

Symposium on Ethiopia Offers New Solutions to the Question: “Where Do We Go From Here?”

Press Release: September 5, 2008

On August 30, 2008, the committee for the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia** held the third event in a series, all geared to mobilize Ethiopians within our society to work together to create a “**New Ethiopia**” where Ethiopians would put **humanity before ethnicity** and where the rights and values of others were held up because **no one can be free unless we all are free**.

In November of 2007, the first event was held to explore the topic: “**Human Rights for Ethiopians in the Next Millennium**,” from the perspective of diverse Ethiopians from all over the country, representing women and men from different regions, ethnic groups, faith backgrounds and political alignments in order to hear the human rights stories of others and from there to start building a movement for a new Ethiopia where our society would respect the human rights of each other.

During the second event, the **Worldwide March for Freedom and Justice**, held May 15-18, the emphasis was on four different events: 1) the commemoration of those who have died during the struggle, 2) organizing marches in the cities and countries around the world to bring greater awareness of the lack of freedom, justice and respect for human rights in Ethiopia, 3) a day to reach out to others and 4) a day of prayer. Ethiopians in 21 different cities and 17 different countries participated.

The goal of this third event, a **Symposium on Ethiopia: “Where Do We Go From Here?”**, was to bring diverse Ethiopians together in a non-political, civic forum to strategize as to how to build the foundation for a new Ethiopia where truth, justice, freedom, the respect of human rights and civility could nourish and enhance the lives of all Ethiopians. The focus of the symposium was not only to bring people together, but to offer a venue to address the question that is on the minds of concerned Ethiopians today, “Where we should go from here?”

We thank God for making this meeting possible and for the remarkable work He has done, blessing us and making it possible for us to hold this meeting despite the obstacles—such as having no budget. It is only by God’s grace that we managed to make this meeting become a successful event and we hope we can now share what we learned with the broader Ethiopian public at home and in the Diaspora.

Our expectation was that more Ethiopians would have come because of the urgency of this crisis, but regardless, more important than attendance is to get the message out as to what must be done to bring about inclusive positive change to Ethiopia. This is the purpose of this press release.

To begin with, it is clear that the crisis we are facing demands more than political solutions—such as a simple change of leadership. Additionally, it is also clear that the implementation of any viable solutions must come from more than those faithful and committed few that attend such meetings, including political meetings.

We understand that some of the people had scheduling conflicts, some hold “loyalties” to only one group and do not attend others, some have withdrawn from their involvement in “Ethiopian issues” due to disillusionment or others have never been involved and find it hard to start.

In some case, Ethiopians from outside the vicinity did not come because they were unable to cover the cost to come. However, we really give thanks to those who did come, especially from distances, like some from Boston, others who drove twenty hours from St. Paul/Minneapolis or those who came from Virginia Beach, Oakland, Florida as well as those from the Washington D.C. area. We also thank the many friends who volunteered to help to make this possible.

The Solidarity symposium was successful, not because of one person, but because of many coming together. We give the credit to those who contributed to its success like Ethiopian radio stations who gave time for it to be announced, like Ethiopian websites that posted information and like those who distributed flyers on the event. It would not have been possible except for the many different Ethiopians from different backgrounds who helped. Their work already displays the kind of solidarity that we need in Ethiopia.

We also give credit to the speakers who came at their own expense like Donald Levine who paid for his own expenses, coming from Chicago. I thank the Ethiopia-Sudan Border Affairs Committee from Columbus, Ohio who paid my airline ticket to Washington D.C. and for the friend who opened up his home for me to stay with him.

We give thanks to those who sent statements of support and opinions as to the direction needed for Ethiopia who were supposed to be speakers, but could not make it. We are most interested in getting the message out as to what we learned and how it can begin to be implemented through different voices, in different ways and in different places.

What Did We Learn?

I will attempt to summarize the substance of the symposium which was to teach and empower the Ethiopian public, creating an institution and a conscious people who could become the watchdog on any government; empowering civic society to teach morality, responsibility, acceptance of each other, to not worship leaders, to not have false pride, to tell the truth and to expose the negative things in our lives and the wrongs of our society that are killing us.

Our Country and People are in Jeopardy

What we learned was that the future looks grim if we fail to collectively stop the downward cycle of our country before it “spins” out of control. Right now, our existence as a people and as a nation is in jeopardy because of the long list of serious problems we are facing—one of the foremost, the ongoing starvation in the country; not only in the rural areas, but in the towns, villages and in our capital city. Combining drought, crop failures, lack of employment and a general lack of financial resources with the skyrocketing inflation has created an urgent crisis where people simply cannot afford food.

In a video recently received from Ethiopia, one man and his wife present a factual portrayal of how difficult life really is for them on a daily basis. They explained that each of them must go hungry every other day so the other can eat. We know that some are less fortunate than these two and are literally starving without any food for themselves or their families. Anyone with family in Ethiopia must know of the increasing number of similar stories about the hardship of Ethiopians at home, stories that are being minimized by our current government and most often, only reported by westerners.

Prior to the symposium, I received calls from Ethiopians from within the country, passionately urging me to please tell Ethiopians in the Diaspora that the lack of food has reached emergency levels and to please do something to help.

The Silence of Ethiopia is Screaming Out to Us for Help

Currently, there is no effective political or civic opposition in place to put pressure on the government to address the crises facing Ethiopians because the government has taken such punitive action towards those who criticize them or who call attention to any problems. We applaud those who are diligently working to do so within Ethiopia because they are so confined by limitations placed on them by the EPRDF that the EPRDF has so far, in effect, paralyzed much—but not all—of what can be done to help from within the country, discouraging the hope of the people for relief or change.

They have made life so difficult in other ways as well—through lack of information coming into the country, through lack of freedom of expression and through distorting and denying any information that finds a way through the filters surrounding this country. It has left the Ethiopian people with no voice but their “**silent screams.**” However, if we listen closely, we might be able to interpret the meaning of their silence so that we and others can understand what it means—repression of life—and become their voice for them. They are depending on us to do far more than what we are doing—to reach out to one another to dialogue, set priorities and to act on their behalf.

We Must Give Up What is Defeating Us

What we learned is that if we want to change the future of Ethiopia, it will require that the average Ethiopian reach out to work with others, but this will never happen if we do not change from the old ways. These old ways are embedded in our tribalistic and feudalistic thinking such as: 1) not talking to each other because you are an outsider to “my” group, 2) putting up obstacles in front of you if you are not from “my” group so you can fail, even when I agree fully or partially with what you are doing, 3) portraying those with whom you disagree, even former friends, as an enemy without any attempt to understand the motivation of the other—like those for or against the armed struggle, 4) by essentially “disowning” others for not agreeing with you, 5) by refusing to listen to others and as a result, never considering that your own position may have flaws, 6) by not taking the higher ground in acting civilly, respectfully and kindly towards others so you lose before you start trying, and 7) by refusing to make reasonable compromises, giving up certain components of one’s position for a bigger or greater cause.

One example is that we can refuse to talk to liberation groups, other political groups, other ethnic groups, Woyane, other religious groups, mainstream groups or marginalized groups, even including women. However, if we want to succeed, we have to find a way to come together to debate and challenge different ideas in the public square. To do so, we do not necessarily need to see things the same way, but we should have an openness to listen, a desire to accept the differences of others and persevere together to a bigger goal—that of seeing all of us free.

Mikael G. Deribe Urged Compromise and the Acknowledgement of Others

Mikael said if we are to move ahead, we must be willing to compromise and acknowledge the opinions of others. He said, “in recent years, we have been hit with cruel ironies left and right that the direction of our struggle has been sort of disoriented and our vision of Ethiopia’s future has been severely blurred.

On one hand, some people say that Ethiopia’s political problem is very complicated and our country will be in trouble for a long time to come! Others have doubted if it is a possible task to solve our insurmountable internal conflict.”

He went on to say, “a substantial number have gone as far as concluding that it is in our nature to live our lives by killing and oppressing each other. In sum, people were led to believe that we Ethiopians are naturally a dysfunctional society that is never ready for constructive and civilized political system thereby incapable of achieving neither democracy nor development for the immediate perilous future.”

He continued to say, “On the other hand, we Ethiopians can never deny and are mindful of the fact that we have never failed to pay the required sacrifice to bring change to our nation. We Ethiopians do have a society filled with altruistic people and we have demonstrated that selflessness just recently in every corner of our nation.”

He continued to say, “Our people have paid their lives in Addis Ababa, in Gambella, in the Ogaden, in Oromia, in Gonder, in Tigray, in Sidamo and other regions of Ethiopia where a hopeful and popular movement was initiated hoping the next generation will live better. However the key question is: despite our past and current sacrifice, why do we still suffer under an oppressive regime? Where exactly did we go wrong?” Please see his complete speech, at <http://www.abugidainfo.com/?p=5803>

Lemlem Tsegaw Speaks of the Crucial Role of Women in Freeing Ethiopia

Lemlem began her presentation by raising four questions: 1) what is the magnitude of Ethiopian women Participation in politics? (Parliament in Addis Ababa as a case in point - 42 women Vs 505 men) 2) Are there obstacles that encumber Ethiopian women from participating in politics? 3) How equipped are the Ethiopian women to compete with the Ethiopian men in the modern political system? 4) What are possible strategies (by role) that increase their participation in politics?

She concludes her talk by saying: “The Ethiopian political condition is quite complex. When we talk about economical hard ship concerning the Ethiopian women we must distinguish among the haves and the have-nots. For instance imagine comparing Azeb Mesfin, the parliament member with a women in Gonder who works in the farm in the day time and at night she must cook to feed her family before going to bed and get early (may be at 5 am) to fetch water from a distant river before she starts her farming duty with a baby in her back”

Lemlem, talked about women’s issues and where to go from a women’s point of view. She said that the issues of women should be raised up because women are at the center of the backbone of this nation and that these issues should be discussed from the perspective of women as well as from men.

Professor Donald Levine

To give an example from Donald Levine’s presentation that he made very clear, he told us that this was only the second time he had attended an Ethiopian meeting. The first time was fifty years ago, also in Washington D.C., and the purpose was to address exactly the same question of, “Where to go from here?” He said, “Apparently, it did not go anywhere” and that is why he came back. He said he was really happy to be there to see if this time, a solution can be found and made to work.

When we invited Professor Levine to speak at this symposium because of his many years of experience, research and dedication to Ethiopia, it was less than two weeks of advance notice and we told him that unfortunately, we did not have a budget to pay him or to pay for his expenses.

He replied to us to say that usually, under these circumstances, he would not accept, but that because Ethiopia was close to his heart, he would consider it and soon after told us he would make it. Yet, some people are saying they did not want to come to the meeting because he was there. He seemed to know this as he warned us before he started into the heart of his keynote speech that “some of you may not like what I am going to say, but I am going to be as honest as I can be in order to best answer this question of this symposium.”

Donald Levine, “There is no one totally innocent group in Ethiopia—all have afflicted pain on others... therefore, Ethiopians should choose the peaceful way of Ghandi or King to become free.”

He went on to essentially say that if we talk about atrocities and oppression within the country, that there is no one totally innocent group in Ethiopia. He stated, “Everyone—Tigrayan, Amhara, Oromo—you name any group—all have inflicted pain on others. Even the liberation fronts that are fighting against oppression, some within them have oppressed their own people or others as well. It would be a lie to say that there is a totally innocent group because if you look at factual history, it will back up these statements.”

He went on to say, “This illusion, where people think Amhara are the privileged, does not play out in reality despite thinking to the contrary. Meles held this thinking when he came marching with the TPLF from the north and voiced it to me in a comment he made in 1992, showing his surprise at the poverty of the Amhara during Mengistu, not knowing how many Amhara were poor until he saw it for himself.”

He continued to say, “All the Ethiopians in the country should be looking at a bigger picture and that bigger picture should be to have a dialogue and to work together. The only way for Ethiopia to be free and for it to be lasting freedom, is to choose the way of Mahatma Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr. where Ethiopians fight together as one people for the freedom of all Ethiopians.

He said he also thought that Ethiopians could learn from Senator Barack Obama who is now a candidate for president of the United States. He said that this kind of opportunity and accomplishment was Martin Luther King, Jr’s dream of forty-five years ago when he led the civil rights movement in America and now it is being realized in this election where one of the prime candidates is African-American.

Levine encouraged Ethiopians to “look and learn from these examples.” He urged, “This is where Ethiopians as a whole—not just the political parties—should go as all Ethiopians should take this opportunity and move forward with it.”

Humanity Before Ethnicity

If I were to summarize the insights of the speakers, as well as what we have learned from prior events that would answer the question: “**Where Do We Go From Here?**”, it is clear if we want to move on to bring about a “**New Ethiopia,**” we must first understand that Ethiopia is only a country because of its people. That means, without its people it would not be a country and what makes people is their common humanity.

Because we are all human beings—even if we are all flawed—we must first respect the dignity and value of the humanity of every person before anything else! The quality of our society can be judged on this basis alone—how we treat the most vulnerable and weak among us! If we succeed in this, we will eliminate the worst of what is destroying us as a country and as a people.

Humanity comes before tribe. What we have come to realize is that **we need to put our humanity before our ethnicity**. We are born a human before we speak the ethnic language of our tribe. For human beings have the commonality of being “human”—we all feel pain the same—we all have blood and need it to live—we all strive for material things that sustain life—food, shelter, clean water, health care and that which enhances life—relationships, an education, employment and some level of prosperity. However, what I have learned is that although all human beings have need of these basic necessities in order to survive as a people and those things that could enhance their lives, these material things are often not distributed in the same way to everyone, unlike how God created each and every human in His image and therefore, of worth.

Our value as an 100% human being has nothing to do with what we do or do not own, with what tribe we do or do not belong to, with what level of education we have or have not attained or if we are physically strong or unable to walk. What we have in common is our humanity. We are neither more nor less human because any of these things. With this in mind, a society that puts humanity before ethnicity is a society that will protect others. Once others are free, everyone is free. It is a natural progression coming out of one’s fundamental thinking.

No one is free until we all are free.

I came to this work because of the massacre of the Anuak, but what I learned, is that the Anuak will not have justice until justice comes to all people. It does not matter how hard I struggle to bring peace, justice, freedom and prosperity to the people of Gambella, it will not be there for them in the long run until it comes to all Ethiopians. We Ethiopians have to put our humanity before our ethnicity. We have to realize that no one of us is free until all Ethiopians are free. This only will free us.

Meles and his supporters are the most un-free of Ethiopians!

Even today, Meles and his supporters who want him to stay in power are the most un-free people in Ethiopia, even less free than the beggars on the streets because for them to go anywhere, they need guns and guards to protect their lives. For Meles to go from his palace to the airport, streets must be blocked and security in place everywhere. Meles is no longer struggling for power, but to survive. The proof is in the increasing control, restrictions and security measures being taken that increasingly infringe on the rights of Ethiopians, only more greatly angering them and re-fueling the fire because of it. Meles must hold the country hostage, an impossible long-term solution to the level of mass outrage emerging.

This is a precarious existence where fear drives actions and the fear from the slightest provocations drive severe reactions. This is not freedom but living in a self-imposed barricade from life that inevitably will fail. Yet, if Meles goes, will we be freed? No! Not unless we are freed people in our minds, hearts and souls for otherwise, Meles will simply be replaced with another ethnically-based group who believe they will be freed by oppressing their perceived oppressors once again.

The same old cycle will start over again, just like Donald Levine said happened in the last fifty years since he first heard the question, at his first Ethiopian meeting, fifty years ago, about, “Where do we go from here?” What will Ethiopians be meeting about fifty years from now? To our shame, I hope it is not a repeat of this same question! We must work together to free Tigrayans for they are among the most un-free! Even though people say that Tigrayans have all the power and are running Ethiopia, I must point out that Tigrayans are the most un-free of people in the country and it is exemplified by the fact that everything in the country is now done by force.

Democracy Cannot be our First Goal

Our first priority cannot be to build a democracy because it will not and has not worked in our society for many of the reasons already mentioned. Instead, we must place it as fifth or sixth on our list of priorities and begin by preparing the ground for democracy so it is fertile and so what we plant takes root.

Our priority should not be overthrowing Meles because with what will we replace him? Instead, our society must have institutions that will represent the people. Such institutions will advance the value of placing humanity before ethnicity, of promoting the freedom of all people and in celebrating our diversity. As of now, we have created a **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia** that advances truth, freedom, justice, the respect of human rights and civility for all.

Creating a Healthy and Humane Society is a Cornerstone of a New Ethiopia

This movement is not a political party movement but it instead is a movement of ideas. It is not a movement to fight for power and control in the country, but it is a movement to teach Ethiopians to accept, value and respect one another, giving people their God-given rights instead of robbing them of them. Once we have these in place, we can have a healthy society. Once we have a healthy society, we will be more able to make those running the government accountable in becoming a healthy government. This is where this movement differs from any political movement for it is a knowledge-based, values-based, bottom-up movement of educating, inspiring and empowering the people to become a society of people who live out these principles on a daily basis.

This Movement is Yours

If you are someone who is hoping for an Ethiopia where there is respect for one another, this movement is yours.

If you are someone who wants an Ethiopia where we celebrate our diversity, this movement is yours.

If you are someone who values the rights and respect of women, this movement is yours.

If you are someone who thinks Ethiopians need to live in harmony with many different religions, this movement is yours.

If you are someone who believes minorities who have been neglected and without opportunity, like those Ethiopians who still live in primitive conditions, walking naked with nothing on and you want to give them an opportunity, tell them that we need them—that they are Ethiopians like us—our own people, this movement is yours.

If you are someone who is unhappy with what is going on in the country, heart-broken by what you are seeing and looking for a way to help, this movement is yours.

This is a movement to empower, educate and transform our thinking and ourselves. If we cannot change ourselves, we cannot change the country. The country is made of people and if we change for the better, we can change the country for the better. This is the foremost answer to the question as to what we must do next.

In the coming days, we will be coming up with some short-term goals and long-term goals. If any of these goals is to be accomplished, we will have to rely on each individual Ethiopian to do their share. **If you are individual who believes these things apply to you, join this movement and start spreading this message around you—humanity before ethnicity and that no one is free until we all are free.**

We cannot afford the luxury of discouragement but must get the word out. This is the way we must go on from here. This movement is not about one person, one tribe, one region, one religion or one class. It is a movement of the people, of humanity and for humanity.

In the Bible, God says what makes us to be a human beings is who we are. He said that the “truth shall set us free” and that “in the beginning was the word and word was God.” This movement is about re-discovering or re-affirming in action, the truth given by God.

Tribes can be for good or can be used as a tool to destroy ourselves. In Ethiopia, it has too often become a means of alienating us from others. Our foremost identity is the one that comes to us at birth and that is as a precious human being created by God. Let us be fully human and give the gift of that same respect for humanity to others. Without it, we will never be a free, healthy, life-sustaining and embracing society. Do your part.

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Or

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