



Isaias Afeworki and the Cost of Flexing and Frightening

November 10, 2009

By Alex Birhanu -

In today's Eritrea, a country of 5 million people, the acute needs are becoming boundless by the day as this tiny nation is continuously slipping down into its deepest political isolation and economic stagnation since its de-facto "16 years of fuzzy independence". A decade after the 1998-2000 devastating border flare-ups with Ethiopia that remains unresolved to this very day, Afeworki has never been permitting popular political elections in country. To the contrary, according to the US-State Department human rights report that came out in 2008, he banned opposition groups and independent media, and reportedly banished thousands of people to remote desert prisons where they languish without trial in "harsh and life-threatening conditions". The unresolved border dispute with Ethiopia is used by Afeworki and his regime to justify the severe restrictions held on civil liberties by effective control of the security force ().

Men and women younger than 50 within Eritrea rarely get permission to leave the country as the entire able-bodied population is assigned on military reserve duty frightening and flexing such duty against the Ethiopian army posted along the border-lines along Badme–Tsorena zones. In fact, anyone who resist the service are routinely imprisoned and tortured, as documented in a 96-page 2009 report by Human Rights Watch, which found that Afeworki's regime had issued a 'shoot-to-kill' orders for anyone caught trying to cross any of the borders without permission. Amidst all these flexing and frightening regime-led chaos, the fabrication of non-existent national attributes in order to arouse the attention of different religious and ethnic groups of people in Eritrea from the mainstream political status quo to less critical issues of separating the Eritrean people from the rest of Ethiopia has remained an age old trick employed by Afeworki and his stooges working for the Eritrean regime that bids mainly to lengthen Afeworki's stay on power.

Thanks to Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia who persistently kept Isaias Afeworki in chase and check positions since the mid-1990s, Afeworki's regime is now almost on the verge of collapse and his tiny nation's economy, education and all other social fabrics are constantly squeezed simply for maintaining its fuzzy and bloody borders watch efforts. Eritrea's de-facto independence has become a high costing game to toil for. Evidently, the Eritrean peoples under 50 years of age are held to indefinitely serve in the national army hiding behind deeply-dug trenches stretching across thousands of kilometres from Badme to Tsorena fronts. And at all times, these SAWA-military graduates remain restlessly alert for any likely flare-up of skirmishes with the Ethiopian army standing equally alert on the other side of the 'no-man-zone'.

Yes, Afeworki's regime keeps on digging-up and employing a series of flexing and frightening old tricks in the same fashion as it used to do during its good-old EPLF-frontal stance of the 1960, through to 1990s by causing riffraff, rifts and ethnic-division among peoples inside Ethiopia; simply to enrich its creational tiny nation that hardly withstands the existence of a united and stronger Ethiopia. While keeping the entire Eritrean population as part of its military garrisons

stretching along the thousands of miles of trenches in the wake of likely attacks by the Ethiopian army, Afeworki simply remains naive enough to assume that his age old flexing and frightening dirty tricks will continue to work for the despotic regime; but it is vivid to anyone today, including the overwhelming Eritrean population, that his outmoded regime's flexing and frightening strategies have failed to work for the past seventeen years.

And now, it is out of context for Afeworki and his totalitarian regime to speak about their flattery favour of the Ethiopian unity and oneness at this 11th hour of the Eritrean regime moving towards its doom. At the cost of repeating history, it is to be recalled from the early 1970s that, Afeworki personally created and reared TPLF as its political baby inside Eritrea; and instructed TPLF to author the 1968 Manifesto while operating underground in its infancy days of their joint political meandering. From the start, this manifesto outlined by TPLF specifies targets to forward its inner wishes and desires on how to manoeuvre the circumstances along with EPLF and come to power, than work towards creating a democratic and federated regime that maintains the unity of Ethiopia in tact.

Although initially the EPLF of those days seemed to oppose the contents of TPLF's initial manifesto and demanded a milder version of it by instructing the fundamental inclusion of the question of colonization of the Tigray-Tigrign peoples into the manifesto; it eventually agreed upon the inclusion of self-determination up to secession of all nationalities. Thanks to the boundless inputs, zealous efforts and strong bondage and comradeships of TPLF, Afeworki and EPLF ultimately succeeded to come to power in Eritrea through involvement in their outlandish public acrimony and playing down the need for the existence of a united and strong Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. And ever since the TPLF-captured power in 1990, it ratified article-39 in its regime's constitution; and even approved this infamous article that made secession legitimate within Ethiopia. But Ironic enough, in Eritrea, there has never been such talks of self-determination up to secession of all nationalities.

Today, after having successfully done the infrastructural damage and the human harm that divided the Eritrean and the Ethiopian peoples, Isaias Afeworki's regime in Eritrea is trying to shade its crocodile tears by openly voicing its concerns about a strong and a united Ethiopia. Although secession was a cardinal decision that belonged jointly to both the Eritrean and the Ethiopian peoples to fraternally hold a democratic referendum such and many more incidents illustrate the fact on the ground, that it has never been the desire of either the Eritrean or the Ethiopian peoples; except for the joint Afeworki and Zenawi decision of the time who wished initially to see a divided and weaker Ethiopia.

Particularly, the Eritrean stance on the issue of Ethiopia has always been unwaveringly agitated on the wrong path since the times of the EPLF-TPLF marriage, forward moving relationships and struggles for power seizure. Ever since its creation, Afeworki and his regime have always entertained a ruse to divide Ethiopia by working hand in hand with different ethnic-led Ethiopian political entities to eventually split Ethiopia into smaller nations; and sought to open a new Eritrean regime's chapter of mutual cooperation and peaceful coexistence with these smaller nations. It has consistently been the desire of Afeworki and his regime to work against a united and strong Ethiopia, because, strength and unity in Ethiopia, means weakness and subordination of Eritrea.

Flexing and Frightening Domestic and Foreign Policy

At the domestic front, lack of basic human rights, food shortages and frustration due to lack of popular government election in Eritrea are few of the trifling faces of deeper problems: a government that commits flagrant human rights abuses suppression and dissent. In future these could be merely the tip of the iceberg if the underlying detailed issues are not addressed. For instance the repression of the Kunama minorities, and religious sects, the widening cultural separation between Moslem lowlanders and the Christian highlanders could lead to the kind of anarchy that has plagued Somalia for a generation.

Regarding law and order in Eritrea, the U.S. State Department's 2008 Human Rights report contains a chilling inventory of Afeworki's regime practices. Lists of abuses are too long to repeat here. Main highlights include: limitations on citizens' right to elect a government; unlawful killings, torture, beating, abuse, and mistreatment of detainees and opposition supporters by security forces, usually with impunity; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly of suspected sympathizers of forces opposed to Afeworki's regime. In fact, the terror Afeworki has inflicted on his own people threatens to turn Eritrea into a failed state and a haven for terrorists by breeding constant fear, violence and systematic repression. In the absence of outside pressure, Isaias Afeworki and his cronies will never willingly change their dogmatic stand.

From its foreign policy point of view, the United States and other international bodies have consistently accused Isaias Afeworki of funnelling arms, money and clandestine piracy supports to Islamist insurgents in Somalia and opposition groups in Djibouti (see the June 2009 report issued by the UN Munitions Monitoring Group) and have even threatened to slap him with sanctions. Regardless of such warnings, Isaias is bent on wresting influence from neighbouring nations including Ethiopia and has opened-up training centres for several rebel groups coming from various parts of the Horn of Africa. To our dismay, since some years now, Afeworki and his regime keep on accusing the UN Security Council of ignoring what it called "breaches of international law by Ethiopia", with which it fought a 1998-2000 border war that ultimately killed about 70,000 people. On the contrary, critics including the U.N. Security Council, the African Union and the United States Government have repeatedly and openly stated that Afeworki's regime has isolated itself; and consequently, it has become a danger to the national and regional security of the Horn of Africa; attempting to destabilise neighbouring nations including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. But Afeworki has always denied claiming that his regime has long been the victim of pro-Ethiopian prejudice and unfair meddling by the international community, particularly pertaining to its border dispute with Ethiopia (See: C Thomson, Reuters 2009).

Conclusive Remarks:

It is high time and quite essential that the international community tied in globalization frameworks, especially the United States of America, press the Eritrean regime to allow the Eritrean people to exercise the most basic human and democratic rights including justifiable referendum to outweigh the likely federation with Ethiopia. On a serious note, the U.S. government should align its rhetoric with its policies by putting critical embargos on Eritrea's outlandish foreign affairs and domestic policies. It should also demand Afeworki's regime to remove restrictions on foreign assistance to non-governmental organizations and give opposition parties access to function within Eritrea and to the media. Or else, the USA should help Eritrean opposition groups in Diaspora to remove Afeworki and bring democratic governance to Eritrea.