

Eritrea at the 24th ICISOE Meeting



Ambassador Tesfamicael Gerahtu

Interview conducted by: Billion Temesghen

East Africa's policy makers held the 24th meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials and Experts (ICSOE) from 24 to 25 November under the theme 'Economic and Social impacts of the Covid-19 Crisis on Eastern Africa: Strategies for Building-Back-Better.' The meeting, which was attended by fourteen East African states, deliberated on challenges and lessons learned associated with the pandemic and ways forward. We spoke to Ambassador Tesfamicael Gerahtu, who represented Eritrea at the meeting, for further thoughts.

- **Thank you for your time, Mr. Ambassador. Can you please tell us about ICOSE and Eritrea's role in the bureau?**

ICOSE operates to promote regional integration for development amongst countries of East Africa. At the 23rd session of the ICOSE that was held in Asmara, Eritrea was mandated to hold the chairmanship. The 24th session was supposed to be held

in Seychelles; but because of Covid-19 we held a virtual session on the prevailing situation [Covid-19] and its impact on the socio-economic situation in East Africa.

- **The two-day meeting was a good platform for member states to come together and deliberate on several issues, focusing on lessons learned during the pandemic in relation to the socio-economic situations of the countries. Can you please give us your opinion on this?**

ICOSE 24th session could be taken as significant and successful. The task of our meeting was to maintain continuity in respect to the communiqué that was announced on the 23rd session while discussing timely issues. The results of several studies were presented and discussed. The thematic areas include, for example, one of the most affected sector of development during the pandemic, the sector of services. There are also other areas that were brought up and discussed. For example, the trade and development strategies that were passed on in our last communiqué, the SDGs and the 2063 Development Frame Work of the African Union were raised and discussed.



Various countries presented their experience in fighting the pandemic, and based on the presentations suggestions were forwarded. After Looking at how we should continue to consolidate our efforts and the need to complement one another, member states discussed ways past the pandemic. We need to be able to move beyond the situation in a pragmatic way to revitalize the socio-economic sector of countries in the region. So, the post Covid-19 development perspective and approaches were discussed as important aspects. I would say the session has been very significant in bringing all countries of the region and see how we could work together and complement one another, trying to share the experiences learned during this difficult situation.

- **Can you tell us about Eritrea's experience of combating the Covid-19 pandemic, which you shared at the meeting?**

There is a saying in Eritrea, 'Nifas Zizere'e Hibula Yiatsed', the implication is that you harvest what you sow. I think when we talk about how Eritrea acted to contain the pandemic, we need to take in to consideration the basis of our pragmatic approaches and strategies that we use as a people in terms of national development aspirations and our social values. One of the most important traits of our history is the responsible participation of the people in several undertakings of our country, whether it is for development or any other situation. In this situation, too, such values contributed much towards the containment of the pandemic. The second important trait is the fact that Eritrea has always capitalized on the extended mobilization, higher organization and creation of national capacity under any situation. Thirdly, we have pragmatic approaches and policies at government level under any situation which are driven and implemented by the people. And all of these traits boil in to the overall equation of national undertaking. As for the pandemic, the preventive measures that were taken as soon as the first Covid- 19 case was found followed by the lockdown and the awareness raising campaigns were all of great significance. Thanks to concerted efforts of the People and Government of Eritrea, we do not have any Covid-19 related fatalities so far and the number of infected people is very limited. Moreover, there is no community level transmission because all of the infected people are Eritreans who came across the borders from Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti and some who came across the Red Sea. This is a phenomenal result that we have achieved at this critical time. It is the result of our people's awareness and responsibility on public health. We are now harvesting the yield of our actions towards ensuring public health. Eritrea has been able to create a viable health security paradigm that has contributed immensely to the health security of our people despite many shortcomings. The effective and functioning public health system that has been created in the country is one that has to do more with personal health security of all citizens at large.

- **It has been a difficult year, especially for the economy. How are things in Eritrea?**

One of the things I mentioned at the meeting is that despite the lockdown, the Government of Eritrea declared the continuation of activities such as agriculture for food security, health facilities, infrastructural development and the provision of basic utilities, and water security and infrastructure. This scheme was elaborated as part of the 2019-2020 transitional program that the Government launched after the

peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well the regional development dynamics for the Horn of Africa.

These were transitional measures of the year 2019-2020, which started earlier and continued during the lockdown as a way of trying to lay the foundation and create the potential of mobilizing the resources, capacity and the organization for the strategic development program beyond 2020. Before the pandemic, the Eritrean Government was planning to embark on the strategic plan that encompasses eleven strategic points declared by the president of Eritrea at the 28th Independence Anniversary and basically what we have done so far, despite the pandemic, is successful especially in infrastructure building, health and water security and water supply structures. That is not to say we do not have economic problems because a lockdown affects many areas, in particular the service areas and the private sector. So, I think there is a challenge that we have to keep addressing as we go on, but I think despite the challenges, hardships have been eased in some ways, even if not to the desired level. The communal compassion and support that has been mobilized by the people themselves inside and outside the country is quite significant, as usual. And, secondly, it is important to mention that the government has been importing certain supplies and, through the Hidri program, trying to address shortages of some critical supplies. Again, it might not be to desired level but we have been able to contain the pandemic.

December 2, 2020