An Open Letter to President Barack Obama,

Will the United State’s foreign policy regarding Ethiopia be on the side of furthering the democratic rights of the Ethiopian people or will the current support for the strong-armed, ethnic-based regime continue?

August 15, 2016

The President of the United States of America
The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20501

Dear President Obama:

Ethiopia is teetering on the edge of a full-scale crisis. As hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians in various parts of Ethiopia protest against the repressive policies of the current Ethiopian dictatorial regime, the minority-led government has responded with escalating violence against peaceful protestors, leading to the death of nearly 800 Ethiopians from the Oromia and Amhara regions, since November 2015. Many of the victims are young teens and even children as young as 8 years old. Over the past week only, it is estimated that government-controlled security forces shot into the crowd, killing at least a hundred or more civilians.

Many worry that the situation could easily explode, pushing Ethiopia over the edge to become another failed state in the Horn of Africa. Actions or inaction taken in the next days, weeks and months may determine which direction it will go. Countries like Libya, Syria, Yemen and now South Sudan provide disturbing images of the kind of disintegration we seek to avoid in Ethiopia. Most would agree that the costs to the people and resources of a country are much less or even avoidable the earlier one intervenes. It is too late to change the course of destructive events in these other countries, but it may not be too late to do so in Ethiopia. There may be a short window of opportunity and that is the purpose of this letter.

Mr. President

Let me introduce myself to you—my name is Obang Metho. I am the Executive Director of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), a non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement representing the diverse people of Ethiopia. The SMNE is committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability, respect for human and civil rights and economic prosperity to the people of Ethiopia and beyond.

I come to you first and foremost as human being who believes that the future well being of our global society rests in the hands of those among us who can put “Humanity Before Ethnicity,” or any other distinctions that divide and dehumanize other human beings from ourselves; inspiring us to care about these “others;” not only because of the intrinsic God-given value of each life, but also because “No one will be free until all are free.” These are the underlying principles of the SMNE.

This may be the last time we approach you or those in your administration about the deterioration of human rights conditions in Ethiopia due to your term coming to an end; however, it is not the first. Our communication with you and your staff goes back over ten years when I was working as the Director of International Advocacy for the Anuak Justice Council, an ethnic-based organization established to protect the rights and well being of the Anuak people, a tiny minority ethnic group located in southwest Ethiopia in the Gambella region. The Anuak are part of the Nilotic family, also related to the Luo who are scattered in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and South Sudan.

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When you were a senator, I personally met with you and your staff in 2006 on behalf of the Anuak Justice Council regarding the horrific 3-day long massacre of 424 Anuak leaders from my own ethnicity by Ethiopian Defense Forces and civilian militias they had armed with machetes in Gambella, Ethiopia. The inciting incident was in 2003, but the killing, human rights crimes, detentions, torture, destruction, and robbery of lives, resources and land have continued in various degrees of intensity since that time. However, oppression and violations of human rights are not unique to one area or people but are widespread among the diverse people and regions of Ethiopia.

Mr. President

We also sent a letter to your current Vice President, Joe Biden, when he was the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations in the Senate, related to the same matter. Here is link to the letter http://www.anuakjustice.org/070718OpenLetterToUSSenateCommitteeOnForeignRelations.htm.

In 2007, I was in regular communication with some of your staff members during your campaign. After you became president, we again sent a letter to you on January 12, 2010, calling for your action regarding the tyrannical government of the Tigrayan Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF), which controlled the three other ethnic based parties making up the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Here is the link to the letter http://www.solidaritymovement.org/100112OpenLetterToPresidentObama.php.

Ethiopian Americans living in the United States, many with families back home, strongly expected you would respond to these overtures, but you did not. Some then thought you would address these issues during your second term in office, believing this great country of freedom would take a role to bring the same kind of freedom to the second most populous country in Africa and a highly strategic country in the Horn.

We, along with many other Ethiopians, continued our efforts with multiple others in your administration. When Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State, we sent a letter to her on August 2, 2012. Here is the link to the letter http://www.solidaritymovement.org/120802OpenLetterToSecHillaryClinton.php and also another letter on May 21, 2013 to John Kerry when he took that same office. Here is the link to the letter http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/OpenLetterToSecretaryOfState%20Kerry.pdf.

A year ago, when you were going to Ethiopia, we sent another letter to you on July 26, 2015. However, today we are coming with even more urgency because warning signs, ignored in the past, are now flashing red, creating fertile ground for unimaginable violence.

Mr. President

The decision you make — for good or ill— will define your legacy regarding Africa, especially if a genocide takes place, or, in a positive direction, if support is provided for a transition that gives all the people their democratic rights.

Last year when you were in Kenya you made a powerful statement regarding the outcome of countries when politics are intertwined with ethnicity. You said:

A politics that’s based solely on tribe and ethnicity is a politics doomed to tear a country apart. It’s a failure of imagination.

Your words ring true today and shed light on the reasons behind this crisis. Yet, the United States continues to provide pivotal support to the TPLF/EPRDF. In doing so, the US has empowered the regime, creating a greater roadblock for Ethiopians to overcome in their efforts to bring freedom, justice, equality and shared opportunity to all the people. It may even add fuel to the conflict, just as you predicted when a regime, namely Ethiopia, rules solely by ethnicity. Those supporting it must also bear responsibility.

Ethiopia: A failure of imagination

Mr. President

The Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), exactly fits your description. Although the TPLF represents only 6% of the population, the TPLF members, and members of their own “tribe” of the same ethnicity, enjoy favoritism and exert control over every sector of society. This includes being the “power” behind the “puppet coalition of the EPRDF” that is merely a facade to make it appear as a party that represents the interests of Ethiopians of diverse ethnicities. For more information and FACTS about the TPLF, read our link open letter to the Chairman of the TPLF and Members of the TPLF Central Committee: http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/140802-Open-Letter-to-the-Chairman-of-the-TPLFBR.pdf

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Nothing is further from the truth and no one knows it better than your own National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, who was a very close friend of the former dictator and the master-mind of divisive ethnic politics.

Despite the repressive track record of the TPLF/EPRDF, the US position on Ethiopia appears to more strongly represent the interests of the regime rather than those of the people. For example, shortly after you made the above-mentioned comment, you visited Ethiopia. Three month earlier, Ethiopia had held national elections. The highly unpopular ruling party had claimed an absurd 100% victory in that election even though not one single opposition member had been elected. Political space had been forcibly closed down early in the pre-election and opponents intimidated, harassed, tortured, jailed or killed. Yet, you publicly called the Ethiopian government a “democratically elected”— a very troubling statement to most Ethiopians, undermining the confidence they have traditionally given to the US.

**Question:**

Mr. President

In light of these concerns, we ask you, will the United States’ foreign policy regarding Ethiopia be on the side of furthering the democratic rights of the Ethiopian people or will the current support for the strong-armed, ethnic-based regime continue?

So far, your administration’s response to the killing of unarmed peaceful protestors, the widespread arrests of journalists, religious leaders and activists, the closure of political space, the decimation of civil society, the misuse of anti-terrorism laws to criminalize dissent, the shutting down of the social media— including the Internet, the eviction of tens of thousands of people from homes and land to the benefit of regime cronies and foreign investors, the questionable economic statistics related to growth and the overall ethnic-based domination of opportunity and resources to one ethnic group has only amounted to statements of “we are deeply concerned.”

The people of Ethiopia are now interpret such concern from your administration as a diplomatic strategy to avoid taking meaningful action that could benefit Ethiopians as well as the long term relationship between the US and Ethiopians. The choice of what to do next is yours; however, you cannot support tyranny and hope to support the people at the same time.

Naturally, we the people of Ethiopia will continue to pursue our freedom regardless of the answer; however, if you so choose to be on the side of the people in support of genuine democratic reforms, we would welcome that support.

**Next steps:**

Mr. President

If interested, we would be available to meet with key decision makers within the US government to begin a dialogue addressing the dangerous political climate in Ethiopia. Due to the closure of political space within Ethiopia and because of the imprisonment of regime opponents; few from within Ethiopia are able to take part in such an effort; however, we can assemble key diverse Ethiopians, currently in the US and the diaspora, to act on behalf of the interests of Ethiopians in the country. This meeting would be preceded by first convening Ethiopians and key non-Ethiopian experts, forming an organized concerned action committee to meet and discuss a way forward to prevent a possible genocide and destabilization of Ethiopia. If your administration is interested, we hope such a meeting could be scheduled quickly due to the fast-paced events unfolding in Ethiopia and the risks involved.

Mr. President

It is this position, which we believe will provide the greatest protection against the internal collapse of Ethiopia. It is also a means, if genuine, to avert ethnic-based violence against members of the TPLF/EPRDF; in particular, against members of the ethnic group and region they represent, many of whom do not support this regime. The ethnic-based policies of blatant favoritism to the exclusion of others, have created deeply seeded anger and resentment that could easily explode if not carefully managed. However, such “management” will not work without measurable changes.

Yet, some fear that the most likely initiators of a possible genocide would start with the TPLF due to their fear of losing control and their determination to hold on to power and all they have acquired through it. Furthermore, brutal force and violence are a familiar part of their history and they have the military capability, intelligence, and resources to do it. If they panic, especially because they are a small minority group, and up the violence and killing; the people will easily respond, escalating the violence to a scale of genocide that could bring the country down.
We the people of Ethiopia seek to avoid this scenario through talking to each other rather than about each other—a genuine dialogue between the people—that would lead to reconciliation, restorative justice and meaningful reforms.

Mr. President

We understand the priority for the US is their national interests; however, such interests will not sustainably succeed if they cost Ethiopians their freedom. Yet, if the US supports genuine reforms that help bring about the democratic rights of Ethiopians, Ethiopians will see the US as a strong ally and friend, investing in mutually beneficial interests along with protecting the well being of Ethiopians.

The current regime claims only the TPLF/EPRDF can protect the national interests of the US, but in practice, such alliances are fragile when they have no regard for their own citizens. The citizens know this and they are now resisting. The US, the number one country of alliance with Ethiopia, should take the side of the people since the regime’s ability to remain is being severely challenged. On the other hand, the people will remain.

As long as the people are free, competitive alliances with non-democratic countries, like China, will not be a threat. If the US pursues an alliance based on upholding the freedom of the people, there will be strength and sustainability to it.

Therefore, this is an invitation to you, Mr. President, your administration and elected officials to start a genuine dialogue with the people, strongly represented by those of us in the Diaspora with links back home in Ethiopia. This is the viable alternative that exists today to bring about a more free, just and reconciled Ethiopia. We await your decision.

May God protect the people of Ethiopia and bring about an alliance based on mutual values and principles that give dignity, freedom, justice, and rights to all.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

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This letter has been CC to:
Vice President, Joseph Biden
Secretary John Kerry, Department of State
Secretary Ash Carter, Department of Defense
Susan E. Rice, National Security Advisor
Samantha Power United States Ambassador to the United Nations
Grant Harris, Senior Director for African Affairs on the National Security Council
Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of African Affairs
Bob Corker, Chairman of the U.S Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Edward Royce, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Christopher Smith, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa

Dr Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations
Dr Jan Eliasson, Deputy Secretary-General,
Mr. Mogens Lykketoft, Chairman of the General Assembly
Ambassador Liu Jieyi, Chairman of the Security Council
Mr Adama Dieng, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide
Dr. Gregory Stanton, President of Genocide Watch
John Prendergast, President of Enough Project
Hailemariam Desalegn, Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia
International Crisis Group
Council on Foreign Relations
Jews against Genocide
High Commissioner of the United Nations Human Rights
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
International Commission of Jurists
Service for Human Rights Protection International
World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)
President of Human Rights Watch
President of Amnesty International
Permanent Member of the UN Security Council
President of the African Union
Head of State Member of the European Union
President of the European Union Commission
Member of the European Union Parliament
Holiness Pope Francis, the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church;
Excellency the Archbishop of Canterbury, England;

This letter has also been cc to major news media outlets such as
Africa Confidential
Al Jazeera
BBC
The Guardian
New York Times
Washington Post,
Wall Street Journal
Bloomberg News
MSNBC
CNN
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