



## Nineteen Ethiopians Released from Detention in Mexico!

---

***Building a “New Ethiopia” is the only way to solve the Ethiopian refugee problem!***

March 3, 2011

Nineteen Ethiopians were finally released on Friday, February 25, 2010 from the Tapachula Detention Center in southeastern Chiapas, Mexico after being held for as long as five months; significantly beyond the 90 day international legal limit for such detentions; after which detainees must either be deported or released.



All Ethiopians can celebrate with them and their families at this joy-filled occasion; yet, as long as Ethiopians continue to fill the countries throughout the world with refugees willing to take enormous risks in their desperate pursuit of freedom, justice, safety and opportunity, we cannot be content with this victory. Building a “New Ethiopia” is the only way to solve the Ethiopian refugee problem!

On February 9, 2011, a family member of the Ethiopian detainees called to inform me of the detention of 13 men and 8 women; asking for help from the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) in advocating for their release. Within days, we received many more calls from family members of other detainees; all pleading for help for their loved ones who were languishing under difficult circumstances. The concerns were greatest for some of the women; one with diabetes and others who were sick and without proper hygiene. Included among them were students, university lecturers, civil servants and opposition activists who were forced to leave the country as the result of intense persecution and fear of imprisonment.

Ethiopia’s brutal government, under the tight control of Meles Zenawi for nearly 20 years, has committed serial human rights atrocities, robbed the people of their land, resources and lives, closed off all political space and criminalized dissent. Ethiopia has become a primary “sending” country of refugees throughout the world as many would rather face detention, danger, hardship and suffering than remain under the tight iron grip of a dictator. Many of these refugees had either gone through Sudan or across the Red Sea to Yemen before arriving in Dubai where they boarded a plane for Panama.

After arriving in Panama, they made their way through Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala before reaching Mexico where they voluntarily turned themselves into the detention center. Usually, those refugees from Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea would be given voluntary departure documents within 90 days; however the policy has abruptly changed for Ethiopians and no one seemed to understand the reasons. Several days before my arrival, they were asked to sign a “laissez passer” document—an emergency one-way passport—believed to indicate that the authorities were planning to deport them back to Ethiopia.

Relatives worried that their lives and human rights would be at stake if they were returned and that they never would have taken on such a dangerous trip had they not faced greater risks within Ethiopia. After relatives contacted the Mexico City Immigration Office they were told that officials were in communication with the Ethiopian Embassy regarding their case and that they had requested the names of all the detainees. Relatives feared releasing these names could endanger the lives of relatives still residing in the country.

In an effort to deal with this by phone or written letter, on behalf of these detainees, I contacted Mexican Immigration, but was told they could only speak to me in person and with an ID. On February 19, the sister of one of the detainees called to express her deep concern regarding the deteriorating health of her sister; fearing that without immediate intervention, they all would be deported or one of them would succumb to the illnesses that are “running rampant.” I agreed to go on February 22.

The morning after I arrived I met with Mexican Immigration Authorities. They were extremely courteous as I shared with them who I was and that I represented the SMNE, a social justice organization concerned about the well being of Ethiopians wherever they were found and that was the reason I was there.

We had an extensive discussion, but they basically told me they could not proceed further unless I gave them the name of a family member in detention. After some continued explanation of my role as advocate rather than family member I finally gave them all 21 names of the detainees as my family members; saying that they were all Ethiopians and because of that they were all my family members! They decided that was enough for them and we moved on to the case at hand.

During this meeting, I learned why others from the Horn of Africa were processed in a timely manner and allowed release, but the Ethiopians were not. They explained that it was their protocol to contact the embassies from the home countries of any refugees and in the past, Ethiopia had not responded but now had done so. Their position was that the Ethiopians had nothing to fear and could go back to Ethiopia. I explained more about the brutality and repressive nature of the current regime and the irony that the Mexican authorities were now asking this same government; from which these young people were running away from, to now make a decision on their future.

I also told them about the families’ concerns regarding the deteriorating health conditions of some of them and that I would be flying to Tapachula to see them at the detention center. Their response was very supportive; indicating to me that the local officials would be in a better position to make the decision, but that they would also do whatever they could to help resolve the problem.

I then met with UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) who said that these detainees were not under their mandate because they did not officially come as refugees; therefore they did not have a refugee document approved by the UN. The Human Rights Commission of Mexico said they were aware of these Ethiopian detainees and had even visited them at the detention center to check on their welfare, but said they could not do anything.

The next morning I met with officials at the detention center after flying in the night before. They explained in greater detail what had suddenly changed their policy towards Ethiopians. Apparently, in 2010, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had visited Mexico. During this visit, he had been asked about these detainees and asserted there was no basis for their claims. He said Mexico could do as they liked; but if they were deported, their lives would not be in danger. He attested to double digit economic growth; claiming it the highest in Africa. In the case of the Eritreans and Somalis, no one from their countries ever responded to their inquiry; but in the case of Ethiopia, their prime minister had denied any need for asylum; leaving confusion between his account and that of the people.

I explained in much greater detail the dictatorial, repressive and abusive nature of the Meles government and they seemed to be genuinely surprised and very grateful for the information. When I asked for the immediate release of all these Ethiopians, they agreed; explaining they had not had this kind of information before. They said paperwork would have to be completed so that the earliest release would be the next day and that I could not visit them before that, but invited me to come back the next day so I could be present at their release, but prior to my flight back in the early afternoon, I was impressed with the professional, serious and respectful manner in which these detention officials particularly Mr. Humberto Savledo and Eliseo Walle carried out their responsibilities.

As I was leaving, I met a young Eritrean at the gate; waiting to turn himself in to the detention center and later met two young Ethiopians who had just arrived.



Everyone had a story and I was interested in hearing. One of them told me how he had gone from Ethiopia to Djibouti to Yemen and from there to Dubai where he had gotten a good job; working for three years to save money for this trip. From Dubai he had flown to Panama from where he had traveled by boat and by foot over unknown territory; depending on people to give directions along the way before reaching Tapachula nearly three months later. He had slept in the bush; often not eating for lack of food. He said it had been an unbelievable journey and that he had witnessed many things as he made his way through the jungle and crossing rivers that he never would have imagined. I asked him if his family knew about this and he said they did. I then asked why he had wanted to come.

He said he was willing to take the chance because there was no opportunity in Ethiopia; further expounding on his own reasons as he spoke of the motivation of three other Ethiopians who had gotten lost in Guatemala and were now being detained there. He summed it all up, “They wanted freedom.”

Another young man particularly inspired me as we engaged in a long discussion about conditions in Ethiopia. He was 21 years old, carrying one small bag as he waited at the gate of the detention center; ready to report himself to the authorities. He hoped to be given a travel document, good for six months within Mexico. His destination was the U.S. where again, he would go directly to the immigration office to request asylum. I noticed them when I was surprised to hear someone speaking to him in Oromo.

I surprised them as well when I began speaking Amharic to them—I only know a small amount of Oromo. I explained why I was there and asked them why they had taken the risk to come. One of them answered me in depth.

He was very bright and articulate and his comments really touched me as he explained his motivation.

He said (summarizing his comments):

*“Ethiopia has become a place where no one can live. You don’t know how bad things are in Ethiopia. My family did not want me to come, but I had nothing to lose because there is no life or opportunity there. If you go to Addis, it is not only the beggars you see now, but the streets are full of families of homeless people. In 2005 when the opposition was stronger I thought change would come, but after the people were killed, my hope was killed along with them. Since then my only hope was to leave because if I died along the way, it would be no different than staying in Ethiopia and dying.*

*Mr. Obang, what we lack back home is role models and a government who cares for the young; instead, they only care for themselves or their own family members and tribes. Right now, if you live in Ethiopia and don’t have family members abroad, no one cares for you or will provide for you.*

*These kinds of things could be changed. In Dubai, I heard about the SMNE and the principles of “humanity before ethnicity.” The people who talked about it agreed that this is how we should look at each other in Ethiopia.*

*When the TPLF came to power, I was only 1 or 2 years old. This has been all I have known in my life. In Ethiopia now, you must be part of the EPRDF to do anything; to go to school, to get a job, etc. Will Ethiopians ever be better off? I usually do not think anything could change; but then sometimes, little things give me hope; like you coming here to help Ethiopians and talking to people like me. It gives me hope that there are people working for change, but inside of Ethiopia, EVERYONE wants to leave the country!”*

In the evening, I went for a walk and reflected on this conversation; trying to answer his most penetrating question: “Will Ethiopians ever be better off?”

I wondered whether 21 years from now, the next generation of Ethiopians would be losing their lives as they crossed the Red Sea or rivers in distant lands like these; desperately pursuing freedom and opportunity? Would Ethiopia remain a place where people only cared about their own family or ethnic group?

Will Ethiopians ever see the shared humanity of their fellow Ethiopians; regardless of ethnic or other differences? Would they uphold their equal rights as fellow human beings within Ethiopian society? These questions continued to absorb my thoughts until my spotted four more Ethiopians.

Here I was in the most southwestern tip of Mexico, but I kept meeting Ethiopians! While taking a walk that evening, I ran into four more—one woman and four men. As we talked, they shared their stories of how they got there.



One of the men told a very sad story about witnessing the tragic drowning of three girls one Ethiopian and two Eritreans who had come via South America. These girls had been with some of them as they were walking on a narrow trail through deep rain forests and had gotten lost for seventeen days.

After one week their food had run out and they had to forage for something to eat. When they finally found the main road, they realized they would have to cross a flooded river, swollen from heavy rains.

These three girls, already weakened from a lack of food and unable to swim, were overcome by the power of the swift flowing current and were swept them away. The girls screamed and cried out as the waters rolled them back and forth. The young man could not hold back his tears as he explained how traumatic it was as he and the others were so powerless to rescue them; knowing they would surely also be overcome by the fast-moving river. We all became very emotional; shedding our own tears as he spoke. The local people had discovered two of the bodies later; both of which were buried, but the body of the third girl was not found. We are deeply saddened by their deaths; which stand as examples of the many tragic, but silent casualties of this regime.

The next morning I went back to the detention center; hoping to meet all my fellow Ethiopians, but I was told officials were still working on their papers. Despite my disappointment, I was thrilled with the knowledge of their imminent release and very appreciative to the staff at the detention center for their sincere willingness to help; however, I had to leave without meeting them. Later in the day, you can imagine the joy of receiving a text message from one of the officials that read, “Your people have been released!”



Soon, excited relatives began to call. A brother-in-law of one of the girls in detention sent me a text; giving his thanks and acknowledging that God uses people to accomplish His purposes. He concluded by saying, “Every family is rejoicing at this time!” It made me think about how many of us worked together to accomplish this; starting with family members who first collaborated among themselves to coordinate the appeal to the SMNE and without which it would never have happened. It made me wonder what we could accomplish for the future if we redoubled our efforts, sacrificed and all worked together like these people had demonstrated.

It did not matter that among those being detained were Oromo, Amhara, Tigray and others of unknown ethnicity. It did not matter that these detainees held differing beliefs; some were Muslim, Ethiopian Orthodox or Evangelical Christians. It did not matter what region they came from within Ethiopia or their educational background; they were all Ethiopians.

Could it be possible for us to duplicate the same collaborative spirit in Ethiopia? To me this was inspiring example of how we might rid ourselves of a destructive system driven by the blood of ethnic-hatred. Such ethnic-based division, dehumanization and alienation from each other is opposite of what God wants for us as a people and as a nation. Could Ethiopia become a country not for the benefit of just a few families, one tribe or one religion, but a place for our entire family of Ethiopians to thrive and flourish?

If we turn from our own self-destruction to God’s ways, imagine what could happen! In all of this, I am encouraged to not give up; putting my hope in God that He will help Ethiopians to see the beauty in the diverse people of Ethiopia and how caring about each other leads to real justice and harmony between people.

For me, I know if I give up on God's assignments for me in these matters, I will be giving up on the future of those who follow; of those still unborn. My failure will be against them. But if we each follow God's personal assignments He gives to each of us, our efforts will certainly bear fruit for the future. This is not just about us, but about other people. We cannot be a country satisfied with seeing the happiness of only a few, but it should be extended to others.

Early on February 26, I flew from Mexico City to Oslo, Norway to testify for Ethiopians at risk of deportation from Norway. Our suffering and hardship is scattered throughout the world where we Ethiopians have sought refuge. When will Ethiopia become a real home for its people? Can you imagine how many would want to return if we ever could bring about a government of the people, by the people and for the people whose first responsibility was to care about its own? Those in many other countries care more about Ethiopians than does our own government.

In Libya, Ethiopians working in the oil fields were at risk as they were perceived to be hired by Gadaffi and had been targeted and three were killed; yet on public radio, the Ethiopian Ambassador to Sudan refused to give his contact number out; surprising even the host who asked him to share it. Now, while other countries are rushing to rescue their citizens, caught in the crossfire of this revolution, the Ethiopian Embassy in Sudan has abandoned theirs.

The victims of the Meles regime are not just those political prisoners in prisons across the country, the victims of the genocide in Gambella, the Ogaden, those being forced off their land throughout the country those beaten and tortured for speaking out or those peaceful protestors shot in the head during the 2005 election protests; they are those refugees who die in the Red Sea as they flee their country or of hunger or sickness in refugee camps in Kenya or Sudan. They are the three Ethiopian girls who died in the raging rivers of South America as they searched for the freedom they could not find in their own country. They were victims of the Meles regime even though they died thousands of miles away in a distant land.

One of the refugees in Mexico told me that America to them is like "heaven on earth" and "everyone wants to go there." He said, "No one wants to go to hell!" Right now, the current TPLF/EPRDF government of Ethiopia has made it a hell for the people instead making it a place to live and prosper. There are now over 80 million people in Ethiopia; all of whom cannot come to America or any other country; nor should they feel so desperate that they risk their lives like all of these detainees. Instead, we must work to make Ethiopia as close to becoming a "heaven on earth" as is possible!

What should we do about refugees and the serious and life-threatening problems they encounter? With God's gracious help and guidance, let us FIX ETHIOPIA! Where there is freedom, justice, peace, equality and opportunity for all, who would ever want to leave such a place!

=====

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your comments to the SMNE Executive Director  
Mr. Obang Metho, at: [Obang@solidaritymovement.org](mailto:Obang@solidaritymovement.org)  
You can find more about us through our website at: [www.solidaritymovement.org](http://www.solidaritymovement.org)