



ETHIOPIA AT THE EDGE:

What can external efforts achieve to reduce the risk of ethnic violence and destabilization in a semi-closed country?

Mr. Obang's speech at the Amnesty International (AI) event in New York City, ETHIOPIA IN CRISIS.

I would like to thank Amnesty International for organizing this very timely event. The theme of my talk is Ethiopia at the edge because the internal conflict between the majority of Ethiopians and the increasingly repressive ruling regime are no longer simmering, but about to boil over.



The situation is grim. The prospects for peaceful resolution without meaningful intervention are highly doubtful; yet, the world seems to be turning a deaf ear to it. If this continues, it may be too late and Ethiopia will join the ranks of others countries that now face disaster because earlier opportunities for prevention have been missed. We do not want Ethiopia to be among those graphic and tragic stories of regret where we only can wish we had done more.

So, what is the evidence that Ethiopia is at the edge? The authoritarian regime of the TPLF/EPRDF has exerted increasing repression, violence, imprisonment, infringements of every kind of liberty and freedom of expression, the closure of political space, the hijacking of institutions and now with a state of emergency declared, the regime has built a wall of isolation around the country. That wall is blocking individual Ethiopians within the country from each other as well as blocking Ethiopians from contact with the outside world. Use of technology in a broad range of ways can lead to arrest. Most communication is only permitted with special approval from the government. Even US diplomats must have "permission from the government" to travel beyond a 25 mile perimeter of Addis Ababa. This has never before been done in the history of the country. Failure to follow these new laws, or even appearing as someone who is a strong leader, is enough for them to defensively act to preserve their power.

The harshest consequences are reserved for journalists, activists, political leaders and members of opposition groups; yet, because it is sometimes difficult to identify such persons in a crowd, the victims of the harshest brutality are oftentimes indiscriminately targeted. It has deepened the outrage, united the people and widened the resolve of those seeking to end the 24 year rule of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition party of four of the nine regions of Ethiopia that are each ethnic based; yet, dominated by the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), the latter represented by the TPLF Central Committee (TPLF-CC).

What is the risk? Currently, the risk of ethnic violence and destabilization of Ethiopia has never been higher, all exacerbated with the recent unrest and harsh crackdown. The ingredients for an explosion are present, causing great concern among Ethiopians as well as among human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Genocide Watch, other NGO's and key players within the international community.

The Ethiopian Constitution is not followed. Independent civil society cannot help, with the possible exception of faith institutions. Institutions of governance are politicized tools of the state, including the parliament where every one of the 547 seats are claimed by the EPRDF. In this kind of environment, it is nearly impossible to organize an effective response.

The Question: Can external efforts reduce the risk of ethnic violence and the destabilization of Ethiopia? I believe it is not only possible; it is critically important, recognizing that these external efforts will necessarily require increasing complementary action and support by internal forces. However, as already mentioned, much of what is required at this stage, can no longer be accomplished within the country, now worsened due to its recent move from a semi-closed country to one that is nearly closed. The best case scenario now would engage the ruling regime in a process that finds common ground in seeking sustainable solutions, which will require the deeper shared interests between those in power and the opposition.



What factors come into play in achieving or in blocking this?

Background: The EPRDF began as a hope for more inclusive and democratic government after the overthrow of the Dergue communist government of Mengistu Hailemariam. It has failed, and with its failure, has come this serious threat to the stability of the country.

What happened? After presenting itself in the first decade as a fledgling democratic government in the likes of the UK, the EU and the US; the TPLF/EPRDF bristled at any criticism of their democratic deficiencies; justifying their authoritarian style of governance merely as a characteristic of new democracies. The late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, explained how they were taking “baby steps” towards a new democracy. They successfully marketed the position, pointing fingers at any who expected more progress as indicative of western imperialism. Many key international donors and institutions accepted this and poured large amounts of money into Ethiopia, including key partnerships in the fight against terrorism, leaving a mix of co-mingled self-interests that have now become complexly inter-tangled. Further complicating the situation have been the more hidden ongoing human rights violations committed by the TPLF/EPRDF against their own people in the grab for power and resources. This has now been forced into open view by recent protests and mass killings against civilians.

Ethnic favoritism and divisions has set up a scenario for ethnic conflict. Because of the highly apartheid TPLF tactics that favored family members, cronies and people of their own ethnicity— only 6% of the population— the TPLF have put their own people at risk for retribution unless efforts to resolve the animosity built up over the years are successfully resolved.

The regime has succeeded in dividing power groups, particularly larger and more powerful ethnic groups like the Amhara and the Oromo, believing the potential threat from these groups were they to unify could mean the end of their power. In response, they invested immense efforts into ensuring the ongoing disunity between and within the two groups, as well as doing the same with numerous others. However, the recent crackdown by the TPLF/EPRDF has ironically created new bonds between the Oromo and Amhara in their unified antagonism towards the TPLF. It has created a real threat never seen before.

Now, with the state of emergency declared, Ethiopia has become nearly a closed country, more closely compared with North Korea than most other autocratic countries. It has left Ethiopians with even fewer options than they had a month ago. It has created greater anger, desperation and determination among the people, especially of the youth, to rise up in any way, with decreasing concern for their lives. This attitude, at times fueled by forces outside of the country, has even led some to carry out acts of violence along with the destruction of property and businesses.

The influence of history: Violence is in our history and has been cyclical. This is not only characteristic of the TPLF/EPRDF, but it is familiar to many Ethiopians, who were part of past armed movements. As a result, pursuing a different means to bring change is uncharted territory for many; yet, for the youth of Ethiopians, the greatest percentage of the Ethiopian population, by the way; peaceful protest has characterized their chosen approach.

On the other hand, the TPLF/EPRDF have resorted to what they instinctually know best—violence. By doing so, I believe they are self-limiting their own prospects for success and integration into a future Ethiopia. Again, older generations can make decisions for younger generations where the younger end up paying the highest costs.

As I see it, three options are available:

- 1) **Fight**
- 2) **Flight**
- 3) **The Third Option—Dialogue.**

Currently, the TPLF appears to only see the first option— **to fight**— as the means to survive and extend their rule. Persons, like many of the older members of the TPLF, who have been traumatized by war, violence and killing in the past, can instinctively react with aggression when they sense danger. This default reaction to fear generated by the current threat to their rule is characteristic of the nature of the TPLF central committee from the beginning. Even in the early days of the TPLF, their response to threats from within or outside was to use increased force, intimidation and brutality. *In the past, much of it was done in the dark so as to maintain a better image; however, as resistance increases, the TPLF is unable to maintain its cover.*

In taking this direction, they are fueling the worst and most violent reaction from others. It is also the most foolish and self-serving, considering the destruction and danger they are leaving behind for others, particularly the people of Tigray and the youth of Ethiopia, if they do not succeed. In fact, the likelihood of success is nearly zero at this point; yet, the possibility of the disintegration of Ethiopia is very possible. Because they realize this at some level; they are simultaneously preparing for the second option—**flight**— where they would flee the country rather than face personal harm. They are also allegedly preparing to bolt the country by already sending their families and assets to places outside of Ethiopia, even issuing a recent rule against top-level members of the TPLF from leaving the country without permission.

Who will be left to face the results of their mistakes? It will be the majority of Ethiopians, including Tigrayans, who will be left to pay the price. In particular, it will be the young who fight and die and future generations who inherit the intergenerational losses, wounds and destruction that darken the future of this strategic country of nearly 100,000,000 people.



BLOCKS TO DIALOGUE: The greatest block to dialogue and the possibility of a better outcome for all is the familiarity of using violence and repression to control and protect self-interests. As indicated, the TPLF, as well as many other Ethiopians, particularly those who were present during the Dergue or the monarchy, experienced regime change through violence, widespread killing, destruction and in general, by an armed struggle. Most will admit that successive regimes did not improve the situation to any significant degree for most Ethiopians. It may have profited some groups alone or in differing degrees, but never, in recent years, have Ethiopians been free.

Additionally, the violence and trauma experienced by Ethiopians degrades the ability of many to choose a different means to resolve current-day conflicts. Traumatized, wounded and angry people recycle the past into the present. What we are suggesting is re-examining the tendency to fight as the default mechanism of Ethiopian history, not just TPLF/EPRDF history. Human rights crimes did not originate with them, but are too closely part of the dark side of human history; however, the tendency towards violence has also led to the repeated formation of armed movements and an ideology that perpetuates a cycle of violence as the only means to bring change. In our current conflicted environment, the danger felt by the TPLF/EPRDF, as well as by unarmed or over-powered civilians throughout the country, is legitimate if Ethiopia descends into civil war and that possibility increases with the use of violence.

Instead, we suggest a third way.

THE THIRD OPTION: Our best option is to engage in a meaningful and voluntary dialogue, not just focusing on leveraging power against the other, but one that can address and repair the harms done, the needs of victims, how to restore justice, and ways to bring healing and reconciliation to Ethiopians.

The TPLF/ERPDP, as well as members of the Ethiopian opposition, may not be ready for a formalized, distant, hard-nosed negotiation process; but instead, we suggest starting with a much more healing and humanizing process where we could find common ground and identify deeper shared interests so as to arrive at a more consensual agreement, starting with protecting Ethiopia from the destruction that has now taken place in Syria, Yemen, Libya and other places. It would protect millions of people from acute suffering and could change the attitude of people towards each other. It would be revolutionary in the best sense of the word. It is only possible if key TPLF/ERPDP and Ethiopian players are willing to explore an approach that could protect the people, the nation and the region from disaster.

It would have to take place in a safe, secure and quiet place. It must be a simple process that can lead to the improvement of life and liberty for ALL Ethiopians. It may or may not work; but it should be tried before it is no longer an option because once Ethiopia has descended into deep chaos, it will only birth new grievances, destruction and losses.

Former US President Herbert Hoover said: *"Peace is not made at the council table or by treaties, but in the hearts of men."* This would be the goal of such a dialogue. External efforts will make a huge difference for such a plan to be developed and implemented as the means to avert an explosion of ethnic-based violence, destruction and the disintegration of Ethiopia. For one thing, it is nearly impossible for Ethiopians to organize within the country; yet, those on the outside can begin plans and involve others within Ethiopia as best possible.

The Ethiopian Council for Reconciliation and the Restoration of Justice (ECRRJ) is a new institution established earlier this year by dedicated diverse Ethiopians who met to address these issues. Currently, they are working on the structure of the organization so as to prepare to move forward with the above-mentioned plan as well as other critical needs such as bringing stakeholders together to establish common goals and vision for a transition to a more democratic, just and free Ethiopia.

Recommendations:

- We call on Ethiopians, human rights organizations, NGO's, religious groups, donor governments and stakeholders to support this plan as a means to address this crisis with this third option as the best means to prevent fight or flight.
- We call on the religious community in Ethiopia, in the Ethiopian Diaspora and internationally, to provide counsel and support for non-violent resolution of this threatening conflict between the ruling regime of the TPLF/ERPDP and the people of Ethiopia who seek freedom and justice. You have a major role to play among power holders and the people as well as between alienated, aggrieved and isolated Ethiopians.
- We call on the Ethiopian Diaspora to continue to call the TPLF/ERPDP to account for its violations of human rights, injustices, repressive tactics, corrupt practices, and inherent structural deficiencies.
- We call on Ethiopians to restrain from violence and destruction and instead to utilize peaceful means of resistance and protest.
- We call on Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians to find ways to communicate, organize, document and provide support to a movement for unity, truth, meaningful reforms, reconciliation and the restoration of justice.

Thank you!

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