

**Remarks by Ambassador Samuel Assefa at the Congressional Screening of  
*A Walk to Beautiful***

April 29, 2008

Good evening. I would like to start by recognizing the Congressional Host Committee for this event: Senators Reid, Dole and Inhofe and Representatives Capps, Honda, Maloney, McCollum, Walberg and Wolf. *(I also am so pleased to see Senator Feinstein here this evening...)*

Thank you to the generous sponsors who made *A Walk to Beautiful* and today's screening possible.

Obstetric fistula. Even the name sounds frightening and harsh. It's something that is not easy to talk about. It is a condition about which people are either uninformed, or would prefer to treat as if it did not exist. We saw that clearly in the film.

But obstetric fistula does exist, and we cannot turn our backs to it. Now, more than ever, we know that the world will not. Not with this film making its way around the world—out of the humble villages of my beautiful homeland to the hallowed halls of government here in the most powerful nation on Earth.

In Ethiopia, we are not willing to ignore fistula—or the harmful practices that result in this terrible condition. My government has put the plight of women high on the social agenda in order to do something about the abduction and raping of women, the impregnating of girls whose young bodies are not developed enough to bear the strain of childbirth, the savage practice of female genital mutilation. We must confront these awful realities and eradicate these practices on a medical, political and moral level.

Fistula also forces us to look at the wider problem of gender-specific suffering and inequality and to explore their root causes. At its core, the mistreatment of women is the unfortunate result of misguided and outdated cultural traditions and the poverty and powerlessness in which many women find themselves today. It is not enough for us to empower women—they must empower themselves, and the key to doing so is education. That is why Ethiopia is working so hard to increase the number of schools and to improve access to them for our girls. We have an economic, social and ethical responsibility to ensure that Ethiopia's women are treated fairly and enjoy equal opportunities to learn and to lead fulfilling lives.

Despite the grim nature of fistula—and the fact that two million women throughout the world continue to suffer from this condition—*A Walk to Beautiful* is not a movie cloaked in sadness. That is because *A Walk to Beautiful* is more than simply a film about wounded women, shame and silence. It is a film about hope, promise, searching and ultimately redemption—the story of Ethiopia's Fistula Hospitals.

Every single day, the selfless and talented doctors who work at these critically important institutions dedicate themselves to Ethiopian women in need of their talents. These hospitals give the gifts of hope, healing and renewed life to so many.

The work they do would not be possible were it not for the Fistula Foundation here in the United States, which provides selfless dedication and ongoing support.

We highly value our partnership with the United States. It is important for Ethiopia to have deeply committed friends like Senator Inhofe and his colleagues in Congress, many of whom are here tonight.

Ethiopia is the cradle of civilization—and a land of great diversity. We treasure our customs, our celebrated history of religious tolerance and personal freedom. We rejoice in the achievements of our athletes—men and women alike—who stand alone atop the pinnacle of the running world. We share our gifts—our world-famous coffee, our legendary hospitality—and we strive to make our nation into the kind of place that is embodied by the Fistula Hospitals—places of understanding, support and love.

Ethiopia is working hard to improve the health of our citizens—and we are succeeding. We have reduced the child mortality rate in our country by over 40 percent over the past 15 years.

Through the widespread use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets and state-of-the-art drugs, we have cut the number of deaths caused by malaria by 55 percent and have reduced by 60 percent the number of our children who need to be hospitalized for malaria treatment.

Ethiopia recently distributed its 10 millionth dose of trachoma prevention medication, and we are working aggressively to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS. The government has embarked on an ambitious plan to provide by 2010 free retroviral drugs to everyone suffering from HIV and AIDS who needs them.

We are also educating a new generation of highly skilled nurse practitioners. Every day, these nurses are providing critical services in places where people before had to wait for help from a doctor. We have done so much, but we will continue to do more in order to create a healthier, brighter future for all our people.

As Ethiopia's representative to this country, I thank you all for being here today. And once again, I would like to extend my most heartfelt appreciation to everyone—there are too many of you to name—for sharing *A Walk to Beautiful* with the world. Most importantly, I want to thank you for telling the stories of our daughters with compassion, honesty, tenderness and with the sacred dignity that they each deserve.