

## **Antu Be'emat – Authentic Eyewitness Account**



By: Simon Weldemichael

In the evening hours of March 3rd, the auditorium of Embasoira Hotel was filled with people from all walks of life, including senior government officials, who attended a special event of celebration and introduction of the Amharic book, Antu Be'emat, to Eritrean readers. The author of the book, Mamo Afeta Ado, was a former Ethiopian (Derg) prisoner of war (POW)-turned EPLF combatant during the struggle for Eritrea's independence.

Mamo was captured by the EPLF in 1977 at the battle of Afabet. Along with thousands of other POWs he was given humane treatment by the EPLF. In 1982, when the EPLF released the POWs free Mamo Afeta decided to join the EPLF and fight for the liberation of Eritrea. He became a freedom fighter, married an Eritrean freedom fighter, and fought until the liberation of Eritrea. After Eritrea's independence, Mamo, an only son to his mother, left Eritrea and went to Ethiopia. In 2021 he published Antu Be'emat, a book that recounts the experiences of his life as a POW and liberation fighter under the EPLF.

During the thirty years of intense fighting for the liberation of Eritrea, thousands of Ethiopian soldiers were captured by Eritrean freedom fighters. The Derg never recognized their status as POWs. The EPLF extended humane treatment to the thousands of Ethiopian POWs, strictly adhering to the provisions of the Geneva Convention. The EPLF's commitment to and respect for basic human rights was demonstrated by its record of humane treatment of Ethiopian POWs.

Though it was not a formal signatory to the Geneva Convention on War and other related norms of international conduct, the EPLF accorded all the rights in the conventions to the tenth of thousands of captured Ethiopian soldiers and officers.

Antu be'emat, a well written Amharic book, has the definite purpose of teaching moral lessons. Mamo Afeta gives his eyewitness account on how the EPLF and the people of Eritrea viewed Derg soldiers, who were forcibly brought to Eritrea to fight the unjust war, and presents his personal experience of EPLF's treatment of POWs in an attractive way.

Mr. Michael Tsegay, who reviewed the book, said, "The book presented the victory of love and just cause, and the defeat of racial hatred and bitterness created by colonial politics. This book is a reward to the history of Eritrean armed struggle and its people. It provides an alternative to the distorted history narrated by those who resort to extenuation and detraction when referring to the history of Eritrea, by presenting the testimony of the prisoner of war-turned freedom fighter. The book tells the truth to both friends and foes. And it is especially enlightening for Ethiopians who have never been told the truth about EPLF's humane treatment of Ethiopian POWs."

The book narrates the life of the author as a POW, his transformation from a POW into a freedom fighter and his love story and marriage with a freedom fighter. In sharing his impressions of the book, Meles Nguse, the poet, said, "This book is a statue and today we are inaugurating this statue." Indeed, the book serves the purpose of a statue by preserving the true deeds of the EPLF that may be forgotten by the lapse of time or suppressed by the dust of distortion. It's also a tribute to the consolidation of peace and friendship among the sisterly countries. The book plays a critical role in acknowledging the wrongs suffered by victims, in healing wounds, and in preventing the recurrence of the past wrongs. Mamo recounted that "my experience under the EPLF was entirely different from what we had been told about the EPLF by our commander." He remembered that right after his capture an Ethiopian war plane came and tegadelti (freedom fighters) ordered them to lie on the ground for their safety and afterward said to them, 'congratulations for surviving.' The author

said that this was way beyond their expectation. He added that he had conducted a multifaceted struggle: struggle for liberation, struggle to learn Tigrigna and struggle to translate books published by the EPLF into Amharic, a language the POWs spoke.



At the event, Mamo Afeta was quite emotional when he gave a speech in Tigrigna. He said: “The Eritrean people are generous who struggled and made enormous sacrifices for independence. I proclaim this based on my practical experience. I experienced hunger, hardship and arduous work with my Eritrean comrades. We sweated and shed blood together.” After congratulating Eritreans for their hard-won independence, he said, “You not only got independence for yourselves but also saved and taught many thousands of Ethiopian prisoners and sent them back home to their wailing mothers. I am one of them, but the fighters who captured and saved us may not be alive.” The book demonstrates the power of remorse, forgiveness and reconciliation that are vital for sustainable peace. It is expected to contribute towards the consolidation of the friendly relationship of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Misgun Zeray (wedi Faraday), the veteran artist, is translating the book into Tigrigna and shared his impression of the book at the event. He had this to say about the author: “He decided to join and fight on the side of the EPLF, having been convinced by its principles, and in collaboration with EPLF fighters, he took the initiative to teach Ethiopian prisoners of war political education and

academic subjects. He is a great person who brought about a big change on himself and his colleagues.” As stated in its National Democratic Program, adopted at its first congress in January 1977, the EPLF was always committed to “provide humane treatment and care for Ethiopian war prisoners.” At that time, it was not formally bound by the provisions of the Geneva Convention regarding the victims of war as it had not yet been a signatory to the convention. The resolve to treat Ethiopian prisoners of war humanely sprang simply from the front’s principled stand.

ART. 38 of the Geneva Convention states that “while respecting the individual preferences of every prisoner, the Detaining Power shall encourage the practice of intellectual, educational, and recreational pursuits, sports and games amongst prisoners, and shall take the measures necessary to ensure the exercise thereof by providing them with adequate premises and necessary equipment. Prisoners shall have opportunities for taking physical exercise, including sports and games and for being out of doors. Sufficient open spaces shall be provided for this purpose in all camps.” Mamo gave his testimony that within its limits, the EPLF provided healthcare services, education, food, and other provisions to Ethiopian prisoners of war. More importantly, the EPLF helped set up literacy classes, cultural groups, and sports teams to improve the intellectual and spiritual state of the POWs. The Ethiopian POWs also had their own magazine.

The EPLF didn’t put POWs in jails within confined walls and instead created an environment where POWs took part in productive activities, such as construction and agriculture. Ethiopian POWs in Eritrea were ignored and betrayed by their government but treated very well by their captors. Mamo Afeta Ado’s decision to recount the truth has a great contribution to invigorate and re-invigorate a respectful, trusting, and long-lasting relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The 370-page long book *Antu Be’enat*, an authentic eyewitness account of a courageous man, is a must-read for both Ethiopians and Eritreans and must be translated into as many Ethiopian, Eritrean and other languages as possible to be read widely.

Profile

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