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Mr. Obang Metho's speech to the Ethiopian in Las Vegas, Nevada.

**POST ADWA VICTORY: CAN ETHIOPIANS OWN THEIR PART IN DECOLONIZING TODAY'S ETHIOPIA--
STARTING WITH ETHNIC APARTHEID?**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you here in Las Vegas. We are here to celebrate two different occasions. First, this is the time that Ethiopians all over the world remember the victory of Ethiopians over the invading Italians in the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Secondly, we are here to commemorate 5th Year Anniversary of Hiber Radio and give our congratulations to its chief producer, journalist Habtamu Assefa, for his five years of dedicated communication service to Ethiopians. THANK YOU!

I would also like to thank Hiber Radio committee members and supporters, namely Tamiru Geda, Dr Mulugeta Kassahun, Eyayu Wende, Girma Zaid, Yonas Cherkos, Yared Tadesse, Michel Emiru, Abereham Aklilu, Mesefen Haile, Rahel Solomon, Getu Amare, Hailu G/Mariam, Bizuwork G/Eyesus and others. You had a vision to create a radio program that connects the people to each other and that helps people know what is going on back home as well as more locally. Inside Ethiopia, information is denied, manipulated, and fabricated to advance the agenda of the TPLF/EPRDF power holders. In such an environment, our journalists and other members of the media have not fared well.

Ethiopia's many committed journalists have been blocked at every turn from the free expression of ideas and information. The ethnic apartheid regime of the TPLF/EPRDF sees them as a serious threat to their control of Ethiopia. As a result, they end up jailed or fleeing the country for safety. Of those Ethiopians who flee the country, some continue to fulfill their calling even with few resources, like you. All of us should appreciate and support these people who are not only focusing on their own personal lives, but who are trying to do something of service to the people.

The role of the media:

The role of the media is vital in any society. It has the role of informing us about our surroundings, our way of life, our values, our principles, our morality, and our identity. For example, in a society where there is no media, how do you know the truth? When the people are denied the truth and information about what is going on around them, they are denied the opportunity to be creative, innovative and to move forward. Compare America and other free countries where there is an active, free and strong media to places like Ethiopia where an elite few purposely hold people back while the world is moving forward.

African democratic activist, author, and advisor to the SMNE, Dr. George Ayittey, has observed that because a well informed and well educated people are such threats to repressive regimes; *the media and all its members and components are generally the first target of a dictatorial government. This includes radio and TV stations, newspapers, magazines and control of the Internet and telecommunications. Those in the media within Ethiopia must self-censor if they are to survive in their professional field; but for some, it becomes more difficult to compromise the truth than to face the repercussions for speaking out. Because of the dangers associated with speaking out, it makes it all the more important to support the voices of truth here in the free world. If Ethiopians are to join the global world, we in the Diaspora must help shine the light to expose the manmade darkness covering Ethiopia.*

If we were in Ethiopia today, what I am going to say related to the Battle of Adwa, a defining moment in our history, might be considered a threat and not be allowed. However, because we are in a free country, I am free to speak about the victory of the Ethiopians over the Italian colonialists and reflect on it in light of the current repressive conditions in our country. *The Battle of Adwa is a proudly acclaimed moment in our history that continues to shape our current identity; but, it forces us to ask, why has life not measurably improved for the vast majority of Ethiopians of today?*

Why is it that 119 years later, a repressive regime in Ethiopia has been forced on the people of Ethiopia? Why is it that this ethnic apartheid regime is now manipulating our history to create division between Ethiopians today? How should we respond? As I have previously stated, for Ethiopia to move forward, we must own the truth—which includes not only celebrating the proud moments of our history and learning lessons from it, but also accepting the bad and ugly parts so we might also learn from them. This must start by talking to each other rather than about each other—a way to bring about greater unity.

A primary factor leading to the victory at Adwa was the fact that greater unity among Ethiopians was achieved as Menelik and the people of Ethiopia came together to face a foreign enemy intent on the colonization of Ethiopia. **What went wrong that we overcame Italy, but yet, have not overcome oppression?**

It cannot be by chance that of the fifty-five countries of Africa, the only one never colonized is Ethiopia. Was this a God-given gift given to the people of Ethiopia for purposes we have not yet fully understood or utilized? *Year after year we cannot celebrate the victory of our ancestors without considering our current state of affairs in Ethiopia. I will say a few words about Adwa, why it was an opportunity for Ethiopians and how we might use the lessons of Adwa to create a victory that will contribute to the lives of all our people as well as those beyond our borders. As we look at what happened then and what is happening now, we should look for the parallels; choosing to pursue what is good and figuring out how to avoid the traps.*

During the last part of the 19th century, most every African country had been colonized with the exception of Ethiopia. Colonization meant slavery, subjugation and exploitation—the lack of freedom, justice and self-determination. With it comes inequality and lack of opportunity. Power is in the hands of a few. The people are not allowed to think, speak or be educated unless natives align with the colonial power. The people have no choice of leaders as such a choice would lead to a reversal of power and the loss of unmerited privileges and wealth. Colonizers were greedy for resources, power, and glory. For Italy, it may have been all three. The fact that they were defeated so soundly was a source of deep humiliation that many believe led to the later invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

Menelik came to power in 1889 during one of the most severe famines in Ethiopia's history. Early on, he signed the Treaty of Wechale, which gave away the northern part of Ethiopia, later to become Eritrea, to Italy. In return, Menelik was assured of sovereignty over the remaining parts of Ethiopia; however, the treaty's two versions were deceptively different. In his book, *A Guide to Ethiopia*, Phillip Briggs states, "What Menelik didn't realize was that the Italians had inserted a clause in the Italian version of the document, but not in the Amharigna equivalent, which demanded that Ethiopia make all her foreign contacts through Italy, in effect reducing Ethiopia to an Italian protectorate."

When it was presented at the Berlin Conference, the deception was accepted by the other members. He goes on to say, "Italy further undermined the spirit of the treaty when, in 1891, they successfully courted several Tigrean princes into alliance with Eritrea. When the princes revolted against the prospective colonizers in 1894, Italy was left with one course open to attain its goal of colonizing Ethiopia: military confrontation."

The Italians did not expect this kind of unification and believed they could depend on some of the vassal kings to rise up against Menelik, essentially hoping to defeat them by internal division. However, in 1895, the Tigrean princes instead joined forces with Menelik in order to all defend themselves from what Menelik described to be "a foreign menace."ⁱ In other words, the Italians did not expect such a large force of united Ethiopians.

The Italians decided on a surprise attack on Adwa on Sunday, March 1, 1896 because it was a feast day in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They hoped the soldiers would be at church celebrating; however, the Ethiopians were ready for them. As a result, the Italians were greatly outnumbered. Two additional factors contributed to the victory over the Italians. Due to rain, some within the three detachments of Italians were slowed down in their movement, causing one group to arrive before the others. Additionally, the inaccuracy of the maps used by the Italians led to a further dividing of the Italian detachments from each other. An African guide is said to have alerted them to the faultiness of their maps, but the Italians decided to trust their maps instead. When the Ethiopians attacked the first detachment, the Italians were overpowered.

Among the fighters, were many Africans, including some from Eritrea, who were fighting with the Italians. When their defeat was certain, they ran, leaving the Italian officers alone. The Italian officers were then forced to surrender. Ethiopian troops then cut off the other two detachments.

This was the first time any African army had so soundly defeated the much-better equipped and militarily-educated Europeans. The defeat was so humiliating it resulted in a petition in Italy, signed by 100,000 Italians demanding an Italian withdrawal from Ethiopia. In 1941, the Italians again tried to take control of Ethiopia, but were again defeated, leaving Ethiopia to be the only African country to remain independent at the end of the scramble for Africa in both the 19th and 20th centuries. Many believe that the Europeans were so successful overall only because they were able to gain the help of African collaborators. Fomenting internal division has greatly contributed to the suffering of Africans both then and now. In the case of the Battle of Adwa, without the unification of Ethiopian ethnic groups, the outcome could have been vastly different.

*Was this a lasting victory or only the short-lived victory of those who united together in 1896? We Ethiopians face the same obstacles in this next century. The 21st century scramble for Africa is in process. The colonizers are not the Italians. A Zulu adage says it all: **"The enemy of an African is he, himself."***

If Ethiopians are not free to choose our leaders; not free to express ourselves on the radio or in other media, not free to utilize our own land and resources; are we Ethiopians really better off? Who defeated us? Ethiopians cannot feed themselves. To get a job, many leave the country. Tribal affiliations open doors to basic rights that should be given to everyone simply based on our humanity and citizenship. Who did this to us? Was it an outsider or us? We are dealing with internal colonizers. We defeated the external, but not the internal. Among those much needed to overcome the new colonization of Ethiopia are our journalists and members of the media. The repression of this sector of our society has greatly impacted the flow of truthful information, but the dedication of these Ethiopians that leads them to speak out is like the sprout of grass growing between the hard rocks. Despite being fragile, these sprouts find a way to grow in difficult places.

During the time of the 2005 election and the time leading up to that; most of the journalists realized, more fully than ever, the importance of the media in bringing change to the country. If Ethiopians were to succeed, the media had to play a bigger role. At that time, the majority of them did something that was unprecedented. They put aside competition and began a cooperative effort between themselves.

Many of them, including Journalist Habtamu Assefa, worked free of charge. Some even slept on the floor at newspaper offices to make sure the work was done. Sometimes, four or five of them would share offices to make sure that something new would come out every day, whether in the newspapers, in a magazine, on the radio, or through varying media sources. They supported each other. It became a goal that was not about themselves; but instead, it was about serving the people and the shared dream for a better Ethiopia for all. This is what made the 2005 election different to the very end.

We know what happened during the election when their dreams were crushed. Many of their friends and colleagues were put in jail; some lost their lives in the street protest following the flawed election. Of those remaining, the majority had to leave the country, becoming refugees. Ten years later, new voices are rising up, trying to revive the same struggle for freedom again. But many more obstacles exist now than at the time of the 2005 election. The *Charities and Societies Proclamation* has closed down civil society. The *Anti-terrorism law* has criminalized dissent. Despite it all, the champions of truth continue to put their lives on the line. Many of those names we already know; people like Eskinder Nega, Woubshet Taye, Reeyot Alemu, Aziza Mohamed, Temesghen Desalegn and many more.

Even after they were put in jail, it did not prevent a new wave of voices from the younger generation from emerging. They have risen from the ashes of these repressive laws. Some of them, like the Zone9 bloggers and the Oromo students who protested against the urban land grabs are now in jail.

The TPLF/EPRDF tried to extinguish their flame that was intent on exposing the truth about what was happening in the dark corners of Ethiopia. However, in trying to prevent their voices from being heard, the TPLF/EPRDF actually mistakenly created an international backlash due to their obviously unjust treatment.

Because the ethnic apartheid regime is so afraid of the light, they continue to repress these emerging voices as well as other facets of the media industry. Even Ethiopian printing shops are monitored and face stiff penalties for publishing anything perceived to be anti-government. As we have learned from the recent report released by Human Rights Watch, Ethiopia is the second greatest jailer of journalists in Africa. We now have 26 exiled journalists in Kenya alone and many more in other places on the globe. Those still remaining in Ethiopia are at risk.

We can look at this in two different ways, the first, negatively and the second, positively. *First, on the negative side, the regime is determined to do anything to close the mouths of those telling the truth. Secondly, on the positive side, the truth tellers are not giving up. The regime can silence ten of them at a time, but ten more will rise up. They can lock up the body, but they cannot lock up their conscience and commitment to truth and morality.*

What should we do?

Appreciating the sacrifices of these great people and their families is not enough. We have to back them up and go to a greater extent in our support of them. *I call on Ethiopian journalists abroad to establish an Ethiopian media institution to work together and become the voice of the silenced Ethiopians within the country.* Civil society is blocked in Ethiopia, but consider just a few of the strategic people now living abroad: the former head of the *Ethiopian Press Association*, the former head of the *Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association*, the former head of the *Ethiopian Labor Association*, the former head of the *Ethiopian Teacher's Association* and the former head of the *Ethiopian Lawyer's Association*, just to name a few. *These organizations can do much to support the many Ethiopians who are suffering in places like Kenya or the families of Ethiopians who are in jail. However, there are even more possibilities than these if Ethiopians are wanting a more lasting victory over oppression.*

All of these institutions should be re-established abroad. If it cannot be done from within Ethiopia, we can start the preparations for the development of strong institutions here and now—in every field. If the TPLF/ERPFD did not exist tomorrow, would we be ready? Do we think the next leadership group would be any different if there were no institutions to hold them accountable? Is it not simply “magical thinking”, left over from our childhood, that leads us to believe that simply getting rid of the TPLF/ERPFD will make everything better? If there were no strong institutions in place, would it not be easy to become the new dictator, never changing the oppressive system? We must be building them now—equipping, preparing, and strategically planning how to create a strong institutional framework for the country that can be ready to secure—not a short victory—but a sustainable one. There are strategic roles for many among us who will take the initiative and organize. We should not waste this precious time we now have.

Different people and groups can contribute, but success will come when many contribute their diverse skills, experience, gifts and knowledge to the whole while at the same time, sharing common core values—like the US Bill of Rights—that is inclusive of everyone. To make it clear, the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) was established due to the human rights abuses that were widespread yet never confronted with one voice.

It was a destructive system that had to be replaced with a different worldview based on putting humanity before ethnicity or any other distinctions and caring about each other because no one is free until all are free. Look at the lessons of Adwa. Are we free? In other words, together, and with God's help, it is up to we the people to bring about a transformation in Ethiopia that will lead to meaningful change. We need help from many directions as the SMNE cannot do it all, nor should we.

The SMNE will be concentrating on reconciliation, peace-building and establishing a healthier, more moral and more principled Ethiopian society, but to do this will require wide participation from many, including the faith community. Yet, *many more areas need preparation—our media, security of our people, the constitution, the issue of private land ownership, business and industrial development, our judiciary, legal matters as they pertain to many areas of life, our educational system, our environment, the development of infra-structure, the areas of health and medicine, telecommunications, and how to deal with social problems—the list goes on.*

Loving Ethiopia, celebrating the victory of Adwa, or being proud of being an Ethiopian without doing anything to make it better is not enough. Those remaining in Ethiopia should not hold on to the hope that someone will come and liberate them. Each Ethiopian should not simply count on others to do the work but do what you can to contribute.

Who is it that God wants us—or Ethiopia—to be or to become? Does Ethiopia have a role to play to the benefit of those beyond our borders? If we were people who loved God and neighbor and who lived out God-given principles towards others, what would happen? If we did, would we see a new victory that would be more lasting? *How do you liberate a nation that has fallen so far from its calling without spiritual transformation; meaning embracing the moral change? We must face the truth about ourselves. This means repenting of the wrongs we have done and facing the ugly part so we could be refreshed as people who live out truth, justice, compassion, integrity, reconciliation and generosity in our daily lives.*

We can go back to the victory of yesteryears, but it is time for a new victory. In 1896, Ethiopians banded together to defend what they had. In doing so, they became the only country out of 55 African states to never be colonized. Perhaps God had a bigger purpose, not only for us but beyond us. Have we squandered this opportunity? It is not too late. Let us fight the battle for a more lasting victory that will bring about an Ethiopia that values others and holds on to what is important in this short life of ours.

May God free us from our fears, our divisions, our apathy, our jealousies and whatever is standing in the way to our freedom, justice, equality, the rule of law and the blessings that come from living rightly. Like the Zulu proverb, may God help us to realize that the enemy of Ethiopia may be us, the people of Ethiopia, ourselves.

Thank you!

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your comments to Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE at:
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ⁱ The Horizon History of Africa; chapter written by Stanlake Samkange; American Heritage Publishing, Inc, 1971; p. 422-423