

## A LETTER TO AN ISRAELI FRIEND

By Emnetu Tesfay

During my six months extensive tour of Israel and the administered territories, I have had the opportunity to see places and talk to people of various professions without restriction. Although the people I talked to were of different ethnic backgrounds and different levels of education, they defended their view of Israel and other Middle-Eastern countries with similar if not identical points. This gave me the understanding that there is uniformity in the supply of information and analysis of events. I was impressed too, by the Israelis' close follow-up of current events and its repercussion to them.

However, there are some missing facts, in the public knowledge, about Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the clandestine involvement of Israel in the bloody war in this part of Africa. I am skeptical that the Israeli public is a victim of deliberate distortion and suppression of correct information, possibly to serve certain political purposes. As a reporter, and more as an individual with first hand knowledge of the situation in Eritrea, I feel it is imperative that the curtain covering the true picture of the war be removed. Since particularly the Israeli government is unwisely involved in this bitter war of independence that was going on for fifteen years.

The history of the people of Eritrea is a chain of colonial rules and wars from early 15th century, until today. The geographical location and the strategic importance of Eritrea, both commercially and militarily, have attracted invaders time and again. It started with the occupation of the Red Sea coastal areas by the Ottoman Turks in the year 1557. After the fall of the Ottoman empire, the Egyptians, whose commercial interests were expanding fast on both sides of the Red Sea, occupied Massawa in 1872 and replaced the Turkish flag with their own.

It was to be followed by the intrusion of the Italian colonial army in the southern strip of Eritrea, which by the end of 1885 the entire coastal areas came under their domination. The Italians did not encounter strong resistance since, in the preceding years, the Eritreans were engaged in long wars defending their land from the Egyptian colonizers in the north and the Ethiopian invaders in the south. The Italians not only colonized Eritrea, but used it as a spring-board to satisfy their imperialistic ambitions of North Africa. To this end, the Italians in no time built modern cities and ports and connected them with asphalted roads. And Eritrea became a stock-pile of military hardware.

During the long colonial rules, the Eritrean people never surrendered their legitimate claim of national independence. To suppress the national movements, all colonizers including Ethiopia today, use "divide and rule" method on religious and regional lines. 56 years of Italian rule came to an end with the victory of the allied nations of World War II. British garrisons entered Eritrea through the Sudan and subsequently liberated Ethiopia and the Italian Somaliland. In Eritrea, the British stayed for ten years.

Failing to come to an agreement on the future of Eritrea, the four power commission, dissolved itself referring the Eritrean case to the United Nations. Subsequently, a new commission was appointed by the 4th session of the General Assembly to study the Eritrean question. After an incomplete tour of duty and giving-in to outside pressure, the UN commission recommended that "Eritrea should constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia." The UN ratified this recommendation which was to be effective for ten years, after which the Eritrean government was to have legislative, executive and judicial powers in the domestic affairs.

The former king of Ethiopia, openly violating the federal act, systematically dissolved the Eritrean parliament, banned trade unions, lowered the flag and arrested political leaders. The Eritrean people reacted with massive demonstrations and strikes. Besides his notorious divide and rule policy, Haile Selassie, in an unprecedented move, closed most of the factories and discouraged higher education. As a result the Eritreans started to emigrate by thousands to Ethiopia proper and the neighboring Arab countries.

The United Nations, ignoring its responsibility, was silent to the cries of the Eritrean people, and actually witnessed the systematic destruction of a nation and its culture. The highly civilized people of Eritrea were thrown to the colonial machination of feudalist Ethiopia. The Eritreans, in a dramatic reverse of civilization, not only lost their freedom of press, expression, parliamentary representation, trade unions but fell victim to barbaric and wanton atrocities.

Despite the factuality of this background, some governments are blinded by Ethiopian propaganda and try to assimilate the Eritrean struggle with a disintegration of Ethiopia. Regardless of the fascistic rule of Ethiopia against the wishes and aspirations of the Eritrean people for self rule, some big powers and Israel have chosen to aid Ethiopia. So far the Eritrean people are positively understood by some socialist states and progressive organizations who base their support on facts and justice. It is also true that some foreign governments want to side with the independence movement for their own political benefit and influence. Such support is automatically rejected by the EPLF.

At this point one wonders as to why the Israeli government is advising and arming the fascist junta rulers of Ethiopia. There is no justification to this alliance. Israel can benefit nothing. Because both peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia are experiencing their darkest hour under the junta. The broad masses of the Ethiopian people have consistently opposed the genocidal war against Eritrea. Moreover, the Ethiopian soldier has no moral for he has no cause to fight. And has a history of suffering humiliating defeats at the hands of the liberation fighters. His biggest and all-time success is slaughtering defenseless children and women in the towns they control.

There are unanswered questions as far as the Israeli government is concerned. Morally speaking, would Israel support an army whose only aim is to physically exterminate an entire nation? Militarily speaking, would Israel support an all-time loser? And politically speaking, would Israel antagonize a people who want nothing but independence for their own country?

Very few people have suffered as much as the Eritreans in modern history. But they are determined to be free from this suffering. The people of Eritrea, be it moslem or christian are firm and united on one thing. Independence. I was very much impressed and encouraged by the instant and rational change of attitude shown by the Israelis who came to light about the true picture of the war. It could be said that there is lack of lobbying and publicity among the Israeli public, but the truth is well known to the government of Israel.

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