



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

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I want to thank you for inviting me to speak at the Group of 78 Annual Policy Conference. It is wonderful being here in Ottawa, the beautiful capital city of our nation! It is also a great privilege to contribute to this public discussion, especially on a topic that is so important to me, African Instability and the role Canada can play in promoting stability. I am here, standing before you today as a proud Canadian citizen from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, grateful for the abundant freedom, peace, stability and opportunities we enjoy in this country. I am also here as an African who knows firsthand about the instability of Africa.

I realize I am here amongst many very distinguished guests who certainly already know much about the subject; however, I hope I am able to shed some new African light on the subject. I hope that I will be able to give new illumination to a situation that has darkened the future for Africans for many years. I am passionate about Africa's journey towards real freedom, democracy and opportunity. I thank you for giving me the honor of being your keynote speaker.

I heartily applaud the conference organizers for choosing Africa as the focus of this conference. As we become a more globally connected world, what happens on the other side of the globe, will affect us Canadians in ways beyond what we have experienced in the past. Yet, beyond self-interest, Canadians have a reputation for being involved in helping the world become a better place as part of our moral mandate in this world. As we engage in this process, we want our efforts to truly contribute to the accomplishment of worthy goals. This conference is a great way to push forward these intentions and I commend you for choosing this topic.

Unfortunately, I am here before you today because of the lack of stability in Africa. In fact, most Africans who are here in Canada as refugees or new citizens, have come to this country, looking for the security and stability that does not exist in most places in Africa. As a result of that instability, I established a development agency in Ethiopia. Because of that same instability, I had to leave the work of development and become a human rights defender. It is in this capacity that I address you today.

The key question we must try to answer is, what is causing such widespread instability throughout Africa and what can we Canadians do to help? Africa has huge problems, but yet it has huge untapped potential. Africans themselves must be central players in the transformation of Africa, but who comes along side them and how their efforts are carried out, will make all the difference. Canada has all the ingredients to become a strategic partner in the African journey if we come along side our sisters and brothers of Africa in a healthy relationship. This does not mean taking a dominant position, nor does it mean being weak about our principles. In any relationship, even between countries, there must be expectations, good boundaries, honesty and engagement.

From early childhood, the instability of Africa has been part of my life. I am here as a witness, as an African, speaking of what I have experienced. I am a living example of what plagues the hearts, souls and lives not only of those living in Africa, but of those who have migrated to this great land where the stability under which we exist is like the fresh air that sustains us. We do not always think about that air we breathe until we are without it.

That is Africa. I am afraid to say that real stability may not happen in my lifetime, but knowing that there are those in the world like you in the Group of 78 and many other activist organizations, who care about bringing stability to one of the most unstable, neglected, poor continents in terms of education, health care, technology and economic wealth, is enormously encouraging. Africa is unbelievably rich in natural resources. Africa is worth investing in. But the best asset Africa has, is the people-- just ask anyone who has visited, no one returns home without becoming a changed person. We have something of great value to give to each other and to this world.

However, it is critical that we develop a better understanding of the complexity of the factors that affect African instability so that we can better maximize our efforts. Without this understanding, we may actually interfere rather than assist. We may instead sabotage our own good intentions even while investing countless dollars, hard work and resources into Africa, wondering why little seems to change. Many see the chronic poverty, the constant ethnic conflicts, and countless examples of corrupt governments and wonder how these obstacles will ever be overcome. Canadian good will and financial aid has not always produced the kind of success donor countries like ours have hoped for, so what is it that impedes progress? What needs to be done to see real change? I think the case of the Anuak of the Gambella region of Ethiopia and the southeastern region of Sudan may shed some light. I know the case well, as I am an Anuak.

The Gambella area is unlike most any other area of Ethiopia, it is very tropical. Gebre-Ab, the former Minister of Federal Affairs, called the Gambella region the potential breadbasket of Ethiopia, if not of the whole Horn of Africa and extending into the Middle East. We have three planting seasons due to our very fertile soil and plentiful water. We also have abundant gold and other minerals.

In the last few years, it has been learned that indigenous Anuak land also sits on large reserves of petroleum. Unfortunately, the oil and other discovered resources, have catapulted us out of our quiet lives into the chaos and hardship caused when others seek to exploit such natural resources for their own selfish interests, excluding the local people from any benefits. Anuak may have been willing to share their rich resources with others if they could have been part of the decision-making. It is in their nature as a people and as a culture to share. Even their name, Nuak, means sharing and Anuak means people who share.

In the past, the Anuak have not been considered "real Ethiopians" as they are darker skinned Africans rather than the lighter-skinned Ethiopians from the highlands of Ethiopia. In 1902, the British drew a line through the middle of Anuak indigenous land, dividing half of the Anuak in the Sudan and the other half in Ethiopia, in essence, disempowering them as an ethnic group and culture.

Now, the Anuak are considered an endangered people group, numbering about 100,000. The Anuak were neglected for years in this remote, under-developed area of the country, but all of that changed after the Ethiopian government gave Petronas, a Malaysian oil company, the rights to drill for oil on Anuak land. The government wanted the resources, but not the people.

Those Anuak who tried to be involved in the regional decision making, were imprisoned, beaten or otherwise harassed. When Petronas contracted with the Chinese to do the drilling and thousands of Ethiopian National Defense Forces moved into the Gambella region, it all exploded.

On December 13, 2003, in Gambella town in southwestern Ethiopia, members of the Ethiopian military and militia groups went home to home, pulling out the educated Anuak men, hacking them with machetes before Ethiopian Defense troops shot and killed them. Over the course of three days, they sought out, tortured and killed 424 people, burned houses, and scattered families. Since that time, the genocide and crimes against humanity have continued, raising the death toll between 1,500 and 2,500, and causing thousands of Anuak to flee to the Sudan for safety-- how ironic in light of the genocide going on in Darfur that Ethiopian Anuak must seek refuge in that country!

Previous to the December 13 massacre, tensions and small skirmishes related to land issues and regional autonomy did exist between minority groups and between the Anuak and the Ethiopian government. Because of this, the Ethiopian government has claimed that the killings have been a result of tribal warfare. However, never before has the scope of fighting been so cruel or large-scale, and through several separate human rights investigations, it has become clear that the Ethiopian government not only authorized the attacks, but planned them as well. These abuses are being perpetrated by the Ethiopian military under the command of our supposed friend of the West, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia.

Many of the Anuak who have sought refuge in Southern Sudan, remain there, due to fear of being killed, tortured or arrested by Ethiopian defense troops, should they return. There they have been largely neglected by the international community. Those Anuak who remained in Gambella are living in a state of constant fear of being killed, arrested, tortured and detained without charges or raped as it is continuing on a daily basis. It has profoundly affected every aspect of life. In August of this year, thousands of Anuak were forced from their homes and left without food, clean water, shelter and other necessities, creating a manmade humanitarian crisis that is yet unresolved. These abuses have been going on for nearly three years at the hands of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces. If the government is confronted with these human rights abuses, they deny their involvement and blame it on ethnic conflict.

Information has been received from most every major ethnic group in Ethiopia; the Oromo, the Somali, the Amhara and even Meles' own minority ethnic group, the Tigrayans, that these abuses are widespread throughout the country and are being perpetrated towards any who dissent or protest the actions of the EPRDF government. Thousands of human rights advocates, journalists and political leaders are imprisoned, cutting off the proven mobilizers in civil society from challenging the regime's control. Censorship has even reached to international websites that criticize the current leadership. There is no such thing as freedom of speech in Ethiopia.

The last national election in 2005 was a sham that international observers condemned for not meeting international standards despite claims to the contrary by the ruling party. The Opposition Party had surprised everyone by doing so well that even after winning every Parliamentary seat from the capital city of Addis Ababa except one unchallenged position, the current regime claimed they won the election. Now, those Opposition leaders who most believe won the election, are imprisoned on absurd charges of genocide and treason even though it was this regime that planned and perpetrated the massacre of the Anuak and are deeply involved in widespread human rights violations.

Meles Zenawi is terrorizing his own people, but little public attention has been given to it due to donor countries in the West having a longstanding relationship with him. Why does the West despise the tactics of the Sudanese government of Omar Bashir in Darfur, but have a close relationship with Meles Zenawi when both are terrorizing their people? Why are Bashir and Zenawi apparently so close, causing them to fly back and forth between Addis Ababa and Khartoum? It does not make sense! They are both enemies of democracy and of their people.

For us Canadians to join forces with Meles only makes us part of holding up a regime that is guilty of incredible atrocities. This is not what Canadians stand for and as we speak out against Darfur, let us not be guilty of colluding in another genocide across the border. It is no wonder why Meles has never spoken out against the genocide in Darfur even though the headquarters of the African Union are located in Addis Ababa.

How can we partner with someone who is known as the silent killer amongst Ethiopian citizens, yet because he speaks the words of democracy and development, we are either fooled or lulled into accepting his false reality because of our own interests in Ethiopia? He is creating a backlash in Ethiopia that has the potential of not only destabilizing the entire country, but also other countries in the Horn of Africa. He is contributing and some believe, creating conflict on the borders of Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya. Ethiopia is currently unstable and repressive. As it attempts to control the majority of Ethiopians who oppose this government, it is using increasing force, further fomenting the political resistance of the people and making it a potential powderkeg.

Yet, because PM Meles speaks the words of democracy, he has not been held accountable by most of the donor Western countries, including Canada. After the suspected hijacking of the National Election of 2005, over a hundred unarmed Ethiopian protesters were shot in the head while protesting the fixed election. Now the leaders are imprisoned and there is no real pressure for the release of these elected Parliamentarians coming from the free countries which are founded on strong democratic principles. We should be speaking out on their behalf.

Right now, 90 % of Ethiopians do not want this government. It is being held up by brute force and intimidation, but recently, even significant key military leaders and others in the government are defecting, not wanting to hold up this repressive regime any longer. Canada should take notice and not participate in holding up an unstable government whose pervasive daily practices are anti-thetical to most every value we stand for as Canadians in a free society.

If Canada could assist in a peaceful transition towards democracy building, it could help prevent Ethiopia from the possibility of it becoming a failed state. As we know, failed states are hotbeds for potential terroristic involvement that can have far-reaching effects. We must encourage, not inhibit, the Ethiopian people on their journey towards freedom, justice and democracy.

We hear glowing stories of development coming from the current government, but the people have no idea where this development is going on because it is not benefitting the vast number of Ethiopians. While the open hand for more aid is constantly in front of donor countries, anti-development practices and the destruction of previous infrastructure is occurring. In Gambella, schools, health clinics, wells and granaries were purposely destroyed. As George Ayittey, the African economist from American University has stated, Africa is being run by corrupt leaders who create "vampire states" where they attempt to hold onto power at any cost as their hands are covered in the blood of their own people. Instead of investing in the people, they have become exploiters, becoming wealthy as their people suffer increasingly more.

The 2005 Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) rankings report was released this week in Geneva by the World Economic Forum (WEF). It shows that out of 125 rated countries, Ethiopia declined in its position, already nearly at the bottom of the scale, going from 116 in 2004, to 120 in 2005. With the billions of dollars this regime has received from the West, something is gravely wrong. Ethiopia ranks 133 out of 157 countries on the 2006 Index of Economic Freedom and ranks in the bottom five of the poorest countries in the world. Something is seriously amiss. Donors have failed to make sure that the aid and investments that are made, really reach the people. We need to demand far more transparency and accountability. Giving large amounts of funds to the central governments of known corrupt countries will never reach the intended recipients and in fact, may be used to further repress them. For certain, the vast military arm of the Ethiopian power structure is taking precious dollars away from the people.

Investments are welcomed by corrupt leaders regardless of the social costs to the people. Again, take a look at the oil development in the Gambella region. The two companies involved, Petronas of Malaysia and Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau (ZPAEB), are the same companies involved in the Sudan. As ZPAEB set up their drilling operations on Anuakland, they set up a parallel privileged economy with clean water, air-conditioning and other luxuries, right next to the neighboring Anuak whose means of livelihood had been destroyed. China, who has a poor record of human rights in their own country, cannot be expected to hold to higher standards in another country where it has its eyes on the oil. Some have identified the interest of other global countries in the natural resources of Africa as being an "African fever." Countries and multi-national corporations involved in Africa must exercise high moral standards so that the continent is not ravaged and exploited, leaving nothing for the people.

Instead, as Thomas Friedman said in a recent article entitled, "Discover India before getting hooked on China," he exhorts countries like in Latin America and Africa to become better at mining its people rather than mining its resources. Even though natural resources have a part to play in any expanding economy, he warns that "countries that get addicted to selling their natural resources rarely develop their human resources and the educational institutions and innovative companies that go with that. So after the ore has been mined, the trees cut and the oil pumped, their people are actually even more behind."

He calls on countries who want to get into global-scale business to do a better job teaching English, to eliminate antiquated legal red tape that interferes with doing business within one's own country and with others and for improved computer training. He believes countries tend to do either one or the other, "developing human resources or selling natural resources." When a country is mostly unfree, repressive and corrupt, guess which model is chosen!

Africa has become a continent known for its vast problems. Colonialization may have contributed to setting up a system where African leaders want to rise to the top, exploit the people and enjoy the life of luxury while their people suffer. As the other ethnic groups are oppressed, they rise up in revenge, thinking that it is "our turn to eat." This cycle must stop. With a more global economy and the explosion of the information age, Africans are wanting change. They want to become part of the new global economy. Now, to do so, most want to leave their countries and go to the free societies in the West-- what a tragedy for Africa. Yet, until peace, stability, education and economic opportunity comes, this exodus will continue.

In order to accomplish entry into the global market, we must decolonize Africa from African leaders who exploit and terrorize their own people while having a hand out to donor countries so as to enrich their own power and coffers. The average Africans are overwhelmed with daily survival needs and the after-effects from living in cultures of violence and trauma that these leaders create and perpetuate. Healing must come and it affects every sphere of functioning from the physical, the mental, the social to the spiritual. Africans must realize that most of the effort must come from Africans who are unwilling to live under these conditions any longer. It must come from Africans who are unwilling to leave it as a legacy to their children or other peoples' children. Africans must get out of the victim mentality and do what each person can do to create a freer society in their country and continent.

Africans no longer can see themselves as victims, but realize that they can be the visionaries, entrepreneurs and mobilizers that can create a more stable and flourishing Africa. But to do this, Africa needs good governance. We need the rule of law, decentralization, transparency and accountability. We must uphold the truth. We must tear down the false realities that cover up human rights abuses, exploitation of the weak and the greed of our leaders. We must make moral choices not "politically correct choices" where others are sure to suffer. We must enforce justice fairly and uniformly rather than through bribes, political influence, intimidation or through taking it into our own hands and seeking violent revenge. We must escape from the cycle of violence and abuse that holds us hostage, killing us while we remain silent. We must reach out to other ethnic groups and countries, valuing their people as children of God. We must value human beings rather than live in a culture of death that dehumanizes each and every one of us. We must realize that ultimately, God holds us responsible for the moral decisions we make or fail to make.

Those of you in this room can contribute to the rise or fall of stability in Africa. Theories are only worthwhile if they work in real life situations. Canadians naturally will have some self-interests in investing in Africa. That is okay and expected; however, we should expect partnerships that have benefits and expectations on both sides, not dependent relationships or exploitive relationships.

These relationships should not contribute to upholding a lie-- we cannot be silent. If Canada is to play a role in the recovery and transformation of Africa, we must promote the truth. We must come up with a concrete plan based on the truth or our efforts will backfire or be swallowed up in a huge black hole that is never satisfied.

No development aid will work without good governance. We must not be afraid to enforce our conditions. We must not be afraid to confront the leaders who only use the words of democracy, but fail to put it into practice. We cannot join with corrupt leaders in their games of pretending, otherwise, the compassion we have as Canadians may be used against the innocent without us even realizing it. We must speak out against human rights abuses. We must speak out for prisoners of conscience who are only in prison for speaking out. We must speak out against regimes like the current EPRDF government of PM Meles Zenawi which is the opposite of a democracy.

In the press, we cannot rely on the "government's spin" when the cries of oppressed people are coming from the ground. As NGOs, we cannot be so afraid of being kicked out of the country that we join with the oppressor, repressing the truth. At times, for real systemic change, we may have to take a difficult stand. We may actually suffer consequences for doing so, but on the other hand, a more passive approach, with little accountability demanded, has been a failure. In order to tackle the big threats to Africa, like HIV/AIDS, poverty and corruption, we cannot ignore those leaders and institutions that keep the systems in power.

When thousands of students, protesting the fixed Ethiopian National Election were detained in military camps, many reported having their heads shaved with a dull razor that was used for countless Ethiopians, raising a real fear that they would be exposed to HIV. Anuak being detained in Gambella are forced to receive an injection of something unknown. They are greatly alarmed, thinking the injection may expose them to HIV. At the same time, this government is asking for money to fight the serious HIV/AIDS problem. We Canadians should not be part of holding up such leaders, but should hold them accountable. We cannot be silent. We must revere the truth as without it, Africa will fail.

Let us Canadians take up this strategic tool of truth that can break through the charade of deception that undermines all other efforts. I am hopeful that out of this conference will rise the moral conviction and the strength of will and action needed to contribute to making Africa a partner, not a project, in this new global world.

Thank you for allowing me to share these views with such an esteemed group.