

## Interview with President Isaias Afwerki

**ON 7 and 9 February 2020, National media outlets, Eri- Tv and Dimtsi Hafash Radio Programme, have conducted exclusive interview with His Excellency President Isaias Afwerki on range of subjects focusing both on regional and domestic issues. Excerpts of the interview follow:**



- **-The peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia have waged long and costly struggles for justice and liberation. And in this past June, 16 years after the decision by the Boundary Commission, the new Ethiopian government announced its full acceptance of the Commission's ruling and its readiness to implement it without equivocation. As a result, both governments have started to take bold measures to put their bilateral ties back on the positive track. What is the political backdrop of this new reality?**

The border problem, the failure to implement the EEBC decision, should not be seen in isolation; outside the larger context. The problem should be seen within the backdrop of unwarranted hostilities waged against Eritrea by the previous three successive US administrations in the past 27 years after Eritrea's independence. And this was also closely intertwined with US, post Cold-War, new global strategy

The Hanish dispute (with Yemen) did not occur, out of the blue, suddenly. It was part and parcel of the larger scheme pursued by Washington, and the West in general, of working through regional proxies and surrogates to advance their agenda of the new world order. The political approach in this configuration involved the propping up of pliable regional proxies while punishing and cornering those who did not toe the line.

Eritrea began to be perceived as a hindrance to the pursuit of US/Western regional strategy within the framework of this uni-polar world order. The inevitable corollary of this perception were the formulation and pursuit of hostile policies against Eritrea; to corner and put the country under relentless pressure; to force it to succumb to these adversarial approaches.

Otherwise, if Yemen truly entertained good-faith claims on Hanish island, why didn't it raise it before with the powers who had colonized Eritrea? Why were claims to this island and issues of maritime boundary raised immediately after the assertion of Eritrea's sovereignty and independence following a long political and armed struggle spanning for 50 years?

And what people may have failed to notice is the peculiarity and anomaly in the ruling of the Arbitral Court. While the Hanish Island, which was part and parcel of Eritrea in all the previous colonial times, was awarded to Yemen, the Court decided to give Eritrea fishing rights in Yemen's territorial waters in that area. This was done to keep the problem alive and entangle Eritrea in a continuous conflict.

The underlying reason of all these complications is transparent indeed. Eritrea's sovereignty was not palatable to those masterminding the new world order. Therefore, the Hanish conundrum was first concocted. And after Hanish, the Badme case ensued.

If the Badme case was really a good-faith border dispute, then it could have been settled through bilateral engagement and various other means. In reality, good-faith border disputes would have been susceptible to prompt solutions as the borders in our region were established through formal or unambiguous, colonial treaties. Our stance, from the outset, was in fact to resolve the dispute through bilateral means and in the event of failure, through international arbitration.

The US was involved as a facilitator in the early days of the dispute. The US Secretary of State at the time, Madeline Albright, sent her envoys towards that end. We were earnestly engaged in the process hoping for a prompt resolution of the case. Apparently, an enduring solution was not desired on their part. The dispute became more confounded; came under the purview of the OAU (in Ouagadougou) to later explode into a full-fledged and costly war that lasted for two years.

The Eritrea-Ethiopia border dispute was later referred to arbitration. Again, the Arbitral Award was not implemented; not because it was rejected by the TPLF regime but primarily by those who were embroiled in compounding the conflict. Because they wanted to use it as an instrument for keeping Eritrea "hostage". The new reality we see today is indeed a result of the political dynamics in Ethiopia in the past years and the resilience of the Eritrean people.

To revert to the prevalent trend, the Djibouti “border dispute” was conceived as another tool for harassing Eritrea. Why were border issues provoked intermittently and given such prominence? We need to ask serious questions to probe the underlying motives and operational modalities in order to avert similar subterfuges in the future as we strive earnestly to cultivate positive bilateral and regional ties

Finally, in 2009, a decision was made to impose sanctions against Eritrea. This may be considered the ultimate attempt to victimize Eritrea after accusing it of supporting Al-Shabaab. This accusation was not based on fact and law.

But in similar fashion as the three border issues, the sanctions regime was concocted to force Eritrea into submission and to dominate the region. The TPLF regime was hand-picked to serve as the pliable surrogate in our region to subjugate Eritrea. We can see it as the vehicle that appeared in the third era – Eritrea was subjugated under for fifty years from 1941 until 1991 where various powers, the British, the US and the UUSR propped up Ethiopian colonial rule in Eritrea; after Eritrea won its independence through a long armed struggle for liberation.

The TPLF’s assigned role has however been increasingly weakening in the past years. It survived literally under intensive care and subsidy in the past five to seven years. This must also be juxtaposed with far-reaching changes in the global order. We have to take stock of changes in Europe, the financial crisis in the last decade etc. All these factors are interlinked.

Against this complex backdrop, the political dynamics inside Ethiopia for radical change ultimately became unstoppable. Indeed, this is perhaps best epitomized by the resignation of former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn.

In a nutshell, the recent developments in Ethiopia can be seen as bringing to an end the spiraling regional crises that beset our region in the post-Cold War period. The scheme to dominate the region through regional surrogates, which lasted almost 30 years, has ended with the coming to power of the new Ethiopian government.

The changes we are witnessing in Ethiopia and Eritrea today reflect the outcome of the two peoples’ resistance and resolve. We are now entering a new era, marking an end to decades of dominance and resistance that began at the end of World War II.

In 1991, there were prospects for peace and development for the people of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the region as a whole. But that was cut short by global and regional factors. The two peoples have learned a lot from the lost opportunities – the Ethiopian government's declaration of its acceptance and readiness to implement the Boundary Commission's

ruling, which heralds a new era, demonstrates this. The question now is about the potential of the new era and how we handle it.

- **-The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship Peace states, among other things, that the state of war [between Eritrea and Ethiopia] has ended and a new era of peace and friendship has begun. It underlines that the two governments will develop close political, economic, social, and security ties, in addition to implementing the EEBC ruling. What is the progress made so far in the implementation of the Agreement? What are the opportunities and challenges that this new era portends to the peoples of both Eritrea and Ethiopia?**

These new developments must be gauged properly and all our efforts must be marshaled to bolster the conducive climate for its consolidation. This is our first priority and primary responsibility. We have a lot of major tasks that must be accomplished in different sectors in the future; in the times ahead. But, the utmost focus of the people and Government of Eritrea must be the consolidation of the peace process that has ushered in a new epoch. We are working vigorously to create mutual trust; an atmosphere of congenial mutual consultation. Ultimately, we need to gauge progress on the basis of concrete benchmarks and figures. We need to strengthen the basic pillars in order to secure future progress and development.

We cannot be complacent and presume that external challenges and conspiracies, both regional and international, have been vanquished; that they will no longer arise to undermine the new era of peace. Accordingly, our utmost priority is to strengthen mutual trust; to better align our respective programmes and perspectives. The reservoir of political goodwill on both sides is huge indeed. We must also take into account that there are internal subversive elements and unreconstructed remnants of the old order whose aim is to curtail progress of the new reality. The mutual trust we have fostered has already enabled us to register rapid progress in many areas.

We should not harbor doubts and indulge in speculative analysis on the viability of the process underway. Yes, there will be challenges but we have to confront them resolutely. And as we work vigorously to consolidate the process, we must also keep in mind and lay the basis simultaneously for the larger objectives that we cherish and aspire for.

The challenges we face will be myriad indeed. Various external forces are still bent on creating hindrances and driving a wedge between us. We can see the ethnic strife stoked in several parts of Ethiopia. Certainly, various fault lines and legacies of the past cannot be eliminated over-night.

What are the primary political challenges? Naturally, each country has its own political challenges. But there are also aggregate challenges that have regional and global dimensions. The hostilities directed against us, against our national security, have been numerous indeed. There are security challenges that have regional dimensions. All these will require mutual effort.

We need to focus on the bigger picture of and enhance the complementarity and synergy that we can tap to better address economic challenges faced by the two countries. Our horizon cannot be limited to mere transaction of goods with the opening of the border. We need to look beyond these single parameters to recoup lost opportunities and seize the new reality to boost shared economic vision between the two countries. This economic synergy, underpinned by security and political cooperation, can have a strong impact in the region. In this case, an ongoing exchange of ideas is opening new opportunities in the developments of the peace process. What we anticipated three months ago and the momentum we have witnessed on the ground is very promising. The steps we are taking in major sectors, particularly diplomatic, political, security, and economic sectors are very satisfactory.

In the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship, we have underlined the need to take our actions beyond bilateral reconciliation towards regional stability. Indeed, boosting bilateral relations will not be a success when critical matters in the rest of the region remain unsolved. We followed the same principle in 1991 and we still believe and are working together to establish regional stability for common benefit.

The situation in Somalia or South Sudan can have a direct or indirect impact on us. Therefore, we need to support positive engagement in those cases and we should not see them as different, in any way, from our bilateral relations. If we look at the VAT - not in the sense of its fiscal meaning of value added tax but Value of Added Time - in this process, I would confidently say that the accomplishment made vis-à-vis the four months of the new epoch have been incredible indeed. Still, we will not relax based on what we have accomplished so far. In fact, we will increase the pace and further strengthen our efforts.

I can say that we have gone beyond what was outlined in the Declaration. Of course, the Declaration includes points anchored on the general vision of the two countries, but in reality, a lot more has been done in a very short time.

- **There have been fundamentally positive developments in our region since mid-2018 with respect to the relations between different states of the region. The 'Asmara joint declaration of**

**peace and friendship', signed between Eritrea and Ethiopia, is just one major example. How is the progress towards achieving the goals of this agreement, which has five basic pillars, assessed?**

.... Surely, Abiy has taken a bold and positive decision. In the circumstances, what is our obligation and response? What are our options and capabilities? How do we see the internal situation in Ethiopia? The internal situation in Ethiopia is of primary concern particularly in view of its fluidity and with domestic and external forces doggedly trying to reverse the change. The problem warrants prudent and wise approach. After all, it is much easier to drive a wedge and sow discord among the peoples than to foster mutual understanding and nurture a viable and positive environment conducive to cooperation.

We cannot downplay the magnitude of the problem. We have to appraise the situation in all its complexities and devise solutions accordingly. This is what we have pursued in the periodic bilateral consultations that we have carried out so far. We also need to monitor and gauge, on a constant basis, the various subterfuges weaved by hostile forces. They are and will definitely continue to foment internal strife in order to roll back the momentum of change and peace. But this will only augment our resolve; it will not in any way weaken our desire and commitment for constructive engagement. The adverse impact of fomenting ethnic strife and polarization has to be assessed fully. We have to recognize its dilatory impact – the fact that the fruits of the political goodwill that we all cherish may not be achieved in a year or two.

Indeed, we may not have achieved much in the past year and a half. But we have done our utmost in our primary task of eschewing reversal and obstruction of the peace process. We will stay the course until this process, which is still at its incipient stage, is consummated. It is absolutely essential that all these facts are well-known to our people. Rigorous sensitization programmes are vital to increase awareness and prompt our people to shoulder their responsibilities. We have to monitor developments meticulously and these must be explained publicly. There are forces who are especially using social media to distort facts and to spread false information; to stoke tension and strife. We need to fully understand the challenges that we are confronting to become well-equipped to thwart them.

What I have explained in this interview sheds some light on what is at stake. But it will be imperative to follow developments closely; to identify the obstacles that will crop up as well as the tools at our disposal to overcome them. This is essential in our endeavours to strengthen our policy of friendship and cooperation. Our people must also be informed accordingly on a constant basis.

The central point is we will not be derailed by obstacles but continue to work with greater vigour to recoup lost opportunities and redress the devastation inculcated in the past decades.

- **Mr. President, how do you describe the role and resilience of the Eritrean people in the last three generations and what do you foresee the future will bring?**

The resilience of the Eritrean people in the last three decades against external conspiracies, for me, is unimaginable. May be we could see it lightly because we live in it and we are part of it. The hostilities and machinations the Eritrean people have faced, the ordeal they had to go through in the past three decades is simply incomparable. Few other people could summon the requisite reliance to overcome such an ordeal.

The change that has unfolded after 20 years is the result of the dynamics of the spiral of hostilities and the strong resilience of the Eritrean people. We could say withstanding such conspiracies and hostilities is gleaned from experience or cumulated historical events. The Eritrean people, after the Second World War, had to go through all kinds of external hostilities. As iron is steeled in fire, the unity and cohesion of our people emanates from this intense adversity.

After the end of the Second World War, Eritrea was perceived as a country “that would not serve their interests”. The Eritrean people thus became their first target. To this end, the people had to be weakened and divided along religious and ethnic lines. The experience gained during the British colonialism, whose hallmark was fomenting parochial division in society, was not easy. We also had to go through similar political, ethnic and other divisive practices during the armed struggle. The experience gained during the civil war and in the later years was not simple. Those trying times ended up emboldening the people. The tribulations helped the people to easily understand the external plots and conspiracies.

In the final analysis, it is not the size of the population or country that matter. The Eritrean people emerged victorious against a huge army supported by various external powers. The size of the Dergue’s army was reportedly about 400,000. The challenge for the Eritrean people was how to change the asymmetry in the equation to their favour. The experiences they gleaned in the vanquishing various enemy offensives, including the Fenkil Operation, were huge indeed. The atrocities committed against them provoked more resolve and resilience enabling them to ultimately emerge victorious.

Against this backdrop of long history of adversity and struggle, the hostilities and conspiracies the people of Eritrea had to face in the past 20 years is by far the worst. Had the Eritrean people not stood in unison against all these frantic external conspiracies to defend their sovereignty

and independence, the positive climate of peace that was ushered in last year would not have occurred.

At the end of the day, the tribute belongs to the people. Political awareness, organization, weapons may be relevant elements. But the determinant factor is resilience. Resilience gleaned in 80 years of determined struggle against incessant hostility by a small people living a relatively small land with its geopolitical complexities. Solid cohesion, political awareness and resilience were all byproducts of this particular history and experience. These attributes have enabled the Eritrean people to vanquish, again in the last 20/30 years, all schemes of division, fundamentalist extremism and other ploys. The Eritrean people are not different from their neighbors in the Sudan, Ethiopia or Somalia. But their distinct historical trajectory, the resultant cumulative experience, has enabled them to acquire an embedded culture of resistance and resilience. This culture must be preserved and transferred to posterity. There is no wealth that is more precious, or resources that are bigger, than this cultural attribute that can be invoked to overcome economic, security and other challenges today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.

- **Mr. President, with the assumption of power by a new leadership in Ethiopia, it seems that the prevalent State structure is changing radically. Taking into account all possible scenarios, what are the potential consequences and ramifications to Eritrea, the Peace Agreement and the region as a whole?**

Needless to stress, our history puts us at a vantage point to better understand how matters will pan out. In this respect, the situation in Ethiopia has inculcated much damage to Eritrea and its people for three generations in our contemporary times. This is also intertwined with the fact that successive regimes in Ethiopia advanced external agendas. Thus, although we have no wish or business to interfere in sovereign matters of others, the situation in Ethiopia is of direct relevance to us due to the damage that befalls us through no fault of our own.

The dangers posed by ethnic polarization that had become institutionalized in Ethiopia over the past 20/30 years cannot be downplayed. We were well aware of the simmering problem from the outset. I remember, we participated at the Conference in Addis Ababa in 1992. Things were developing contrary to the proposals and advice that we were providing in good faith. Each group was advancing its own ideas and wishes under various pretexts to justify the misguided policy of ethnic fragmentation.

I saw the Ethiopian draft constitution in 1994 before anybody else. I was asked to give my comments on the draft. I was convinced that a constitution that polarizes people along ethnic lines under the pretext of



self-determination will not serve the interests of the Ethiopian people. That was the envisaged road-map and they rejected our advice.

The “ Federal Democratic Constitution” was subsequently adopted. The end result was polarization of the Ethiopian people along ethnic lines. This should have been avoided from the outset. The conspiracy against Eritrea emanated from this stance. There was no reason for the border conflict. It was only an ill intended philosophy to divide and rule the country. We were not there when the border has been demarcated, we inherited it. There was no reason for conflict.

The principal cause was the agenda of the bankrupt clique that was at the helm of power in Ethiopia. “Elections” were conducted in Ethiopia every five years. These were invariably endorsed and had the blessing of external forces and special interest groups.

The border conflict was unleashed at the behest of external powers. We know in detail how the border war was initiated and conducted. It was not carried out through the internal capacity of Ethiopia alone. We cannot claim that it encompassed the entire Ethiopian people. It was, in essence, the agenda of and instigated by a bankrupt clique.

I am dwelling on this dimension of the border war in order to stress that it was not our choice; that it was not of our making. And its relevance to the current reality is evident. The dangerous political trends that could have been avoided then must be fully appraised to prevent another folly today. In a nutshell, the narrow politics of ethnic polarization – irrespective of seemingly plausible rationalizations of the rights of nationalities etc. – will ultimately foment discord among the various constituents to advance narrow interests to the detriment of larger objective of nation building.

The political dynamics in Ethiopia in the last year and half is characterized by two opposed trends or options... the first category wishes to preserve or even narrow further the politics of ethnic polarization (this is often taunted as more appropriate and democratic); the second choice spearheaded by Dr. Abiy and others is forward looking and wishes to bring change as a panacea to the problems of the past. We can also look at the neighborhood and draw lessons from what the events that are unfolding in Iraq, Somalia, Sudan etc, with all their specific peculiarities. And it is not about passing quick judgements or interfering in the sovereign affairs of our neighbours. As I underlined above, political developments in Ethiopia will affect Eritrea. So we need to closely monitor developments and make our views known to avoid damages later. It is with this perspective that we should strive to make modest contributions.

We will of course continue to strengthen our relations and our common objective with those who are promoting the positive trends in Ethiopia. This has nothing to do with personalities. This is the duty and

responsibility of both political forces and peoples to stem emergence of warlords and kleptocrats that will plunge the country in a quagmire. The ultimate objective is to ensure enduring peace and stability in Ethiopia. On our part we are ready to make our modest contribution.

- **Mr. President, what should we expect from now onwards?**

Any prognosis of potential trends must be predicated on a thorough appraisal of the prevailing reality on the ground. In this sense, the inevitable consequence of politicised ethnicity is that fragmentation is not confined to and does not stop at the large building blocs. It cascades down to the clan and sub-clan levels even within the “unitary” ethnic constituency. It becomes a recipe, as it were, for spiralling strife between and within separate ethnic groups because the political leaders embroiled in the scheme stoke further division to maintain and consolidate their power. This is not abstract or academic inference. It is what we actually see on the ground in all the ethnic based Regions. This is manifested in all its dimensions; political, cultural, social, economic and security sectors. The fragmentation of society has degenerated to its smallest units.

The panacea does not lie in addressing the outward symptoms of the malaise but in uprooting the underlying political structure of institutionalized ethnicity. This must be the overarching objective. Differences within society and one country on the basis of distinct political programmes and choices are natural. But creating a permanent chasm on the basis of ethnicity is toxic that will only destroy the unity and cohesion of any country. The specific institutional forms and systems of the alternative framework can be worked out. These can evolve with time as they are dynamic; not immutable beliefs and precepts as providential books.

The overriding task is to reverse the politics of ethnicity and foster social cohesion as well as unleash positive forces in society through articulation and nurturing of consensus on the new alternatives. We have to recognize this is not easy as there are political leaders who are keen to exploit the inherited and entrenched sentiments of ethnic politics to serve their narrow interests. The political discourse propagated through different media outlets corroborates these conflicting situations. Controversy on the timing of elections, now envisaged for 2020, is another dimension which may further compound the prevailing political polarization. This should not be another bone of contention or polarization. In the final analysis, what is of paramount importance is the substance of the transition; the calendar of the elections is arguably secondary to that central objective. External actors – including pundits, certain think tanks and research centres – are often not helpful as they tend to prescribe solutions that are neither viable nor in consonance with the specific contexts and local realities.

As far as we are concerned, our position is not ambivalent. We strongly believe that the policy of institutionalized ethnicity is toxic and obsolete. In our view, eradication of this malaise will serve the best interests of Ethiopia. Furthermore, Eritrea and the region as a whole will also benefit from this. Ethiopia is not like any other country. The spill over effects in the region (Somalia and elsewhere) cannot be underrated. Geography and geopolitics have their own importance. History also offers invaluable lessons.

The new relationship we are cultivating with Ethiopia is on the right track. We also believe that differing options floated to uproot and eliminate toxic and politicized ethnicity should not create cleavages within the forces of change. Some of the generic labels used – i.e. “federalists versus unionists” are in themselves shallow and unhelpful. The discourse must be more profound and nuanced to be constructive and productive.

We can invoke our experiences of the last 30 years. In many ways, what we are saying now is not new. Our position now is not different from what it was in 1994. Had that folly been avoided then, all the problems that ensued thereafter would not have occurred. The enormous losses and sacrifices incurred could have been avoided. The challenge now is to eschew recurrence of another debacle in a proactive way. In this sense, it is vital for us to follow developments in Ethiopia closely so as to avoid potentially negative ramifications.

- **Mr. President, now to revert to the Sudan; a new change has occurred in Sudan too. Subsequently, exchange of visits and meetings have and continue to take place between the Government of Eritrea and the Transitional Government of Sudan. What is the current political situation in Sudan? And what would be the role of Sudan in the ongoing effort to forge a new chapter of regional peace and cooperation?**

Developments in Ethiopia and Sudan directly influence us more than any other situation in the region. Perhaps the similarities between the trajectories in the recent decades and current developments in both countries may not be that far apart.

To understand the historical relationships between Sudan and Eritrea, we may have to look back at political developments in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s etc. As we know, a major shift occurred in the political landscape of Sudan in 1989. Still, it would be more logical to see the different segments in their complementarity; as one integral whole. And we cannot also look at these continuums distinctly from our own history.

Since the 1950s, or even before, there was no country in our region, in comparative terms that had a fairly advanced political culture as Sudan. The influence of the Sudan on Eritrean politics, and even in Egypt, was not

negligible especially in terms of the beginning of the armed liberations struggle.

The political culture in the Sudan was peerless in comparison to other African countries. Divisions along religious and ethnic lines were non-existent in Sudan in the 1950s and 60s or known. Except the traditional political parties, such as UMMA, the political makeup of Sudan had its own political features.

At the end of the Cold-War, "Political Islam" emerged as a new trend. This had nothing to do with Islam or religion. It was concocted to disrupt the prevalent advanced political culture. How did the Islamic movement emerge and develop? In 1983, at the time of Numeri and when Political Islam was at its incipient stage, the National Islamic Front (NIF) did not represent even 5% of the people's political outlook within the existing political parties. It never exceeded that figure thereafter in spite of the NIF's cravings to assume power.

In 1989, the NIF seized power through a military coup. This political agenda that was imposed through a coup plunged Sudan into unimaginable political quagmire, economic stasis and perennial insecurity.

To downgrade a country like Sudan, which had such an advanced political culture, is no less than a high crime. This is especially so when seen in the context of the propaganda and programme that the NIF had pronounced when they seized power in 1989 with what transpired during the subsequent thirty years of their rule. What was the situation in Sudan, in terms of all the relevant parameters, during those 30 years until the advent of change yesterday through a spontaneous popular uprising? This was sadly a period of immense havoc and decline in political, economic, cultural, social and security sectors.

This may be irrelevant and imprudent today. But in my view, the separation of South Sudan was not inevitable. The rights of the South Sudanese people could have been addressed like other people's rights. Separation was essentially triggered by the venal political stance that we have described earlier. They may justify it through different excuses, but the original notion was to secure an appropriate resolution of the issue within a unity state. This should have been solved as an internal Sudanese problem. The argument is not about the fundamental right of the South Sudanese people to separate from the Sudan. And in any case, has South Sudan achieved internal stability and peace? Is the relationship with North Sudan cordial? When you examine the events that unfolded from the 1990s until the ultimate separation, was the latter inevitable? Were there other alternatives? We know the developments that led to the separation of South Sudan because we were actively engaged in the process of resolving the problem. And in retrospect, it is clear where the blame lies.

Other crimes such as Darfur, Eastern Nile, Bahir Al-azraq (Blue Nile) and Kordofan also followed in its sequel. They (NIF) fomented social cleavages that were never heard of before. They were bragging about "self-sufficiency" and posing as "defenders and guardians of the oppressed people". These were hollow words.

After 30 years, what is the accumulated debt of Sudan? This is estimated at around 60- 50 billion US dollars. 90 to 80 billion USD was reportedly looted and deposited in foreign banks. The Islamic agenda was obviously a convenient mask for otherwise uncouth kleptocrats bent on embezzling public funds. The spontaneous popular uprising that erupted was the inevitable response to the calamitous reality.

Sudan is one of the richest countries blessed with mineral resources and agricultural potential. During the British colonial era, the Gezira Cotton Project alone was billed for contributing almost 10% of the (annual) revenues of Great Britain. Sudan's agricultural potential and wealth is simply unparalleled.

The vibrant industries and agricultural enterprises finally collapsed to the extent that the country was beset by acute food shortages. In addition to the political cleavages induced by the regime, rampant corruption and embezzlement of public funds in the name of Islam were the principal causes of the economic crisis. And more ominously, they made Sudan the epicenter of terrorism and regional destabilization.

Osama Bin Laden was operating in Sudan in 1994 when we were compelled to sever our diplomatic ties. Al-Qaeda was based there. Eastern Sudan became a haven for terrorists. The 1989 coup leaders who presumably set out to change Sudan became sponsors of fundamentalist terrorism from the outset. Thereafter, they continued to provide sanctuary to other terrorists including Boko Haram, Daesh etc. Even Carlos was there at one point in time. They plunged Sudan, against the will of the people, in a cauldron of fire with all the attendant economic problems.

Sudan must now be removed from the list of countries that sponsor terrorism and focus its efforts to resolve inherited economic problems. As I underlined before, the popular uprising did not stem from organizational or sensitization campaigns of political parties; it was a spontaneous reaction to the destruction of the country in 30 years of NIF rule.

In short, it has become now very challenging to reform the political structure and get rid of their legacies. Today there are many opposition organizations operating in different parts of the country. These were directly or indirectly created by the former regime.

Sudan is now in a period of transition which has its own peculiarities in comparison to the ongoing process of change in Ethiopia. The direct

internal challenge is political as there is assorted opposition movements essentially linked to the NIF regime. The external dimension too must be recognized as Sudan was isolated before

The expectations are Sudan will restore and revert to its advanced political culture and assume its rightful place in the region. Sudan had entered pacts and alliances with certain forces of regional destabilization. It was embroiled in forums and networks alien to the region. Rectification of these follies and Sudan's constructive regional stance will contribute to greater regional stability. This will remove prevalent threats to our own security and prompt us to work together for better results.

The government has embarked on a transition period (3 to 4 years). The political solutions floated will surely face a host of challenges and obstacles. Will the proposed frameworks bring about enduring and sustainable solutions? What are the political, cultural, social, economic and security hurdles that must be scaled? There are internal forces who seek to scuttle the process of change. There are also external attempts to reverse the process by forces who consider the change as a loss.

For our part, we have no choice but to follow events closely. This is critical both for formulating informed choices and options as well as to gauge and properly identify the modest contributions that we can make. Again, we cannot be bystanders or indifferent to developments that unfold in our immediate neighbors as would normally be the case for events in other distant countries. It must also be noted that in the last 30 years, it was not only the people of Sudan who lost opportunities. We have lost development opportunities as well. In the event, and as it is the case with Ethiopia, our active engagement is warranted for a raft of reasons: Sudan's role in both bilateral and regional terms is significant; positive change and restoration to normalcy in Sudan has considerable dividends to the region; and, the opportunities for promoting mutually beneficial regional cooperation in economic and security matters will be greater. These sentiments and positions are mutually shared and reciprocated by all Sudanese political forces engaged in the transition process. Both sides have accordingly embarked on a structured and periodic process of mutual consultation. Our long exposure to and intimate knowledge of events in the Sudan is of course an asset.

Still, the challenges are not easy and should not be underrated. Some of the political actors in Sudan are powerful in terms of their economic muscle which can be misconstrued to create pressure. The arsenal in their tool box is not negligible. They can funnel these tools to stoke social mistrust and discord. The same is true with regional powers who harbor ill-will. Who are these powers? What are their tentacles? In which sub-regions are they active? Which instruments are at their disposal? Here again, the complexities are evident.

We should also take into account the perspectives of major global powers. What was their calculus in the region in the 1940s (after the end of the Cold War) when they were asserting that Eritrea “will not serve our interests? What are their interests and what is the hierarchy of these interests through their own prisms? The primary challenge in our region is economic and the countries continue to grapple with daily challenges of food security. Yet, all the powers that are exerting pressure these days have all along compounded the problems and participated in the looting of the resources of the region.

Regional players who had instrumentalized Sudan to advance their subversive agendas cannot be expected to embrace the change with folded hands. They will try to reverse the trend; they will use their financial leverage to that end. We know these forces intimately.

The challenges for transition are thus complex and multi-faceted. It requires capabilities to thwart external subversive schemes, prudence in tackling internal challenges and cohesion with its ranks and constituent parts. It may be premature now to discern with absolute certainty how the process will pan out. The political, security and above economic problems that the transition has to grapple with are not easy. What are the options in respect to the latter in particular – soliciting external assistance, subsidy and loans; reviving domestic potential, etc. Cultivating internal consensus for whatever approach is preferred is another challenge.

The recent disturbance in eastern Sudan is another dimension in the spectrum. This was deliberately fomented by the internal and external forces bent on rolling back the change underway. The situation in eastern Sudan has a bearing on Eritrea. The scheme is thus driven by their negative agenda against Eritrea as it affords the architects of this political mischief to “kill two birds with one stone”

In the event, it is too early to say that Sudan has fully resolved all its problems and is currently progressing forward without obstacles. It is still in a transitional phase. For our part, we will continue to monitor developments and strive to make modest contributions. Our approach in terms of cultivating positive interaction with the forces in the transition is not different from what is being done with Ethiopia. But in the final analysis, what is determinant is their perspective and programmes in this journey which is in its early phase.

- **Mr. President, we would like to focus now on the broader neighborhood and particularly the Arabian Gulf. The Government of Eritrea has been exerting efforts to cultivate solid ties of friendship and partnership with Gulf countries, besides its endeavours in the Horn, pursuant to its foreign policy of safe and peaceful neighborhood. What is the progress in this regard?**

Our initial reference frame was not one region but the neighborhood as a whole. In our lexicon, the neighborhood consists of four regions. First are the countries of the Nile Basin such as Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, etc.

These countries are very important because of their strategic and geographic location. The second group are the countries in the Horn of Africa, such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea and others. The third category consists of the countries bordering the Red Sea, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Yemen etc. And lastly, we find the Gulf States, which are an integral part of the neighboring countries.

These four regions are not only related by geography. They are also interlinked by shared strategic, economic, political and security interests and affiliations. This is too palpable to merit more elaborate discourse.

Our domestic programmes are of course of paramount importance to us. Our domestic priorities cannot be put to the backburner. Still, a stable regional environment of mutual respect and cooperation is vital for us. This is not a choice or option; it is a necessity. So we need to interact with others and make modest contributions. The issue is not whether we have influence or not. We may gauge the respective influence and leverage of others - that of Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Yemen and others in the wider neighborhood. Obviously each country has its own specific influence or leverage that is congruent with its capabilities.

Irrespective of this factor, synergy is created where mutual respect and cooperation flourish. Stability that nurtures trust will be enhanced too in this setting. Economic development; the betterment of citizen's quality of life become more achievable in a conducive climate of cooperation. Combatting threats to regional security, money-laundering, illicit arms trade, human trafficking; and programmes of counter-terrorism are more effective through collective and concerted action.

The critical point is nurturing consensus on the underlying notion. The geographical boundaries of the constituent parts are not really a matter of controversy. Once there is agreement on the desired goals and objectives, these secondary issues can be handled with flexibility. We can subsequently work out the most appropriate mechanisms.

This is not a new invention. When the Horn of Africa Initiative was launched in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, we participated from the beginning with the frontline parties. The revitalization of IGAD followed in its sequel. The controversy then was not about the name of the organization but its core objectives and functions; that the ultimate aim is to enhance regional integration. The limited mandate of drought was extended to include development and regional integration.



Unfortunately, IGAD became subservient to external agendas and a tool against Eritrea.

Invasion of Somalia occurred in 2006 through the collusion and instigation of the TPLF, the US Administration and others. The cherished mechanism of regional integration was consequently scuttled. We suspended our membership and we are not and will not be there.

But, the idea and commitment to regional cooperation in its widest sense that we are talking about now is not different, in essence, from what was contemplated then. We may sometimes exaggerate by saying that we have a better understanding of the imperative of robust cooperation because we have acquired rich experience long ago, and overcome countless challenges. The issue is not about geographical or population size. It is not about economic power. It is about the quest for stability. And when it comes to stability and peace, we are in the forefront in terms of unequivocal choice and commitment.

For us, to work for the stability of the neighborhood is not an agenda for tomorrow or after tomorrow. Taking stoke of our past experiences, the modalities will have to be worked out meticulously and comprehensively. This is not merely a matter of political goodwill.

Past experiences will surely be useful for drawing appropriate lessons. The new ties we are cultivating with Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, the Gulf countries fall within this larger framework. And in all these instances, nurturing consensus and the convergence of views are obviously cardinal pre-requisites.

Let us examine, for instance, issues on the Red Sea. The 11- point concept paper we submitted summarized our view on the platform and mechanism envisaged. Clarification of objectives and mechanism – which may be seen in three phases – is of paramount importance. Irrespective of its power or wealth, one country cannot shoulder the obligations of the other littoral State. The legal provisions must be clear too.

The Somali problem cannot, for instance, be solved by other countries but only by Somalis themselves. Missiles and drones – or other imported technology – will not resolve the security situation in Somalia. In brief, each littoral States must first build its defense and security capabilities. One littoral State cannot be a substitute to another in this regard.

Synergy will be acquired once this is done on an individual littoral State basis. Extraneous powers can be involved if there is a need to buttress our collective and pooled capability. If the littoral States cannot coordinate among themselves and pool their capabilities, the security of the Red Sea will not be guaranteed by other external forces. When we pool together our collective capabilities – of all armed services – the impact will be much

effective. We may then invite the support of extraneous forces through mutual consultation when and if warranted. This approach is equally valid for other regional mechanisms of cooperation; in the Horn of Africa; the Nile Basin or the Gulf.

These are the skeleton or essential contours. The specific details can be worked out by expert and professional committees. So there is no need to delve into unnecessary controversy. This broad roadmap can be taken as a starting point.

It will also be essential to examine broader global changes and trends and its ramifications to the neighborhood. What is the regional impact of developments in the Americas, Europe, and Asia? In today's interdependent world, we cannot speak about our neighborhood in isolation from global dimensions. The interlinkages cannot be ignored. If we talk about counter-terrorism, there is consensus in terms of eliminating the scourge. The task is then reduced to practical matters of organizational and methodological configurations for the desired concerted action.

### **Domestic Issues**

**It is to be remembered that on 7 and 9 February 2020, National media outlets, Eri- Tv and Dimtsi Hafash Radio Programme, have conducted exclusive interview with His Excellency President Isaias Afwerki on range of subjects focusing both on regional and domestic issues. Excerpts of the fourth part of the interview on domestic issues follow:**

- **Your Excellency, the introduction of a new salary scale in the year 2016 for government employees has benefited those in the Eritrean Defense Forces, as well as nearly 70% of those in national service and civil service. But the salaries of senior employees and those whose education is below twelfth grade has not yet been increased. What is the government's salary settlement program for this year?**

I would first like to remind everyone that this issue cannot be talked about in an hour or two as it needs a long time. The people and the concerned government employees must understand the issue. It is a topic that must be dealt with in-depth and with other programs.

When we talk about government employees, we are not dealing with ordinary government employees as in other countries. Members of the Eritrean society that fought in the liberation war later became government employees. When someone who has spent their life in the struggle, in

raising children, and taking various responsibilities finally becomes an employee of the government, we must ask how this person lives. And when did they become a government employee? How is the senior, intermediate, and new employee classified?

Since the issue raised is related to salary, you can look into this topic in-depth and collect data until you have the full picture. Government employees are still working with a nominal salary. We cannot say that the salaries paid after Eritrea's liberation covered the costs of living, but this cannot continue the way it has.

Having realized that the introduction of a new currency in 2015 might impact our fiscal and monetary policies, it was said that government employees' salaries should be considered along with it. Of course, this idea did not just come in 2015 - it had been a cause for concern for some time.

How can a government employee lead a normal life? Those who lived alone in the past now support a family - how can they live on the same salary? Let us start talking about this issue in relation to the period starting from 2015, that is, with the introduction of the new currency, by conducting the required assessments of the salary scale and looking at the living conditions of people, including the destitute and the needy, who cannot be seen in the end in isolation from government employees. We must search for ways to change their living standards for the better.

Given the many obstacles that we faced in the past and the inability to build our economy quietly, this has put great pressure on us, in addition to other pressures. To find the answer, we must do our duty and conduct studies.

The matter that needs to be addressed is not only the salaries of government employees, but the conditions of our economy. Let us look at this vital issue. If we want to come up with a comprehensive solution, we must first understand and define our problems. Finding a solution does not take place solely with ambitions. The determining factor in this is our economic reality and how and where it is going. If the salary is to be adjusted, it must be done in a way that improves the standard of living of all employees with different levels of salaries. We must go back and look at the conditions of our economy. But what are the criteria that we look at? If you want to talk about the economy of any society, the first criterion is productivity or innovation. It is all about wealth creation. You must look at what the production is and its quantity in every sector -for instance, in fish production, agricultural and mining activities, and other sources of production.

An evaluation of all sectors and factories can provide us with a general picture of the nation's wealth and how it has been developing or how it

will develop. In the end, if you think about the issue of salaries, you should think about the conditions of all government employees and not only about individuals. If we want to grow our economy, we must understand the challenges and opportunities, and by what methods growth can be achieved. This field is very large, and you cannot find an easy answer for it; you must have numbers.

This topic leads us to say that the economy is not limited solely to the production process. It also requires wealth distribution. If the economy includes production, distribution and consumption, then production is the basis. Increasing production is an important process to support the economy and create wealth. What about wealth distribution? The distribution of wealth is arguably related to production, and ultimately to consumption as well.

How is wealth distributed now, not only among government employees, but also to those who depend on the agricultural sector and other areas such as trade and investment? How do these people live and how is the nation's wealth distributed to all of these groups? Is wealth distributed equitably and does it promote safety and stability? Does it provide additional strength to the economy?

There may be a distribution of wealth, but what does that distribution look like, and how and what are the living standards of our people? How do they get their share of the wealth, and how does it affect the living standards of government employees and others? When we want to decide the amount of salary it should not be for a year or two. It must be for an extended period, with sustainability ensured. The salary affects government employees, but it must go beyond that to affect the economy positively.

Generally, we must collect information related to these matters, complete the necessary studies, and in the end, without wasting more time, and after confirming the conditions of our economy, its growth, and nature, we must decide the amount of the salary despite the difficulty of this matter.

In addition to the studies we are conducting to determine the salary, we must decide the salary scale, and we said let's start from the lowest level. The matter was discussed extensively. It was said that if you want to define the lowest level, you have to assess what individuals need in terms food, water, clothes, shoes, and housing. In short, we must determine the minimum level cost of living.

We said let us make the minimum level of salary 1800 Nakfa, with five total levels ranging from 1800 to 4000 Nakfa. Age, skills, and specialization were considered for the minimal salary of 1800, but for those who graduated with a bachelor's degree, the starting salary is 4000 Nakfa. As for the five levels, they should be arranged well, provided that

this is a starting point on which to focus. When we collect sufficient information and data, then we are able to have a clear picture, and in this case we can determine what may be done. But now, instead of waiting for the study to be completed, we saw that we should start with this and implement it on the ground.

Given that the total salary is frequently entered in the state budget, for how long will the state budget bear this burden? Since we cannot apply this decision to all, we decided to start with those who are less well-paid, for example, members of the Defense Forces, civil service, and government and parastatal organizations. If we say we start with the members of the Defense Forces, let us start with the ordinary individuals, and then move up the ranks slowly.

We put the Defense Forces at the forefront because they constitute the majority of those who work in remote areas and villages. The salary adjustments should begin with them. Also, those who live in villages are given precedence over those who live in cities. Similarly, those raising families are prioritized.

As for government employees living in cities, we can come to them later. It was decided for this approach to be implemented in 2018. Based on economic growth and development trends, data collection in various areas is required – fisheries and agricultural development, and national development related to energy, infrastructure, water, housing, and various services.

If we take agriculture, for example, our people are dependent on it. How much annual production can we have? How much food is imported by the government, in addition to local production? Do we have agricultural programs that we talk about year after year, because the rainfall is beyond our control and can change annually? Thus, we may not be able to guarantee our productivity, including consumables, which go hand in hand with salary. We mostly import agricultural produce, and this leads us to disburse funds in hard currency, which we must reduce. It is only when we solve this challenge that we can confidently say the introduction of the new salary scale has worked.

And now the first stage of salary adjustment has begun for members of the Defense Forces. But in the civil service this program has not been implemented, and we can ask what the guarantee is for those who receive the lowest salary, 1800 Nakfa.

If a person who receives 1800 buys a bottle of water for five or ten Nakfa, and at the same time pays 1000 in house rent, then a salary of 1800 will not be sufficient. That is why we say 'no need to rush but will study it carefully.'

The state owns water as a public resource. But at what price is water being sold in cities and do people who live in villages and towns have access to clean drinking water? What can a government employee with a salary of 1800 buy?

If we want to live in dignity, we must know the existing prices. There may be basic foodstuffs that the state brings to the citizen, but individual needs are not limited to that. When we try to study the situation, data can surprise.

For example, the government sells water to water-tank truck operators at 47 cents per barrel, which operators then sell for 50 Nakfa. A liter of milk is now sold for at least 20 Nakfa. But it should not cost more than four Nakfa.

The cost of living cannot rise in that way, and it is not possible to live in this way anywhere in the world. We must find solution to this matter. If a person's salary, as mentioned, is 1800, how can they live or rent a house?

The employees, especially those who support families, are in a difficult situation because most of them receive the lowest salary. How can a government employee live in this situation? The cost of living is the sum of the basic consumables that a person needs – food, clothes, housing, and other supplies. The government cannot come in and intervene, saying the price should be like this, or lower or raise this price.

Prices are increasing, and because buying and selling are conducted with speculation, this is driving inflation. When a 200-liter plastic barrel is sold at 40 cents per liter, one liter ought to be sold for a quarter of a cent. So, in what sense does one sell half a liter of water at five, eight or ten Nakfa?

Moreover, the salaries that started with the introduction of the new currency in 2015 should be considered. How strong is the purchasing power of the new currency? The issue of addressing the cost of living is determined on the basis of the government employee's salary of 1800 or 4000 and the purchasing power of the currency. Once the government has decided that the price of the dollar is 15 Nakfa, it is not considered sufficient given the high cost in the markets. What can one buy for 15 Nakfa from the market? Is the price of the dollar close to the prices in the countries that deal in dollars? This causes you to doubt the stability of the exchange in this respect. There will be a drop in the purchasing power in the markets, because the salary that the employee receives, whether it is 1800 or 4000, will be exchanged in the markets for the purpose of purchasing.

If all employees spend their salaries in the markets to buy their necessities, surely that lowers the purchasing power of the currency. And

this continuous depreciation of the currency leads to a decrease in the value of salaries and their inability to buy, and life becomes difficult.

Speculation must be controlled, as it is harmful to the economy. It is difficult to say now that there is a merchant who pays taxes in a legal way and earns a fair profit from their trade. The cumulative effect of all this is seen in the living conditions of government employees. We all know who is building economic projects and working in national development activities -- it is the government employees who constitute the majority. But, if the salary you decide on today does not help them to live tomorrow, it is not possible to continue in this manner.

So who needs control must be controlled, as it is not reasonable to live at the expense of others. It is the responsibility of the government to protect the employee who toils. In what sense can one sell a sheep that one bought from a shepherd at 700 Nakfa at a price of 3000? The shepherd who worked hard to raise the sheep did not profit from it. Therefore, adjustments must be made. It is considered unhelpful to confirm the effectiveness of salaries before stopping speculation. Therefore, we decided to start with the priorities where there is an influential link between the two sides, i.e. salaries and the issue of controlling prices in the markets.

The issue cannot be addressed as if it could be solved simply by increasing salaries only. Therefore, the situation needs a sustainable adjustment. Improving people's lives and changing the quality of their lives should proceed along with economic growth and wealth distribution. Hence, the salaries that started will not stop and should continue, and the task of controlling the economic situation is necessary. If we take 1800 Nakfa as a salary at the present time, we assume 60- 70% of it covers basic needs. But we see considerable price increases every year, making the salary too weak to cover 20% of needs. If prices continue to increase in this way, what can an employee buy after two or three years? What can one buy with a salary of 1800 Nakfa or even 4000 Nakfa? So, it does not make sense to say that we decided to increase salaries before we put an end to speculation and the damage it is causing the economy.

You take water for free and sell it as you want. The price of a plastic bottle, at its highest, is only 80 cents. So how on earth can a bottle of water be sold at 10 Nakfa? Is it fair? Do people have the ability to buy it? The government cannot remain silent when such injustice happens. In order for the government worker to be productive and contribute to the economic and social development, they must get service that rewards their effort. And this issue is not only limited to the employees, but also the common people.

Animals slaughtered for meat are provided by the farmer who raises them. Farmers are part of the society, but they do not have clean water to

drink for themselves or their livestock. The cattle are their wealth, which they sell at low prices to speculators who then sell them at very high prices. Should the government simply watch such an act without stopping it? It is impossible for the government to tolerate this.

Therefore, salaries that have been approved to improve the living conditions of government employees are not reversible. Besides this, irresponsible actions that complicate the living and economic situation must be controlled. And the matter of controlling the markets is in progress. Following studies that were conducted, it has been in effect since 2018, and it is showing relative progress, though not at the required level.

Without any convincing reason, one load of sand that they took from this land has been sold at 10000 or 11000. They also sell water they took from the dams at ten, 50 or 80 Nakfa. This must be controlled. As for the salaries approved, people who did not receive the salaries fixed in 2018 for various reasons must be paid their two-year salary retroactively. We must also know that there is no government decision that sets 500 Nakfa as a salary for any reason. People who have been paid 500 Nakfa must receive the difference, 1300. This is the only acceptable solution. There is no other way to settle this issue.

And in the end, any government worker - in the army, construction companies, and various government agencies - must receive their salary under this specified value scale. As for the people who did not receive this salary, their salaries will be adjusted according to the accepted value. By 2021 we do not want to hear of an employee who has not received their salary as they should.

This does not mean that we have put an end to the problem. The point I talked about earlier is how we can describe the reality of our economy and where it should go, in addition to the large development projects that are being mapped out. After the completion of our preparations during 2020, we will continue in 2021 to achieve the development that we desire.

Efforts must be made to build a stable and growing economy. As far as production is concerned, we must define sectors or industries that we can work on, and think about how we can gradually strengthen them. Reforming government work in a manner that eliminates corruption and strengthens the factors of production was outlined in the announcement made last year on Independence Day.

Government workers are not the only productive people. Ultimate production is conducted by the entire population. Our goal is to provide opportunities for the people and work to strengthen its productive role. This is our responsibility. It must be understood that this is not easy. It does not end with a discussion that comes from knowledgeable people, as



this issue concerns the people in general. This is what the people should know because it represents the complex and interrelated matter that affects their lives and contributes to their development. The state of the economy should be understood by the ordinary citizen, in order for them to contribute to its construction with vigor and vitality. It should not be perceived that economy is explained by the higher authorities only.

In order for the issue to be understood in this way, the points that I have made in-depth regarding the economy must be well recognized by the people because the economy is related to their daily lives. Since the people participate in building the economy, the people should know what the economy is and where it is going. This way they can consciously confront interventions that negatively impact the growth of their livelihoods.

At this time, we are on a better stage and we can push our economy to a higher level. We overcame our external challenges with our steadfastness. And since we trust in our capabilities, we can push our economy towards development, even in light of challenges. Society must realize the depth of the task to build a strong economy.

The issue of understanding means doing the work, and if all people understand the situation well, they can actively participate in the development programs that are defined in projects related to both industry and other sectors. This task can be accomplished with the participation of all people.

The issue that we started with, the salaries of government workers, has taken us to several issues. If we take the issue of salaries alone, it is very difficult to believe that by raising salaries to 1800 or to 4000 the challenges for employees will have been solved. This is not the final solution to the issue and it needs continuous follow-up. In the three years since the introduction of the new salary scale, we have been able to recognize strengths and weaknesses. And we are working with great commitment to solve this issue so that there are no unresolved issues regarding salaries next year. We want to ensure that every employee gets the specified salary according to their level. And I mentioned that we must go beyond the problem of salaries and work on improving the lives of people by building a stable economy.

- **Your Excellency, the issue of residential houses is a challenge. To solve this problem, it was previously mentioned that housing projects have been planned. What are the viable programs for 2020?**

This in itself is a significant topic. Housing is one of the programs that we have not been able to fully address in the past. Every effort to improve the living standards of people is interlinked.

So considering that this issue is one of the basic problems, we must find a solution. Attempts have been made to precast houses and provide construction materials. Attempts were made to establish local companies that work in construction and foreign companies have also been invited. We tried foreign companies that built what is known as the "Korea Quarter" in Massawa and Asmara. The housing programs were introduced in connection with the issue of providing homes. The projects started and at a time when we did not develop other sectors, providing a home for every citizen was the initial objective.

What would the map in front of us look like? We consider what percentage of citizens or families have their own homes, regardless of their quality, whether they are traditional or modern. Owning a house, whether in the countryside or urban areas, is considered one of the basic requirements for living. Houses must contain sewer lines, toilets, water lines and electricity, transportation facilities, and access to markets, as well as to education and health services. This development must gradually be extended to all parts of the country for the benefit of everyone.

What matters most to us is the citizen who lives in the remote countryside who does not find potable and sufficient drinking water and water for washing or cleaning. The main concern is how we can provide sufficient water for hygiene, agriculture, and livestock.

Instead of focusing only on big cities, we must ensure the improvement of this situation and also gradually solve the issue of living. We can talk about the challenges that prevented the completion of many buildings, given the quality of construction materials and equipment that we can produce with our own capabilities, doors, windows and flooring materials. What are the materials that we have and that we can import? And by adding all of these factors, one can ask in the end what percentage of the population has their own home? This also must improve. If it was 10% in the past year, let us say it reached 15% in the current year, and then 20% and 30% subsequently, in order to ensure its continuous development. We can finally complete the remainder by providing the needed materials and equipment.

And since the challenges are not easy, we have not been able to accomplish what we have previously put in place at the required level. If there are those who believe that any problem related to economic and development projects will be solved in isolation from providing housing projects, they should not waste their time. If you do not initiate a solution to the problem of houses in the foreground, you cannot solve the problem of eating and drinking, for example.

Based on our observations in the past two years, we can ask about our capabilities and the obstacles facing us. Is it stemming from a lack of equipment and machinery? Or is it stemming from the lack of professional

staff? Through this research we can say that we have at least some understanding of these obstacles. When we say that we have not accomplished this task at the required level in the past, we try to study the obstacles that prevented this from being achieved, and work to find solutions. To solve this problem, we must gradually provide housing throughout the country. The benefit of this situation is the role it plays in upgrading production and the creation of a prosperous economy. If only 1% of the productive force owns homes, the role that the workforce can play is very limited in achieving the desired development. When the worker owns a house, he will definitely contribute more.

We have been able to improve the building material industry, and we have no problem. We have a cement factory that has materials sufficient for the industry, but as a result of the continuous power outages, we have to import cement from abroad. But is there sufficient water or human resources trained in the professions?

There are new programs we have introduced to achieve housing projects in a stable manner with the capabilities we have. We must, above all, encourage foreign investment in housing projects if we are sure that they benefit us.

We have some programs in this regard that we will start implementing in 2021 by specifying the areas and number of houses to be built? What are the types of homes that will be built, and what can we do regarding the provision of building materials, manpower, machinery and technology? This will give us a general picture. And since we have not previously succeeded in accomplishing what we planned in building houses, it is not necessary to say that we will do this now and achieve this. So we preferred to start this year to work until we are sure of what we are doing and we will see it next year.

- **Mr. President, in light of the developments in relation to the prevailing peace in the region, what are the plans charted out regarding the regional partnership in development programs, foreign investments and the encouragement of local investors?**

Our view of investment is comprehensive. Investment does not mean the arrival of an investor carrying his bag of money. The real investor is that farmer who seeks here and there to market his products from crops and livestock. It is this that revives the economy and helps accumulate wealth. If it provides an appropriate environment for this activity, this means that there is an appropriate environment for investment. But to achieve this reality, what should be done? Here it is necessary to refer to the national programs. If you are seeking to create a suitable atmosphere for the

promotion of development, you must look at the condition of your infrastructure -- asphalted roads, railways and others. I mean, what is the status and reality of the infrastructure components that help to push any economic activity? What are the costs required for structural projects? If there are impassable methods, we can move as easily as we want, and we can produce more with lower costs. In the event that such opportunities are available to most of the people of the country, the total return on benefits to the national economy will be very large. I mean, the investors must find, whether it is from the inside or provided from the outside, the foundations of qualified infrastructures that enable them to perform their duties comfortably.

If we take electricity, for example, the power plants in Hirgigo and other sites have not been able to provide the required services. Therefore, a fundamental solution to the energy problem must be found, and the electricity services must be integrated so that investors can work without obstacles. At the same time, the cost of energy services needs to be appropriate. Energy should be made available everywhere, whatever the source of energy. The same applies to land, sea and air transportation as well. This is how you create the right atmosphere for investment.

Education and health services are among the most important factors for economic growth and development. You may have money or natural resources, but skills and capabilities are the most important. An investor requires skilled professional capabilities to accomplish his project, especially in an era that requires technical know-how.

If we asked about the level we have reached in the field of vocational training so far, then most of our programs that were not profitable are our educational programs. Every year, more than 10,000 students complete their secondary school education, and we wonder what these young people have achieved. We must change our educational system from ground up as it is related to our development. The number of those who go to college does not exceed 15%, so where do the rest go? What can a high school graduate do after 12 years of education? We can attract investment and the ability to accumulate wealth, but we must work hard to enhance our human capital, which is the basis for ensuring sustainable development. Thus, it is important to create an appropriate environment for investment.

Of course, it is not possible to compare our economic standards with the major industrial countries. If the industrialized countries are the standard of technical development, then we must create economies that are more industrialized, and in order to achieve this we must fully meet the requirements of development.

There is no difference between a foreign investor and a domestic investor. No investment can be underestimated. A small project for livestock

farmers in the villages may have a good contribution to the economy. The important thing is to create appropriate conditions for this situation.

The current challenges and obstacles facing us in our development efforts are not few. The economic war that was waged against us for 20 years to prevent us from developing our infrastructure and economic capabilities was more powerful than direct military aggression. What did countries do when the dispute occurred between us and Ethiopia, which was a source of happiness for them? They want us to live in this state of hostility forever, fall behind in development and fail to compete. They have no desire to see a joint action to achieve development. In such a situation, you cannot accomplish any project, build roads and airports, or exploit your marine resources. What they want is for other countries to advance and for us to wait at the bottom. You must be disabled and paralyzed so that you cannot catch up with them. In such a situation, I remember Britain's actions in Eritrea in the past. The economic development in this country was big and unparalleled in the region. A railway was established and we had cable cars. We had an active port in Massawa, which was known as the Pearl of the Red Sea. The first thing that the British did to ensure that this country could not rely on itself to survive was to attack the economy of the country until it collapsed. After that, wars came, and there is no room for reconstruction under the weight of war. We missed many opportunities. These events did not happen by coincidence, but were deliberate because economic war is worse than military war.

The story is still continuing today. There are obstacles facing us. We cannot pave roads and implement energy and other development projects. This means that this matter is not new; it is a continuation. Of course, it is not something that terrifies us and affects our morale. In fact, we are working and we are aware of its existence. So we continue on our path, and in this context our products should be distinct and able to compete in the local and global markets.

The priority in investment is our people. We must create an appropriate environment for development in any location, on the shores of the sea, with our marine resources, or in the field of agriculture, including livestock, or other natural resources, especially mining. Our focus is to strengthen our people's capabilities to produce. In the same way, we need to create a suitable atmosphere for Eritreans in the diaspora to provide them ample opportunities in any field they wish to invest in.

There is no difference between foreign and domestic investments. If we look at the textile factories in our country in the past, we know the manufacturing industries had been very well established. There was cotton plantation in Aligidir and other areas. The cotton was processed and turned into garments at manufacturing plants. The added value made manufacturing profitable and helped create many jobs.

The leather manufacturing factories that functioned well in the past do not exist anymore. There is not much to talk about the best shoes that were once made here. And exporting leather as a raw material is not profitable. What must be done is building solid economic foundations for better and more valuable production, with fewer expenditures, and job opportunities for the largest number of people.

What we are witnessing today are obstacles aimed at stopping the growth of our economy and the development of our nation so that we can fall into the arms of charitable organizations. We are not facing these challenges alone.

There are other peoples who also live in the same atmosphere and suffer from this reality. If we are to get out of this cycle, we should do more to improve our economy and encourage foreign investment. For example, when investors asked to buy Ex-Baratollo Textile Factory, a committee was set up to assess the factory. But, what is better for us -- the millions that we get from selling the factory or rehabilitating the factory? And if it is to be sold, the investor should work to modernize the factory through advanced technology, by giving training to the work force, and by improving the quality and quantity of production.

The glass factory in Asmara was unparalleled in the region in the past, but today it does not exist. Today, we produce gold, but we sell raw materials that have not been refined. It is not possible to run an economy this way. So in order for us to strengthen all productive institutions and take advantage of our competitive advantages, our ultimate goal should be to raise the level of the economy. The issue is not whether the investor is local or a foreigner. As is known many factories were privatized in the early nineties, but there hasn't been any change. What is most important is producing premium products to be sold at low prices so that they can compete in the world market. We need to create a suitable atmosphere for this to happen.

- **Your Excellency, in the speech you delivered on the occasion of the 28th anniversary of Eritrea's independence, you mentioned 11 points that focused on development programs that would be implemented, including social services, infrastructure, industries, housing projects, and others. What are the programs that we can start working on this year?**

These programs will be implemented using not only local resources but require regional collaboration. Joint action helps to produce good results and tangible development quickly. I am not certain that we have overcome all challenges. But we must work hard to enable the ports to become fully operational, not only for Ethiopia, but also to make good use of the available opportunities. As we are a maritime country, in addition to strengthening the ports we should also benefit from the international

waterway. We also have to work on medium and large scale infrastructure to take advantage of our long coastline, including Assab, Barasole, Edi, Tio, Beilul and Zula as well as other areas in the northern coastal region. But before doing anything else, let's start by activating the operation of the two main ports.

We have designed a development plan regarding the port of Massawa, but we are not in a hurry to implement it at the present time. We have to start with the first stage, which is its rehabilitation. The second stage relates to developing the port so that it can provide better services. The third stage includes the port's expansion. The port can be expanded by 20 kilometers from the north side as well as the southern side, and we will start this with our local capabilities or take advantage of external loans, if necessary. We are also making efforts targeting the port of Assab. We have developed a road map aimed at developing and expanding the port, but it is better to start with what is available.

As for the fisheries industry, preliminary studies do confirm that we have stored marine wealth estimated at between 80,000 and 100,000 or 120,000 tons, but what percentage have we harnessed in the past. The rate does not exceed 10,000 tons. Are there any reasons to justify this? We must establish the infrastructure. We built jetties in Edi, Tio, and other areas. Despite the provision of facilities, such as refrigerators, in these jetties, they were not utilized at full capacity. So we have to establish all the requirements needed to start benefiting from the marine industry. We have to create roads linked to the beaches from the southern and northern sides.

The total amount of raw materials at the Gedem cement factory does not exceed 30 million tons, and the raw materials for the cement industry in Tio are estimated at 100 million tons. The development of this factory meets local as well as export needs. We also have potash resources at Colluli although production has not yet begun. But starting production requires the provision of electricity, water and transport. We are well placed to identify those plans for the management this year.

The Massawa - Dekemhare - Serha - Zalambesa road is being rehabilitated. The road needs to be expanded and bridges of various sizes need to be built heavy machinery and more manpower.

The "Ring Road" that connects Asmara-Adi-Guadad-Dekemhare and Mendefera is under construction. And the construction of the Adi- Guadad - Mensurea -Akordet - Omhajer road will start this year.

As for the energy sector, we will upgrade Assab electric supply by 30 megawatts, Massawa by 20 megawatts and Asmara by 10 megawatts. All in all, there will be an addition of 60 megawatts and this will be gradually upgraded to 120 megawatts and then to 240 megawatts.

And in terms of transportation services such as cable cars and other means of transportation, we are working to complete studies which will help us to have a clear picture. I do not think that there are any obstacles that can impede the completion of the task.

Water is the most crucial thing because we cannot accomplish any task without preserving sufficient water. So, we will continue to construct small, medium and large dams. Nothing can be carried out without performing these tasks. We are not in a hurry to work on "White Elephant" projects. Instead, we have to work on development projects that progress at a steady pace. To do this successfully, we have to secure our human resources, raw materials, heavy machinery and other equipment and then proceed with the implementation of the projects..

As for the mining sector, we are still working hard. Generally, we do not just talk about our programs in the new era of development of peace and partnership. We must try to understand the joint work that is going on between Eritrea and Ethiopia. How do we connect roads and railway networks between the two countries? We can also implement this jointly with our Gulf partners. Likewise, these actions can be carried out with Sudan. You can start the journey alone but we would like to succeed jointly with our partners. However, there are many forces that work hard to block these joint actions, especially with Ethiopia. So, we take into account these obstacles in the context of our development undertakings and design practical strategies. Before talking on the media or conducting public relations campaigns, we have to learn about how to connect roads and railways that benefit everyone. All of these programs will start in 2020 if preparations are completed, and if not they will start in 2021.

- **Your Excellency, for 20 years we went through a difficult stage to protect our sovereignty, and we finally won because of our determination. What is your message to the Eritrean people, especially the youth, at this stage?**

We do not distinguish between age groups. During the past two or three years we have carried out successful evaluation projects. We planned for zero wastage of human resources. The youth, and generally all citizens, should make good use of their time, without wasting time on what is not beneficial. Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in our academic programs as we should have.

We have to organize effective vocational training courses, and these only succeed with the empowerment of human capabilities and accumulated experiences. All people, especially the young, must be involved. Every young person must acquire a profession.

We have introduced vocational training program at SAWA, and the established training schools have accomplished a lot. But we should not be



complacent. The potential of young people must be strengthened, and we must employ those capabilities in the required programs. Whatever technology and equipment we have, we must provide effective human power and this is a major priority.

Our educational programs, from preschool all the way to higher education, need to be reviewed. Of course, no one expects this to be accomplished in just a year or two. We understand the need for strengthening human power, but the question here is not about how the programs are completed on paper. The issue lies in identifying the human resources before everything. We really worked hard and we have tried some programs. We are still working to empower citizens through training programs offered locally and abroad. Despite this, it has not progressed as it should. The need for skilled human power is now considered essential, especially for the youth. Some programs have started and some are under study. We do not want young people to waste their time. It is necessary to provide the youth with training programs to develop a qualified workforce.