



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Ogadenis in Minnesota: “Let us Break Down the Invisible Fences of Ethiopia!”

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It is an honor to be here in front of you to talk about human rights in Ethiopia. Human rights abuses are going on all over the country, but right now, the people of the Ogaden are paying the heaviest price. What is happening in the Ogaden is a silent Darfur. I am here with you today as a brother who knows what you are going through. I am here to grieve with you as part of your Ethiopian family. I am here as a fellow worker in a battle against the same injustice that is killing all of our people—the people of Gambella, the Ogaden and in all of Ethiopia!

I want to thank the Ogaden Youth Network for inviting me to first Annual International Ogaden Youth Committee and for all the excellent work you have done in organizing this conference. I thank the Ogaden Human Rights Committee, the University of St. Thomas who is hosting this conference and the many others who assisted in bringing this about.

I am glad to be in this great state of Minnesota. Minnesota has become my second home. Since 2004, I have been coming here many times to speak, starting with the Anuak. You may not know that most of the Anuak in the United States live in Minnesota, as do my family members, friends and some of my work colleagues. More recently, I have been here to speak at the University of Minnesota and just two weeks ago to speak to the Oromo.

More Oromo live in Minnesota than anywhere else in the country, but I have just learned from some of my hostesses that there are 15,000 to 18,000 Ogadenis here in Minnesota as well—again, more than in any other place in the country! I now feel all the more strongly that Minnesota is my second home because I feel so at home with not only the Anuak, but now also because it is the largest US home of Ogadenis and the Oromo. You all are my new brothers and sisters and we have much in common, but the Anuak and the Ogadenis have had little chance to meet in the past.

I first met some of you in January of this year when we were in Atlanta at a meeting about the human rights abuses in Ethiopia that was organized by African Americans. During our stay, some of us met informally in a hotel room and talked for hours. There were four Ogadenis, one Amhara, one Oromo and me, an Anuak. While we were there, Abdulhakim, an Ogadeni, commented that it was unbelievable that we were all there together in the same room. He went on to say that previously there had been an invisible fence that had blocked us from each other that had been set in place by the Dergue and now was reinforced by the Woyane government.

Then another Ogadeni, named Yassin Kiassim, said jokingly, “That’s why we don’t even have the name “*Baria*” to call you—because we’ve never met you before!” We all laughed about this and then agreed that we had to break this invisible fence so the people of Ogaden could settle in Gambella if they wanted to and so the people of Gambella could do the same in the Ogaden, just like in the United States where US citizens did not have to go through a check point to move from state to state!

Why can't we do the same in Ethiopia? As we talked more, we were very encouraged as we were all able to envision such a new Ethiopia! This is one thing for which we Ethiopians can thank Meles—through our pain and suffering at the hands of this regime, we have found the threads to bind together those of us from the southwestern region of Gambella with those of you from the southeastern region of the Ogaden, forming a new friendship and partnership. These friendships and resulting partnerships have now stretched across the country to bring us together as one family of Ethiopians.

We should continue to reach out until we are all under the shade of one tent. As your faith of Islam states, we were created and shaped out of the same clay making us all equal. As we realize this, it should help us build friendships based on respect and appreciation of each other, regardless of our differences. This is the way to break down the invisible fences that have needlessly separated us for so many years. As I learn more about the people of the Ogaden, I realize how much we have in common, but unfortunately, we also have suffered at the hands of our government in similar ways.

This is where I would like to start today—by first comparing what happened to the Anuak of Gambella with what is now going on with those in the Ogaden. Secondly, I will discuss the impact of human rights abuses on the country as a whole and how we have become part of a system where many factions have been vying for ethnic dominance—a dominance that can also later be used to oppress others, even those of one's own ethnicity—lasting only until the next group takes over and repeats the cycle.

Thirdly, I will speak about what we can do to stop this cycle that is causing us to self-destruct and how to replace it with an alternative that could lead to living in cooperation, peace and harmony. The burden to change is on our shoulders now. We must seize this opportunity so we leave a different legacy for our children and grandchildren.

The first step is for all Ethiopians to get to know each other as unique people and as fellow human beings, then to acknowledge whatever pain and suffering we have might have caused to each other and then reconcile. In the case of the Anuak and the Ogedenis, we have few, if any, conflicts or hard feelings between us since we were so unaware of the others' existence!

Even a day before I came to meet with you, as I told an Anuak friend that I would be speaking to the people of the Ogaden, he asked, "Are those the people with an Afro and who always have an AK-47 in their hands?" I said, "No, I think those are the people of Afar!" In fact, I have also been invited to speak to the people of Afar sometime in the next month and also to the people of Sidamo. I am very excited to get to meet with my Afar and Sidamo brothers and sisters! It is exciting to meet other members of our Ethiopian family—just like you!

However, this lack of knowledge we have about each other shows that we have much more to do in order to reach out to our fellow Ethiopians who have been separated by the invisible fences of all over our country. As fellow Ethiopians, we are supposed to not only know about each other, but we are supposed to protect each other and each others' interests like a good neighbor who watches over your home while you are away. But this is hard to do if we remain divided. But again, our shared pain and tragedy has had one unexpected reward that Meles never intended, we have been introduced to each other!

Over a year ago, I had heard about your (Ogadenis) suffering and wanted to include your stories in my address to the European Parliament last May of 2006. You responded to my call and you told me about the widespread human rights crimes in your region. I heard about years of neglect by the last two regimes and that life was actually easier for you under Haile Selassie. In 1991 when Meles overthrew Mengistu, both the Gambella Peoples' Liberation Movement, the Ogaden Peoples' Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front and many others were fighting along side of the TPLF.

When the Woyane or EPRDF developed the new Ethiopian Constitution, both Gambellans, and Ogadenis, Oromo and many others were supposed to have the right to govern themselves and to benefit equally in the country with everyone else, but the Woyane did not really mean that for us or anyone else but themselves. They simply used these words to manipulate us as they proceeded to take over all the power from the Ethiopian people.

From the start of their administration, there were Tigrayan cadre in the Gambella and Ogaden regions who were called “advisors,” but instead of simply “advising,” they were actually the puppets of the EPRDF, used to enforce federal agendas and to suppress any who attempted to advance regional goals. Their intent was exposed in the 1995 election when the local people from Gambella and from the Ogaden challenged the government with actions meant to lead to greater self-determination.

For instance, in Gambella, the local people formed the Gambella People’s Democratic Congress party in opposition to the ruling EPRDF, primarily to challenge consistent violations of the human rights of Anuaks. In year 2000 national election, the Gambella People’s Democratic Congress party ran against the TPLF-imposed party candidates in Gambella. In the Ogaden, the Ogaden Liberation Front ran against the Woyane endorsed party in your region. When the results came out in Gambella, nearly 90% did not vote for the Woyane, but for the Democratic Congress party, their own indigenous party. The Democratic Congress party won a majority of seats in the government of Gambella State. The arrests of Anuak men became increasingly prevalent and in October 2002 the President of Gambella region and 44 Anuak leaders were arrested and sent to jail in Addis Ababa and they were held without trial until the end of 2006 and more than 400 Anuak men are still held in Gambella jails since December 2003.

In the Ogaden, 85% voted for the Ogaden Liberation Front, instead of the TPLF-backed party. Regardless of the people’s choices, the TPLF central government claimed they were winners in Gambella and arrested those candidates who had actually won the popular vote. The same manipulation of the election occurred in the Ogaden where the winners were also arrested. At that time, the TPLF took further action and started killing the leaders in both areas, arresting any challengers.

Does this remind you of what recently occurred in the Ethiopian National election of 2005? What happened in 2005 should not have come as a surprise to us as this was not a new tactic, but one the EPRDF had been able to get away with in the past, especially in the rural areas like in Gambella and in the Ogaden where there was little transparency. This was when the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) finally declared they had no other choice but to fight to defend themselves. In the case of Gambella, it was not until the 2000 election that the Gambella Liberation Front was formed after the same thing happened a second time. Again, it was to defend themselves, just like was the case in the Ogaden.

To make the situation even worse, while the federal government of Ethiopia exerted increasingly greater control over both our regions, the development of the areas was totally neglected leading to significant marginalization—among the worst in the country. Even when I formed the Gambella Development Agency in 2001 and as an NGO, was required to first register at the Office of the Minister of Justice in Addis Ababa in order to work in Ethiopia, I faced resistance to working in Gambella. The man that processed my information was me why I wanted to go to the Gambella are and told me that there was greater need in the northern part of Ethiopia in the Tigray region. It probably was no coincidence that he was Tigrayan.

I explained to him that I had never been to the northern part of Ethiopia and there may be need there, but that I wanted to work in Gambella. He then asked me why I wanted to go to Gambella so much. Let me first say, the interview was conducted in English and it became apparent that he did suspect I was an Ethiopian, but that I was from some other country in Africa like Kenya.

I then told him I was an Anuak from Gambella. His reply was, “Oh, I’m sorry. I guess you can go to Gambella.” My white Canadian colleague who was there with me at the time expressed his shock at how such gatekeepers to development in the country can so easily control the distribution of services, humanitarian aid and development from those coming from the outside! I am certain the same has happened in the Ogaden.

I have heard about your lack of schools, health clinics, clean water and any infrastructure in the Ogaden. You do not even have a road leading from the Ogaden to Addis Ababa, the capital city! I heard about the countless numbers of Ogadeni political prisoners, the extreme oppression of the people and the infiltration of Meles supporters into most every key position in your government, preventing the people of the Ogaden from having any real voice in your own regional affairs. Unfortunately, following Ethiopia’s invasion into Somalia and the killing of the Chinese in the Ogaden by the ONLF, your situation has dramatically worsened.

For those remaining in the Ogaden, life has become intolerable—a daily struggle simply to survive—due to the massive human rights abuses going on right now in the region being perpetrated on civilians by Woyane National Defense Forces. Yet, surprisingly, for the Anuak of Gambella, some semblance of normal life is returning. The Anuak women can go unescorted to gather firewood or to obtain water without the previous very real prospect of being raped, harassed or even killed.

Anuak men can travel on the roads without fear of the military spotting them and shooting them for simply “looking suspicious.” Some children are returning to school, as they are less fearful of the trip back and forth, as are the teachers. This is not to say that the schools, health clinics, homes and most of the infrastructure of the area was not seriously damaged or destroyed by Meles’ military, but at least, the security issues that turned the daily tasks of life into possible encounters with death from the ENDF, have mostly disappeared. What accounts for this improvement in Gambella and for the worsening crisis in the Ogaden?

As you may already suspect, the same Ethiopian National Defense Forces that killed, raped, tortured and imprisoned the Anuak in Gambella for the last two to three years, have now been moved, by the thousands, to the Ogaden. This includes two of the same Commanders. These commanders are Major Tsegaye Beyene and Captain Amare. None of these men has yet been held accountable for their actions in Gambella and now they are going on to the Ogaden.

Reports coming out of the Ogaden testify to the unfortunate fact that Meles’ defense forces are committing the same crimes again with the same impunity. Instead of being defenders of the Ethiopian people, they remain the foremost perpetrators of crimes against Ethiopians. They say they are fighting insurgents, but they are only inciting more Ogadeni to pick up arms to defend their people. Meles, as he did in the past, is adamantly denying the veracity of these reports, but too much evidence contradicts his assertions of innocence. Instead he is increasing his attempts to block access to the area to outsiders like the International Red Cross and reporters like Jeffrey Gettleman of the New York Times so more information does not get out.

What is driving it all? Again, the similarities between Gambella and the Ogaden are painfully striking. Both are closely linked to natural resources—oil in Gambella and natural gas in the Ogaden. Even the companies are the same—Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau, a subsidiary of the Malaysian company, Petronas, the latter which has been given the rights to develop the natural gas in the area by the Ethiopian government, without representation from people of the Ogaden. This is the same thing that happened in Gambella with the Anuak.

Every day, more Ogadenis who come into the vicinity, are being killed, harassed or imprisoned for only looking suspicious. Countless innocent civilians—children, women, elders and non-insurgents—who are simply struggling to maintain their lives in an already difficult environment—are the victims. If most really knew the real stories they would be horrified—for example, the story that was told today of how one Ogadeni mother was held back by Woyane troops and was forced to watch while her four-year-old son was stomped to death by another in the ENDF.

If it were known how your cows, essential to your survival, are being shot and killed, most life-respecting people would be outraged. This same tactic was used against the Anuak when the ENDF burned down homes, crops, granaries and destroyed water wells, schools and health clinics. If it were made known how many Ogadeni and Anuak women have been raped by HIV-carrying or STD-infected troops, most would again be shocked, especially as the government makes a plea for more funding to fight HIV/AIDS! Despite all these reports, Meles supporters are still denying these occurrences because the truth is too shameful to be admitted.

We in the AJC reported on these occurrences in Gambella as far back as early 2004 and saw little response from the media or from the international community. However, the mood and times are different now and we in the AJC are willing to work with you in getting out your story—something that is more possible now than it was several years ago when Meles was still “the darling of the west.” This is no longer the case as more and more documentation points to him as being a terrorist of his own people despite his request to the US State Department to put the ONLF on the list of terrorist locations. But you and I know clearly who the real terrorists are—they are Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his murderous regime!

It is critical that the dominant Ethiopian groups, who have louder voices, better representation and more numbers, speak up for the people of the Ogaden and others across the country who are suffering. Just because the CUD leaders and some journalists have been released from prison, we should not sit back. We must recognize that our prisoners are not only found in Addis Ababa. We need to raise the level of the rallying and protest to even exceed that which was done in the past after the election and for the release of the political leaders.

Those of us outside of Addis Ababa and outside the dominant ethnic groups have mostly felt in the past that we did not count as true Ethiopians; but yet, Ethiopia does not exclusively belong to them—it belongs to all of us, including them! For years, Ethiopian culture has been typified as the culture of the Amhara, the Tigrayan or the Oromo. Educational and economic opportunities as well as the development of the infrastructure usually favored these regions. Our largest ethnic group, the Oromo, have been repressed, but if they finally emerge as a powerful group because of their size, what are the prospects for the futures of the other many medium-sized or even tiny ethnic group who may only number .01% like the Anuak or like the Ogadenis?

For instance, the people of the Ogaden were essentially left out of the last election. It is absurd that Ogadenis did not even have the opportunity to vote in the Ethiopian National Election of May 15, 2005 until six months later! Even if the election had not been rigged, it is obvious that your votes would not have been counted. This must change. Ethiopian government must not only be for the people of Addis Ababa or for the dominant groups in the country. The government of Ethiopia should be for all of the people of Ethiopia. This includes those who have been marginalized and neglected for years—not only the Ogadenis and the Anuak, but those from the Southern Nations, the Afar and Etc.

What is required today, is a new movement where our rich cultures and collective wisdom can benefit each other. Our dominant Ethiopian ethnic groups have a beautiful cultural practice of how everyone joins together in support when someone dies. At such a time, a tent is set up and all are invited to come under the tent to mourn the passing of a human life, one which was very dear to the family, friends and community of the deceased. Many people bring food and gifts to the tent as then settle down to support those who have lost their loved one. Even strangers and passersby are invited into this tent where everyone is welcome. No one is left out, segregated or marginalized because of their ethnicity. Everyone comes in as an equal.

This is a wonderful part of the culture of our dominant groups that can be an image of a new Ethiopia! It can be put into practice right now by erecting a tent for the Ogadeni in your present time of need. If our dominant groups join with our minorities in coming together to grieve together now, we may be able to have reason to hope for a new Ethiopia. It will start in such a tent.

As we seek these new beginnings, we find they are wonderful opportunities to meet each other! I have been privileged to meet the Ogadeni and now can see what great people you are—very caring, hardworking and generous. I have learned how you value giving help to those who are struggling or weak and how you don't complain about those who are stronger or better at something; instead, you challenge yourself to do the same. You don't believe in being held down by sitting by, wishing and complaining for change, but instead you try to overcome your obstacles. This is an admirable characteristic of nomadic people that helps you survive in a difficult environment. You have much to share, but instead of others benefiting from you and you benefiting from others, government policy has encouraged our separation and alienation from each other.

I am comparing these two regions with each other, but if you look closely at most any other region in the country, you will find the same thing has happened, frequently resulting in the formation of many liberation or “breakaway” fronts. People are often confused by the name “liberation front”, but we need to look deeply as to why these liberation fronts were created in the first place. Invariably, they arose out of the suppression of the people and their rights.

I believe that some of these liberation fronts do not really want to break away, but are doing it because their rights are being rampantly violated and because they have been denied countless opportunities that are reserved for those few in power. If we understand this, we should not be afraid of reaching out to these liberation fronts because they not only have legitimate complaints, but they are important segments of our population that cannot be ignored.

If we want to create a more stable Ethiopia, we must instead work together to correct and resolve the wrongs going on now and in the past so that we can live together in harmony in the future. This means justice, respect and equality for the Anuak, the Ogadeni, the Hamar, the Hawadle, the Welayta, the Guji, the Nure, the Shekicho and for all Ethiopians!

I believe if these groups who are fighting one another can come together in a genuine spirit of reconciliation—expecting to give and receive justice, we will succeed in finding a sustainable solution, even if it calls for some compromise on all of our parts. As these issues are adequately addressed, many, if not all of these liberation groups may no longer have any reason or desire to separate themselves from Ethiopia, especially as the trend in the world is increasingly one of coming together.

After all, consider who would be left in Ethiopia if every one of us who has been abused split off into our own groups, forming our own countries! What would Ethiopia look like then? Who would be left? Yes, the more dominant ethnic groups might be the only ones wanting to maintain Ethiopia as their own, but they have much to lose if we are not among them! We, and many other minorities who are still unknown to the mainstream of Ethiopians, have many things to share and to contribute to in a future Ethiopia. All of that would be lost without our presence and active participation.

However, if we are really talking about a new Ethiopia where everyone is included, there is a group of excluded people that need to join us on the frontlines. These marginalized people are actually the backbone of our Afar, Anuak, Ogadeni and Ethiopian society, yet their voices are often not heard. Their voices are those of our own mothers, our wives, our sisters and our daughters.

Now, I must first say how encouraged I was to see so many women here today, nearly half of those in attendance! I have not seen this at any other Ethiopian meetings. Instead in this case, it was young Ogadeni women who actually invited me today and were some of the chief organizers of the event. I applaud this achievement. We need to encourage more of this because if we do not include women in all aspects of this movement, we will lose a perspective that is critical to our survival as a people.

Women have been the backbone of Ethiopian society as well as of African society, helping us to survive very difficult circumstances. Wherever you go you see them holding us together. In fact, if we continue to marginalize our women, the new Ethiopia for which we are fighting, may die well before its birth. If it even succeeds in being born, it may end up scrawny and under-developed for lack of nourishment. If it grows up, it may end up unruly and disorderly for lack of discipline and guidance. Let us not underestimate how the hard labor, nourishment and sustenance from our women, can give great strength and sustainability to our futures.

During many hard times, men may be fighting among themselves for the power or the control while the women end up in charge of the practical aspects of life. Within their families, mothers learn to be peacemakers and negotiators who can discipline without favoring, who can listen to both sides and find common ground and who can sacrifice for the good of their loved ones. These are all the same skills that are necessary to better the future of the next generation of Ethiopians and Africans.

Additionally, if mothers were in charge, they may not be so quick to resort to settling conflict through aggression and violence. Yet, they are often the recipients of such violence at the hands of men. The government must create and enforce laws that protect our mothers, wives and children from us men. For instance, those in the ENDF who have raped our Ethiopian women must be brought to accountability. We need to give our women an equal opportunity in their futures to participate like any other women in the world. In other words, our women are not only there to cook for us, to bear our children and to maintain our homes for us, but they are also competent to govern, to make decisions of importance and to influence our society at every level.

I have seen a young Anuak woman in Gambella not go to school so she could gather firewood and cook food so that her male brother could go to school. I remember seeing fifteen years old girl on the streets of Addis Ababa begging for money while she was holding her newborn child, alone without any help from anyone. I have seen nine years old girl in Awassa, carrying over ten pounds of charcoal on her head for 12 kilometers in order to sell it so the money could be used to sustain her family so her brother could go to school. I have heard that the same thing is going on in the Ogaden where a young girl will spend her whole day taking care of the cattle so her younger brother can go to school. This has to stop. We need to invest in our women at the same time as we continue to invest in our men.

The Anuak, the Ogadeni's and other minorities are marginalized by their ethnicity, region and also by their gender. In order to change, we must change our thinking and be transformed into people who follow God's principles of putting others first and consider them equal to ourselves. It should not be about "ME" or "US".

Our women are the most marginalized and if we want to change our society they need to be included and we can only do this by changing our thinking and putting it into practice! This is the same kind of fundamental change of thinking that must take place before there is any hope that the dominant groups will include the minorities and before the minorities will effectively trust and embrace the dominant groups, yet it must be our focus if we want Ethiopia to change and it must include all women!

Even now in this struggle for unity, freedom and justice, those in the dominant groups and those in the minority groups must recognize that we need each other—whether we all like to admit it or not! If we treat each other as equal, fellow-human beings, we can be stronger and better as we learn how to willingly share power, resources and opportunity. This is what has been lacking in the past. As we change, we will begin to see the depth of our commonality and we may learn we love each other more than we hate each other! After all, we are all Ethiopian. After all, we are all African. After all, we are all human beings!

May we fully commit ourselves to follow God's principles that He set up when He created us in His own image out of the clay of the earth. Our Maker calls us to Himself because we are each precious and loved! He created us 100% human, not 95% or 99.9%! This is what lays the foundation for all of human rights!

I am told that the name, Ogaden, means "people who know." The name, Anuak, means "people who share." It is time for "people who know" and for "people who share" to work together as fellow Ethiopians! More than that, we need the help of all Ethiopians. Again, anyone who lives within the borders of Ethiopia is part of this group as they are all 100% Ethiopian. There is no one ethnic group or dominant groups who is more Ethiopian than others. We must tell the majority and those in power that they have an obligation towards all Ethiopians.

If we are really going to change the country, this is where real change must begin—with how we value and include our neighbors, even the ones we don't know very well or who might be culturally different from us. If those with the "upper-hand" are unable to understand this, they will stand in the way of a new Ethiopia. This is at the heart of freeing us as a society from the prison in which we all now live. Without it, there is little to offer to these break-away groups that will convince them to stay for such inclusion is the groundwork of liberation for all of Ethiopia. Repressing large portions of our society for the benefit of others is like a vessel with cracks. It will eventually break and disintegrate into pieces like the regime of Mengistu and like the regime of Meles will soon do as well!

However, equally important, if we in the minority groups are offered new opportunities, but yet choose to refuse to give up our past resentments, preferring to continue to complain about past offences by the majority, we leave no room for forgiveness, healing and restoration and we will be stuck in a cycle of hate, bitterness and blaming. None of these lead anywhere but downward to destruction!

Equally important, we must see ourselves as equal, valuable and contributing members of Ethiopia regardless of how we have been viewed in the past. Those views came out of ignorance and societal dysfunction. Instead, we must consider how God views us as precious. Because he values us, He urges us to seek Him and as we do, He will show us the purposes He has for our lives that will bring the greatest satisfaction. Remember, those who devalue God's children, are themselves in need of help.

We must stop a cycle that defeats us by devaluing ourselves or others. This is not just directed towards those who have been in power and privilege. It goes for the minorities and the “dis-empowered” as well. Sometimes those who have been offended or abused, hold on to a victim mentality or a bitter grudge of resentment that goes back many years. If you do this, you will never see your own contribution to your problems! Instead, we must know who we are in God’s eyes and reach out with grace, forgiveness, humility and love to others. This is the only way we are going to see Ethiopia freed from the grips of tyranny. God will find a way out where no way is seen by human eyes.

Our Ethiopian or African leaders continue indeed to use the power of the State both to enrich themselves and their ethnic communities and to repress any opposition or criticism. The politics of privileging ethnicity for those in power and diminishing ethnicity for those out of power has continued to dominate the African political landscape. The question then is what is to be done in the face of this ethnically-based politics? How can we move forward?

The answer is simple yet profoundly difficult to implement. Ethiopia and Africa must move away from the politicization of ethnicity. Celebrate the ethnic and cultural mosaic of Ethiopia or Africa but at the same time create an ‘a – ethnic’ or non-ethnic politics. Ethiopians or Africans must surrender their ethnic clothes when they move into the political arena and assume positions of power.

It is time for a Movement for a New Ethiopia or Africa, one shorn of ethnic chauvinism in the world of politics. Unless this happens then political leaders will play one ethnic group off against another for political advantage parallel to the past colonial practice of ‘divide and rule’ and the current neo-colonial practice of foreign intervention in ethnically-based strife; mounting the war on terror; and, driving for control over valued resources.

The Ethiopians or Africans have been divided for too long and separated from their common heritage by artificial boundaries and the ethnic and regional and religious divides. Ethiopia or Africa must re-discover its soul and celebrate its African-ness. The soil of Africa continues to be stained by the blood of its sons and daughters all in the name of mindless ethnic power struggles. A politics of collaboration and consensus must be re-asserted drawing on Ethiopian or African tradition within the local community. That community must be expanded to become inclusive of all Africans. Otherwise, Ethiopia or Africa will continue to be in disarray, in decline, and incur more death and suffering.

In this weakened condition, rapacious leaders can prey on their people and foreign interests can continue to exploit and manipulate for both profit and power. The time has come for a new Ethiopia or Africa, one where its people can see each other as one, as sharing the soul and soil of the continent for their mutual benefit and development. The cloak of ethnicity must be removed in the realm of African politics. Until that day arrives, Ethiopian or Africans all suffer for their loss of humanity.

We must think beyond our ethnicity, our Ethiopian-ness, our African-ness and see ourselves as children created in the image of God. Our Ethiopian leaders have not seen the way out of this because they may not be able to see the bigger commonality of our shared humanity. Instead, they may have made decisions based on short-term worldly goals of pleasure, luxury and power at the expense of others rather than realizing they are only refugees on this earth until they are reunited someday with their Creator. These are two very contrasting views of life with very different outcomes. It is for each of us to choose between them.

As my Ogadeni sister cited in her beautiful poem at the opening of this conference, I believe that God is rising up to help us and that He is using some of our young people to do it. Let each of us take part in this. May He help the Ogadenis to rise up.

May He help the Ethiopians to rise up with other Africans and light up this Dark Continent that is overcome with man-caused suffering, misery and death! May He help us rise up as human beings who are His children, ready to generously spread his love around!

It is our duty to fulfill God's purposes for our lives while we are on this earth. These purposes will differ, but our value as people will not. As an Anuak, or as a Canadian Ethiopian or as a follower of Jesus Christ, I may be different from you in these ways, but I am still connected to you, respect you and love you as a fellow human being. You are my people and God tells us to love, protect and uphold each other.

As we seek to work together in our mutual struggle for freedom, justice, equality, peace and reconciliation, let us become ambassadors to others in Ethiopia, fearlessly revolutionary in reaching out in love. If movement for a new Ethiopia is to rise up, let us be the seeds planted in fertile soil that will bring a great harvest that reaches all the way from the educated and more privileged to the average people of our nation and of our continent—the hardworking, the poor, the undereducated, the oppressed and the devalued!

May God give us the strength, guidance and resources to nurture such a movement! May He give us the means to break down the invisible fences separating us so that we can join together in unity of purpose, with respect for each other and with the moral courage to stand firm for what is right!

Thank you.