

A Town Hall Meeting on Ethio-Somali Crisis Held in Twin Cities

A town hall meeting jointly organized by Kinijit Support Group in Minnesota and the Somali Institute for Peace and Justice was held in Minneapolis on Saturday, January 27, 2007 from 4:00-7:00 pm. The meeting, which was the first of its kind to bring together members of the large Somali and Ethiopian communities in the Twin Cities metro area, was well attended. Both Ethiopian and Somali intellectuals participated in the discussion on the ramifications of the recent incursion of Ethiopian forces into Somalia. The public discourse was civil and constructive even though the panelists expressed divergent views.

Professor Solomon Gashaw made a presentation on the “impacts of ethnic and clan politics on the basic human rights of citizens.” In his analysis, Dr. Solomon showed why elitist groups, mostly in developing countries, tend to exploit ethnic and religious differences to ascend and to remain in power. Governments are effective tools for accessing scarce resources. In most developing countries, governments control the administrative and judicial machineries as well as much of the productive sector, which is the source of most of the wealth. Whoever controls the government controls the wealth of the nation. The taking of political power by one group always meant a net loss or a zero-sum-event for those that are not in power. What this usually meant is that those outside of the narrow constituency of the group in power, irrespective of their size or proportion in the overall population of the country, lose everything. Since grabbing governance power is viewed as a key to economic and political empowerment, ethnic and clan loyalties are exploited by the power-hungry elite ascend and remain in power. Professor Solomon acknowledged the value of preserving ethnic and clan heritages but insisted that citizens do these as private activities. He concluded his presentation by imploring his audience to insist on a governance system that is based on political and economic programs rather than narrow sectarian interests.

Sheikh Hassan Ali Mohamud, J.D., spoke on the topic “Islamic Fundamentalism in the Horn: A Myth or a Reality.” He stated that if “Fundamentalism” refers to a strictly adherence to Islamic teachings, he argued that it may not be negatively viewed by Muslims. He further saw problem with the concept of the separation of state and religion since Islam is a way of life rather than an ideology or a religious doctrine and therefore does not make clear distinction between private and public life. Dr. Mohamud observed that there has always been mistrust and suspicion between Ethiopian and Somali and he feared that the recent invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia has exacerbated the situation. He expressed pessimism on the possibility of a partnership between the two countries in the economic and social sectors in spirit of good neighborliness.

Dr. Selameab’s speech was on “Ethiopia’s legitimate or perceived interests for intervening in Somalia.” In his presentation, Dr. Selameab reviewed the strained relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia since Somalia gained its independence in 1960. He speculated the primary motivation behind the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia to be TPLF/EPRDF’s desire to divert domestic and international public opinion away from its repressive actions following its defeat in the May 2005 election. The illegal imprisonment of the leaders of the main opposition party, Kinijit, the killing and

wounding of hundreds of demonstrators against the outcome of the election and the muzzling of the fledgling independent press after the election have eroded TPLF/EPRDF's legitimacy to power. It is plausible, therefore, that the crisis TPLF/EPRDF ignited with Somalia could stoke nationalist sentiments among Ethiopians and give the regime cover to continue dismantling the opposition. Dr. Selameab, however, argued that the short-term benefits TPLF/EPRDF may gain from the invasion should not overshadow the legitimate threats the UIC posed to Ethiopia. A radicalized Islamic state in Somalia would not be good for Ethiopia with a large Muslim population. The resuscitation by the UIC of the claim of successive Somali governments to Ethiopia's Ogaden region for which two bloody wars were fought in the last 40 years should be of a serious concern to Ethiopia. Somalia's historic support to anti-Ethiopian unity secessionist forces is another serious issue that had prevented the normalization of relations with the two countries.

Dr. Selameab called for the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces. To remove the core problem that has been vexing the relationship of the two neighboring countries and prevented them from developing mutually beneficial economic relations, he also called on enlightened Somalis as those in the Diaspora to encourage their country to accept the AU's charter principle Article 4 (b) that demands "respect of borders existing on achievement of independence." Though there may be an element of injustice implicit in this principle, the alternative to not adhering to it would be a never-ending cycle of war between the two impoverished countries, Dr. Selameab observed. It is true that colonial powers had demarcated borders arbitrarily splitting ethnic groups. Attempting to redraw maps of African countries now based on population settlement patterns would relegate our peoples to a never-ending cycle of war.

Dr. Ali Khalif Galaydh who was a former prime minister and minister of industry of Somalia spoke on the "historical relationship between governments of Ethiopia and Somalia." In his speech, Dr. Galaydh alleged that Emperor Menilik connived with the European colonial powers to claim the Ogaden. He explained how Somalia enjoyed multi-party democracy between 1960-1969 including a free press. He argued that the pressing problem for Somalia at the present is repelling the Ethiopian invasion using all means available to it.

Zainab M. Hassan, who has MA in Public Affairs, is the Chairperson and cofounder of Women of African Resource and Development Association (WARDA). She talked on the traumas left by civil wars on African societies and stressed the need to create institutions that will heal the psychological scars left by conflicts. She pointed out that such institution could be modeled like the South African Peace and Reconciliation or others UN based models. Ms Hassan concluded her speech by reading an inspiring poem she wrote on Peace.

Following the presentation by the panelists, the audience was involved in a lively question and answer session. Varieties of views were expressed but there was agreement on the immediate withdrawal of Ethiopian forces. The meeting also noted the need to continue the dialogue and interaction between the two communities in the Twin Cities.

