

Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Oromo Community in Minnesota and Asks the Question: If Woyane Can Unify, Why Can't We?

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By Mr. Obang Metho

I was invited by our Oromo brothers and sisters through the Oromo-American Citizens Council to speak at the Second Annual International Oromo Human Rights Conference on “Conflict in East Africa and the Current Human Rights Situation.” I was to address the subject of human rights violations in Ethiopia with a special focus on the Anuak as well as to assess the risk of genocide and further human rights violations against other ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa.

I was very pleased to participate because I am fully committed to speak up for the betterment of the Oromo, who I know have been the targets of countless human rights abuses for many years, based on their ethnicity and the desire of each consecutive government to subdue and control this largest of ethnic groups, accounting for 40% of all Ethiopians. These abuses include extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, disappearances, false imprisonment and threats and intimidation along with more subtle forms of repression reflected in the lack of health services, infra-structure and access to economic, political and educational opportunities.

I was very aware that like the Anuak in the Gambella region, our Oromo neighbors, whose land nearly surrounds us, have suffered so greatly that many Oromos have formed a liberation front and have sought for their independence from Ethiopia in self-protection and in a desire for self-determination. Even though I personally believe in a non-violent solution to the crisis we face, I also would have been very willing to come if the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) had been the ones to invite me to speak as I understand how committed they are in working for the betterment of the Oromo after suffering so greatly and for so many years—first under Haille Selassie, then Mengistu and now under Meles Zenawi! This kind of government that destroys large segments of its own civil society in order to advance their own self-interests, cannot continue and we must look for immediate solutions.

I thank the Oromo political and civic groups for giving me the privilege and honor of presenting my own views on how I believe this war for freedom, justice, equality and unity can be fought. As I make my comments, I do not speak as an expert, an elder or as an Oromo scholar who has been studying this for years.

I know that some of you may disagree with me, but this should not interfere with us continuing to struggle together to find common ground where we can work together. We must recognize the truth that as humans, none of us is ever 100% right—only God can be that. I accept that limitation myself so that I may also be open to others as well, just like I am asking of you.

We can easily agree when the Oromo tell us that they have been colonized, hated and enslaved within Ethiopia. We can also agree when the Oromo tell us that they have been denied their rights and called Galla— or slaves, across the country, just like the Anuak or the other darker-skinned ethnic Ethiopian people have been called Baria—or slaves. It is not even necessary to debate this as everyone knows it and these people know it better because they are the ones who have felt the pain! However, if we focus on the past too much, we can never move on as we will never forgive or let go of many justifiable reasons for our anger.

On the other hand, if we forget our past, we will repeat it as we will never learn from our mistakes. Both can lead to a destructive cycle of oppressing or being oppressed—exactly what we have been living with for many years and centuries. Neither option will ever free us. Instead, the question for today is—how can we move on without forgetting, finally getting out of this downward cycle and moving on? I think this conference is a good starting place to have this discussion and this is why I look forward to talking more with you.

After I arrived in the Twin Cities, I met for supper with a number of leaders in the Oromo community, along with non-Oromo westerners. It also was my first opportunity to meet the former President of Ethiopia, Negasso Gidada, an Oromo himself who grew up in Dembedollo about 45 kilometers from Gambella and who is now an elected independent parliamentarian from that area. We all talked, not about politics, but about life in general.

The next day, we went to the rally—“Oromia Shall Be Free,” sponsored by the International Oromo Youth Association with support from other groups as well. The purpose of the rally, as they stated in their literature, “was to address the injustices and hidden ethnic cleansing directed at the Oromo” and “to get fair and balanced media attention on the situation of Oromo refugees in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.” When I arrived at the rally, close to a thousand Oromos were already walking by the Minnesota State Capital building.

Several things really struck me. First of all, I was impressed with the number of people and their signs. The signs read: “No Justice in Ethiopia,” “Ethiopian Government Persecuting Oromo,” “Genocide of Oromo,” “No Peace in Ethiopia,” “No Freedom in Ethiopia,” “Meles is a Terrorist and Should Not Be Supported by the US Government,” “TPLF Government Persecuting Oromo Students,” and many, many more signs. I had seen many similar signs at other rallies by Ethiopians in Canada, in the United States and in Europe, but what was very absent was any sight of the Ethiopian flag, even though Ethiopia was repeatedly referred to in the signs as not having peace, justice or freedom.

Instead, most everyone had an Oromia flag and most signs were written in English. In addition, I was struck by the fact that there were only Oromo present at the rally. I did not see anyone from any other Ethiopian ethnic groups.

As the majority of Oromo youth leaders began to speak, it was mostly in Oromiya, but I could still understand parts of it, but not as easily as I understand Amharic. However, because this is the language of the majority ethnic group of Ethiopia and because the Oromo people are our neighbors to Gambella, this language is high on my list to learn and to master in the future.

Following the speeches from the youth leaders, one of the majority leaders of the Minnesota State Legislature spoke. He said, and I paraphrase, “We will work with you to make sure that justice comes to your homeland. We hear your voice. The people of Minnesota will stand by you until you gain freedom and justice in your homeland, just like you enjoy here... We don’t want the Oromo to only have peace and justice in Minnesota or in the US, but we want you to have peace and justice in your home country of Ethiopia.” At this point, a good number of people in the audience corrected him and said, “Don’t say Ethiopia, say Oromia!” He then corrected himself and said, “Africa,” but never said Oromia.

I then was introduced to speak. The following is a synopsis of my two addresses, the first at the rally and the second as a panel member at the meeting. I have also included some additional thoughts I wanted to clarify.

“Thanks to the Oromia community for inviting me to say a few words. I came all the way from Canada to be here with you today. Some of you may wonder why I am here. The reason is because of the injustice in Ethiopia and above all, I am here as one of you—to be with my people. As I have said many times, you are my people because when I say “my people,” it does not mean only Anuak, but it means all the people of Ethiopia.

Most of you may not know how I got involved in human rights. It was not a plan, but it was a reaction to a horrific event when the Ethiopian government defense forces killed Anuak people in the Gambella region. I was very close to many of those who were massacred and since this time, I have been compelled to do what I can to change the system that is responsible for these atrocities, the current EPRDF government of Ethiopia!

Many Anuak have fled for safety to Sudan or Kenya, but the truth is, we are citizens of a country that does not have the right to kill and oppress my fellow Anuak or any other of its citizens and I want to do my best to make sure they did not die in vain. Why is this my approach?

Because they had lived in Gambella and then were killed in Gambella! Where is Gambella? It is inside of Ethiopia. Who killed them? The government of Ethiopia! So today, all of you who are here to protest the killing of your people, I ask you—where were your people killed? In Oromia. Where is the Oromia region? It is in Ethiopia. Who killed them? The government of Ethiopia!

Whether we like it or not, the killing, suppression and oppression of our people within Ethiopia has united us as one against a government that is killing Oromo, Anuak, Banishangul, Welayta, Shekicho, Tigrayans, Amhara, Afar, Sidamo, Ogadenes and we can work together not only against the evil system held up by the current EPRDF government, but also to prevent others just like it from rising up, believing it is “their turn to dominate the rest of us.”

After all, Woyane are not only Tigrayans, but there are Woyane from every Ethiopian ethnic group. The Woyane have succeeded in unifying, much better than have we, but for all the wrong reasons! For instance, there are Oromo Woyane, Anuak Woyane, Amhara Woyane, Sidamo Woyane, Ogaden Woyane and so forth who then rule over their own people as members of the EPRDF.

The same thing was accomplished under the previous government of Mengistu. The Dergue was portrayed as being dominated by Amhara, but in fact, there were Dergue “puppets” and sympathizers from most every ethnic group who were then used to advance the control of Mengistu.

On the other hand, we know that there are many Tigrayans, Amhara, Afar, Sidamo, Banishangul, Ogadenes and so on in each of these and other groups who would make excellent neighbors, community members, friends or even family members let alone colleagues in this struggle for freedom, justice, equality and peace! But some of us have never been even introduced to each other before, like those in the Ogaden or Afar regions who did not even know the Anuak existed! They are more like us than those who call themselves Anuak or Oromo, but perpetrate injustice against us as Woyane members.

If Woyane can unify, why can the rest of us not unify, especially when we consider how our blood is already mixed through centuries of intermarriage with many in our Ethiopian or even African or Middle Eastern families!

Why should we not learn from our oppressors who seek supporters from every ethnic group in order to gain power and control over us! The Woyane are working very hard to make us forget that the blood we will pass on to our future generations cannot be tested for its ethnicity—it will only show itself as being the blood of humanity!

For example, here I am as an Anuak, speaking to Oromo about an issue very critical to both of us—human rights abuses being perpetrated against us by the government of Ethiopia and its supporters. If we were in Ethiopia, what we are doing right now would be impossible. Our unity of purpose would be very threatening to the government and they would want to stop us.

Some of us, regardless of whether we were Anuak or Oromo, would not make it home from here. By now, many might be dead or arrested because Ethiopia is not like Minnesota. Ethiopia is a country where you are not allowed to peacefully protest like you are now doing in front of the capital building of this great state.

Brother and sister, we have more in common to unite us than do we have differences that divide us. If we concentrate on that commonality, we could free our people and our country. For so long, the people of Oromia have suffered a great deal and the suffering of the Oromos did not just start after the May election of 2005. In fact, the struggle of the Oromo started before I was even born, in 1972, when the OLF was formed as a way to resist the human rights abuses against your people being perpetrated by the government. Now it is under the government of Meles.

An example of injustice against the Oromo even came out of the genocide of the Anuak when six Oromo soldiers were falsely blamed for the massacre of the Anuak in December of 2003 even though they were stationed no place near to Gambella until months after the killing when they were moved to the region. They were considered discardable scapegoats for the EPRDF. I was incensed at this injustice. In addition to the Oromo being falsely blamed, so were our Gambella brothers and sisters, the Nuer, and even other Anuak when the blame should rest with the EPRDF!

I know about your suffering and that you are fighting against its root cause—the injustice being perpetrated against you by the EPRDF. So are the Anuak doing the same as are countless other individual groups. I want you to know that in your fight that you need not fight alone. I will fight along with you, at your side. However, we need more Ethiopians to come along side of us to fight with us against this injustice that is oppressing, suppressing and killing Ethiopians all over the country.

Our history indicates that we have been isolated from each other, fighting the same opponent, but doing it alone. We have been doing it haphazardly and mostly ineffectually, from many various fronts. The evidence of our frustration is in the many years of our struggle. As long as we fight our battles alone, we will not win the war. Instead, we are not only prolonging the suffering of our people, but we are actually contributing to the destruction of everyone who lives in Ethiopia. We know that what this government fears the most is unity within our ethnic groups and unity among differing ethnic groups.

Think what could happen if the Oromo, being the majority ethnic group, became united as one so you could speak with one voice. You could possibly bring this government to the end by yourselves. However, think about what could happen if the Oromos joined with other ethnic groups! Our victory could be more certain than ever.

Think what it will take to sustain that victory for the future generations who we would want to live in peace and harmony with their neighbors. To win such a battle for lasting justice, we have to first think differently and then do things differently. This is what I'm going to talk about now.

When the Anuak were killed in 2003, most of the Anuak who lived in Minnesota came to protest in front of the Minnesota State Capital, just where you are standing today. The truth is, there were no Oromo or any other Ethiopians from other ethnic groups standing by their side.

Today, when you are rallying here, I see that most all of you are Oromo. Yet, we know that as we speak, others—from most every Ethiopian ethnic group—are being killed today such as our Ogaden brothers and sisters. After we rally today, we will go home, but tomorrow the Ogadenis may be standing in our place—alone, without support from others suffering in the country.

A series of protests by individual groups will not have close to the same impact that we could accomplish if we were all standing here together at the same time—united by our common humanity rather than divided by our ethnicity or from what region we come. We should be united by our Ethiopian-ness and our African-ness!

I know that some of you here might not be happy about what I am saying because from looking out at you, I cannot see one single Ethiopian flag, but only Oromia flags. There is nothing wrong with the Oromia flag at all, but we are missing the big picture by not having an Ethiopian flag here. Even if Oromia some day is going to become its own country, until it does, it is still within the borders of Ethiopia. To those people who do not know where Oromia is and what this flag represents, it will be very confusing, especially as you urge westerners to replace your country name, Ethiopia, with Oromia while still carrying placards that call for freedom in Ethiopia. .

I am not disclaiming the horrific injustices that have been done to the Oromo people, but there is another way we can approach this. An example is to have an Oromo flag as well as an Ethiopian flag for I believe that what has happened in Ethiopia cannot be solved by isolating ourselves from Ethiopia as a whole. Ethiopia is like a hut in which we live. If we get hurt inside our hut, we do not have to burn down the entire hut or abandon it, but instead, we work to change or move the thing that hurt you inside the hut.

In other words, we do not have to give up on Ethiopia itself, especially now when so many within the country are calling for substantial change. If Oromos add their voice to that of many others, Oromos and others may be able to accomplish shared goals that would otherwise be impossible.

Admittedly, we have a lot of work to do to change our situation, but the spirit of discontent is spreading across the country and many are motivated in ways never seen before. We need to work hand in hand with other Ethiopians in acknowledging either the wrongful acts committed against us or the wrongful acts we have committed to others so we can reconcile and live in harmony with each other. Most of us have good reasons to run away and isolate ourselves, but is that the best plan?

For instance, when I was in Ethiopia, I could not count how many times I have been called Baria—or slaves but that did not lead me to go somewhere where I would not be called Baria. Just because I am called Baria, should I give up my rightful place and run away? I say no. The reason is that I believe I should instead educate those people who do not know the equality of all humanity and that degrading others comes out of their own sense of inadequacy, not mine.

As I have said before, a garden with only one color of flower will never be as beautiful as a garden with a rainbow of colors. I must make an effort to win their minds in this way. This is the same in America where we have African Americans who were enslaved, but they wanted to figure out how to free themselves and yet how to continue to live together.

The problem of Ethiopia is not with the flag, the soil, the mountain, desert, or the hills; it is with the thinking and actions of Ethiopians who should not be able to bully everyone else like an abusive husband or father who pushes his family out of their legitimate home. Such an abuser needs to be stopped and held accountable.

It is time for the oppressed people to confront the bullies and exploiters of Ethiopia, no matter what ethnic group, region or political party they represent, even our own. Unfortunately, it is easy for the oppressed to become the next oppressors. Instead, we need to address the root problem of injustice by creating an attitude that values and includes all people and groups as valuable members of our society. To do this, we must uphold the rule of law and policies that protect us from ourselves.

We must understand the preciousness of each person inside or outside of our groups while acknowledging the potential for evil and selfishness within each of us so that we can more honestly, fairly and equitably administer a society that provides for the protection and rights of all people and groups as equal under the law.

To my brother and sister, some of you may not like what I just said, but that is okay. I feel that the only way we can improve this situation is to be honest with our ideas and to not avoid having these controversial discussions. Through them we might come up with better solutions. As we do, let us love and embrace each other as God would have us do. What Ethiopia needs is not more hatred or division, but more love, respect and acceptance. We have much to correct and much to forgive.

We have many damaged relationships that we can repair if we are willing to start reaching out to those people who have hurt us or put us down or to those whom we have hurt. I have been hearing more and more people agree that what we need is a new Ethiopia—a better Ethiopia than the Ethiopia of today. To build this kind of country, like I have already said, it will require a new thinking and some compromise. Each of us will have to give up some of the things after which we have strongly sought.

For instance, the world we live in has become more of a shared world where the walls between groups are being broken many shared economic interests, improved technology and increased communication with the world outside our national borders. Many are forming new coalitions and partnerships for their mutual benefit.

We must ask ourselves whether it is in our best interests to further isolate ourselves from others. For self-protection it may be better in order to survive, but if we can join together and correct what is threatening our survival, we may be able to come up with something far superior to retreating inward.

We can learn from America where fifty states have become one country or from Europe where many countries that used to fight and kill each other have now become a union with a shared common values, interests and even a common money—the euro. Together, as united people groups, they have become a louder and more powerful voice in the world.

I believe that the Ethiopia of tomorrow must be along these lines. That Ethiopia must be one where no one ethnic group claims they are more Ethiopian than the other. Any who live within the borders have equal claim based on the Ethiopian soil upon which they live, not because they are a member of any one dominant ethnic group like Amhara, Tigray or Oromo. We are all Ethiopians. We are all Africans. We are all human beings. We should be concentrating on that.

Our action should emphasize not only overcoming ethnic divisions but as well substituting a new identity a Pan-African bond whereby all peoples consider themselves as being inextricably linked to the earth of Africa. It is Mother Africa which defines us and gives us a sense of place not the lines on a map demarcating Ethiopia. Until people shed the nation-state reference in Africa, divide and rule and playing off one group against another will prevail.

After all, original man and woman came from Africa and then peopled the world. We are not Ethiopians, rather we are Africans. What we are seeking is not a new regime but for the first time an African status independent of any particular government or nation-state. It is our African-ness which unites us not the lines of Ethiopia on a map. Our leaders should not divide Africans from themselves. To be African is to be unified automatically.

If we want to survive as a people, we have to put our humanity before our ethnicity. This is the only way we can become greater people and a greater country. To accomplish this, you have to start by loving and accepting yourselves as God loves you so that you can better love your families, your communities, your ethnic group, your country and all of humanity as equally worthy of God's love and care. We can defeat all this injustice only with one weapon and that weapon is love.

Know that others may not understand this principle and instead believe that in order to survive, that they must dominate others for their own self-interests so as to fill their empty hearts and souls with things that will never satisfy. Instead, we are called to love God and to love others as we do ourselves. In the future, will we cry only for ourselves or will we join with others in their grief, helping them to overcome the source of their suffering?

I believe this is the only way to stop a government who triumphs over us by singling each of us out, fighting us one at a time? Instead, we must join together, caring for each other. This is what Ethiopia lacks. This is what Africa lacks.

Go home and make a difference in someone else's life. This is a duty that God has given to each of us. An individual acts can add up to big actions for change. Be activists and agents for positive change. Be informed and challenged the evil system of destruction. Look forward with hope. Be inspired and trust the Movement for New Ethiopia.

This world is temporary. Do not live as if it is the end. Show others how to live life well. This world has so much injustice, but few who are willing to become fighters for justice, not only for themselves, but for others as well. You have a choice how you will live during the limited days God has given to you. Will you continue to be divided and to have hatred towards your Ethiopian brothers and sisters or will you use these days to make a positive difference to our children and grandchildren, trusting in God to guide you?

Africa is known as the Dark Continent where we kill each other in vengeance for our suffering or where we exploit our neighbor when given our turn at power.

At the time of the massacre of the Anuak, I was living in Canada and had started the Gambella Development Agency in an effort to help bring new development to the Gambella region. In addition to relatives and friends, many of those Anuak killed were people with whom I had been closely working.

When I called the US State Department to alert them to what was going on, the woman who answered passed off my urgent request for help as she told me, "People are been killed in Africa all the time! Africans are killing each other all over the continent! We can't do anything!" She then hung up the phone. Seven minutes later, I called her again and she said, "Why are you calling me again?"

I can tell by your accent that you're the same person." I told her there were US citizens in the midst of the killing. All of a sudden, her attitude totally changed and she was asking me to help her locate all the necessary information to send in US Marines who later intervened on their behalf of these American citizens!

Now, we can be upset with her focus on the citizens of her country—Anuak Americans—or with her negative impression of Africa, but rather than waste our time responding to that, we must each ask ourselves some questions. How are we contributing to prolonging this image of Africans as being people who kill or are killed, who exploit or are exploited, who oppress or are oppressed?

More importantly, we must ask ourselves how we can stop it. Let us be people who God can use to change Ethiopia into a new Ethiopia and a new Africa. We cannot wait and hope someone from the outside will do it for us. It is up to us, with God's help!

We can learn a lot from the biblical story, the children of Israel are in exile in Babylon, defeated and demoralized. Nehemiah goes to King Artaxerxes of Babylon, the foreign king under whose rule the children of Israel have had to live. Nehemiah reports, "... So the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste and its gates have been destroyed by fire?'" Nehemiah asks permission to rebuild Jerusalem. Upon receiving it, he goes to Jerusalem and gathers the Survivors still in and around the city. "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem (Ethiopia and Africa of today) lies in ruins with its gates burned down. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem (Ethiopia and Africa), so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." "So they committed themselves to the common good". Nehemiah 1-2.

This is the prophetic call after the exile. The Jewish people are dispersed. They have no land and no home; this is the beginning of the rebuilding of their ancient city. What is the relationship to our situation in Ethiopia or Africa? Ethiopians or Africans have sacred land and home overflowing with brutality, hatred, lies, death, pain and destruction and this is the beginning of the rebuilding of their ancient land of Africa, the birth place of humanity.

I leave you (my fellows Ethiopians or Africans) with this challenge. How should you and I respond for the betterment of all the people of Ethiopia so justice overflows from East to West, from South to North parts of this ancient land of Ethiopia and then comes back to bless and support us all? The choice is ours and the time is now!

May God bless the Oromo people and enable you to become soldiers of love, justice, equality, peace and unity!

Thank you.

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