

December 10, 1987

### **A Memo to the OLF leadership via Dr. Mohammed Hassen**

In this discussion, I will comment on the two points raised by Y. L. Wakeyo in his letter of August 20, 1986. These are: (i) how to organizationally link the unions and the front, and (ii) how to create some mechanisms whereby the “concerned militants” could directly contribute to “the formulations and implementations of the movement’s policies”. In addition, I would like to make some other related observations as a way of raising some issues of concern with respect to the Oromo national struggle.

- (1) How to increase the participation of unions abroad and concerned individuals;
- (2) How to organizationally link the unions and the front.

#### **My Initial reaction:**

Any interest and effort by the front to initiate more participation by Oromos would be a positive development and welcomed news. This issue was discussed in the summer of 1984 when Obbo Lencho and Obbo Jeylu Denboba visited North America. During that brief visit, I had lengthy discussions with the two representatives on the subject (more will be said of this later).

#### **The issues:**

**The nature of the Unions:** Before making any definite recommendations on how the unions can be linked to the front, I think some fundamental issues relative to these unions must be analyzed openly and objectively. One of the issues of concern to me is the *nature of these unions*. It is my observation these unions, (at least, the one in North America) are extremely contentious, poorly organized and administered, terribly deceived and control-oriented instead

of serving as facilitation avenues. I know these facts are well known to you and the leadership in the front. However, for the purpose of clarity, it is appropriate to cite at least three cases.

1. In 1981 the conflicts between various factions within UOSNA broke out wide in the open; at the surface, it had the tone of religious and regional rivalry.
2. Similar types of strife broke out between the Minnesota Chapter of UOSNA and ORANAC (Oromo Relief Association in North America) in 1983. The representatives from the field who attended the UOSNA congress that summer recommended the closure of ORANA and, subsequently as you may know, that organization ceased to exist.
3. About one a half years ago, another conflict broke out within the Washington Chapter of the Union of Oromos in North America (UONA), which was apparently more serious. As a result, another political organization was formed. This particular development has had far reaching negative consequences on our capacity to work on Oromo issues in North America and beyond.

Although, admittedly, I have never worked with the Union in Europe, my information confirms similar type of situations. Therefore, are there any presumed benefits to the Oromo's cause when there is such a strife within organizations; and (rightly or wrongly), when the majority of Oromos have the view that is these Unions which have contributed the tragic divisions amongst Oromos in exile (at least this is the feeling among the majority of Oromos in North America); how would this enhance the Oromo cause both at home and abroad?

When this issue came up in 1984 (as indicated earlier) I suggested the following models:

1. OLF should have representatives in North America, at least for six months, and reconcile different factions. It was my view that frequent visits and contacts by OLF representatives would ensure the quality and the integrity of the Union and its potential contributions toward the Oromo national struggle. I strongly warned them that internal strife could explode at any time and disrupt any meaningful function of the union.
2. We should establish an umbrella organization with different branches, including a branch for Oromo professionals and scholars. It was my view, such an organization should be governed by a **board** representing various branches and OLF should deal directly with that board. The background to this model was that at the time the OLF representatives were interested in increasing participation of Oromo professionals and scholars in the Oromo cause and the union of North America was the Union of Oromo students in North America. The third model, which I recommended was that the Oromo professionals and scholars form an organization parallel to the student organization (UOSNA) and OLF should assist in creating amicable relations between these organizations so that we could mobilize our resources to maximize our potential in supporting the Oromo struggle.

As you may know, a year later, a draft of the constitution for the union in North America arrived in the US. Initially the responses from those active Oromos were positive; it was generally thought that, maybe, if the union is governed by the constitution which originated from the field, it might bring in more fairness, order and stability. After a year, all that changed. More people started having reservations. Many felt that as long as these (perceived or real)

differences existed, whether between OLF leadership in the east (i.e. Jara and his group) and the west (i.e. those in the Sudan), the union should not be under any of these “factions”. Instead, the union should speak on behalf of the larger Oromo cause. This debate did not receive any proper leadership from neither the field nor by Oromo scholars. The discussions led to tremendous schisms and eventually led to a break up. Today we find several organizations (political and non-political).

**Recommendations:**

1. OLF should not limit its interests to the unions only.
2. Genuine effort must be made to reconcile various actions, both in Europe and in North America. OLF, as well as Oromo scholars and other Oromos who are outside the organizations should be involved in this process.
3. Simultaneously, effort must be made (I do not know the details) to reconcile the frictions between various factions in the field (particularly the Jara case should be solved). Without resolving these conflicts between the Oromos both at home and abroad, having unions under OLF would not do any appreciable good for OLF itself, much less uniting the Oromo people. With respect to how to create mechanisms so that “concerned militants” could have input in OLF policy formulations. Even so, I am not sure I understand what is meant by “*militants*”.

The following points, also, need some clarifications: (1) One could be *militant* in appearance only. Indeed, we have too many of those who are actually contributing to our psychological and

emotional crises. (2) There are a lot of thoughtful Oromos who may not be so vocal to fit the image of *militants* but who have the concerns of the Oromo nation and have useful ideas. (3) I think the support base has to be broadened. Currently, a lot of frustration is developing among Oromos, at least in North America.

#### **li. Some Other Issues Which the Letter Did Not Address**

In this section, I would like to take the liberty, if I may, and raise some other issues, which are of concern to the Oromo people in exile and, of course, to the larger Oromo society, which were not raised in the letter from the field.

##### **A The Jara Issue**

I have already referred to this issue in the previous pages, though indirectly. Now, I would like to address this issue directly. I have been very silent about this issue up until now, mainly due to the fact that I am not very familiar with the background which led to the crisis and the subsequent activities pursued by all the concerned parties. I never met Jara and I don't even know, whether such a person exists, but his image and shadows haunt the Oromos. As you may expect, I have heard all kinds of stories as to what he did or did not do; what happened to him etc. No matter what explanation may be given, the issue is increasingly dividing our people. Are there ways to reconcile and resolve this crisis? If those of us who are in exile told the true story (i.e. particularly the Oromo scholars), may be, we can propose something in the way of seeking to resolve the conflicts. If nothing else, that dispute should not be allowed to interfere with the humble efforts we are doing in exile for the Oromo cause.

## **B. The Role of Oromo Scholars and Oromo Professionals**

There has been a lot of talk about including this group in the Oromo national struggle. Yet, I have not seen concrete direction or guidelines from the field. The few who control the union in North America fear that the involvement of this group will diminish their own role (i.e. those who control the union) and visibility in the Oromo cause in North America. This I know from personal experience. Of course they do selectively court some Oromo scholars and professionals for their own political ends. As a matter of fact, the intrigues they play on some of the competent Oromo nationals are so ugly and appalling that many are asking, “Where do we go?” As long as OLF is glued to this group (i.e. those few who control the unions) we may lose this generation of Oromo scholars and professionals to indifference! In my view, this is where there is a need to broaden the definition of the Oromo cause and Oromo nationalism so as to open more ways so that this group (i.e. Oromo scholars and professionals) can make contributions to the Oromo cause. In my view, this is very *critical*. Stated differently, do we have to do the same thing? Do we have to lock ourselves up in some small apartment rooms and shout at each other “Order” and “Order”? This is the legacy of the Union in North America has earned our image and name.

## **C. The Plight of Oromo Refugees and Our Responsibilities**

It is estimated by some accounts that about half of the refugees in the Horn of Africa may be Oromos. Due to the factors known to all or most of us, namely, well sustained ruthless oppression and systematic deprivation – the Oromos, although occupying the richest land in the region, have become the least exposed to modernity, the least sophisticated and the least equipped for the crisis which faces them at this point in history and far beyond. Therefore, the

refugee issue is of deep concern to many Oromos in exile. To my knowledge, ORA does not have any programs for refugees and understandably so. In my view, we could organize a well recognized humanitarian organization which has legitimacy in the U.S and which can be run by Oromos in exile. I believe this will give us the necessary legitimacy. We can take stages with other North American based ethnic groups such as American Jews, Afghans, etc. and educate the world about Oromos. We can also mobilize resources to do something about the languishing refugees in refuge camps in neighboring countries. Our own humble efforts here in Washington, D. C. in the form of *The Oromo Committee on Immigration and Refugees (OCIR)*, which you had kindly endorsed, brought a lot of recognition for the Oromo cause. For example, we have been invited to serve as “expert witnesses” in courts in New York City, Washington D.C. and Minneapolis, Minnesota on immigration cases where Oromos have applied for political asylum and when cases have gone to U. S. Immigration courts. OCIR has been recognized by one hundred twenty different ethnic and humanitarian organizations in the U.S. We have been able to share stages with other important organizations. In my view, having such an organization should not be viewed as opposing to ORA or lack of support for OLF. In fact, I do not know why ORA has not been established in North America up to now. Why the Jews have so many organizations and still managed to work toward the same goal—protecting the interests of the Jewish people and the Jewish state, Israel.

#### **D. Oromo Communities**

As you know, during the last two years, a number of Oromo community-linked organization, have emerged. The prominent ones are the Oromo Community of Minnesota, Oromo Relief Organization in California, and Oromo community in Ontario. I have had the privilege of visiting

Minneapolis and California last spring in conjunction with some of their activities, where the communities in these two locations have initiated, directly or indirectly, some constructive activities relative to Oromo studies. In both cases, the nature of the organizations (that they have organized as humanitarian) gave them the ability to take the stage with other important local organizations. In effect, these approaches opened new avenues and helped to build new legitimacy. I did not see why any of these organizations should be seen as being against the Oromo national struggle or OLF, per se. It is true there were some individuals, who had some concerns. It is also possible, that some Oromo individuals, who have some grievances (rightly or wrongly) against the union in North America and indeed against OLF, may want to use these organizations as stages.

It is my view, that if such tendencies exist, we should see and treat them as the symptoms rather than the causes (i.e. these Oromo communities are not the cause). Therefore, it is my view that it would amount to a major mistake by all of us, including Oromos in the people in the field, if we fail to recognize the values of these organizations and not cashing in on the benefits they bring to our cause. In my judgment, if the people in the field select to work with the Union only and ignore these other organizations, this will, no doubt, will contribute to more divisions among Oromos in exile. It must be remembered, that at this point in time, there is more membership in these communities than in the Union (i.e. North America). Finally, shouldn't those Oromos in exile examine the local environment and establish organizations which fit the local patterns, ethos and according to the law of the land in which they found refuge?



### **E. Rivalry and Regionalism**

It is my experience and observation that rivalry is a major poison amongst Oromos in exile. I must say that this psychological phenomenon is limited to a few vocal individuals who want to control and dominate the humble constructive activities, which can be done in North America in support of the Oromo cause. Such individuals usually have limited education, limited ability and usually hate Oromo intellectuals, scholars and professionals; the only time they approach Oromo professionals is when they think they could use them for their own empty ego. If necessary, they turn to regionalism and any other evil tool to stand in the way of progress; as a result, many able Oromos feel or become intimidated. In my view, this problem has stifled the creativity and has caused many to avoid deep involvement in our work. I will give you two examples: (1) Our radio programs in Washington D.C. were killed due to this problem. (2) *Waldhansso* still remains awfully poor and parochial and almost useless piece of literature to the Oromo cause. I would like to state very clearly that I am not opposed to the participation of the least educated Oromos in our work. I believe there is room for every stripe of Oromo to contribute towards the Oromo national struggle; but when our efforts are controlled and stagnated at the lowest level of our potential, then there are problems. Why, I am discussing all of these negative points; I believe, it is about time we evaluate our efforts and methods, we are employing in working for our cause, impediments, some possible new avenues, and potentials.

Yours truly,

Hamdesa Tusso