

**Mr. Obang Metho's speech:  
"In Honor and Remembrance of the Life of Professor Mesfin Woldemariam"**

October 6, 2020

Good Morning to everyone here. First of all, I would like to give my deepest sympathy to the family of Professor Mesfin Woldemariam and the great numbers of Ethiopians who consider him a great friend of the Ethiopian people for many generations. I also thank those who have given me the opportunity to speak today about one of greatest men I have been privileged to meet and know. This giant of a man has played an important and strategic role in my life and that of many others.



Most people know him as a defender of human rights; and yes, I am also a defender of human rights; however, I did not have the privilege of knowing him when I was young, living in Gambella. It was not until the killing of the Anuak at the end of 2003 when everything changed.

This is when I suddenly started receiving phone calls from Anuak in many other places. At the time, I was living far from my home country of Ethiopia. I was in Saskatchewan, Canada, the only Anuak in the area. I heard about the massacre of many Anuak leaders that was going on. They asked for help. For three days, I tried calling everyone I could think of, but no one responded to these requests for intervention.

I felt as if I were in the wilderness, lost, not knowing what to do. Then I got the list of over 424 dead, mostly the educated Anuak leaders. Had I been in Gambella at the time, I would have been on that list. We were looking for someone to help us or to consult with us. Already, the government was trying to dismiss it, to blame others and to cover up the truth—the last stage of genocide is the denial and cover up according to Genocide Watch. First they blamed the Anuak, then the Nuer and then outsiders.

When I was feeling the most hopeless, the first report came out with the truth. That report came from none other than Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, representing the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, of which he was the head.

It was like someone reaching out to hold your hand. It was like someone offering assurance that you will be okay— that there is a tomorrow, that you are not alone, that those who care about human rights and dignity are here at your side and that justice will be done. It was the only report reaching beyond the country to the whole world that upheld human dignity, not tribe. It reported the truth with boldness. That report was his way of encouraging me to step forward, helping me to believe I could make a difference. This was my first introduction to this man of strength and integrity. Professor Mesfin stood up for us and it restored my faith in the Ethiopian people, giving me new comfort after the resounding silence from the majority.

The Gambella region was intentionally marginalized and the people had been neglected by the TPLF and previous governments, despite the fact that the people of Gambella had fought and died, defending their country going back to the Battle of Adwa. In terms of education and development, it also was neglected just like the people and that is why few were educated with most teachers coming from the highlands. Because of this, the people had an expectation that the more dominant ethnic groups would speak up on behalf of the Anuak, but their voices were no where to be heard. It was painful to see the lack of sympathy and support. Yet, out of the silence, Professor Mesfin stepped forward as a true patriot, citizen and leader of all Ethiopians.

I then called him to thank him and he said I did not need to thank him because it was his job to protect the rights of all citizens. He then gave me the encouragement to take on the job before me. It was the beginning of our friendship and from then on some of us organized and subsequently formed the Anuak Justice Council.

Then, for the first time in his life, he became involved in politics and became a member of the Kinijit. After the election was rigged in 2005, he was imprisoned for two years with the rest of the party leaders. After he was finally released, along with other Kinijit members, he came to the United States where I finally had the privilege of meeting him in person. He became advisor, my friend, a respected elder and a model of someone who was dedicated to a higher calling.



I still remember his powerful prayer in Washington DC when he first met with the Ethiopian Diaspora. That prayer so strongly demonstrated his faith that influenced all he did. I was greatly moved by it. Our

friendship continued and I always called him Gashe or Papa Mesfin, my grandpa. During his yearly visits to the US, we always made time to meet.

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came into power, he invited the Diaspora to come back home and the SMNE team decided it was time to go. When we arrived in Addis, we made time to visit him in his home. Since that time, we have kept in communication with each other.



I called him just two weeks ago just as he was waiting for an ambulance to take him to the hospital. It must have been God's timing. As we talked, he wanted to set a date to go out to lunch together. When I later checked in on him a few days later at the hospital, his voice sounded weak; but again, he reminded me of our lunch plans. He also told me to take care of myself and seemed to be more worried about me than himself. The last time I talked to him it was a very short conversation because he was too weak to talk. Then he died. I never got that lunch, but in heaven I will look forward to that lunch.

Before he died he told me, "If I die, I don't want people to cry for me, but to celebrate."

We will Papa Mesfin! We will celebrate this giant of a man whose life was well-lived. We will celebrate what he left behind— a legacy of faith and action. We will celebrate the principles, leadership and values by which he lived.



To those who don't know human rights, we are talking about the rights of human beings, but no one can put a price on the value of a human being. Ask someone who has lost a loved one. Now we see him in a coffin— how can we put a value to the time he invested in others, the people he touched, the leadership he showed, his encouragement, love, advice and wisdom? He is gone now, but what he has left behind remains a part of our lives.

The purpose of life is given by our Creator to live out here on earth; what he has given to us out of love, out of his generosity and in mercy —he did for us. When we leave this world, to whom will we answer?

Professor Mesfin knew and never forgot this but lived it out through the years of his life. He had a calling from God and it meant fighting for the wellbeing of others. It was not always easy, but he was driven by principles, integrity and truth. He sometimes suffered for it.

**People kept trying to put Papa Mesfin in a box, but he never accepted boxes, he remained upright in all he did.** Even though he was arrested many times, he still refused to fit into the box, but he remained an Ethiopian citizen and a human being. He encouraged this principle many times, starting with the government of Emperor Haile Selassie and at the beginning of every successive one afterwards; but he would still say, *“Let's give them a chance.”* In other words, he wanted to support and guide them in the right direction; unfortunately, they did not take his advice and instead, tried to force him into their own boxes. He refused the box of feudalism, the box of communism and then the box of ethnic federalism, also known as “tribalism.”

He told me a number of times, “Please, Obang, if I ever die, I want you to continue to promote the principles of the SMNE (Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia). The only way our country can survive and have lasting peace is when you protect the dignity of the people and respect all the citizens of Ethiopia, regardless of ethnicity or other differences. I gave him my word that I would continue.

Professor Mesfin died without resources and material possessions. Instead, when he died, he did not have a house, but lived a small, low-income government one-bedroom apartment.

Some feel sorry for him that he died with so little; however, he might look at it differently. He may not have had a house, but his principles gave him a country— the country of Ethiopia. The regions or

provinces (Kifle Hager) of Ethiopia are his many bedrooms. What wealth he really had and left behind for others to share.

Professor Mesfin had three children and four grandchildren; but really, he had millions with the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren from the four corners of this country and from every ethnic and religious group. Who knows how many more he will gain in the future with his legacy?

He was very faithful to his Creator. When there was a problem, he told people to pray. He may have lost his faith in politicians and the government, but he never lost his faith in God. It grew stronger. Neither did he lose his faith in the ability of the people to change.

He was the first in Ethiopia to form a Human Rights Council. He wanted the rights of all Ethiopians to be respected; but as result, he was jailed many times. He suffered, but he never gave up.

He did not believe in hatred, revenge or killing as a punishment. He would say, if someone wants to choose to hate; then, hate the oppression, not the oppressor. Don't hate the people, hate the problem.

He hated the oppression but he loved Ethiopia. At times he had the luxury of leaving to live abroad; but in the darkest hours, he remained in Ethiopia and never abandoned his country. He has now died in an Ethiopian hospital, unlike many of the elite and powerful African big men who die abroad and only their bodies are brought back to be buried in their country.

He did not sit on the sidelines like the elitist who enjoys the perks but disregards real life on the ground. Neither did he only criticize, but was willing to offer his help and advice repeatedly, like he did with Emperor Haile Selassie when he advised him to organize a national dialogue in response to the demands of those in the student movement.

He offered the same help to the Dergue when fighting with Eritrea. He even provided written resolutions that suggested the creation of an inclusive transitional government, which could lead to free and fair elections later, but his proposal was ignored. Part of that proposal including the convening of a genuine national dialogue and a process for reconciliation and restorative justice like was done in South Africa. None of these suggestions were accepted and the opportunity was discarded.

When the TPLF came into power, he offered solutions that were not taken once again; yet, he had a unique quality—he never gave up, even though he was betrayed many times. When challenged or confronted, he did not answer with emotions, but gave others a chance to speak or follow their choices; however, during the Dergue, his life was made very difficult, as it was during the TPLF/EPRDF due to many betrayals.

He believed each successive government should have their own chance until they proved different. To our new government of Prime Minister Abiy, he called on him to institute meaningful reforms, including Constitutional reforms.

He did not live to see what he was offering and seeking. Someone may guess from his last written statement that he was worried about where the country was heading. His main message was to not let the country collapse into a failed state. He reminded us of past challenges from foreign and domestic forces that had tried to take over the country, but had failed; however, he warned of present challenges from both that now had to be confronted. He had faith in God and the people that the failure of Ethiopia could be prevented once again.

He consistently lived out his principles during his lifetime, while at the same time, he has seen many changes come to the country, many very difficult. For example, the country has split into two and become landlocked. The law of the land has become one that is based on ethnicity rather than **“we the people”**.

Ethiopia has been subdivided into ethno-linguistically based regional states called "killils" or tribal cages, the word "kilil" more specifically means "reservation" or "protected area" or and the Ethiopian citizens are confined within their killils or tribal cages. It has resulted in people becoming more divided by ethnicity than ever before in our history. Even marriages and communities have been broken up for this reason. In the last two years inter-ethnic violence and ethnic-based targeting have recently exploded.

Professor Mesfin saw changes in regard to the language, the history, the flag and the currency; however, the primary change he worked for and dreamed of was not realized during his life. What he strived for was unity among Ethiopians, a unity based on principles of valuing each other as a human being and as proud Ethiopian citizens.

The regimes and people wanted to push him to change the wrong thing and to put him in a box, but he refused it until his dying day. Now, the Almighty God, who loved him, called him home and said to him, “Come to me and others will carry on.”

He finally accepted this as he took his last breath. His spirit has gone to the Almighty and his flesh is returning to dust. Now, his body will be in the only box he has accepted. It is his coffin. He has refused the box of ethnicity, the box of oppression, division, brutality, injustice, robbery, elitism, corruption, ethnic federalism, tribalism and extremism of all kinds.

Now, we will put this box containing his earthly human remains in the ground and cover it not only with soil, but with dignity and respect. As he told me to uphold the respect for this land; his body will now be part of it. His legacy encourages us to sacrifice whatever it takes to protect and nurture the people of this land, so whoever comes after him, will be respected and valued, restoring flourishing life to this shared home of ours.

Farewell, Gashe Mesfin, you have done your job and now the Creator is calling you. You have not only done your job well, but you have done it with love. Now, you will find rest with your Creator and as an esteemed elder and highly respected role model, you have set a high standard for us to follow.

As you spent so much of your life fighting for others, you gave up many other things to make sure the country would go in the right direction and that others would follow your example. Farewell Papa Mesfin; be at rest.

Now, for us Ethiopians, if there is something Professor Mesfin would want us to do, it would be to stand up for the dignity and rights of everyone in this land. This is the torch to pass on to others.

Will we pass the light or destroy the torch because of ethnicity, differences of religion or because we want to get rich? Gashe Mesfin is gone, but can we learn from him even now.

He tried repeatedly to offer solutions to decision makers in the past; but because many would not listen, the situation only worsened and now we Ethiopians have to try to repair, as best we can, the damage done from past mistakes. This is added to whatever new challenges we face, but now may be the right opportunity and the right time.

Good bye, Gashe Mesfin, physically you may no longer be with us, but what you have done has left a legacy. Now it is our job. As a person from a minority group, I have already learned from you and have

already taken up my torch— no need to worry. **I refuse to be put in "killils" or tribal cages or any kind of box until my Creator puts me in that final one. It is about freedom for no one will be free until all are free—until we all are out of our cages, putting humanity before ethnicity or any other differences.**

May we Ethiopians join together, and like Gashe Mesfin, have faith in our Creator, pray and refuse to be put in the wrong box. Let us keep the light of our torches bright and pass it on to others.

Will we take the advice of this wise and dedicated man, advice which lives on through these godly principles? Let me read from the Word of God, Jeremiah 26, verses 2-3:

***This is what the Lord says: Stand in the courtyard of the Lord's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the Lord. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from their evil ways. Then I will relent and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. Jeremiah 26: 2-3)***

Will we listen and pass on the light to each other so we all can see? Will his death stir in us the seeds of change? What a celebration that would be! Perhaps, that is what he envisioned. May he rest in peace.

Thank you! Long live Ethiopia! May God be our ever-present guide!