



ETHIOPIANS IN JAPAN: THE BURDENS THEY FACE ARE OURS TO SHARE OBANG'S REPORT FROM JAPAN

May 22, 2010 (Tokyo Japan)

Ethiopians are living all over the world and Japan is no exception. Going back to the summer of 2008, I have been speaking with Ato Tewodros Alemu and a number of Ethiopians living in Japan. Some of the key people were interested in the principles of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) and wanted to know how to become involved. This started us talking, but since that time I have become aware of how hostile the Japanese system is to the refugees. Conditions have been unbearable for many; creating great hardship. Some refugees have been in jail for a long time. As I tried to advocate for them from a distance, it became more apparent that more could be accomplished by coming to Japan. Since the beginning of the year, I have been urged to come due to the desperate situation and finally agreed, arriving in Tokyo just two days ago.

Japanese immigration policies prohibit refugees—and their children—from ever becoming permanent resident or citizens, from getting a job or from enjoying some of the basic privileges of native born Japanese. Refugees were required to renew their visa status every month, until last month into every six months. I am told; often face resistance from Japanese government officials who do not want to give them extensions.

Over the last year, the SMNE tried to help from a distance by writing some twenty or more letters to the Japanese immigration authorities regarding their refugee status and why they should not be deported. In some cases, Ethiopians who had “overstayed their time,” according to these policies, ended up in detention centers; some for over two years with no hope for resolution.

I intend to meet with the Japanese government officials about finding better solutions to this extremely difficult situation for the over 300 Ethiopians, including children, who now live in this country. The problem is made more difficult because the Ethiopian Embassy informs immigration officials that there is no reason for granting political refugee status to these Ethiopians because they are instead “economic refugees.” They deny that there are any problems in Ethiopia.

When I arrived in Tokyo international airport on Thursday, after a 20 hour flight, I was met by two great Ethiopians, Ato Abebe Zewge, the Chairman of AdeyAbeba Ethiopia Association in Japan and Ato Tewodros Alemu, none of whom I had ever met in person, but yet I felt I already knew through the strong relationships we had made by phone! These are hard workers for the community of Ethiopians in Japan; succeeding in creating AdeyAbeba Ethiopia Association, an official Ethiopian association—the first and only African association ever started in Japan! They had just received approval for the association on May 18, 2010.

As we arrived at my hotel, we were joined by two brothers, Ato Aahlesilassie Amare and Ato Angagaw Mengistu. We talked about Ethiopia and found we had much in common as well as our shared hope of going back to Ethiopia some day. These men were like some of the other great Ethiopians I have met all over the world and we talked for hours. We discussed the seventeen Ethiopians in detention, who had committed no crime other than having expired documents. I wanted to see the detainees. We were able to make arrangements to visit six Ethiopian men in Mho-Shi Ushiku Immigration Detention Center the next day. I was told that there were also some girls in different detention center.

At 6:00Am in the morning, we all met together with Ato Tesfa Haile and Ato Kiflu Egi and Ato Tewodros Alemu to travel by train, one and a half hours, one way, to the Mho-Shi Ushiku Immigration Detention Center where these Ethiopians were being held. It was in the middle of nowhere, far from Tokyo city. The cost of transportation was nearly \$100; making it hard for most to visit. We had to fill out forms to explain the purpose of our visit. I explained that I was from North America, that I was a human rights activist and that I wanted to know the condition of the Ethiopians being held in their facility.

We met with six men namely Tilahun Bekele, Michael Mulugeta, Dereje Demeke, Johny and Mahmude Kemal. Most were under 30 years of age and had been told someone was coming to visit. We could not shake hands because we were divided by glass. We could only put the palms of our hands up to the glass as they held up their hands to us. It was heart-wrenching. I asked each of the men to tell us about themselves and how long they had been there.

The first was Tilahun Bekele, a young man who was very articulate. He explained that no Ethiopians or human rights advocates had come to see them before this. He said it was a “terrible place” and that all nine of them stayed in one small room. He said, “The conditions are unbelievable.” He told us of three detainees (non-Ethiopians) who had committed suicide last month.

He talked with great passion about Ethiopia before explaining why he had been detained. He said, “I did not commit any crimes. He said he left Ethiopia after 2005 election because there was no peace, but said that the officials kept postponing the signing of his required document, which would have extended his stay there, believing that they did not really like refugees in the country. He had already been in detention for one year and six months. He was so emotional as he talked about being separated from his family and about the hardship they faced in Ethiopia due to the injustice, lack of peace and good government. As he talked, it almost made me cry but I tried to hold back. He said that since he had been there, he had never seen green grass or trees; explaining, “We never even go outside!”

The second person was Michael Mulugeta, he told us he had been detained since November of 2009 when the government wanted to deport him. He said he had wanted to renew his visa, but that they would not renew it. Shortly thereafter he had been arrested. He talked about his future, not knowing what was going to happen with his life. The third person was 43 years old Ato Dereje Demeke. He had been there the longest—two years and eight months. During all of that time, he had never been outside. He said, “If they want, they should deport me because my life is so bad here. He told us how he had lost his hearing in his right ear from not receiving medical treatment when he had had severe ear pain in the past.

Another young man, Johny, had been detained for one year and eight months and the sixth man said he had been there since 2009. The last person was Mahmud Kemal, he has been there since October 2009. Every minute I was there, I had to hold back my emotions as I saw their own emotion and heard how difficult it had been for them. I told them that I would try to do whatever I could and explained some of my intentions to meet with the Japanese government officials.

I told them I intended to ask why they were being detained for so long with no charges and why if the Japanese government did not want them there, it was not possible to go to another country rather than being deported back to Ethiopia or staying indefinitely in detention. I told them I and the leaders of AdeyAbeba Ethiopia Association would be meeting with the Japanese Minister of Immigration, the Minister of Justice and the United Nations in order to get answers to these questions. I would also be meeting with the Canadian officials to ask how they help Ethiopian refugees in Japan. I explained what the SMNE was; that it was a voice of the people, meant to speak up for Ethiopians wherever they are facing injustice and hardship and that this included them.

One of the men asked me to question the head of the detention center about why they are being detained for so long. I said I would. As we ended, we again put the palms of our hands on the glass against our sides of the glass as we looked at each other; inches away but worlds apart. The emotions of all of us were so strong as we struggled to contain them. As we parted, we told them, “Take care, we at the SMNE will try to do whatever we can do to help.”

I then asked to talk to head of the detention center and were able to meet with him. I asked why when international law required detainees to be charged or released, they were being held for so long in detention. He admitted that he did not know and told us to ask the Minister of Immigration and Minister of Justice.

As we made the hour or more train ride Tokyo city, there was time for much reflection. As I looked out the window, we passed Japanese farmers working peacefully in the fields. As I thought about what we had just experienced, I kept asking why we Ethiopians have to suffer the way we are suffering; not only in Ethiopia, but in many places throughout the world—like the Anuak and others still in refugee camps in Southern Sudan or Kenya, the Ogadeni, the Oromo, the Afar and Ethiopian people from most every part of the country. Why so much suffering and for how long? Who will free us?

As I was so deeply saddened by these thoughts, I was then encouraged by thinking about the presence of many compassionate and wonderful Ethiopian people who we can trust to care about all Ethiopians because of their shared humanity rather than discarding others if of another ethnicity or religion. I did not even know ethnicity of those Ethiopians I had just met Immigration Detention Center. I only asked their names because their ethnicity or religion did not matter in terms of feeling their pain and longing for their freedom. They were the future of Ethiopia, but their young lives were being held up in jail where they could not do anything for the country. They might be someone else's children, but the truth is, they are also the future of all of us. These are our people, my people. If every Ethiopian and I do not speak for them and care for them, who will? This is the meaning of "No one is free until we all are free."

Officials from the Ethiopian embassy never went to see these detainees even though they are Ethiopians being detained for no crime but seeking freedom, justice and opportunity. Those Ethiopians who believe in the humanity of every Ethiopia, who believe until all free, none are free and who believe we are part of a family of Ethiopians—these are the people who will make up the foundation that will bring a better future so our grandchildren will not run away from Ethiopia only to be locked up in jails in a foreign land.

The Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia is about putting people first. We want to advance this idea of respecting the humanity of every one of us. What is lacking in Ethiopia is solidarity of the people around these life-giving principles. When I meet with Ethiopians of Japan this Sunday, I will tell them about being one family who care about each other. My theme will be to break the cycle of the apartheid system of the TPLF/EPRDF and we do not have to wait for a change of government to start this change within ourselves.

We Ethiopians should care about each other as all nations have special roles in protecting their citizens from harm. The Japanese care for the Japanese, the British for the British, Americans for Americans and Ethiopians should care about all Ethiopians. Those in prison are us—as are those in difficult situations throughout the world. They are our people. Their pain is our pain; their sorrow is our sorrow; their hardship our hardship. All should reach out to love each other; creating the New Ethiopia in Japan or wherever you are. Our suffering is too great. To end it will require us to change the way we think and do things.

As you know the election is Sunday and we all know what the result will be in Ethiopia. But we do not have to wait for another election to be part of a moral transformation that could revive our country. We must contribute to making Ethiopia a place not to run away from but a place to thrive and plant our roots. I have hope, but not in Western countries or rich countries, but in God because God will never give up on Ethiopia and we should trust His ways that call us to love and respect one another. May God help us become a people who put our humanity above our differences. These Ethiopians in Japan who are suffering are not alone, but there are so many more in dark places in Africa, Middle East and throughout the world. As they sought freedom and a better life, they found new difficulties outside as well. Had their country given them freedom, security, justice and opportunity; most would never have left.

In two days, I will be meeting with the Japanese authorities. This will be followed by asking Ethiopians to write letters to urge countries to abide by international laws and for the UN to hold violators accountable. Do not be bystanders while our Ethiopian women exploited in Middle East, while our country is near the top for human export, and while our people suffer for lack of justice. We cannot sit back and do nothing. It is our responsibility. It is every Ethiopian responsibility. Be part of bringing change. Complaining, accusing, sabotaging and blaming others will not bring change. This is no time to turn away from the misery of our Ethiopian people. Let us become the solution. Will you? =====

For further information, please contact me, mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE at:

obang@solidaritymovement.org