



“Fighting for a Country”: A Summary of Obang’s Talk in Dallas (Part Two)

June 9, 2009

Fighting for a Country

In part one, I talked about how we Ethiopians have essentially fought against the evils and injustices of the current regime by separating into disjointed, divided, alienated and non-cohesive “self-interest groups.” I used the term “village” to depict the way these groups then often work at odds with each other, only for their own interests, rather than for a “country.” I use the word “country” to describe how I believe we must work together as a whole for larger, more inclusive goals—united by principles and as Ethiopians who **seek an Ethiopia where humanity comes before “ethnicity” and where we collaborate for the betterment of all Ethiopians, because “no one is free until we all are free.”**

Because of these principles, a national focus that strengthens justice, rights and equality, should also empower those seeking self-determination at the local level, giving them a louder voice in both regional and federal affairs like in the United States and Canada. This is contrary to a “village” approach that puts one self-interested “village” group in control of the entire country, all the way from the kebele level to the federal level.

An approach that promotes “country” is one where the voices of diversity, ethnicity, regionalism and special interests should have greater say at every level, but particularly in the areas of the country that most affect them. Yet, years of operating on a “village” level in Ethiopia has even restructured our struggle into one where groups are warring between themselves to become the next dominating “village” over the entire country—a feudal model that we should discard.

This is inherently flawed and unless we change course, some one group might “win the battle” for themselves, but in the long-run, we all will “lose the war” for a new and for a better Ethiopia. In other words, until many of our people are freed from this “damaged” thinking, our sub-sections of our society of diverse people, will be “un-free.” Instead, we need to form a nation around inclusive, life-giving principles that will liberate all of us. This leads to the question, what will it take for Ethiopians to fight for a country rather than for their own village?

It will mean that we Ethiopians must begin to repair the broken elements of our society before it leads to the further disintegration of all of Ethiopia. I suggest we start with five actions:

Actions to Repair Broken Relationships and Strengthen our Society

1. **Reach out:** Start talking with each other, especially taking care to listen to other points of view,
2. **Reconciliation:** Admitting our wrongs, asking and giving forgiveness, seeking resolution of conflicts even when wronged by others wherever and whenever possible

3. **Transparency:** Speaking openly and honestly about our goals rather than secretly pursuing self-interest or “village interest”
4. **Persevere through conflict:** Work diligently and with perseverance to resolve disagreements, to gain understanding and/or to bring about consensus or if not possible or advantageous, agree to disagree with civility
5. **Collaboration:** Work collaboratively together towards common goals, even if organizations maintain separate identities

If we could take these meaningful steps towards each other, it would shake the Meles regime to its core and he would have to start worrying about it collapsing completely. Disagreement is common in human experience and is happening all the time, but when an organization’s main power, survival and threads of unity depend on “being against” other ethnic groups, political groups, religious groups or some other subsection of society or making sure they stay alienated, that organization’s survival is threatened by reconciliation efforts. Meles Zenawi and his clique have taken this to a new level; but yet, the practice is deeply entrenched in Ethiopian culture and is holding us back as a country.

If we acknowledge that we want to have a country, but yet are acting in a way that only supports our own “village,” are we not then our own roadblock to our goal? If our village, tribe, political group, region or religion is working hard to “take all,” and to dominate over everyone else, we cannot have a nation. If we can change this, we can have a healthy society, if we fail, we will not. We need to avoid falling into Meles’ tribal thinking where he cannot work with people outside his own small group. The supporting leg of his table is built on breaking us down into little, controllable, weak, warring villages. He has done it with language. We thought it was great to start, but it has divided us; probably, just as was intended.

What a sorry position we are in now. The people born in the last 18 years do not have a common language. The Afar, the Ogadeni, the Oromo, the Benishangul and many millions of others do not speak the national language of Amharic, but only their own tribal or regional language. Yet, language is a tool that empowers, connects and facilitates the carrying out of practical tasks of life, especially in an increasingly complicated world. Worse yet, our failure to have a common language is an ingredient for destruction. Look at the 300 million people in America who can communicate with one language, especially important when they have a problem. Even with Mengistu, we did far better than we are doing now under Meles. Our children cannot even communicate with each other, which makes it far more likely for conflict to explode into violence or killing when you have no common language to work things out peaceably.

Language has also been used as a “gate-keeper” by only admitting certain people who know the “right” language will leaving out others who do not. It has given a chosen few a monopoly on access to opportunities within the country and outside of the country; for example, Meles’ children and other children of TPLF members are taught not only Amharic and Tigrayan, but are given instruction in other Ethiopian and international languages, including English, giving them improved access to higher education and enabling them to go abroad to universities and colleges outside of Ethiopia. Those who might be hardworking and bright will not have access to the same opportunities because language has been used as a means to uphold an apartheid system of opportunity.

It has eliminated competition for advanced education, private and public jobs, partnerships with people outside of one’s own group—both within and outside of the country. This is selfish, wrong and will hold us back as a society. Who knows but it could be a science-minded man or woman from Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, or from the Southern Nations who would discover an effective means to eliminate the threat of malaria, a vaccine to protect against the HIV virus or a source of alternative energy, if only they could converse with other scientists throughout the world!

The extremes of this preferential treatment for one group, coupled with the brutal human rights abuses and repression of others, can produce the seeds of genocide, dictatorships and corruption. It has been used by the Woyane to monopolize on opportunity, to prevent us from having compassion towards our fellow Ethiopians and to prevent us from creating a cohesive and a collaborative society.

We are much more than the tribe, the region, the village or the family to which we belong to for we are unique parts of the fabric that make up the quilt of humankind. This is why we must freely speak up for justice beyond our groups, something that will loosen Woyane's delicate balance of power. We must forgive those who have wronged us and apologize with humility when we are wrong, understanding that each of us is a human being and has made mistakes.

Ethiopians are wonderful people, but these are the issues we must deal with if we are to stop propping up this regime. Remember people can change, including ourselves! Leaders are those who are genuinely willing to humbly lead the way in making such changes themselves and seeking reconciliation with others.

For example, we heard recently about Hailu Shawel showing up at Birtukan's candlelight vigil as a sign of support for her and other political prisoners. This is a sign of progress and is the type of action, when done in humility and earnestness, which will bring transformation to our country. I not only applaud him for this action, but really admire and appreciate the meaning of what he has done. If I had advice for him, I would say, "Job, well done Ato Hailu. Now I hope you will continue to reach out to others like this for it is a great example to us of humility, courage and wisdom." I also hope his followers can do the same and that they will be joined by many others from every group. This is how we broaden the struggle beyond ourselves and our villages—by repairing broken relationships. In doing so, we strengthen our society.

Fighting for Humanity

Changing our focus to a national one, where **"no one village is free unless all are free"** goes beyond being a political problem. It is about the survival of all of us and because of that, it cannot be done by one political leader, by one tribe, one political party or by one human rights advocate, but must be done by many of us doing it one person at a time to another. Each of us must declare ourselves advocates and start talking to others and following the steps to resolve our conflicts and divisions. This is why **humanity must come before ethnicity, because otherwise we will place obstacles in our way that could otherwise be easily removed.**

The attitude that will free all of us is to value every human being as being worthy of respect, basic rights and dignity, simply because God created them in the same way He did each of us. **If you want respect, basic rights and dignity for yourself, first give it to others.** This is a principle for success. Our society will be transformed if we demonstrate that we genuinely care about the well being and happiness of others—because **"until all are free, none are free."**

God's principles, which established these universal rules from the beginning of time, are those same principles that will reap great benefits for any society that practices them. Are you willing to become part of the clay that forms that kind of society? Are you dreaming of *"a land where peace and prosperity flourish"*? as great Ethiopian poet, Lemlem Tsegaw put it in her poem entitled: [*I Dream For*](#). It will only happen if each of us makes that step of courage in humility.

May God create in us willing hearts to build new bridges between our villages so we can journey together to that New Ethiopia!

Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: Obang@solidaritymovement.org