

Ambassador Samuel Assefa
Address to Houston International Festival
(Delivered by an Embassy of Ethiopia Representative)

April 18, 2008

It is a pleasure to be with you here at the Houston International Festival. As you all know, the theme for this year's event is "Out of Africa." As Ethiopia's representative to the United States, I find this to be a particularly fitting topic to address. After all, it is simply impossible to discuss Africa's history and its impact on global culture without speaking about Ethiopia.

On so many levels, the world has and will continue to benefit from the many wonderful and fascinating gifts that continue to emerge "Out of Ethiopia."

Ethiopia truly is the origin for us all—the birthplace of mankind. Discovered in 1974 near Hadar was the 3.2 million year old skeleton of Lucy—one of humanity's oldest ancestors. Many of you here today may have already seen our national treasure first-hand—she is currently Houston's oldest visiting tourist. Due in large part to the efforts of State Senator Rodney Ellis, Lucy has been on display at The Houston Museum of Natural Science since last year.

From the prehistoric past through the 21st century, Ethiopia's story has been one that inspires. The unbroken continuity of Ethiopia as a state dates back to the reign of Emperor Menelik in 1,000 B.C. Ethiopia is the only African nation that was never colonized.

Ethiopia is an amazing land of tolerance that sets an example for other African nations as well as the rest of the world. For centuries, Ethiopia has been home to members of the world's three Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Our country boasts a rich and celebrated history of members of the three great faiths living together in mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

In terms of geography, we are uniquely positioned—sitting at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East and Europe. We are a young, federal parliamentary democracy. The current government, which is led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, has made the economy a central focus—and has worked to put in place the critical infrastructure and economic development incentives to take the country forward.

Today, Ethiopia has begun opening a new chapter in our proud history—and the world is increasingly coming to see that Ethiopia is both a nation steeped in history and tradition and a pioneering economic dynamo leading by example and setting a new standard for Africa.

Ethiopia is blessed with a favorable climate, vast land, and water and labor resources, which combine to make it an incredible hub for investment.

Ethiopia has demonstrated remarkable economic development as evidence by an average double-digit percent annual growth rate since 2003. This rate is among the fastest in the world, is double the African average and is projected to continue for at least two more decades. Recently, the International Monetary Fund ranked Ethiopia as one of the top 10 sub-Saharan nations in terms of economic growth and in the top 10 of those attracting foreign investment. Ethiopia's economic surge has been mostly export-led.

The current and future strength of Ethiopia's economy is due to its robust position across a variety of sectors. When it comes to agriculture and agroprocessing, mining, floriculture, tourism, leather and textiles—Ethiopia already possesses the critical infrastructure needed to succeed. Yet each of these arenas also provides plenty of room for growth, and solid business opportunities for foreign investors.

One example that I will point to in order to illustrate how far Ethiopia has come and how far it is going is the case of our coffee industry, which is on the brink of a major economic breakthrough. Ethiopia is the birthplace of coffee—the name comes from Kaffa—one of many parts of Ethiopia where coffee is grown.

While Ethiopia is already Africa's largest producer of coffee and its beans are renowned for producing some of the world's best brews, Ethiopia today represents just 3 percent of the global coffee market. Sadly, the Ethiopian farmers who cultivate and protect our country's "black gold" have until now failed to reap the financial benefits—living a life of poverty despite the lucrative harvest they produce each year.

We have embarked on a path to correct that unfair situation and ensure that our farmers receive a larger slice of the multi-billion dollar global coffee market. In partnership with local and international organizations who shared our concerns, the government has launched the Ethiopian Trademarking and Licensing Initiative to acquire trademark protection for our country's premium coffee brands: Yirgacheffe, Harar and Sidamo.

By securing trademarks in 30 countries and signing licensing agreements with more than 70 companies, we have been able to build a network of partners committed to protecting Ethiopia's coffee brands and helping our farmers garner a higher price for their beans.

The world's largest and most prominent coffee organization, the Specialty Coffee Association of America, has recognized these efforts and granted Ethiopia the opportunity to become the Portrait Country at the SCAA conference next month in Minneapolis. We have come a long way, but I assure you that Ethiopia is on the brink of taking its coffee industry to a whole new level. Juan Valdez—beware!

Before I conclude, let me leave you with 10 reasons to invest in Ethiopia.

Number 10—Good Infrastructure Standards

Ethiopia already has good transportation, telecommunications and power infrastructure standards that continue to improve.

Number 9—Trainable Labor

Ethiopia's 75 million people—the second highest population in sub-Saharan Africa—comprise a motivated, highly trainable and inexpensive labor force

Number 8—Strong Natural Resource Base

Ethiopia's climate, soil and massive livestock resources combine to create ideal conditions for agriculture and agro-processing.

Number 7—Strong Market With Excellent Market Access

Ethiopia is uniquely positioned astride Africa, the Middle East and Europe and enjoys duty- and quota-free access to the U.S. and E.U. markets.

Number 6—Investment Opportunities

Remarkable investment opportunities exist across a variety of sectors.

Number 5—Conducive Tax Environment

The Ethiopian government has established low tax percentage levels structured to make doing business in Ethiopia attractive.

Number 4—Significant Tax Incentives

From 100 percent customs duty exemptions to no export tax to tax “holidays” ranging from 2 to 8 years, Ethiopia is willing to work with investors, and offers a menu of economic incentives.

Number 3—Security of Investment

Government guarantees and constitutional protection from expropriation, Ethiopia’s membership in international investment-related institutions, and its highly responsive Foreign Investment Agency ensure secure and smooth business.

Number 2—Liberalized Economy

All major sectors of the economy are liberalized for investment and marketing and 100-percent foreign ownership of investment is permitted.

Number 1—Stable Economic Environment

The safe and secure living and work environment, steady double-digit economic growth, low inflation rate, absence of corruption and stable, democratic government combine to make Ethiopia an incredible investment opportunity for foreign investors.

When I began my remarks today I reflected briefly upon the incredible history of Ethiopia—the nation that I am so honored and privileged to represent here in the United States.

Yet I believe—In fact, I know—that the finest days for Ethiopia lie not in our glorious past, but in the promise of our future.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. I look forward to continuing to enjoy this wonderful festival and celebrating all the wonderful things coming “out of Ethiopia” and “out of Africa.”