

May in the History of Eritrea



Hamid Idris Awate

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A society without a collective memory is like an individual suffering from a loss of memory. The long tradition of resistance of Eritreans has turned every place in Eritrea into a historical place and every day into a historical period with memorable events. The month of May has hosted many honorable as well as terrible events. Dear readers, I feel delighted to share with you some of the major events that happened in May.

5th May 1941: the association for the love of country (Eritrea) was established. Immediately after the end of the over fifty years of Italian rule and the beginning of the British Administration, Mahber Fikri Hager (Association for the Love of Country), the first national Eritrean organization to represent the entire society, emerged in 1941. On May 5, 1941, a diverse group of Eritreans established the first political organization. The Association elected a 12-man leadership divided equally between six Christians and six Moslems. Gebremeskel Weldu was elected president and Abdulkadir Kebire became vice-president of the patriotic association. Other members included Weldeab Weldemariam and Ibrahim Sultan who later played a great role in the struggle for the independence of Eritrea.

28th May 1962: the martyr and hero Hamid Idris Awate passed away. Hamid Idris Awate was the man who assumed the title of “father of the Eritrean armed struggle” for he became the first man to fire the bullet against Ethiopian colonization in September 1961. However, this doesn’t mean that the Eritrean

struggle for independence started in 1961. The struggle of Eritreans against foreign invaders was a process that involved generations. Hamid fought against the British and the Ethiopians starting from the 1940s. The personal trait of Hamid Idris Awate was enviable. He was honest, charismatic, visionary, courageous, magnanimous, and a man of integrity and few words

Awate died when our revolution was in its infancy and when it was in desperate need for his leadership. He left a legacy of heroism, courage and self-reliance among others. The death of the first leader of the Eritrean revolution, Hamid Idris Awate, was kept a secret for several years to keep the morale of the people and the liberation army. Awate's burial place was also kept a secret for many years, known only to few fighters. After independence, in 1994, the government relocated the body of martyr Hamid Idris Awate to Haikota and built a monument there in his image riding a horse.

20th May 1984: first commando operation at Asmara airport. EPLF commando units performed a daring attack on the Ethiopian air force base in Asmara. Sixteen EPLF commandos participated in the operation. The planning and implementation of the operation was among the wonders of the Eritrean revolution. The devoted commandos did the operation within eighteen minutes and so the operation is now called *Srhit qiya 18 deqayq* ('the miracle of eighteen minutes operation'). In this miraculous operation 33 Ethiopian war planes were destroyed.

12th May 1988: 400 civilians were massacred in She'ib. The violence of the Ethiopian army against the civilian population increased towards the end of the armed struggle. In retaliation for a humiliating defeat in the battle of Afabet and the demise of the Ethiopian Nadew command in which Ethiopia's best army was routed, there was a series of massacres. On 12th May 1988, the Ethiopian army ordered the inhabitants of She'ib to gather on the eastern plain of She'ib, and 400 people including pregnant women, children and elders were rounded up. The Ethiopian army encircled the people and overrun them using tanks.

The She'ib massacre was so barbaric and cruel that 400 innocent civilians were mercilessly killed. As a tribute to the victims, a monument, with the names of the victims inscribed, was erected in She'ib.

Many poems and songs have been produced to commemorate the suffering of the Eritrean people under the Ethiopian army. In 1989, at the memorial service to honor the dead one year after the She'ib massacre, patriot Zeineb Yasin had described the barbaric action of the Derg as a sign of madness and frustration

and lent her motherly and patriotic advice to the people of Eritrea to stand firm and continue to persevere.

24th May 1991: liberation of Asmara. The political and armed struggle of Eritreans for liberation was one of the longest and bloodiest wars of liberation in Africa. Spanning for half a century, it finally successfully removed Ethiopian occupation with the liberation of Asmara on 24th May 1991. The tenacity and bravery of the Eritrean freedom fighters captured the hearts of the international community and their echo of victory alarmed the world.

The EPLF made a wise decision to legitimize the military victory through a fair and just referendum. As a result, the official declaration of independence was made after the UN-monitored referendum in May 1993. On May 24th 1993, Eritrea became the newest African state to join the camp of independent nations. On that day, independent Eritrea's new flag was hoisted and Eritrea emerged as a sovereign and independent state.

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