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Mr. Obang Metho Addresses the Ethiopian community in Calgary, Canada. Ethiopia, a Country of Repetitive Crises: Will we miss our opportunity once again?

Thank you to Calgary Ethiopian Unified Task Force for inviting me to come here to your beautiful city to talk about the future of our country. I would like to thank the leaders of Unified Task Forces especially, Tamri, Mike, Ali, Ezra, Zewdu, Molalet, Teshager, Solomon, Amsale, Zelalem, Amsalu, Tesfaye, Tallu, Mesfine, Melaku, Amsalu, Fasil, Anbes, Tsegaye and all the people who have arranged for this opportunity to meet with you.

When I was a university student, I used to love to visit Calgary every summer. Since I have become involved in human rights and social justice work, this is the third time I have had this opportunity. The first time was in June 2006 to speak to Ethiopians when the opposition leaders were still in prison. The second time was in September 2008 for a screening of our newly produced film documentary, *The Betrayal of Democracy*. The third time is today to talk about our future as a country. It is good to be back.

The theme of my talk today will be focusing on the opportunities we Ethiopians have missed over and over again throughout our history. In order to not repeat our mistakes, we must think about the reasons for our failures and what to do in the future to avoid them. I believe the lack of strong institutions has undermined our progress as a country and as a people. Such institutions must be built by people of strong moral character who are willing to engage in the struggle for the common good. These go hand-in-hand and should lead to building relationships of trust and agreeing on shared core values. This begins by talking to each other. Only then can we broaden our efforts to create a more just and free Ethiopia for all rather than only for a few from one's own ethnic group.

Let us start by reviewing our history of repeated crises over the last nearly eighty years, as well as including one encouraging example of a crisis where the outcome was largely a success. The questions I will attempt to answer are:

- 1) **When and what led us into these crises?**
- 2) **Why have we failed to build a better Ethiopia for all?**
- 3) **What was different when we succeeded?**
- 4) **Will we miss our opportunity again?**
- 5) **What must we do to avoid failure once again?**

Let us think back to some of the greatest crises in our more recent history.

First crisis:

It is 1936. Ethiopia is in crisis. Ethiopia has been invaded by the Italians under Mussolini. The Italians want Ethiopia as their colony. The people of Ethiopia rise up to stop the Italians but have no aircraft or trained military. They are totally out-matched. They are the *David*, seeking to defend themselves against the giant, *Goliath*. **Ethiopia has joined the League of Nations, an international organization of 50 nations that has pledged to defend its members against foreign aggression. Emperor Haile Selassie has sought help from the League, but finds himself and Ethiopia abandoned. Italian aircraft are bombing towns and villages, spraying the ground with mustard gas, searing the flesh of its people.**

Some in the international community come up with a peace plan that essentially turns over half of Ethiopia to the Italians and leaves the other part to Italian domination.^{i ii} There is public outrage among Europeans when they hear of this plan. The plan is never implemented; however, Ethiopians are left to their own means in their struggle against Italy. Early on May 5, 1936, the Italians take over Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie must flee the country. Everyone expects the overthrow of Ethiopia. Remarkably, against all odds, Ethiopians overcome a greatly more powerful foe within a few years. The Brits finally lend a hand in restoring Haile Selassie to power in 1941. Ethiopia remains the only country never colonized in Africa. **The power in Ethiopia remains hierarchal, the majority of the people are in poverty, cries for land reforms go to no avail, famine strikes Ethiopia and Haile Selassie denies it, leading to his downfall. No institutions of the people are allowed.**

Second crisis:

It is 1974. Ethiopia is in crisis. The people of Ethiopia want change. They complain of oppression at the hands of Emperor Haile Selassie and what they believe is a feudalistic system, leaving out the majority. A student movement has risen up with the slogan, *land to the tiller*. They seek to tear down the monarchy of Haile Selassie and to replace it with the military regime of the Dergue under Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam. Many are killed, including the Emperor and many of his ministers. Mengistu and his supporters bring Communism to Ethiopia. **They promise a more just, fair and inclusive Ethiopia where the many millions of people in dire poverty—the masses—will fare much better. The people are hopeful for a better life. There are still no viable institutions representing the people of Ethiopia.**

Third crisis:

It is 1991. Ethiopia is in crisis. The communist government of the Dergue has become so brutal it has earned the nickname of the “Red Terror.” Mengistu Hailemariam harshly represses any who threaten his power, including ruthlessly purging his own ranks and conducting mass arrests and executions of his top generals as well as of vast numbers of dissenters. Poverty has not decreased, but instead the people struggle to survive. A Land Reform Bill, passed in March 1975, with little popular support, has outlawed private land ownership and replaced it with collectivization, villagisation and resettlement.ⁱⁱⁱ **As famine strikes the land, especially in the dry north areas of the Tigray region, Mengistu turns his back on their suffering, denying the famine like Haile Selassie. One million people die.**

Ethnic-based liberation movements have risen up in the regions of Tigray, Eritrea, Oromia, Somali-populated southeastern Ethiopia and in many other places. Communism starts to weaken and with it, the support of Communist Ethiopia. To hang on to power, the Dergue must change its alliances. In September of 1987, Mengistu claims Ethiopia to be a *Peoples’ Democratic Republic* and holds an election. All the candidates nominated are Dergue-approved.

Mengistu claims a spectacular electoral win despite the regime's unpopularity. Shortly thereafter, the TPLF and EPLF form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Movement (EPRDM), later becoming a *front* rather than a *movement*—the EPRDF.

On May 5, 1991, the day of the 55-year anniversary of the Italian invasion of Addis Ababa in 1936, the TPLF and EPLF controlled EPRDM, with the help of other ethnic-based liberation fronts, take over Addis Ababa. Mengistu has already flees the country. The EPLF sets up a transitional government in Eritrea, later leading to their succession from Ethiopia. The TPLF/EPRDM promise an Ethiopia where ethnic groups will have the right to self-determination and where democracy, with the representation from “*nations and nationalities*” among the people of Ethiopia, will drive development throughout the country. **Again, there are no viable institutions representing the people of Ethiopia.**

Fourth crisis:

It is 2014. Ethiopia is in crisis. The EPRDF remains under the control of the TPLF Central Committee despite the pseudo-political party of the EPRDF made up of representatives from four of the nine regions of Ethiopia. The EPRDF claims a 99.6% electoral victory despite their widespread unpopularity. Land continues to be government-owned. Ethiopians continue to be displaced in a new collectivization, villagisation and resettlement program—strongly criticized by the TPLF prior to the fall of Mengistu. Dissent is again criminalized and many languish in prisons, jails and detention centers. Human rights atrocities are widespread. **The TPLF basically controls all aspects of public and private life in the country and has utilized divide and conquer tactics to thwart others from gaining a voice. Resentment has increased towards the TPLF and their domination. Many fear a possible explosion of violence against the ruling party due to the increasing bitterness and resentment due to the exclusion of the majority of Ethiopians from any opportunities.**

Will this crisis be wasted? Ethiopians have repeated the same mistakes over and over again. **What we do in the next months of this year and into 2015 will be an indication of whether or not we do this once again.** I have often said that it must be the Ethiopian people who, with God's help, define their destiny and free themselves. However, my fear is that Ethiopians will seek a short-cut, and in doing so, will compromise on exactly what is necessary to bring about a more free, just and prosperous society for all. **Instead of breaking free of the cycles of tyranny and injustice of the past, we will end up repeating the same mistakes.**

Contrary to common opinion nowadays, our problems did not start with the TPLF/EPRDF, but instead have been rooted in our culture. In other words, it is not only our leaders, but also our people who perpetuated a culture grounded on feudal hierarchies, ethnic-based injustice, fear, violence, disunity, hero worship of our leaders and weak, absent or dysfunctional institutions. How can we deal with our current crisis if we do not understand our own contribution to it as well as our responsibilities to bring it to an end?

We have an example from our past when we did it much better. Consider what it took to overcome the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini's forces? **The only time the people have effectively risen up to accomplish something for the common good was in their defeat, but when it comes to building an Ethiopia for the common good of our own people, we have failed over and over again. Would it have been different had there been strong institutions acting as watchdogs of the people? I believe so, but unfortunately, they are under the control of the TPLF/EPRDF.**

I would contend that it is time for the people of Ethiopia to fill the vacuum for our failed institutions. Because of their dysfunction, it is we who must work together, across all divisions, and with God's help, if we are to achieve meaningful reforms, justice, transparency and accountability. Over the past eighty plus years, we have never had viable institutions of the people to overcome the wrongs in our society.

Who are we today? To whom does Ethiopia belong? The colonizer we now face is among us and within us. It includes our own ethnic alienation, prejudices, hatred, fear, apathy and exploitation of those outside our own groups. Wherever I go, Ethiopians are telling me of their increasing fear that there will be an explosion of violence due to the rising level of anger among the people. **They believe the ruling regime has pushed the people of Ethiopia to the edge and that something unexpected will trigger that explosion, resulting in the destruction of lives and property.**

There are people who are ready to seek vengeance, but they often are not thinking through the consequences and the impact on all of us as a people or as a nation if such a thing occurred. They think we must pick up arms to fight, but Ethiopia cannot be built through the death of its people and its destruction. This violent approach is nothing new, but where in the world is it working today where it is creating a healthier, more harmonious, and prosperous society? **I want to caution any who think this might be a shortcut out of our crisis because the results of such actions may end up being far worse than what we now have.**

Armed movements and explosions of violence have led to horrific crimes, unspeakable acts and uncontrollable situations that quickly descend into chaos and ongoing conflicts that are difficult to end. Think of our capacity to destroy ourselves in 2014 compared to the Ethiopia of 1991 when the TPLF/EPRDF took power. It is starkly different. In 1991, Ethiopian armed movements were poorly equipped, having mostly small arms, and lacking military training. In 2014, armed conflicts can very quickly become more deadly and destruction more widespread. **Think about Syria, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Rwanda or South Sudan. Think about the loss of lives, the devastation of infrastructure, the costs to rebuild, the loss of family members that will affect the next generations and the cost of never-ending retaliation. We kill our own sons, daughters and tribes when we kill yours for it recycles time and time again.**

Another exacerbating factor is our ethnic division. **In 2014, we have reached the dead end of ethnic-politics.** **If we allow it to go further, we may finally see it as a hopeless road to mutual destruction. What do you imagine the Southern Sudanese in refugee camps in Ethiopia think about finding a better alternative to violence? It is too late to go back in time for them, but we still have opportunity. The current TPLF/EPRDF regime has taken the struggle to a worse place than did the Dergue or the monarchy in terms of ethnic division. It did not happen by accident. How can we form an institution of the people so as to create the viable alternative of diverse Ethiopians that was missing during every transition of power we have experienced?**

We can see that Ethiopians have never been given a chance to choose who led them, even though historically, Ethiopians boast of being an ancient country, never colonized. People have never had a choice. If you go back, from the build up to WW II to now, the people of Ethiopia have never had breathing time to work towards progressing as a society that is more free and democratic. Haile Selassie's system was not democratic, but repressed the people. Instead of responding to their demands, the grip on the people was tightened. As a result, we saw the rise of the student movement.

When the monarchy was brought down, many lives were lost and much destruction was committed, including the destruction of some of our national treasures. Some of those killed were public servants who could have helped the transition. Only injustice accompanied the Red Terror. That continued until people rose up who opposed it.

Unfortunately, every time we have changed governments, the next one starts from scratch. This has nearly always meant discarding the people from the past and starting over with their own—an incredibly difficult task in many contexts. Also, a new regime that destroys the old oftentimes must bear the cost of redoing the progress of the past rather than reviving, restructuring or rebuilding it. This holds true for institutions as well. Instead of trying to build stronger and more effective institutions for the future, those who take over, dismantle any from the past. Leadership is transferred to loyalists to the new regime and institutions once again become an extension of whatever party is in power.

When the TPLF/EPRDF came in, what did they do? They destroyed most everything the Dergue had done. On the other hand, when the Dergue had actually made positive material contributions in various places, the TPLF confiscated these assets and transferred them to their own region. It showed how little they cared for the people of the country. For example, in the Gambella region, the TPLF stole the only power generator providing electricity to the region. They also took all the equipment and large machinery being used to build a regional dam that would have otherwise benefited not only the region, but the country. Additionally, over a hundred tractors, meant to be used for agriculture in the fertile region of Gambella, were also removed. How many Ethiopians could have been fed had agriculture been allowed to develop? This pillaging of local property was repeated in every region.

Once again, all public servants, including university professors, were kicked out, even those who were experienced and who could have helped in a transition to a freer government and a more educated populace. They could have continued in their jobs in order to help build the country. Instead, they were pushed out, often ending up in exile. They were replaced with loyal TPLF/EPRDF members who then had to learn the job from scratch. The TPLF/EPRDF only would allow those in such positions who would loyally protect the interests of the TPLF. Again, the institutions brought in were no different or better than those under the monarchy or the Dergue. Instead, they were used to manipulate, control and advance the interests of those in power.

A major weakness common in each of the periods—from the Monarchy, to the Dergue, to the TPLF/EPRDF—has been opportunism. Each new regime rushed in to replace the former and ended up doing the same or worse than the one before. Each took advantage of their power to advance their interests, only rewarding the loyal rather than the wise, the competent, the brilliant, the honest or the courageous.

Had Ethiopians had stronger institutions, capable of representing the interests of the people, the Dergue would never have been able to walk in so easily and trick the people. Keeping the people uneducated, not knowing their rights, preoccupied with survival, or without access to information, became part of each successive power-holders' strategy. Each claimed they would be different and do better in meeting the needs of the people than the preceding regime. However, because nothing was in place to hold them accountable, their promises were not kept and the sacrifices and hopes of the people were wasted. These have been lost opportunities for the people of Ethiopia.

Now, under the TPLF/EPRDF, we have an added ethnic dimension we should have easily noted from the beginning of their ascent to power. Nothing has wounded and divided our nation more than these ethnic politics. We should carefully avoid this widely practiced tendency now, which many among us have now adopted as their own.

When the TPLF went into the bush, they were motivated to do so in order to liberate their own region and ethnic group. They did not fight for the interest of the country or for the well being of the Ethiopian people, but only for their own tribal interests. Their cousins, the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), did the same. The EPLF went to fight for the interest of Eritreans who wanted to divide their region from Ethiopia. Many other groups were the same; for example, the Oromo Liberation Front fought for the interests of the Oromo. The same was duplicated by the people of Gambella, the Ogaden, Benishangul, Afar and elsewhere. **When the Dergue fell, had there been a body that represented the national interests of all Ethiopians, these self-appointed TPLF tribal leaders would have not had such an easy time to take over. The people of Ethiopia missed their opportunity and the tribal interests took over and remain in competition with everyone else.**

Over the last 23 years, the TPLF have been promoting their tribal agenda and are not there for the national interests of the Ethiopian people. As a result of their narrow tribal policy, they have not only put themselves at great risk of downfall, but in doing so, when they fall, if it is done in the wrong way, it could jeopardize all of the people of Ethiopia. This makes it imperative for the people of Ethiopia to come up with the body that cares for the well being of the entire people so we might make a way for a different kind of transition. No one ethnic group will be free until we all are free.

Right now, Ethiopians have been divided by tribe; people don't talk to each other, but only about each other. As previously mentioned, **Ethiopians from all over the world express their fear that Ethiopia could turn into a Rwanda. This is the fruit of the tribal policy—its inevitable conclusion.**

The root cause is really the abandonment of virtue among our people. If we do not put the fear of God and the respect for humanity above anything else, this is what we end up with—caring only about ourselves and a few beyond us. **This is where ethnic federalism has taken us—to the possibility of a bloodbath, genocide, the destruction of Ethiopia, the failure of all its institutions, the possibility of widespread and cyclical revenge, among other detrimental outcomes.** The TPLF leaders are already sending family and money abroad and buying up property outside of Ethiopia so when it happens, it will not affect them. However, they leave behind the majority of their ethnic group, many who are innocent. **Let us come up with an alternative, but it means looking at our own attitudes because this crisis we are in did not start with the TPLF/EPRDF but has been a running narrative.**

People are becoming so selfish. For example, many within the country hold to the idea that an Amhara cannot live in the Oromo region or that an Oromo cannot live in the Amhara region or that a Tigrayan can live wherever they want, but others cannot. Those who have the more valuable land are evicted without being consulted or compensated.

The people of Ethiopia who used to live together are now killing each other like in Gambella. It is happening all over the place where there is ethnically-targeted killing. The seeds of this violence were planted by the TPLF/ERPFD's ethnic-apartheid policies. This policy was a calculated strategy to enable a tiny minority to lead without threat; but it has gone wrong and could take down not only those who developed and implemented the plan, but everyone with them.

Now, every living Ethiopian will be put to a test. Ethiopians will be defined by how they handle this. We must create a different ending to this story than did our predecessors. For one, this idea of self-deception and/or pretending on the part of the TPLF/EPRDF that Ethiopians are unified more than ever, when the reality is a polar opposite, is a dangerous lie to repeat. One must speak the truth in order to deal with it. Similarly, it flies in the face of truth when the TPLF/EPRDF gives data and statistics about the wellbeing of the people, the effectiveness of various aid programs, double-digit economic growth, and assertions of being a democratic Ethiopia.

This is a country where there is no opposition, no independent voices, no civil society, no access to the Internet, daily power outages in the capital city, and chronic poverty. The Ethiopia claimed by the TPLF/EPRDF to be widely improving is an illusion that does not exist in reality. Ethiopians must come to confront this false image, freeing ourselves from these lies and then, start afresh. This must come from the clean heart, mind and soul of those who care. We cannot change the past, but we can change the future. The infection that threatens our country now is tribal hatred and division and the unhealed wounds from loss, grief and unjust struggles.

To find healing for these wounds and a cure for this infection it must begin by repenting, forgiving and reconciling to the point that you will make things right and call for meaningful reforms and for justice for all people. It includes reaching out. This means talking to each other rather than about each other. This means refusing to demonize or dehumanize other groups, especially when you may even want the same thing they have—tribal dominance, but this also means giving up a desire for you or your group to dominate others in order to exploit them.

When we talk to each other we will more easily see the God-given humanity of others—putting humanity before ethnicity or any other distinctions. Eventually it will lead to the softening of one's heart and increased trust toward the previously unknown other. As that happens, we may be able to see the possibility of forming a partnership to work towards building a New Ethiopia where there is a better future for all of us and for our descendants.

Virtue builds and strengthens societies. Moral goodness builds relationships and associations. We cannot pass a law making people more kind, compassionate, civil, or generous, but we can individually become more accountable to God and His universal principles. Moral and spiritual fruits are known to advance and transform lives, families, communities, and societies into more hospitable places to live, but they have to come from within the hearts of people. If Ethiopia is to ever build and recover, it should encompass these spiritual values.

We should change our language from “us” versus “them” to “there is no us and them, only us, one family—the family of Ethiopia.” At the same time, we should work to create a viable institution of the people so when the opportunity comes; the people are ready to stand up together through a transition to a different government that actually can unlock our future from the chains of the past mistakes. We do not want another opportunistic group like the Dergue or the TPLF/EPRDF to hijack the dreams, hopes, aspirations and sacrifices of Ethiopians.

May we listen to the voice of God who has called us to a better way of life. We have to find a way to recover and be healed if we are to survive as a people. May God give us softness of heart, strength and wisdom to confront and correct what is wrong, not only in another, but within ourselves. May He help us to see the beauty of the God-given humanity in others for then we will not be limited by our differences.

When Emperor Haile Selassie stood before the League of Nations in 1936, realizing that the allies he had hoped would come to the aid of Ethiopia might never come, he said:

I pray to Almighty God that he shall spare to the nations the terrible sufferings that have just been inflicted on my people... It is international morality that is at stake...

Should it happen that a strong government finds that it may with impunity destroy a small people, then the hour strikes for that weak people to appeal to the League to give its judgment in all freedom. God and history will remember your judgment...if help never comes, then I say prophetically and without bitterness: "The West will perish." (Following this, Hitler was emboldened; shortly thereafter, marking the beginning of World War II.)

Consider this in the context of today. It could be a prayer to relieve the suffering inflicted on many of our fellow Ethiopian brothers and sisters. **What is at stake is the morality of Ethiopians, not of foreign powers this time. If a strong regime, with impunity and power to destroy the small or weaker among us strikes, it will be a judgment against those who should have helped.**

Today, Ethiopia is in crisis. Let us consider the peril of all our people—not only of our own tribe—and rise up in defense. If we do not, Ethiopians' hopes for a New Ethiopia may only be an elusive dream. We have a formidable foe, but like in 1936, who would have expected Ethiopians to stand to the end for their freedom. We can do it again, against all odds, if we stand together.

At this moment, Ethiopians may feel hopeless because the rich and the powerful nations of the world may not be with us as we seek freedom, but never forget that Almighty God, who created Ethiopia and its people, is always with us. Never lose hope and do not be discouraged until freedom and justice prevail.

Thank you.

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoare%E2%80%93Laval_Pact Hoare-Laval Plan

ⁱⁱ Why Europe Fights, by Walter Millis; William Morrow & Company, New York 1940; Chapter 5 and 6, assorted pages

ⁱⁱⁱ Guide to Ethiopia, by Phillip Briggs, Bradt Publications, UK 1998, p. 43-50