

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE MUST BE HEARD

An Appeal to the people of Ethiopia from Mr. Obang Metho

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November 6, 2020

To my dear Ethiopian brothers and sisters,

We are presently at a very dangerous impasse due to the military confrontation between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Regional Government of the Tigray region. As a part of the shared family of Ethiopians, I am highly concerned, as are most of you.

A military attack was reported to have occurred on November 4, 2020, when members of the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) attacked the Ethiopian National Defense Forces of the Northern Command, stationed in the Tigray region. It was reported to have included a robbery of the artillery and military equipment of the Northern Command. No casualties have been reported, but few details are yet known.

In response, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a military confrontation by Ethiopian National Defense Forces, asserting in a letter from November 4, that: "war" was necessary *"to save the country and region from spiraling into instability."* Since that time, he reported that federal troops had used military force in the region. Again, few details are known.

In a separate action, the Federal Council of Ministers have decreed a State of Emergency in the Tigray Region for six months and appointed a State of Emergency Task Force, described in a different letter made public on November 4, that the task force was *"to be led by the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, composed of representatives from pertinent institutions and accountable to the Prime Minister."*

This conflict has escalated over disagreements between the Tigray regional leadership and the federal government's leadership under Prime Minister Abiy regarding the latter's decision to delay the Ethiopian National Election, originally scheduled for May 2020, and then moved to August, due to concerns regarding COVID-19; however, the election was again delayed for a non-specified period of time, suggesting the possibility of nine months or more. The present term of the government of Prime Minister

Abiy was supposed to officially end on October 10, 2020, now creating an automatic extension of their power.

The regional government of the Tigray Region challenged this third delay, calling it unconstitutional. Instead, they held their own regional election in defiance of this plan, also calling out the present government as illegitimate and no longer having the authority to rule, following the October date, due to its lack of compliance with the Ethiopian Constitution. In response to what was seen as an illegal election by the Tigray region, the House of Federation, under the present government of PM Abiy, voted to redirect government funding from the Tigray region, worsening the situation and leading the outbreak of military action.

Why are other options of resolving this crisis not tried before military action? Is the escalation to a military conflict, a civil war, the only option to this impasse? Are there not other approaches; like a genuine national dialogue; and other resources, not only government, but especially members of civil society, that could be engaged to address these issues? Where is the effort to help prevent this conflict from intensifying or others from reaching this point?

Yes, some efforts have been made; however, much is at stake and some independent voices of reason from respected members of Ethiopian civil society may be needed to intervene in this power struggle in order to de-escalate the tensions between the federal government and the Tigray regional leadership that have already led to an unwanted war. The fear among many is that this conflict could trigger the destabilization of the entire country, and beyond, setting into motion a tragedy beyond comprehension.

Challenges:

Currently, in Ethiopia, no one trusts each other, and sometimes for good reason. Trust has been repeatedly broken over the years as truth is exchanged for whatever feeds one's self-interest. The lack of trust between the major players in this present crisis is a critical factor, especially when both believe only one can win. To give in or to give up would make only one the winner and the other the loser as there is not any win-win solution at present. At the same time, the Constitution is being used to justify both positions. What voices of reason need to be heard? What process or solutions will lead to the best outcomes? Additionally, this is not the only problem right now in the country; help is needed in many other places.

Too little attention is being given to the widespread ethnic based killing, human rights atrocities and destruction of property being carried out over the last months against our fellow Ethiopians. It is affecting many of our people throughout Ethiopia, from Afar to Oromia, to Benishangul-Gumuz, to the Southern nations, the Amhara region, Harare, Dire Dawa and Gambella. No ethnic-based killing has been reported yet from either the Somali or Tigray regions. Yet, in other places, hundreds of people are dying violent deaths as many are targeted based on their ethnicity or religion. Just this past week, dozens of people, mostly of Amhara ethnicity and Orthodox faith, have been killed. No one should be silent about this. It is clearly wrong and cannot be ignored. Why did this happen? How can it be stopped?

Our current ethnic federalism system is based on ethnicity, stoking division, win-lose politics, injustice, poverty, insecurity and instability. If we based the structure of societal institutions on God-given principles that promote human dignity, as well as on what actually works to produce peace, security, a robust economy and human flourishing, what would that look like? If what creates the first list of difficulties could be changed for the better, why do we not take action on it? Why do we think we must choose the most violent alternative before implementing a variety of approaches that may help us avoid human rights crimes, displacement, civil war and the accompanying destruction that affect our people? We may all lose much more than we can imagine if we fail to address these worsening crises.

Currently, there is no mechanism to provide a venue or structure for strategic dialogue, conflict resolution, meaningful reforms, peace building, reconciliation and the restoration of justice based on shared principles to enhance the lives of all Ethiopians. In fact, our structures, institutions and even our Constitution may actually be used to create divisions and undermine freedom, justice and equality among the people.

The opportunity to create a people-driven mechanism to genuinely address these problems and to bring meaningful change is now. It has been made all the more apparent through the current crises we are facing. During the time period preceding the election; and, as a way to avert a civil war, we, the people of Ethiopia, must act to demand a voice in resolving this crisis and supporting genuine democratic reforms.

In suggesting this, I am presenting a proposal to be explored, examined, criticized and improved upon as a workable alternative before we escalate this conflict into greater violence, destruction and civil war; all of which could lead to Ethiopia becoming a failed state like Syria or Yemen. I hope others will also present their ideas, so together, we can come up with the best course of action for our shared future.

Proposal:

Government alone cannot solve this present crisis, those crises that will follow or those now festering below the surface, waiting to erupt. Civil Society, including our religious leaders, elders, women and youth, must be part of the solution.

I propose the establishment of an independent council of highly respected, non-political and diverse stakeholders, voices of reason and wisdom, all of whom are committed to the basic principles of human dignity, basic freedoms, justice, equal rights and opportunity for all citizens of the country, whose role would be to study, advise and lead an inclusive, people-led movement for the building of a New Ethiopia for all the people. This would include convening a Sovereign National Convention—a national dialogue— where participatory democracy would be advanced to achieve freedom, justice and human flourishing for all Ethiopians.

Conclusion:

The current impasse serves to highlight some of the legitimate issues we face that should not be overlooked until they explode into full scale crises, where those involved seek to resolve potential problems through the use of force and violence, especially when other options may be available. When possible, this should be proactive rather than reactive in nature in an effort to set up principle-based structures that will help us avoid future problems.

The principles of putting *humanity before ethnicity or any other differences*, based on the truth that our Creator has endowed value to every human being, is foundational to a healthy, well-functioning and peaceful society. To this we add the social responsibility to care about the freedom of others, not only because it is right, but because *no one will be free until all are free*. Let us speak up for each other to ensure a better Ethiopia for all of us. This is our vision for a New Ethiopia. This is a voice from the people.

In closing, this recommendation is not new, as it has been proposed by us, the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), from its conception nearly fourteen years ago; yet, due to the current situation, the urgency is all the more clear. The time to move forward is now.

May we seek God's leading at such a time as this. May He also protect the people and land of Ethiopia and beyond. Long live Ethiopia!