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Washington, DC March to Stop Genocide and Dictatorship

By Gerald LeMelle, Executive Director of Africa Action

Almost 46 years ago to the date (August 28th 1963) 200,000 people tired of the being abused and brutalized, tired of living in fear for loved ones, tired of political inaction and nonsensical policy statements giving pretense to opposing the status quo while all along supporting it and tired of being lied to, marched on Washington to demand freedom and jobs for African Americans. The event set in motion a series of actions leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 1965— legislation that changed the United States forever.

On September 13th 2009, a different but extremely significant march will take place: *The March to Stop Genocide and Dictatorship in Ethiopia/Africa.*

Marches against dictatorship, and particularly dictators that are militarily supported by the United States, are not new. In fact, for the last six decades, it is often the fodder for much foreign policy activism and political protest here in the U.S., not to mention around the globe.

However, there are three major differences here that should be noted. First, this march is being organized within the African immigrant community. In fact, it is a group called the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia is spearheading the effort. This organization describes itself as a non-political and non-violent social justice movement that seeks to unite the many Ethiopian ethnic groups into a *solidarity movement* that stands together to call the current Ethiopian government to account for myriad allegations of human rights violations. If you look up the group on their website solidaritymovement.org you will see the second major difference: The Movement includes prominent representatives from various ethnic groups including each of the largest ones, the Oromo, Tigray and Ogaden among others, and is led by a renowned Anuak advocate.

Perhaps the easiest way for U.S. policy makers to downplay human rights abuses in Africa is to say that those raising attention to the abuses are Western human rights organizations and not African themselves. Furthermore, when African are involved, they tend to be aligned with a single ethnic opposition group and are simply dismissed as advocating the replacement of one form of tyranny and corruption with another. This reasoning, along with the oft repeated assertion by top policy officials that ‘Africans simply aren’t interested in democracy!’ serve the purpose of upholding the United States’ strong relations with some of the most brutal and non-democratic dictators in Africa. The Solidarity Movement may be serving notice that the African immigrant community is no longer going to accept idioms from the U.S. policymakers -while consciously seeking to avoid being divided and easily conquered.

One of the pillars of U.S. policy towards Africa as articulated by President Obama is promoting and strengthening democracy. As the President said in his first major address on Africa in Ghana, “This is about more than holding elections – it's also about what happens between them. ... No person wants to live in a society where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery. That is not democracy that is tyranny, and now is the time for it to end.” While all African human rights activists are in total agreement with this sentiment, it is extremely doubtful that an administration official will attend this particular rally. This is because President Obama is continuing the Bush administration's policy of supporting Ethiopia's and vehemently anti-democratic dictator Meles Zenawi. You can tell American audiences how our support for Zenawi serves US military interests while not squaring with our pro-democracy rhetoric, but no one can seriously articulate to Africans how Zenawi's reign has benefited more than a very small few.

This point highlights the third major difference between the typical rally and this one. The Solidarity Movement is attempting to reach out across the continent. Everyone knows that there is an enormous battle to decide Africa's future and more particularly, where its resources are going. In fact, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's trip to Africa in July was described in U.S. financial newspapers as ‘Russia's attempt to vie with China and the West for **control** of [Africa's] energy and resources.’ As we know from history, African people are not going to negotiate their way into protecting their future, rather their strength is in numbers—one billion people saying they have had enough.

As lopsided deals are made and more and more of Africa's most arable and resource rich land is dealt away to secure someone else's future, it is important for those who care about the future of Africa people attend this march and tell the world that we are tired of the being abused and brutalized, tired of living in fear for loved ones, tired of political inaction and nonsensical policy statements giving pretense to opposing the status quo while all along supporting it and tired of being lied to. Maybe this will be the catalyst for transformational change that Africa really needs.