



Representatives of Diverse Ethiopians formed: **ETHIOPIAN COUNCIL FOR RECONCILIATION AND THE RESTORATIVE OF JUSTICE (ECRRJ)**

Press Release
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Executive Summary:

On February 14, 2016, the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) announced the formation of the **Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and the Restorative of Justice (ECRRJ)** at a public meeting held at the Sheraton Hotel in Silver Springs, Maryland. The Council's formation was the outcome of a strategic planning retreat held over the course of three days previous to the meeting. Those attending the retreat were representatives of diverse Ethiopians. The ECRRJ is a people-to-people movement for healing, reconciliation and the restorative of justice in Ethiopia.

Background:

The need for reconciliation and restorative justice has been an integral part of the mission of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) from the beginning. The SMNE was birthed as an idea, years prior to its official formation in 2008. In fact, the idea resulted from a deepening awareness of the pain and suffering of Ethiopians throughout the country following the genocide of the Anuak in 2003. In a country stuck in cycles of violence and revenge; it became clear that the only hope for sustainable peace and justice was to disengage from that cycle of revenge and hate; and to instead choose forgiveness, reconciliation and the pursuit of justice as a deliberate choice to forge a new path.

As the idea grew; it became evident that freedom and justice would never come to the Anuak alone, until freedom and justice came to all Ethiopians. In a deeply divided country, this meant we had to step out of our tribal boxes to embrace others; putting humanity before ethnicity or any other differences, in order to create a more harmonious society. Finally, in 2008, the SMNE began as an effort to bring together the diverse people of Ethiopia to work towards the goals of bringing truth, freedom, justice, transparency and accountability. It led to efforts to bring reconciliation among divided and disconnected people as well as a sense of cohesion, empathy and social responsibility towards others.

In the last 23 years, when some of our people were afflicted in one place; others often did not seem to care. When we are flicked ourselves; it often goes without notice. When the Anuak were massacred, only the Anuak cried. This disregard for each others' well being can be seen in case after case, despite the fact that we live among each other or were born in the same country. The truth is; we do not have a history of talking to each other.

The SMNE has worked towards this foundational goal of unity-building in various ways; including efforts to bring diverse people together in public forums, marches, discussions, reaching out to advocate for others outside our own groups, standing up for the rights of others in harms way and other reconciliation efforts over the past years.

In November 15, 2014, the SMNE hosted a number of public forums in Washington DC and in other cities, emphasizing the need to "talk to each other rather than about each other." The formation of the **Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and the Restorative of Justice (ECRRJ)** is a continuation of this effort.

Current crisis leading to strategic planning retreat:

We believe the crisis in Ethiopia has reached a new level of urgency based on the present escalating violence in Ethiopia. In order to formulate ideas and a plan to address these issues, the SMNE organized a retreat and invited diverse Ethiopians, who are invested in seeking a different future, to come together for a 3-day retreat this past week to explore possibilities and then to share them at a public meeting held on February 14, 2016 in Washington DC.

It is easy to focus on the urgent issues — an oppressive government, corruption, killing of the Oromo student protestors, or the impending famine and food insecurity— and conclude it is all about the TPLF/EPRDF. It leads to the notion that removing the TPLF/EPRDF will solve our problems; however, there are many people who believe that without healing, reconciliation and the restorative of justice among the people, Ethiopians will be unable to find solutions to the crises of conflict, famine and rising instability in Ethiopia. In fact, without a foundation of healing and reconciliation, our future may end up no better, if not worse, than our present condition.

At the retreat, participants heard the grievances, hardships, wounds and cultural perspectives of others as each told their story. It was intense. People wept, reached out, felt pain and connected to each other. There was serious discussion. There was the sharing of food and laughter. There was a campfire with more stories and discussion. At the end, the healing had begun. New relationships were formed. The understanding of another's experience and pain was enlightening; broadening the perspective of what Ethiopia could become if people listened to each other. At the end, there was renewed hope that Ethiopia could be a home for all its people; that neighbors did not have to fight each other if they more fully understood that each Ethiopian has a name.

Formation of the Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and the Restorative of Justice (ECRRJ):

The final outcome of the retreat was the unanimous decision to form the Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and the Restorative of Justice (ECRRJ), *believing it is only through healing, reconciliation and the restorative of justice that Ethiopians will find a meaningful and more sustainable solution.* A summary of the group's decision, describing its basic purpose and goals are as follows:

Purpose:

To provide a framework for people to forgive, repent, and have an open dialogue in order to create healing, understanding, atonement, peace, and justice among all Ethiopians, domestic and abroad. We are all equal! We accept, include, and acknowledge the grievances, hopes, fears, and experiences of all Ethiopian people, regardless of political affiliation, religious belief, or ethnicity. We will work on a people to people grassroots level, among all ethnic groups including elites, civil society or stakeholders but not with the TPLF/EPRDF government.

Goals:

We have four immediate goals:

1. To officially structure the council with a functional structure within six months.
2. To promote tolerance, trust, equality and justice for all Ethiopians.
3. To reach out to Ethiopian religious, civic and political organizations to enhance ECRRJ's mission and ideas. We seek to build partnerships with other people and organizations.
4. To use the media to create greater awareness on healing, reconciliation and the restorative of justice.

SMNE Public Meeting:

At the beginning of the people to people public forum, the SMNE leaders expressed their cordial thanks to all the participants for their contributions to the retreat and forum. Mr. Dawit Agonafer, Board Member of the SMNE, opened up the public forum; Miss Yerusalem Work, SMNE Director of Operations read an emotional and touching poem entitled: *Love of Country*; Mr. Tesfa Mekonnen, the Chairman of the SMNE's DC Metro Chapter welcomed the public; and, Dr. Gregory Stanton, President of Genocide Watch talked about the early warning signs of genocide.

The Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and the Restorative of Justice (ECRRJ) statement was read in four different languages: Amharic, Oromiffa, Tigrigna and English. The retreat participants shared their diverse experiences as citizens of Ethiopia. Many questions and comments were made, leading to a very lively and at times, intense, discussion. A video of the event will be available to the public in the near future.

Rationale for the Council:

There are many people who believe that reconciliation is key to creating a conducive environment to be able to effectively resolve the problems within our country. As indicated, some of those individuals met the past week to discuss the challenges presented in our very divided country. They came to the conclusion that it will be difficult to find a solution to the crisis of conflict, famine and rising instability in Ethiopia without first resolving the conflicts among ourselves, different ethnic groups and different sectors of society. This calls for a more intense focus on reconciliation, aided by representatives of different groups of our society, to steer such an effort in this direction, preparing for another stage where the restorative of justice and meaningful reforms would be addressed more intensely.

The ECRRJ was formed to act as a diverse, yet consolidated, voice for such a solution. We believe it begins by seeking individual and collective healing for Ethiopians, following years of trauma, suffering, loss and hardship caused by oppression, marginalization, war, corruption, ethnic-based hatred and alienation, discrimination, torture, false imprisonment, human rights abuses and deep-seeded injustice. Such trauma can be experienced as individuals or as members of a collective group. It can be passed on to the next generations, along with the destructive emotions of anger, bitterness, alienation, prejudice and the desire to seek revenge or hold strong prejudices against a collective group of people, even if it is against their descendants.

One of the participants, Mr. Roba Ahmed, an Oromo man, said that anger over injustice had been passed on from his grandfather to his father and from his father to himself and that he refused to pass it on to his children. He said that was the reason he was there. It was time to stop it. He was speaking of the pain, bitterness and resentments of the past that were destroying possibilities for working together as Ethiopians, making cooperation in the present a step of disloyalty towards an ancestor of the past. He wants to end the vicious cycle, enabling the next generation to be freer to live in peace.

Unhealed trauma, wounds and anger have led to a divided, suspicious, abusive and unjust society where there is little trust. One only feels safe within one's own group, although those groups can also be divided. It is all propelled again and again through cycles of violence and revenge. Under such conditions, genuine unity among the people that would enable Ethiopians to work together towards shared goals, is an illusive dream. The collaboration that everyone is calling for now is to "take down" a mutual "enemy," but even if it worked, it is short-lived and easily subject to hijack.

Consider how yesterday's or today's victims will function if given power, without first experiencing healing and reconciliation. The TPLF is an example. They were thrust into a war in the bush as victims of injustice, now becoming like those who afflicted them in the past. A recycling of aggression, victimization and self-interest, without regard for others, is relived now in a new generation.

How can this pattern of dangerous dysfunction be broken without healing, reconciliation and the restorative of justice? It should be lead by diverse Ethiopians who can propel this vision forward and act as bridges of reconciliation between the people. As people are reconciled, they are humanized in the eyes of the other. They are also newly connected to each other to form relationship. With relationship comes the social and moral imperative to correct wrongs when and where one can do so. These relationships can involve individuals, families, groups, ethnicities, regions, religions, or among aggrieved citizens of a nation. This effort should address issues of wrongdoing, including individual or recurring incidents of injustice as well as systemic injustice when such wrongs are deeply entrenched into the fabric of society.

Restorative justice is a means to transition out of a violent, divided, and unjust society to something better and more responsive to the rights of all its members. For example, a criminal justice approach looks at what laws were broken, who did what and what they deserve. **It serves to punish chief offenders as well as petty offenders in some cases, but it does not assure needed structural changes to institutionalized injustice, especially when previous power holders remain entrenched in the system.**

The emphasis of restorative justice looks at who was harmed, what are their needs and who is obligated to address them. Correction of wrongs committed over the past years will include some degree of obligation to fix them and if systemic, it will require systemic changes to our institutions on the local, regional and national levels. It will involve listening, public discussion, an openness to change and effective implementation of changes necessary to restore justice. Restorative justice may bring more sustainable peace, justice and equity than either an over-heavy use of the criminal justice approach or a violent overthrow of the current system because restorative justice seeks to repair a deeply broken system, not just replace the people on top.

The ECRRJ's goal is to bring diverse voices into strategic and empowered positions to focus on bringing healing, reconciliation and the restorative of justice to Ethiopians as the only way to break this self-destructive cycle of violence, injustice and oppression. Even those who consider themselves victims of this regime can fail to see how to break the cycle and can start to over-identify with the role of victim or even move between the two roles in destructive ways affecting self and others.

Our mission is to provide a means to escape from this cycle by promoting the healing of individuals, communities and our nation. This means an intentional strategy to bring diverse and alienated people together to talk to each other rather than about each other. It also includes bringing factions together to listen to each other so as to better understand the "other" and to better deal with the pain and grievances of these others.

The Council's position is to seek an environment where healing and reconciliation will equip the people to better focus on the future, becoming part of the solution to restoring justice and bringing about meaningful reforms for the common good. This is why the council was formed. Ignoring these problems and the problems of others within our society can have serious consequences. Once we better understand the pain of others; we will be able to join together to confront the current crises we are facing— the starvation, the lack of political space, the land issues, the lack of opportunity and other issues.

We in the ECRRJ are not interested in artificial or shallow cohesion; it will not last, nor will it give us what we want. The main responsibility right now is on the people to put our act together. If we do, we can confront our many crises or even prevent them, like avoiding ethnic conflict. The voice of healed and reconciled people or groups, can assume greater strength and moral authority. This is what we seek to encourage, direct and empower through the ECRRJ.

As the ECRRJ is launched, we are calling on the people to start this dialogue. When violence occurs, it does so to individuals; so we must become agents of reconciliation and justice, talking to each other in the language of love and respect in a humanizing, not dehumanizing way.

This starts from within the hearts of each of us. Seek a quiet place and listen to one's conscience as we face this present crisis; it may be during this time we are most ready to hear and to receive instruction, joy, conviction and healing. Reach out to reconcile with those closest to us, even within our families, communities, places of worship and work places. We call on members of the religious community, as well as many others, to join this effort. How can justice for all be restored in a country like Ethiopia without embracing the humanity of others? Let us do our part and seek God's help to do what seems otherwise impossible!

May God protect Ethiopians from choosing the wrong paths that will inflict harm to self and others and may lead to our mutual destruction.

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