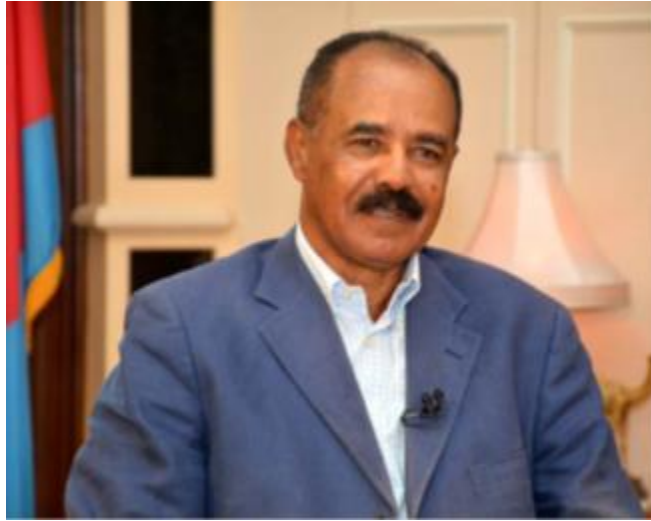


Interview with President Isaias Afwerki On topical regional issues



President Isaias Afwerki was interviewed by local media on topical regional issues on Sunday, 14 January this month. Excerpts of the interview :

Q: Mr. President, last week the Al-Jazeera television channel at Egypt broadcast a story asserting that Egyptian and Emirati troops equipped with tanks and aircraft were deployed in Sawa (western Eritrea). This news story was recycled by numerous media outlets without any verification. What are the origins and aim of this story?

PIA: I heard this news story while I was on the plane back home from Abu Dhabi. Frankly, I consider it a silly joke of 2018. We can raise many questions with regard to its aim, its timing and its links with various events taking place in our region and the wider neighborhood. This issue is not new at all. This false news is part and parcel of the cumulative lies, related to Eritrea, that have been fabricated in a similar manner. While we can mention a number of examples in relation to how such news stories originate and their potential consequences, what immediately comes to my mind is a previously fabricated news story claiming that Egyptian troops were deployed in Tsorona. Before they launched the attack against Eritrea at Tserona, the Weyane (TPLF) cadres told their army that “Egyptian army contingents had been deployed there”. How the Weyane regime tries to misconstrue and distort its ties and perspectives with Egypt is a broad and complicated issue. Leaving this aside, how can one justify the loss of life and other sacrifices that ensue from these fabrications?

At this moment, it is being claimed that Egypt has deployed soldiers and weapons in Eritrea. What was aired by the Al-Jazeera news agency was a fraction, the tip of the iceberg, in this campaign of disinformation. It was subsequently claimed that Egyptian troops have also been deployed in Barentu. This was apparently concocted to entangle the Sudan into the trap. There were allusions to verification of this story by independent and credible sources. We hear intelligence and security officials from Ethiopia and the Sudan held meetings in Kassala “to assess the exact locations of this supposed Egyptian troop deployment and to monitor its activities”.

All these stories are pure fabrications. But the architects of these lies often cite places and names in order to imbue credibility to their wild allegations. For example, it was claimed in one of the news report that a military officer named Tekle Manjus has been assigned to coordinate the troops deployed in Southern Barentu. How does such disinformation influence ordinary people and decision makers?

The lie associated with Sawa is the most baseless one. It has to be the most ridiculous joke because of its short-lived nature. In a way, it illustrates that those who fabricate these lies are not sophisticated enough to mislead the public. Al-Jazeera is a news agency serving such purposes. Obviously, we need to take into account how it is funded, led and managed. Al-Jazeera has established an office in Addis Ababa with the express purpose of coordinating the malicious agendas and conspiracies targeting Eritrea. Regardless of the claims made during its inauguration, this office is there to spread ill-advised propaganda against Eritrea. The fictitious news about Sawa was fabricated by this office. When you consider how informed those who are involved in the fabrication and spread of the false news are, you tend to feel that they are aliens from Mars or other planets. CJTN is a Chinese TV channel. Their correspondent in Cairo was asked to comment on the news story? He was supposedly an expert on the region and well-informed about the issue. He stated, unabashedly: “I know that the UAE has a military base at Sawa Island! But I am not sure whether the Egyptians are there or not.” This shows how such fake stories are spread without minimum verification. What will this correspondent say if asked whether there is indeed an Island called Sawa and in which Sea it is found? Other big TV channels too followed suit. The story was gullibly recycled by Russia Today and other major networks who quoted and requited Al Jeezera without any validation. All these fabrications indicate the frivolity of the architects of these lies: the Weyane regime and its patrons. The Weyane regime is really a surrogate that does not have its own indepdent agend. So in a way, the blame rests squarely on its patrons.

This latest disinformation is linked to what was previously propagated about Israeli surveillance station at Emba Soira. That Israel and Iran have military

bases in Eritrea's Dahlak Islands was routinely claimed for almost a decade now. Most lies are short-lived; just the same as how dew evaporates shortly. The lie associated with the deployment of Egyptian troops is the most frivolous one and it is less likely to mislead the public. What will Egyptian troops deployed in Sawa do? If we really assume that Sudan is the target of "this conspiracy" what is the point of Sawa as Egypt's border with Sudan in the north is wider and closer to the Sudan. Therefore, why do Sawa, Barentu, Haykota, Tserona become issues? Is the threat directed at the Weyane regime? Again, this is silly and deliberately propagated to deflect public attention from the Woyane's domestic woes and crisis. The fact is Ethiopia's situation has become very worrisome and uncontrollable, both to Weyane and its patrons, and hence the ramping up of the disinformation campaign.

Weyane has multiple patrons. The fact that over time the situation in Ethiopia has been very disheartening and disappointing to all of them on the one hand, and the futility of the conspiracies engineered against Eritrea in the last 25 years on the other, have caused and fueled such fabrications and diversions. I would like to take this opportunity to praise the Eritrean people for their steadfastness and resilience to overcome the prolonged conspiracies against our country. While Weyane was supposed to be a servile agent of its patrons and a lot has been invested to strengthen it and weaken others in the region, the reverse has happened. What is being propagated in relation to Egypt is a baseless claim and a lame excuse intended to cover up the failures associated with the misguided policies of Weyane and its patrons.

The lies and propaganda messages mainly target Sudan as it is assumed that Egypt's presence in Eritrea is a threat to Sudan. There are issues involving the Weyane regime and some interest groups in Sudan. These matters may be raised at an appropriate time in the future. Such interest groups aim to mislead the people of Sudan and they are not concerned about the problems or consequences created. This is coupled with the desire of Weyane and its patrons to make Sudan part of the alliance against Eritrea, Egypt and others in our region. Therefore, the fabricated stories are ultimately expected to culminate in pushing Sudan into conflict with Eritrea. Recently, the border between Eritrea and Sudan was closed and there are maneuvers around the border. I have learned that parallel to the fabricated news story, Weyane and Sudan agreed last week for the former to deploy its troops in the southern part of the Kassala Province in the Sudan; in a place called Wilayat. It is said that financing the activities of such an army is the responsibility of the Sudanese government. This is mere speculation but an established fact. How will this operate? What will be its outcome? Is this army really expected to respond to an imagined attack against the Sudan from Sawa by Egypt?.

The ultimate aim of such false stories is to create conflicts and stoke tension between neighboring peoples. Thereafter, it becomes easy to abuse or manage the ensuing crisis. An intractable crisis situation in turn tends to create a fertile ground for deflecting attention from real problems. What comes to mind is the ignominious fabricated report of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Colin Powell to the UN in an attempt to justify the war against Iraq. Look at the consequences of this act;

how it has impacted Iraq.

The Woyane regime claims that Egypt aims to weaken Ethiopia because of the Millenium Dam Project. Eritrea is considered, in Weyane's eyes, an instrument to weaken Ethiopia. This wrong perception has to be bolstered by an intensive media campaign. Given the extensive coverage of today's communication technology, there is a misguided belief that fabricated news stories can be consumed as truth. It is believed that once false stories are repeated and recycled by various media outlets, the public can be convinced and influenced accordingly. The Weyane regime can continue to buy time. It may continue to be provided with intensive care and preferential treatment by its patrons. However, the situation in Ethiopia is irreversible. The ploys and games described above and that are masterminded by Weyane and its patrons can no longer be effective. The past 25 years are indeed lost years. There are changes in the world, as well as in our region and our broader neighborhood. Such lies can never be useful for the survival of the Wayane regime. What is being amplified by Al-Jazeera will, therefore, be futile. The message that I wish to convey to the people of Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt is that it is time to say enough is enough. On our part, while we believe that such fabrications easily evaporate as dew, we have been doing what we should.

Regardless of what is being said and propagated about the deployment of an army, about whether the border is closed or opened, we firmly believe that this has nothing to do with the national interest of the people of Sudan. As I asserted earlier, the issue is associated with creating crisis and maximizing the interests of those who happen to mastermind such games in the course of managing and sustaining the crisis or conflict situation. So I earnestly remind the people of Sudan to open their eyes and their ears so that they can be conscious not to be misled by the frivolous propaganda games. We should all be conscious enough to fight and uproot such ills and wicked intentions from our region. Enough lessons have already been learned regarding the lost opportunities in the last 25 years and we should not tolerate further losses. The interest groups in Sudan are not concerned about Weyane or the Ethiopian people. Their problem is associated with their fear that peace and cooperation between Eritrea and Ethiopia does not serve their purposes; good relations between Eritrea and

Ethiopia are perceived to be not advantageous to them. This perspective was there prior to the current regime in Sudan. Similar fear was experienced or harbored in the minds of these interest groups when the situation changed in our region in 1991 and when this situation created a fertile ground for cooperation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. We say to such minority interest groups, who do not represent the people of Sudan at all and who are now conspiring with the Weyane, "Please be sensible enough to realise that attempts to create conflicts and border disputes between the people of Eritrea and Sudan are useless and it is better to come to your senses and discontinue creating conflict between the two peoples." I would like to take this opportunity to make things clear that on our part we will never consider an invitation to such issues.

We may also relate these developments with our domestic situation. However frivolous and baseless they may be, they help us interrelate our situation with what is happening in neighboring communities. As I said earlier, the last 25 years are the lost years. Our region has been afflicted by interminable conflicts essentially to provide fertile ground to those who aim to maximize their vested interest and benefits by sustaining crisis. Let us say what has happened is enough and let us avoid further losses.

Coincidental as it may be, the fact that Christmas was celebrated at Sawa must have conveyed the right message to those who fabricated the lies of a phantom Egyptian military base there. I do not know why and how it was organized, but I must say that the Ministry of Information has done a good job.

Q: Last month, several media outlets reported that Turkey has plans to establish a military base in Sudan, in addition to its military involvement in Somalia. Many pundits maintain that the Horn of Africa is influenced by and interlinked with the geopolitical strategies of major countries in the Middle East. What is Eritrea's perspective in this regard? What is the stance of Eritrea with regard to the developments in our region?

PIA: Such concerns need to be examined from the perspective of a broader framework. After the end of the Cold War, during the last 25 years it was believed that a unipolar economic system would be created. Consequently, there have been major developments in our region. The situation in Somalia is one of the major disappointing consequences of such a perspective and prevailing developments. As part of our foreign policy, we firmly believe that whenever and wherever there is a gap in a particular neighborhood or region, this becomes a major cause of political instability. Whenever one country or government is excluded in any neighborhood or region, a major gap is created and this is a major cause of political instability. Think of what happened in the region or the

broader neighborhood after the end of the Cold War. Consider what happened in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Afghanistan may be far from our region, however there is a major gap there. Everyone is aware of the situation in Afghanistan. If we explore the origin of such a situation, the motives associated with what has happened there, and why it is sustained, we can easily see the similar effects of similar motives in our own region. The situation in Iraq is also another major gap. A lot may be said about Iraq. The overall situation in Iraq, including what is happening with the advent of ISIS and other terror-related problems, has caused a perpetually tense state or condition in the region. This major gap is also related to the eight year war between Iraq and Iran, the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, and the invasion of Iraq by the USA. Further, consider what is happening in Syria. There is also a similar problem or gap in Lebanon. All such problems are interrelated in terms of their effect on creating unstable political situation. What recently happened in Libya and Somalia also needs to be added to such gaps. All such situations are the same in terms of their cause: decisions that were based on fabricated lies led to such situations. Similarly, all that was said against Eritrea before the 2009 sanctions that were decided by the UN Security Council will remain in our active memory. Consider the lies fabricated in relation to nonexistent deployment of 2000 Eritrean troops in Somalia and the lies fabricated in relation to other issues by the officials of the Clinton and Bush Administrations in the US.

Somalia is a part of the Horn of Africa. In terms of strategic geopolitical relevance, Somalia is a very important country. The Somali people are proud people who are capable of making great and constructive contribution in our region. However, Somalia has been excluded from the map in terms of its potential contribution in the region for a quarter of a century. This major gap became a fertile ground for terrorism. This has been caused by the strategy of Weyane and its patrons in the last 25 years. They aimed to destabilize Somalia. In 1960, when Somalia became independent, it was divided into two parts – South and North. However, the people of Somalia became united and one country through their voluntary initiatives and endeavors. This was a unique occurrence in Africa. Who knows, they might have planned to reach beyond this so as to include Ogaden, Djibouti, North or Eastern regions and Kenya? The central point is that Somalia's nationalism and patriotism was at its apex at that time. It can be claimed that it was a very exemplary one in our region. In the course of their nation-building process, once unity was achieved between the two parts of Somalia, the Somali people were determined to uproot tribalism from their society. This was a miracle and very symbolic. It means Somalia was one of the most powerful countries in our neighborhood.

Unfortunately, war lords were created to destabilize Somalia. Clan or tribalism was considered the weak point to be exploited in order to create vertical polarization, cleavages and conflicts among the communities of Somalia. The efforts to weaken Somalia are linked to the establishment of anchor states in different parts of the world, which is part of the 2002 National Security Strategy of the USA. Ethiopia was selected to be an anchor and police state in the Horn of Africa. The intention was to make Ethiopia a regional superpower and make the rest of the states of the region subordinate ones that need to be disciplined by the boss or police state – Ethiopia. Somalia was considered a threat to this strategy. The situation in Kenya and Djibouti also has to be looked at from this perspective. The ultimate consequence is that Weyane became a regime that is a servile agent of its patrons in our region. The Weyane regime became a policy instrument for implementing the agenda of its patrons. Even though the question we have raised is related to Somalia, the Eritrean case is linked to this situation and assessed from the same analytical framework.

Because of the motives described above, during the last 25 years, unity has been undone in Somalia and its sovereignty has been undermined due to the polarized cleavages and civil war. Somalia's previously strong military institution is no longer there. At this time, it is not able to resist terror groups and those who are involved in piracy, such as Al-Shabaab. Somalia once had the strongest air force in the Horn of Africa. At this time, it is non-existent. In terms of its potential influence and contribution, Somalia has been excluded from the region. During the Siad Barre administration, especially at the end of his rule, there were excuses associated with terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, mainly related to Eitihad. Such pretexts were intended to weaken Somalia and eventually make it inactive in the politics of our region. The invasion of Somalia by Weyane was not endorsed by the Security Council. It was just imposed and Weyane was ordered to invade Somalia by its patrons. Three consecutive US administrations significantly supported Weyane and contributed considerably in having Somalia eventually destabilized. A lot is said about Al-Shabaab. We may talk a lot with respect to who actually supports Al-Shabaab, who provides financial and logistical support to Al-Shabaab. Given this background, what is the need for the intervention of Turkey in Somalia? In terms of what is claimed by Turkey, there is a need to fight terrorism where it is – at its origins or sources. To this effect, does it mean Turkey should go to Somalia to fight Al-Shabaab and other terrorists that may be in Somalia? Can such a joke mislead us or eclipse what we can easily see with our eyes?

Last month, several media outlets reported that Turkey has plans to establish a military base in Sudan, in addition to its military involvement in Somalia. Many pundits maintain that the Horn of Africa is influenced by and interlinked with the geopolitical strategies of major countries in the Middle East. What is Eritrea's perspective in this regard? What is the stance of Eritrea in regard to the developments in our region?

What is Turkey doing in Somalia? Turkey is one of the powers who is vying to expand its influence in our region. To advance this ambition, Turkey uses the Muslim Brotherhood card in its operational methodology. Turkey doesn't want to see Egypt as a regional power and its presence in Somalia is simply to assume control from the southern tip of the region. What is the reason behind the Turkish relations with the regimes in Ethiopia and Sudan? Is it really aimed at the terrorism in Somalia or to take over the country? What grounds do the Turkish have to secure a military base in Somalia? They may say they have made an agreement with the government in Mogadishu. But in reality, the military presence of Turkey or any other extraneous power in the region will not resolve the problems but exacerbate the crisis in the country. It has been proven over the years that Turkey has been using turmoil in countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen or Ethiopia for that matter, including the hot zones in the north, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, to extend its influence. Turkey is one example of the "want-to-be" regional powers who are complicating domestic problems in the region in order to secure their presence and influence.

Our policy in this matter is coherent and consistent. It does not stem from an emotional stand point. For the Somali people to enjoy their sovereignty and secure the development of their country, they first need to assume control of their independence and have a government of their own, in addition to having security institutions. It is their inalienable right as a nation; no other party or power can do it for them. And for those who claim they are assisting the Somali people, the question is, what have we witnessed, what is there to show, over the last 25 years?

For Somalia is to make constructive contributions in regional affairs, then its rights to independence must be asserted in the first place. There are many naval powers in the sea of Somalia. They have secured their presence under the pretext of "fighting terrorism or sea piracy". But what the peoples of this region need; what we need is to handle our domestic matters by ourselves. Is foreign assistance needed? It is us who need to come together first and request or invite external assistance when and if needed. The result of direct intervention or using puppet regimes to rule the area is what we have seen in Somalia during the last 25 years. In this respect, there is no need for Turkish intervention in Somalia.

We have seen many African and foreign powers scrambling over the issues in Somalia...maybe Kenya, Ethiopia or Djibouti want the Somali case unsolved for their own benefits. But at whose cost? If the UN or the Security Council is still there, they need to urge these countries preying over the people of Somalia to stop intervening in the matters of a sovereign country.

Your Excellency, it has been reported that Turkey has plans to establish a military base in Sudan, what is your take on this matter?

First of all, we need to ascertain the reliability of this information. Obviously, the government of the Sudan has every sovereign right to establish ties with Turkey; they can also allow them to build a military base in their territory. But the question that has to be raised here is, why in Suakin? The time factor, too, should not be overlooked here. As we know, the superpowers often use proxies to maintain their superiority in a specific region. And as I said earlier, Turkey is one of the regional powers who is vying for stakes in the region. What it has done in Somalia is beyond the limits of jurisdiction. Indeed, considering its geographical remoteness, how is Turkey influenced by developments in Somalia? Perhaps, developments in Iraq and Syria directly affect the security of Turkey; especially through the Kurdish dimension. But are there Kurds in Somalia? And why intend to intervene in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Libya? I don't wish to digress into these issues. There are those who maintain that Turkey aspires to revive the Ottoman Empire from the ashes. Personally, I see this specter as shallow/childish analysis.

To revert to the main issue, what agreements were exactly made with the Sudan? Is Turkey really planning to establish a military base in the Sudan? Our analysis must be based on verifiable fact; not on press clippings. In my view, these news reports are merely peddled for public relations consumption. On the other hand, if matters go beyond that; beyond what we know so far, then they will provoke major questions. What messages is Turkey trying to send by standing on Sudan's side, while tensions prevail with Egypt? If we take the scenario that Turkey is building a major military base in Suakin, then what is the mission of the army? We don't need to make premature statements or analysis concerning this case; but if true, it would not be acceptable. Such intrusion cannot be justified.

From our experience, many false allegations have been said about Eritrea: allowing the Israelis and Iran to build military bases in Dahlak; the existence of Israeli surveillance station at Emba Soira etc... But what do these news networks gain from disseminating these baseless allegations? So one has to be cautious to differentiate fact from fiction.

The strategic importance of Bab-el-Mendeb, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal as international water channels is evident. Within this broader picture, what does Turkey want in this area? We need to look into how this could affect our

sovereignty and security; both in its national and regional ramifications. In any case, we do not wish to jump to conclusions. We have to monitor developments closely. The Weyanes are also playing their negative role in this regard. Be that as it may, we need to look at these developments from the broader foreign policy perspective towards our neighbors. We can even ask the Turks what they are doing in Suakin if they are willing to share information candidly.

Mr. President, Ethiopia is in tatters and overwhelmed by political crisis. Conflicts are transpiring regularly within and among the ethnic regions/kilils; mass protests are directed against the government, and the ruling party is engulfed in spiraling internal strife and acrimony; with reports of deep divisions. Where is Ethiopia heading?

The situation in Ethiopia concerns us more than any other case in the region or the neighborhood for evident reason. What has been done over the years? I read a joke in the news very recently that the Ethiopian parliament, meaning Weyane's parliament, has established an inquiry group to investigate the conflicts between two ethnicities. We can look at the contents of Article 39 of the constitution of the Federal Democracy of Ethiopia. This brings us to Weyane's number one agenda; that they want Ethiopia to be plagued by perpetual ethnic strife. If we ask what has transpired in Ethiopia over the past 25 years, the answer is simple; destruction of the country that emanates from the regime's divisive policies. When our ties were good in the early 90s, we used to discuss paramount matters that affect the destiny of the two brotherly peoples; because the future of the two peoples is interlinked. We have fought and sacrificed together. Early on, during the liberation struggle, the TPLF's agenda of the self-determination of Tigray was, for them, independence. We kept telling them that this is not right; [however] they kept on emphasizing that they don't want to live together with the Amhara. This was dropped later but apparently they felt that as they were a minority in numerical terms, they can only rule Ethiopia by driving a wedge and conflicts amongst the other constituent ethnic groups. This agenda was a dismal failure.

The "Progressive" Constitution of the Federal Democracy of Ethiopia was drafted against this backdrop. The overarching state of mind behind this framework was institutionalization of ethnic cleavages in Ethiopia to make it easier for the TPLF to rule the country. Before the EPRDF was even formed, and other forces were around, we used to tell them that this is not the right way. In 1991, we told them to have a transitional constitution for the Ethiopian people to know where they were headed. We were not meddling in their case at the time. Because we were partners, we envisage at least 10 years of transition period. The EPRDF was for them a mere umbrella; not a veritable vehicle for

cultivating unity. Now forming an “inquiry committee” to investigate the cause of the conflicts is really risible.

I was one of the first people to look at draft of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (because of our good ties at the time). I maintained from the outset that the inclusion of Article 39 allowing ethnic self-determination up to secession was misguided. In a country of ethnic diversity, instead of organizing their unity for a developed nation, they disregarded the gravity of the situation and kept it as an organizational structure. It is a very dangerous game and the key architects behind this dangerous game were the Weyane regime.

Weyane have committed four major mistakes. Dividing the people of Ethiopia was a strategic folly. Monopolizing or controlling was another grave error. Putting the resources of the country in the hands of a few people mostly representing a certain ethnic group is very dangerous. They made campaigns in the US and Europe, proclaiming that Ethiopia is lucrative for investment; that it was registering double-digit economic growth; they indulged in reckless selling of the lands. All these led to the prevailing situation. What is the status of Ethiopia’s economy at the moment? It is not what the IMF or the World Bank have advised to [revive] the economy by devaluing the Birr, the country’s legal tender. How can an economy that registered a double-digit growth be in such ailing conditions?

The third agenda was controlling the military and security. How did the current security problems in the country unfold? They didn’t even need to have the military or security to live in peace with Eritrea. A mutually-friendly grounds for peace and security was all that was needed. There was no reason for them to go to Somalia or wage a war with Eritrea from the beginning. The government’s fourth agenda was to control the situation by relying or becoming subservient to foreign powers. This inevitably engenders dependency. They felt they could rely on external powers to control the domestic situation at home and to betray and victimize Eritrea. What has unfolded in the last 25 years demonstrates the gross errors committed by the TPLF regime and its international partners. If we closely examine the government’s policies on politics, economy, security, and foreign policy, the blatant mistakes are clear. The turmoil we see today was not triggered by a single factor; rather it is the accumulated outcome of years of miscalculations in internal and external policies.

Looking back to the past, we can refer to the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations’ role in the unfolding crisis in the country. They are responsible in many ways for encouraging a government that was never ready to lead a country responsibly. Where were these administrations when such shambolic

policies were being drafted and consequently implemented to devastating outcomes by the Ethiopian government? Why were European government giving a deaf ear to the early warnings coming out of the country? In truth, we cannot just grasp the current unstable climate in the country from internal agendas of the government, but we as well have to shed a considerable amount of light on external and foreign agendas. The government is not capable of handling or delaying such a dire condition for a long period of time. It simply doesn't have the capacity to do so.

The biggest obstacle was the political and economic injections that were made to delay the unfolding circumstances. Major investments were made in the country; in return, these injections not only created the crisis we are witnessing today, but they also played a major role in keeping it under wraps for a long period of time. However, the "intensive care" that was provided could not postpone the inevitable crisis for an indefinite period. The political, economic, security and foreign relations that were said to be positively harnessed over the last 25 years were a slippery slope for Ethiopia. They were misled by Washington and European counterparts. Over the years we saw the government of Ethiopia disregard the history they shared with the Eritrean people. We were betrayed and every tactic imaginable was deployed to erase our entire history. Attempts were made to put a wedge between the good people of Eritrea and Ethiopia. 25 years have been lost and the opportunities for development and stability that were squandered were immense indeed. But we regret nothing. The good relationship between these two countries will never wither.

The government is perhaps in its last straw as it strives to hold a tight grip on power. Assurances of political and economic reform are pronounced every day. Talks of the release of political prisoners are said to be underway. More promises are being made to resolve the ethnic-based political representation, all of which are nothing but false promises made to keep the current government in power and minimize the severity of the crisis. All these efforts notwithstanding, the TPLF has come to the end of the road; It is Game Over!

As a result of the current crisis in Ethiopia, how can it influence Eritrea and the Horn of Africa? Bearing this in mind, how can we proceed on revitalizing the relationship between the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia?

The background is like I stated above. We cannot restrict ourselves to seeing the relationship between the two people of these countries. After the end of the Second World War, the Ethiopia fable was created. Ethiopia annexed Eritrea, Ethiopia did this and that...but Ethiopia is not the only one to blame. This is not to undermine the then government of Ethiopia, but it was never a decision made only by Ethiopia. At the time, just like every other colonized African nation that

declared independence, it was also the people of Eritrea's inalienable right to declare their own independence. But that was not granted to our people. The new world order of the time created a whole different political climate in the Horn, under the pretext of the Ethiopian fable. For the Eritrean people, it was decided to annex them with Ethiopia. And when we were denied our chance and basic rights to create a sovereign nation, we turned to an armed struggle and we paid heavily to realize our independence.

In the past 25 years the dream of creating one great hegemonic Ethiopia in the region has continued. After independence, both peoples of the countries worked together to further their cause for development and stability. What should have happened after the Second World War was realized a full 45 years later. But had we got our independence at the dawn of the end of the Second World War, and had both countries continued on the path of mutual development cooperation, the price that was paid, the opportunities that were lost to both countries as a result of Eritrea being denied its sovereignty, would have been completely avoided. It was for this reason that both countries entered a struggle: to correct a mistake and create a stable and developing region in the Horn.

Especially after the Derg came into power in the 1970s, the efforts made by both people was remarkable and it is duly recorded in the history books of Africa. After independence, using the good relationships we had forged on the battlegrounds, we set out to continue our extraordinary relationship towards realizing the full potential of this region. We talked about embarking on a journey to help our neighbor Somalia and to set up a powerful coalition of nations. In 1993 we concentrated on strengthening the region first, then set out to form international relations. If we examine history, both people always enjoyed mutually-and strategically-beneficial relations. These were never based on an outcome of political powers.

As I had mentioned above, the government of Ethiopia has created this distortion of historical values over the years and this has to be returned to normal. Creating a climate of disdain between the two people of these counties cannot amount to anything good or productive. But by working together, the results that we can achieve on all fronts... politics, economy and security... the diplomatic relations we can possibly form with our regional neighbors, as well as international friends, can be formidable and beneficial for both countries and the Horn of Africa. This is not an option. This has to happen at any cost.

The people of Ethiopia defiantly have to reevaluate the future of their country and decide how they will proceed without any intervention from external powers. Without a doubt, there definitely has to be a transitional period for this to happen. At the moment, there are different factions working under the EPRDF and outside it. For us it is not about taking sides. For both countries to

fully be able to seize future opportunities, first the current crisis in Ethiopia has to be straightened out. The misguided policies of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations in Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and this region, in general, played a negative role and has to stop. There is no reason that European countries and others such as China and Russia, who are trying to play a new role in this region, cannot help in harnessing a progressive outcome. What we proceed to do in this New Year has to be planned and calculated in a way that will best benefit this region. We also have to take the current issues in South Sudan and Somalia into consideration. In the case of Djibouti, the problem was with the former administration. The administration that came after the late Gouled had a notion of making the port of Djibouti the largest in the region. And for them they were under the assumption that as long as Eritrea and Ethiopia were at a loggerheads, this was achievable. This is simply a narrow-minded thought.

For this region to prosper and develop in the future, all nations have to come together. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, all our wide neighbors across the sea have a vital role to play. Each country has its own sovereignty and independence to preserve. In the end, we all have mutual benefits to gain and just like we are ready to work together with the people of Ethiopia, there is no reason others can't join as well.

Foreign powers have been using youth migration to shake the unyielding determination of the Eritrean people. What has the government of Eritrea done to tackle these conspiracies diplomatically and legally? And what message do you have to the people of Eritrea, in general, and the youth, in particular?

These are the challenges and conspiracies of the past 25 years. Threats have different levels and hierarchy. Military aggression is a violent threat. No less lethal are conspiracies that undermine the cohesion and unity of a nation; machinations aimed at disintegrating the fabric of the society. The previous three US Administrations - the Clinton, Bush and Obama Presidencies – pursued policies of “regime change” against Eritrea. In much broader terms, economic, political and psychological subterfuges were unleashed against Eritrea to weaken the resolve of the youth. The network involved operatives in the region and certain countries in Europe. This is the backdrop behind the increased migration of Eritrean youth. It is also related to the wider phenomenon of heightened migration in the global sense with the emergence of a unipolar global order after the end of the Cold War where the powerful have strived to control the economies of the weak.

US National Security Strategy of 2002 envisaged reliance of selected “Anchors” to advance US perceived interests in a specific region. In this scheme, if a country is perceived as an obstacle to the strategy, it must be erased from the map. In 1991 (when we achieved our liberation), we had hoped fifty years of historical mistakes and injustice (on the part of the US) would be redeemed. But as I pointed out earlier, what prevailed was a new US agenda that again victimized Eritrea. This was the genesis of the strategy of “regime change”.

The migration programs especially those that targeted Eritrea were designed to advance this strategy. The story is long. It also encompassed hiring of quislings to facilitate these programs.

Let us take the case of Eritrean nationals in Israel for instance. The original plan was to entice Eritrean youth for migration abroad in order to organize an armed opposition for “violent regime change”. The estimation was that this should be feasible since most of the youth have undergone military training in the National Service. There were other factors and attributes that were taken into account too. These were some of the reasons why youth migration was encouraged in an organized manner. What does a youth need to cross the border to Sudan? Who organizes it for them? One cannot venture into the unknown without facilitators and guides. Once they arrive in Sudan, they are approached by UN agencies and they have to fill forms. When they do that, they have to demonize the government so they can be accepted by these agencies. The script is... “endless national service and slave labour; gross violation of human rights” etc.

There are networks that perform the necessary “paper work” for “these refugees” in the Sudan; that organize the illicit trips to Libya or Egypt. Police and security officials are involved in this network. They say there are around 40 thousand migrants in Israel today; out of which around 20 thousand are Eritreans. When the original subversive schemes failed to materialize and the migrants became a burden there, the issue now is the manner of their expulsion. As I emphasized earlier, those who wish to return from Israel have every right to do so. This was communicated to the authorities in Israel. Naturally, we requested access to register the 20,000 or so Eritrean migrants. But this was not allowed. If, as are told now, they are “asylum seekers... who have escaped human rights violations’ that needs to be verified too.

Furthermore, these youth who have been victimized need to make up for lost opportunities and support to start a new life in their country. They need to receive vocational training; to acquire employable skills which could be done relatively easily in Israel in view of the advance economy and technological

advantage there. Again, these proposals were rejected. They simply wanted to deport them by giving each one of them 3,500 US dollars. But how much has each of these migrants paid to reach the country? What are the tribulations each has faced at the hands of human traffickers to enter Israeli – not accessible by any means - from the Sudan and through Egypt? The high price they must have paid cannot be equivalent to 3,500 dollars. They need fair compensation to start a new life in their home country. Our estimation at the time was each one deserves a compensation of 50,000 US dollars.

The discussions with the authorities in Israel reached a deadlock. Later, they said the Eritrean migrants will be deported to Rwanda and Uganda. Now they are dubbed as “infiltrators”; not “refugees”. We are told they will be deported to any country that can accept them. These are human beings; not livestock. No country can claim legal responsibility to receive our nationals. This cannot be acceptable by any standards. In this connection, we also deplore the cynical policy the EU has announced recently. They have allocated 700 million dollars to Ethiopia, ostensibly to “create jobs for Eritrean youth in the country”. What is rationale and legality of this act?

In 2013, we requested the UN, when Mr. Ban Ki Moon was the Secretary General, to undertake an independent and transparent investigation of human trafficking. As I clarified before, all the demonization campaigns; all the allegations of depicting “National Service as slave labour”; the false accusations of “gross violation of human rights” have failed to achieve the intended subversive agenda. We are always open to those who want to come back to their motherland, but their rights have to be preserved. The problem is there are agencies in Europe who have politicized the agenda of migration for their own selfish ends. The problems in Europe, with Brexit and other ramifications, growing unemployment in several countries, have also brought the issue to the forefront.

Migrants from Africa and elsewhere are employed, particularly in times of economic downturn, as janitors or babysitting pensioners. No one has the capacity to contribute in high-tech activities. This is modern slavery, especially in Africa. It is not acceptable to use the continent as a source of raw material and cheap labour, while holding hostage its economic growth. Who created the existing problems in the Middle East? We can take Libya as an example. Why has Libya become the corridor for such criminal networks? By whose legal authority has NATO destroyed the country? Who is benefiting from the transpiring situation? Who instigated this havoc and why? In this context, migration is an issue we need to see from a broader global scope. It is not something that is particularly targeted at us.

As I said, we made our plea on this matter five years ago. We called the UN and the UNSC to take a serious look at this case and take legal measures against the principal in the criminal network. Our calls fell on deaf ears at that time. Now, five years later, the issue has come into the limelight due to a dramatized CNN documentary. But, where and who filmed the documentary? Who were the enslavers and the slaves? It was a big topic on the TV network and it slipped without raising these basic questions.

Something has to be done about this 21st century slavery. All conscientious people, especially Africa, have to fight it. We have been fighting this issue from the beginning and many attempts have been made to silence us. We have been accused of human rights violations. They called our national service slavery. Now that everything has been exposed, we are working on how to defend our citizens. We have presented our plea again very recently. Of course we don't expect it to end soon. Yet we will not stop our fight for this cause. Thanks to the resilience of our people, we have prevailed against all the odds.

Mr. President, the main victims of these evil plots are the youth. What particular message do you have for them?

We have apprehended a number of individuals involved in human trafficking, and the stories they tell to attract the youth are amazing. It is true people want to change their lives; make a better living. But most are deceived to ditch a lifetime opportunity of education to flee.

The wrong image of a "greener pasture" given to the youth must be debunked. The awareness of the youth needs to be raised. It is not easy to control the yearning of the young for this deception and to stop them from falling into the hands of these criminal networks, but some mechanisms must be worked out. We closely follow the plots made to drain our capacity. Intelligence operatives hunt the youth, particularly the educated, to spread their words of deception. We know the details of how these networks work. They put most of their focus on college students and the educated. So, here is where awareness of parents and the youth is needed. The youth naturally have bigger dreams, but the parents or families need to intervene and use their influence to protect them from these pitfalls.

The government is making substantial investments in education. Around 17 thousand students sit for their high school matriculation examinations annually. 10-15% of those students may join the colleges. How about the rest 85%? Where do they go? Can we create immediate job opportunities for them? It is not economic problems that are making these youths to flee their land. This issue demands an exhaustive study. What are the factors that are deceiving the

youths? How are they polluting their minds? Is it the economic status of the countries that is attracting them? Then why are they going to Lampedusa, why not go to Saudi Arabia? There are richer countries in our region, if the issue is an economic question.

No one has a magic wand in his hands. This matter will remain a challenge, but the lasting solution will emanate from development projects we undertake in here. We may still pursue the diplomatic, political and legal aspects of this matter, but all the local organizations including the NUEYS, NUEW, administrations, communities, and even families, need to shoulder their responsibilities and work accordingly.

Thank you Mr. President

Eritrea Profile