



US Africa Summit 2014: Are African Strongmen Being Chosen Over African Civil Society? Where is the Voice of Africans?

PRESS RELEASE. FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 3, 2014,

Washington, DC-- Mr. Obang Metho, the Executive Director of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), a non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians; committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability and respect for human and civil rights to the people of Ethiopia and beyond, shares some of his thoughts on the upcoming US Africa Summit.

The US is in the middle of a dilemma this coming week as some fifty-one African presidents and unknown numbers of African diplomats converge on Washington D.C. from August 4-6 for what is being called historic, the first US Africa Summit. It appears from the agenda that the emphasis will be on encouraging US Africa trade, investment and business partnerships; however, the mediators of any new deals are some of Africa's numerous authoritarian leaders, seen by many Africans as responsible for many of their woes. At the same time, the absence of members of African civil society has stirred up strong sentiments in the African Diaspora and they are talking, something that could not be done without fear of retribution in many of these countries.

One of those voices comes from Obang Metho, the Executive Director of the [Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia](#) who sums up his position on the US Summit as follows:

“A US Africa Summit? Good idea! A US Africa Summit to advance economic partnerships? A great idea! A US Africa Summit without civil society? Bad idea! A US Africa Summit with only African leaders, most of whom are strongmen? An outrageous idea!”

“The theme of this US Summit is to build the next generation, correcting what has been holding back Africa; yet, in many countries, like in Ethiopia, civil society only exists in exile. If African civil society is denied a place at the table in a free country like the US, because no dictator wants to hear from them, let alone to sit next to them, what message of impunity will this send to these leaders or of betrayal to Africans living under such tyranny? Will this Summit result in stronger dictators or stronger institutions? We are not against talking to them, but what happens when civil society, the other part of the equation, is left out? It will only further undermine the creation of strong institutions that most of us agree are necessary for the future well being of Africa.”

The SMNE was founded to build a better future for the people and is based on the belief that the future well being of our global society rests in the hands of those among us who can put “humanity before ethnicity,” or any other distinctions that divide and dehumanize other human beings from ourselves; inspiring us to care about these “others;” not only because of the intrinsic God-given value of each life, but also because “none of us will be free until all are free.” These are the principles of the SMNE; yet, this kind of thinking is not popular among these strongmen.

Mr. Metho clearly remembers President Obama's famous speech in Ghana during his first official visit to Africa several years ago when the new president spoke to the hearts of many Africans, saying: ***“What Africa needs is not strongmen, but strong institutions.”***

Mr. Metho reflected,

“Africans were excited, believing that this might signal a priority to pressure African leaders to stop the rampant human rights violations, to make democratic reforms, to strengthen the independence of key institutions, to increase transparency and accountability and to create an inclusive society where ethnicity, political affiliation, patronage networks, religion or other distinctions did not exclude you from participation in the perks of citizenship.”

Mr. Metho hopes that the Obama Whitehouse has not forgotten or discarded this position.

“There is nothing wrong in having a dialogue but if we are only having a dialogue with those who are anti-change; in reality, what can we expect? Look at the African Union. It is nearly fifty years old and so much more that could have been accomplished. Some of these leaders have been in power from ten to thirty years, with no term limits. Most are there, not by the choice of their people, but because of flawed elections, oppression of the citizens and flagrant violations of the rule of law. How can a future be built without stronger institutions? If we genuinely want to improve Africa, building partnerships between the US and Africa, how can we hope to accomplish this by using rusted- metal to build a new bridge? Has Obama changed his mind on this?”

Mr. Metho says, *“Events like the US Africa Summit can be historic and result in new trade, investment and business partnerships to the benefit of both the US and Africans; however, it must be conducted with both caution and with long-term goals in sight. Right now, I am deeply concerned that members of African civil society are excluded from the agenda, despite attempts from many to pressure organizers to give them a voice. Unfortunately, it gives the appearance that the Obama Whitehouse is cozying up to African dictators, especially when some of the most burning issues of Africans are not covered on the agenda.”*

He continued,

“For example, combating wildlife trafficking is included, but not [human trafficking or organ trafficking](#)ⁱ of some of those fleeing their countries. In how many African countries have iron-fisted leaders brutally clamped down on the basic rights of the people; yet, neither human rights nor good governance have been highlighted for discussion. The same goes for corruption, despite the accrual of vast amounts of wealth by regime strongmen and their cronies resulting [in record amounts of illicit financial outflows](#)ⁱⁱ from the continent. The new phenomenon in [Africa of land-grabbing, seen as the New Colonialism](#)^{iv}, which has led to the forced displacement of some of the poorest Africans from their land, is another forgotten topic, nowhere to be seen. How about a discussion on term-limits and free and fair elections? How many of those invited are here because of rigged elections? Discussion of these tough topics is critical to the future of Africans and should not be avoided.”

This does not mean that Africans are not interested in some of the major topics of the conference. Mr. Metho stated:

“Prospective business partners may find out that Africans are actually more enthusiastic about trade, investment, development, and building infrastructure than are our African strongmen, but the difference is that we want such deals to benefit both the people of Africa and our partners. Those wanting to build business partnerships in Africa may not find it so easy to [do business with dictators who](#)^v are used to doing things as they please. If contracts or agreements are violated, what recourse do international partners have when all the key institutions, including the courts, are under the control of the “other side?”

“If dictators can fast track an investor or business through many of the obstacles, legal requirements, costs and risks of doing business in their countries on the front end; they can also do it at the back end, giving partners few options when “their interests no longer coincide.” This is another risky part of doing business with authoritarian leaders who are in complete control of their country’s corrupt institutionalized systems. Furthermore, when doing business with unscrupulous leaders; keep in mind; it is possible to contaminate one’s own business reputation through such associations.

This might be through real or only perceived complicity with the regime in their perpetration of human rights abuses, in their imprisonment of political prisoners who criticize the regime for violating their own laws and Constitution, by agreeing to pay hefty bribes or kickbacks in violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, through a failed business partner relationship that leads to contrived and fraudulent charges of corruption by regime leaders, or through loose association with the regime in the confiscation of land, assets and resources from some of the poorest, most marginalized people.”

Mr. Metho referred to various models of partnership followed by commonly by different countries, some of which made a practice of overlooking some of the related abusive practices committed by African strongmen. He said:

“In some countries, like China, the model of economic expansion in Africa is to forget about freedom, human rights, equality, rule of law, and freedom of expression in these countries; relegating all these attributes that make a society function well as secondary to its major goal, the economy. As a result of being willing to work with African strongmen, China has leaped ahead of countries like the US in creating a footprint all over Africa; however, is their model of aligning with authoritarian leaders sustainable or will it eventually lead to the destabilization of regions, regimes, countries and partnerships? In places like South Sudan, turning a blind eye to the corruption, ethnic-based conflict and poor governance has proved risky as the country exploded into conflict, violence, insecurity and upheaval, affecting Chinese oil business interests there.

Ethnic conflict and human rights abuses over land, water, [minerals and other resource](#)^{vi}s have also broken out all over Africa, in places like Kenya, the Congo, Mali, Central Africa Republic, Somalia, Nigeria, and Libya, all holding back the economies of these countries as well as causing suffering and hardship to the people. This should be a big theme at this Summit. In economies where people live under the rule of law and in peace and harmony; investments are far more secure, sustainable and free of risks. Where tyranny exists, the risks of doing business there quickly rise.”

[In the case of Ethiopia](#)^{vii}, increasing repression may be reaching a tipping point where it will jeopardize the long-term interests of foreign investors and partners, especially considering the [strategic role of Ethiopia](#)^{viii} in the region and in Africa. The warning signs are present. Ethiopia has imprisoned many of those most outspoken. [Countless voices of freedom, conscience and justice are languishing in prison](#)^{ix}—[bloggers](#)^x, journalists, religious leaders, activists, human rights advocates and opposition figures. Most of them are charged and sentenced under [vague anti- terrorism laws](#)^{xi}. A draconian law directed at civil society, the [Charities and Societies Proclamation \(CSO law\)](#), restricts any organization that receives over 10% of its budget from foreign sources from advocating for human rights, children’s rights, women’s rights, rights for the disabled, and from fulfilling its societal role in civil society. The penalties are harsh, including up to 15 years imprisonment.

Many fear that the Ethiopian government’s ethnic-based apartheid policies, combined with widespread human rights abuses, [the lack of freedom of expression](#)^{xii} and association, the criminalization of dissent, the [massive grabbing of land and resources](#)^{xiii}, [high levels of corruption](#)^{xiv}, [the elimination of civil society](#)^{xv} and the tight control of key institutions within the country, will lead to its destabilization, accompanied by a reversal of power and retribution against power-holders. Rising division within the ruling party, under increasing pressure from the public, may further erode the stability of this regime, creating an environment hardly conducive to long-term business partnerships.

However, should the government of Ethiopia, under pressure from the people and potential partners, become more willing to invest in substantive democratic reforms, the restoration of justice and a dialogue leading to national reconciliation, Ethiopia and its people may avoid some of the worst fears from materializing and actually build much better prospects for its future.

If the US Summit were to be genuinely successful; trade, investments and business partnerships would be undergirded for future sustainability through the advancement of strong institutions, good governance, free and fair elections, independent institutions, respect for human rights and civil rights, democratic reforms, inclusive development and the promotion of business deals with the people of Africa, not just with their dictatorial leaders. Investing in strengthening African civil society—rather than investing in African strongmen who are anti-institutions—will lead to the most beneficial and most sustainable partnerships.

Mr. Metho states:

“If this US Africa Summit is to be successful, ask Africans for their input and ongoing involvement; not the leaders who have held it back. We need new thinking. When the continent of Africa was divided at the [conference of Berlin in 1884-1885](#)^{xvi}, the African people were neither given a seat at the table; nor were they consulted. As decisions were made about how to divide Africa, the African voice was not present. It resulted in bloodshed, misery, and pain, some of it still affecting the African people in 2014. It produced African strongmen and when these strongmen get power, even today, they repeat the pattern of not consulting the people or allowing their voices to be heard.”

“Will this mistake be repeated at the US Africa 2014 Summit? Does the voice of the African people matter? Will oversights of today affect the future tomorrows of some of the most vulnerable Africans? Will we lose some of the brilliant, noble and most creative Africans and their ideas because our African strongmen fear their voices? “

“We have African warriors of freedom, accountability, justice, equality, unity, peace, and prosperity who have been struggling to speak up for the voiceless. They are all over the continent: from Ethiopia to Equatorial Guinea, from Libya to Zimbabwe, from Egypt to Eritrea, from Mali to Madagascar, from South Sudan to Somalia, from Niger to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), from the Congo to Rwanda, from Benin to Burundi, from the Sudan to the Central Africa Republic, from Uganda to Chad, from Gabon to Guinea Bissau, from Cameroon to Algeria; all of whom have never been represented. They are the heroes and heroines who could bring the change we are talking about but for the fact they are locked up in prison by strongmen. These people are the ones who should be talking about the next generation of Africa, not their so-called African leaders. People from these countries have stood up for the value, dignity and worth of human beings. These are the people who should be talking about how to build the next generation of Africa, rather than partnering with the big men in the name of their own personal short-term goals.”

In conclusion, Mr. Metho challenges:

“An Africa that can thrive rather than just struggle to survive is one where civil society is strong. Even if the voices of the African people are faint, they will not rest until they claim their God-given rights, dignity and freedom. If the US Africa Summit results in advancing their voices, in strengthening African institutions and in building new bridges to mutually beneficial US African partnerships, this could truly create a meaningful legacy. This would be truly historic and the people of Africa would be the first to applaud this effort!”

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ⁱ <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/131019-current-political-conditions-in-Ethiopia.php> A speech given by Obang Metho to immigration authorities in Switzerland

ⁱⁱ <http://www.financialtransparency.org/2011/12/05/illicit-financial-outflows-from-ethiopia-nearly-doubled-in-2009-to-us3-26-billion-reveals-new-global-financial-integrity-report/>

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID: **“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.”** (Comment highlighting Ethiopia made by Global Financial Integrity on December 5, 2011 preceding the release of their study on Illicit Financial Outflows from Developing Countries Over the Decade Ending in 2009i)

^{iv} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/130415-Land-Grab-Panel-DC.php> African Land and Natural Resource Grabs Destroy Lives and Futures of Africans : Mr. Obang Metho’s speech at the U.S. Congressional Briefing on Land Grabs in Africa on April 15, 2013

^v <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/130205-Speech-to-India-Press-Club.php>; Doing business with a Dictatorship is a Risky Venture: can an Outsider Ever Be Assured of Winning? A speech given by Obang Metho at the National Press Club of India, New Delhi, India on February 5, 2013.

^{vi} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/140218-Civil-Society-Cannot-Exist-in-Ethiopia.php>

^{vii} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/130620-Testimony-before-Subcommittee-on-Africa.pdf>; Obang Metho's Testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations; June 20, 2013

^{viii} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/140401-Strategic-Importance-of-Ethiopia-in-Africa.php>;

Ethiopia's Strategic Importance in Africa: Will Its Influence Be Used for Good or for Ill? Obang Metho addresses the Women's National Democratic Club in Washington D.C. on April 1, 2014

^{ix} <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/03/ethiopia-terrorism-law-decimates-media>

^x https://www.ifex.org/ethiopia/2014/07/21/journalists_charged/

^{xi} <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/20/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSBRE95J13Q20130620>

^{xii} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/140310-Speech-to-the-Norwegians.php>; Ethiopia—An Abusive Home for its People? March 14, 2014. A speech given by Mr. Metho to Frontline Club Oslo and other members of civil society in Norway.

^{xiii} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/120920-ECOGA-Speech.php> Land, Water and Resource-Grabbing and Its Impact on Food Security in Africa; A speech given by Mr. Obang Metho at the 1st Africa Congress on Effective Cooperation for a Green Africa in Bremerhaven, Germany; September 20, 2012

^{xiv} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/131104-Press-Release.php>; SMNE Calls for Strong Measures from the International Community, Donors and International Investors in Confronting Official Corruption in Ethiopia; Press Release, November 4, 2013, Washington D.C.

^{xv} <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/140218-Civil-Society-Cannot-Exist-in-Ethiopia.php>

^{xvi} http://www.africafederation.net/Berlin_1885.htm;