculty**

September 18, 2010

Columbia University  
in the City of New York  
2960 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027-6902

Dear **President of the Student's Union, Columbia University students and faculty:**

My name is Obang Metho and I am writing to you, first and foremost, as a fellow human being who believes that the future well being of our global society rests in the hands of those among us who can put **“humanity before ethnicity,”** or any other distinctions that divide and dehumanize other human beings from ourselves; inspiring us to care about these **“others;”** not only because of the intrinsic God-given value of each life, but also because **“none of us will be free until all are free.”**

These are the underlying principles of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, of which I am the executive director. **The SMNE is a non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians; committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability and respect for human and civil rights to the people of Ethiopia and beyond.** The SMNE has branches in the United States, Canada and United Kingdom and chapters in various cities and countries throughout the world, including within Ethiopia. You can find us on Facebook or through our website at: [www.solidaritymovement.org](http://www.solidaritymovement.org).

On behalf of the SMNE, I am hoping that many of you from this *prestigious and influential university will stand with the oppressed people of Ethiopia and the world against tyranny, injustice and corruption. Columbia University has established a reputation for critical thinking, provocative dialogue and social activism, which led to significant contributions to major social changes; an example being in South Africa, where students and faculty in earlier years took a moral stand against the apartheid. What is happening in Ethiopia is no different and again, we call on you to stand with the people of Ethiopia.*

On September 22, you will have an opportunity to listen to and question the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, who will be speaking at the World Leaders' Forum. He is an African leader, *in power for nearly twenty years, who speaks very well the language of democracy and economic growth, but who is known by Ethiopians to be a brutally repressive dictator who is personally profiting from the economic growth he will be describing to you.*

As an example of such brutal repression, I would refer you to my own previous speech at Columbia University's College of Law in 2007 regarding the December 13-15, 2003 ethnic-based genocide of 424 leaders from a tiny ethnic group, the Anuak, of Gambella, Ethiopia. Over the following two years, nearly 2000 more Anuak were killed; accompanied by widespread rape, arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, torture and the destruction of homes, health clinics, schools, crops and granaries. Investigations by *Genocide Watch linked these acts all the way to the top leadership—to Meles Zenawi; your speaker—and his regime's desire to eliminate any opposition to the exploitation of the fertile land and untapped natural resources such as oil, gold and plentiful water; all existing in the Gambella region.*<sup>1</sup>

This case is not unique for *this regime has committed a series of acts of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes throughout Ethiopia; particularly in the Ogaden region of southeastern Ethiopia and into Somalia where a genocide is being carried out even today*; earning Meles the name of “**silent killer**” due to his and his regime’s ability to cover up their human rights atrocities.<sup>ii</sup> However, the evidence has accumulated resulting in these cases being referred to the International Criminal Court.

As you listen to this speaker, please keep in mind that those probing questions you will be free to ask following his address, would never be allowed to be asked by students in Ethiopia. Meles Zenawi and his regime are considered enemies of the people. Here are some of the reasons why:

#### **Enemy of students and education:**

- In January 1993, six students were killed, many others wounded and still others disappeared in a deadly government-sponsored attack on student protestors at the University of Addis Ababa.
- In April 1993, 43 professors and the recently demoted former president of the University of Addis Ababa were dismissed after signing a letter protesting the January violent attack on the students.<sup>iii</sup>
- In April, 2001, 40 students were killed in a violent attack at Addis Ababa University while peacefully rallying for a student newspaper and for more academic freedom.
- In June 2005, 193 people; including 35 students from Addis Ababa University were shot in the head and killed following a protest of the 2005 rigged national election where Meles claimed victory.
- 50,000 of these protestors were rounded up and detained in detention camps throughout the country where their heads were shaved, using the same razor blade countless times; purposely exposing them to HIV.
- All peaceful rallies and protests are now outlawed in Ethiopia.
- Meles ended long distance education as of September 2010; affecting 75,000 students.
- Meles instructed schools and universities to end degree programs in education and law.
- Educational opportunities are linked to party membership; with best opportunities given to family members of the regime’s top elite.

#### **Enemy of technology**

- **Access to the Internet is the lowest in the world**; about 7 times behind the African average with the government being the only provider; limiting access and closely monitoring use.<sup>iv</sup>
- Internet opposition **websites, like our own, are blocked in Ethiopia.**
- **The rate of mobile phone usage (3.2%) is one of the lowest in Africa**; 20 times less than leading African countries<sup>v</sup> and even lower than war-torn Somalia. The government is the only provider.

#### **Enemy of the media**

- No private newspapers exist in the country; they all have been closed down by force or intimidation.
- The single radio station and TV station are both owned and operated by the government. Meles has publically admitted to jamming radio/media broadcasting from other countries, like the Voice of America.
- In 1995, more than 130 journalists were fired from their jobs; forcing many into exile and since 2001, more journalists have gone into exile from Ethiopia than from any other country in the world.

#### **Enemy of democracy:**

- Meles and his ethnic-based political party, the TPLF, have established a one-party, apartheid-like state that has held a tight grip on power since 1991; including control of the judicial system, the military and the election board.
- Prior to the 2010 national election, the regime closed all political space; harassing, threatening, killing or imprisoning opposition members. Food aid, seed, fertilizers, jobs, and other perks and opportunities were all linked to party membership. A system of spies was established, down to the neighborhood level, to report on any who might oppose the ruling party or refuse to vote for them.
- In the 2010 national election, Meles’ EPRDF party claimed a 99.6% victory; taking all but two of the 547 seats of Parliament.
- Birtukan Mideksa, the first woman to lead a major political party, was given a life sentence in December of 2008 for refusing to recant a truthful statement made regarding the terms of her release from a previous imprisonment following the 2005 election.

She is viewed as a heroine by the people but a threat to the regime. There are many thousands of political prisoners throughout the country; being held for years without trial and when tried, the outcomes are politically controlled.

- Wanting to appear “democratic,” the Meles regime allowed a rally for Birtukan in 2009, but all participants were required to pre-register; giving their names and addresses. All signs and slogans had to be approved by the government.

#### **Enemy of civil society and social harmony**

- New laws restricting civil society prohibit organizations—who obtain 10% or more of their funding from foreign sources—from advocating for human rights, children’s rights, women’s rights, rights for the disabled and conflict resolution between ethnicities and religions; under criminal penalties; now called one of the most repressive civil society laws in the world.<sup>vi</sup>
- A new anti-terrorism law is so vague that almost anyone could be found guilty; making it effective in suppressing a peaceful struggle in the country.
- This minority regime has a long-standing history of using “divide and conquer” tactics to maintain control through inciting ethnic, religious and political conflict and division.
- In her recent trip to KRAKOW, Poland, Her Excellency secretary of state Hillary Clinton, listed the names of Intolerant governments across the globe that are “slowly crushing” activist and advocacy groups that play an essential role in the development of democracy. Among those she named were Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, ETHIOPIA, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Venezuela, China and Russia.

#### **Enemy of economic development by the people**

- Meles boasts of double-digit economic growth; yet, in the newly published Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index, compiled by Oxford University, they document that 90 % of Ethiopians live under the poverty line; making Ethiopia the second poorest country in the world among those studied.<sup>vii</sup> Economic decline among the people has worsened since this data was first collected.
- Meles and his cronies monopolize all aspects of banking, investment, trade and business; conducting secretive deals with foreign and private investors of their choosing; often giving mineral, land and petroleum rights to outsiders or their friends while enabling them to take advantage of the public resources, preferential loans and incentive deals that include tax and duty free privileges.
- 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 in the world, along with Iran, North Korea, Angola and Ecuador, for strategic AML/CFT deficiencies and called on its members “to consider the risks to the international financial system arising from such deficiencies.” They indicated that lack of such compliance makes not only Ethiopia, but also others involved with them, whether inside or outside their borders, extremely vulnerable to illicit activities.<sup>viii</sup>
- Meles regime controls all the land, with no private ownership by the people; making it difficult for subsistence farmers to invest in their land and to use it for capital.
- The government is displacing people from their homes as this regime leases vast quantities of fertile agricultural land to foreign investors wanting to export their produce rather than to feed Ethiopians; many of whom depend on foreign food aid.
- These secretive land-leasing deals are made without any consultation from the indigenous people of some of the most marginalized regions such as Gambella, Benishangul and others, for up to 99 years at giveaway prices of \$1 per hectare; when equivalent land in places like Indonesia or Malaysia cost \$350 per hectare.
- Displaced Ethiopians are providing cheap labor as they are paid wages beneath World Bank poverty levels.
- Meles and his wife, Azeb Mesfin—who is signing many of the land deals, are said to have amassed over a billion dollars; allegedly stashed in overseas accounts; some in the US. Others in the regime have also accumulated great amounts of wealth while the majority of their people are starving. They call this economic growth.

***The people of Ethiopia are being held hostage to this exploitive government. Even though Ethiopians know what they want and are ready for that change; it is these corrupt leaders, with their cronies and foreign partners, who are robbing the Ethiopian people of our future and our dream of living in freedom.***

In human history, it is often *the young students who take a moral and courageous stand against injustice; not only for themselves, but also for others*. In this case, *the students of Ethiopia have no voice and are screaming in silence. Together we call you to stand with Ethiopians and other oppressed people throughout the world to open up a way for them to be heard. Be on the side of the Ethiopian journalists, the political activists and the warriors of democracy, liberty, justice and equality*. Columbia University already has that track record of standing up for the voiceless when as they stood side by side with South Africans apartheid. South Africa is now one of the most free countries in Africa.

Now, we in the SMNE call you to also stand with the people of Ethiopia by challenging Meles and those who are helping him cover up his atrocities. *We ask you to help mobilize other students both at Columbia and elsewhere; informing them about the suppression of democratic rights, the gross human rights violations, the lack of justice and accountability and the endemic corruption; all of which is the root cause of the never-ending starvation, hardship and misery of the Ethiopian people*. We ask you to put pressure on the Obama administration as well as on *your elected officials to refuse to use US tax dollars to support a regime that uses American money to suppress, kill and rob Ethiopians of their lives and future*.

We encourage those interested to join the SMNE. If you want some of us to come to speak or to work with you in mobilizing the people, we are ready. *It is the current students of today who will be tomorrow's leaders; giving us responsibility for building a more peaceful world where the God-given rights of all people are respected*.

*Fighting for freedom from tyranny, injustice and persecution has no ethnic, national, religious, political, color or other kinds of boundaries for when it comes to humanity there is no us and them! It is all "us!"*

Respectfully yours,



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**This letter has been cc to**

Sasha Ahuja, Vice President Student Government  
HuaJuan Chen, International Student Representative  
Lee C. Bollinger, President of the University  
Professor Joseph Stiglitz  
Professor Jeffrey Sachs  
Professor Jagdish Bhagwati  
Professor William Easterly  
Ben Cotton Editor in Chief

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.anuakjustice.org/doc\\_index.htm#investigations](http://www.anuakjustice.org/doc_index.htm#investigations) See various human rights investigations

<sup>ii</sup> History of Human Rights Abuses in Ethiopia: <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/historyOfHumanRightsViolations.php>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3234&start=0&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight> ; "The Murder of Addis Ababa Students: January 1993"

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.researchictafrica.net/new/images/uploads/RIA\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Ethiopia.pdf](http://www.researchictafrica.net/new/images/uploads/RIA_Policy_Brief_Ethiopia.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/humanrights/documents/EthiopiaCSOPaper-Nov2009.pdf> Sounding the Horn: Ethiopia's Civil Society Law Threatens Human Rights Defenders; November 2009

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Ethiopia.pdf> ; July 2010, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/dataoecd/34/29/44636171.pdf>.