



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

**Mr. Obang O. Metho,
Director of International Advocacy, Anuak Justice Council (AJC)
Speech to Ethiopian community, at University of California in Los Angeles,**

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Good Evening! Most of you may already know my name, but for those who do not, my name is Obang Metho and I am the Director of International Advocacy for the Anuak Justice Council, also known as the AJC. It is great to be here on the campus of the University of California in Los Angeles tonight and it is also great to be back in LA after being here just about a month ago to film footage for the documentary you are about to see.

I am excited to be with you tonight for the premiere showing of the AJC's new documentary film, the Betrayal of Democracy: Ethiopia. What better place than the film capital of the world for this premiere showing! I want to thank you all for coming and I believe you will not be disappointed.

First of all, I would like to thank all the people who made it possible for this showing of the Betrayal of Democracy: Ethiopia. I want to thank the UCLA, the Ethiopian Student Union on campus, Professor Alemayehu Mariam, Meron Ahadu and so many other people who made it possible.

I want to thank my colleagues from the Anuak Justice Council who had early on, seen the need for a documentary, that could visually depict the truth of what was happening to the Anuak. I also want to thank the Anuak, especially those in Africa who have worked so hard to provide documentation and testimony, at risk to themselves, but without whose help, I would not be here today.

I also thank those Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians who were interviewed in the film for being willing to speak out for the suffering people in our homeland. I thank those who risked their lives to take some of the film footage in Ethiopia. I thank all those who contributed to the content by providing information or other assistance.

As we further investigated the situation in Ethiopia, we became aware of widespread human rights abuses going on all over the country. Because it was so systemic, affecting the majority of Ethiopians, we felt called to include in this documentary, not only the voices of the Anuak, but also the voices of any Ethiopians being oppressed by the current government of the EPRDF. Those in the AJC have worked hard towards its production with all this in mind.

I thank the production team from the Department of Media and Technology from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, with whom we closely worked. The AJC hired their production team for the filming and production of this documentary and therefore, we must clarify that the views presented in this film, do not reflect any endorsement of the University to such views, as the University of Saskatchewan must maintain neutrality in any contracted projects. However, the production team with whom we worked was terrific.

I must especially mention the director of the project, Bill Nixon, who was really great to work with, but is one of many people on their staff who contributed. They were true professionals—creative, hardworking and rigorous in upholding the highest of standards. We heartily thank them for the excellence of their work.

I thank those who financially contributed to this production, taking a risk in standing up for the Anuak and other Ethiopians through the visual media. I thank those who fervently prayed through many obstacles along the way, but most of all I thank and praise God for making an impossible dream of ordinary men and women, come to life as only he can do—doing more than we can ask or imagine. The impact of this documentary is in God's hands and may he accomplish his purposes through it as we now dedicate it to him.

I was asked to speak about the documentary and so I will concentrate on that, knowing there is not much time as people are eager to see what is in this film. However, before I start, I would like to remind you that I do not belong to any political party or group and that I realize that by age and education, that there are those more mature, experienced and well-educated than am I, but I am just one person who wants to do my best to contribute to what is wounding my people, the Anuak and all my other brothers and sisters in Ethiopia who are suffering under tyranny, hoping for their freedom.

I stand for non-violence and will not support revenge and a hate-filled response to this government or to any ethnic group in Ethiopia. What you will see, is very disturbing and sad and its purpose is to show what is going on in Ethiopia, but I do not want anyone to use it as a reason for violence or any more actions that would result in the loss of innocent life.

This documentary is about human rights, not about a political party or about one ethnic group. It is not about the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front), the CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy), the AFD (Alliance for Freedom and Democracy), the UEDF or any other political party or organization in Ethiopia. This documentary is about the human rights abuses in Ethiopia that continue to go on today to the Anuak and throughout the country despite the government's claim to be a democracy. Instead, what is happening is a betrayal of democracy.

We have titled the film about this betrayal because all of you know that Ethiopia is not a true democracy. If some say it is, they are either lying to themselves or trying to deceive others for some reason because all of us Ethiopians know what is happening to our people back home.

As most of you will see from the poster of the DVD, you will see a map of the country with barbed wire circling the country, ripping the map apart. The reason for that symbol is because the country is silenced by the barbed wire that allows nothing into the country and nothing out of the country. It is symbolic of showing the destruction occurring in the country since the EPRDF has come to power.

We know what has happened to Ethiopia in the last years. We know about the hijacking of the national election only a year ago when 90% of eligible voters marked their ballots for a change of leadership, but the victory of the opposition leaders was stolen from the people by the EPRDF. More outrageous was the imprisonment of these leaders under the fabricated charges of treason and genocide.

Unfortunately, what one sees and hears in the news, only gives the "government version." Ethiopian journalists, human rights advocates and members of the media have been imprisoned for telling the truth. Now, even the Internet is being censored.

Yet, we need to know the truth. As Professor Mariam states in the film and as Jesus earlier stated in the Bible, it is only the truth that will set us free. It is absolutely essential that the truth be told and right now for we are deeply engaged in a battle for that truth. The purpose of this documentary is to visually show the kind of evidence necessary so as to come to your own conclusions about that truth.

This film gives an unfiltered view of the tyranny, corruption and oppression of the Ethiopian people that is being held in place by a complex assortment of players, ranging from Ethiopians themselves to those in the international community, from both democratic and more autocratic countries, all with vested interests that may be at odds with the interests of the Ethiopian people.

There are the western countries, like the US, who are havens for oppressed people, yet who sometimes do not see the root causes why so many Ethiopians are seeking to become refugees here. Under the leadership of President George W. Bush, the advancement of democracy in countries dominated by tyrannical dictators has become part of the stated US foreign policy.

Yet, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, has become a strategic partner to the US in its War on Terror even though he is secretly terrorizing his own people. The truth must be told to the power holders, and the citizens who vote them in, who inadvertently, may be helping sustain this regime through a lack of information. The truth of the widespread injustice must be told in a way that is credible enough to convince them to take a strong stance against it.

Countries like Malaysia and China, who themselves have poor records of upholding the human rights of their own people, have also become key players in sustaining the current government. Their desire for the natural resources in our country, such as the oil in Gambella and the natural gas in the Ogaden, have made their investment in the exploitation of these resources very lucrative for a small group of EPRDF elite. As they do, the government terrorizes the people, robbing them of their land, rights, opportunities and lives. It is not by chance that the human rights violations are so rampant in the areas where these rich natural resources are found.

The international community must be informed about what is going on in Ethiopia. Ethiopians who know, must work harder, in collaboration with each other, so as to get accurate and “from-the-ground” information out to the public. This documentary has been created with this in mind.

Early in 2004, after the massacre of the Anuak that began on December 13, 2003, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was publicly interviewed about the killing of the Anuak. He called the massacre of the Anuak “a fiction.” He could have called it something tragic or terrible, but instead, he denied that it ever occurred. Truth matters. It is because of this denial of the truth that this documentary was produced—to provide visual and credible evidence of a government cover-up of the massacre of the Anuak.

Several months ago, when I debated Bereket Simon, the Minister of Information for the EPRDF, on the television broadcast of the Voice of America, he said that things were now good and normal in Gambella. But the truth is, even today, outside of Gambella town in the rural areas not open to the public eye, gross human rights violations are carried out daily against the Anuak and others. Thousands of Anuak from small villages have been forcibly displaced from their homes by EPRDF troops. They have been left in the middle of small towns with no food, clothes, shelter, clean water and way to access such help. Their crops will be harvested by monkeys and wild animals if they have not already been destroyed by EPRDF troops.

This is a passive genocide—a government created humanitarian crisis that will take lives and futures. It is a waste of precious food when Ethiopians are going hungry throughout the country. Couple that with the rampant arbitrary killings, torture and detention of any who speak out for right and truth. Why is this not in the international news? Why is this information being suppressed?

If it is never reported, there can be no public outcry from decent, compassionate citizens of the free world who would be willing to stand up not only for their own rights, but also for the rights of those silenced by such tyranny. Again, this is the reason for this documentary—it is for those people of heart, who care about the suffering and plight of the oppressed, who respond with heart and action once they hear of such injustice—it is to enable them to know.

This documentary is for the government decision makers who do not have access to the real stories of the people. The EPRDF government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is lobbying hard for a false story to be presented to decision makers. They are lobbying hard, allegedly paying \$50,000 per month to a lobbying firm in Washington DC in order to convince Western policy makers that they must sacrifice the will and the lives of the Ethiopian people for the illusion that such an alliance with the EPRDF will benefit the West—but such an alliance is doomed to backfire and fail as it is built on a dying regime.

As they hear these real stories and see the evidence, let these policy makers strengthen their convictions to make the moral decisions required of those in power who are called to take a strong stand for right.

The United States of America came about because of the tyranny of King George III of England. The American founding fathers and the people of America chose freedom, democracy and the rule of law rather than tyranny. The United States should not support “the King George III” of Ethiopia against the will of the Ethiopian people.

Yet, you will see that this documentary is not only about what others should do—it is about what we Ethiopians must do, and it will require much more than what we are doing now. It is our goal that this documentary will inspire ordinary Ethiopians, wherever they are, to beat their drums until those in the next village join in, increasing the volume and vibration across the land. As we Ethiopians beat the drum for freedom and democracy, we take ownership of our problem. It is not someone else’s problem—it is ours and we must come up with the answers and the action required. We cannot only talk about it.

It has been nearly a year since our elected leaders were locked up in prison. People have become quiet. It is almost three years since the Anuak were massacred. It is still going on day by day. Those of us privileged to speak up, must engage our neighbors, our churches and our communities, informing the average person about what is going on.

We must reach out to our people, crossing the lines of division, whatever they might be. This problem cannot be solved by the Anuak or another individual ethnic group, organization or political group. The EPRDF government is surviving by breeding hatred and suspicion between the people of Ethiopia.

This government has studied us well and found our leaders within our communities and ethnic groups who could mobilize others for the good of the country and imprisoned them. They have destroyed and contained the leadership this way so they could sabotage our efforts and so we would lose our momentum. They have hired these lobbyists to sway the votes from HR Bill #5680, presenting lie as truth, attempting to persuade them with incomplete and distorted information to side with a system that holds up a tyrannical regime; attempting to convince them that the Ethiopian people cannot be trusted to establish a system of stable, unified and democratic government.

We Ethiopians must show them differently. The goal of this documentary is to show that for the Anuak to be freed and to prosper, substantive changes must be made to all of Ethiopia so that a system of government is put in place that will ensure the political rights of all, even the neglected, marginalized and persecuted from the minority groups such as the Anuak, seeing each person as unique and as part of the people of Ethiopia. This also must include the Tigrayans whose ethnic group is in power, but who totally disagree with the current brutal and corrupt policies. We must see them as our brothers and sisters and above all, we must see them as children of God.

We must not become paralyzed in despair even if systems fail and we ourselves feel inadequate to overcome evil. The Anuak woman at the beginning of the film says it all. She is putting her hope in God that he will give her the days necessary to testify about what was done to her people. Perhaps her testimony in this documentary is the beginning of that. Perhaps her testimony and that of others in this film will wake up many to the truth that must accompany the struggle for the justice, peace and freedom for which we all yearn. Let us now, through this documentary film, add our voices to the ones coming from the dark places of our world.

Again, as we dedicate this documentary to God, who hears the cries of those quiet voices coming from the dark, may he use it to bring his transformation, restoration, reconciliation, hope and change to the people of Ethiopia. This must mean a fundamental change of thinking about justice, it cannot mean revenge or change will not occur.

Those who believe in revenge, where if someone from one ethnic group, kills a member of another ethnic group, you must then kill one of theirs, will not be able to bring to an end the senseless legacy of torture, terror and killing going on. This legacy is not only about the EPRDF regime, but it has been our history and if we are to put it to an end, we must find a final solution. Revenge and hatred is not part of that solution.

There must be a total change in the thinking that perpetuates this cycle of violence. The goal of this documentary is not to promote a violent overthrow of the government. It will not work. This cycle of revenge and hatred must stop and be replaced with a model like what happened in South Africa when forgiveness and reconciliation became the only path to reconciliation and stability for the country.

If we want Meles to leave, the way it is done makes a huge difference in our future. Further violence taken into our own hands, where the innocent are most always certain to be the primary victims, will leave the seeds of bitterness behind that will grow into more poison for our already wounded society and culture. We must learn a better way as the future of Ethiopia is in our hands. We will be held responsible for what we do right or what we do wrong. Let us look to God for a way out of our cycle of revenge that has kept us enslaved as a country and even as a continent.

I want to conclude before we go on to view the film, by asking you to reflect on what you can do to help. All of us have a role to play to improve the situation in Ethiopia and to bring about peace and reconciliation with ourselves, our community—even including the ruling government. This kind of human crisis we are in, is not new.

To give one exemplary example from the past, I will tell you about two young German girls who lived in Germany during the Holocaust of the Jews during World War II. They chose to become advocates for telling the truth, refusing to ignore what was going on to the Jews, even though they were not Jews themselves. What they did became well known and I have read about their heroic example, recorded in history because they refused to conform to the evil system. They asserted, as must we, by saying, “We will never be silent.”

This applies to all Ethiopians and applies especially to me as a human rights advocate. As long as God gives me a voice, I will never be silent and I will try to do whatever little things I can do to improve someone else's life. It is the little things that make the world better. Each one of us in this room has a decision to make each and every day, whether you are an educated or uneducated woman or man, as to what we can do to make this world better for each other. If we want to have universal justice and respect for each and every individual, we must help and protect each another. If you have not already started to do this, now is the time to start. Go and make a difference in someone else's life.

Thank you. Now is the time to watch the film. May God bring peace and justice to Ethiopia.