



An Open Letter to Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

November 15, 2009

The Honorable John Kerry, Chairman
The Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
446 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6225

Dear Senator Kerry:

RE: Why are Meles and his corrupt regime getting special treatment?

As an esteemed member of the Senate, as the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as an advocate for human rights and democracy, we in the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** and on behalf of many like-minded Ethiopians, *want to call into question the current United States partnership with one of the most repressive dictators and violators of human rights in Africa—Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia.*

The “free pass” he has enjoyed because of this partnership with the US may no longer be justifiable in light of the increasing repression, deteriorating conditions and worsening tensions in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Looming starvation, the closure of all political space, the warnings by the Washington DC based International Crisis Group of possible ethnic violence, continuing human rights crimes and the increasing radicalization of some in response to these crimes are all warning signs; any one of them a serious risk factor, but together, all the more worrisome.

As many from the Horn perceive that it is US support that is prolonging this regime, *we urge you in significant positions of leadership to make swift adjustments to failing past policies that favor the dictator and increasingly alienate the people of the Horn from donor countries like the US. It may be the only way to salvage a deteriorating relationship and to avert the increasing likelihood of large-scale consequences.* It is also *highly imperative that the US policy makers seek consultation and assistance from those Ethiopians and others from the Horn who are most invested in peace, stability and prosperity in the Horn—not government promulgators of propaganda.* In light of this, *we are formally requesting a Senate hearing on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa focused on seeking solutions.*

I am writing to you as a representative of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia.** Before informing you of a recent outrageous example of the lack of justice in Ethiopia, permit me to provide some background on the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia. The SMNE is not an opposition group, but a non-political, grassroots social justice movement of Ethiopians who have come together in coalition across ethnic, regional, political, religious and cultural lines to bring about a more open, liberal and prosperous Ethiopia where “**humanity comes before ethnicity**” and where freedom, justice and the respect for human rights is available for all for “**no one will be free until all are free.**”

We represent Ethiopians who are not asking the US to do the work for us, but are requesting that the US and other outsiders who are supporting this totalitarian regime to stop creating obstacles to our freedom. US support is now shoring up a “strong man” instead of “strong institutions,” in opposition to what President Obama stated would be our position in his speech in Ghana. In fact, evidence of this “strong man’s” complicity in the perpetration of widespread human rights crimes, including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, has led to Prime Minister Meles’ referral to the International Criminal Court.

As Ethiopians face a food crisis, potentially affecting more than the food crisis in 1984-1985, Meles is blaming the US for climate change rather than taking any responsibility for his repressive agricultural policies that deny land-ownership as well as access to such supports as fertilizer, seed, agricultural experts and other resources unless one is a party member. Will the US provide food aid without looking at the root problem or the politically and ethnically based distribution of our aid?

You and others may not be fully aware of the evil underside to this illiberal government due to the repression or distortion of information coming in and out of the country; however, even the US media has been strangely silent, partially due to countless restrictions to journalists and other media. Regardless, Ethiopian Americans maintain strong informational pipelines to the country, often gaining first hand information from relatives and friends who are sometimes victims and witnesses.

In closing, allow us to recount an incident of “*Orwellian Ethiopian justice*” from this past week. Earlier this year, on April 25th, over 46 Ethiopians from inside the country were arrested, charged and detained for attempting to overthrow the government. Those arrested in relationship to the suspected coup plot are said to be working in partnership with the Ginbot-7 Movement for Justice and Democracy, a political opposition group led by Dr. Berhana Nega and Mr. Andargachew Tsige, both currently living in exile outside of the country. Among those arrested include family members of Ginbot-7 leaders, including the 80-year-old father of Andargachew Tsige, (known to be diabetic and to be recovering from recent heart bypass surgery) and at least one member from Nega’s family, who were reportedly taken to Maekelawi Prison.

Another, Mr. Asaminew Tsige Tebeje, had been a former Ethiopian Air force general in the Meles-controlled military whose loyalties became “suspect,” possibly a casualty of the “ethnically-based cleansing” of non-Tigrayans from the military that occurred earlier in the year. Mr. Asaminew was first demoted then fired from his job prior to his arrest. Currently, there are said *to be 61 leadership positions within the EPRDF military of which 57 are held by Tigrayans, who only make up only 6% of the total population.* The second general Mr. Mekonnen Worku had been retired from the military.

After many months, these two prisoners along with two other were brought into court on Friday, November 13, 2009, for a hearing. Family members, many other Ethiopians as well as some reporters were present for that hearing and witnessed the opening statement by the prosecution where a postponement was requested, citing the need to compile further evidence. Mr. Asaminew, fearing that he would again being locked up for an indefinite period of time, bluntly spoke out telling all present that he had been tortured by security agents in the prison. The other general Mr. Mekonnen, then also spoke out, alleging the same.

Immediately, the judge stopped them as the government prosecutors said it would taint the image of the Ethiopian justice system due to the presence of foreign journalists in the courtroom.; postponing it until the next hearing. At this, the former general Mr. Asaminew, broke into tears, triggering an emotional reaction by the audience, the press and most everyone present. Before it could be controlled, many were loudly sobbing and the judge ordered the spectators to be removed from the courtroom.

While others were leaving, the judge then allowed the two men to proceed. Mr. Asaminew reported having lost his left eye, his hearing in one ear and that he had sustained unknown internal injuries from severe blows to his body. He testified that an ankle bracelet had been ripped off, tearing away flesh. He said he had been repeatedly insulted and called names because of his ethnicity (Amhara). He wanted the court to do four things: *1) provide medical treatment, 2) allow visitors from the International Red Cross and Amnesty International, 3) end his solitary confinement and 4) arrest those who tortured him;* all of whom he said he could name. He denied the basis for all charges saying he had done nothing wrong.

The other retired general showed the court physical evidence of a broken arm, injury to his leg and other injuries. As a result, the judge said to put their testimony in writing and to come back Monday of the following week.

This event, as reported by eyewitnesses and Voice of America, provides an example of the many incidents of torture and injustice being carried out by a government who is supposed to be our ally.

Another case involves four Anuak men, Mr. Obang Oluch Achew, Mr. Omot Okomu, Mr. Okwiia Akway Omot and Mr. Obang Ogom, who fled the Gambella region of Ethiopia in 2003 after their family members and over 400 others were killed in the government perpetrated massacre of the Anuak. No one has yet been brought to justice for these crimes, which forms part of the basis for the referral of Meles Zenawi to the ICC for complicity in genocide and crimes against humanity.

Two months ago, these Anuak were trying to return to Ethiopia from Sudan and were arrested and accused of being insurgents. While being detained, they were tortured in the Gambella region and then disappeared. Relatives were told they had been taken to a military prison in Addis Ababa, but no one seems to know their location. There are many other cases like this in the regions of Oromiya, Afar, the Ogaden, Amhara and throughout the entire country where the situation is similar.

The one and only viable human rights institution in Ethiopia, Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), who used to document this, has been blocked in its efforts by the same government which has also passed a bill making human rights work—as well as advocacy for children’s rights, women’s rights, rights for the disabled and ethnic or religious conflict resolution—punishable by up to 15 years for any organizations receiving more than 10% of its funding from foreign sources. Please see the link of the law in its entirety (**[Anti-terrorism Law](http://www.solidaritymovement.org/090415IsRockThrowingPunishableByDeathInEthiopia.php)**). <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/090415IsRockThrowingPunishableByDeathInEthiopia.php>. This ill-defined law could be tailored to justify what are actually politically-motivated charges and the innocent could be targeted with trumped up charges while government-supported perpetrators went free.

An Ethiopian judge, whose name is being withheld, sums up the lack of justice in the following testimony: **“You ask if there is justice in Ethiopia and my answer to you is, none. Even in the wild jungle there is more justice than what we have here! The bylaws and articles we have in the Constitution are meaningless. We have been ordered like dogs, to go do one thing, and then we are ordered to do the opposite--all the time. If I speak up or refuse to do what I am instructed, I will end up behind bars like those imprisoned across the country. The federal system interferes all the way, even to the district level...Justice only applies to those who have a political position...what I am saying may cost me my own life, but it may enrich other people’s lives who will not be haunted by their own thoughts as I am... I will leave it to God! My only hope is that the end is not far away and that justice will come to Ethiopia!”**

Is this the kind of government you and other supporters of democracy in the Senate, House and administration intended to support with US tax dollars? Such a government cannot be a trustworthy partner and will play us against other donors and the people. In other countries of similar nature we have suspended aid, revoked visas, barred entrance to human rights perpetrators, called elections illegitimate, given sanctions, exerted diplomatic pressure and in a few cases, intervened militarily. Why are Meles and his corrupt regime getting special treatment?

No longer can we simply excuse our position by blaming Ethiopians for not having “a viable alternative” when Meles makes sure there is none or contrives look-alike ones to his favor, which is not a problem if all others are able to openly compete for offices. However, this is not the case; instead, he is arresting any of those who present as a threat, like the leader of the Unity for Justice and Democracy (UDJ) party, Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, a former judge and the first woman ever to lead a major Ethiopian political party.

Ms. Mideksa, was elected in 2005 national election. Mr. Meles Zenawi is an individual responsible for the rigging of the Ethiopian National election where he declared himself the winner. He was complicit in the repression and shooting of 200 unarmed election protestors and in the arrest and 20-month imprisonment of Ms. Mideksa and other opposition leaders.

In October 2, 2007, Ms. Mideksa, testified in the US Congress, after she was released. In late 2008, she was again arrested and given a life sentence for refusing to recant a statement made in Sweden regarding the terms of her pardon, leaving her young child in the care of her mother.

In summary, we are hoping you will take leadership in setting up a Senate hearing to re-configure the US policy towards Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa now that the true nature of this regime has been revealed.

This request was informally made just two weeks ago, when I and some of my colleagues were in your office in Washington DC and had a very good conversation with your Assistant at Foreign Relations on Africa. We also made the same request to Donald Payne, the Chair of the House Sub-committee on Africa, who is also considering this request.

We would also respectfully ask that you send a letter to the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, requesting that she and the State Department clarify their position on how they are responding to the worsening conditions in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa. We hope to be part of that solution.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,



Obang Metho
Executive Director
Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)
PO Box 50561
Arlington, VA 22205
Phone: (202) 725-1616
Email: obang@solidaritymovement.org
www.solidaritymovement.org

This Letter has been CC to:

Senator Richard G. Lugar, Ranking Member of Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Russell D. Feingold, Chairman of Subcommittee on African Affairs
Senator Patrick Leahy, Chairman of Subcommittee on Foreign Operations
Senator Robert Menendez, Chairman of Subcommittee on Foreign Relations International Development
Members of the Senate

House of Representatives, Mr. Donald M. Payne, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health,
House of Representatives, Mr. Christopher H. Smith, Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health,

Vice President, Mr. Joseph Biden
Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton
Deputy National Security Advisor, Michael Froman

Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Lawrence Cannon
UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Mr. David Miliband
German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Guido Westerwelle
French Ministry of Foreign affairs, Mr. Bernard Kouchner
Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Carl Bildt
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Jonas Gahr Støre
Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Katsuya Okada
European Union Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Gabriele Albertini
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Justice Navanathem Pillay
Amnesty International
OMCT - World Organization Against Torture
International Red Cross