

Presentation for an EU Parliamentary meeting¹

Madam Anna Gomez,

Honorable members of the European Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first thank you for giving me this opportunity to provide a brief assessment of the current political situation in Ethiopia and present, for what it is worth, my own assessment of where things might be going in the coming months and few years. I know that the EU parliament has followed the Ethiopian situation very closely since the aborted democratic experiment of 2005 that the EU observation mission, led by led by Madam Anna Gomez closely monitored. I am therefore not going to revisit the history of that period in this brief remark. I believe it would be more profitable to use this brief encounter to exchange views about Ethiopia's and by implication the region's, immediate future.

I must, however, begin by thanking the EU parliament for standing with the Ethiopian people and the basic principles of liberty and justice through its numerous resolutions calling for the establishment of a real democratic political order and a respect for the rule of law that the people of Ethiopia affirmed in their votes in 2005. As we all know this revealed desire for liberty was crushed by a cynical and brutal dictatorship by brute force. I wish I could equally thank the commission and the council. I guess it is one of the quirks of this EU experiment that well meaning and principled resolutions of the parliament can be ignored by the executive branch in the name of pragmatism and real politick. The real life historical lessons of the disasters that could emanate from unprincipled pragmatism seem to be lost when those in a position of power concentrate on playing power politics for its own sake.

Where are we now?

When I came to Brussels exactly three years ago immediately following the June massacres in Addis Ababa, I warned that things were slowly getting out of hand and that the peaceful electoral transition to a democratic dispensation that we all worked hard for, that people in Ethiopia died for, was seriously threatened by the intransigence of the Meles regime. It was clear to those of us that were active participants in the unfolding drama then that if the EU and other donors fail to take a firm and unified stand against dictatorship in Ethiopia and show this willingness by taking concrete measures that could raise the cost of dictatorship, not only will

¹ Berhanu Nega. A remark delivered to an informal hearing of EU parliamentarians.

the infant democratic experiment abort, but more importantly, the human cost will severely escalate and peace and stability will elude the region. The government's unwillingness to respect the public's will, Meles' inability to even contemplate constrained power that democratic governance necessarily requires, his certainty that he can manipulate international players to continue to support his dictatorship irrespective of what he does to his own people, the willingness of some members of the international community to eagerly be manipulated by Meles, perhaps perceiving the temporary convergence of their own narrowly defined self interest with his unquenchable desire to stay in power by any means, has now brought our worst fears. We have a very unstable and dangerous region with the largest country that was supposed to provide a semblance of stability to the whole region about to implode with severe consequences to the international community, people of the region in general and Ethiopians in particular. Let me briefly highlight the basic features of this looming crisis to give you a sense of what is really at stake in the near future:

- There is a total obliteration of the peaceful democratic movement and its attendant loss of hope that democratic change in Ethiopia could be achieved through a peaceful electoral process. Nobody in Ethiopia now seriously believes that this government will hold a free and fair election. In fact, the government has made it clear that nobody should even seriously think that such a possibility remotely exists. They are not even pretending anymore. This evaluation is not arrived at lightly. After the suppression of the democracy movement in 2005 and our imprisonment, we have done everything within our powers to appeal to the Meles regime to come back to its senses and restart negotiations about the future of democracy in our country. We informed the so called elders and the international community to use whatever influence they have to start negotiations. The Meles regime was simply not interested. In fact, our gestures were taken as a sign of weakness and were used to play a silly game of politics for the benefit of the donor community. Everything that happened in the country since then including the sheer arrogance of the regime in giving the name of our party to one of its agents, our election symbol to some one that has betrayed the party and joined parliament with his own separate party identity and the complete sham of the recent local election that handed the ruling party almost 100% of the votes are a few examples of this. As clearly seen from the recent law on charitable organizations, the government is not only totally closing the space for meaningful legal opposition, it has demonstrated its desire to totally close the space for independent civil society organizations. The message is loud and clear. No more competitive elections in Ethiopia in so far as the EPRDF are in power. No more independent social action.
- The total decimation and naked manipulation of both formal and informal institutions of peaceful conflict resolution in the country (such as the judiciary and the traditional

institution of elders) to the point where no one really thinks that societal conflicts could be fairly resolved by resorting to the courts or traditional arbitration mechanisms. There are no independent institutions in the country that ordinary citizens have any real respect for. The humiliation of the Elders in the fiasco that ended with our release once Meles believed that it has achieved its political objectives, the humiliation of the courts in our own case in front of the whole world, rendering parliament a useless toy that Meles can kick around at will, (not even consulting parliament in making a decision to go to war in Somalia, ceding boundary to the Sudan without even discussing it in parliament...etc.) is part of the process of making the country a one party/one man totalitarian dictatorship. In terms of the existence of even semi independent institutions, Mugabe's Zimbabwe looks more civilized than Meles' Ethiopia. It is important to note here that the peaceful and legal opposition in Ethiopia was brutally suppressed in 2005 not for contesting power. But, for asking the existence of independent institutions that the constitution of the country clearly stipulates. It is for asking the government to respect its own laws, that hundreds of people got massacred.

- The dramatic escalation in the extent and nature of violence perpetrated by the state in the country and the region at large not only on armed groups but on innocent civilians. Clearly violence is not new or novel to the Meles regime. It has killed hundreds of citizens before the 2005 election. The brutal massacre of the Agnwak in Gambella, the killing of innocent people in Sidama and Keffa-Sheka zones were all well known and taken by the international community as aberrations. The cold blooded shooting of hundreds of unarmed protesters in Addis and other towns of the country following the election, and the brutal suppression of unarmed youth in Oromia region took the mask off of Meles to show what he is really capable of. However, the brutality of the Ethiopian army in the Ogaden and Somalia is simply unprecedented even by the standards of the blemished recent history of the Ethiopian armed forces. The decimation of villages, the rape of women, and the indiscriminate killing of civilians in the Ogaden is now openly categorized by independent international human rights groups as war crimes and crimes against humanity. An Ethiopian refugee from the Ogaden region recently told me that he has never seen such cruelty at the worst days of the Derge regime. I have never thought I will hear this in my life time. The indiscriminate shelling of highly populated urban areas, the cold blooded massacre of civilians inside places of worship in Somalia were similarly categorized as war crimes perpetrated by the Meles regime. It is important to note here that this was the first time that the Ethiopian Army invaded another country in its entire history endangering the country's security and the possibility of peaceful coexistence with our neighbors in the future in this fragile region. All cross-border wars that the Ethiopian army has engaged in before has been provoked by an aggression by others. All these are clear indications of the

increasing desperation of a regime that is bent on creating havoc on the country and the region and seriously damaging the long term interest of the country and the stability of the region, in order to maintain its tenuous hold on power.

- There is now an emerging consensus among political forces in the country and the public at large that the international community has more or less abandoned the fate of Ethiopia to this brutal dictatorship. Whether because of the feeling that regimes such as Meles' are not amenable to international pressure (a view that is hard to maintain given the current position of the international community on Zimbabwe) or simply believing that this is the best kind of government that countries such as Ethiopia can reasonably expect or, even more cynically, believing that despite the regime's ugly features, it is the best regime that could protect the interests of the West, the international community seems to have chosen to work with or even shore up this particular dictatorship. In the absence of any serious and credible move either by local institutions or the international community, therefore, it is becoming more and more obvious that a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the political crisis in the country is not in the cards. It is in the hands of Ethiopian political forces, especially those democratic forces that are committed to make the Meles dictatorship the last dictatorship in the country's history, to find their own solution to this problem that is seriously threatening the very existence of the nation.
- The moral basis for peaceful resistance is now almost totally eroded by the reality on the ground. The choice that the Meles regime is giving Ethiopians has become increasingly stark. (And he has said it in so many words just before he started the brutal repression of the democracy movement in front of an EU official). It is no more between civil resistance and armed resistance with some possibility of achieving the objectives of liberty, albeit at differing costs. It is rather between totally abandoning the quest for liberty and democratic governance and thus long term stability on the one hand, and resisting the dictatorship by any means necessary, with the obvious exception of avoiding any damage to the civilian population, on the other. Given the fact that armed resistance in Ethiopia has already been operational by those that have given up hope on peaceful transition much earlier, the choice is clear. What would be new this time is the much stronger moral and material backing of the population to such forces, very quickly increasing the intensity and the geographic spread of the armed conflict. In other words, armed resistance is morally legitimized.
- Finally, the economic problem facing the country, particularly the runaway inflation that has completely decimated the lively hood of a large section of the population, combined with rampant corruption has seriously increased the tensions in the society making an already fragile situation rather explosive. The situation is further exacerbated by the recent draught and a rise in international commodity prices making life simply

unbearable to many. It is not clear how long the situation can hold like this and what form the expected social explosion will take.

Where are we heading?

Given this current reality, what can we expect in the near future? What are the kinds of measures that can be taken by political forces in Ethiopia and the international community to bring about a soft landing to this gathering storm?

The first thing that we need to come to terms with is the fact that the current situation is simply untenable. There is no question any more that the current regime in Ethiopia has any basis of legitimacy to stay in power even for a single day. The only reason it is still in power is because of its willingness to use brute force and the financial backing it receives from its international sponsors. The force that it has relied upon has stretched itself so far and wide that it has started to show signs of strain and vulnerability. Accordingly, there is no doubt anymore that it is going to go much sooner than what you might expect. And the sooner it goes the better for the region's stability. It is high time that the international community give up the illusion that Ethiopia under Meles will be a source of stability in this very fragile region. In fact, it is time to fully recognize that the Meles dictatorship is one of the main sources of instability in the region. Anyone seriously interested in stabilizing the region cannot hope to be successful without addressing the potentially explosive political situation inside the largest country in the Horn region. It is time for those that have a vested interest in the stability of the country and the region to seriously think about a post-Meles, post-EPRDF Ethiopia.

The most important responsibility in this transition is on political forces operating in Ethiopia. As you well know, there are two broad categories of forces in the Ethiopian political opposition. In the first category are forces that claim to represent the aspirations of particular ethnic groups. In the second category are multi-ethnic political forces that are organized on the basis of citizenship within a democratic Ethiopia. These forces have hitherto operated at cross purposes making a unified and effective opposition to tyranny very difficult. It is time for these forces to get together and forge a clear and collective vision about the future of the country and start to take practical measures towards realizing this common vision. The new movement that I belong to "Ginbot 7" (May 15) has recently forwarded such a common vision that could serve as a basis for initiating such a discussion among the political opposition. Our proposal starts with two fundamental principles that we believe are broadly shared among most of the opposition parties in both categories. These are:

- 1) An unflinching commitment to the principles of liberty and democratic politics as a process to resolve political differences within the society. In addition to respect to the full array of rights as individual citizens and collectives (cultural communities and other organized groups) that are enshrined in the United Nations universal human rights declarations, this principle requires for a full acceptance by all parties that all political power in the country at the local, regional and federal levels can only be legitimate if it is achieved through free and fair elections. This is a required commitment by all parties to make the Meles regime the last dictatorship in the country and provide a peaceful and stable political future.
- 2) A recognition by all parties that there is a political community called Ethiopia that provides equal political rights to all its citizens and that all political differences should be resolved within this political community. This principle of national unity within a genuinely functioning democratic process is deemed required both as a theoretical principle and a practical requirement for an effective resistance against the Meles regime and the achievement of a stable political community in the future.

Such an agreement will not erase the political differences that exist between political parties among the two categories or within each category of forces. What it provides is a reasonable and fair rule of the game through which these political differences can be peacefully resolved. It is our firm belief that such an agreement is not only desirable but also achievable. I think political forces in Ethiopia know full well that a fractured opposition has not in the past and will not in the future deliver the desired outcome of a democratic political order. Neither will an alliance shorn of all principles. The alliance that need to be created must start from a shared commitment to a peaceful democratic political future for the country based on the realization of a shared history of oppression that we all wish to abolish as well as a sense of shared destiny. I realize that this agreement in principle will not be enough. It is important to work out agreements on operational details as well as organizational structures that convert such a broad vision into an actionable program. But, I believe that can be done once such a broad principled agreement on the modalities of the future political dispensation is reached. Such an agreement will go a long way to reduce the suspicions that exist between political parties making a detailed constructive discussion possible.

There is reason to be hopeful. I believe there is an emerging consensus among the political opposition that such a framework could possibly lead to an agreement on the future of Ethiopian politics. We all realize that the stakes are too high to bicker on secondary issues that can legitimately be presented to the Ethiopian public for settlement once there is an agreement on the rules of the game. I believe this task is already underway and will bear fruit in the not

too distant future. In any case, this is a task that must and will be done by Ethiopian political forces.

On the part of the international community, what is required is a principled commitment to democracy in Ethiopia not only as desirable in its own right, but also as a guarantee for the stability of the whole region. The European parliament has shown in its numerous resolutions that it is committed to this ideal. It is high time that the commission and the other executive bodies of the EU as well as the member states follow suit. I believe the concerted effort of the international community to penalize the Mugabe dictatorship will bear fruit in the near future. But, this must be a principle applied for all people across the continent. A British foreign ministry that is willing to openly declare Mugabe an illegitimate ruler because of his refusal to accept the will of the people and stay in power by force, A European Union that is willing to impose all kinds of sanctions against the Mugabe regime, cannot with a straight face financially and politically support an equally brutal regime in Ethiopia that is accused of crimes against humanity by credible international human rights organizations. This would be a hypocrisy that has a potential to undermine Europe's claimed commitment to human rights and democracy across the African continent. So, what is expected of Europe, I believe, is to take a responsible and principled position in our part of the continent to promote human rights and democracy. It is high time to rethink the old policy of providing material support for the "strengthening of institutions" that do not exist. It is time to realize that providing "technical support" for supposed "democratic" institutions will not deliver democracy when the government in power deliberately makes these institutions impotent. A united principled European foreign policy can be a strong catalyst for the realization of the democratic aspirations of people in Africa. You should not underestimate your influence if you are committed to speak in one voice and on the basis of moral principles that you share as a society. In Ethiopia, the place to begin is to help the efforts of the opposition in its attempt to forge a common democratic future. I believe the Ethiopian opposition is willing and open to have a constructive dialogue with all forces that are committed to such moral principles.

Finally, I am not naive enough to think that the road I broadly charted above will be smooth sailing. The damage that has been done to the body politic of the country by successive dictatorships require careful and deliberate measures with a potential to contribute towards the healing of the wounds that has been festering in the psyche of a suffering population. I realize that it will not be easy to bring together a country that has been purposefully fractured by divisive political machinery with no moral qualms. To address the numerous problems of the Horn of Africa requires wisdom and foresight and a load of good will from all parties that is desperately in short supply in that part of the world. Even after achieving our objective of getting rid of this dictatorship, we have a lot of genuine reconciliation work to do. But, this is not an impossible task. I don't think we really have an option but to try. I really believe that it is

doable. I am sure there are going to be lots of ups and downs in the road ahead. It will require innovative thinking. But, what I am absolutely certain about is that the only place we can begin is by providing voice to the ordinary people of the region through a genuine democratic dispensation. No place in the region is this desperately required as in Ethiopia at this moment in time.

Thank You.