

ADDRESS

BY

**H.E ATO SEYOUM MESFIN, FOREIGN MINISTER OF THE
FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA**

OPENING

**THE 17TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF ETHIOPIAN
STUDIES**

NOVEMBER 2, 2009

ADDIS ABABA

Dear Chairperson,

Distinguished Participants,

Honoured Guests, Academics, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here today on behalf of the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, and on my own behalf, to this the 17th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. I am honoured to be here at the celebration of your Golden Jubilee and to be associated with your half century – in itself a tribute to the long history of the Ethiopian state and to Ethiopian studies as a discipline. Virtually no other country in Africa, and few elsewhere, can offer such a perspective – or such an opportunity. It is indeed a source of great satisfaction and honour for our country and its people.

The first of these conferences was held in Rome in 1959 and it was largely a meeting of foreign scholars with, I believe, perhaps only one person going from Ethiopia itself. Many of those there were Italians whose interest in Ethiopia was still over-informed by the then recent history of relations between Ethiopia and Italy. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since; and Ethiopians and Italians have become the best of friends. Nations benefit from friendship, not from enmity. Ethiopia first hosted the third conference in 1966, and subsequently the eighth, eleventh and fourteenth meetings. Those attending have seen major changes, political, economic and social.

Some, but perhaps not all, has been reflected in the papers over this half-century. Governments and ideologies have come and gone. The Ethiopian Empire reached its apogee perhaps in the early 60's only to disappear a dozen years later. A military dictatorship of appalling violence has been and gone. Now we have something very different: a democratic constitution and a federal government founded on universal democratic values and norms. The basis for the New Ethiopia. No doubt, the foundations for making this ancient nation viable in the 21st century, and beyond, are being laid, and are being consolidated. This is pretty much known and suspected by those with little

goodwill towards Ethiopia; it has, however, taken too long for many friends of our country to notice the full meaning of the changes in Ethiopia.

This is what I want to talk about today, though briefly. Opportunities such as this must not be missed among friends for saying things from the heart.

I want to go back to eighteen years ago during the last days of the Military Government and to the subsequent transition. No doubt, many friends of Ethiopia, including those closely associated with Ethiopian studies, were concerned about the fate of the country. Given the magnitude of the challenge faced by the country no friend of Ethiopia could really have been free of such sentiments of apprehension and anxiety. This applied almost to everybody. The EPRDF leadership could not have been an exception. However, while the future was full of uncertainties, therefore the apprehension, at least on one thing reasonable people with goodwill and clarity of mind unclouded by prejudice could not disagree: there was no possibility for Ethiopia to proceed in the old ways in a variety of areas, but most particularly in terms relations between the centre and the regions and in terms of the inalienable rights and privileges of the nations, nationalities and peoples of the country.

I would like to report to you, friends of this great country --- eighteen years after that difficult period of full of uncertainties --- that Ethiopia has never, in its modern history, been as ready as it is today to defend its legitimate interest, to be a reliable and beneficial ally to its partners and to those who wish it well, and to take advantage of opportunities and withstand unfriendly acts.

I would like to underline this, but with humility. This is so because we are still not out of the woods concerning those matters that, at the end of the day, really count. Poverty still makes us vulnerable; so does the fact that our democratization is not yet deep enough, or sufficiently strong. It is indeed unrealistic to proclaim certainty in one's security amidst unimaginable poverty which engenders hopelessness about the future and undermines the moral fiber of even the strongest. In parenthesis, I should indicate that this explains the tragedy of Somalia and the Horn of Africa and why we suffer from the onslaught of extremism in our region.

We are also vulnerable because of our weaknesses in the area of democratic governance. We are absolutely convinced that Ethiopia—this ancient country --- will never be fully viable and secure without ensuring high quality democratic governance with the full ownership and participation of its people, based on full and genuine commitment to both individual and group rights, values and principles that are fully embraced by our Constitution.

Dear Chairperson,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

But what I said in the foregoing --- both about the economic difficulties we face and the fledging nature of our democracy and their implications --- is just part of the story. The narrative will not be complete unless we also refer to the progress we have made in both areas over the last eighteen years. Though not out of the woods yet, the new Ethiopia has already managed to be on a fundamentally different trajectory from the one that had led the country eighteen years ago to the age of the precipice.

In economic terms, the rapid economic growth that we have managed to register over the last six years is unprecedented in the entire modern history of the country. There is no reason why this trend cannot continue. The Infractural transformation of the country --- not just in urban areas --- is open to factual_verification. Though we don't claim to have achieved food security – a daunting task further complicated by the worsening climate change --- our agricultural sector is amidst huge transformation. In both the health and education sectors, the progress made has been significant. On both sectors Ethiopia is reasonably optimistic to achieve the MDGs by 2015, if not before. Taking just the education sector for illustrative purposes, in less than two decades, primary school enrollment was raised from less than 20% to a national average of above 90%. The enrollment of girls at the primary level has reached almost 50%. We have also raised the number of public universities from three to twenty one which will have the capacity of admitting by next year close to 120,000 students annually. Seventeen of these institutions graduated students last year. Another ten public universities are going to be

established shortly. In addition, several private universities and colleges have been established during the last 18 years. Their contribution is indeed significant. We are launching a nationwide electronic library system which will link all existing 21 universities to a database made up of all available books and other reference records and material from government universities. But of course, it is not just the number of universities that counts; quality matters. We have to do more in this area. This is where the engagement of many friends of Ethiopia would be critical; and I know some of you already are.

The achievements in the creation, expansion and deepening of the democratic space in Ethiopia over the last eighteen years is equally historic; and this will be part of the bedrock on which the viability of Ethiopia in the 21st century and beyond, rests.

We would have made even far greater stride toward the further strengthening of our democracy, if we could have avoided the post-election political setback we faced during the 2005 election. This is an issue which still awaits fair and objective academic treatment. But all the same, lessons have been drawn on the part of all concerned except by those for whom politics has no premium than self-aggrandizement. No better example can be adduced for this than the historic events that we witnessed a few days ago when the four political parties, the ruling and three in opposition, signed the agreements On Election Code of Conduct for political parties and the Implementation Mechanism for the Code of Conduct. There is no doubt that this event is perhaps one important indication of the beginning of the development in our country of those critical traits --- tolerance, mutual respect, adherence to principles of give-and-take and to the rule of law – which form the foundation for democratic political culture.

This is a process which Ethiopia cannot afford and which, given Ethiopia's position in the Horn of Africa and, in fact, in Africa in general, our region and the continent cannot afford, to be reversed. As for our country, to reiterate, its viability cannot be delinked from the necessity of its continuing democratization.

This is our vision. It is a vision that we have had over the last eighteen years.

The success of Ethiopia's development and its democratization hinges on what its people do and the steadfastness with which they handle these pursuits. But the support of

friends is critical, and, in fact, given the challenges of the Horn of Africa, indispensable. Our region is not at present exactly conducive for enhancing the legitimacy of democratic governance and rapid economic development. Somalia has continued, with the support of spoilers such as Eritrea, to be a space in which extremism thrives. No doubt, behind Eritrea, there are entities--- including states --- whose authorities move easily in civilized circles, engaged in aiding and abetting extremism in Somalia and in our region. These are issues which affect the future of our region and Ethiopia, and which students of Ethiopia cannot and should not ignore. It is an area left, more often than not, to those with little sympathy for the peoples of the region or are downright sources of liability for their various professions. It is indeed sad to observe that anything can be reported about Africa, and in particular about the Horn, including the most outrageous, without fear of loss of credibility. In fact, doing so might lead to an award for great achievement. Tragic but true.

Perhaps, the entry point for all this is for us to know each other better; scholars and academics, on one hand, and practitioners, on the other, each devoted to his/her vocation, but working together, in good faith, to ensure that this great country will continue to thrive, not only in the interest of its own people, but also in those of the people of the region and the entire Africa.

Dear Chairperson,

Dear participants, and Invited Guests,

I wish you a successful conference, and to those who have come from abroad, a happy brief stay in Addis Ababa.

I thank you