



Outcome: Building Democracy in Eritrea, Virtual conference 2020
Monday 29th June – Saturday 4th July

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Introduction

This report contains notes from the virtual conference held between 24 June and 4 July, 2020. Organised by Eritrea Focus, the conference replaced the physical conference that was originally planned for April 2020, but unfortunately had to be cancelled because of Covid-19. The conference was a sequel to the April 2019 conference on Building Democracy in Eritrea. At the end of that conference, it was decided that critical areas pertinent to the transition be explored. As a result, teams covering six themes or research strands were established (see summary section below). The main aim of the 2020 conference was for the different teams to share their findings and to bringing together Eritreans and some friends of Eritrea to discuss the presentations and exchange views on other pertinent issues.

Despite some concerns expressed by some members of the organising team, especially regarding hosting members of the Eritrean diaspora with diverse views, the conference went ahead without any major difficulty. It surpassed the 2019 conference, in as much as it attracted a wider international audience. Overall, participation in terms of religion, ethnicity, age, gender and political affiliation was much better than the first conference.

The debate and discussion were engaging, serious and invariably polite. There was a sense in which the Eritrean community is beginning to gain an assurance and confidence that it has lacked for many years. People across the various ethnic and religious groups are working together in a way that was inconceivable a few years back. The political differences among those seeking a democratic transformation are being put aside, even if they have not always been resolved. There is a yearning for progress among all sections of our community – particularly among the young.

This report is an extract from the notes taken during each of the six sessions. It is a summary of the key points raised rather than a complete record of the discussions. The conference lasting c. 23 hours in total was recorded in its entirety and broadcast on Assenna Television (ATV) and is available on Assenna YouTube.

Executive summary

The six-day virtual conference brought together around 300 delegates from the UK, USA, Africa, Europe, Israel, and Australia and further afield. A series of questions were debated which will be critical when Eritrea moves beyond the dictatorship in which it is currently trapped. Those that addressed the conference ranged from current and former professors, community and political party leaders and judges to human-rights activists. The majority were Eritreans, but they were joined by speakers from the USA, Norway, Israel, Ghana and the UK.

The topics covered were:

1. The rule of law and administration of justice;
2. The national economy in an integrating region;
3. Foreign policy and the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia;
4. Lessons from other countries' transitions from dictatorship to rule of law;
5. Engaging with international democracies; and
6. Eritrean diaspora working together, including religious groups, youth and women.

One of the main criticisms against the 2019 conference had been insufficient representation of Eritrea's diverse ethnic and religious groups and all its religions and those with different political views. Most of these shortcomings were addressed in the 2020 conference. However, the challenge of women and youth representation has not been addressed satisfactorily, and we are working very hard to understand and address these particular constraints.

The conference was widely covered in the Eritrean media, both online and on television, and the BBC Tigrinya Service.

Post-conference activities include continuation of engagement with human rights organisations working on Eritrea and have established a team that meets monthly online. We have also begun a series of in-depth lectures on critical topics on Assena Television and online. The first, on the making of the Eritrean Constitution by Dr Bereket Habte Selassie, former chair of the Constitution Commission, reached an online audience of over 89,000, with tens and of thousands of others watching the lecture and Q & A live on television. It will be followed by others. We are also commissioning a series of films aimed at promoting public awareness, especially that of young Eritreans in which basic issues of democracy will be explored. At the same time, we are engaging with Eritrean opposition movements, even though we remain an unaffiliated and independent organisation.

Opening remarks by Habte Hagos (Eritrea Focus Chairman)

We meet at a critical moment. The needs of our nation have seldom been more urgent. As we are all aware, the conditions our people live in are truly intolerable.

- The inhuman treatment of those rotting in prisons;
- our young people trapped in the slave-like conditions of indefinite 'national service';
- our women subjected to the whims and abuse of officers;
- our religious groups persecuted, infiltrated and controlled;
- our diaspora spied upon and manipulated, abused and divided.

Even ordinary families, scraping a living on the land, know the pain of shortages and deprivation.

I will not dwell on these facts – they are what draw us together today and motivate our actions.

We know that the regime, which was trapped in isolation, has freed itself from these constraints. The reasons are not hard to find: they have nothing to do with improvements in its record. The chronic conditions under which people exist forced many tens of thousands to flee to sanctuary in Sudan and Ethiopia. From there they often made the terrible journey across the Sahara and then across the sea before arriving on Europe's often unwelcoming shores – if they were lucky. Many paid with their lives.

Their arrival was, in some months, the largest influx of refugees. European leaders, faced with millions fleeing the Syrian civil war, panicked. The strategy they adopted led to them to reach out to African states to try and halt the refugees at almost any cost. It mattered little

how dictatorial the regime was. And so, the new 'engagement' strategy with Eritrea was born.

At about the same time, the Yemeni civil war exploded across the Red Sea. The Saudis and the UAE, determined to halt the Houthi allies – Iran – looked abroad for support. Eritrea was an obvious potential partner. Once Isaias ditched his Iranian allies the way was clear for Saudi and UAE bases in Assab, and for flows of finance into the corrupt coffers of the regime in Asmara.

These two events set the scene for the Eritrean government's re-emergence on the world stage.

Look at the consequences:

- Limited military sanctions were dropped by the UN Security Council;
- Eritrea emerged as a respected partner, engaging with EU leaders as equal, with the Khartoum process, designed to reduce migration flows; and
- Ultimately, the way was cleared for the re-engagement with Addis Ababa, via Prime Minister Abiy's acceptance of the border agreement and the ending of the no-war, no-peace stalemate with Eritrea.

None of this required anything from Isaias. There has not been a hint of reform from the regime, which is smug in the belief that it is powerful, invulnerable and – above all – always right. The suffering of the people of Eritrea are simply an irrelevance to the political and military elite surrounding the president.

But this is only one side of the balance sheet.

The opposition to this tyranny has not been inactive. As we meet today, we know we have laid the foundations upon which a new Eritrea can be built. This Eritrea will be very different from what we see before us today. It will be founded on the vision of the martyrs, who laid down their lives for a free and democratic nation; for a people enjoying the freedoms enshrined in the UN Charter and in which human rights are respected.

That vision is closer than it has been for a generation. Today we see:

- A growing unity in the opposition, with parties in discussion and the Yiakl movement showing how young people can forge a new future;
- Divisions of religion and ethnicity are being acknowledged, but respected and our different traditions cherished;
- Links established with forces inside Eritrea, with those who share our belief in a free and democratic people; and
- New ties with friends and allies in the activist community in the United States, Canada, Israel, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the Scandinavian countries who are keen to assist in this fight for justice for our people.

Let me point to just two examples of the latter.

Firstly, the cases that are now being mounted in the Netherlands and Britain to challenge the legality of the shameful road building projects that the EU acknowledges employs national service men and women in slave-like conditions.

Secondly, a new and imaginative campaign which is being launched by Freedom United, a movement that fights modern slavery and human trafficking, reaching some 200 million people in 195 countries. The campaign will call for the divestment from all projects in Eritrea that employs forced labour in any form. We are delighted to be allied with and partnering both these initiatives.

As you know, this is the second conference in a series of three.

Our first conference, held in London in April 2019, asked what the key issues were that a free and democratic government would have to face, once the current regime comes to an end.

This conference begins to lay out an answer: with expert groups having drafted papers encompassing issues from how we can work together, to the changes needed to reconstruct our economy. I would stress that the papers are – at this stage – the property of their authors. Eritrea Focus thanks them for their hard work and welcomes their contributions. The papers are still in draft form and work in progress.

That work will take place in the week ahead of us. During the workshops and lectures the papers will be presented, discussed, criticised and debated. We call on everyone to engage in a frank, open and comradely debate in a friendly and collaborative atmosphere.

Once this week is over, the many points that have been raised will be taken away and considered. Further work will take place before the third conference – hopefully not a virtual one – when the final blueprint will be presented for the Eritrean nation to consider.

In the meantime, we will continue to work, to lobby and to find ways of fighting the Eritrean regime. Our aims are simple: a free and democratic Eritrea and we will settle for nothing less. Our people deserve it; our martyrs fought for it. Now it is up to us to deliver it. But of one thing we are confident: the tide of history is moving in our direction and while the forces of opposition grow more confident and more united, the regime is more fragile and more vulnerable by the day.

As Dr Martin Luther King put it so eloquently: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Rule of Law and Administration of Justice

(Day One, 29 June)

Habte Hagos welcomed the participants and opens the conference, with his opening statement. He handed over to **Michael Gebrhewit** (Eritrean Law Society) to chair the session. Michael introduced the two speakers, **Dr Daniel Mekonnen** (Eritrean Law Society, a former Judge and now with Leiden University) and another former Judge, **Justice Habteab Yemane** and former lecturer in Asmara.

Daniel Mekonnen said these issues are of paramount importance, which build on the last conference. We developed a briefing paper which contains the details of our proposals. Today we look at issues of national concern, which need to be taken up after transition. First, we need to have a concept of the rule of law. There are some tasks we need to do now. The key one is consensus building by democratic forces, to reach a common ground. Minority rights, language rights and a unitary or federal state need to be considered. Daniel defined a working definition of the rule of law, which essentially holds all private and public entities (including the state) to be accountable to laws which are public and abide by international principles of human rights. The supremacy of the rule of law, separation of powers, the avoidance of arbitrariness and transparency are vital.

These have been abrogated by practice that does not respect laws and regulations that have been brought in since 1991. There is a lack of political will to accept that everyone and every institution is subordinate to the rule of law. To establish this will require ending the dictatorship of the ruling party, the PFDJ. To do this will require a united front of all democratic forces. Yiaki is part of this, but civil society, grassroots groups and parties need to participate in these developments. If we take an optimistic approach we can hope for a smooth transition, but we know there are risks of instability. Everything depends on how transition takes place and the regime is defeated.

There must also be accountability for the past violations of human rights. The current case in the Netherlands challenging the EU's right to use 'slave labour' is an important part of this process. We need Security Sector Reform – cleaning state institutions that have been involved in human rights violation. These include the police, military and local government. This must be systematic. These institutions need to be democratised and abuse and abusers must be removed. Judicial Sector Reform is the second question, which will involve enhancing the lawyers and judges so that there is an independent and impartial judiciary. From now on we need to build consensus about the issues I mentioned – e.g. minority rights.

Some Eritreans consider the 1997 Constitution legitimate; others do not. We cannot reject either side. The issues of land, minorities, languages and the system of government are all important and we must accept that there is a great deal of divergence. We should iron out these issues now. At the same time, we must recognise that a Constitution is not a panacea. Many African countries have fine Constitutions but are poorly governed. Eritrea has a rich corpus of laws, even without a Constitution. We might adopt the 1997 Constitution as a working document, until another can be adopted by consensus. This is the view of the Eritrean Law Society.

It is possible that transition could take place by means of a military coup, a negotiated transition, the toppling of the regime by outside opposition forces, a popular uprising and other possibilities. Difficult to assess which will take place, but we can't rule out any of these. Some may not lead to a stable transition. Our ability to bring about a smooth transition depends on how change takes place, but we must plan for the change. To do this we need to avoid the duplication of efforts and bring groups together.

If a government of national unity is formed, how will accountability take place as well as the reforms required in the security sector and the judiciary? If we can iron out our differences, we can have a faster, smoother transition.

Habteab Yemane – my presentation focusses on judicial reform. I will begin with the present situation.

The current regime wants an all-powerful president and a non-existent parliament, with a weak judiciary. The judiciary and prisons often find their roles eroded – they only exist as a formal structure. Investigation, prosecution is often undertaken just by one person or one body. Over 80% of prisoners are in the army and under martial law. The commanding officers, including the chief of staff, punish people – putting them in underground containers. The president himself and his guards simply imprison those that they wish to. There is no recourse to the courts. Government companies hold young Eritreans – thousands and thousands of them – as prisoners and in salve-like conditions. Associations are not elected, but appointed by the government: for example - the workers association. There is no independence of action and they act as spies of the government. They work against the interests of the workers.

The police are controlled by the military and the professionals have been isolated and removed. The public protector never intervenes to prevent the senior members of the military from imprisoning members of the public. Village administrators are required to work with the local military to prosecute anyone who drops out of school or training. Some judges attempt to be independent, but the government continually undermines this. The special courts are given orders by the president and those around him. Colonels are assigned to the special courts to act as judges.

What shall we do? We need to recognise the current justice system is not independent and must work to:

1. Liberate the justice sector. Ensure the separation of powers by removing the control of the ministry of justice. After transition we need to end this control so that judges can act independently. It might be necessary to abolish the ministry of justice altogether;
2. To ensure their independence, the tenure and payment of the judges must be guaranteed. Independence must be ensured and the judiciary must be resourced. It must have its own budget;
3. Bring powers back to the public prosecutor, judiciary and prisons – removing the supervisory role of the military;
4. Abolish the special court;
5. Clean up state institutions, but retain as many as we can. We do not want to make too many enemies by purging the state;
6. Release immediately all prisoners held without due process as the result of the actions of extra-judicial actors – except murderers and rapists;
7. Law reform is vital. We must review all existing laws;
8. Training for police, lawyers etc. is critical if we are to have an effective judiciary. The existing law school is an important resource; and
9. Hold accountable all those who committed human rights abuses during the dictatorship but in the spirit of reconciliation.

To achieve the above deliverables, we need a Transitional Law Reform Commission, a Judicial Reform Commission and a Prison and Prisoner Screening Commission. The Law Reform Commission could start work now.

Daniel said there was a debate about the extent to which the current laws could be used. He argued that they could, even though they needed reform and updating. Law is not static. They are a starting point. The Criminal Procedure Code of Eritrea (effectively a mini-constitution) contains all the rights enshrined in the full Constitution, but they are ignored. They are a departure point. It was suggested that a Truth and Reconciliation Commission might be established, as had been done in South Africa after apartheid. There are clearly a huge number of crimes that have been perpetrated by the current regime. There is a need to establish commissions to be ready to act. The immediate task will be the release of all political prisoners. Eritrea's human rights violations are well documented. We need to just identify who designed or implemented those heinous crimes.

When the regime collapses, then the question will initially be a political one. 'Nature abhors a vacuum.' Our clarion call is that democratic forces in the diaspora need to think seriously and to act to make a united democratic front possible, as a potential replacement for the regime. This is vital for our people, and also for the international community. In South Africa some forces were inside, but some were in exile. So, our forces need to unite and concentrate on unity in order to defeat the regime. The sooner the better. This is the only way out. Everyone should back Yiakl. It is moving towards forming a global umbrella movement. It has a council in several countries. They are negotiating to form a global initiative. That is one of the few options we have – its pragmatic. In Switzerland we have managed to unite the most important political actors. In other countries I do not know precisely but I expect similar initiatives to be taken place. The first priority must be regime change, at the least costly and the shortest time.

Some questioned the suggestion of using the current Constitution – even as an interim instrument. There was debate around this issue, without a firm conclusion. Some supported it, others were opposed to the idea. It was recognised that there was a need for a compromise, which could not be imposed. If the Afar say the 1997 Constitution is illegitimate, then we have a dilemma and must find ways of addressing their concerns. These divisions based on a 'take it or leave it' approach need to be ironed out. This was pointed out by the Nairobi group. We need to remember that a Constitution is not a silver bullet. Many African states have excellent constitutions, but poor governance.

Eritrea already has sufficient laws currently in place. We can get by without any more – even those that protect the human rights. The problem is one of implementation and political will. In the end, of course, we need a Constitution, but it is not vital in the first few weeks or even months. Some suggested adopting the model that brought about change in Sudan, using the professional bodies to oppose the regime. But there is a critical difference in that such bodies have been crushed in Eritrea or are subservient to the government.

Habteab Yemane explained how the penal code was developed - over 7 or 8 years— documents were brought together. It took 15 years in total, with translation into Tigrinya and Arabic. We maintained the 1957 codes. Some had only existed in Amharic and English which some judges could not read. Many control mechanisms were introduced. A great effort was made to make it a good penal code that can adequately serve the people.

Daniel asked if the current laws can be used? They can be used, but need reforming and updating. Law is not static. They are a starting point. The Criminal Procedure Code of Eritrea

(mini-constitution) contain all the rights enshrined in the full Constitution, but they are currently ignored by the regime.

Q & A

Q: UN report of the crimes against humanity- including the president. How can they be brought to justice, while going for a policy of reconciliation? How can these two opposing views be reconciled?

Daniel: For grave violations, grave crimes it is hard to concede any amnesty. They could only be forgiven if there was a full disclosure to the victims and the whole society of what took place. The South African TRC is a good example, but is not directly applicable in Eritrea. Officials and commanders outside the country can be prosecuted even today if they are in foreign countries. Has not happened so far. The key individuals must be held to account. Only likely to take place in full if there is a complete defeat of the regime.

Q: The sheer size of the violations is enormous. So how should we proceed?

Daniel: We have to prosecute the most serious crimes. Crimes against humanity is an example. Torture against a large number of people is another. Anyone designing or planning these must be pursued. In South Africa amnesty required confession and was only given after their confession was made in public, was this granted. The circumstances under which this can be done requires consultation with the victims.

Q: Some of the ideas are long term and good, but what are the immediate needs? What is the first priority if there is an immediate transition? How will we uphold the rule of law? There is huge mistrust. What is the most immediate and most important need?

Habteab: Unless we prepare now, it will be hard to react fast. We need to establish commissions now to be ready to act. The immediate task post regime change will be the release of prisoners. Eritrea's human rights violations are well documented and those who committed those heinous crimes will need to be brought to justice in the spirit of reconciliation.

Daniel: When the regime collapses, the first question would be political. 'Nature abhors a vacuum.' Our clarion call is that democratic forces in the diaspora need to think seriously and to act to make a united democratic front possible, as a potential replacement for the regime. This is vital for our people, and also for the international community. In South Africa some forces were inside, but some were in exile. So, our forces need to unite and concentrate on unity so as to defeat the regime. This is the only way forward.

Comment: Duplication of effort is a real problem. We need to work together, bringing in other groups. It is not just wasting time but it can also create a culture differences and disunity if we do not work together. Working together is vital, as we do not know when change will come. We need our leaders to collaborate. Religious leaders need to be brought in.

Daniel: All your points are valid. We need genuine meeting of mind and interactions – in formal and informal settings.

Q: Our priority must be to bring change. How do we do it? One likely possibility is a popular uprising. My question is Yiakl has a good chance to succeed, but how can we persuade the Yaikl to lead? Can the political parties be persuaded to fall in behind them?

Daniel: A straightforward question. Everyone should back Yiakl. It is moving towards forming a global umbrella movement. A council in several countries. They are negotiating a process to form a global initiative. That is one of the few options we have – its pragmatic. In Switzerland we have managed to unite the most important political actors. In other countries I don't know. The first priority must be regime change, at the least cost and the shortest time.

Q: Thanks Eritrea Focus. A wonderful presentation. You say 1997 Constitution act as a transitional one. Why would we do that? Currently we have a decay of our society. Why should the forces that lead to transition create a transitional government? There is a power struggle in Eritrea now. There may be a sell-out to Ethiopia. First, we have to bring change and a transitional government. Then we need a Constitution. It is the third phase, which depends on phases one and two. Should we not concentrate on these – they will determine the transition? Yiakl is doing the job to bring change. But is it replacing the other parties and groups? There must be communication. The same is true if there is an uprising.

Daniel: You have raised many important issues. The 1997 Constitution: we are not imposing it. We say there needs to be a consensus building process. The Eritrean society needs to discuss this. We know it has shortcomings, but can it serve as a transitional document to allow a move to democracy. Ours is a pragmatic view. About how change will come: you are right. There are many. There is a danger of Ethiopia swallowing up Eritrea. We all need to resist this. Yaikl: is it political or not? In Switzerland we have stated clearly that it is a grassroots political movement seeking change. But it is not a political organisation. What role can the Eritrean Law Society play in bringing political actors together? I think that Eritrea Focus can play this role – as long as it is as inclusive as possible.

Q: What is the immediate task under the circumstances of a change? This must be to have supremacy of law. This is the Constitution. 1991, 1993 and 1997 are the key dates in our growing legitimacy. We must focus on Chapter 1 Article 3: all laws contrary to the Constitution are null and void. It is the supreme law. We must work within this framework. The National Assembly must meet as soon as possible, to enact the Constitution.

Q: Often the process of change is influenced by the violence in the first weeks and months of change. Is there any best practice to act as a reference to maintain peace and security, so that vindictive actions can be prevented and change can be smoother?

Q: Crimes against humanity. The existential threat to the Afar people in Dankalia includes mass murder and mass displacement. Resources are driving this. In terms of reform our view is that the 1997 Constitution cannot work for the Afar people. The role of the UAE and Ethiopia's role in Assab are all issues. How can we get justice for this – including these international actors, which threaten our sovereignty?

Q: The Constitution: It is controversial and can't be imposed. At the same time, we need peace and stability when transition takes place. We need to look to the experience of other

changes – like Sudan. The professional societies in Sudan produced a document for the transition. We need something like this.

Q: The Law Society can help the military and PFDJ to think about what they will face if there is a transformation.

Q: There is a lack of diversity. We are not reaching out to the diversity of Eritrean society. We need to reach everyone who feels abandoned by the system. I want the Law Society to act.

Habteab: Isaias does not want to implement the Constitution but there is no alternative charter. The only document we have to serve the transition is the Constitution. If you can come up with an inclusive, participatory, working charter, then good. So far it doesn't exist. That's why we call it a transitional document. After that it is up to the people. So, we can prepare a working charter, but many groups like the ELF, lowlanders need to participate. Without it, we must turn to the Constitution.

Daniel: Briefly – it's been a long time. Thanks to everyone. Much appreciated. At least three people have talked about the Constitution. We have not yet prepared about the immediate challenges when the transition takes place.

Q: how do we incentivise senior officials to come over to us? We have not thought about this, and we need to give it due consideration.

Fessehaye: Thank you the presenters. We had an interesting and diverse discussion. That's what the conference is about. Eritrea Focus is a forum for discussion for everyone, irrespective of background. The lack of a rule of law that is a critical missing element in the current situation in Eritrea. Eritrean Law Society is a good example of what we do not have inside Eritrea. We need such professional bodies.

I thank Daniel and Habteab – and everyone who participated.

The National Economy in an Integrating Region

(Day two, 30 June)

Dr Mohamed Kheir former Dean of Sciences at the University of Asmara. Author “Dynamics of an unfinished African dream.”

He explained the objectives of the workshop. Looking for a blueprint for transformation. Can a free trade regime be established? What is the role of aid? How can we attract diaspora investment? How can we establish a well-organised banking sector; sustainable mining and extractive sector; revenue streams and sustainable fisheries?

Dr Mebrahtu Ateweberehan (on the current state of the economy and proposed plan for the transition)

The current state of the economy in Eritrea is a manifestation of the political failure and the lack of democracy in the country. In this study, the group are not presently looking at the long-term development, but rather at stabilisation of the economy and peace building. The promises by the PFDJ still hold in as far as they refer to the free market and exports.

The group looked at 3 specific scenarios on how a change may come about in Eritrea:

1. A smooth transition – low likelihood;
2. A negotiated transition – moderate likelihood; and
3. A difficult transition – high likelihood.

The group believes the third scenario to be the most likely because the government has an interest in this and because the opposition is divided. If the opposition works hard in a unified manner, then scenario 2 could be a more likely outcome.

We took a wide look at the economy, focusing at manufacturing, mining, fishing and agriculture and carried out sectoral analysis. We have made recommendations on how to tackle some of the potential problems that are likely to emerge post regime change. As part of this, we have suggested a 3-phase and 3-year transition plan underpinned by six priority areas. The priorities include rehabilitation of vulnerable members of society, job creation, capacity building, rehabilitation of critical infrastructure, diaspora engagement and improving international relations.

The promises of the liberation movement – especially the EPLF – was a market led economy. This was underscored at the 1987 Congress and in subsequent documentations. Agriculture is an important sector. All these were thwarted. The economy is currently under the control of the PFDJ and the military. The private sector is decimated to the point that it no longer exists. The country is acutely short of capital investments, manpower and technology. Military ventures and public administration suck up much of the manpower through the ineptly called national service. The never-ending conscription leads to an exodus of youth making the workforce pool even dire.

According to the government, the Eritrean population in 2010 was 3.2 million. This suggests a population increase of 500,000 since 1991. Current estimates show the population as static. The demographic structure is badly skewed – especially in the over 20 age group. It is mostly female. Very different from the younger group, where male/female is almost equal.

GDP per capita: World Bank estimates GDP at US \$715 per capita – but this is probably too high. The most realistic figure is around \$500. The country is performing poorly in almost every business and economic indicator. Agriculture is very important, but only contributes about 10% to GDP. It is declining significantly, because most young people are away from the farms and villages, trapped in the national service. The same can be said about fishing and services. The private sector cannot compete with the military/party dominated sector which monopolises manpower through the national service. The diaspora is failing to invest because their investments are insecure and worried about the endemic repression in the country. Diaspora remittances are barely sufficient to meet household needs and consumption, let alone capita investments.

The only hard currency revenue generating sector is the extractive sector. But again, it is dominated by the government with revenue streams ending up in offshore accounts rather

than improving the lives of citizens. There is no transparency nor budgetary control in place. Apart from Isaias and three or four cliques nobody knows the finances of the country.

Major challenges:

Acute shortages of capital, technology and workforce. The latter is particularly a major problem and extremely difficult to address as a large segment of the productive youth have left and continue to leave the country. There are also recurring droughts and natural disasters combined with persistent and endless hostility with neighbouring countries inhibiting investment.

What can be done to reverse the economy decline?

A three-year and three-phased transition plan along the following is suggested.

1. Phase one (first 6 month) - rehabilitation;
2. Phase two (next 6 – 18 months) - Work and community projects; and
3. Phase three (next 18 – 36 months) - human resource development, training of young people.

General recommendations to kick start the economy:

- National reconciliation and transitional justice;
- Rehabilitation: national Service, youth and women and returnees;
- Capital, technology and labour;
- Agriculture (60 – 80% of population);
- Reduce dependence on remittances and mining;
- Avoiding the debt trap – e.g. from China; and
- Improving international co-operation, especially with Ethiopia.

These recommendations are considered in turns by the speakers below.

Professor Gaim Kibreab on returnees, rehabilitation and job creation.

Almost all Eritreans who fled the country remain in exile. There are now more than 500,000 refugees abroad, mostly in Ethiopia and Sudan. The lesson is that repatriation is not a monocausal issue. Removing the current regime may not necessarily lead to immediate return of refugees to the country. That will depend on the conditions of returnees and the conditions in the countries they fled from. Few who have established themselves abroad will return until and unless they see signs of improvement and freedom. Some 174,000 Eritreans are now in Ethiopia: in 1999 there were none. Most fled to avoid indefinite national service. The vibrant economy of Ethiopia is also attractive. Only if there is economic and political stability in Eritrea will refugees return.

What should happen to national service after transition? Today the national service has no legitimacy. Post Isaias, the national service could potentially end, make it voluntary, limit it to 18 months, reduce the upper age limit or eliminate the military element. All these options and more should and must be considered.

Job creation is essential to peace building. The workforce has been de-skilled and job creation will require training. All this depends on good governance and backing from the international community. Women face the worst conditions inside and outside Eritrea. It is all too common and post-independence women have been treated poorly. Ending this victimisation of women will be critical.

All these are required to grow the economy:

- A private sector economy is vital;
- PFDJ controlled entities should be dismantled;
- A transitional government and engagement with the international community and the diaspora;
- Rule of law giving security of investment;
- Weak financial sector needs to be reformed and revamped;
- Good neighbourliness re-established and enhanced; and
- Education reform - make it free of government intervention; and
- Vocational training.

Q & A

Q: A move to market led economy – we need to learn from the Russian situation in that we might have our resources taken into the hands of “oligarchs”. Public wealth into private hands at a discounted price is a big challenge. How can this be resisted? What is the future role of the government in economy management?

Q: Three phases over the first three years. Good to focus on the vulnerable. But regime supporters and civil servants are part of the economy. What are we offering them?

Q: We like to suggest we are entrepreneurs, but our capacity is small. We will not be able to produce large scale employment and investments at least in the early stages post regime change. How much can we expect from the private sector and what role is there for the public sector in the first 3 years?

Mebrathu: I will start with the market economy and concern about the “oligarchs”. Our proposal underscores the 1994 PFDJ document which highlights the private sector. But we focus on job employment and agriculture. The market economy is a long-term vision, not immediate. The 3-year transition can be extended, if need be. Our plans assume a manageable transition. Otherwise transition will take longer.

Gaim: We are reacting to our experiences. We are frustrated by our government, which has raided private property. Semhar’s question is a warning. The private sector is not a panacea. It needs to be constrained by a meritocratic state. The state must be run by a committed, competent civil service. It is vital, as is an independent judiciary. There are small shop keepers and businessmen, but are they able to take over major enterprises? Need training. Private sector doesn’t fall from the blue sky.

Q: The returnees – what about the land issue? Very contentious. People were not allowed to returned to the area they used to live in. PFDJ has not sorted this out. How can this be sorted out?

Comment: We need to prepare for the day after transition and this group has not addressed the mechanism for creating jobs. To jump start the economy we need a huge capital investment. There are not many wealthy Eritreans. The diaspora could potentially invest in small scales, but needs the right environment. The right rules and regulations.

Q: To demobilise the national service will require money. To create jobs, require money. Everything needs capital and this requires confidence in the diaspora to invest. Where will the capital come from? This needs to be identified now, before transition.

Q: Gaim talked about repatriation. Mentioned that the return has to be 'sold' to refugees. But what exactly do they need?

Q: Investment needs rehabilitation. Will we open up the economy? Will we be exploited? What about China? The importance of the ports.

Q: What do we do about the PFDJ controlled companies? Should we continue the national service to help save the economy from getting even worse?

Gaim: On the land question; parts of the land is overpopulated and some of the land is of poor quality. There has been movement from the highlands to the lowlands, where land seems abundant. We need a working group from different background to look into this issue before people start to return from exile. Most who left for exile were from urban areas and won't want to farm. An issue of great sensitivity. I won't give a blueprint.

How to jumpstart our economy: if we have a viable environment, we can pool investments. With patience and competence, we can deal with this. Inward capital investment will be hard to attract, but in a conducive environment we can potentially get this from international markets and to a limited extent from members of diaspora.

Unless we re-assure the refugees that there is security and a hope for a good life, they will not come home. They are risk averse.

Dr. Samson Maekele - Capacity building and training.

Challenges: Human resources are important, but we lack qualified people. Migration and mismanagement have squandered our resources. Many of the educated have fled. Some currently in a position of authority have little ability, skill or experience. Education is being used to further a political agenda and the militarisation of education is well known.

There is an opportunity to open new institutions and build on existing ones. The University of Asmara may be closed, but it could be restored in a short period of time. Many academics abroad would offer their time and skills, if the circumstances were right.

Recommendations:

Immediate:

1. Strengthen human resources. Many are not up to date. For example, students don't have access to credit cards – they only know them in theory;

2. Offer short-term courses;
3. Train people at diploma level, short term;
4. Link institutions; and
5. Motivate our staff to retain them, with decent salaries and benefits.

Long term:

1. We need a higher education plan. We need an international conference to upgrade our institutions;
2. We need a new ministry to oversee our educational institutions;
3. Upgrade University of Asmara and other facilities;
4. Establish post-secondary, technical colleges. Link these to more academic institutions and
5. Open private institutions.

Tewelde Stephanos - Infrastructure.

The electrical grid is critical. At present most fuel is from wood and animal waste. Just 21% from oil. Burning wood currently at twice the sustainable rate. Arable land is just 5% of land and shrinking. Yet 80% of our population depends on this. Over 83% of electricity is used by households but it is unreliable. We are at the bottom of the hierarchy of needs. Our Gross National income is \$531, with 66% of the population below the poverty line. Extremely difficult to live at this level.

If we build the key infrastructure correctly growth can come. Information technology will come with abundant electricity. With this we can get knowledge and allow smart government. This feeds into other sectors, including health care, and industry. We are well situated to use wind and solar energy. Also pumped hydro-electricity. We can store our energy. This is achievable, but we need long-term development partners that are reliable, for example, Scandinavians. We need to start talks on this early.

If we have sufficient energy, we can attract energy-intensive industries. We need to have plans ready and good partners; we can scale up fast to meet demand. This will be a critical path for growing the economy.

Dr David Styan - Diaspora and remittances: these are critical to the economy.

Remittances – represents a third to a half of the economy – this will continue after a transition. Also, a source of investment and foreign exchange and taxes. Remittance policy is critical.

Key issue: will the 2% tax continue?

More broadly: private v public sector. Will property rights be respected? Crucial. Monetary policy is important. What will be the value of the Nacfa? Will it float? This will determine the relationship between the new authorities and the diaspora. What role will the diaspora have in shaping policy? What will be the attitude to trade and investment be? Currently the linkages are limited and personalised. Tied to mining, rents

from the Gulf etc. The IMF may have a role in the future as might other international agencies. China will also have a role. As will the Gulf countries.

Relations with Ethiopia: the partial opening of the border has been reversed. Ethiopia's economy has changed very substantially. Now far richer and more advanced and self-confident.

Remittance policy: retain 2% tax or higher? Call for Nacfa to float? What other sources of foreign exchange? This will be more important than ties with donors.

Economic ties with Ethiopia: Will may need to use the 2018 – 20 agreement. Cross border trade?

Regional ties: Links with Saudi and UAE – and Assab. China and its Horn policy.

Dr. Mebrahtu Ateweberhan – The role of the extractive sector

I will cover Michael's presentation as he cannot make it.

In poor countries like Eritrea it is important for forex and employment and wages, skills and funds for government. It works across the environment, with social and economic impacts. All must be considered. The needs of future generations, as well as present ones. Important as mining is a finite resource.

Eritrea is endowed with precious metals and construction and industrial minerals. In the past these were mined by artisanal mining, but this has vanished or is controlled by the military or the PFDJ. The Party is supreme in the mining sector. Collaborates with foreign mining companies. Estimated income is \$1 billion a year from Bisha and Zara. Potash mining in Danakil is expected to start in 2022.

On the downside, there has been denial of human rights in the extractive sector, unsafe working conditions, no community engagement. The sector is monopolised. Environmental laws are not enforced. No transparency of the mining licence approval process.

Mining is neither sustainable for environmental or human. It does not contribute to sustainable development. What needs to be done?

- Review investment laws and regulations;
- Encourage local and international investment;
- Investigate corruption;
- Establish a transparent system of exploration and development; and
- Value added through spin offs.

Land belongs to the government at the exclusion of local stakeholders. An entirely new environment needs to be created to improve the rights of communities, ensure safe mining and end corruption.

Q & A

A range of issues were raised, including:

- the need to improve official statistics;
 - the vexed question of land and ethnicity – everyone knows who owned the land in the past and who has rights to it;
 - the need for green economic growth and renewable energy;
 - the depopulation of rural areas;
 - the role of a regional electrify grid; and
 - the important of peasant agriculture and how to improve it.
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Foreign Policy and the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia

(Day three, 1 July)

Dan Connell - Eritrea-Ethiopia ties

Dan explained his long involvement in the region. He visited regularly, including the border area as recently as November 2019. In his view 2020 looked very much like 2019 – nothing has changed despite the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. There were two important developments; (a) the Ethiopian elections (which had been postponed) and (b) the Covid pandemic, which both leaders are attempting to capitalise on. Abiy has also moved to close the refugee camps close to the border and make the situation more difficult for Eritreans by removing their refugee status. Both Isaias and Abiy are using the pandemic to their advantage – stopping protests from developing in Eritrea but Covid is also a humanitarian challenge – squeezing people that are already vulnerable.

In Ethiopia the political situation had deteriorated following the assassination of a popular Ormo singer in Addis, triggering protests in Oromiya, which were blamed on the TPLF and Egypt. This led to a wave of arrests, including Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba, which showed the fragility of the country during a political and health crisis. There was continuing instability within the country and between regional states – with conflict between the Popular Party and nationalist parties in Oromiya and Tigray. It is very difficult for Abiy to form a coalition except with the weak states like Afar and Somali and maybe the Amhara, but certainly not with the Tigrayans. There is a tense situation between Tigray and Addis. Mekele wants to hold elections but Abiy is threatening Tigray, telling it not to do so.

In Eritrea – President Isaias is attempting to squeeze the Tigrayans and the TPLF. Internally, at the start of 2020 the economy was stagnant and it is now under lockdown. There is no connection between the two countries, except via phone and airline. The border is closed. Otherwise, no meaningful change in the life of Eritreans.

There is a challenge for Eritrea Focus – bringing forward the issue of providing support for the thousands of Eritreans refugees trapped in Tigray without federal support. This needs more attention.

There is also a need to recognise that:

1. The Tigrayan - Abiy rift needs to be healed without interference of President Isaias; and

2. Eritrean – Tigrayan relationship should be improved. Badme is not a problem but Irob is a sticking issue and needs to be resolved either by tweaking the border or through resettlement.

Professor Kjetil Tronvoll – Tigray

My talk builds on what Dan said. Ethiopia is complicated for two reasons:

1. Federal government and Tigray; and
2. Presence of opposition parties at the regional level.

Changes in Ethiopia after the establishment of Popular Party forced TPLF to rethink its relationship with the rest of Ethiopia and Eritrea. There is a difference and closeness between TPLF and Tigray people depending on the circumstances. The people are forcing the TPLF to think about the issues they face. Tigrayans are becoming more and more hesitant about their position in Ethiopia. They feel they are persecuted and marginalised. The questions asked are: “Where do we belong? Who should we partner with – looking for traditional and historical allies? We don’t feel part of Ethiopia and are not protected by the Federal Government.”

There has been establishment of new parties in Tigray – three of them ethno-nationalist composed mostly of young people active both at home and diaspora. They want to form a de facto state in Tigray. This comes up against the dominant opinion of leaders in Tigray – who instead call for autonomy within the federal framework inside Ethiopia. The TIP, which called for independence, forced the TPLF to readjust its position. Reorientation away from an Ethio-centrist view. And that is where Eritrea comes in. Many Eritreans are coming and settling in or transiting through Tigray. From the Tigrayan side there are expressions of cultural connections with the Eritrea, but also a common sense of belonging.

Tigray needs to rethink and reconceptualise its relationship with Eritrea. What new configuration be foreseen in the future? What model to follow? Federation, confederation with Eritrea? Independent Tigray, however, should not stand alone. Tigray needs to reconsider its relationship with both the Ethiopian and the Eritrean state. But this is not a forgone conclusion as there are many factors that could affect this. The main future is the election in Tigray – is it going to happen and how the Federal Government is going to react.

Question and Answer session

Comment: Eritrea has neighbourhood not only with Tigray but with Djibouti, Sudan and along the Red Sea. Alliance with Tigray is not an Eritrean issue.

Comment: I am seeing it only from the Tigrayan perspective. But you are right. The problem is that you do not have agency at the moment. But I see that there is interest for Eritrea to have a relationship with Tigray and Ethiopia. The Agazian movement is different now and has lost momentum as most of them have joined the nationalist parties and promoting their national agenda.

Comment and Q: International relations and foreign relations should not be done based on emotions but on national interest. We have long history and complicated relationships. We

cannot ignore what is happening in Eth and the Sudan as well. How can we use the situation in Eth for the interest of Eritrea? Of course, I understand the dichotomy in Tigray. How should we deal with it?

Comment: The region will remain unstable future if not worse for the foreseeable. I advise Eritreans not to involve themselves in Ethiopia. The Eritrean activity in Ethiopia could endanger the long-term relationship with that country. Keep yourselves away from Ethiopia would be my view.

Q: The problem of the Nacfa. A spark of the border war. What can be done to avoid a similar situation?

Comment: There is a strange exchange rate between the ENA and the Birr. First the Birr was stronger, then parity as the Nakfa is fixed. Cross-border trade, bilateral trade and the port agreements have not been signed. Ethiopians are ready to go ahead with that but Isaias is not willing. Eritrea wants parity between Birr and ENA but Ethiopia is holding on that. The same problem as in 1998. No formal relations but personalised ones.

Comment: Many people were holding large wads of old Nacfa that was made illegal in 2015.

Comment: I want to underline what was said before. Animosity between Eritrean highlands and Tigray is historical – 19th century, armed struggle and later border war. Historical problems starting from the atrocities and Alula and Tigrayan warlords and local communities in Eritrea. I am reading two books by former leaders of the TPLF, the level of animosity between the two leaderships does not allow that. May be in the long future.

Q: Despite the concerns stated above and the war drums beaten by both leaderships, don't you think that change in policy that promotes peace would change the situation? And why doesn't the West intervene when they see danger developing?

Dan Connell: It is way too early to talk about political unity between Eritrea and Tigray. It will be used by Isaias who would continue to disable Ethiopia. You may not be involved in this but you will be affected by it. I think the Tigrayans are not going to hold back but it doesn't mean they will allow troops to withdraw soon while squeezed by Abiy and IA.

Q and Comment: what do you mean tweaking the border agreement? The issue the Tigrayans have in relation to Irob - as 20% of Irob land has gone to Eritrea and they want to swap land with places south of Tsorona that have gone to Tigray. If not, resettlement would remain the only option.

Comment – Let's not dwell in the past. Former leaders like Gebru Asrat and Aregawi Berhe are already discredited. There are many young leaders in Tigray who are willing to promote peace with Eritrea.

Q: I would like to talk about the assassination that has triggered the violent protests in Ethiopia. They have accused the TPLF, Oromo nationalists and foreign powers, probably Egypt. How would this impact the already complex relationship between PP and Tigray?

Dan: I don't know where this would go. I have also read an Amharic article that accuses the TPLF of committing the assassination. I don't think so. If true, it doesn't bode well for the TPLF. It could be Egypt but I don't know. Let's wait and see.

Comment: We need to understand the entire region. The role of Gulf States in Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia, Turkish role in Sudan and Somalia.

Comment and Q: I want to make a remark. I come from the western part of Eritrea. Why do we always talk about Tigray and Eritrean highland relationship? What about other regions. And the role of the ELF?

Q: My question is about Sudan. What is going on in Sudan? The Eritrean regime has been in support of the military in Sudan disregarding the civilian coalition partners. Now Sudan is siding with Egypt. How does Sudan's position affect the Tigray-Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship?

Comment: Yes, atrocities were committed. Both liberation fronts collaborated and also went against each other. We should forget all that and give port access to Tigray.

Comment: Rapprochement. I agree there is huge animosity but it is not one way – it goes both ways. Rapprochement should be a two-way street - I have no problem with Tigrayans claiming we are one people as far as it does not encroach on our sovereignty.

Comment: Now we are talking on the back of transitional period. It is always good for people to come to Eritrea and feel at home unless they have ulterior motive. This is a transitional period and Eritreans have a lot to do within. This is not the time to dwell on the past.

Comment; There is no permanent relationship. We are not going to erase Tigray or they are not going to erase Eritrea from the map. We should have a good relationship and we can agree with Tigray if it doesn't compromise our sovereignty.

Martin Plaut – Eritrea and the wider world

One of the great problems for Eritrea and not an easy one to deal with is that it is a small country – not a major issue to the rest of the world. Limited consideration is given to it.

Martin summarised Eritrean relationship with the wider world as follows:

- Relationship across the Red Sea: Isaias well known for his ability to shift quickly within and outside region. He has the ability to project his power far beyond the region, e.g. in the Congo. Dumping Iran, he shifted immediately toward the Saudis and the Gulf States. UAE now uses Assab as a base and a torture-prison against the Houthis. There are also secret UAE flights from Eritrea to Libya in support of General Haftar;
- The GERD Dam issue – Isaias's position is unknown, but at present he supports Ethiopia;
- Eritrea-EU: this has produced nothing for the EU or for the Eritrean people. But Isaias doesn't give a damn. The EU were outplayed by Isaias because they were desperate to stop the flow of refugees. Now being challenged in court cases in the Netherlands and UK (we will use UK slavery laws);

- US-Eritrea: Long history from post WWII – Eritreans always see the US suspiciously. Eritrea felt treated badly by the US which sees Ethiopia as a priority. But that is the reality of world politics. Eritreans have to learn to live with it:
- China-Eritrea: Not very strong at the moment. But could change with interest in Eritrean ports and mining where the Chinese companies are the dominant players; and
- Eritrea - Turkey: Trying to recreate the Ottoman Empire. Take the example of Libya which is split down the middle.

The future – a democratic Eritrea needs to professionalise the civil service and the diplomatic service in order to place its foreign relations on a firm basis. The country needs to be institutionalised and outside the whim of one man. Eritrea must stop meddling in neighbouring states. Eritrea must of course pursue its own interests in the region and in the wider world, but in a formal and professional way.

Q & A

Comment: The Amhara ruling class have never accepted the independence of Eritrea. So, we have to choose for the sake of our sovereignty, we need to establish a good relationship with Tigray. Eritrea and Tigray need to ally themselves because both of us are under threat.

Comment: People reacted in a polarised manner to our views. We don't have anything against Tigray but the Tigray media is playing a political game using disgruntled Eritreans. It is different with Sudan. They have no interest in Eritrean land were never violent towards our people. We have to look forward but not forget our past. We have more to do at home.

Comment: As Eritreans, we have problems ourselves. We are talking only about Tigray. We have the Jebertis and Sahos in the highlands and then the vast lands of Semhar, Dankalia and western lowlands. What is going to happen to the rest of Eritrea? Tigray's problem is only with one man. Eritrea needs to solve its own problems first and then deal with Tigray and others.

Comment: Unfortunately, we are in a volatile region and the Eritrea/Tigray relationship has divided us further. This has contributed to furthering our division. We need to think first on how we would unite our people, and then look forward to having formal relationship with our neighbours. We need a short and a long-term strategy. First focusing on ourselves and look forward to forging relationships with other countries.

Comment: I am a bit confused. We seem to be mixing foreign relations and people to people relations. Foreign relations is about national interest. So, let's talk about that. Eritrea was born in this volatile region and we cannot do anything about that. Our foreign relation should focus on what we want as a country.

Q: Martin what is that you can tell those of us in the diaspora to gain the support of the international community?

Martin – This has been the focus of Eritrea Focus – trying to bring people together. The main problem is that there is no unity among Eritreans. But it is starting now. As far as you remain united then you will be able to persuade people. Eritreans involving in their local politics is important.

Q: We should not dwell in the past. How does Eritrea as a sovereign state promote its interests because different regions have different socio-economic dynamics? How can we position ourselves outside the influence of superpowers?

Comment: We should learn from Djibouti that is gaining a lot from its strategic position.

Dan: We seem to go way ahead of ourselves. I agree that we should start from within and then look outside. We should also not forget cross-border relations, e.g. the Afar and refugees. Regarding the US, a smart national policy is one that looks at long-term not zigzagging along short-term interaction. Eritrea has a role to play in regional stability - important for its relationship with the US. There is interest from the US side but it is Eritrea that is slamming the door.

Martin: We have eternal interests and we have no eternal enemies – Lord Palmerston. Applies to any country.

Comment and Q: It is Isaias who is giving us the agenda regarding our relationship with Tigray. What concerns me most is that Isaias wants to start a war with Tigray, may be because he wants to stay in power. What do we do?

Comment and Q: I like the idea that Eritrea should forge a stronger relationship with Sudan as it has no stake on Eritrea. What will happen to the peace process if Abiy does not win the election. Who controls the Ethiopia army at the disputed border? What happens to the Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship if Tigray becomes an independent state?

Comment and Q: How can we build peace within? How can we build an Eritrean common ground first? We are making ourselves irrelevant by focusing on side issues.

Comment and Q: As you said (Martin) Isaias is quite dynamic in the way he manoeuvres diplomacy. Can the Yeakl movement be a vehicle for creating strong diplomacy? Can we build relationships with countries in the region, such as Djibouti, Gulf states, and other countries, e.g. Scandinavia?

Comment: We need to unite ourselves and form a diaspora leadership. Then the international community would listen to us. Isaias has signed an agreement with Egypt to have a base in Norah Island but has refused to uphold that promise after he signed peace agreement with Abiy. He could also attack Tigray from behind with the help of Abiy and give Ethiopia control over Eritrea in the process.

Comment: Foreign relation needs to reflect the Eritrean nation. I want us to think as Eritreans and look back at our history. We had better diplomacy during the war but ignored those once we became independent. We need to focus on ourselves first and then think further.

Comment: We also need to think what the immediate concerns are. Which country is most likely to step in the day after? Most likely the UAE - experience of the Sudan.

Comment: Without unifying the various Eritrean identities, we will not go further. But we should discuss everything and not leave any stone unturned. We need to use this time to

discuss within ourselves irrespective of what happens in Tigray and Ethiopia. We need to create a roadmap on what type of foreign diplomacy we can follow.

Comment: All our borders were delineated by colonisers and there are different ethnic groups straddling the various borders. So, it is important that we consider that when we talk about borders.

Dan: On the question of how do make ourselves heard, you need to be united. There are two sides. The humanitarian organisations and the governments. The latter is difficult to convince unless it is about refugees. You need to make them interested. First, you need to answer the question why anybody should care about you.

Martin: I agree with Dan. You need to build a strong diaspora community. Learn from the Indians who give their diaspora community passports and other incentives to make them feel as citizens. Also, the French... representatives in parliament.

Lessons from other countries' transitions

(Day four, 2 July)

Dr Adane Tekie – moderator

We need to learn from the experience of others: both successes and failures. In preparation for this conference, I looked at other countries with a similar context. We believe Eritrea is unique – in terms of history and the nature of the regime. What are the forces of change? How do those who promote change overcome those who resist change? What are the social conditions and how do these impact on change?

Meron Semedar

I worked in South Africa and spoke out on the situation of refugees. From there I moved to the USA and worked on human rights issues. I work at the University of Berkley.

Meron then introduced: Professor George Allotey (from Ghana) who has been fighting dictatorships most of his life. George was an adviser to Hilary Clinton. He has much to teach us. Fetsum Abraham – is an Eritrean living in the US. An engineer by profession and an international human rights activist.

We looked at the topic for this session in two steps; step one: how the regime is removed – the triggering factors, and how do these lead to change. Step two: how to transform our society and politics - what factors make a transition successful? We looked at case studies of various countries: Tunisia, Zimbabwe, etc. I am going to look at how change came in some African countries. In some (e.g. Zimbabwe, Libya, Eritrea) it was through armed struggle.

How does transition begin? Revolution can have an event that triggers it – as in Tunisia, with a suicide leading to calls for change. The Tunisian revolution was popular and served as a catalyst for the Arab Spring. The diaspora is important. But in Eritrea's case the diaspora is divided. Everyone wants change, but issues of religion, region and political affiliations

remain a problem. In some corners, there is fear for the Eritrean government collapsing because we have no working Constitution and no democratic institutions nor a functioning judiciary.

What forms of organisations do we have in Eritrea? Women and student organisations are controlled by the PFDJ. In other countries there were professional organisations (doctors, lawyers) as in Sudan. We do not have anything similar, since the regime has crushed all independent organisations. So, who can we work with on the ground? Sadly, there are only a handful available.

What should the transition look like? How long will it be? We have no answer to these questions. Of course, we want a democratic and smooth transition, but that depends on how change comes to the country.

Professor George Ayittey

The way a dictator is removed determines the transition. The Arab Spring showed dictators can be removed by street protests. Zimbabwe required a coup, but it replaced one dictator by another. You need to have groups you can work with on the ground. In Ghana we had an Alliance for Change – to remove Rawlings. At the moment, there is no similar force in Eritrea. But in Ghana we decided we could only do it via the ballot box. This brought together the opposition parties and we succeeded. So, street protests, ballot box and coups can all work.

The second step is to dismantle the legacy of dictatorship. This requires restoring electoral freedom, elections, constitutional reform, institutional reform (judiciary and police and military) and finally economic reform. Unless the sequence is right the change will be hijacked. In Egypt there was a failure to reform the military and the judiciary, so the army was able to seize power again.

Festum Abraham

Festum's summaries how changes can come about as follows:

1. *Revolutionary change*: no promises made and seldom produce democracy;
2. *Incumbent change*: Tanzania and Ghana and Kenya – all transitioned because the leaders wanted to allow transition. Can produce sustainable democracy;
3. *International transition*: The society cannot function any longer and the UN intervenes. The UN has done this on many occasions. In East Timor this was chaotic: civil war, hunger etc. The transitional government was installed by the UN, and there was a smooth transition. These were neutral governments leading to sustainable democracies. The situation was unique, but the result was the same – a good transition; and
4. *Power sharing*: perhaps the most possible way of transitioning in Eritrea. Can take place in many ways. Burundi was an example. It produced a stable democracy. The same is true in South Africa. Liberia: four parties shared power and this led to a neutral government and democracy. A fine outcome. Sudan: a transitional government that shared power between the professional groups and the army. This has led to the rule of law.

Neutrality is required for democracy. It is a process where the government gives 75% of seats to the people and the rest to the parties. A neutral government has to have power and must act. In Eritrea we must communicate clearly with all actors.

Only a neutral government will produce a sustainable government. The political parties cannot manage the process. But we have weak professional organisations and civil organisations. This leaves power with the political parties, but can they manage a democratic transition? What is the role of the diaspora? At the moment we have no unity among the political parties, so they can seize power and try to lead the change and not be led by the people. Civil society must be ready to assert itself and say loudly that they want a smooth, neutral and democratic transition.

Meron Semedar

The first step is the guide to transition. We have parties in the diaspora but not on the ground. They don't talk to each other or come together. PFDJ seems to be the only one. The opposition is deeply divided. Look at what happened in Ethiopia – about 60 parties. Should we dismantle the PFDJ? At the moment they have the power. We have no civic society on the ground. Even in the diaspora the civic societies are weak. Where are our youth? In Ethiopia/Sudan or the rest of the world. In most of Africa the diaspora has led the way to change. In Eritrea they are absent, while the military is on the street. Will our people come out onto the streets over the prices of bread or fuel? No, because they will be killed in mass as has happened with the disabled war veterans.

Can we ask Isaias to leave the party in peace? It might happen but unlikely. We need to explore all avenues. The situation is close to that in N Korea. We need to find new ways for change. The military have huge power but do not seem to want to use it. Isaias will someday go, but do we have a contingency plan?

We have to deal with the regime, whether we like them or not.

George Ayittey

We do not want the UN to come in and impose its solution. We need African solution for an African problem. Otherwise we will be waiting forever. A neutral transition team: any group will want to control it. The military will want to do this. It happened in Egypt and in Nigeria. You need an external group. The Sudanese professional organisations acted like a watchdog. So, neutrality will not arrive by itself. South Africa – there was a watchdog group. Also, in Liberia. They play a vital role.

Engaging with International Democracies

(Day five, 3 July)

Dr Sarah Ogbay

Sarah introduced herself: now in Manchester, but I was with the University of Asmara for 27 years. I am engaged in the Senit movement – which looks at transition. We need to

approach this with care, we find ourselves in the current situation due to mistakes made in the past.

What is required to improve lobbying to achieve democracy? How can we engage with relevant decision-makers? We hope to learn from lessons across the world.

Mike Slotznick - The America Team for Displaced Eritreans

How to advocate right now with democracies and how to advocate after transition.

We will spend most of our discussion on the work currently done, but will also look ahead to building democracy in the future. Together our three organisations: Eritrea Focus (UK), ourselves in the USA and Hotline for Refugees and Migrants (HRM) in Israel, have made progress – we have made a start. But we need to learn how to go forward. The diaspora needs to engage with their governments as well as discuss internally. If there is one lesson it is this: just talk to your government. The American Team had no plan and we learned as we went along. We need to ask what we can do ourselves – not leave it to others.

Each organisation has some successes: advocating for democracy, advocating for refugees, taking issues to court. All the 3 organisations do at least 2 of these. Eritrea Focus and HRM and The America Team all do some of these. We hope to compare notes and we ask people to join. Each organisation has found its own path out of pre-existing organisations, some out of happenstance.

HRM – Israel. About 13 years ago the migrants were tolerated. Gradually the environment became more hostile. Israeli citizens have empathy with refugees, but the tension arises due to the desire to keep the Jewish character of the state.

Eritrea Focus – UK: A strong Eritrean concentration in London and Eritrean professionals. These have been used to become a strong advocacy movement.

American Team: US mostly focussed on refugees from Mexico. But in 1960's John Stauffer was with the Peace Corps and 35 years later was approached by an Eritrean former student. Asked for support. They formed a group and this has continued.

In each case we have seized on our opportunities and resources.

Habte Hagos and Jack Patterson, UK

Jack: Main differences between UK and USA and EU. There is a formal opposition in the UK, which is responsible for scrutinising the work of the government. It can summon ministers to parliament.

I work for an All-Party Parliamentary Group. It does not have the legal ability to summon a minister. It has members from the governing party and the oppositions. Committees can compel evidence. APPG's cannot. In reality ministers do not refuse to attend. There is only one APPG for each subject. An APPG speaks neutrally on any subject, and carries the logo of parliament, but receives no resources from parliament. The members can speak as members of the groups. Ministers are always members of the House of Commons. Some of

the former ministers are members of the APPG. They carry the weight of a former minister and are respected by the civil service.

European Parliament: has always played a larger role in foreign affairs. The development committee had a meeting with the EU civil service and were told that the EU would no longer pay for work involving national service conscripts. The EU is seen as undemocratic and the parliament is seen as weak, but EU civil service feels responsible to the parliament, because it is the only democratic organisation in the EU.

The House of Commons has an increasing role in foreign affairs, since Blair allowed a vote on going to war with Iraq.

Habte: Eritrean diaspora in the UK. There are around 150,000 Eritreans in the UK – about three quarters arrived since 1991. Half of this lives in London or South East. A large number is successful in academia and business. But unlike in the USA no-one has so far been involved in UK politics – at a local government or in parliament. Unfortunate. Eritrea Focus works pro-actively to allow Eritreans to have an access to policy makers.

We are a fairly small organisation and try to work closely with other similarity-minded organisations. We pro-actively reach out to other organisations. We have a network of partner organisations: e.g. forced labour lawyers, extractive organisations, etc. We are non-political and will work with other organisations and individuals, irrespective of background or history. Legal work: we have defended individuals who were attacked by PFDJ. E.g. an attack on Martin Plaut and Emmanuel Eyasu. We helped both and the attacker was convicted.

A case against the International Development Ministry (UK). We have instructed lawyers (Duncan Lewis) to try to halt aid for the road rehabilitation project (Massawa to Ethiopia) which uses national service conscripts. Since the start of the case in May a lot of work has been under way. We have a junior council and a Queen's Council – Richard Herman – who is considering the case. Then we hope to then submit our case to the courts. We hope to press this by end of July and early August. Our lawyers are in contact with lawyers in Canada, Netherlands and the Special Envoy to the UN.

Foundation for Human Rights in the Netherlands has begun work against the EU also on the road project. The EU first put in Euro 20 million. A further Euro 60 million is in the pipeline. The EU justifies this by saying this is being oversighted by UNDP and is not overseeing the project. On 15 June this case was submitted to the courts. On 17 June the EU said it would not fund anything further on the road projects. The Eritrean government has called for a further Euro 50 million but this has been refused.

Normally, we would support aid for our country, but we are not. Firstly: aid is not used for the purpose given. Most aid money goes to offshore bank accounts of PFDJ members according to an IMF report. Secondly: the legal action brings to the fore the slave like conditions of labour. Thirdly: stopping aid cripples the country's economy until the regime halts its human rights abuses. Sanctions halted apartheid; it can work in Eritrea.

Sigal Rozen and Ghebrehiwot Meles, Israel

Sigal: I am a founder of Hotline – begun 22 years ago. We fight for the rights of migrants and since 1998 we have entered detention facilities to give para-legal support and to fight human trafficking. We have achieved systematic changes. Those facing deportation need to know their rights. We work with others which reduce the vulnerability of migrants. Eritreans: there are 22,000 now in Israel, arriving in 2006 and afterward. But only 13 of these have formal recognition as refugees. We have helped them get released from detention centres. These detention centres are used to try to encourage them to leave the country. We work in the media with parliament and encouraging parliamentary debates. We conduct research and produce legal reports. We have helped get rights and benefits for refugees. This includes a Supreme Court ruling that asylum seekers can seek work; a limit on the time of detention; expulsions to Uganda/Rwanda; ending 20% deductions of salaries of asylum seekers.

A new government has been formed. This offers challenges and opportunities.

Ghebrehiwot: We work with Hotline and I am happy to meet other Eritreans and my former classmates. I represent Eritrean refugees who live here in uncertainty. I arrived in Israel in 2007 when all Africans were called “Darfuris”. We established a structure to explain we were Eritreans (different from Darfurians) and increased awareness of our situation amongst the Israeli public. Before 2008, Eritreans were given visas and work permits. But the situation has worsened since.

We have joined parties and movements to help our cause. Every year we demonstrate outside the Eritrean embassy, calling for an end to the dictatorship, so that we can return home. The Eritrean ambassador was challenged and this was broadcast on al-Jazeera. This led other Eritreans entering their embassies and to challenge the representatives of the regime. We have also seen Eritreans from Israel going to Ethiopia and demonstrating on the Eritrean border.

During the COVID-19 lockdown in Israel, we did not receive any benefits. We had to help those who were in difficulties irrespective of their politics. We work on social media, created a single Facebook page where people can get information. We helped about 500 people who were in desperate need for food and rent. We work for the entire Eritrean community, including people who support the Isaias regime. This has allowed us to reach out and create relationships with people who are pro-PFDJ.

John Stauffer, USA

American Team for displaced Eritreans: we do individual work and advocacy work. As Mike said, in 2003 I was contacted by a former student – who threw his return ticket to Asmara in my fire place rather than return home. This alerted me to the situation in the country and why people do not wish to return there.

We have worked with refugees in Ethiopian camps providing them with training. We also assisted refugees who arrived in the USA; we also gave aid to refugees in Sudan and Egypt. Since then we have worked with Eritrean refugees across the world – e.g. Russia, Ukraine and Saudi Arabia. We helped an Eritrean in Vietnam to give birth in hospital. The list goes on and on. Four teams who defected and refugees in Libya have been challenging. In the US several hundred Eritreans seek asylum every year. Many ask for assistance. We provide

testimony and evidence; assistance preparing requests and cash help for phone calls and travel. We have done interviews with many media organisations and produced a one-hour video. There has been lobbying with Congressmen and women and staff. We work to increase knowledge and to halt forced return of refugees.

We have: saved hundreds from deportation; created lines of communication with UN/US officials; testified before US Congress hearing; a letter from 43 Congresspeople was sent to the administration opposing deportations.

Frustrations: little understanding of Eritrea in the US. We have not managed to persuade a Congressman to take up the issue of Eritrea as a major concern. The current administration does not care about Africa. Now there is the re-election of the presidency. The work is hard, but rewarding. We must prepare to ask our governments to act when a democratic government unfolds.

Q & A

Mike: Can all panellists please engage. Jack: the APPG is successful. Is this true?

Jack: It is active. We worked with other APPGs. We have 15 officers now. Eritrea is towards the top of almost every human rights list. How do we measure success? This is hard. Britain paid into the EU road programme. We tried to get to know who signed off the road building programme, when it used slave labour. No-one wants to come forward.

Habte: we have some key supporters – e.g. Lord Alton, a committed Christian. Religious persecution is a major issue for him and for others. On the extractive sector, there are other individuals and organisations both national and international that we work with.

Mike: we wish we had someone like Lord Alton in the US. Habte and Jack try to answer. Not easy but it always helps to identify the specific interests of parliamentarians.

John: We don't have significant diaspora groups that campaign in Congress. How can we rally them? They oppose Isaias, but they don't effectively engage. How can we get them to engage? All their energy is internal – over the last 15 years.

Habte: We had Glennys Kinnock, who was a politician and then in the House of Lords. She had a network of contacts. Helped us to form the APPG. Finding the first person is the trick. In terms of mobilising the diaspora, that is proving elusive to us on this side of the pond too. But things are beginning to change and there are now a lot more Eritreans in diaspora opposing the regime in Asmara than there were only a few years ago.

Jack: MPs often have a constituency office and a political office. Working with a diaspora group may not work. Can the US work with the black caucus in Congress?

Mike: we have tried to work with African-American congresspeople, but to little effect.

Ghebrehiwot: I am a member of EPDP but during the COVID pandemic we had a taskforce working to help Eritreans in some sort of a crisis management capacity.

Sigal: Lobbying in the Knesset (Israeli Congress). We have one lobbyist who works for a number of refugee organisations. She identifies who in Knesset to approach, arranges meetings with parliament members who are sympathetic. But these are few and far between. Most do not care about refugees – even if they are sent back to die. “We are a small country surrounded by enemies – we cannot help,” is usually what they say.

Mike: There are groups – like the Poles, who work together, e.g. public relations. Is there a concept for community relations in Israel to improve their image?

Ghebrehiwot: Yes, we make demonstrations. We work on specific issues and win on these. Our lobbying: because we are divided, we are less successful.

John: Article in the Guardian: This is about the 7 members of the football team that was in Uganda for a match who decided not to go back and were in hiding in Kampala. We were contacted to help. We found a place for them to go for some months. The PFDJ found them. They did this by lured one out – they knifed him. So, we are lobbying with UNHCR to get in there. Mike: I raise this because the Guardian comments on the work of the American Team.

Q and A with participants

Comment: We are only talking to ourselves. We have done very little with Trump in the Whitehouse.

Comment and Q: I was deeply touched by the work of the three groups. It amazes me to learn what can be done by a few dedicated individuals. We have the Yiakl group USA. We have the research group. What can they do? But what are the risks we face if we back Biden?

John: You focus on asylum seekers in US. Under Trump things have gone very badly. I can see no downside for you to campaign. It is up to you. But you need to see your members of Congress. Get groups of Eritreans to lobby their offices. You will see staff and explain to them what is going on. Begin the process, as you have votes.

Mike: We are non-partisan and don't link with any political party.

Comment and Q: Disunity is a major issue. How can we unite the divided diaspora? I live in the US and I am involved in politics. When I go to the government, they ask me where are our supporters. How can we mobilise our people in the diaspora?

Habte: How best to bring the Eritrean communities together – this is the topic for tomorrow, but it is critical. The question we should ask is what is our first problem – is it Isaias, or is it disunity? I think the latter. Our disunity is sustaining the regime. We have the largest per capital opposition groups in the world. Hard to explain who we represent when we lobby, a big challenge and recurrent challenge. This constant talk of ELF-EPLF division is not helpful and frankly drives me and a lot of others mad. Many of the people who were in the struggle are our problem when they should be the solution. We need young people to come forward. The opposition are in their 70's or older and unfit to govern. This is why I

encourage everyone to stand behind the Yiakl movement. They are our only hope at the moment.

John: We try to make things perfect. The main thing is to raise awareness – whoever delivers it. It does not matter which party delivers it.

Comment: I work in EEPA in Brussels and work on refugee rights. We engage with the EU and Netherlands. We are always asked: what alternatives do you have? How do you convince the major powers to intervene? We have raised issues of extortion in the Netherlands. It was a domestic problem. On the road building programme, it was not the role of the EU Parliament that changed the issue. Denmark, Netherlands and Germany intervened. It was their intervention that changed policy on the road building. It was by raising issues of internal issues – like abuse, threats and 2% tax that changed policy.

Comment and Q: In the US I am part of Yiakl. We try to work with Congressmembers when it comes to deportations. The Yiakl movement has brought together refugees in Sudan and Ethiopia. It was not enough to meet the crisis, but many people joined hands and contributed – even some who were pro-regime. They contributed funds. My question: how can Yiakl – now in 7 countries – help solve the question of refugees? I look forward to another event – I can help with the Yiakl movement.

Mikel: Please contact us, Fikre.

Habte: There needs to be a forum to discuss refugee communities. Eritrea Focus can help organise this.

Q: Discouraging aid and investment deprives funds from going to the Eritrean government. But what about the collateral damage to the Eritrean people? Secondly, is there any work to explain this to the people?

Habte: A lot of the international aid to Eritrea never reaches the country. All you have to do is read the World Bank report released in March 2020 that explicitly states where international aid for Eritrea goes. In terms of inward investment e.g. extractive sector, I ask if we really want to see our youth enslaved, tortured, raped and abused in these projects in the way the UN and many others have reported? I hate to see a single Eritrean family go hungry but sadly that may be the sacrifice we have to make. Can you imagine our country been liberated from Ethiopian oppression without the sacrifice our martyrs made? Freedom is NOT free. Further work on this need to be carried out to explain the rationale behind divestment.

Q: How can democracies help us to have democratic change?

Mike: Just do it. Get together. Choose a leader. Communicate with your government. Just do it.

Q: We live in fear in Israel. Human rights organisations fight for our rights. But I want to add to Habte's point. Outside aid does not go to the Eritrean people. The exchange rate of money sent to Eritrea is terrible – it is a rip-off by the regime.

Q: We have a problem with Eritrean refugees in Saudi. They have been ordered to leave, or go to jail. Can you help - I can give you the details, John?

John: Please contact me after the meeting and we will discuss.

Comment and Q: There is a hidden famine in Eritrea. People say they are starving. In the lowlands, children are dying from malnutrition. The regime has no interest in feeding the population. The regime refuses to accept aid from Ali Baba. The UAE in Assab offered help to the community but the regime has blocked it. Is hunger not the priority of the people?

Q: I was touched by the work of the US group. Eritrea belongs to all Eritreans, irrespective of their political parties. Does the UK Eritrea Focus have contact with the EU?

Habte: Food aid is needed for our people – as raised above. However, when the Eritrean government is hell-bent on starving its people, where do we go? The fact that the UK is leaving the EU makes it difficult for us to work with the EU, but we can work with people like EEPA and Klara.

Q: What they are asking in Sweden and other countries is asking them to bring IDs from their embassies. How can they do that when they know they had fled the regime and asked to go to the embassy, which will force them to sign the 'I regret' document.

Q: Mobilising public opinion has been tried in many countries for the last 20 years but has not worked. Diplomatic and political sanctions are important. I come from Sweden and I am the eldest activist. When we approach the Swedish Gov and other organisations, they ask us – who do you represent? A point also raised by Habte.

There are 41,000 Eritreans in Sweden. Those in the opposition face difficulties. They are asked to go to the Eritrean embassy to ask for ID. Their hands are tied. How can they ask the refugees to bring IDs from the embassy that persecuted them in the first place?

Most of the regime supporters are refugees... they invest in housing in Asmara... You run away from a country and you go back and invest. Isn't that double standard?

We have been told that after the Isaias-Abiy deal that the situation has now changed. Are they still investing in Eritrea? How can our people in Saudi and Middle East who are under the absolute control of the PFDJ be helped?

Comment and Q: Eritreans, we always had this question of unity that was never solved. In contrast, the effort and help from friends of Eritrea was amazing. But after independence, those friends were chased away because they became the watchdog. That may happen again as freedom fighters turn into dictatorship after taking power. Us Eritreans, how many human rights organisations do we have and duplicate efforts? But I want us to address the time before and after change and I would like the friends of Eritrea to stay as neutral as much as possible.

Habte – On Eritrea opposition unity I am afraid I do not know the answer to that. In terms of human rights groups working together, we approached many groups but there was not much success. We got a response from two groups but even those did not progress much. But we in Eritrea Focus are always ready and willing to work with like-minded organisations.

Q: Israel has a strategic relationship with Eritrea although they do not say it openly. The Israeli politicians have tried to make us look like economic refugees. They used the photos of some Eritreans who were dancing at the embassy to justify their claims. The Eritrean Govt also systematically exploits the situation, they control us in different ways and extract money from us, e.g. housing investment, bonds, expatriating bodies, etc.

Mike/John - Another problem with Eritrean ID is that many Eritrean groups come with different ID cards belonging to different opposition groups, instead of only one. This makes it difficult for the authorities. We helped one Eritrean to be released from prison after one year by lobbying with an organisation in the US. We have seen more than 100 Eritrean doctors and professionals come together and that is a good example. If they are able to do that, then we can do that as well and our misery can end.

Working together

(Day six, 4 July)

A minute silence to remember our compatriot and former Eritrean Ambassador to the UK, Mr. Afewerki Abraha, was held. Our brother Afewerki passed away two months ago due to COVID-19. He was a great supporter of Eritrea Focus and attended our conference last year. We also remembered all those who died from the virus.

Professor Araya Debessay – welcome remarks

This is the session with the highest attendance – an indication of the interest of Eritreans to come together. We all know the atrocities of the regime. For several years we have said we are close to losing our sovereignty. We need to save our country and bring about a democratic change. Everyone – apart from the regime – has proved their loyalty. The 2020 manifesto of academics have established the Eritrean Institute for Policy and Strategy. They have called for people to join. The Institute will enable the diaspora to work together to move towards democracy. I urge you to join. Until we are united, we will not be supported by the international community. Yiaki is a movement for unity. All of our people should join. First, we need to work together, without denying the rights of our political parties, which will form part of our post-Isaias multi-party democracy. I hope we can all work together.

Mr Abdurahman Sayed – Multiparty democracy can bring us together. I have been an activist for 30 years and I am the moderator for this session. The aim of the virtual conference is to produce a blueprint for a democratic government. The papers will be based on the remarks at this conference. We will look at the role of women and youth – including refugees. How can we re-unite our people?

Dr Fessehaye Woldeyesus – member of the Eritrea Focus Conference Organising Committee and leading the Working Together Group. The Group has drafted a working together document for further consultations and in that endeavour, we will aim to involve faith groups, women, youth, civic societies and political parties. We will look at the strengths and weaknesses of our working together from the perspectives of past experience and explore ways how best our failures can be avoided. Our disunity only helps to exacerbate the suffering of our people in the hands of the dictator.

We are all suffering and desperately want change that leads to democracy and for our people to live as normal human beings in their own hard-won country. We are all victims of the regime in one way or another. If we continue as we are, the suffering will undoubtedly worsen and the regime gains. It is important we change course and look at issues that unite us rather than those that divide.

How do we do this? The first phase of change starts with the diaspora. The second involves those living in Eritrea, who are, by far, the major stakeholders. The issues at hand and must be addressed are; (a) how we facilitate the will of our people to establish a democratic Eritrea? and (b) how we should plan and manage transition when it comes? These important issues can only be addressed if we are united. Unity is not a novice concept for the Eritrean people. Through unity our freedom fighters defeated a formidable power that was armed to the teeth by the superpowers. For us to coming together should not be impossible given our past experience. If we can unite in the past, we can most certainly unite now to face a formidable internal enemy that is hell-bent to destroy our people and the very existence of our country.

In this afternoon's session we will have eight presentations from various faith groups, women, academics and young activists. The message throughout these presentations will be to focus in the future rather than dwell in the past.

Dr Berhane Asmelash – studied medicine in Addis Ababa and returned to Eritrea after independence. He came to the UK in 1999 and is the chair of Release Eritrea (a Charity that advocates for religious freedom in Eritrea). The Charity also works with refugees in Ethiopia and the UK.

Christianity arrived in Ethiopia in 330 AD and it became a state religion. The first Muslim followers fled persecution to come to the region and the Negus (King) welcomed them. There have been conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the past that were instigated by external forces. During the British administration of Eritrea there was initially no division between the two faiths and until the British came up with the idea of partitioning the country along religious lines; Muslims to Sudan and Christian highlanders to Ethiopia. This partition was planned by Sir Newbolt in 1943. The Beni Amar rejected the division of their country and so did other groups. About 75% of the population were for independence. There was a consensus for a progressive country.

After independence and until 2002, there was freedom to worship. The PFDJ then summoned faith leaders and insisted they formally register with the authorities. Some religious institutions were linked to established movements. Their leaders, therefore, hoped the regime would re-open their places of worship, but this has not happened. Instead they faced slander and suggestions that they worked for the CIA. There were arrests. Hundreds of Pentecostals have been imprisoned along with their clergy. Many Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and others have also been arrested.

Muslims and Christians have lived in peace in Eritrea for 1,400 years. Eritreans fought side by side heroically during the struggle, regardless of their faith, to free our country from Ethiopian oppression. We need and must build on our strength and common identity to unite to free our country this time from an internal enemy. It is crucially important we work on our weaknesses that include Islamic fundamentalism, regionalism and Agazianism. We

need a dialogue of all faith groups and practice civility and respect each other. 'Love your neighbour as yourself' whether they are Christian or Muslim, without discrimination. Discrimination against anyone is discrimination against us all.

Sheikh Adam Omar Abu Hanifah – born in Asmara and he gained a BA from Morocco University. He is an expert on Islam in the West and Chairman of Eritrean Islamic Academic Network. Sheikh Omar thanked Eritrea Focus for its invitation and its work. He added we see all such initiatives as positive and help narrow differences through dialogue.

We were approached by Eritrea Focus to take part in the Conference a little late and so we have not had time to gather all the information on repression of Muslims in Eritrea. The regime maintains secrecy. Persecution from followers of Islam began at independence and we have been viewed with suspicion ever since. The first victims of the regime were Muslims. There was a crackdown on our intellectuals, teachers, businessmen and fighters, who were seen as potential sources of opposition. Many in Keren were arrested and have not been seen since. Some 150 were executed. The regime tightly controls what is said in our Mosques all around the country.

Friday services are swamped by secret service and teaching is censored. Dr Faha Nur was arrested and disappeared. In 2008 at least 40 scholars and teachers were arrested and taken away in unmarked cars. In 2017, the Abdiya School in Asmara was closed and its leadership arrested. In 2018 there were further arrests. Muslim groups are not allowed to receive funding from Muslim countries, while the Catholics could receive overseas assistance until recently.

Most of the Eritrean people wish to live together side by side as they have done for a long time. The current disharmony between faiths in our communities is instigated by the regime.

Sheikh Adam suggested the following as a way forward that can help bring the various faith groups together:

- To prepare a new Constitution in an atmosphere free from intimidation where all citizens can participate and have a voice;
- Half a million refugees are in Sudan – mostly Muslims. They were not allowed to return after independence. They must have the right to return to their homeland;
- Eritrean Muslims reject extremism. We therefore object to being treated as second class citizens and threats to security. We demand to be treated as equal citizens of our country;
- Islam should be equal to all other religions in the country and Muslims allowed to control their own affairs;
- Community leaders should be allowed to educate the youth on religion and faith; and
- Violence should be challenged by all faiths.

Rev. Yohannes Gebrehiwet – an orthodox priest from Manchester, UK and a broadcaster, with many followers. A regular keynote speaker on freedom and justice when Patriarch Antonios was removed from his position in 2006. As a result, he was under house arrest by the regime. Three leaders of the renewal group and five monks are still in jail.

Government interference has affected all Eritreans. The Eritrean government needs to change direction. We need transition by revolution or a democratic transformation. Only then will religious freedom be achieved, which is our human right.

We need to recognise the moral imperative to confront injustice. All groups and faiths must come together to share our stories and efforts to bring about freedom and human rights.

Q & A

Fessehaye – we need to look forward to the future. Everyone accepts what has gone wrong and the injustices of the past. To move forward, we need to ask; what role can faith group leaders play, together and separately?

Comment: I would like to see a free Eritrea to take up issues of Muslims, the same for other faith groups as well as support others collaboratively.

Comment and Q: each religious group has subdivisions. But we want unity between religious groups. Did you invite other groups – like the Catholics? Why are they not here? In 1993 when the Muslims were attacked did the Christians speak out? In 1952, full freedom of religion was guaranteed. I ask Dr Berhane and Rev Yohannes: Did your church speak out when Muslims were arrested or killed? Only the Catholics spoke out.

Berhane: When I heard in 1993 that Muslims were being arrested, the propaganda at that time was that the Muslims were fundamentalists. We were a new country and sadly believed what Isaias said. I later tried to speak out, but I was pushed out by my own faith perhaps for fear of reprisal by the regime. Now that I know how deceitful Isaias is, I apologise for not speaking out. It was a mistake.

Sheikh Adam: If we are to move to a new Eritrea then we have to accept this land is the land for all. The regime has not survived because it is strong, but because we are weak and disunited. We do not have different groups of Muslims – only one. We must respect other faiths for the common good of our country.

Dr Asia Abdelqadir – Chairwoman of the Network of Eritrean Women. She has worked as a gender consultant for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), where she developed manuals and conducted relevant assessment research. She was a Programme Manager for Chief of Party (Mercy Corps Somalia) and is the Country Coordinator of the German aid organisation, Kindernothilfe, for Somaliland.

Building democracy in Eritrea and the role of women: In the past few years, the number of Eritrean women joining the Eritrean opposition and justice seekers in the diaspora has increased exponentially. However, only a few hold leadership positions and women's organisations are often marginalized and excluded from major roles. It is therefore vital to examine the absence of women in leadership positions, eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and re-visit some of the gender-responsive recommendations previously made. It is also important to emphasize on Eritrean women's crucial role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes. Here are few recommendations:

- Ensure women's meaningful participation;

- There needs to be an equal representation of women /women’s voices and needs;
- All groups should protect Eritrean women’s rights;
- It is imperative that all groups advocate against gender oppressive cultural and traditional practices and gender-based violence against women; and
- All groups should encourage a culture of open discussions to promote women’s participation in economic, social and political structures as equal partners.

Dr Mohamed Kheir Omer - former Dean of the College of Agriculture and Aquatic Sciences at the University of Asmara. Member of the “G 13” who wrote an open letter to the President of Eritrea in 2000, calling for democratic reforms. Author of “The Dynamics of an unfinished African dream.”

Eritrea is not only a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural, but is historically diverse and politically plural. We state this fact more than we practice it. The culture of negation, exclusion, not accepting others, the definition of Eritrea from one’s narrow interpretation has been one of our problems. Add to that the notion of playing the vanguard, I know it all, and you have to follow me, has hindered us from working together on a common platform. We must understand and embrace our diversity wholly to be able to work together. Some of the challenges we face today have roots in our distant past. It is helpful that we look back into history. Here are some ideas that could help alleviate the problems we have:

- It is essential that we understand, recognize, and holistically appreciate our diversity and agree on basic principles on how to manage our variety in the future in a democratic country;
- we need to recognize the President cannot and will not reform, will not deliver power to the people willingly. Like all dictators, he will hold to power to the last;
- The regime has lost all legitimacy to rule us, represent us, and speak on our behalf;
- The government is not only an individual called Isaias Afworki but an array of beneficiaries, a system that also has a social base, the ‘Nhna Nissu, Nsu Nihna’ and we need to work to separate him from his social support;
- As opponents to the regime: We have to unequivocally accept that the Eritrean people are the ultimate owners of their destiny;
- The current opposition role is to topple the government and hand over power to the people. Whatever we produce: a road map, a charter, a transitional structure, mechanisms of managing our diversity need to be approved by the Eritrean people after the regime falls. We have to practice democracy, uphold the rule of law and hold a higher moral ground than the government in our organizations, be it civil or political;
- It is vital that we engage the youth, women and lay the ground for them to be masters of their future. The youth need to engage with the older generation, learn from their mistakes, and build on their strengths. The future is theirs, and they have to own it. We need to increase our efforts to involve women in the fight against dictatorship. The struggle cannot be won without their participation; and
- We need a clear strategy on how to engage positively with all neighbours and the international community without comprising our sovereignty. The policy of antagonism and insults practiced by some corners will not take us anywhere and only serves the regime—an influential unified media and a joint diplomatic action plan to counter the regime’s vast propaganda machine is essential.

Dr Salah Ibrahim Jimi – Lecturer on Climate and Earth Science Systems at Monash University. He is member of Eritrean-Australians Advocacy Team. His effort is well recognised among members of the Eritrean communities in Australia, particularly in Perth and Melbourne. He has been an active member of the Eritrean Community in Australia Inc., and served as a lead member in the office of Social Relations between 2005 and 2008.

His presentation was on Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Eritrean Perspective: In most developing countries – including colonial and postcolonial Eritrea – the main cause of conflict is entrenched injustice arising from socio-economic grievances. Conflicts in the Horn of Africa have been worsened by on-going conspiracies on the part of governments of the region against each other. Rather than embracing the noble idea of good neighbourliness and cooperation, these governments have resorted to conspiracy as a means to prolonging their grip on power. The long stalemate in the Eritrean case can be primarily attributed to the self-styled uncompromising character of Isaias Afwerki and fragmented opposition.

I seek to initiate discussions on how to guarantee firstly a smooth and orderly transition from dictatorship to an era marked by governance of the rule of law; and more importantly, to achieve a durable peace, justice and democracy in post-PFDJ Eritrea.

- The importance of political consensus in the opposition camp. Can we afford to convey multiple National Conferences? And what does this imply for our national unity?
- Do Eritreans properly understand the real causes of their grievances? And do Eritreans discuss contentious issues in an open honest and transparent manner?
- What does social justice in an Eritrean context mean?
- A strategy to embrace good elements of the Eritrean regime (if any), which will in part, guarantee smooth peaceful and orderly transition from dictatorship to the rule of law;
- Fostering relationship among opposition political parties/organisations and civil societies.

Leading a nation like ours requires deep understanding of the needs of each section of the society, and more importantly, a constitution ratified through proper democratic process. The problem is worsened by the lack of role models and charismatic leaders or a team leadership of prominent national figures capable of creating harmony among the diverse social groups. To effectively resolve any conflict and to achieve a long-lasting peace, political dogma and perceived mindset need to be replaced with pragmatism. That is the key message of this presentation and it is an important one!

Fikre Gaim – is a Lead Strategy Advancement Advisor. He is one of the executive leaders of Bayto Yeakl USA and specifically leads the Dialogue and Reconciliation Task Force. The global Yeakl is an inclusive mass movement (civic society + parties + scholars and professionals, women) that and fight for democratic change and then transitional period.

Working together is the only way forward. Yeakl can be a tool to fight the PFDJ and help with post-PFDJ transition. Eritreans are in a crisis of trust both inside and outside of the country. The government does not trust its people and we do not trust the government nor do we trust each other. The root of this mistrust is complex, but without trust there is no way forward and no mass movement to change the status quo. In order to build an effective Eritrean mass movement, we must among others, create the conditions of trust, healing, engagement and cooperation among ourselves immediately. There are four pragmatic concepts that every Eritrean should commit to moving forward:

- (a) Create a consolidated powerful movement;
- (b) Engage and empower our citizens now;
- (c) Focus on empowerment of the youth and women; and
- (d) Start a national dialogue and reconciliation process

Our struggle for a democratic peaceful change in Eritrea must change direction immediately if we are to be successful. We need one united face of the opposition not over 60 organizations so that the silent majority can easily distinguish the choices they are making. More importantly, our limited resources are not scattered but laser focused on the enemy. This united mass movement should encompass those inside and outside Eritrea. We need to ensure that the youth and women are engaged and empowered, and this will ultimately determine whether the movement grows or dies.

Change comes from each and every Eritrean getting together, participating, trusting each other to make our situation better, grow stronger and healthier. It is also important to note that positive change cannot be sustained without building sustainable civil societies and democratic institutions. All these will have to start with mutual trust, open dialogue and reconciliation for national healing.

The transition could be shaped by:

- Scholars who could start the government until the parties are ready to take over;
- Professionals and civic organisations should create a united front starting today so that we have a smooth transition that is sustainable;
- Youth and women – there is still little participation, including in this conference. We need to empower the youth and women; and
- Reconciliation – among different groups. We never had the chance for reconciliation after independence. Reconciliation should be one of the core initiative post regime change and perhaps start now...

Mohammed, I was talking about the stakeholders. Dr Tronvol and Dr. Abdulkader Saleh made a stakeholder assessment in 2015. Eritrean opposition is characterised by divisions along religious and ethnic lines but also the legacy from the armed struggle.

We need to agree that Eritrean people are the ultimate owners of their destiny – reconciliation among the different groups is critical. Although I belong to a certain societal group, I believe I am defined by the characteristics of other members of Eritrean society. So, we have to look at it in a holistic way.

Fessehaye – We already know the grievances we have; we need to look forward. We also need to think of the previous generation and how it could be linked with the next generation. We are divided because we do not trust each other. We have had no problem of religion in Eritrea before but there were signs when crimes were committed in the field against certain groups. Now we are doing the same and saying let's wait and we would look at things after change. I warn you; we are in danger of repeating those mistakes and we need to work on it now to avoid repeating the same mistake.

Comment. It relates to the Orthodox Church. I would like to highlight that the Orthodox Church is a major and older institution and has suffered much under the PFDJ. We need and must understand the confusion that can arise by mixing religion and politics.

Comment and Q: The suffering of the Eritrean people first started with Muslims, then Jehovahs Witness and finally the Orthodox Church. All have suffered under the PFDJ. What can we learn from the reconciliation process in South Africa?

Comment and Q: I would echo what was said about religious groups working together and also the point on the generational issues. My question starts from Dr Asia's remarks that we are not listening to each other. We need to think how a national dialogue can be held now before we go into transition? Could Eritrea Focus hold a national reconciliation forum?

Comment: What I would like to say is that Snit, Eritrea Focus and Manifesto 2020, look like the same - too many and confusing. They should come together. The same with the parties... they need to come together as one.

Comment: We need to start talking about our problems... and a conference would be a good start.

Sheikh Mohammed – Religious leaders, unlike politicians, we focus on a specific issue. It is very difficult for us to take the initiative to work together with other groups although we would be very willing. This is a good start and we need to take it further and Eritrea Focus should take this initiative instead of asking us to do it by ourselves.

Comment: what we need is a secular state that works in a transparent and accountable manner that is independent and treats all religious groups equal. I would like to help organise the conference for religious groups.

Comment: If you look at the history of ArbaEte Asmera, it was the women that led the unity and kicked the enemy out. Women have been dormant during the last decade but good to see that they are waking up now.

We need to support the Yeakl because it is very independent and doesn't aspire for power.

Comment: There exist many blueprints by many organisations, Nairobi and Medrekh - 2015, Snit – last year, EPG with Eriplatform – this year and others, and now Manifesto 2020? What makes Eritrea Focus's initiative different?

Comment and in response to above: We do not want to be one but identify a common vision. On the platform and initiatives, let them do it their own way and we choose the best as they are all different.

Fikre - on reconciliation we have to start within ourselves and now. On moving forward and a roadmap – participants of this conference need to come up with a roadmap.

Comment: I have posted a link on the declaration of the coming together of the opposition parties and also the Awasa declaration on the transition.

Q: one question to the organisers of the conference: The number of participants from youth groups is small. We have seen good young leaders coming up – the older generation needs to pass its legacy...

Comment: Those with bad history can still be part of change. We need to forgive but not forget.

Comment: We are all in pain... Let's not focus on our pain but think as people that is united by our pains.

Q: What specific areas of the constitution need looking at and how would a new constitution help?

To Fikre: Why can't Yeakl be involved in power sharing?

Fikre – The political parties are also within Yeakl. So Yeakl has to act only as a watchdog and should not vie for power.

Comment: Working together is crucial – the international community understands that Isaias is not able to make peace and has become a liability because of his involvement in Ethiopia. There is a momentum to work with the international community and we need to exploit that goodwill.

Comment: The Eritrean youth is mostly outside Eritrea scattered all over the world. There are two worlds. The majority of our people, the young ones in particular, discuss things on Facebook while the professionals use twitter. Eritrean intellectuals have the responsibility to bring the youth closer.

Comment and Q: We need to acknowledge that women experience issues differently from men. So, we need to think about that. How much of the participation of women raised by Asia last year was addressed?

Comment: You need to improve women's participation.

Habte – Apologised for the low number of women participants but this was not due to lack of trying. He then asked Asia and Fessehaye to look into this issue and ways of increasing women's participation in Eritrea Focus's work and future conferences.

Comment: I want to challenge each and every one of us to take initiative. It should not be left only to a specific group.

Closing remarks by Habte Hagos

[Not read at the end of conference due to time constraint. It was published on Eritrea Hund and Assenna website shortly after the conference].

As this conference draws to a close it is my pleasure to make a few final remarks.

Let me begin by thanking everyone for their contributions; whether you are here today, or you were here earlier in the week. I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that this has been a considerable success, where we all too often feared it would be a failure.

As you may know, we had prepared for a conventional conference in partnership with the University of London Institute of Commonwealth Studies, with a wonderful venue kindly donated by them. Sadly, COVID struck and it was not to be. All those face-to-face meetings and informal discussions were, unfortunately, lost.

However, the task of working on a transitional blueprint for a democratic Eritrea was urgent, and we had to act. So, we took advantage of this new technology, and here we are. People attended from various parts of the United States, Australia, Israel, Southern and East Africa and beyond.

I want to thank everyone who participated, giving so much of their time and energy to helping us take this work forward. Much of the credit must go to the experts who spent over a year preparing the papers that underlay the ideas that we have been discussing. The spirit of lively, but courteous, debate that characterised this week is a credit to us all. Even when the most hotly-contested issues were before us, we treated each other with respect – something we cannot say always characterises Eritrean discussions!

Special thanks must go to those who worked hard behind the scenes: Helen Kidane, Yvonne Orenge, Paulos Michael and Kiflom Teklehaimanot in particular. We are also immensely grateful to our sponsors – the National Endowment for Democracy. Their generosity has made this conference possible. I will be formally writing them to convey our thanks for their donation.

As I said at the start of this conference, we will now take the comments and feed them into the discussions we will continue to have to formulate a blueprint. Once this has been thoroughly prepared and reviewed, we will be ready to go public with our work. We hope to hold a further conference towards the end of the year/early next at which we can formally present our blueprint to the participants and then make it public for the Eritrean people. Our aim will be – as ever – to make a contribution to a democratic, free country. Our work, along with that of others, should help a future government to find a way forward in those first, vital months following a transition.

What this conference has shown is the immense goodwill that permeates our community. Eritreans from very different backgrounds came together to share their experiences. It was humbling to listen to men and women who have spent the best part of their lives attempting to build the kind of Eritrea that we all want. We heard from Professor George Ayittey (from Ghana) on the lessons from other African nations which was insightful. We listened brother Festum Abraham's comments about how vital a neutral administration is in overseeing a transition process.

For me, this conference had three key lessons.

Firstly, there is a deep desire in our Eritrean community to unite, work together and to transform that desire into a movement that can lead us to a new democratic Eritrea that is

at peace with itself and its neighbours. Eritrea Focus is not that movement, but we are willing to assist and do all we can to encourage our diverse communities to come together;

Secondly, we have an immense pool of goodwill from our allies across the world. Whether you look at the work of the *Hotline for Refugees* in Israel, or the *America Team for Displaced Eritreans*, we know who our friends are. We will build on their contributions and find others who can support our work. We already have links with democratic institutions across the world. We will strengthen these and seek even more supporters who share our vision, whenever we can and wherever they maybe; and

Thirdly, our work – collectively – is well understood and appreciated by our people. We can say with some confidence that even in the villages of Eritrea and the refugee camps of Sudan, Ethiopia and Libya there is an increasing awareness of what we, in the diaspora, are doing. The regime may seem strong and stable; the reality is quite the opposite. The more credible and viable we are, the more confident our Eritrean people will be that the bright future ahead belongs to them and no one, but no one, can take it away from them again.

Finally, and as we bring the conference to a close, I would like to pose two question that, we as Eritreans, need to take away with us and ponder upon:

1. Was the sacrifice of our martyrs to liberate our country from Ethiopian oppression only for our people to be humiliated, abused, enslaved and exiled in their tens of thousands by an internal enemy?
2. What are we going to do about it individually and/or collectively to ensure justice is served and that the long nightmare of our people comes to an end with the establishment of a truly democratic nation in which all can thrive in peace and security?

I often wondered who or what the worst enemy of the Eritrean people is; Isaias or our disunity? I was, therefore, absolutely delighted to hear from brother Hailemariam Tesfai that the Eritrean opposition groups have decided to unite. I commend them hugely for that. At long last, the suffering and nightmare of the Eritrean people may be coming to an end.

With that, I bring this conference to a close - I wish you all well and stay safe.

Thank you.

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