

IT'S TIME FOR US TO SAY "THANK YOU!"
Inquiry Commission West Coast Tour
Alemayehu G. Mariam

Never was so much owed by so many to so few...

How does one thank those who put everything on the line to stand up for justice, truth and the Ethiopian way?

How does one express appreciation to those who left their families, friends, neighbors and country to expose the truth about unspeakable crimes committed against children, and call international attention to the massive human rights abuses committed by Zenawi's regime?

How does one express admiration to those who left high positions of authority and willingly gave up their professions and livelihoods because telling the truth was far more important to them than any amount of personal gain or advantage?

How does one say thank you to Woldemichael Meshesha, Frehiwot Samuel, Mitiku Teshome, and Alemayehu Zemedkun?

I am overcome by deep emotion as I struggle to answer these questions. And I find myself lacking the eloquence of diction or enough words in my vocabulary to express my respect, admiration, gratitude and appreciation for what these young men have done in the cause of freedom, democracy and human rights in Ethiopia.

Our Four Points of Light...

These young men are four points of light in a country gripped by the darkness of fear and terror. Frehiwot, Woldemichael, and Mitiku illuminated the dark secrets and the ugly truth about the massacre of hundreds of our children by Zenawi's specially recruited storm troopers.

They undertook a thorough and meticulous investigation of the massacres. They conscientiously documented the facts of the murder of each child and young person, interviewed hundreds of witnesses including those who were wounded and maimed in the brutal assault and talked to family members of victims. They examined the photographs of the grotesquely disfigured and bullet riddled corpses of the young men and women, and evaluated all manner of physical evidence related to the killings.

They energetically interrogated evasive, cagey, cocky and imperious officials who spared no effort to stonewall their investigations. And they fearlessly pursued their fact-finding mission without backing down. Not even once!

Then they reported to the world the shocking facts by way of a briefing to the United States House of Representatives. The body count: *at least* 193 young people murdered in cold blood. Over 760 suffered life-threatening bullet wounds. These were only the victims for whom documentation could be obtained or their deaths and injuries forensically verified. There were thousands, tens of thousands of other innocent citizens who were executed, made to disappear or grievously injured in the prisons, in the streets and in their homes and places of work. No documentation could be found for them, but the whereabouts of these patriots is known only to God.

But that was not all: These young men documented what the world had suspected all along. The young protesters were righteously indignant in challenging the election results, and they went about it in a peaceful and civil manner. They destroyed **NO** private or public property. Not a single one of them was armed! They were just a feisty throng of youthful demonstrators.

And finally, they forced us to confront the shocking truth that caused the deepest wounds in our hearts. Zenawi's troops fired on these children not to disperse them, and not to scatter them away. No, No, No. Zenawi's troops intended to butcher as many of them as they could that day. They intended to mow them down like grass stalks and leave their bodies littering the streets. Yes, all of those young men and women died from bullet wounds to their heads and/or upper torso. Such are the facts these young men discovered.

In the end, Mitiku, Woldemichael and Frehiwot revealed to the world the truth about the monstrous crimes committed against Ethiopia's future, its youth. Their report became a devastating indictment of Zenawi and his regime for crimes against humanity, and a testament of truth for history and succeeding generations that there once was a regime in Ethiopia so cruel, so vicious, so depraved, so barbarous and demonic that it massacred its youth in the streets in cold blood.

Alemayehu Zemedkun was the deputy attorney general for the civil division in the state ministry. He was ordered to initiate civil action against the imprisoned leaders of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, human rights defenders and civic leaders for damages allegedly caused by the young protesters. "Sue them in civil court. Let's take everything they got. Let's not just send the opposition leaders to the jailhouse, let's also send their families to the poorhouse," Alemayehu was commanded.

But he declined to prosecute. He told his bosses that there was no evidence to prove the opposition leaders had anything to do with the protesters or any damage that may have been caused by them. He told them the civil process can not be used to persecute citizens for their political views or beliefs. It is fundamentally unfair to have these individuals defend against both a criminal prosecution and a civil action at the same time, he told them. In any case, he was not in the business of using the law to steal from the people, or to oppress them.

He knew he had no place among a horde of thieves, and so he packed up and went into exile. By taking such a heroic act, Alemayehu thwarted Zenawi's carefully laid plans to send the families of the opposition leaders to the poorhouse.

Godsend to the Diaspora...

Frehiwot, Mitiku, Woldemichael and Alemayehu are a Godsend to Ethiopians in the Diaspora at this crucial stage of our struggle to improve the human rights situation in the homeland. As we pursue our human rights agenda in the United States Congress and H.R. 5680 returns to the legislative process under a different number, we will have our unimpeachable witnesses to tell the American people of the horrific crimes that are being committed on Ethiopian citizens by Zenawi's regime. We will show them how their tax dollars are being used to support a vicious and ruthless dictator.

And in time, these young men will make their mark on the human rights struggle and make their contributions to us in many ways and forms. In their West Coast Tour, we will be learning a great deal from them. As Inquiry Commission members and judicial officials, they have seen the ugly underbelly of Zenawi's regime and the massive human rights abuses he has unleashed on the people. We want to know firsthand what really goes on in the "belly of the Beast" where the innocent are arbitrarily arrested, tortured and killed, and often disappear altogether without a trace.

We aim to interact with them and sharpen our awareness of human rights abuses in Ethiopia, and tap their insights about what specific things we can do in the Diaspora to help out. So, as they begin their tour of the West Coast, we are confident that they will inspire us all to be better organized and become more effective advocates in the cause of human rights in Ethiopia. Ultimately, we are hopeful that their civic efforts, moral authority and legal skills will help us bring those who have committed crimes against humanity to the bar of justice.

Our Messengers of Truth...

As we think of the ways to thank these young men, we remain mindful of the fact that they are part of a generation that had faced the greatest challenges in Ethiopia's modern history. For much of their lives, they have known and lived under tyranny and oppression -- first it was the red terror, then white, then terror in Technicolor under Zenawi's regime.

During their adult lives, they lived in a country of extreme contrasts: a country with a few millionaires, and tens of millions of poor people. They lived in a city bursting with "economic development", and a country agonizing under grinding underdevelopment. They walked among elites who spend their work and play time in posh and plush hotels sipping the best French cognac and champagne, and a country where the bar tab for the evening can sustain several families for a year. They grew up in a country where the powers that be

believe that everybody has a price -- cash, a house, a fancy car, a good paying government job, influential position, title, whatever.

But there is no price to buy Alemayehu, Woldemichael, Frehiwot and Mitiku. Neither all of the gold mined and stolen out of Adola, nor the aid money siphoned off from international organizations and donor countries is enough to buy off these young men. Zenawi found out, much to his dismay and mortification, that these young men are not for sale, at any price.

But they will be available to us in America freely, to share the truth about the brutal dictatorship of Zenawi's regime, the massive violations of human rights and ruthless suppression of dissent in Ethiopia. They will be our messengers of truth; and they will tell it like is! They will visit the cities of Sacramento, San Jose- Oakland-San Francisco, Los Angeles , Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Diego and Seattle to spread the truth.

(See their tour schedule at http://ethiomeia.com/addfile/ic_official_tour.pdf)

Forever indebted...

As we stretch out our hands and welcome these young men in our midst in the West Coast, it is going to be an extraordinary experience for most of us. Few of us have ever met real Ethiopian heroes. We know more about brutal dictators and child killers than heroes who tell the truth and uplift the spirit of their people, give them hope, and inspire faith in the future of their homeland. You could say we are besides ourselves having them in our midst.

And as they visit with us, we shall thank them profusely, but not necessarily in the usual way of lavishing them with empty words and hollow phrases. No, we shall thank them by asking them deep and probing questions that will help us better understand the human rights crises in Ethiopia, and inspire us to take effective collective action.

We want to know about the human side of their investigative work. How did they feel when they found out that 193 young people were intentionally shot and their bodies thrown into the streets like rabid dogs? How did they feel when they spoke to those young victims who suffered life-threatening bullet wounds or were maimed for life and learned about their pain and suffering? How did they handle their grief and sorrow? How did they feel when the world remained silent or made empty gestures and sounded hollow words about human rights violations and extrajudicial killings, yet did nothing to help bring the criminals to justice?

We want to know about how it felt to show courage under fire: What was it like to look the Beast in the eye and say: "No! No! No! We will not change the truth. We will not fudge the facts. We will not falsify our conclusions. You can do whatever you like, and if it must be so, we will go to our graves clutching the truth close to our hearts." Halleluja!

And we can't wait to learn about duty, honor and country from these young men.

Duty. We want to know the enormous difficulties they faced performing their fact-finding duties, and how they managed to find the truth and document it massively despite relentless official stonewalling and bureaucratic obstructions. And once they discovered the truth, we want to know how they made it their sacred duty to stand for the innocent children who were murdered, to speak out against injustice and to hold a candle of hope for human rights for all their countrymen and women who suffer in quiet despair under Zenawi's regime.

We will ask them about how ordinary people like themselves -- fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, neighbors and jolly ole' good fellows in their communities -- become extraordinary moral leaders by merely performing their duties with fairness, diligence, expertise, meticulous care and professionalism. We want to know about the moral supremacy of those who perform their duties with unflinching fidelity to the truth, while upholding the virtues of honesty and integrity, over the wicked villains who extol corruption as their highest moral virtue.

Honor. These young men would rather honor the memory and suffering of their young countrymen and women, than sell their souls to the Prince of Darkness for a few pieces of silver. They chose honor over everything -- self, family, profession -- and never gave in. As Winston Churchill said: "Never give in, never give in, never; never; never; never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty -- never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense." Woldemichael, Frehiwot, Alemayehu, and Mitiku never gave in, except to the truth and the facts they discovered in their investigations. We hope to learn about honor from them.

Country. We want to ask them about patriotism and their love for their homeland and people. Like all patriots the world over, they did their duty out of love of country and pride in their people. They believed in their Ethiopia, no human life, no person, however poor or wretched, deserves to be killed or maimed for exercising basic human rights. They loved their country and people so much, and had such great hope for the future, that they stood ready to offer their own lives and liberties in exchange for liberty and justice for all!

We want to talk to them about others things as well. Perhaps talk them a little bit about character. What is it in the character of a man or a woman that will embolden them to stand up and shout a mighty shout when confronted by acts of injustice? We live in America in relative comfort with robust constitutional rights, but most of stand mute in the face of manifest injustice and unfathomable acts of political cruelty. We have the means to help bring about change, but we lack the will to act.

We can organize and use our resources to promote human rights and freedom, but we spend more time pointing accusatory fingers at each other and showing each other's fault. We criticize others for being intolerant, oppressive and tyrannical, but we hardly practice the

virtues of tolerance, respect, compassion or collaboration. We want to know what it is that these young men “got that we don’t got”?

Perhaps these young men can tell us a little bit about courage since they have practiced it so well. How does one acquire courage when one is overwrought by moral cowardice to the point that one is afraid to take a stand in public. Some of us write in pseudonyms and made-up names to criticize and castigate evil; yet we are afraid to show our faces or be known. Perhaps they can tell us where to shop for courage?

And while they are with us, we would like to tell them a little bit about ourselves in the Diaspora. They probably already know that far too many of us have gone into “survival” mode or AWOL from the CAUSE. We have become businessmen, learned men in the arts, sciences, the law and medicine. We are all very important people. We can’t be bothered by the situation of those poor little people who are dying over there. There is not really much we can do. We will probably explain to them in sophisticated scholarly language: “You must understand human rights abuses are systemic and structural problems. To improve things over there, you need process change and structural transformation.”

Perhaps we’ll change the subject and ask them: “By the way, how are things over there? We hear business is booming. We want to go back and invest, you know, help the poor people there, give them jobs. May be snag a parcel of land and build a house while setting up the business. What do they think?” They may look at us in disbelief and amazement, and ask themselves: “Are we on the same planet with these guys?”

But we are also apprehensive about some tough questions they might ask of us: “In our short stay in America, we have noticed the deafening silence of the Diaspora intellectuals on the human rights situation in Ethiopia, could you please explain why that is so?” Not an easy question. Got to do some hard thinking to answer this one.

Or they could ask: “It seems that Diaspora Ethiopians always react to what is done or not done by Zenawi or his regime. Many of you seem to be standing in a fog of uncertainty and vacillation about what you support and what you oppose. Could you please explain to us your agenda for Ethiopia?” Even tougher to explain this one.

Perhaps they may ask the most dreaded question of all: “What is the Diaspora’s vision for the future of Ethiopia?” We are mindful of the fact that these guys are lawyers and skilled fact-finders who will ask many follow up questions. Ummm! What to say?!

And we will ask them to join us in celebrating other great heroes and heroines of human rights in Ethiopia -- 193 young men and women slaughtered defending democracy along with 763 wounded, the leaders of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy and other civic leaders and human rights defenders, and the thousands of unnamed political prisoners and torture victims, and their families who have sacrificed so much and suffered so greatly to

advance the cause of freedom, democracy and human rights. Lest we forget, we shall also celebrate our sister in the cause of human rights, Ana Gomes.

So, how do we thank these young men? Let me count the ways...

It is hard to resist the temptation to use mere words to thank these young men. But thank them we shall: for speaking the truth, for helping wage a human rights struggle against a monstrous tyranny that has set a new benchmark for cruelty and viciousness in the modern annals of crimes against humanity.

We shall thank them for putting justice above ethnicity, human rights above personal gain and democracy above partisan interest.

We shall thank them for lifting our hopes, for giving us pride in the determination and steadfastness of purpose of the younger generation.

We shall thank them for reinforcing our faith that not all of Ethiopia's heroes are dead and gone; and for proving to us that we need not look to history to learn about duty, honor and country.

We shall thank them for keeping the memories of the young people massacred by Zenawi's troops alive, and for reminding us that though these young people have died, the principles of liberty, freedom and democracy for which they gave their lives will endure and outlive any two-bit tyrant.

We shall thank them for teaching us the true meaning of being an Ethiopian -- it is not ethnicity, religion, language, profession or bank account or residence -- which is love of justice and belief in the dignity and worth of every human being.

We shall thank them for making us aware that millions of our countrymen and women who suffer under tyranny, and whose true leaders languish in prison, look to us for moral leadership and encouragement, even though we are separated by space and time.

And we shall thank them for teaching us the greatest lesson of all: "Never to give in, never to give in, never; never; never; never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never to give in" to the underhanded trickery, bullying, threats and intimidation of the bloodthirsty Beast who devoured so many of our children!

West Coast Challenge to the Rest of the Diaspora...

And so we freedom-loving human rights defenders on the West Coast call on all freedom-loving Ethiopians in the in the United States of America -- our home away from home -- to join us and say to Frehiwot, Woldemichael, Mitiku and Alemayehu: "THANK YOU FOR

WHAT YOU HAVE DONE FOR OUR HOMELAND AND OUR PEOPLE. THANK YOU FOR AWAKENING OUR CONSCIENCE AND FOR BEING OUR CONSCIENCE. THANK YOU FOR GIVING US HOPE. AND THANK YOU FOR REINVIGORATING OUR FAITH IN A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR ETHIOPIA.”

We on the West Coast also put out a challenge to all Ethiopians living in America -- from sea to shining sea, to those who live on the East Coast, in the Midwest, the Northeast and Northwest, the South, Southeast and Southwest -- upon whom God has shed his grace, to open your arms in a warm embrace and welcome these heroes into your communities and personally say to them: “THANK YOU. THANK YOU. THANK YOU. THANK YOU.”

Postscript

On a personal note...

I am overcome with a sense of deep humility and great pride that these four members of the legal profession spearheaded the effort to expose the truth about the massacre of the young people after the 2005 elections, and for unearthing evidence of massive abuses of human rights in their investigations. In many ways, these young men remind me of the great African American lawyers who fought against racial segregation and discrimination in American society. Such dedicated lawyers as Thurgood Marshall, Charles Hamilton Houston, Oliver Hill and Elaine R. Jones, all great African American lawyers who stood up for truth and justice at great risk to their lives, and who ultimately cast their lot with the oppressed and the weak, and the wretched of the earth.

Though separated by distance, time and culture, our young lawyers also stood up before the court of world opinion and shouted a mighty shout: “193 children cry out for justice from their graves. Their families float in a sea of tears. Thousands of others are imprisoned daily, tortured and killed.” These young lawyers are now the voices of all of these victims from the grave, and from the prisons and jails, in exile and from wherever else Zenawi’s victims cry for justice. I have never been more proud of the members of my profession than I am now. I am overwhelmed. My cup runneth over!