



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Open Letter to Ethiopian Concerning Starvation: Are we so absorbed in our own lives or groups or in competition with others that pity for the less fortunate has disappeared from our souls?

September 26, 2008

Dear Ethiopian:

I am addressing this letter to every Ethiopian, especially those in the Diaspora. A huge and urgent food crisis is endangering the lives of countless Ethiopians back home and we must wake up to the reality of it or millions of lives will be lost!

We all know about it! The tragic images are everywhere. Those traveling back home bring back horrible accounts of the hardship and hunger of our people. We can read the reports from NGO's and western reporters in the news and on websites. We have no excuse for not knowing!



An Ethiopian baby is watched over by her mother at a medical center run by Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) in the town of Kuyera on September 2. Aid organisations say Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country, is on the brink of famine akin to those of the 1980s, when millions of people died. Source: AFP

Why then is there such a lack of response from most Ethiopians? Where is the engagement of multiple individuals or organizations into a large and effective group effort? Why is there such a resounding silence and the lack of any collective action?

What is wrong with us? Do we not care? Are we so absorbed in our own lives or groups or in competition with others that pity for the less fortunate has disappeared from our souls? Are our minds so disconnected from our hearts that no amount of the reality of their situation will overwhelm us with sympathy towards our people? Do we justify inaction by stubbornly holding on to weak excuses for not helping?

It is close to one year since we first heard that 11 million people needed food and since that time, the seriousness of the situation has worsened even though the numbers of those in jeopardy keep changing. Now we hear that the starvation could be worse than what happened in 1984, but there is no response from those in charge of our government. The American economy is in crisis and you can see how hard the government and institutions are working in order to find solutions, but there appears to be nothing similar going on in Ethiopia during one of our worst ever crises.

The United Nations is appealing for \$460 million dollars to help feed starving Ethiopians. The U.S. and the U.K. are also making plans to contribute along with other international organizations who are pleading for funds to meet the needs of starving Ethiopians, but it bothers me that we are not hearing the same urgent pleas from Ethiopians outside the country. This is what is motivating me to write this letter.

Why are non-Ethiopians working harder than we are? Why should they care about our people if we do not care enough to share? Why do we expect others to do the work for us like we are incapable of doing anything ourselves? Are we only victims who constantly have to be taken care of by “leaders” or “outside beneficiaries” as if we were a culture of children?

How can we live in such a delusion of being “proud Ethiopians” from an “ancient culture,” “never colonized” by outsiders”, when we expect everyone else to do the work for us? This is to our shame! It is like we are refusing to “grow up” and assume responsibility for helping our own people back home, even if it is a dollar at a time!

First of all, I am coming to you only as a person who can no longer stand it! This is no longer about the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia—no matter how much I believe in its principles. It is not about the Anuak Justice Council or any other organization because I am fearful that Ethiopians might simply use such a label as an excuse not to join in and help. For the same reason, it is not about Kinijit, Ginbot 7, Andenet, EPRP, the OLF, the ONLF, the EPRDF or the many diverse other political, ethnic, religious and civic organizations! This is about all of us Ethiopians!

I am not saying that joining together in solidarity would not be better because the basic objective of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia is about saving lives and saving our country from disintegration. This is a time to put our differences aside and join to create a stronger, more effective and more compassionate society!

The mission statement of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia is: **To establish a viable alliance—a united front composed of all dissatisfied groups, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations and political tilts, with the common goal of installing genuine democracy and social justice in the spirit of a united Ethiopia.**

I also am convinced that Ethiopian solidarity is the only way to succeed in surviving as a nation; however, at this point, there is too much resistance to unifying even though it is about coming together under the principles of putting *humanity above ethnicity* and *fighting for the freedom of each other since no one will be free unless we all are free.*

If we could have already established an effective institution to spearhead this effort—one that was largely supported by all Ethiopians—this would have been the time to organize a mass effort. However, because that is not the case, we must each now do our best to help, in whatever way we can, instead of failing to do anything because we are opposed—or wary of giving support—to any outside our own organizations.

A week ago we saw a video of the Tigrayan people, praying to God for food and rain. Just recently we saw the video of the Ogadenis who are starving. We heard about children unable to attend school because of hunger and families having to eat in shifts. In the last month it has been a daily thing with new examples of suffering and hunger. My appeal to Ethiopians is to put yourselves in the shoes of those people back home. Forget the division between the political groups and who has done what—attacking, blaming and finger-pointing! Enough with all of this! The people of Ethiopia are dying.

There is no way that differences between Ethiopian political parties are more important than the Ethiopian child who is dying because of no food.

There is no way that differences between Liberation Fronts or break-away groups and those who oppose such break-away groups are more important than the mother who just buried three of her children because of starvation.

There is no way that differences between those who advance an armed struggle and those who advocate a peaceful struggle are more important than helping the father or mother who can only offer emotion, tears and despair to their children, rather than the food for which the child is crying.

There is no way that differences of ethnicity and language are more meaningful than reaching out to help those who are only able to eat one meager meal every other day.

Many Ethiopians are religious people, but if Jesus Christ or Muhammad came to Ethiopia today, would we be ashamed of how Ethiopians who have more, have treated other Ethiopians who have nothing?

Right now we have no time to argue about what divides us. Every one of us is needed to act with compassion and generosity towards those in need—to be Good Samaritans to those Ethiopians who are starving. If we ignore the great crisis facing Ethiopians at home it will be a disgrace to us as a people. Why should we be doing less than those in the west who are now pleading for help more than we are?

Consider the last time we Ethiopians rose up in action, it was following the shooting of election protestors in the streets of Addis Ababa and following the imprisonment of Kinijit leaders. That was good, but what about now? More Ethiopians will lose their lives to starvation and related disease today than were shot following the election of 2005.

I responded to the brutal attack on the Anuak people at the time of the massacre of Anuak leaders in 2003, but it is very possible that more people will die in one day throughout the country from starvation than were massacred on December 13th. The Meles government is passively ignoring this crisis and people are dying as a result. Why our complacency now over these deaths?

We can look at most every region in the country and find that more lives may be lost to starvation in Oromia, in the Ogaden, in the Southern Nations, in Tigray and all over Ethiopia in the next weeks and months than have died in the last 17 years of the EPRDF through direct human rights abuses!

One Ethiopian from Boston recently told me that the only thing that would get Ethiopians to take action now would be if they saw pictures of people shot and killed in Addis Ababa! What has happened to us?

Yet, I know of some wonderful examples of Ethiopians whose hearts of compassion have led to practical acts of generosity and kindness—and there are probably many more of which I have not heard. The example I am giving you is of Ethiopians who are ordinary people who are making a life and death difference to other Ethiopians.

Let me tell you my friend from Washington D.C., who is one of five friends who are doing their “dirsha” share, providing rays of hope to some struggling Ethiopians. Ten years ago they formed a financial savings fund that is regularly distributed to the most needy Ethiopians by their families in Ethiopia.

These friends have been contributing \$20 a month that was sent to trusted members of their families in Ethiopia who would look for the poorest of the poor in their communities and help them by giving them 1000 birr at a time, to not only use for expenses, but to use to start a small business through receiving this “micro-loan.”

The recipients were not related to them, but were people struggling to survive who could now be empowered by this small gift. They probably will never fully know the impact of what they have done for these individuals and families over all of these months and years, but I am sure there would be stories of inspiration.

We Ethiopians should follow the example of these five Ethiopians who have found a way to contribute back to the people of the country without requiring that the funds go for one ethnic group, one political group or one religious group or to any other “select” group. The only requirement was that the recipient was in need.

We have two dilemmas related to taking action collectively. First, if one organization was to collect the money, which organization would it be that is trusted and in a position to make sure that the funds get to those who most need it in Ethiopia especially since we can see that the Meles government has built up countless obstacles? Secondly, how do we make sure that the money does not end up in the hands of those who will pocket it themselves or misuse it? These are real concerns.

We can see resistance on the part of Meles to Ethiopians in the Diaspora helping their fellow Ethiopians because we can see evidence that he may be intentionally starving the people to make the people weak because then they will not have the energy to resist. Others, with good documentation as proof, believe he is punishing the people who are most resistant to the EPRDF with the lack of food in places like the Ogaden.

Reports from the EPRDF meeting last week in Awassa clearly indicate their intention to destroy the opposition inside and outside of the Ethiopia. In fact, during that meeting, it was made clear that the EPRDF believes they have succeeded in destroying the opposition in the Diaspora—that the opposition is finished, making it possible to move forward on their EPRDF agenda because the Kinijit, the OLF, the religious groups, the community groups are all so divided that they are no longer a threat! The other reason is because of our apathy!

Yes, this system is evil and is heavily contributing to the destruction of our country, but I cannot pretend that Meles is the only one who needs to change. There is something wrong with us if we ignore this crisis and use our divisions as a reason not to act.

There are many obstacles; yet, if we do not try to find ways to overcome these obstacles, people will continue to die. If we have trouble going through civic organizations due to the Woyane sabotaging our efforts, we should follow the example of the five Ethiopians in Washington, DC I mentioned.

Some of us should also try to work through our churches, mosques, communities and other civic organizations who can deal more directly with their counterparts within the country for the person of helping the poor and the hungry. Also, people traveling to the country can bring along funds from others to be used to help.

The West is doing more than we are! Shame on us! If we pretend that we are proud people and that we care yet we do not respond to this, it is a disgrace and it makes me ashamed of being an Ethiopian! There are a million of us out here and if we can even contribute one dollar each. That means we could use a million dollars that will get to the neediest of our people because it is interpersonal giving. You do not need a politician, a political party or your own ethnic community to do it—this something you and people you know can do on your own.

What I want people to do is to take action immediately. Make phone calls to family, co-workers and friends and organize informally so you develop a system, increased accountability to each other to continue and brainstorm about ideas that might be most effective.

If you come up with some good ideas, share them. You may be contributing money to your family, but if you can add more for others, do so. If your family is able to make it without your help, ask them to help find needy individuals and families in their area.

Call your government representatives in whatever country you are living to ask them to address the crisis of food and governance. Tell them about the issues that have led to these problems. Together our voices can be loud and persuasive if we work together for the people.

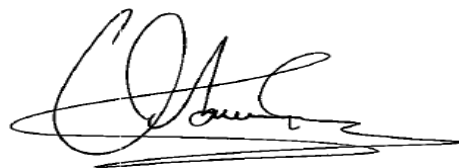
When we in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia said that this is your movement, this is what we mean. Put these things in action. We will give you the ideas and you do it. Each of you must be a leader and not wait for someone else. This is not about politics but about survival! The role of politicians is to enrich and protect the lives of the people, but if they die, what is the point?

During the Ethiopian famine and the mass starvation of millions of people in 1984, there was a group called, “**We are the World**,” but today, there is no such group except for you. Each of us should now be saying, “**We are Ethiopia!**” **The suffering and deaths of our people should make us one.**

What more do we need to unify us than our dying people? Starvation does not have a tribe or a language. It is targeting all of us. Let the dying of our people unify us not by words, but by actions until we become the hands and feet of God to the suffering, until we become a blessing to our people.

May God help us to be people of virtue, integrity, compassion and justice.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Obang Metho', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Obang Metho

For more information, please contact me: E-Mail: obang@anuakjustice.org