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ETHIOPIAWINNET: COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENSE OF CITIZEN RIGHTS

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24 October 2014

The Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr President:

Please accept our warmest greetings. We are **Ethiopiawinnet: Council for the Defense of Citizen Rights (E:CDCR)**, an Illinois registered rights-based civic organization providing support for peaceful civic engagement in Ethiopia in defense of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We write you today about your policy toward the seriously troubled region of the Horn of Africa as starkly articulated by your public statement on September 25, 2014.

Mr. President:

We must admit that we were taken aback by the unreserved praise you heaped on EPRDF's Ethiopia for its fast-growing economy and its active role in peacekeeping but conveniently ignored its alarmingly high rank for decimating the already narrow independent civic and political space through mass imprisonment, torture, and killing anyone remotely suspected of harboring ill-will toward the regime. We also wish to note with appreciation the additional financial commitment in support of CSOs in non-democratic states. However, we are baffled by the presumption that channeling funds to government-controlled CSOs is expected to enhance the capabilities of the few "uncaptured" civic organizations.

We do not for a moment doubt that your Administration is fully aware of the fact that the present government of Ethiopia has extended and deepened the network of command and control over every sector of society (political, economic, and social) which rivals that of China and Cuba. We, therefore, will not repeat the litany of human rights violations that are fully documented by myriad international organizations and in the annual reports of Department of State. We only wish to point out with utmost concern that the foundations of the strongest state in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia, are being relentlessly undermined by the current government with a combination of a one-party dictatorship (where the shadow party bureaucracy makes decisions for implementation by the civil and security services), an Apartheid-style minority rule, and a colonial-style governance by fomenting inter-group conflict.

The regime hopes that rapid economic growth, funded largely by aid and remittances, will be an adequate counterbalance for the denial of freedom. What it and its myopic foreign benefactors fail to see is that eradication of poverty is predicated on mobilization of domestic resources and freely engaged citizens with a sense of ownership. While we applaud, as you did, the respectable rate of economic growth in the past ten years, we also recognize that 8 out of 10 Ethiopians still subsist on less than \$2 per day. To make matters worse, the entrepreneurial domestic private sector has been shackled by a doctrinaire conception of government-directed development. This is in large part why USAID admittedly channels its aid solely through the private sector.

As U.S. citizens of Ethiopian heritage, we cherish the idea of a mutually beneficial relationship between the geostrategic goals of America and the interests of the Ethiopian people to be free of the triple tyranny of totalitarian rule, abject poverty, and, yes, geopolitically-motivated charity. It is indeed in America's enlightened self-interest to nurture a strong Ethiopian state by supporting sustained and inclusive economic and political institutions rather than by flirting with elusive and one-legged (terrorism, drugs, cold war, etc.) alliances with one oppressive regime after another. We think it is eminently shortsighted to apply FDR's Samosa principle, "He may be an SOB, but he is our SOB," to a volatile region of 250 million people of the Horn of Africa.

Mr. President:

It is our belief that the supposed tradeoff between security objectives and human-rights promotion is more apparent than real. America's interest in taming extremism in the Horn coincides with the interest of the Ethiopian people to live in peace. America's interest in a prosperous and friendly Ethiopia is also identical to the interest of the Ethiopian people to live free of poverty and inter-group violence. What is often forgotten is that the bridge that joins security and prosperity is economic and political "freedom" for all Ethiopians. The disappointing choice of U.S. policymakers to willfully look the other way while this tenuous bridge is being systematically dismantled will only invite disdain for the hypocrisy, not to mention an ineffectual firefighting against one extremism or another. As Ethiopian farmers like to say, "Those who do not choose seeds wisely will only harvest weeds." There is no compelling reason why America has to relegate its high ideals for myopic geopolitical objectives.

We, therefore, humbly submit to you that it is high time to reimagine U.S. policy toward Ethiopia. We can assure you that the Ethiopian-American Diaspora, with our abiding loyalty for both our country of birth and our adopted country, has much to offer in this area. We stand ready to help with a roadmap of workable transition to a government of national consensus that will pave the way for functioning democracy and market economy. An unequivocal signal from you in support of the rule of law and unconditional release of the hundreds of political prisoners would be a great start. We thank you for the opportunity.

Respectfully,

Betru Gebregziabher

Chairman, E:CDRC