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Addressing Women's National Democratic Club Ethiopia's Strategic Importance in Africa: Will Its Influence Be Used for Good or for Ill?

Good evening! I want to thank Women's National Democratic Club for inviting me to this very important discussion today. It is an honor to be here at this very historic meeting place, established only two years after the women of America were given the right to vote in 1920 with the passage of the 19th Amendment.

At the time, Eleanor Roosevelt affirmed the God-given right for women to choose who they wanted to represent them in their government. Since that time, the seeds she, the founder's of this club and others have planted, have grown; giving women a voice in public issues as well as the opportunity to assume positions of leadership, both previously denied to half of the population.

It is really a privilege for me stand in the same room where Eleanor spoke many years ago, especially as someone whose own mentor, my grandmother, empowered me to be who I am. She was deeply concerned about human rights and the suffering of others and passed that concern on to me. Unfortunately, the objectives of this club are far from being achieved in my own country. It does not need to be so. The topic of today will point to some of the reasons.

Today I am here to speak on the topic: **"Ethiopia's Strategic Importance in Africa: Will Its Influence Be Used for Good or for Ill?"** I will be speaking on behalf of the [Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia \(SMNE\)](#), of which I am the executive director. The SMNE is a non-political and non-violent social justice movement of diverse people that advocates for truth, freedom, justice, good governance and upholding the civil, human and economic rights of the people of Ethiopia without regard to ethnicity, religion, gender, political affiliation, socio-economic status or other differences.

The reason I am with you today began on December 13, 2003¹ when Ethiopian National Defense Forces, accompanied by militia groups they had armed, began a massacre of leaders of my own ethnicity, the Anuak, in the resource-rich Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia. Within three days, 424 of the leaders and most educated within a marginalized community were brutally killed, countless women were raped and nearly 10,000 fled to neighboring South Sudan for safety. Many still remain.

[Human rights violations](#) continued along with the widespread destruction of schools, clinics, crops, homes and granaries. Over the next few years, nearly two thousand Anuak were killed. Why? The government contracted with a Chinese company to begin drilling for oil on indigenous Anuak land. Now, in the last few years, [Human Rights Watch](#) has reported that over 70,000 people from the Gambella region have been evicted from their prime agricultural land in order to lease it to regime, foreign and crony investors. The same story is repeated in other parts of Ethiopia.

Since that day, just over ten years ago, my life has changed. The goal of helping to build an Ethiopia where its people can live and flourish, has become a driving force of my thoughts and efforts every day. As a result, today's topic is very relevant for when the Anuak were massacred, Ethiopia enjoyed high standing internationally and few seemed willing to consider its darker side.

I have four questions I would like you to consider today. They are: 1) what makes Ethiopia so strategic, 2) will Ethiopia's strategic influence in Africa be used for good or for ill; 3) is Ethiopia's increasing repression within the country becoming the source of its own instability; and 4) will the international/ donor community heed the warnings and support efforts of Ethiopians for reforms before it is too late?

[Let me start by giving you a picture of Ethiopia:](#)

Ethiopia is a beautiful country of many landscapes—the deserts, mountains, flatlands, as well as lush tropical lowlands where rivers, fertile land, forests and wildlife abound. It possesses enormous untapped resources and is the land of many geological wonders, including an active volcano. It is also the birthplace of one of our favorite beverages—coffee.

Its beautiful, hard-working and hospitable people are like a garden of many different blooms. They are as varied as the land they live in, ranging from the lighter-skinned African/Arab looking people of the highlands of Ethiopia to the more typical African looking people of the lowlands. We have the sophisticated and more internationally aware people living in our cities; however 82% of Ethiopians are living as subsistence farmers in the rural areas of our country.

We also have remote tribes of people who still live as they have done so for thousands of years, most of them near to our great rivers. In all, Ethiopia is home to over 80 different ethnic groups, many with their own language and cultural practices.

The image of Ethiopia is often as a place of famine, hunger and starvation; however, in some places the nutrients in the land are so high that three crops can be grown in one year. Ethiopia could feed itself contrary to its usual image.

Ethiopia is an ancient country with a rich history. Ethiopia—or the land of Cush—is mentioned in the early books of the Bible. Pathways and rivers connected the people of Ethiopia to early civilizations in Sudan, Egypt, Israel and other parts of the emerging world. Three of the major religions of the world—Jewish, Christianity and Islam—have strong roots in Ethiopia and unlike in many places, Ethiopians of different faiths have lived in relative peace for centuries.

[What makes Ethiopia so strategic?](#)

Ethiopia's strategic importance to Africa is undeniable. Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, could now be considered the capital city of the continent. It is home to many inter-continental and international organizations, including the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Every country on the continent and around the world has an embassy there. Ethiopia is also the second largest country in Africa, with a growing population that is already over 90 million. Its recently deceased Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, was regularly included in G-20 meetings, climate conventions and top-level economic meetings where some considered him to be "the voice of the continent." Ethiopia became a valued ally to the United States and a favorite of western donors, receiving more financial aid than any other country in Africa—four billion.

Located in the epicenter of the fragile, geo-politically strategic area of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia sits in the middle of failed or potentially failing states, all of which pose risks to the region, Africa, the Middle East and beyond. Among such neighbors, Ethiopia has long been viewed as the most stable country in an unstable neighborhood leading to Ethiopia becoming a major partner in the War on Terror during both the Bush and Obama administrations. They have received significant amounts of military training and aid, enabling them to become one of the strongest military forces in Africa. The Ethiopian National Defense Forces, supported in part by the U.S., led a major incursion into Somalia. They also sent peacekeepers into South Sudan, Sudan and Somalia. As a result, despite its own democratic failings, Ethiopia has assumed a major role in regional, African and international issues.

Will Ethiopia's strategic position in Africa be used for good or for ill?

Unfortunately, many on the ground, contrary to those in the international community who have been courted, deceived and charmed by the current government, do not see the results of Ethiopia's influence as being positive for either the people of Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa or the continent. Ethiopia is one of the least democratic countries on the continent; particularly in regards to its: imprisonment of journalists, criminalization of basic civil rights, widespread violation of human rights, flawed elections, governmental control of technology, severe restrictions on civil society and in its endemic exploitation of national assets, land, resources and people.

The current one-party government of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is controlled by an elite group from the ethnic-based Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in power for over 20 years. *Prior to overthrowing the last regime in 1991, the United States Department of State had classified them as a terrorist group for their brutal acts based on their Marxist-Leninist ideology, which is still followed. Instead of becoming a beacon of justice, they have repeatedly terrorized their own people. During the Ethiopian military's incursion into Somalia, with the stated goal of curbing the spread of radical Islam, its rampant human rights violations and the widespread destruction of homes, livestock, wells and property has been considered as one of the factors that incited the rise of al Shabaab, now classified as a Somali terrorist group.*

For Ethiopia to use its strategic position in Africa for good rather than for ill, it is imperative that it start at home by initiating meaningful democratic reforms, inclusiveness of opportunity, the restoration of justice, reconciliation and genuine accountability that goes beyond deceptive rhetoric to actual practice on the ground. Only then will the lives of its own citizens be enhanced and its continental influence finally used for the good of the people of Africa. Until then, its influence will simply reinforce similar deficiencies in other countries on the continent, making it all the more important to see changes come to Ethiopia.

Is Ethiopia's increasing repression within the country becoming the source of its own instability?

The most critical question today is whether or not the TPLF/EPRDF's increasing authoritarianism, corruption and monopoly of all parts of Ethiopian society will lead to its own instability, something which could easily result in an explosion of violence and chaos in the country. The warning signs are present and ironically, it is the years of refusing to deal with the deepening anger and dissatisfaction among people of every background—except by forceful crackdowns—that has created such a ticking bomb. This viewpoint is shared with experts like Genocide Watchⁱⁱ who has listed Ethiopia as among the countries most likely to become a failed state, with little hope that it will be resolved without violence and possibly genocide against the ethnic group in power.

There are many sources of discontent and instability; however, it appears that the anger and frustration level is cumulative. Ethiopians in the Diaspora who visit Ethiopia return home expressing fear that the tensions are so high they believe something unexpected could set it off. Life has always been difficult, but conditions are worsening for many, not only in regards to freedom and opportunity, but in regards to the impossible challenges of life. In order to continue to exploit the national assets, land and resources, the power-holders must increasingly repress the people. It is an impossible situation if it continues to be ignored. The following factors all contribute:

1. Lack of freedom

The 2011 Legatum Prosperity Indexⁱⁱⁱ among 110 countries in the world places Ethiopia at the very bottom for freedom and 108th overall. In [Freedom House's 2014 index of freedom](#) in the world, Ethiopia was seen as "Not Free."

2. Lack of political space

Since the national election of 2005, when the Ethiopian opposition nearly won the election before the TPLF/EPRDF stole the election, *declared its own victory and killed 194 peaceful protestors in the street; the regime has cracked down on every freedom, essentially closing all political space. In the 2010 election, they won 99.6% of the vote. In addition to arresting, intimidating and obstructing the opposition,* Human Rights Watch^{iv} documented in its report: [“Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression,”](#) the regime’s abuse of development aid in manipulating the vote in that election. As of today, opposition leaders are regularly arrested and harassed.

3. Criminalization of dissent and suppression of free speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the media

Ethiopia is one of the worst countries in Sub-Saharan Africa for arresting journalists. *Some of Ethiopia’s most courageous voices of freedom, including journalists, editors, human rights and social justice activists, religious leaders and opposition political leaders, are imprisoned under vague anti-terrorism laws meant to silence any critics and competition. Many self-censor themselves rather than face punitive measures.* According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, [“They Know Everything We Do”](#); the phone calls, emails, and Skype calls of citizens are routinely monitored, taped and are played as victims have been interrogated and beaten.

4. Suppression of civil society and religious freedom

The ERPDF has passed a draconian law, the [Charities and Societies Proclamation \(CSO\)](#) *restricting and controlling civil society that has essentially closed down any independent voices. It prohibits any organization that receives more than 10% of its budget from foreign sources from (a) advancing human and democratic rights, (b) promoting equality of nations, nationalities, peoples, gender and religion, (c) promoting the rights of the disabled and children, (d) promoting conflict resolution or reconciliation and, (e) promoting the efficiency of justice and law enforcement services.*^v *Harsh criminal penalties are imposed for violators; however, in place of the 2,600 or more organizations that were forced to close, have arisen regime-controlled pseudo-organizations to dupe outsiders, pretending to be objective voices of civil society.* Recent religious protests have come from the government’s efforts to interfere in the affairs of religions, including in its choices of leadership. Rumors indicate that tougher legal controls on religious groups are planned. This is a major source of potential conflict that will cross religious lines to include all people of faith. Already, numerous protests have been organized and carried out in the last year.

5. Centralization of power into the hands of the inner TPLF/EPRDF circle, including control of all institutions and sectors of society

No level of government is ignored by the TPLF/EPRDF, but all affairs are controlled down to the local level, including who receives business licenses, who can lease land and who can obtain a loan. The regime even controls who has access to jobs, higher education and economic opportunity. No major or minor institution is independent of their control. This includes all ministries, the judiciary, the election board, the military, and the Ethiopian Parliament. Out of 547 members of parliament, only two are not EPRDF members.

6. Endemic poverty for the majority while TPLF/ERPFD inner circle members, their family members and cronies are exploiting the land, resources, business opportunities and every other opportunity leading to a mass exodus of the people

Since 2008, the TPLF/EPRDF has embarked on a model of economic development that is closely related to the Chinese model where human rights, inclusive development and basic freedoms are ignored.

Under this model, members and friends of the inner circle of the TPLF/ERPFD have flourished, gaining great wealth as they access economic opportunities, loans and partnerships for themselves which are closed to the majority.

According to the [2013 Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative](#) which measures multi-dimensional poverty indicators, *Ethiopia is the second poorest country out of the 144 countries studied. Although the regime claims double digit economic growth, the majority of Ethiopians have not been part of it and many have actually become worse off due to forced evictions from their land in order so as to lease their ancestral land to regime insiders and foreign investors* according to an extensive report on [Understanding Land Acquisitions in Ethiopia](#) from Oakland Institute.

The results are increased hunger and the loss of livelihoods as many are displaced. Resistance has been met with human rights abuses, causing many to leave the country. In desperation, many fall victim to human traffickers as they seek jobs or refuge in neighboring countries.

Over the last several years I have listened to the personal testimonies of countless Ethiopians who have undergone horribly inhumane circumstances in order to find a better life outside of Ethiopia. These first-hand testimonies describe the great suffering many have gone through and comprise some of the most heart-breaking stories I have ever heard. Most of them are young people, the sons and daughters of Ethiopia – the next generation—and they are leaving in huge numbers. Many of the women who find employment in the Middle East experience severe physical and sexual assault, denial of salary or payment of only partial salaries, confiscation of passports and other identification papers, inhumane conditions, psychological trauma, denial of freedom of movement, inability to change jobs and even murder.

According to the U.S. State Department Report of June 2013^{vi}:

“Although the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) reported that licensed Ethiopian overseas recruitment agencies received 198,000 applications for work in 2012, more than double the amount received in 2011, the ministry estimated that this represents only 30 to 40 percent of all Ethiopians migrating to the Middle East. The remaining 60 to 70 percent are either trafficked or smuggled with the facilitation of illegal brokers.”

In the past 4 months, over 160,000 Ethiopians were deported from Saudi Arabia back to Ethiopia as Saudis turned on the migrant workers for taking their jobs. Many believe the government has turned a blind eye to the illegal trafficking and plight of Ethiopians in foreign countries due to its complicity in this highly lucrative business.

7. Illicit financial flows in Ethiopia are blocking Ethiopians from rising out of poverty

Preceding the release of [Global Financial Integrity's](#) study on [“Illicit Financial Outflows from Developing Countries over the Decade Ending in 2009”](#), they made the following comment pertaining to Ethiopia, *“The people of Ethiopia are being bled dry. No matter how hard they try to fight their way out of absolute destitution and poverty, they will be swimming upstream against the current of illicit capital leakage.”*

The [Task Force for Financial Integrity and Economic Development](#) reported that *Ethiopia lost US \$11.7 billion in illegal capital flight from 2000-2009 and that the illicit financial outflows nearly doubled in 2009 to US \$3.26 billion, double the amount in the two preceding years—with the vast majority coming from corruption, kickbacks, bribery and mispricing. It has only increased since this study came out, with many more government cronies and insiders becoming enjoying new found wealth.* In fact, [Ethiopia leads the continent in new millionaires](#) according a recent study by New World Wealth, an Oxford-based consultancy.

Is it not interesting in light of the TPLF/EPRDF's own disturbing track record of corruption that an arm of their own government wants to study this whole topic regarding Africa? *The Institute for Peace and Security Studies out of Ethiopia's Addis Ababa University has introduced the [Tana High-Level Forum](#) that will focus on the problem of Illicit Financial Flows in Africa and its association with peace and security issues? The forum will meet in late April in Ethiopia. [Professor Andreas Esheté](#), Special Advisor to the Prime Minister with the Rank of a Minister in Ethiopia is part of this forum's board.*

Is this organization really an independent voice for the people or for the TPLF/EPRDF? How can one talk about promoting financial transparency and accountability in Africa when it does not exist in Ethiopia? On the other hand, controlling the outcome so it results in a favorable disposition is the goal of all these pseudo-organizations. However, suppressing the outrage of Ethiopians will be more than the Institute for Peace and Security Studies may be capable of handling without instituting meaningful reforms of the above-mentioned factors. It is hard to maintain peace with those you rob and oppress, is it not?

[Will the international donor community heed the warnings and support the efforts of Ethiopians to bring reforms before it is too late?](#)

International acceptance, large amounts of financial aid and impunity at home and abroad have been gifted to this authoritarian regime, giving it undue legitimacy and support that has resulted in prolonging its control over the majority within Ethiopia. *At the same time, this regime, which has a vested interest in gaining the rewards of such partnerships, has used its position to covertly undermine peace and security in the region. Regional peace, including not only in Ethiopia and Somalia, but also in Eritrea, Sudan and the new Republic of South Sudan, will never come to the Horn as long as this regime is in power. Their model of ethnic apartheid is only worsening the situation. Their tactic of maintaining power by dividing the people along ethnic, religious, political and regional lines will backfire. Their fear of opening up Ethiopian society to all citizens will lead to its own downfall.*

There is a window of opportunity right now that should not be ignored. Most believe the TPLF/EPRDF regime cannot last and as a result, it may be willing to use any degree of force to maintain its power unless a different path can be forged before it is too late. *In the past, the West has attempted to maintain stability by supporting this regime, but it has reached a tipping point where the regime is so repressive that the people can no longer tolerate it. Pressure from Ethiopians for meaningful reforms in every sector of society can make a difference; however, when such pressure is combined with new leverage and support from the international donor community for such change, it could help avert Ethiopia's descent into serious conflict or upheaval.*

There were numerous warning signs in the new Republic of South Sudan prior to the outbreak of violence on December 15, 2013. The government of President Salva Kiir was seen as increasingly authoritarian and as favoring one ethnicity over the others. Last year, increasing competition between the president and his vice president, Riek Machar, resulted in the president sacking Machar and numerous others of similar ethnic background.

Corruption was rampant and the billions of dollars of aid never really improved the lives of the people, but were siphoned off in illicit financial flows out of the country by power-holders. If these and other governance and trauma issues arising from nearly 30 years of war had been addressed effectively early on, it may have helped this new country avoid the mass killings of tens of thousands of people along ethnic lines and the displacement of nearly a million people, a third of them children. Approximately 254,000 of these fled to neighboring countries, many of them to Ethiopia. Both of these leaders may eventually have to answer to alleged complicity with human rights violations. Is it not ironic that the selected leadership for peacemaking in South Sudan is coming from Ethiopia?

Now, Ethiopia, as a member of the regional organization of IGAD, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, is leading the peace negotiations in Addis Ababa in a regional attempt to resolve the crisis. *Yet, how can a repressive, ethnic based regime like the TPLF/EPRDF hope to bring peace to vying political opponents in South Sudan when their flaws are reportedly so similar? If the TPLF/EPRDF cannot succeed at home, what do they have to offer to South Sudan? Has Ethiopia really solved the grievances of their own repressed people? Has Ethiopia held its perpetrators of human rights crimes accountable? Has the climate for corruption in Ethiopia been any better than its neighbor's? Are not Ethiopia's own people flooding into other countries, including South Sudan, seeking safety and protection?*

Comments from the ground:

Right now, nothing seems to be working in Ethiopia, not just its government or its institutions, but the practical things of life according to two people who recently returned from Ethiopia. I knew neither of them. One was a man I just met from West Africa who had recently visited the capital city, Addis Ababa. He said he had heard of the impressive economic growth in Ethiopia and its achievement of its Millennium Development Goals (MDG), but when he got there, he was shocked. He said, *"Nothing worked—I couldn't even charge my phone."*

Another man, a Tigrayan who is a government supporter found my number and called me after returning from Ethiopia. He was very upset with what he had seen in the country and repeated some of the complaints of the West African. He stated, *"Nothing worked! There was no phone, no water, and no electricity for a good part of the day as the government switched it on and off between areas of the city. Everything is a mess in the country! The government talks about growth but what we see on the ground is nothing! Ethiopia doesn't have anything except good people."* He said everyone he talked to knew there was a problem, but felt stuck. They asked, *"If the EPRDF went today, who would carry on? There is no viable alternative."* He then told me the purpose of his call, *"I am asking you to help create an alternative!"* I replied, *"Your people made a mess and now you are coming to me?"* He then spoke about his fears that it will all collapse because of the corruption and that even the elite should understand that they will lose everything if there is no viable alternative.

Conclusion:

His concerns are valid. Ethiopia does need a viable alternative. If it were done properly, it could positively affect the entire region and beyond for good. Those who care about the stability and future of Ethiopia must start talking about it and looking for the steps to make reforms. In the past, US, UK and EU policy has focused on ensuring stability above the rights and well being of the people; however, stability for outsiders means instability for the people and this has contributed to the problem we face today. When donor countries, intellectuals, NGO's and others in the international community deny the truth about Ethiopia, it will contribute to its collapse.

The whole country of Ethiopia is like a wooden table supported by rotting legs; it only is a matter of time before something unexpected will put too much weight on it, causing the whole table to collapse from the pressure. This is analogy to what is happening in Ethiopia when the truth is denied; it creates a false illusion of strength. The legs will continue to rot away, becoming weaker and weaker, but without an acknowledgement of the problem, who will fix it?

For example, the danger is exacerbated when members of the international community say such things as: *1) things are good in the country when they are not; 2) by passing on data that is not substantiated with evidence; 3) by reporting booming economic growth when only a few power-holders are benefiting; 4) by minimizing the explosive potential of the TPLF/EPRDF's divisive ethnic apartheid tactics and policies that have deeply divided Ethiopians; or,*

5) by ignoring the simmering tensions resulting from widespread human rights crimes, divisive policies, corruption, oppression, manmade hunger and the daylight robbery of its resources, believing this government will last. When outsiders do this, they are putting more weight on this table when there is already too much for the legs to bear.

The TPLF/EPRDF is presenting a false picture for their own survival, but others should not give their endorsement of these lies. Eventually it will come to the end and when it does, there will likely be violence; however, those who are outsiders will not be left with to deal with all that might result. From afar, some may sympathize with the fact that Ethiopians are killing each other, but to us, it is our people killing each other and it would be a tragedy. This is what we do not want to happen. Outsiders can separate themselves from the fallout, but the same people denied a voice will be left to deal with the aftermath and will be blamed for the violence, chaos or destruction.

If these assertions of progress were real, people like me would be thrilled and would not be talking to you here today. This is why when we speak of accountability; we are including those members of the international community who have knowingly supported these fabrications, often becoming the mouthpiece of the government. In doing so, they become complicit in the possible future collapse of Ethiopia. Ethiopia needs more international partners ready to speak the truth so the need for real reforms are acknowledged. In the long run, the greatest stability will only come as the companion of meaningful reforms, the restoration of justice and the reconciliation of the Ethiopian people. Only then will Ethiopia be in a position to use its strategic influence for the good of the people of Ethiopia, Africa and beyond.

It is time for the transformation of Ethiopia, starting with seeing each other through the eyes of our Creator, rather than dehumanizing and devaluing each other based on our differences of ethnicity, gender, culture, political view, religion, nationality or any other factor. The SMNE's principle of "putting humanity before ethnicity," or any other difference is a building block of a healthy society and Africa needs such values imprinted on the hearts of its people in order to truly move ahead.

Our second principle is to help our neighbors, near and far, because no one is free until all of us are free. If we oppress others, not only is our own future uncertain and in possible jeopardy, we also end up living diminished lives as human beings. Africans know what it means to live in robust community among their tribes, but we are called by God to reach beyond to care about each other beyond our tribes, for our shared humanity has no boundaries.

Thank You!

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ⁱ http://www.anuakjustice.org/doc_today_for_killing_anuaks.htm; Today is the Day for Killing Anuak and Human Rights Watch report: <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2005/03/23/targeting-anuak>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.genocidewatch.org/alerts/countriesatrisk2011.html> ; Current Countries at Risk of Genocide, Politicide or Mass Atrocities

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.prosperity.com/country.aspx?id=ET> ; 2011 Legatum Prosperity Index

^{iv} <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/10/19/development-without-freedom-0> ; Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression

^v http://www.civicus.org/csw_files/CIVICUSAnalysisEthiopiaCharitiesProc160908.pdf

^{vi} http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/250812/361665_en.html