

The Empowerment Initiative

Human Rights, Social Justice, Non-Violence Advocacy

8 June 2007

JOINT SUMMIT OF THE MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS AND EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT CONCERNING THE GENOCIDE IN DARFUR, UNRAVELING OF SOMALIA AND GROSS AND SUSTAINED HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN ETHIOPIA.

U.S. House of Representatives, 2172 Rayburn Building, Washington, D.C.

Honorable Member of the E.U.Parliament, Congressmen, Professors and Guests,

My name is Keif Schleifer and I am presenting this letter of support to you on behalf of myself, my friends and my colleagues from the southeastern United States. We belong to advocacy and support organizations that represent various ethnic, religious and political groups in northeast Africa. Most of our colleagues are from this area of Africa and a great percentage of those fled to America for their lives.

We are deeply concerned about the destabilization and demise of many countries across the Horn of Africa. We initially began working together to bring accountability, transparency, peace and reconciliation to Ethiopia, in particular, and have since enlarged our scope to extend to neighboring and surrounding countries.

We strongly denounce the genocide in Darfur. This is a heinous act. It is an act that has shamefully taken place time and again in Africa. This crime becomes all-the-more unfathomable once it is recognized on the world stage and still continues. We plead to our brothers and sisters in Africa to stop this crazed frenzy and acknowledge that there is enough land, enough resources, and enough opportunities for all on the mighty continent of Africa. We appeal to the citizens of the world to find the humanity within yourselves to not turn away from these atrocities---we must intervene.

Somalia experiences tremendous suffering despite continued efforts of its citizens to self organize. The tsunami that captured the world's attention in December 2004, drew little attention to Somalia where it is "believed to have stirred up tonnes of nuclear and toxic waste illegally dumped in the war-racked country," as reported in the Times of London in March 2005. In this same article, Nick Nuttal, a spokesman for the United Nations Environment Programme stated, "Initial reports indicate that the tsunami waves broke open containers full of toxic waste and scattered the contents. We are talking about everything from medical waste to chemical waste products." We are certain that Somalis cannot lead healthy, productive lives and attract commerce to generate prosperity when their environment is laced with poisons. We ask that all eyes of the world now turn to this environmental disaster because it is an on-going problem that continues to unravel the essential fabric of livelihood and sustainability in Somalia.

Problems in Darfur, Somalia and Ethiopia are all dangerously intertwined as these conflicts and disasters spill over colonial borders. While genocide prevails in Darfur (and surrounding areas) and Somalia unravels under environmental disaster and the military intrusion of US & Ethiopian forces, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, exacts his reign of terror under the guise of a democracy. People throughout the Horn of Africa suffer because of this unchecked authoritarian rule, propped up by donor nations, which has pitifully stood as the norm across Africa for too many decades. We believe that Prime Minister Zenawi is exploiting and exasperating the catastrophes of his neighbors to pull international focus away from his systematic dissemblance of "democracy" in Ethiopia.

The foremost action that Meles overtook to eviscerate Ethiopia's once-respected democracy was the disenfranchisement of millions of Ethiopians who voted in the polls during the May 2005 elections. Meles and those closest to him, along with those who gravely fear him, overturned the will of the people who cast ballots for a broader based government. Millions of people in the Ogaden were denied the original vote altogether. These misdeeds were duly noted by Election Observers who had nothing to lose by speaking the truth. We assert that taking the vote right out of the hands of conscientious citizens precludes any notion democracy.

Two years ago to this date, students and citizens defended the ideals of democracy by protesting the violations of their rights to participate in free and fair elections. They did this in the manner of Mohandas Ghandi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's. non-violent, civil disobedience and for that they were gunned down in broad daylight in the streets of Addis Ababa by their own military forces, many of whom deceptively wore the uniforms of the local police whom they locked up in the jails knowing that these public servants would not turn on their own people.

We surmise that the current Ethiopian government condones the carefully orchestrated racial/ethnic segregation of the national military forces into select militias and places them in regions of the country that are distinctly different than their own ethnicity so that they may execute the Meles administration's brutal dictates. We see that this pits ethnic groups against one another and erodes our common brotherhood. At its worse, this facilitates atrocities like those in the Gambella where nearly 500 Anuaks were viciously slaughtered in three consecutive days during December 2003. Sanctioned killings continue there to this day and the death toll is well over 2000 while approximately 50,000 Anuaks have fled the country, most often into the Sudan.

We call into question the government's administration of the land-tenure program as yet another method of disenfranchising, displacing and disconnecting citizens from their livelihoods and their ancestry.

Anyone who expresses dissent or resistance to this authoritarian rule is summarily rounded up, locked up, tortured or killed. This has been well documented by Amnesty International. Freedom of the press is stifled as many journalists now reside in prison. The right to representation is squashed as many democratically elected officials now reside in prison. Critical discourse is no longer allowed as many professors and educators now reside in prison. The rule of law has been cast to the wayside as many lawyers and judges now reside in prison. Doctors, Engineers and Human Rights Advocates all languish in the same prisons. They are told to prove their "innocence" to trumped-up charges of "genocide" and "outrages to the constitution" in a kangaroo court that drags its feet to avoid the inevitable sentences that Meles, himself, laid out long ago. We call this entire farce an outrage. We demand the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, prisoners of conscience and those who have been unjustly incarcerated throughout the region.

Personally, I wear a yellow band on my wrist with the red/yellow/green colors that embody the spirit of Ethiopia. On that band is the name of Judge Bertukan Mideqsa who has endured the hardships of the infamous Qaliti prison with her colleagues. She is stalwart to the current regime's tactics of intimidation. I want her to know that way across her continent and over the Atlantic Ocean, I say her name everyday. I make sure that others see her name everyday. When I see red, yellow and green together, I think of Judge Bertukan and I know that the real spirit of a peaceful, liberated and thriving Ethiopia lies within her heart and others like her. Judge Bertukan, humble as it may be, I will not abandon my efforts to push for your freedom and I look forward to talking with you about it in person when freedom is yours once again.

Qaliti is but one of many prisons across the country. Others, in very desolate regions far from the view of the public eye, are even worse. They are the concentration camps of our day. The Meles regime has incarcerated and sent tens of thousands of innocent, non-violent citizens to these prisons.

The list of atrocities continues. The disaster and destabilization of the region continues. Conflicts continue to grow. Diseases continue to spread. Overwhelming as it may appear, crisis in the Horn of Africa is distant.

Though seemingly far away, however, as an American I see how Africa's problems are nonetheless problematic for me, too. The US government, diplomatic corps, and military have long maintained a presence in Ethiopia and much of the Horn of Africa. Living a contradiction, the current US administration considers itself a liberator of the oppressed yet continues to turn a blind eye to the atrocities and human rights violations exacted against everyone who is a perceived threat to the Meles regime, regardless of ethnicity, political affiliation, occupation, gender, health, age, etc. My tax dollars are used to finance US endeavors within Ethiopia and are taken by the corrupted Ethiopian government in the form of financial assistance.

I can think of better ways to spend limited tax dollars. I'd rather spend them in the Gulf Coast states to help my neighbors here at home reclaim their lives. I certainly don't want to endow and empower governments that partake in genocide, oppression, and human rights violations.

We applaud the work of Congressman Christopher Smith and Congressman Donald Payne to keep bringing these issues before the US Congress because our government has a stake in northeast Africa and we are currently contributing to the problem. We encourage all members of Congress to learn more about the situations we have enumerated and what others will present on this day at this very timely and important joint summit. Please vote on our behalf to ratify H.R.2003.

Finally, we are very grateful that the Honorable Ana Gomes is a relentless champion of our cause. By bringing the fight right to our very doorstep, she continues to inspire and invigorate us. Thank you, sincerely, for bringing the gravitas of your position and your personal conviction into this struggle to reclaim human rights and social justice. We offer this letter in show of support for all that you do in this matter.

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