

**Interview with President Isaias Afwerki
on Regional and Domestic issues,
17 February 2021 (Excerpts)**



- **Question : The TPLF’s massive attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian Defence Forces in early November of 2020 has resulted in the removal of the TPLF from power. What will be the ramifications of this event on Ethiopia, the wider region, and, especially, the peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia?**

President Isaias Afwerki: First, we need to appreciate the positive shifts brought about by the political reform in Ethiopia and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s willingness to embark on genuine relations with Eritrea based on what he described as ‘love, peace, and cooperation’.

We all recall the euphoria and optimism engendered by peace and the prospects of stability and development when the Declaration of Peace and Friendship was signed (in July 2018). At the same time, this momentous event signalled the end of the TPLF’s schemes in Ethiopia.

Against this backdrop, what were the underlying reasons for the unimaginable and unthinkable reckless military attacks that the TPLF unleashed three months

ago? What prompted the TPLF to act as it did? These issues must be appraised with comprehensive and profound depth.

The TPLF clique was gripped by unbridled anxiety during the past two years. The prospects of enduring peace and stability, the cultivation of warm ties between Eritrea and Ethiopia, along with its regional impact, bred apprehension within the ranks of the TPLF and its backers. Preparations for war by the TPLF clique were set in motion and steadily grew.

The announcement by Prime Minister Abiy that Ethiopia accepted the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission decision and Eritrea's subsequent acceptance of the Prime Minister's initiative was spelled out in my speech on Martyrs Day in June 2018. This deepened the TPLF's anxiety.

It began to use the border issue as a trump card, keeping Tigray hostage and creating a huge political challenge for us. To us, the implementation of the border decision was not a matter of immediate concern. Our sovereignty over Badme or other occupied lands was not controversial or up for debate. Hence our decision not to focus on the border issue and instead set it aside for the time being in order to focus on what we considered to be more important – lending support to the efforts in Ethiopia for positive change.

Our main concern was to work for a lasting peace and we decided to patiently observe developments. We increased our efforts to further develop the climate for peace.

By contrast, the TPLF was immersed in preparations for war and futile attempts to create stumbling blocks for peace and good relations between the two countries.

The Ethiopian Federal Government was also monitoring the TPLF's preparations for war and other activities.

Prime Minister Abiy came up with many well-intentioned proposals. On our part, we preferred to proceed with caution, mainly because of our past experiences. After the signing of the Peace Agreement, we took concrete steps

and opened the border with Ethiopia at Bure, Zalambesa, and Omhajer in order to give further impetus to the peace process.

Prime Minister Abiy continuously urged me to meet with Debretsion [TPLF leader], and I told him that I did not need an intermediary to speak to Debretsion. However, since we saw unfortunate things developing, I explained that there was no need for haste and that we should work towards further securing the peace process. The fact was that the TPLF persisted in its entrenched stance against the peace process. It continued with military preparations and was conducting a propaganda campaign intended to drive a wedge between the two countries. In the event, I did not have much appetite to meet Debretsion on the occasion of the border opening ceremony in Zalambesa.

However, I agreed to meet him during the border opening ceremony at Omhajer, when the request was renewed at the last minute. We met briefly for a couple of minutes on the margins of the ceremony. I had only one message to him which I was mulling with hesitancy. Having debated whether or not it was necessary to mention the matter, I decided that it was better to mention the subject in order to avoid any regrets in the future. I also did not want to lose the opportunity to ask, as Prime Minister Abiy was pressing me on the matter.

Eventually, I asked Debretsion why they were preparing for war. He replied that “it won’t happen”. I then asked what ‘it won’t happen’ meant, but it was not made clear.

At the time, I saw my role as a messenger, to pass on the message that war was not a viable option and that the TPLF needed to stop thinking about war. There was no point in holding their people hostage or claiming they were going to be invaded from the south by the Ethiopian government and by Eritrea from the north.

It was after that we decided that we should study the matter in greater detail and begin to draw up possible scenarios. Nobody could have predicted or contemplated the event that unfolded on November 3. All meticulous assessments could not have predicted this scenario as a probable or possible outcome. This could not have been contemplated with a miraculous crystal ball.

The Northern Command was about 30-32,000 strong. Of these, about a third were Tigrayans. Before resorting to military action, the TPLF conducted what it termed “democratic elections”, so as to declare the Federal government as illegitimate. This could be considered the first part of their game plan. The question was where all this was leading to. Evidently, this was a prelude and supposed to clear the path for the military attack. An attack that was tantamount to madness, in my view.

The ultimate aim of the plot was to destroy the Ethiopian Northern Command, by either killing or capturing its members. The scheme also involved falsely claiming that the Northern Command had surrendered. A triumphant TPLF would then march to Addis Ababa and later bring about “regime change” in Asmara if all went well.

To wage war with such an insane attitude can only stem from a gross miscalculation. In all military confrontations, the pitfall invariably lies in miscalculation. But such a gross miscalculation is unprecedented. This is a historic folly.

During the attack, many were killed and many others were taken prisoners. However, the key point occurred when a substantial number of soldiers thwarted the attack.

It is now about three-and-a-half months since these events occurred. The Northern Command of the Ethiopian Army is best placed to narrate what happened as they lived through the experience. But from our end, it never crossed our mind that this event would happen. None of us anticipated the recklessness, irresponsibility, and desperation that drove the TPLF to take such extreme measures.

The events of November 3 must be seen in the context of the past two years. What were the underlying reasons for the adventurist and destructive decisions? Much can be said, but ultimately the issues are not limited to the past two years only. This is the culmination of the politics that prevailed in Ethiopia during the past 30 years and perhaps beyond. It is not something that happened overnight.

A profound understanding of the root cause, which is essential for finding a lasting solution, will require analyzing beyond the last two years.

All that has happened recently is a direct consequence of what I consider as ‘time bomb politics’. What prevailed in Ethiopia 80 years or so ago may have its influences. But mainly, the misguided policies that the TPLF pursued in the last thirty years are the principal cause of what has transpired today.

In the early 1990s, when our ties with the TPLF were good, we routinely discussed various issues. One of the relevant discussions linked to the present situation is an important event that took place in 1994. This is known to me and Meles only. Meles told me that he was coming to see me as he had a matter he wished to discuss. He brought with him a copy of the draft Ethiopian Constitution and told me that not many people had seen it. He wanted me to give him my opinion on the proposed constitution.

I read it several times and highlighted some of the issues of concern. I was overcome with a sense of foreboding and could see the potential serious dangers embedded in the proposals. It was not only Article 39 [the right to secede] that was of concern; the entire draft constitution gave an indication as to where things would go.

When I met him again, I shared my thoughts and told him that the proposed constitution was not suitable for the people of Ethiopia by any standards. I told him that it was also not fit for any other nation or people.

He told me that he had expected my response and explained that he only showed me the copy as a courtesy. As far as he was concerned, the constitution was the only one that would work for them (TPLF). Meles went on to say that they would plant bombs in all the regions; if things went well, fine, but if problems arose, then they would detonate the bombs one by one.

Nation- and institution-building cannot be undertaken with such thinking. The philosophy behind the creation of Regions or Kilils is not geared for creating a cohesive government structure. It reflects the misguided objectives of the TPLF.

When we look back at the past 20-25 years of politics in Ethiopia, we see that the political culture that has been cultivated is one based on pitting one ethnic group against another in order to cause enmity between them. Division and strife were sown at all levels and this culture of fomenting discord is the principal cause for what we are seeing today.

What is behind the current affliction in Ethiopia is this policy of institutionalized ethnicity. But the seeds of this policy were not originally sown in 1994. It goes back further. We know quite well, more than others, of the TPLF's orientation in the 1970s. The politics and culture of ethnic polarization is not limited to Tigray. It has proliferated all over Ethiopia and is a real concern. This culture will also have adverse consequences in our ability to live in peace as neighbours.

Without digressing too much, we can cite similar patterns or trends that were fostered in other countries, such as Somalia, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, and Sudan. Narrow clan or ethnic-based, sub-national state configurations presided over by warlords is a recipe for disintegration. The ensuing chaos will allow external actors to intervene and manage the chaos. This is sometimes conducted by forces that come with a religious mantle. The chance to create national sovereign institutions is squandered. Societal polarization is intensified and the country becomes a victim of external agendas.

We have gone through a similar process and learned from these experiences. The polarization of Eritrean society along religious and other parochial tendencies in the 1940s during the British Military Administration and the divisions within the armed liberation movement from the early 1960s until 1981 on a sectarian basis are cases in point. We would not have secured our independence and sovereignty had these policies of division prevailed. It is the lessons gleaned from our experiences in those times that saved us from this latent danger.

Bolstering enduring peace and stability and fostering a conducive climate of cooperation will require concerted efforts to contain and eradicate the problems posed by policies of ethnic polarization. The principal reason that we supported the reform process in Ethiopia in the past two-to-three years was because we recognize the need for mutual support to bring about lasting peace in our region.

Our interests will not be served by a situation of turmoil in Ethiopia where different ethnic groups are pitted against each other. Regional peace and stability will not be guaranteed in a toxic climate of ethnic strife. Our perspective and firm policy is based on these critical pillars.

We have learned important lessons from the TPLF's reckless recent acts. We cannot say that the issue has been fully resolved. Efforts to reverse the prevailing achievements are underway by external forces and remnants of the TPLF through waging a war of attrition and subsequent launching of counter-offensives. The situation will require close monitoring and gathering appropriate lessons that will enable us to chart out proactive initiatives moving forward.

Ethiopia's role in this region cannot be downplayed. This has been our consistent position from the outset. Ethiopia must contribute to regional peace and stability. However, it cannot fulfill its rightful regional role and responsibilities if its domestic situation is precarious. We have endured the fallout of this reality for the last 80 years. As such, we have a vested interest – more than other countries in our neighbourhood – in seeing peace and stability in Ethiopia. Accordingly, we are working to shoulder our obligations to contribute towards this end.

- **Question : For years foreign powers have used the TPLF as a proxy in order to wage a baseless campaign of vilification against Eritrea and isolate it. What will become of these efforts and what can we expect moving forward?**

President Isaias Afwerki: We have to see this within its historical context. If we look at the past 80 years, particularly since the end of the Second World War, Eritrea was one of the African countries that was due to become independent. When in the 1940s, John Foster Dulles [former US Secretary of State] declared that an independent Eritrea will not serve their strategic interests, our fate was sealed. We were forced into our long struggle because we were denied our right to self-determination.

For us, the period between 1941 and 1952, when we were a British protectorate, was a period of transition. It was then that the superpowers to be determined

Ethiopia would serve as their proxy in the region. Because of that we were denied our rights.

The price we have paid as a result of foreign interference in our matters is indeed a very high one. Ethiopian governments of the past were carrying out the plans and agendas of foreign powers. There was no real reason for animosity between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The rulers of Ethiopia did not have an agenda for conflict with Eritrea – they were pushed by foreign powers and encouraged to pursue the policies they did. This was despite it not being in their interest. Had they not been given support by foreign powers, the issue would not have lasted as long as it did.

It was in 1961 that the Eritrean armed struggle began. In 1974, the Emperor was overthrown and the Ethiopian military took power. Despite the change in government, the new leaders carried on fighting in Eritrea for the next 17 years. The principle behind the war waged by both Ethiopian governments was the same: they were attempting to implement plans of foreign powers who had determined that an independent Eritrea was not in their strategic interests. The Ethiopians were simply conduits through which foreign powers were implementing an agenda. The fight against this foreign influence and the achievement of an independent Eritrea required great sacrifice.

The question raised is: what has this taught us? It has shown us that what we have endured during the past 50 or so years was primarily a result of foreign forces who promoted policies of polarization, division, and conflict in our region.

By 1991, the Cold War and the East- West/ US-Soviet rivalry was over. The World entered a new era. This event coincided with the time that we got our independence

We had been determined to work closely with the new Ethiopian government to bring about a positive change in the region in this new era. But, even before we had embarked on this new journey, problems began to arise under the pretext of border issues. The issue of the Hannish islands with Yemen was raised, an issue that until that time had never been raised before. One has to ask why this was so

and whose agenda it was. This was not really Yemen's agenda. It was the agenda of those who consider themselves to be regional and world powers. They had decided that Eritrea should not have any respite and would not be allowed to be left in peace. The intention was to cause interminable problems.

Immediately after the resolution of the Hannish conflict, the Badme border dispute was instigated. Badme was a deliberately manufactured problem, Badme was just a pretext. Badme was intended to derail the budding good relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia. When we look at how the issue developed, the war from 1998-2000, and then the period until 2018, we see that it was due to foreign influence and foreign agendas.

While the dispute was induced by external powers, the TPLF regime discarded all the solidarity fostered in decades of struggle to betray and wage war against Eritrea. In return, the TPLF was rewarded with massive funding in the form of grants and loans. US support to the TPLF regime in subsequent years is estimated over 20 Billion dollars. The underlying purpose was to entangle Eritrea and Ethiopia in conflict to advance ulterior agendas.

The thinking behind this has to do with the end of the Cold War in 1991. We can cite the writings of Fukiyama and other western philosophers. These theories can be distilled in the following: the consolidation of a uni-polar global order where there is one overarching power that rules the world for long years. This will be effected by dividing the world into spheres of influence with subservient regional anchors in these spheres of influence. These theories are found in their official documents.

When it comes to our region we have to ask how they implemented their policies. Border disputes have been used as a pretext for conflicts. The various conflicts between governments in the region are not due to governments pursuing their own interests. Instead, they are a result of foreign powers aiming to further their own interests through governments in the region.

In the past 20-25 years, the TPLF-led Ethiopian government was portrayed as an exemplary government and the amount of support it received was immense. Was the TPLF working on its own? Was what we saw a product of the narrow-

minded thinking of the TPLF? We should not limit the issue in this way and belittle it by thinking as such.

When we look at the recent developments between Eritrea and Ethiopia, we should note that not just the TPLF, but also the foreign elements that were pursuing policies of polarization and establishing obstacles, are deeply perturbed.

If we examine what has been said during these past three months, we have to ask what is behind the disarray and anxiety. The other issues we witness unfolding in our region are part of this development. When we examine developments, we have to be able to relate them to each other. We are not the only actors, there are others. Those with the biggest influence are evidently the global powers.

We have tried to engage with the TPLF – even as far back as the 1970s and 1980s. We worked closely with them and we managed to dissuade them from the initial stand that they had about Ethiopia. After 1991, we made our humble contributions towards the betterment of the region. But in all the time that we worked with the TPLF, it was obvious that foreign-sponsored agendas took prominent place for them, overshadowing our efforts. We cannot solely blame foreign actors because without willing local partners, they would not be able to carry out their agenda.

If we are to understand what has happened over the past three months, we have to be able to read the agendas. Who are the regional actors? Who are the global actors? What have they been saying? What is it that they want? Ultimately, their effort to create regional spheres of influence and support proxies will have its own impact.

When we look at the last three months, we realise that the matter is not yet finished. Will those with ulterior motives accept what has transpired and let the matter go? The experience that we have accumulated over the past 80 years tells us that they will not. When we consider the interventions in countries like Iraq, Sudan, Syria, and Lebanon, we understand that what we are seeing in Ethiopia is merely a continuation.

Let us remember the heavy-handed approaches that are employed in such cases. False witnesses are solicited to produce fake reports, and punitive measures taken on these bases by powers who act as prosecutors and judges. We all recall how the UNSC sanctions were imposed on Eritrea. We should not harbour illusions or expect external agendas to disappear. We have to draw appropriate lessons from our history and try to change potential trends through active engagement.

- **Question : We have seen several recent incidents which may threaten to have a negative impact on the new era of peace in the region. These incidents include the border issue between Ethiopia and Sudan, and the issue of the Nile between Ethiopia and Egypt. How can a fair, just, and long-term solution be found for these issues and what role can Eritrea play?**

President Isaias Afwerki: Our foreign policy is based on the principle of acknowledging that conflict is always a result of imbalance. Where there is imbalance, uncertainty and conflict are sure to follow as a result of miscalculations. Therefore, it is our belief that for there to be peace in our neighbourhood, there must be balance.

We see our neighbourhood as having four major components. The first is the Nile Basin, the second is the Horn of Africa, which overlaps the Nile Basin, the third – and most strategic- is the Red Sea area. The fourth is the Arabian Gulf. To have balance in this region, every nation must occupy its rightful place. This is not about who is rich or powerful. It is about being able to establish cooperation between states and bringing about positive change. It is not our intent to try to exert influence in this region beyond our size or capacity. Our intention is to play our role within a peaceful, stable region.

A problem is the imbalance within our region. We have to look at all the countries and ask if they are occupying their rightful place and if the conditions in the region will allow for a harmonious coexistence of these countries. When examining developments, we have to consider how external influences impact the interactions of these countries with one another. Our region is plagued by

problems caused by external actors who wish to establish spheres of influence. We have to see how global powers are able to influence the balance in our region.

The primary intention of our foreign policy is to work towards a region which is stable and peaceful. Our policy is also designed to identify and avoid developments which might disrupt the stability in the region and lead to conflict and animosity.

A point in case is the border issues. These issues should be considered in the wider context and not be viewed solely through the narrow prism of a border issue. Who are the various actors – domestic, regional, and global – and what are their intentions? We need to anticipate where the region is going. We have the history of the past 10 years, even the past 30 years, to get an idea about the recent issues. We have to examine, in particular, the influence of the powers who aim to create a unipolar world.

How do we see the current issues being raised by Ethiopia's dam on the Nile?

The issue first came to my attention back in 1993 when I attended the summit of the former OAU leaders for the first time as an independent nation in Cairo. I attended the meeting with Meles. We sat together and discussed many issues, including the rumour that Egypt was intending to build a canal connecting the Nile to Israel so that they could sell the water of the Nile to the Israelis. Meles told me that he intended to discuss this with the Egyptians. I told him that it was not the time because we were new, it was our first summit, and it was impractical to raise such weighty subjects before we had time to settle in. He agreed and we left it at that.

We broke up for lunch and after lunch when Meles returned I could see he was angry and flustered. I asked him what happened and he replied, "I should have left the matter as we agreed but I decided to speak to Omer Suleiman about the rumours. He showed great disdain towards me and asked me who I was. Therefore, I will show them who I am." He vowed to take revenge against Egypt.

When we look at the Ethiopian government prior to Eritrea's independence in 1991, we recall that Mengistu Hailemariam, who claimed the Arabs were helping the Eritrean struggle, once declared, "the Arabs might have oil, but we have water!" He was pointing out that Ethiopia was contributing 80% of the Nile waters and could use that as a weapon. These are indications of the problems that underlined the thinking of those governments.

The Nile issue is not owned solely by the TPLF. It is worth closely examining who were the major contributors to the project since its inception in 2011? Who was funding the project and how did it reach this stage? It is a very complicated issue. Only the naive could think that this issue is solely restricted to Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. The problem with the Nile issue is that it is being turned into some sort of PR exercise or being used as a pretext to pursue other interests. Because of this, the underlining problem has been confounded.

As the construction phase progresses and completion becomes a real possibility, tensions are being further stoked. The real question is why were the issues currently being raised not raised five years ago? Why were they not raised 10 years ago, or before 2011 when the project was first planned? Some might claim that these issues were raised, but they were not raised in a manner befitting the seriousness of the matter.

Our view is that the issue cannot be resolved while both Ethiopia and Sudan are in the process of transition and reform. The manner in which the issue is being handled, with claims that the issue will be brought before the AU or that the US will intervene as a mediator, are just pretexts to prolong the matter and let it fester without any intention of resolving it.

The issue of the Nile is an issue of our region. It affects us both directly and indirectly. When you take into consideration that the population of Ethiopia is about 110 million, Sudan's is about 40 million, and Egypt is around 100 million, we are talking about 250 million people along the Nile. In 20-25 years, this population could double to 500 million. In our view, the only way to resolve the issue is by implementing a purely technical solution. Ways to best utilise the water of the Nile to the advantage of all the people should be sought, in which it is determined how much of it can be used to generate power, for agriculture,

drinking, and so on. The parties involved should seek a real solution, avoiding gimmicks and threats.

They should seek a long-term solution that provides benefits to all and ensures benefits for future generations. The focus should remain on cooperation and sharing benefits, based on facts and technical data, rather than headlines and PR exercises. The fact that we cannot see a solution on the horizon is a concern for our region.

The rapidly escalating issue between Ethiopia and Sudan is not only very surprising, it is also concerning and alarming. The issue had been in a state of limbo for many years. The government that had been in the Sudan had knowingly exploited it for its own advantage. It was a matter that had been set aside by the TPLF and other parties with influence in the region. The question is, why is it coming to the fore now, at a time when both Ethiopia and Sudan are in transition? What reason is there for the matter to escalate into a military clash?

It is important to step back and try to identify the variables in the situation that are causing the matter to escalate. It's not about pointing fingers at anyone. However, while this issue had previously been set aside, who will benefit from the developing tension and clashes?

We see this as a worrying development for the region. It is important to understand that this issue is not an issue of either Ethiopia or Sudan. We know that there are some who are busy stoking the fire. We do not believe that the issue, on its own, is a large enough matter to spark clashes or tension. It is a matter that requires a calm approach to seek a lasting solution. There is no issue that should come between Ethiopia and Sudan, as both countries are in a transition. Both should be working to ensure that they establish stability before trying to find a solution for the issue at the border. The priority at this time is enhancing the historically strong relationship between the two peoples.

The issues we face in our region cannot be resolved through a zero-sum game mentality. There should be a genuine desire to resolve the issues and a conducive environment for doing so should be established.

What we are seeing at the moment can only be described as an insult to our intelligence. We are aware of the limitations of what we can do as we neither have the ability nor the influence to bring about a solution. However, the gravity and seriousness of the issue must be underlined.

Our foreign policy is anchored on the belief that solutions can be reached for any of the region's problems, if those involved engage in a calm, patient manner and use appropriate methods.

It is important that issues are addressed and resolved, rather than being set aside. Ignoring them can lead to problems down the line. Having said that, we also have to identify priorities and ask if the priority of Ethiopia and Sudan at this time is the border issue. If you set aside the really important issues and focus on secondary issues, will you be able to deal with the consequences later?



- **Question : Eritrea and countries in the Middle East, especially in the Arabian Gulf, have made efforts to strengthen ties. Last December, a high-ranking Saudi delegation visited Eritrea as a part of these developments. What is the progress of cooperation and development of ties among the Red Sea littoral countries?**

President Isaias Afwerki: It has to be acknowledged that Saudi Arabia plays a special role in this region. Its contribution in maintaining stability should not be underestimated. The stability we envisage for the region can only be achieved when Saudi Arabia plays its role. When we look at the capacity it possesses, we

see that it is not just a regional player, but a global one. The developments of the past few years inspire hope.

The issue is not solely about economic ties or investment. It is about mutual understanding and cooperation. The relationship we aim to develop is not about temporary interests, but about long-lasting benefits.

The understanding we have developed over the past several years, despite challenges, has progressed well. A delegation is scheduled to visit at the end of the month. The purpose of the visit is to work on mechanisms to establish the common understanding that we seek. This is a long-term process and will help lead to clear projects and further cooperation in the future.

On the wider region, if we are to strengthen our cooperation and develop it, each country must contribute and play its role. For example, if Somalia is unable to resolve its internal problems, it cannot ensure the security of its 3000 km-long coastline or fight against terrorism, illegal trade, and other threats to security. This is applicable to all the countries.

-Question 5: The government of Eritrea has taken strong measures to contain the coronavirus. Until December, it seemed that the measures had been working well. However, since then it seems that there has been a second wave. What should be our approach and road-map? What plans are there to strengthen the capacity of the medical institutions to control the spread?

President Isaias Afwerki: The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call. It has shown the need for a strong economy and means to fight it. Whatever plans we have to fight the pandemic have to be long-term, with people at the centre. We need to empower the people and one of the basic means of empowering the people is to provide an effective healthcare system. In order to achieve this, we have been providing free healthcare to our people. We also have policies to improve existing delivery of health care. Of course, it should be understood that having good policy and having the means or capability to implement them are two different things.

COVID-19 has forced us to assess all levels and aspects of our healthcare system, in terms of human resources, management, distribution, and quality of services. The pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to work towards long-term solutions. Although we may not have the economic resources to do this alone, we can work with partners to achieve this.

When it comes to COVID-19 and its consequences, we do not have the capacity to address large-scale spread or transmission at the moment. Our only option is to focus on prevention. It is important to raise awareness and we have seen the benefits of doing this.

We are also working towards improving services, but what is most important is developing our human resources and increasing awareness.

- **Question 6: The impact of the pandemic on the global economy is clear for all to see. In our country, the measures taken to prevent the spread have affected people's lives and impacted the economy. What is being done to help alleviate the various challenges?**

President Isaias Afwerki: To date, the economy of Eritrea has been mainly subsistence, with few major industries that add value to products. The important question is finding a long-term solution to the economic constraints we have experienced, which existed even prior to the pandemic. To address this issue, an intergovernmental committee chaired by the Ministry of Trade and Industry is conducting a study of all the sectors and industries to determine where our focus should be for sustainable economic growth and development.

We should see COVID-19 as a temporary challenge. Our aim is to review our economic plans and revise them so that we are able to transition from a subsistence economy to a more robust one. Our aim should be pragmatic and our assessment down-to-earth, in keeping with realities on the ground.

- **Question : In your speech during Independence Day last year, you noted a number of national projects that were in different phases of development. What are the priorities that can be implemented this year?**

President Isaias Afwerki: It is not our intention to limit our focus to a narrow sector. We have to work on the interconnected sectors and move ahead. If you take the water sector, for example, it is a huge sector. It involves harvesting and using your resources so that we can meet the needs of our people, agriculture, and industry. Water should be distributed to the cities, as well as towns and rural villages.

Along with the supply of water, we should be looking at the supply of power. Currently, we do not have a national grid that covers the country and provides power across cities and villages. Thus, we have decided on a modular approach where we have local grids with local power generation. Our aim is to have our power generated from renewable sources.

We can also consider infrastructure, like roads. These sectors are integrated and have to be seen in conjunction with others.

Annually, we assess our progress and challenges in achieving our aims. The water and power sectors are huge, and we can only progress so much. Nonetheless, it can be said that we are making progress year on year.

- **Question : One of the major steps taken by the Eritrean government in recent years was the salary adjustment for the public sector. The programme was largely implemented in phases in the past few years. Furthermore, salary adjustment for those in the lowest rung – i.e. those with high school education and below – was made and raised to 1800 NKF per month. Still, there are few categories that have not been covered by all the previous measures. What is the timeline for the remaining few?**

President Isaias Afwerki: The main thing is to increase our awareness of the problem. The issue is not how much someone earns but what the purchasing power of the currency is. A person on the lowest grade in the public sector must be able to cover all their needs with the money they earn.

We should be able to cut out waste in the public sector and end the squandering of resources. The savings we make must then be transferred to the pockets of

employees. This will require a fundamental restructuring of the way the government works.

The wages paid should be a living wage and should take into account the cost of living. Public sector salaries should be reviewed annually and adjusted based on the consideration of a number of factors.

While we need to focus on public sector wages, the current adjustments are just a starting point. We should address other issues as well, like inflation, to make the adjustments truly meaningful.

- **Question : Considering the various challenges we face, from the coronavirus to regional developments, what messages can you give us as to what to expect?**

President Isaias Afwerki: The one message is: total mobilization.

- **Question: Can you elaborate?**

President Isaias Afwerki: Yes. Take the COVID pandemic for example. While the state institutions can try to do what they can, if the people do not play their part, then the efforts go to waste. This is the same for all sectors. Everyone should be prepared to play their role and contribute towards the larger, final goal.