



AN URGENT CALL TO ALL ETHIOPIANS TO EMBRACE A COMMON VISION BASED ON PRINCIPLES

Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Ethiopian Muslims in Washington, DC

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As-Salaam-Alaikum, እንደ ምን አለ ችሁ (əndämən allačču?, Akkam jirtu? and good afternoon everyone. I would like to thank **United Ethiopian Muslims' Peaceful Movement Support Group** for inviting me to this excellent conference.

It is a real privilege to be among you today, my fellow Ethiopians, who care greatly about our country and its future. We know that our homeland is in serious crisis today, a crisis that has been building up for years. Because many of us share this concern, I was asked to speak on the topic of how we Ethiopians might work together around shared values and principles in order to forge a better future for all of us.

Today I ask you: **What can we do to contribute to a better outcome in Ethiopia than what we have achieved in the past? Why have our past efforts repeatedly failed to produce a freer, more just and more democratic Ethiopia for all of us? What are the lessons of the past that we may have to re-examine? Do we continue to react in a self-defeating way out of habit, culture or pressure from our groups to conform, even if it is not in the long-term interests of any of us?**

Let us not underestimate how difficult it is to break old patterns. Yet, if Ethiopia is to be transformed into a culture that recognizes the values, rights and dignity of others beyond our own groups, we must first look at ourselves. **What are the good and bad parts of our past and present culture or sub-culture so we can discard what leads to failure and instead choose the best to preserve?**

The choices we make today, in the next few weeks, months and years will define our future as a nation; however, some of us give up trying out of frustration, discouragement or feeling overwhelmed with the situation. It is also easy to become distracted by the demands on our lives, especially because life in this new country is often hard. Yet, it is encouraging to see so many here. You would not be here if you did not care about the future your children and our country.

The assignment for today is to consider how we might choose a shared path to a free, just and more democratic Ethiopia that will uphold and respect every one of us— regardless of our differences. **Then, and only then, can we build a societal structure that can shape a better future for all of us. Some may wonder if it is possible for people as diverse as we Ethiopians to work together to bring about a better shared future?**

Let us start with one small example—ourselves—you and me! Within Ethiopia, we would be considered diverse in about every way. However, today, I come to this gathering feeling a very strong bond of affection, friendship and connection between myself and my Ethiopian Muslim brothers and sisters. How did this happen? How did a dark-skinned, Christian guy like myself; born among the rivers of the hot and steamy lowlands of Gambella, on the far southwest side of Ethiopia, and coming from a small, isolated ethnic group called Anuak— which makes up only .01% of the population of Ethiopia, get so connected to lighter-skinned, Muslims from the highlands or arid deserts of southeastern Ethiopia, who make up a large portion of Ethiopians, whether from the Oromo majority, the Afar, the Somali or others—most every group is larger than the Anuak!

Our cultures are very distinct in many ways; yet, here we are today; both wanting to work together to seek the common good of each other as well as of all Ethiopians. Neither of us started our struggles that way, but we have learned a lot along the way, have we not?

For me, my life was drastically altered on December 13, 2003, when I suddenly became deeply involved in the human rights crisis affecting my own ethnic group, the Anuak of Gambella, Ethiopia. It started when 424 Anuak leaders were brutally massacred over a three-day period. It was a solitary struggle of disarmed Anuak against the heavily armed TPLF/EPRDF military forces and highlanders militia groups they had armed. Their mission was to “teach the Anuak a lesson” for seeking self-determination.

It was and continues to be a right assured in the Ethiopian Constitution, but when it came to the Anuak being consulted in regard to extracting resources on Anuak indigenous land along the Upper Nile River Valley, it was violently denied. This time it was about oil but the next time it was about confiscating the fertile farmland, water and minerals. Over 16,000 Anuak have since been displaced from their land to make way for development that has left out the Anuak. Many have had to flee for safety to refugee camps in Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda

Prior to 2003, others within our country had experienced injustice and human rights abuses, but I must admit, I was focused on bringing development to Gambella and never got involved in their struggles. Yet, when we Anuak went through our own tragedy, it was painful to see how few others paid attention. **Partly it was because of our isolation, but it was also because of our many differences from most others in the mainstream highlands of Ethiopia. We from Gambella region and Omo Valley in Southern Ethiopia had never been seen as “Real or Typical Ethiopians,” but it was my first confrontation with the fruitlessness of taking on a systemic problem alone.**

I started questioning this approach—can the Anuak really bring freedom and justice to themselves alone? That is when we started better noticing what was happening to others, like the Oromo.

In the 2005 election protests against what was seen as a rigged outcome, and the killing of 193 peaceful protesters on the streets of Addis Ababa, an opportunity to unite was before us. We did not use it; however, it was then I began to more seriously question the validity of bringing change to the Anuak through an ethnic-based organization, especially as a tiny minority group. A momentum for change triggered a large response from many through the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), also known as the Kinijit party, but when the TPLF/EPRDF troops moved from the Gambella region to the Somali region of Ethiopia in 2007, few did anything. However, we Anuak knew what would happen since those same troops had just left our own region. The human rights abuses in the Ogaden were sadly called a “silent Darfur” among some international NGO’s for the little attention it drew.

We had no interaction until then, but we in the Anuak Justice Council (AJC) felt compelled to speak out on behalf of the Somali Ethiopians in the Ogaden following the massacre of your people, the serious human rights crimes, the wide spread destruction of homes, infrastructure and livelihoods and the mass exodus of your people to other countries to find refuge. It was then we first started to interact.

What brought us together and what keeps us together gives me hope that we Ethiopians can work together to bring greater freedom, justice, opportunity and prosperity to all the people of Ethiopia. Yet, why have we Ethiopians still failed to come together in a meaningful and effective way?

I believe it is because we have accepted a way of thinking— a worldview—which is made up of many good things we should value, but it is also built on many unreliable, undesirable and untrue ideas that **DO NOT WORK TODAY— EVEN BECOMING OBSTACLES LEADING TO OUR MUTUAL DEFEAT.** These should be re-examined and where wrong, they should be discarded or overcome.

OBSTACLES TO OUR MUTUAL SUCCESS

What are those obstacles to our success, where do they come from and how do we rise above them so we do not become a major part of our own problem? The main obstacle is our flawed approach. We have engaged in **seasonal solitary struggles** where a group defined by ethnicity, religion, politics or region faces the adversary alone.

1. Seasonal Solitary Struggles: A Ethnicity, Religious, Political, or Factional Group Faces the Adversary Alone

I contend that in Ethiopia, one of the greatest obstacles we face to securing freedom, justice and greater democracy for all our people is our preference for **Seasonal Solitary Struggles rather than for a Sustained Shared Struggle**. A seasonal solitary struggle is our favored approach and history shows us it does not work.

In a seasonal solitary struggle we rise to action in our own "season of need," **which may be triggered by killings, human rights abuses, injustice, land grabs, and other similar grievances against the current or previous regimes. When we do respond to some wrongdoing, we mostly work alone, without asking others to join or without others joining us. Instead, we attempt to rally our own group together to defeat the adversary by ourselves, without the help of others.**

Examples are abundant and go back many years; but here are some groups that have experienced targeting by the current regime of the TPLF/EPRDF from its inception— and some, repeatedly: Oromo, Amhara, Ethiopian Orthodox, Sidamo, Anuak, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar (some differences, but perceived an Oromo Protests or an Amhara Protests), Ethiopian Somali, Muslim, Christian, Oromo, Amhara (Gondar uprising) and so on. **When targeted, many of us are frustrated that others fail to join us. At some point, we or others finally are forced to realizing that success is a hard and impossible road to travel alone. At the same time, we can become resentful and mistrustful of others for not joining us or seeming to care. This creates more resentment, suspicion, alienation, isolation, tribalism and a deepening of the attitude of "not needing others."**

2. WHY DO WE CONTINUE TO REPEAT AN APPROACH THAT DOES NOT WORK TO THE BENEFIT OF ALL ETHIOPIANS?

A. Historical: A variety of interconnected, deeply-seeded worldview that are in conflict with inclusive rights of all

- **Tribalism:** It's our turn to eat; a survival mode for tribal groups; who will take care of you if not your own tribe, village, and/or family? Retaliation: one tribe against another; rewards and favoritism given to your own people— the more closely related or the more loyal, the more rewards given or received.
- **Monarchy:** Ethiopia's history under monarchy where favoritism based on ethnicity, family connections, cronyism, and loyalty to those at the top
- **Feudalism:** Entrenched system of feudalism, usually combined with ethnic-based loyalties/tribalism combined with the elite vs poor: rationale for power over others is justified and repeated
- **Marxist-Leninist Communism:** Combined again with ethnicity; but carried out like feudalism with oligarch leaders empowered and masses manipulated and exploited through promised intentions that never materialize
- **This is the way you get power; take it from everyone else.** History has been repeated. **Individual struggles for power and privilege have resulted in one ethnic group rising to the top, leaving the others as "outsiders" no matter what is said upfront.** Examples include: TPLF/EPRDF, and current independent struggles with unresolved differences and issues.
- **We fought "harder" than "you" did against tyranny so "we" deserve to rule and to enjoy all the "spoils of war!"** Example: the TPLF; even though others fought along side them against the Derg, they felt like they came to power by the gun and now deserve to stay in power, even if by the gun. If you want power, you have to go against us and "earn it!"

B. Lack of trust: Suspicious of self-promoting motives of others while seeking to advance own

- **Ethnic-based power grabs, betrayals, divisions, attacks, wounds, losses and grievances of the past** separate Ethiopians; some holding to the belief they cannot be resolved without retribution or a reversal of fortunes.
- **Efforts to join together have been hijacked** by others for the benefit of one leader, one ethnicity or group, resulting in another TPLF/EPRDF model, only with new power holders.
- **Ethiopia's history of secrets, mystery, pretending and deception**, all blocks trust, transparency and accountability
- **Motives to take power may exist among some in individual or group struggles.** Underneath the "going it alone agenda," the leadership and followers may hold to an agenda of "earning their way into power."
- **Lack of inclusiveness and reaching out to others;** divisions, alienation, isolation and failure to talk with each other.
- **Lack of integrated and accepted core principles or lack of trust in the integrity of the leadership and their agenda,** etc
- **Obstacle of resistance to joining anyone else** because you may be empowering someone else.
- **If you leave the confines of your own group to work with those across lines of difference, you may ultimately be left out of your own group.**
- **Belief that other groups only want to "use us" for their own goals and then we will suffer under you.**

C. Reluctance to give up "ethnic" identities as primary identity factor rather than being human

- **Easier to rally and gain support from one's own group than a mix of groups,** especially if you promise them group power and privilege, etc
- **Easier to control and shame others within a well-defined group for disloyalty,** not joining in or holding to a different opinion (simply a more inclusive viewpoint can be a threat at times)
- **Easier to join violent struggle because history of armed struggles**
- **Easier to rally groups around ethnicity rather than nationality;** if meeting held by one group, full, but not when its based on national interests, etc
- **Easier to rally around an individual or your own group than a higher cause;** it often doesn't require principles because you believe you will be favored
- **Unresolved wounds of past interfere with joining;** reasons to stand apart; ongoing suspicion hard to break when isolated or alienated.

D. Grievance-driven or event-driven struggles may not endure without deeper and broader roots.

- **A reaction to some major injustice, killing or outrageous act affecting one's own group creates an incitement of response, but is often limited to a seasonal solitary struggle that is not sustained.** This grievance-based reaction, is often interpreted in light of members of one's own ethnicity, religion, region, political viewpoint and other identity-oriented group, creating a group response and a "season of need" for this same group.
- **Emotionally driven; it is harder to sustain the effort** as the energy necessary to maintain an organized and effective response weakens and limits success in achieving the goals of freedom, justice, rights and opportunity.
- **These event-driven reactions often do not include others; nor have others outside their group rallied around the aggrieved in support of them, perceiving it has nothing to do with them.** Yet, the next time, the same grievance will affect this other group, with others again not joining in— you didn't come to us at our time of need, so we will not do it in your time of need

HOW DO WE OVERCOME THESE OBSTACLES?

In light of these obstacles, how can we break this cycle of defeat, which includes our history, past grievances, personal and tribal ambitions and other obstacles to success? We are now also facing a deepening crisis in our home country. What can we do?

1. Create a Sustainable Shared Struggle of Diverse People

A. Promote a culture that advances the characteristics of a Sustainable Shared Struggle

- It must be grounded on principles that value the lives, rights, and well being of all Ethiopians
- It cannot merely be against someone; the right kind of struggle is for the benefit of all Ethiopians, including those who we see are doing it wrong.
- Our problem did not start in 1991 when the TPLF/EPRDF came into power; we must also look at our system, our worldview and our attitudes about each other across identity lines so as to embrace a system that gives justice, opportunity, freedom and respect to all our people regardless of ethnicity, religion, skin color, gender, political viewpoint, regional or cultural background and so on.
- We must understand that seasonal struggles with our own aims for power and privilege will fail. As I have already said, I realized this myself— that we Anuak were in a seasonal struggle and were never going to achieve freedom while others around us remained unfree. The same is happening with you as well as with many others, with similar results.
- Not everyone is ready to understand this change of thinking, but we who are here and who agree with it, are responsible for living it out, ensuring it is integrated into all parts of our society
- We should learn the lessons from other places in the world where the crisis of today should have been solved yesterday or years ago, whether Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya, etc. **It is the failure of the citizens of the country of coming up with the higher common good, instead, pushing forward their own factional agenda, leaving the whole country vulnerable to the point of collapsing and becoming ungovernable.**
- We must genuinely live out a viewpoint affirming “others” matter. In our past, it has always been about only one group moving ahead; many can pretend to care or to love the country, but still fail to reach out and to respect the rights of others.

B. Create non-political institutions that work to promote these higher principles

- God has given both us and our “neighbors, near and far,” worth, dignity and value as human beings; how should that affect our worldview and the daily life of people and organizations?
- Ethiopians, involved in political groups, ethnic organizations or communities, religious groups, regional groups, and other organizations should identify core values, goals and principles they seek for all Ethiopians and integrate them into their institutions, groups or organizations.
- How can these higher principles be strengthened through civil society and institutions? How can these be formed now in anticipation of the coming need? **The crisis in Ethiopia can be better averted if supporting institutions were in place.**
- How can we transition to something better while holding all stakeholders more accountable? Consider how a groundswell of individuals, groups and organizations who endorsed these principles, values and ideals could influence the outcome.
- How can we prevent violence and destruction and re-integrate those perceived as “our adversaries” back into an inclusive and just Ethiopian society? **I believe we need stronger institutions to help in this process.** We can name it Institute of Ethiopian Affairs (IEF)

- In light of this, we in the SMNE recently have formed the Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and Restorative Justice (ECRRJ).

C. Characteristics of work of institutions during transition:

- Work for the freedom, justice, security, rights and well being of all Ethiopians in all regions without exception, including the Tigrayans,
- Help to ensure internal integrity, following principle-based practice on the ground, so that efforts do not disintegrate because of underlying injustice.
- Security for all; all lives should be protected and all should work to prevent harm to others— this includes no ethnic violence or bloodshed to any group
- Help in a transition to end injustice, to uphold the law, to bring meaningful reforms and to bring reconciliation; all carried out without favoritism or partiality.
- If there are strong, impartial organizations to keep the country intact; aggrieved groups will more likely seek resolution of conflicts through the system, rather than resort to violence, protest or seeking refuge outside the country.
- Help maintain the internal integrity of the roles of institutions to protect and uphold the rights and well being of all so the country does not disintegrate because of deep-seated injustice. Look at Libya; because they had no shared vision for the people, nor any institution standing for all, they collapsed. The same happened in Syria where people are divided into factions with no shared vision for all people. As a result, no one was there to protect the integrity of the country.

WHY ESTABLISHED: The Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and Restorative Justice?

The only solution to bring change to the country that will contribute to a better future for Ethiopians is through reconciliation and restorative justice. This includes meaningful reforms that will correct the root causes of so many of our grievances past, present and future. For hundreds of years, groups have been guilty of wrongdoing towards others, creating a history of wounds, losses, resentment and cycles of violence from each other. We are traumatized people, a characteristic of many groups that experienced persecution and then became the persecutors of others.

There is a better way; however, because there has been so much mistreatment, while at the same time, no equitable rule of law, these grievances of the past remain unresolved. It will be impossible to correct every wrong of the past; yet, we if we are to create a different vision for our future, we must still find a way to move ahead. If we are to do so, we must let the past be our teacher, but not our controller or obstacle to a better, more prosperous Ethiopia where opportunity and justice are available for all rather than a few. These core goals are already the mission of the ECRRJ and we ask for your support and advancement of these values and principles.

The mistakes we made have shaped us into a compartmentalized nation of dissatisfied, disempowered and discouraged people. It is a consequence of leaving others out. In the struggle against tyranny, singular groups believed they had no option but to create their own liberation front. During the sixties, Ethiopian students movement struggle began which was supposed to be about all Ethiopians, but it did not last. The result of its failure is the major reason every region started a liberation front to liberate themselves from the country because no one genuinely stood up for all.

Contributing to that was the failure to have a leadership or institutions that really stood up for the wellbeing and rights of everyone in Ethiopia. It is the reason that everybody is fighting for freedom— the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM), Gambella

People's Liberation Movement (GPLM), the Sidama National Liberation Front (SNLF), the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF) and so on.

Everyone can see clearly the outcome of denying the rights of the people. By not recognizing that this viewpoint is not only wrong and backward; it creates a legacy of governmental flaws that will produce repeated failure. **It will require a strong institution to confront a system that is doomed to fail no matter who is in charge. This is still the viewpoint of some of the people today who are fighting to get rid of the TPLF.**

Over two years ago, Ethiopians Muslim peacefully protested TPLF/EPRDF interference in your religious affairs. You did this, not for a day, a week, a month or a year, but for almost two years until the regime succeeded in cracking down on your leaders. Many were imprisoned and still have not been released. **The efforts of Ethiopian Muslims did not succeed because the rest of Ethiopians did not join in— the Amhara, Oromo, Somali, and others.** Yet, within your own ranks there were Ethiopian Muslims from every group— ethnicity, gender, age, skin color, region, and language— all under one umbrella. The same diverse make-up exists with the Ethiopian Orthodox and the Ethiopian Evangelicals.

Almost a year later, the Oromo came out, condemning repression and seeking justice for themselves; but again, when they did this, few came to their side. They were on their own. **Ethiopian Muslims are now asking; how can we stand together for higher principles and avoid greater mutual disaster? The problem in the country will not be solved alone. No one will be free until all are free.**

Will Ethiopians fail to change this system by simply replacing it with another just like it? This is the result of a seasonal solitary struggle and is the dissipation of Ethiopia.

Dissipation means something of value that becomes less than it should be; wasting its potential. This has been Ethiopia. We are wasting our potential.

Think about the human potential within each person that could flourish under better conditions. Ethiopia also has immense resources, but some of them have been ruined, polluted or wasted. I think of our Shea tree forests of Gambella that have been cut down, instead of being used for multiple reasons all over the world. It will take decades to replace them. Think about the young people who have died too young because of violence, poverty or inadequate medical care. Think about the numbers of displaced persons who can only think of survival instead of contributing to the economy or the well being of others. How many are missing their education during their formative years? Let us stop the dissipation of Ethiopia by coming together around God-given principles that value the rights and lives of all the people of our country.

Ethiopians, historically, are known for not seeing each other as threats. The fact you opened the door to the Mosque, knowing I am a believer in Jesus and inviting me here to speak to you regarding our shared values is an indication of the respect we cherish among each other. Respecting the right of all people to belief, faith and conscience is one of the reasons the SMNE spoke out for you when the TPLF/ERPFD sought to interfere in the internal religious affairs of Ethiopian Muslims. This is one of the basic foundations of a free society and is one of the reasons you did the same, condemning the destruction of ancient Ethiopian Orthodox monasteries in the North.

To change our direction, where and how should we start?

1. **Identify a common vision based on shared core principles:** To succeed, we must identify the most important issues, around which we can develop a common vision for the future. **This vision must be based on shared core principles which uphold the value, worth and well being of all people and must be in place before addressing the many other issues affecting diverse Ethiopians.**

- **Common vision must come first:** Our mistake has often been to reverse this order— calling for the resolution of our individual grievances before showing any willingness to come together around a mutually agreed upon vision that will make the latter easier to resolve in the future.
- **Principle-driven vision rather than one driven by emotions should undergird all aspects of an applied vision:** eg. a) Valuing **humanity before ethnicity** or other identity factors and b) caring about the freedom of others because **no one is free until all are free**
- **Dialogue among stakeholders to define this common vision:** To define this common vision; all the stakeholders must be called to one place to carry out an extensive dialogue to bring cohesion to a collaborative effort to stand together as a coordinated force to bring greater freedom, justice and well being to all Ethiopians. Only a sustained shared struggle can be effective against the TPLF/EPRDF.

2. **Prioritize commitment to work together to prevent bloodshed and the disintegration of Ethiopia**

- **Make** an individual and collective commitment to protect the lives and well being of all Ethiopians, including those within the TPLF/EPRDF.
- **Maintain internal integrity of principle based vision to the benefit of all** so Ethiopia does not descend into ethnic-based violence, vigilante justice or other violence or destruction of life, property or infrastructure; **helping to ensure that Ethiopia does not become the next Libya or Syria.**

3. **Form a transitional government and once in place, work together to address issues**

- Form a transitional government where leaders, parties and stakeholders genuinely uphold principles, vision and core values
- Carry out a collaborative effort to bring meaningful reforms and restorative justice:
- Address issues such as past grievances, injustice, lack of self-determination, land ownership, resource use, language and other multiple issues that affect diverse people, communities and regions.
- Open political space for political parties
- Reconciliation process developed and implemented

If this vision for our shared future is to succeed and if we Ethiopians are to better reach our potential; it will mean seeing the dignity, worth and value of others.

If asked the age-old question: **“Who is our brother’s keeper? Let the answer be, “We are, the people of Ethiopia regardless of our ethnicity, religion, language, skin color, gender, political, education and any other distinction!”**

May God's/Allah bless us all and guide us to the right path that leads toward unity, justice, freedom and liberty for all.

Thank you!

Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: Obang@solidaritymovement.org