

## **OPEN LETTER**

To: President Girma Wolde Giorgis  
President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia  
Addis Ababa  
March 23, 2010

Mr. President:

Please accept my greetings and good wishes.

I write to you today because of a strong urge I have, to scream loudly on top of some mountain-- calling out for justice. Had God, and my conscience not compelled me so forcefully, I would not bother you.

It has been over a year since Ms. Birtukan Mideksa was abducted ON A HIGHWAY. I will not get into the merit or demerit of the charge against her. My focus is on the moral issue; and on the spirit of justice. Birtukan is but one human being; as such, she has basic rights. She is a young person; as such, she represents the majority of Ethiopians and therefore the hope of the majority. She is a woman; as such, she represents the future and the hope of Ethiopian women---that's at least half the population. She is a lawyer; as such, with her few legally trained colleagues, she represents the idea of the rule of law. She is the leader of a political party; and as such, she represents the handful of leaders who carry the burden of peaceful political combat.

This young lady has been the messenger of love and peace for this poor country, and the emblem of our diversity and our unity. She is a person who intellectually and morally chose the high road to stand steadfastly for the rule of law, which could be the source of our strength and our prosperity. In spite of all this, I have witnessed what she had to endure at the time of her abduction. Not only was I there with her; I even sustained a blunt injury to my bladder with a rifle butt. Even after her arrest, she has been treated as if she were a threat to her country and her people, more harshly than other prisoners, and denied visits other than from her mother and daughter. She has spent the last 14 months without access to a radio, or books. Although the court has ruled that she is entitled to visitors just like any other prisoner, it

has been impossible for her to receive them. Ms Birtukan has high regard for and great confidence in the law. When the law is applied differently to different persons, it is eventually reduced to nothingness ultimately losing the public's confidence, and increasing suffering and moral torment. What crime has Birtukan committed that she is subjected to this kind of punishment? Others whom we know have betrayed their country have not been subjected to this kind of punishment. So, where does this level of ruthlessness come from today? And how is it useful to our nation?

On March 21, 2010, when her mother, Mrs. Almaz Gebre Egziabiher went to visit her, Ms. Birtukan began to tell her mother that she was ill, the prison guard who overheard it was angry at her and forced her to go back to her room and expelled the mother and the daughter from the prison grounds, interrupting their visit. Although this behavior will create all sorts of suspicion, I personally believe that discussing illness with a mother should never be viewed as disclosing a terribly sensitive secret and cause the wrath of authorities, cutting short a prisoner's visit. If Birtukan is unwell, finding a way to get her the help she needs can only eliminate possible suspicion. I also believe that this is the legal and humane thing to do.

When Birtukan, her mother and her daughter are all weeping upon such abrupt forced separation from each other, would their tears not parch the earth? When, just because a daughter shared her ailment with her mother, Birtukan's mother, Birtukan, and her daughter ---three generations are crying in agony, would God not be watching? Would the world not be watching? Where do the grief and the tears of three generations place us in the eyes of humanity, in the eyes of the law, morality, and in the eyes of history? Where will this get us?

We should look at this matter in two ways -- considering our country's name and history jointly and separately with each of our names and stories-- in order. We may be able to arrive at a correct and reasonable decision by reflecting separately on the consequences on our country's name and history and those of our own. I plead with you in the name of God to help us find that path and find the way for Ms. Birtukan to get the help she needs.

Respectfully yours,

Mesfin Wolde-Mariam