

## **Horn of Africa Peace conference London, UK, 18-19 December 2009**

### **Dr. Berhan Ahmed**

Distinguished guests, brothers, sisters and friends

#### **Introduction:**

The theme of our meeting is peace and I like to remind everyone including myself, that this meeting is hosted in a country that owns peace and shares peace with others including us, therefore, can we own and share peace with each other and with other people? So my focus is - what are the steps to own peace? It is important to free ourselves from hate, start to create forgiveness – along with the preparedness to compromise, accept and respect, with humility.

We need to know where we are coming from, where we are now, and we also need to have a vision of where we want to go. That's essential if we are to plan for the future.

#### **The past**

There are actually good, practical reasons why we should look at the long history of our region. Historically, there have been stable cultures and governments in the region that have lasted for centuries. The reason this is important is, if we look at history, we can get an idea of what are the natural divisions of the region. The historical countries follow the natural divisions of geography, and also give rise to regions of culture, language and religion. If we are aware of what worked naturally in the past, this may help us to find solutions that respect the history of the region and that can be as long-lasting as those old countries. We can be absolutely certain of that. We are the cradle of humanity, one of the first in history to provide amnesty to asylum seekers from across from Red Sea and have a proven history on religious tolerance.

#### **The present**

We all know that the whole Horn of Africa region has at the moment very great problems. Economically, the whole region has been subject to droughts, famine and floods caused by climate change and civil war, lack of leadership, abuse of human rights and exacerbated by rising food prices with various causes, one of which is the diversion of food crops to biofuels. So these problems affect the whole region, the world and they are going to get worse.

#### **Somalia and Sudan**

Before looking at Eritrea and Ethiopia, let's just touch on Somalia and Sudan. At present there is really no Somalia, and it's not even clear that there should be. We have a collection of different states. We need to try to get the most stable of those recognised and accepted by the developed countries.

Then Sudan, we have a government that was actually performing well until not so long ago, but then in response to internal developments it resorted to repression and to allowing power to pass into the hands of militias. This has had a disastrous effect. We should be very aware of that when we look at the situation in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

### **Ethiopia**

Ethiopia is probably the best performing of the countries in the region. It has attempted to preserve and extend freedom and to engage with the developing world in a positive way. It has engaged in military conflict, generally as the aggressor in Somalia. At present and for the foreseeable future, it seems that Ethiopia is acting as a source of stability. It could perhaps even be more so if it were not for the war in Somalia and the Ogaden region and severe financial problems. It has endured the worst of the droughts and, like, Sudan, is also having to cope with large numbers of refugees.

### **Eritrea**

Eritrea is rapidly deteriorating. A government formed from an army is basically continuing to run the whole country using the harsh methods need to win a revolutionary war. But what works for a war fails for a country. Especially since 2000, repression has been increasingly harsh. The closer Eritrea gets to collapse, the harsher the repression becomes. Lately it has become especially harsh, and what this tells us is that the government is probably quite close to losing control. The infrastructure is collapsing, the army deserting, and it is doubtful whether the country even has the ability to defend itself.

So looking at the region as a whole, what can we learn? What we see is that it is occupied by a diversity of peoples. Trying to impose one very rigid rule doesn't work, because immediately you get dissidence, which soon turns violent (our youth are voting with their lives - perishing in desert and ocean). The successes that have been gained have been gained by an ability to accommodate different ideas and to let the various peoples and groups keep and uphold the core values that they feel are essential to them.

### **Our vision for the future**

What do we want? We want to see a region where there are a number of governments which correspond closely enough to natural divisions and that allow enough freedom so that they have stability. We need them to accept each other enough so that there can be an end to the bitter wars and disputes. The developed nations have indicated that they are prepared to accept responsibility for being the leading cause of the climate change that is causing starvation in the third world. They have indicated that they are prepared to devote money and resources to the region. This will only happen if there are governments that are stable enough to support infrastructural development. Let's also get that clear. Rogue governments – no money. Responsible governments – money to restore damaged infrastructure.

### **How to create peace**

How can we achieve a lasting peace in the area. Before we get into specifics, there are two general points that we need to make about peace.

#### **Peace is a process**

Peace is a process, not a state. Peace is a process not a thing. We can't think of peace as a 'thing' that we can somehow grab or buy and then keep. Peace is dynamic. It is a balance. It is something that requires continual rebalancing. And please keep this word 'balance' constantly in mind. This is very important.

#### **Peace involves sharing and giving**

The second thing is that peace always involves sharing and giving. In this case, what we are talking about specifically is giving and sharing power. If you don't give and share power, you can't have peace. It will never happen.

Now let's talk more specifically about how we need to achieve peace?

## **Peace comes from some level of democracy.**

### **Trying to maintain a monoculture will fail**

Historically, there are two ways to make a peaceful state. One way is to make the state so powerful that it enforces one way of life throughout the state. Nowadays we can see that this just won't work. Firstly, modern states are too diverse. The types of monocultures that existed in history just don't exist any more. Secondly, technology has given power to individuals and small groups. I'm talking about bombs and guns. So in modern era, even a small group has the power to cause a lot of damage. This won't destabilise established democracies, but its enough to overturn a new state. In any case, a state with that level of repression can never be peaceful. It is violent towards its people.

### **We have to have a democracy**

To create peace, we need states that are democratic. In other words we need states that represent the people. If we look at history, we find that democracies don't make war on other democracies. So we have to have some level of democracy. It doesn't have to be of a western form.

### **There are two basic principles in a democracy**

#### **1. People must directly choose who will govern**

There are states that use a three-tier principle: villages elect village heads, then the village heads elect the parliament. There are a number of states that have tried this model, and it ends up being rejected, for example in Nepal. It just doesn't work. For a democratic state to work the representatives have to be responsible directly to the grass roots.

#### **2. In a democracy no entity must have the power to be able to rule by itself**

Democracy is a balance of power between pressure groups. This is something that is often not understood. The principle behind democracy was expressed most powerfully by Winston Churchill. Someone once said to him that the developed countries shared power with the people. Churchill said that on the contrary, the way democracies work is by sharing power between pressure groups. This is political pragmatism. If we talk about sharing power with all the people, it seems this is a type of idealism and in practice it doesn't really work. What does work is sharing power with the representatives that the people choose. You look at who actually has the power. Then you make sure when you create the government that it reflects the actual state of affairs as far as power goes. The developed states have maintained democracy is actually that no one group is powerful enough to run the state by itself. Power is split between the government and the administration and the judiciary and, in practice, also the media and other groups. Because nobody is able to govern by themselves, they are forced to co-operate to govern.

### **We need to empower and involve grass root people.**

First, in order to have peace, we have to involve all the people. We won't be able to build peace unless all the people have a stake in it, unless they all gain from it. If there are parties/individuals who are going to benefit more from war, it won't work.

What we have at the moment is a very good ground for peace, because everybody is sick of war. Sometimes when there are disputes, you have to wait until everyone sees that war won't work. When even the people in power, the people who are temporarily gaining the most, see that they are getting poorer and losing, then you have some grounds.

So starting from that point, you have to let everybody see that they are going to be included in the peace and are going to be beneficiaries of the peace. You have to let everyone see that they have a share of the power. Now there is something there which is quite hard to swallow. **The people who have power and who are abusing power have to be included in the peace.** That is something very hard to accept. We have to understand that if those people are not included, we won't be able to make things work; we won't be able to move on. I will get back to that later.

### **In a democracy you must have some level of media freedom**

In order to empower the people, you also have to have at least to some degree a free media. Repression and corruption operate in secrecy. In order to empower the people, the people have to know what is going on. The reason why you have free media in democracies is because without free media, you can't have a democracy at all. Of course you can also have a media that is too free, some people become very upset. So this is again part of the process of balance.

### **Culture of Peace**

In order to achieve peace, you have to have a process of working towards a culture of peace. You have to consciously plan for the culture of peace. What do I mean by culture of peace? The culture of peace is about accepting and respecting differences, all adults have the right to make their own decisions and control their own lives. We have to accept that people will choose to live their lives differently and that they have a right to do so.

Repressive governments work by creating division and by disempowering groups. They are authoritarian and believe that they have the right to make decisions for others. So we need to consciously work to change the war culture.

### **We need to work towards empowering women**

One of the principal ways that we can change this culture is by empowering women and giving them control of their lives. When women are empowered in this way, the whole culture becomes more democratic. There are three things that are essential to empowering women. The first is raising the marriage age. Women are disempowered if they are forced into marriage at an age before they have developed some independence. The second thing is raising the compulsory education age. In this way we ensure that women are more empowered because they are more educated. And the third and by far the most important way is by giving women the means to access birth control. This is by far the most

important factor. It is only when women can decide when they are to have children that they have freedom and control of their lives.

### **How can we change from No war/no peace situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea?**

Looking more closely at Eritrea and Ethiopia, it seems likely that what will happen will probably follow the same pattern as what happened historically between Cambodia and Vietnam. Vietnam only tolerated the continual aggression and border disputes with Cambodia for so long. When the Cambodian government had collapsed to the point where it couldn't defend itself, Vietnam invaded. So I may be wrong, and I am certainly not making any suggestions, but it does seem to me that the only reason Ethiopia has not invaded Eritrea is due to lack of resources and international pressure. As soon as Ethiopia feels strong enough, it will act to end the continual aggression from Eritrea. Either for that reason or because of an internal collapse or putsch, it seems to me that if we don't act soon, we have to prepare for the collapse of the current Eritrean government.

If Ethiopia does invade, what will happen then? I think again we have to look at the Cambodian/Vietnamese situation. The world would not let Vietnam incorporate Cambodia, even as a separate self-governing state in a dual-nation government with Vietnam. Vietnam would not withdraw until they were satisfied that Cambodia had some sort of stable government. I think we have to expect that the world will not let Ethiopia govern Eritrea – that point has already been decided in the past. But the Ethiopian government will want to keep a military presence in Eritrea until it is satisfied that a stable government exists which will no longer threaten Ethiopia. There may be other scenarios, but that seems to me the most likely at this point.

### **Where/how to start peace in an environment of mistrust and hate?**

When we arrive at a situation where we can actually create a new government within Eritrea, where and how are we to start? This is a situation in which there is a very great history of pain and harm and mistrust. We can say that the country is divided into many, many different groups, but in practice we are only really talking about two groups. On the one hand we have the majority, who have been disempowered and abused. On the other hand, we have the minority who have benefited, but that is also probably quite a large minority.

So the first thing that we need to acknowledge is that we can't possibly arrive at a workable situation if we have in mind vengeful motives. To tell you the truth - and this is a very hard thing to accept – you can't even arrive at a workable situation if you are going to insist on justice. If you are going to insist that the torturers and robbers face justice, then those people will do everything they can to undermine the government and to destroy the peace.

But, on the other hand, you can't have a workable situation if those who have been abused are cut off from justice. If they have no voice and no outcome, then, also it is not going to work.

How can we find a balance here? There are ways that have worked in Eritrean and Ethiopian customary laws (where our fore-fathers resolved many social issues) and in South Africa and other places, by establishing a reconciliation commission. If the people who have been abused can face their abusers and say "You abused me" "You mistreated me" and have that acknowledged, then it is possible to be able to move on. There does need to be some justice – have to be some trials. But in order to move on, we have

to limit this, otherwise frankly it won't work. So one of the things that we are going to have to decide here is how far to take that processes and what kind of reconciliation process we are going to put into place. Then we can start to build trust and peace again. We need to do that very deliberately and very consciously.

### **Leadership has key role in creating and maintaining peace**

Leaders chosen to represent the people, have a very important role to play. The leaders above all create the atmosphere of working together, respecting each other and creating harmony. In order to do this, we have to understand two things. The first thing is that we must compromise. There is no way that we will be able to create peace if we have immovable positions. We need to understand that the only way we can move forward is by accepting less than we want and by accepting that we won't get everything we want. We need to recognise that the first priority, the overwhelming priority is to get a stable government in which all the main parties have a voice and all the main parties can compete for power in a democratic way. **21<sup>st</sup> century leadership qualities are different from traditional leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.** In a hunter's society a hero is "Someone who kills a lion" i.e. in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century but in modern society or the 21<sup>st</sup> century a hero is someone who admits they have made a mistake, even lied; because it takes courage/humility to admit.

In order to become 21<sup>st</sup> century leader, in order to achieve the positions raised above, leaders have to develop consultative teams, have vision, be flexible, strong personalities and drive change. It is always something you find, when you come to share power, there are some people that it is essential to work with whom you really don't get well at all. Sometimes we are all being tested how far we can compromise! So we have to be prepared to try to be smaller and to let ourselves be modified by others. We are really the examples of what our society should be.

### **Leadership should pitch on common issues and benefits for all**

#### **Focus on what we have in common**

We all have so many things in common such as the desire to improve things for our people. What we all want to see is an Eritrea, Ethiopia and the region that are strong and where the people have peace and prosperity. We want our people to be proud of their identity and to be leaders of the world. We know that our people have a history that is five thousands years long and that for much of that time we have been leaders and innovators that showed the world a way. We know that our people are people of wonderful potential and skill. What we all want is to create an environment of peace for the people to use those skills, talents and wisdom.

#### **Look for points of agreement**

Then, we have to look specifically for points of agreement. There are going to be lots of disagreements between us. However, what I always find is that when I look at disagreements, what I find is that they are really agreements in disguise. The disagreements are really all about How much? For example let's talk about press freedom. I think we will all agree that an independent press is important. We all agree that there are some limits that need to be placed. But what limits and how much? So what we need to do as much as we can is to agree on the essential minimum, and then over that, we all need to have some

flexibility. So I implore you all, don't get bogged down in details. This is really a time when we need to keep the big picture in mind (our youth dying in desert and ocean fleeing human right abuses and starvation at home).

### **Two concrete things each of us need to do to make this conference work**

I hope you will let me point out these two very simple things. Perhaps you will forgive me if I admit that I am going to find this very hard myself!

#### **Accept the limit of time**

In order to reach agreement we need to be strict about time. All of us have the tendency to think that what we have to give is more important. But it's very important that we all get the chance to contribute. So we have to put a strict limit on how long we speak. That will make sure we stick to the most essential points.

At the same time, we have to accept a time limit on any given topic. We should know that we have to reach agreement and produce something workable in one hour or three hours or one day. Use that time pressure to make sure that we actually produce something concrete. Also let's trust and endorse the organisers to produce a collective vision or peace.

#### **Accept the directions of the chairperson**

And then it goes without saying that we should all accept the directions of the chairperson of any given session with grace. We need to accept that we have given one person the responsibility for keeping that session within limits and moving it along.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding, I want to say again that I think the present situation can't continue much longer. A change is coming, and I think probably quite soon. Whether those changes produce real benefit or whether it just results in more disruption and harm is really very much up to the leaders. What happens will depend on how well we can plan and how we can build unity amongst ourselves. This is the moment of decision. This is really where we can plan a new nation and make it work. Very soon the world's eyes will be on us. Let us be ready.

### **Acknowledgement**

Special thanks to the Peace forum organising team (Gaim, Dawit, Salam and Suleiman) for their commitment, dedication, and vision for peace in our region and the world. Also special thanks goes to the funding body.

Thank you for listening and your patience