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Birtukan is Still Not Free! She Has Only Gone from One Small Cell to a Larger Prison— If all Ethiopians are to be Freed, the Responsibility Now is Ours!

SMNE Press Release

Over the last few days, Ethiopians all over the world are rejoicing at the release of Ethiopian political leader and heroine, Birtukan Mideksa. The **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** and its members and supporters join in celebration of this day with her, her family and countless Ethiopians who have worked and prayed for her release ever since this courageous and morally principled leader was found guilty in December of 2008. Her crime?—*being truthful when this regime, who covers up their own crimes with deceit, expected her to become part of that cover-up!*

Her forced admission now; under terms that may remain unknown, is only further evidence of the prison-like conditions that exist beyond the locked cell of Kaliti Prison; *only giving further proof that Ethiopians are being held hostage in their own country by one of the most repressive regimes in the world. She has gone from a small cell to only a larger prison where the entire people of Ethiopia have been held captive since 1991 when this ethnic apartheid-like system came into power.*

Birtukan's sacrifice, as a popular opposition leader, *has drawn greater attention to the tens, if not hundreds of thousands of other Ethiopian prisoners of conscience who continue to be held in Ethiopian prisons, jails and detention centers across the country.* Up until now, Birtukan has rallied the most widespread support; but *from now on, the real question is how can we Ethiopians make the cases of our other political prisoners as much of a political liability to this regime as was Birtukan's?*

This is a victory for her and for the people who fought hard for her release, but we have much work yet to be done as long as these others remain locked up around the country. *Just last month, four thousand Oromo prisoners were released from prison. How many more remain? How many other similar Ethiopians—all over the country-- are in the same position?*

These people, who come from all different ethnic, religious, cultural, political and educational backgrounds, are not criminals. Their only crime is standing up for what is right for their families, communities and country. They are the warriors of justice and the true heroes and heroines of freedom. We cannot rest until every political prisoner is released, but released to what? We can see from Birtukan's release, that her freedom to speak out for other prisoners or for freedom and justice for the country, will be greatly restricted. **This puts great responsibility on us in the Diaspora to do more.**

Thanks to God who produced these courageous and self-sacrificing people among us; like Birtukan and others. *There will never be enough words to adequately thank them for the contribution to the freedom of all of us. These people have only been imprisoned because they pose the greatest threat to a regime that hates the truth and any who are willing to express it.*

Leaders do matter and *those who have been imprisoned are among the best of us; giving us hope for a future; however, when a country is run by leaders who do not care about the wellbeing of the people; you end up with a country like Ethiopia, where everyone wants to run away, where 90 % of the people live in poverty; where the quality of education is among the five lowest countries in the world and where some of the best among us are the most persecuted.*

As we rejoice at Birtukan's release, *let us remind you that there is a lot of work to be done which cannot be done by her; particularly now as she will be closely watched and controlled by this repressive and fearful dictatorship. Let us do our jobs and remain humble; not fomenting harsh judgments, unfounded rumors and gossip that will undermine our effort.*

Birtukan has made a huge contribution to the struggle for freedom and justice in Ethiopia; all of which could have been more profitable had we in the Diaspora collaborated more effectively. *Let us now better focus on what we can do for the country rather than seek our own personal interests.*

In conclusion, with her release, we must understand that the TPLF government is looking for a way to calm down the public outcry from places like Columbia University; where Birtukan's unjust imprisonment had become an embarrassment to this image-conscious regime. They will do their best to silence her and her advocates around the world. Whether or not they succeed is up to you and me.

With Birtukan's release, the pain of our fellow Ethiopians has not been eased. Like with a human body, when one part is afflicted, the whole body is impacted. As long as Ethiopians suffer, we must persist in solidarity with one another. This is solidarity of "people to people;" not of "organization to organization." We in the SMNE are here; ready to work with everyone who yearns for a healthier Ethiopia where humanity is elevated above anything else. "Until we are all free, none of us are free."

May God transform us to become a changed people; empowered by Him to break down the walls of injustice, inhumanity and hate; freeing our people not only from their cells, but an entire country to new life!

"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil... who are clever in their own eyes... who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent... for they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty." (Isaiah 5: 20a, 21a, 23)

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