



## OPEN LETTER TO ETHIOPIAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS. MAY 13, 2011

Dear Ethiopian religious leaders and community leaders,

We in the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** are appealing to you on behalf of the countless Ethiopian refugees throughout the world who are undergoing severe hardship or peril as they seek safety, freedom and justice outside of our mother country of Ethiopia.

These are our sons, our daughters, our brothers, our sisters, our friends, our community members, our leaders—our people. How many parents will or already have received a letter like the following:

*Greetings,*

*Dad, Mom, Brothers*

*It's my regret to inform you that I have left Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I am really sorry for not telling you the decision I made before I left. My causes for leaving my beloved home land are not poverty or economic reasons... [but]the continuous harassment by the ruling party (TPLF) officials. No matter how much I love to live in Ethiopia; I decided to leave my country for security and freedom reasons. It has become impossible for me to live under continuous threat...I feel like a refugee and a prisoner in my own country of birth...so I have no other option but to leave without informing you and the family [so as] to seek my freedom elsewhere." (Dawit, Kenya)*

How many of our best journalists, community leaders, intellectuals, activists and political leaders have we lost for some of the following reasons described by an Ethiopian who left the country after being a political prisoner? He is now facing possible forced deportation after failing to gain asylum in both Sweden and Norway. Please consider his difficult situation:

*I have always [been] concerned about the current Ethiopian regime's human rights violations, systematic suppression of freedom of expression and the overall lack of good governance. As a result of this I was jailed. During this time, I was tortured by government security forces both physically and mentally. After being released on bail, I was under frequent surveillance by security forces over the last four years... I appealed to the court in order to quit the charges and asked that they return my [bail] money. However, the court rejected my appeal. Instead, I was again detained by government security forces...[I was detained] in a dark cell without access to food, water, court or family. During this time the security forces beat me too much with rubber truncheons...I got a chance to escape from Ethiopia to pursue my masters degree...but, unfortunately, I cannot continue my studies because I developed psychological problems related to what happened...I don't have any hope to stay alive. Please, please help me in the name of God. (Asnake, Norway)*

Consider the story of a courageous Ethiopian journalist who opposed the idea of all journalists wearing a T-shirt with the EPRDF electoral symbol while reporting on the 2005 Ethiopian national pre-election campaign. He also refused to report the post-election lies that were circulating during that time. As a result, he was fined, fired, arrested and detained without a court hearing. After finally being released, he fled the country to Switzerland where his asylum was denied. He then travelled to the Netherlands; hoping to find asylum there but was told to go back to Switzerland. While appealing this decision, he was jailed, where he remains today. Someone, writing on his behalf, called on Ethiopians and human rights activists—including the SMNE—to please appeal to the government of the Netherlands for his release and protection.

These are only three of the many heart-wrenching stories refugees have shared with us. For example, there are countless Ethiopian refugees or migrant workers now suffering in North Africa because of the violence, but rather than go back to Ethiopia, they are risking their lives to escape to other countries. Last month, 70 Ethiopians died in Libya after entering into containers they hoped would be transported by trucks to boats on the coast of Tunisia and then shipped to Italy; however, the truck(s) broke down in Libya. The drivers abandoned them and they all perished.

Now, news reports indicate that human traffickers are herding many desperate Africans, caught in the violent conflict in Libya, into overloaded boats; taking their money and possessions as they often put them in perilous situations. Earlier this week, an overloaded boat of 600 migrants capsized off the coast of Libya. Tragically, many of the passengers drowned because they did not know how to swim. Another boat carrying 250 passengers from Tunisia capsized in April. **How many of these victims were our fellow Ethiopians?**

Ethiopians are suffering and dying throughout the world—in the Middle East, in Africa, in Europe, Asia, South America, Central America and Australia. We in the SMNE greatly sympathize with their plight and have attempted to intervene in regards to some of the most pressing refugee concerns in places like Japan, Mexico, Norway, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Djibouti, Kenya, Dubai, Malta, Italy, Libya and Tunisia; however, *the vastness of the problem and the urgency of need is beyond our resources and mandate.*

*The primary task of the SMNE must remain focused on correcting the root cause of their suffering and the abuses in the country that cause so many to risk so much to leave their homeland in the first place—the injustice, human rights abuses, corruption and fomenting of ethnic, regional and religious division by the dictatorial regime of the EPRDF/TPLF. Yet, the difficult circumstances our Ethiopian brothers and sisters are facing cannot be ignored; but instead, should be shared with others like yourselves. We in the SMNE will continue to advocate for refugees, but we need your help!*

*No one is better equipped to help our Ethiopian refugees than you in our own Ethiopian religious institutions and community groups. You already have the organizational infrastructure that could provide humanitarian help, spiritual and emotional support, advocacy work, financial assistance and in some cases, sponsorship. Many of our community organizations, and particularly our religious groups, already have strong mandates to care for the poor, needy, defenseless and oppressed. You should be among the first to help rather than waiting for someone else, like the UNHCR or other non-Ethiopian religious groups or NGO's to do it.*

*Put yourselves in the shoes of these people. Speak for those who have no voice. This is our moral duty. If you are reading this and care for your people, please have this read this in your church, mosque, synagogue or community group. Ask your faith leaders to talk, pray and strategize about what you might do to help. Organize a plan of action within your religious group or community organization.*

*Ethiopia is being held in a stronghold of evil that must be broken down through truth, justice and mercy. People of faith should be the torch-bearers; turning their faith into practical action by ministering to the needs of these Ethiopian brothers and sisters. Religious and community groups have the greatest resources and ability to raise money through which they can respond to various refugee needs in doable ways. Some of our faith organizations have raised thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars to renovate or build a new facility. What would happen if several religious or community groups, from the same or different backgrounds, combined their efforts to help those suffering the most in places like Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Japan.*

*We in the Diaspora should be able to cross bridges of our religious, ethnic or political differences to work together in cooperation; being an example that should replace the destructive divisions between Ethiopians that this government has used to remain in power. It would also enable us to combine resources and expertise to target groups of refugees. With more widespread organization, some could take the lead in greater advocacy or in talking to immigration authorities in the US, Canada or Europe about sponsorship possibilities, which might include raising funds to cover the associated costs of sponsorship or to improve the overall well being of these refugees; wherever they are.*

Most all of us Ethiopians in the Diaspora have come through some hardship ourselves and now that we are safe, we should help others. This is what it means to be a human or a citizen of the same country. *Those we help do not have to come from our own family, ethnic group, region or practice the same religion; they are us—they are our people—for Humanity should Come Before Ethnicity or any other differences if we want a better Ethiopia rather than a beggar Ethiopia that depends on foreign aid.*

*We should be there for them. Their pain should be our pain—for No One Will Be Free Until All Are Free! This is not a political endeavor but is a call to save lives and to minister to the hurting. The refugee problem is now! We cannot wait for the regime to change as a solution to this problem! Instead, with God's help, we can “be our Ethiopian brothers' and sisters' keepers” here and now. As we do our moral duty in this way, we are preparing the road to a New Ethiopia where the God-given rights of all the people are respected.*

Without justice and mercy we have no future as a nation. **May God help us to not turn away from this call or to use politics or division as an excuse to be hard-hearted, un-giving or unwilling to help.** Our refugees and those suffering Ethiopians within the country need our help. Please be our examples and take the next step!

If there is anything we can do to help in this effort, please do not hesitate to contact us! You can call or E-Mail: Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE, Phone (202) 725-1616. E-Mail: [obang@solidaritymovement.org](mailto:obang@solidaritymovement.org)  
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