



July 10, 2011

Mr. Obang Addresses Ethiopian community in Geneva, Switzerland: “Public Engagement Key to Unity-Building in Ethiopia”

My fellow Ethiopians, I am honored to be here among my dear Ethiopian brothers and sisters. I thank Kifle, Meseret, Dawit and all the people who have arranged for this opportunity to meet with you; particularly because it was only less than two weeks ago when I first informed some of my good friends and members of the SMNE in Geneva that I would be coming here to participate in the UN Human Rights Committee’s country review of the state of human rights in Ethiopia. Within a short period of time, this was all set up and *now I am very happy to be here with you today to discuss how we might create greater unity as we worked together to build a better future for all of us.*

What we are hearing from Ethiopia is really disturbing; not only the worsening hardship, but the increasing sense of frustration and hopelessness in bringing the change necessary to build a brighter future for the people. Even should this government be replaced with another, many wonder whether a different government would be any better than what we have now—or perhaps, even worse; particularly after seeing decades of the status quo.

By measurements of most any index of well being, Ethiopia remains near the bottom of every one. Life for the majority of Ethiopians has not improved regardless of what regime has been in power. Most Ethiopians continue to live under oppression, marginalization, poverty and limited opportunity. In 2011, many in the prime of their lives are actually worse off than their parents were fifty years ago. What should be our response to this? I focus on nine points!

Point # 1: We must not give up!

Giving up is not an option! We cannot give up on our life, our families, our future or on our children’s futures. Something good will not come by itself, but with God’s help, people must work for it. *The good things we all dream about for Ethiopia require sacrifice, but for some reason, many Ethiopians have given up, thinking that our favorite political leaders, our favorite political organization, some other country or some force within the international community will do it for us. In doing this, we have given over an enormous source of our God-given power for change.*

Even if the Meles regime has pushed us into the deepest mires of misery, we do not have to submit to the role of the never-ending victim. We must fight for the good and NOT give up on the country. We must embrace the struggle as our own. Once we have done that we can reach out to others; cooperating together to achieve bigger goals than we could do on our own. This leads to my second major point.

Point # 2: We must fix what is not working and that starts with our lack of unity!

Many would agree that a primary obstacle needing “fixing” is the lack of unity, which also can be described as failed or absent relationships that are strong enough to enable us to cooperate on shared goals with respect and civility.

We cannot hope to build unity without fixing damaged relationships and nurturing new ones. You can call it disunity, mistrust, alienation or hatred based on differences of ethnicity, political view, religious belief or interests, but whatever the reason, we Ethiopians are in a state of immovable paralysis unless we pay attention to repairing relationships at every level. Right now we have an “us-them” unity against the current regime, but the building blocks of a better future must be based on more than that if we seek a sustainably harmonious and productive society where the rights of all our people are upheld.

Point # 3: Unity should not be glorified to “unity for unity’s sake” for unity that is not based on universal values and principles that enhance worth, rights and opportunity for all our citizens will simply lead us in the wrong direction and when leaders veer from this path it is up to the public to hold them accountable before we get stuck like we are now.

The responsibility to bring greater unity should be in the hands of the public; not in the hands of the politicians. It has been in the hands of the politicians for the last twenty years. We can blame them, but the public is at fault for not holding them accountable. For example, what would have happened in the early Meles years had Ethiopians of every ethnicity and background confronted the injustice, corruption and tribal favoritism of this regime?

Understanding that the true nature of human beings is flawed, we must build strong local governance, strong cooperation among regions and strong institutions to be watchdogs of our common good; including of ourselves. It will not “just happen!” We have countless political groups and factions who are often in gridlock as they vie for their own interests. People are held hostage by these fragmented political groups who may be compelled more by narrow agendas and power-seeking more than by public agendas and empowering the people. The public must come out and take a role. Recent history demonstrates this in Egypt where within 18 days after the people took a stand, the 30 year regime with large military resources was over and done.

Point #4: Meles is banking on our predisposition towards disunity for his regime’s survival. We do not have to cooperate!

Meles and his TPLF regime are known as great masterminds of division. Using the tools of deception, they capitalize on our present prejudices, self-interest, resentments, past grievances, suspicion or even our differences of language, culture, education, religion, gender, age and a host of other tools; all geared to break down cooperation among us. It is their favorite and most successful survival technique.

Look at the results. Everyone is divided—the opposition, ethnic groups, religious groups, community organizations, political organizations—we could go on endlessly. We know the TPLF/EPRDF has sent some into the Diaspora with the specific purpose of dividing or sabotaging organizations or with the purpose of blocking information or the work of others. However, Meles should not be given all the blame for such devious plans because we have cooperated by becoming easy targets as it is an outgrowth of our culture of division. *A cycle of grievances, woundedness, betrayal and revenge has taken a toll on us and most of us have been caught up in it at some time.*

Reconciliation and healing must be part of our recovery process; however, there are signs of hope that in some cases, the people are actually unified more than understood; particularly because so many have had enough! People are unified against the entrenched injustice, the human rights violations like the killing of the Anuak, the killing of election protestors in 2005, the widespread arrests of Oromo, the loss of territory in the Amhara region, the loss of our land, the arrests of journalists and the crackdown on any who speak out; leading many into exile from every ethnic group. People are unified by all these criminal acts as well as a desire for a better future.

Point #5: Our struggle must be a national struggle of many working together, but it must start with a few in small groups; wherever you are.

You are in Geneva so the struggle for Ethiopia must start in Geneva. The same is true in every other locale in the Diaspora where there are Ethiopians. Within the country, it will start with families, friends, communities, kebeles, organizations, interest groups, religious groups and others who work locally first and then reach out to others to achieve shared goals. Creating stronger communities and regions are the building blocks which will hold this and future governments accountable.

This is what Ethiopians must understand for the present. *Instead of asking which political leader or party will bring an end to this misery we each must ask—how can I contribute to the common good? There are many ways. Organize from wherever you are. Come in as people first who put the well being of others as important. Encourage others to become involved as the misery, pain and horror of Ethiopia will never go away by itself. People must become aware; educating ourselves and educating others.* Our role is to accurately expose what is going on, where and when there are human rights violations, where there is corruption and the details of all of that.

Knowing what is going on is the first step to a victory. This regime is hanging on by fooling people; not only us, even outsiders. Those who help advance the TPLF/EPRDF become their instruments to bring pain, hunger and suffering to others. *When this regime goes, they will be held accountable by the rule of law. If you know who they are, identify them—from the police to the courtrooms to the ministry offices to the kebele local governments to the military commanders to Meles. Document what crimes they have committed and the evidence; all of which will be used at the right time in the future.* They are not nearly as fearful of the guns in the hands of Ethiopians as they are afraid of the truth being told. I will be talking about this in my statement tomorrow to the UN Human Rights Committee.

Point # 6: The paradigm of top-down politics and top-down governments must be replaced with the empowerment of citizens who hold their government accountable.

Decades of top-down politics, uninvolved constituents at the local level or heavy-handed repercussions against those demanding greater self-determination has shifted our thinking from actors to victims. *For years, a few powerful elite at the top have controlled the engine of the train and the rest have followed. It is time to change direction by having an informed and active citizenry take charge of the engine. Ethiopians must say enough!*

Look at this statement from a letter written by the Editor in Chief of the Feteḥ Newspaper to Meles:

There are so many thing that you have to be blamed for but amongst those the most profound blame is what you promised us 20 years ago—that Ethiopians will be able to get 3 meals a day. But after 20 years getting something to eat is just a dream. Even the government controlled ETV reports how children are fainting due to hunger and are taken to ERs – here in the Capital Addis!!

Accept it or not, under your leadership the country and the generation is going down the drain. The difference between you and Mengistu’s regime he used a real bullet and your bullet is hunger. But both of you are killing [us] and for those who are dying [whether by] real bullet or by hunger bullet, does not make any difference!

To tell you the truth, what we are worried about now is not what Al- Shabab or Al Qaida will do to us. But the rising cost of living. People are now worried about how they will die of hunger than that of bombs.

Point # 7: An empowered citizenry would be most capable of challenging this top-down model of dictatorship as well as to most effectively address our biggest challenges such as hunger.

Our present system is a rigid top-down approach where the federal authorities dictate everything from the national level—from Meles and his cronies—down to the kebele level. *Empowered citizenry, local involvement and regional self-determination are threats to the interests of a model that seeks to maintain its control to achieve its own self-interests. This was the same model whether under feudalism, communism or Meles’ revolutionary democracy. The model does not work and has kept Ethiopia as an entire nation in a position of dependence among other nations.*

In the Foreign Policy Journal’s article, Local Governance: A New Approach to Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Elizabeth Royall observes that **“increased indigenous responsibility increases political participation, transforming subjects into empowered citizens who then build their own systems of local governance and accountability.”** (<http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/07/07/local-governance-a-new-approach-to-post-conflict-reconstruction/>)

She gives a remarkable example:

*“Somaliland (a former British protectorate)—a secessionist state of Somalia whose 1991 declaration of independence no country has recognized—features **undefined borders, competition between clans, and an absence of foreign aid. Despite these problems, Somaliland created a government, held three fair elections (in 2003, 2005, and 2010), built an airport and three universities, and formed a functioning economy.** International aid and capacity-builders were not available, so created their own, showcasing 20 years of slow but solid success”*

In an example from Uganda she reports:

A Ugandan monitoring project provided information to 50 villages on health services they were entitled to and how their village fared in child mortality compared to other villages.

Within a year child deaths declined across the board by 33%.^[2] People shifted from passive victims to empowered citizens that held their government accountable.

More Ethiopians face starvation than ever before. Instead of being prepared to face the worst famine in sixty years, Ethiopia is selling off prime Ethiopian agricultural land, buying 200 tanks worth a \$100 million (USD) and not able to account for over eight billion dollars; believed to have been laundered. **Would an empowered citizenry tolerate this?**

Ethiopia just received \$150 million from the World Bank for “governance” and local assistance.

- Would not an empowered citizenry hold this government accountable when none of those funds reached the local people?
- Would not an empowered citizenry demand to see concrete examples of how previous monies were spent and when few or none could be given, would they not call on the World Bank to redirect funds to localized and more accountable conduits?
- Would not an empowered citizenry demand that those involved in embezzlement of funds face justice?

Foreign aid from the UK to Ethiopia has now doubled; making Ethiopia the top recipient in the world of such aid from the UK!

- Are Ethiopians so incapable of providing for themselves? I think not! An empowered citizenry might be assisting others instead! Yet, thanks to this top-down model of dictatorship, millions of our people face starvation despite millions in aid!
- Where is this aid going?
- Who is the UK asking to give accountability for use of these funds?
- Are they asking pseudo-corruption commissions run by the TPLF/EPRDF or are they asking empowered citizens?

The Gates Foundation just donated \$11.8 million (USD) to the UN Development program to partner with the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture for agricultural assistance to Ethiopia; particularly meant to help raise sustainable productivity for smallholder farmers; just the people the Meles regime is displacing from indigenous fertile land.

- Who will administer such monies? With the top-down approach of the Meles regime, corruption will certainly eat away most of it.
- If locals are involved, who will they be? Will they be part of an empowered citizenry or will they be government-supporters speaking pro-government language.

Again, only real local involvement in the use of such agricultural supports from the Gates foundation will increase future food security and avert disaster.

Point # 8: The current humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia and Somalia can be directly linked to human rights abuses in the region, purposeful destruction of livelihoods, displacement of the people, agricultural mismanagement as well as to record drought conditions; most of which could have been prevented or at least minimized.

Does anyone believe that Ethiopians; particularly in the southeastern region of the Ogaden, would be facing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world if local communities had been empowered to address their own food security issues over the past years?

If the local people had been involved in the decision-making process regarding extracting the natural gas and other resources in the area would the region have been blocked from access to humanitarian organizations due to alleged counter-insurgency?

What is going on behind the scenes in this cordoned-off area; particularly now with the drought?

Would they and millions of Somalis across the border be at such catastrophic risk if they had not been subject to the civil strife caused by Ethiopian National Defense Forces as they committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against civilians?

Could they have better survived had these same Meles-controlled troops not also destroyed homes, livestock, crops, wells and other infrastructure; causing hundreds of thousands of Somalis to flee the country or to become internally displaced persons?

Would al-Shabaab have been so radicalized and themselves commit other human rights crimes had the Meles regime acted as real peace-keepers rather than commit crimes against humanity and war crimes against civilians?

Point # 9: As the race for financial gain ensues, wherever there are resources to be exploited, the people are at risk unless an empowered citizenry rises up to stop this regime. A weakened and divided public, which does not take its responsibility seriously, cannot stand up against a strong top-down model of dictatorship.

Ethiopians have to be the ones to find solutions to Ethiopia's problems. To do so will require that we assume responsibility for breaking down prejudices, apathy, passivity, divisions and dependency. As we do we will be able to achieve far more through cooperation than alone. Strong involvement in our local communities; whether in the Diaspora or within Ethiopia, creates the foundation for representing both local and regional interests as well as national concerns where small groups can merge with others for mutually beneficial goals.

As I conclude, I want to give you an example of how one country, Switzerland, where most of you live today, accomplished this. Today, most of you live in Switzerland and see it as a beautiful and peaceful country, but although it was always beautiful, it was not always peaceful. In the past, Switzerland was divided by warring provinces that used to continually fight each other. Eventually, a few provinces saw the futility of this endless cycle of violence that was destroying them all and decided to form a union to find a solution that would be good for all and one that would bring lasting peace, freedom and security.

Some who thought “out-of-the-box” introduced the goal of coming together to form a union. Not all agreed, but the three provinces that did, followed through with their vision and formed such a union. Eventually the others also decided it was to their advantage and joined; eventually creating Switzerland. Simply speaking, what they have learned was that the previous fighting was counter-productive. Not only did it perpetuate death, destruction and instability, it also interfered with advancing shared goals.

These early unionists, for the sake of freedom from conflict, found a means to create a country with four national languages; going as far as accommodating people who represented only 1% of the population. What they did became a model for others. Switzerland is a landlocked country of six million people. They do not have large reserves of national resources; but yet they created a country known for its wealth, peace and security. As a result of that, when Europe was in the middle of World War II, Switzerland was able to maintain its security and preserve the functionality of its institutions. Because of this, other European countries embroiled in the conflict, used the security of Switzerland to store their valuables and money.

Even dictators have placed stolen assets in banks in Switzerland due to the lack of security within their own nations; although Switzerland has at times ordered all banks and financial institutions to freeze assets of such dictators as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya until legal proceedings can determine ownership.

When the United Nations was created, it was decided to make Geneva its home because they believed Switzerland's neutral position provided greater security.

Ethiopia is over 3,000 years old; yet, we have still failed to come up with such a well-working concrete solution that would attract other nations to it because of its security; instead, all our own people are running away because even we Ethiopians cannot live safely, freely and productively in our own country. After a millennium of droughts and famines, we still were not prepared for what now threatens millions of our people.

Ethiopians should be able to feed themselves without chronically depending on the world to feed us! We have the potential for helping to feed people beyond our boundaries so what are we doing in this cycle of dependency?

Ethiopians must come up with our own solutions and take ownership of our problems. What is good for Ethiopians must be decided by Ethiopians. Start locally; representing the interests at that level, but then find ways to enhance larger goals by joining with others.

One group can start in Geneva and then join with others in Zurich, Bern, Stockholm, Oslo, Toronto, Colorado, Israel, Kenya and beyond; all joining with the same kind of movement throughout Ethiopia. Centralized authority will never be as effective in dealing with local and regional issues as would an engaged and empowered citizenry. Both are needed and support the performance of the other. Switzerland is an example of how we Ethiopians can create a better future for Ethiopia.

Finally, as we see the unthinkable pictures of starvation, thirst and death coming from the Ogaden, the South and Somalia; particularly when much of it could have been averted, and as we hear of the suffering of our people in all corners of the country, we have a moral call to action as never before.

I have hope in the people of Ethiopia that they will be moved by their consciences, compassion and conviction to stop the engine of the train we are on from taking us over the cliff.

The safety and security we Ethiopians in the Diaspora have in a foreign land can be created in Ethiopia if we commit ourselves to it. By coming here today, that commitment has already begun and now it is your responsibility to take it from this room and advance it to at least one other Ethiopian every day.

God has called us to respond to the cries of our brothers and sisters. How are we doing? The land that gives us life has now become a land of death. Do you hear the cries of the Ethiopian mothers from every ethnic group as their child takes its last breath? Can you see the pain in the faces of those fathers who can no longer provide food for their families? Consider the sorrowful reports we are hearing from that precious and beautiful land of ours as a call to each of us. It is our duty. Never quit! Never give up! Never lose hope that God can use the willing to come to the aid of the hurting!

May God provide us with vision for a New Ethiopia and empower us to accomplish it; helping us to be people who really care about each other and who refuse to turn our backs from the pain of others—putting humanity before ethnicity, religion, viewpoint, culture or any other distinctions!

May God bless Ethiopia as its people seek to enhance the freedom, justice, peace and daily sustenance of others; building a more life-affirming, harmonious, secure and prosperous nation that will be a blessing to other peoples!

Thank you!

=====

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