

The Debate Over The Need For Or Inadvisability Of Cooperating With Isaias Afewerki And His Regime:

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

A Personal Observation:

By: Ayal-Sew Dessye

I have been involved in Ethiopian politics since my high school years a long, long time ago. Throughout this period, everything I have done was motivated by nothing else other than a burning desire to defend the fundamental interests of Ethiopia and to improve the lot of the common citizen. I view myself as an unabashed Ethiopian nationalist and for this I offer no apologies. It is this spirit that moved me to join the recent debate among Ethiopians concerning the question whether it is wise or advisable to cooperate with Isaias Aferwerki and his regime with a view to bringing about political change in Ethiopia.

The immediate impetus for this debate is an article bearing the name of Major Dawit W/Giorgis (Ethiomeia, June 29, 2009). It came on the heels of another article of similar import written by Tagai Neamin Zeleke. I know both of these authors personally and I have no doubt that the views they expressed in these articles are guided by the love of country and a desire to see Ethiopians freed from the clutches of Meles Zenawi's ethnocentric dictatorship. These are two of the most dedicated, hard working, energetic, and patriotic people I have come to know through the years.

If readers find that I am touching on many points in this one piece and that it is a bit lengthy, I beg their pardon and ask for their understanding, for no single issue can be seen in isolation. As we all know, our problems are complex and interconnected. I hope readers will read the whole piece before jumping in to conclusion or before giving their own interpretations based on one thing or another. I ask for their indulgence.

Let me state what is clearly not in dispute. Being an ethnic liberation front, and undemocratic to its core to boot, the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF), has no title to rule Ethiopia. If the notion of popular sovereignty and representative government has any meaning at all, the TPLF is bereft of any democratic legitimacy and can never qualify as the **national government** of Ethiopia. Therefore, we all agree that the regime of Meles Zenawi has to go.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

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Such a fate awaits any other ethnic liberation movement that seeks to impose itself on the Ethiopian people through connivance and the use of nefarious means and divisive tactics. Ethnic based ideas and politics are by definition too narrowly drawn to be compatible with country wide politics. Nor can such a movement ever hope to win the trust of other ethnic groups simply because **it has already defined itself** as being **as separate** and **distinct** from the rest of the country's population. Once a group goes down this road, it is only a short step before it views other groups through the prism of "we" and "they", and a further short step before the "other" is seen as the "enemy." And if such a group ever gets the chance to seize power at the national level, it is foolhardy to expect anything different from what we have seen in the last 18 years under the TPLF.

The solution to the ethnic conundrum that the TPLF has created is for all Ethiopians of all walks of life and linguistic backgrounds to come together in the realization that **NO ONE IS FREE UNTILL ALL ARE FREE**, and that **INJUSTICE TO ANY ETHIOPIAN IS INJUSTICE TO ALL ETHIOPIANS**.

I honestly believe that one does not need to be an Oromo to fight and die for the rights of the Oromo, a Tigrean can and should fight for the rights of the Wolaita and all other Ethiopians, a Gambelan can and should fight and die for the rights of all Ethiopians, etc. As Ethiopians, we cannot think of ourselves as one people and the country we love as united if each one of us does not have the mental and psychological disposition to feel the pain and agony of every Ethiopian as our own, have a demonstrable commitment to see in each other a compatriot whose needs and desires are the same as ours, and have the realization that our unity is anchored in justice and equality for all.

Some may see equality and unity as two competing ideals the balancing act of which is difficult to achieve in as diverse a society as Ethiopia is. I don't agree with that at all.

Although I understand the elastic nature of both, we cannot aspire nor can we talk of genuine and durable unity of a country in the absence of justice and equality, nor can we have equality and justice without unity in a diverse a country as Ethiopia is.

My contention is that a unified people have a far better chance to have justice, freedom, equality and economic development and progress than divided people could ever aspire. We cannot underestimate the benefits of diversity when that diversity is anchored in the unity, equality and freedom of the people. Countries with diverse populations have a demonstrable capacity and a better disposition to have a more steady development and better economic and social progress than those who are not. India, as diverse as it is, is economically much stronger and politically more stable than Bangladesh or Pakistan. Both were part of India.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

South Africa could not have been an African powerhouse if it did not remain united. If the thirteen independent states remained divided, the United States would not be what it is now. It is not only to the greater good and benefit of Canada that Quebec remained a Canadian state, but to Quebec itself. I have yet to see the benefits - be it political or economic - of dividing a country along ethnic or any other line. I am not talking about countries that came to being through forceful integration of already independent states, like the former USSR or Yugoslavia. Dividing an already integrated society weakens all.

This, unfortunately, is the complexity we'll be facing for a long time to come as long as we as a people, for one reason or another opt for or enmesh ourselves in ethnic politics, especially at this day and age in a globalized world and an ever increasing destabilizing radicalization of society.

Let's first clearly state the general sentiments and stated facts so that we can have an unambiguous understanding of the issue or issues at hand.
Do we agree on the following points?

1. Ethiopia is being ruled by a brutal maniacal dictator and an ethno-centric clique.
2. The people of Ethiopia hope for, desire, need and deserve change and are struggling in every which way they can to have a government of their choice.
3. The regime of Tormentor-in-Chief Meles Zenawi has brutally crushed peaceful dissent, has effectively curtailed civil liberties and made peaceful struggle absolutely difficult (some say impossible).
4. The opposition is dismally divided, has incapacitated itself, so far lacks well thought-out and practicable strategy, and to the dismay of the people of Ethiopia lamentably continues to be incapable of getting its acts together and form a principled coalition, alliance or any such common platform to coordinate its efforts.
5. Because of internal, regional and international factors, Ethiopia's stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity are at an ever increasing danger.
6. The people of Eritrea are equally under dictatorship, and hope for, desire, need and deserve change.
7. The predatory government of Isaias Afewerki is playing a destabilizing role and is among the forces that are working to undermine Ethiopian national interests.
8. The region is exposed to more poverty, misery, overpopulation, radicalization to dangerous levels.

It is my hope that we agree on most, if not all, of the above points, as my arguments and contrarian views are mainly based on them.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

It is with all my heart that I express my appreciation and admiration to those selfless Ethiopian patriots who have sacrificed in so many ways and who steadfastly are engaged in their fight for the unity of the country and the freedom, equality and wellbeing of its people. I salute all those compatriots who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Major Dawit's narrative has raised several points. I am hopeful that this will encourage us, Ethiopians in general and the opposition in particular, to have civil, frank and open discussions on a variety of vital national issues relevant to our collective future as a people and that of our beloved country Ethiopia.

I truly believe in having a public dialogue and engaging in civil and open discussions among ourselves. Some shy away from having open discussions on issues of national relevance among and by opposition groups and individuals fearing that doing so will 'weaken' us, the opposition. This is further from the truth. What is glaringly lacking is that such debates do not take place. Whenever there is an issue of concern, it is either timidly addressed or totally ignored. Most issues so critical for our collective future and critical in shaping the conduct of the struggle, are at times limited to sloganeering.

Debates on, say, national reconciliation, ethnic politics, methods of struggle, the danger fundamentalists pose to the security and national interests of our country and its people, etc. are not discussed and debated to the extent they deserve.

Some issues we either totally ignore, or without weighing the danger and the consequences blindly and out of hand oppose simply because either we fear the discussion will further divide and 'weaken' us or in some cases the current government is somehow involved in them. I do not believe in wholesale condemnation or support of anyone on any issue without seeing all sides in a sober and deliberative manner; it is neither constructive nor helpful.

A case in point is the situation in the Ogaden region and to a greater extent the situation in Somalia. This was especially true as regards to EPRDF government's intervention in Somalia.

Most of the arguments I heard revolved around EPRDF. EPRDF and nothing else became the whole issue. I expected more discussions on the whole issue of radicalism in the region vis-à-vis Ethiopian national security. To my surprise, that did not happen, not even among and by political groups, who limited themselves to pronouncements of condemnation of EPRDF. As far as I know, only United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) had an objective assessment of the situation. That single vision approach led some to totally ignore the core issue

**Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian
Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?**

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

that fundamentalists pose to the safety and security of our people and the unity of the country. Such one-sided – oppose-everything-and-anything-EPRDF – approach led some to the extent of slandering Ethiopian troops. Some have even shown a reckless, irresponsible and indeed a revolutive and repulsive reaction to the desecration of dead Ethiopian soldiers under Ethiopian uniform that radicals brazenly and without due regard to human dignity dragged in the streets of Mogadishu.

I will return and say more on the issue some other time. But suffice it to say now that we cannot underestimate, let alone dismiss, the danger posed to our country and its people by radical elements and groups in Somalia and their affiliates and appendages in Ethiopia proper. Denying this very fact will be folly, forgetful of history and to our peril.

The absolute and deafening silence – of those who decry foul over events in Somalia - on the atrocities of ONLF and other radical groups committed on innocent Ethiopians is incomprehensible and really troubling. This, by no means and under any circumstances, is meant to deny, let alone condone, the documented brutality against the civilian population perpetrated by either the regional government or the national government. How many showed outrage at the slaying by ONLF murderers of unarmed civilian Ethiopians for simply being employees of an oil company? Were they killed for being employees of the oil company or for being Ethiopians?

I am just raising a question of fairness, objectivity and balance that is egregiously missing from the pronouncements of outrage and appropriate concern by some in the opposition about the situation in the Ogaden and Somalia proper.

Let me be as clear as I can be. I recognize and am concerned about the danger - yes the imminent and gathering danger - radical groups pose to the security and unity of the country and the safety of our people.

Although I understand the compelling reasons behind the very idea of the intervention in Somalia by the Ethiopian government, I do not support the execution, the manner and conduct of the intervention, neither do I blindly and irrationally condemn it. No one in the right mind would ever condone what our Somali brothers and sisters are subjected to. I am deeply saddened and disturbed by their continued misery, troubled by their plight and anguished over and concerned about their uncertain future. I am also angst-ridden and apprehensive about what our Ethiopian troops were exposed and subjected to.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

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Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Condemning in the manner some do and above all the incredulous and seeming support - albeit inadvertent - to radicals is, to say the least, unwise and unpatriotic, and doing so would be utterly forgetful of past history and irresponsibly ignoring present dangers.

Nonetheless, as this undertaking by the Meles regime in the name of Ethiopia is the first of its kind in the country's history since the great military expeditionary campaign across the Red Sea by Ethiopia at the behest of suffering Arabs of the day during the glorious Axumite era, extra caution, sober assessment and careful handling of the situation on the part of the EPRDF government that took the country in to war, and closer scrutiny of developments by the people of Ethiopia is in order and necessary.

As far as I can see, at least four things were amiss in the government's adventurous undertaking.

First is the domestic political environment at the time of the intervention. No country embarks on or even contemplates military adventures, especially as serious a mission as taking a country to a war beyond its borders, without first satisfactorily convincing the population that doing so is in the country's best interest and garnering their support. This can only be done by addressing their concerns, solving internal problems and pacifying the country first and foremost. The primary thing the EPRDF should have done at the time was at least to free political prisoners it so unjustly imprisoned and open a dialogue leading to national reconciliation. Sadly, but consistent with TPLF leader's obdurate pigheadedness, incomprehensible arrogance and deviant obstinacy, that obviously did not happen. That was sheer madness.

Second, it is regarding the nature and conduct of the military campaign itself. I am of the opinion that intervening the way the EPRDF government did was neither wise nor sustainable, in fact was counterproductive. Knowing too well that such massive intervention in Somalia by Ethiopia, even with a purported "request and invitation" of the Transitional Government of Somalia, would, regardless of the intent, inevitably be viewed by Somalis as an outright occupation - a boon to hard line nationalists and fundamentalists, giving them a much needed cause and a reason to rally Somalis as well as foreign 'jihadists'.

The stability of Somalia is not only desirable, but necessary to both Somalia and Ethiopia and the region. And doing anything and everything possible to that end is necessary and commendable. But the way EPRDF intervened - that can

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

only be characterized as an outright occupation - was wrong and counterproductive. I believe quick and surgical operations the type EPRDF itself did against Al-Ithad Al Islamia in the nineties would have been the most effective and preferable method. Occupying Somalia for as long a time and in the manner the government did was dead wrong.

Third, the intervening party (Ethiopia) should have pressed hard on the Transitional Government of Abdulahi Yussouf to open the political space and create a favorable environment where all groups, at least as many as possible, no matter what they stood for in their prior endeavors in government-less and chaotic Somalia – especially knowing too well how shady a character Abdulahi Youssouf himself was – could take part in the TG. That could have given the opportunity for Somalis to form a broad-based government and a chance for many Somalis to join the fragile TG rather than the hard line opposition. But the EPRDF government instead, a la TPLF, allowed Abdulahi Youssof to further alienate many who could have been his allies, if not for anything else for the sake of their country. That intransigence on the part of the TG officials was a blunder that the interventionist Ethiopian government would and should have prevented.

Fourth, the intervention ought not to have been seen or give the impression that it was being done at the behest of foreign powers, especially the US. True, the west's interest and that of Ethiopia's in as far as curbing and combating radical elements and groups in the business of terrorism overlap. The proven existence in Somalia of radical elements and the suspicion of their connection with al Qaida, and the great potential for unstable and government-less Somalia becoming a haven to terrorists and radical fundamentalists is a shared concern of Somalis, Ethiopians, the west or any peace and freedom loving person for that matter. It was not only to radical elements wishing to wage 'Jihad' against the infidel "Christian" Ethiopia and America that gave reason for fundamentalist radicals to flock to Somalia, it also gave incentives to some countries like Iran to be at least indirectly involved in a proxy war.

I am not denying the fact that some groups and individuals have been writing some on these and other issues. What I am talking about here is the absence of **open, sober and deliberative** public debate on issues that are too important to ignore.

The absence of open debates and discussions, I believe, will only keep our people from getting facts they deserve to know, facts which could help them in making an objective and informed decision, the absence of which, in the final analysis, could deny them the chance to be involved in the process of shaping

**Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian
Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?**

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

their future. Above all, not having frank and open discussions on national issues of undeniable importance will be a bulwark against creating an open society. Such attitudes will lead us to ignorance and only create a fertile ground for demagogues and pretentious individuals to creep to power and become dictators. The only people who should oppose open debates on issues of national relevance are either those who are afraid of the truth, whatever that may be, or those who, unfortunately, may have hidden agendas. We need neither.

**THE INADVISABILITY OF COOPERATION WITH ISAIAS AFEWERKI AND
HIS REGIME:**

Why would and should Ethiopians care about the issue of cooperating with or getting assistance from Isaias Afewerki and his regime?

This issue is important to Ethiopians in general and the political bunch in particular, as it is something as critical as it is consequential to the unity and the very existence of our country. In light of its importance, it is necessary to have a healthy debate.

I agree with my dear Major Dawit that Eritreans have contributed to Ethiopia in many areas and ways. And more than anyone else Ethiopians can count on Eritreans and vice-versa, and if peace, security and progress are to be sought, their future is inseparably tied and they have not only a shared history but also a shared destiny.

But as great and immense a contribution at different levels and in many areas as our Eritreans brethren have definitely made to Ethiopia, Ethiopia as a country should also be commended and applauded for giving them an equal opportunity (if not at times more than citizens of other extractions were given) to reach the highest offices, thrive and prosper as they did. It spoke as much, if not more, about Ethiopia than it did about Eritreans, as Barack Obama becoming the first African American president – a first generation African in a way- bespoke volumes on what America is more than about Obama himself – as great as he is.

Of course, in contrast to that image of what we have of our Eritrean brethren, we find people like Amare Teklie (like his grandfather Shumbash Goshu) and Bereket Habte Selassie - who broke the trust Ethiopia had bestowed upon them and who stabbed her in the back. Yet, there are Ethiopian compatriots of Eritrean extraction, people like Professor Mesin Araaya, who, even in the heat of the moment and when it was fashionable - especially for the ethnic elite, to take

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

opportunistic lines or sit idly by or claim indifference - maintain their level-headed and principled stance in not only opposing the toxic tyranny of both Isaiyas and Meles, but also consistently making their positions clearly known that it is not only feasible but also highly desirable and necessary for the people on both sides of the Mereb to be once again reunited by peaceful means.

Eritrean and Ethiopian historical, cultural, etc., ties have survived the test of time. Even after over 50 years of direct Italian and 10 years of British occupation, Eritrean never gave up hope of one day rejoining the motherland. Despite Mr. Isaiyas Afewerki's laughably fictitious story that Eritrea was never part of Ethiopia, the knowledge of which he systematically denied Eritrean youth to know, the irrefutable fact is that until fundamental rights of citizens - as in the rest of Ethiopia - were trampled upon and the Eritrean people, especially the youth - because of the brutality of the Dergue and the policy of forced recruitment by the fronts, especially EPLF - were forced or had little or no other option than joining the struggle, at times en masse, the overwhelming Eritrean population never questioned their Ethiopian identity and had all their hops and dreams in Ethiopia.

True, even after 30 years of bitter blood letting, EPLF's brutal and barbaric massacre, in cold blood, of surrendering troops, forcing Ethiopians to take off their shoes, leave behind and to go across the 'border' bare-foot, even extraction by force of gold filled teeth from Ethiopian soldiers, massive looting and gross mistreatment of Ethiopians at the end of the war, after what could be called at best a questionable "referendum", and even after the war under the current TPLF/EPRDF government that was rapaciously instigated by the Shaebia government of Isaias Afewerki resulting in the death of tens of thousands, including the intentional bombardment of school children in Tigray - an unprecedented act of barbarism - Ethiopians as a people never once blamed their Eritrean brethren for all those and other egregious atrocities by EPLF.

It is abundantly clear that Ethiopia and Ethiopians are always welcoming of Eritrea and Eritreans. They (Ethiopians) may disagree with the fact that they (Eritreans) are a different entity now, yet they understand the circumstances that led to the imposed separation and more importantly, it is my contention that Ethiopians would have no qualms with the choice of Eritreans if only that were done in a democratically transparent and legitimate way.

Ethiopians will welcome enthusiastically Eritrea & Eritreans back to a democratic and united Ethiopia where the equality and the democratic rights of all its citizens are fully respected. Ethiopians see and very well know the distinct difference between Eritreans and the brutal dictatorial regime of Isaias Afewerki

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

that has been tormenting the entire population as his counterpart comrade -in-crimes, Meles Zenawi is doing to Ethiopias.

As Major Dawit aptly pointed out, during the war that lasted for decades, there was no blind resentment towards or collective blame of Eritreans, let alone civil strife strictly on Ethiopian/Eritrean line of thinking. To the best of my recollection, even under the much hated Dergue, civilians were not deliberately targeted. As far as I know, it was a given that not only human lives but also properties of the civilian population were to be protected. (As a young officer of the highly professional and very disciplined Ethiopian Airborne, I remember to have myself fined a soldier in my unit 10 Birr of his very meager salary for a simple infraction of having hold of a peasant's goat - whatever his intention- as it was a conduct strictly unbecoming of a soldier worthy of wearing the country's uniform, above all that of the Airborne. Proud to say that was the norm then).

By in large, the conduct of Ethiopian troops in particular and the war in general defied what usually occurs and transpires during a classic war of "liberation", especially and sadly in places like Africa. That is testament to the bondage between the people of Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia. I'm glad to report that the Airborne unit which I'm proud to belong to, with the wise leadership of the late Colonel Alemayehu Asfaw put an immediate stop when at one point a destructive move by some unprofessional individuals in Asmara subjected citizens of the city to a whole-some terror.

With all that said the question of the day and the very reason I forced myself to put my penny's worth in the debate is what kind of relationship organizations and groups that are opposed to the policies of Tormentor-in-Chief Meles & Company and who are struggling to free their country and people could and should have with Isaias and his regime, or if they **need** to have any at all.

We will have to ask the following questions and get answers to them in order to understand as clearly and as much as possible.

What exactly is Isaias Afewerki's Eritrean assistance needed for and what kind of assistance do Ethiopians need and seek? Is it military, financial, political/diplomatic? What is the wisdom, the purpose and the overall strategic benefit of getting military assistance from the Isaias regime? What are the stakes here? Who benefits from such cooperation and why? Does Isaias really want the Meles & Co. regime to go? What is the end game for Isaias & Sheabia? Who and what type of people are undertaking such endeavors and why? What are the compelling reasons that some find it necessary to cooperate with the regime of

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Isaias Afewerki, albeit with a stated aim of seeking assistance? What kind of assistance is sought, and conversely, why will it be unnecessary? How is it viewed by the Ethiopian people, especially by members of the Armed Forces? Do we have other options, if so what and where are they? Will it be ill-advised or even dangerous to be cooperating with or getting assistance from Isaias and his regime, and why would that be?

I want to be very clear from the outset that I have all the respect and admiration for the people of Eritrean, among whom are members of my own extended family, and agonize over their situation and always wish them well as much as I do for all Ethiopians.

As I mentioned earlier, it is a fact that there is no, and has never been, hatred between the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea who are bound by more than one thing. It is also my sincere belief that the people on both sides of the Mereb have a shared destiny and will reunite in less than a generation and enjoy the benefits of a democratically united people.

My contention is that Isaias and Shaebia are not synonymous with the people of Eritrea, and therefore, any opinion about, for or against Isaias and/or Sheabia should, in any way, shape or form, be taken as that on or about the great people of Eritrean.

It, therefore, is with that kind of belief and strongly held conviction, and from an Ethiopian nationalist's perspective and prism that I present my assessment and arguments about this issue at hand.

I don't believe for a second that accepting of Isaias and his regime is continuing with the erstwhile good natured and sincere love Ethiopians have for the people of Eritrea, or not liking or in fact opposing, Isaias and his regime for suppressing and oppressing the Eritrean people and for his destructive conduct in the region, is in any way, shape or form, breaking the time tested bondage or jeopardizing the future ties of the people on both sides of the Mereb.

As stated earlier, the critical point people miss or ignore to understand is the fact that Sheabia, let alone Isaias the individual, cannot not be synonymous with or a replacement/substitute for Eritrea and the whole population of Eritrean. We cannot even take them to be the legitimate representatives of Eritrea - for they are not democratically elected. Meles Zenawi had sham elections - and their presence in power is through sheer power only. Therefore, Isaias and his Sheabia regime have neither the legitimacy nor the moral high ground to speak

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

about the misery of Ethiopians while they so brutally are enslaving Eritreans, let alone to be taken as liberators or standing for the freedom of Ethiopians; unless we choose to turn a blind eye to the brutalization of Eritrean at the hands of Isaias and his regime or we don't care about Eritreans and prefer to ignore, to our peril, what he is doing to the people of the region. An abusive husband has no moral standing to talk of his neighbor's equally abusive behavior.

In addition to the Meles regime under whose reign of terror Ethiopians are suffering and are struggling to free themselves from and to claim and regain their freedom and dignity, Ethiopians are wary of and have a legitimate concern about and a problem with the paranoid Isaias and his regime.

It is safe to say that President Isaias Afewerki, an indictee-in-waiting, at the head of a soon to be a pariah state, wants to sustain his regime through terror, and is bent on fulfilling his dream of being leader of a 'regional superpower' and as the uncontested strongman of the volatile region.

It needs to be abundantly clear that proponents of closer ties with Isaias and his government have a very sincere and genuine desire to see their country free, their intentions, therefore, cannot be summarily questioned. Not at all. I can attest, with all my heart, to the sincerity, devotion, patriotism and unwavering commitment to Ethiopia and its people at least about the people I know, Major Dawit W/Giorgis, Tagai Neamin Zeleke and others.

The problem I have is with the judgment and the intensity and the oversimplification of the approach, the misguided hope and naive belief about Isaias and his regime, the whole notion that he and his regime are the sole venue to fulfilling our collective desire to remove Meles & Co., end the misery of our people and bring democratic change to our country. I understand the sincerity, the commitment, the eagerness, the fervor and the emotion about trying to rid Ethiopia of Meles & Company. But we are talking about the fate of a country in an environment of an ever increasing danger looming over it; putting its very survival in question.

What are the roles and contributions of Isaias & his regime to the whole equation of peace and stability in the region? We need to carefully and seriously answer this question.

When we talk about the fate of a country and its people, we should not take things personally and need to differentiate between the tactical from the strategic. Our passion to see a free and united Ethiopia is admirable. The tireless efforts to that end by all patriotic Ethiopians, is indeed commendable and it is the right

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

thing to do. I believe that doing so is our collective duty and responsibility. But we need to avoid tactical thinking and see things strategically, soberly and in a dispassionate manner.

Admittedly, cooperating with Isaias & his regime may have some tactical benefits, but could not be strategically beneficial and is rather dangerously counterproductive. This has to be seen in context.

To begin with, we Ethiopians are fighting for respect of human rights, the rule of law and a democratic system of government. Human rights are universal. Obviously, the people on both sides of the Mereb are being ruled by toxic brutal dictators who, even after so many years in power, still have the mind set of a guerilla movement leader and who continue to act as such. - even after so many years in power – mistaking the people they were supposed and had the honor of leading and administering for their guerilla fighters they used to command with absolute and uncontested authority, many a time ruthlessly.

It is against these facts and the belief that Eritreans are our brethren that I ask the proponents of cooperating with Isaias to reconcile this contradiction - a clear contradiction between our belief in the universality of human rights and the brutalization of Eritreans under Isaias, and between our earnest desire for and commitment to our unity and Isaias Afewerki's contrarian conduct – his relentless effort to undermine Ethiopian unity – not his blank pronouncements, but his deeds. This is a difficult circle to square.

If we believe in the universality of human rights, if we feel the agony of the traumatized people of Eritrea, feel their agony as they should feel ours, and if we think that Eritreans deserve freedom and democracy as we aspire, then we have to support them in their quest for democracy. If not for universality of human rights, for the importance and direct bearing the freedom of Eritreans has on our struggle for democracy and vise-versa, and conversely the danger absence of democracy and continued denial of freedom to either or both could entail on Ethiopians and Eritreans. Our interests to be free are inseparably tied together.

I'll argue that Isaias does not want, in fact is wary and in perpetual fear of Ethiopian unity and the prevalence of democracy in Ethiopia never mind in Eritrea. From what I understand about Isaias is that he is someone who does not want to be a junior partner and hates to be second to anyone, hence his fear of a big neighbor unless he is sure about having a direct or an indirect controlling authority. That was what transpired between the time of Dergue's demise and his disagreement with TPLF /EPRDF.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

It is clear now that, once TPLF became more assertive of their authority in Ethiopia and an effort to put a break on Eritrea's free wheeling behavior was in motion - thanks mainly to the people of Tigray - Isaias was enraged, found it an unacceptable attempt on the part of the people he considered to be his loyal placemen. That is one of the reasons the fallout with TPLF began and their up to that point lopsided relationship started to unravel.

As we all know, Ethiopia under Meles was a literal colony of Isaias Afewerki's Eritrea. Thanks mainly to the tacit approval and direct cooperation of the Sheabia clique within TPLF, which may or may not be organizational but surely ideological and sentimental, Isaias and Sheabia had unhindered access to the immense wealth of Ethiopia and controlled most import-export businesses. We all remember how Eritrea became an overnight coffee exporter. He imported tax-free and paid in Birr to Ethiopia for whatever he purchased, but asked to be paid and collected hard currency for what he sold. His murderous squads roamed the cities, towns and villages of Ethiopia and did whatever they wanted including assassinations.

Therefore a democratic and united Ethiopia, while extremely important & highly desirable to the people of Eritrea, is unwelcome to Isaias as it contravenes his imagination of self importance and his insecurity of being threatened by a bigger neighbor he cannot control, and making it impossible for him to continue with his undemocratic and brutally authoritarian rule, as Eritreans will be influenced by events in Ethiopia to be enticed to revolt against him.

We need to ask this: Would there have been a fall-out between EPLF and TPLF if TPLF continued to serve EPLF's insatiable desire to loot Ethiopia? I don't think so. Isaias Afewerki's problem is not TPLF per se, but his loss of control over it that denied him the ability to continue his loot of Ethiopia. He would act the same way, as he does now, with any government in Ethiopia that does not allow him to do what he was able to do well through the closing years of the nineties. Paradoxically, some Ethiopians could not grasp this fact. If TPLF were out of power today and found itself in Tigray alone Isaias will be the first one to ask TPLF for alliance to work against "chauvinist Ethiopians".

His assumed or real hate for TPLF is only a reflection of his inherent hate borne out of insecurity and fear of a bigger neighbor. Therefore, it is my contention that no matter who is in power in Ethiopia, his attitudes and paranoia will prevail. It is therefore logical for him to look to replace Woyane with some subservient group to execute his wishes, and wants to be sure this time he will remain the uncontested boss beginning to end.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

He cannot be satisfied short of having either a subservient group of his placemen rule over Ethiopia or see Ethiopia divided into many mini states where he assumes the role of a big brother, the super power – the indubitable strong man - of the block and a vital and indispensable power broker. And until that happens he continues on his destabilizing effort as that constant tension in the region gives him the irrational rationale and the inexcusable excuse to stay in power.

Ethiopians, as we all know, want and are fighting for a democratic order. It will not be in the interest of Isaias and his regime to see democracy take root in Ethiopia. Democracy, freedom, civil liberties and the likes are anathema to Isaias.

It was heart wrenching to watch the recent infomercial type interview of Isaias Afewerki. No question it was a good publicity stunt for him. His message was to Ethiopians as much as it was to the West.

I don't question the motive or the commitment to Ethiopian unity or the love of the country of the interviewers at all. I only wish they didn't do it.

Of the questions I found offensive to the sensibility, honor, pride and dignity of Ethiopians was the one that solicited him to be the leader of a reunited Eritrea with Ethiopia. A man who has Ethiopian blood all over him, who ruthlessly continues to suppress Eritreans and who relentlessly is trying to do all he can to undermine Ethiopian unity to be Ethiopia's leader? Have we lost our senses? What a travesty?

Yet, against all odds, I foolishly expected at least one question to be asked; that of the fate of members of Ethiopian Armed Forces. The condition and whereabouts of Ethiopians like Colonel Bezabih Petros, Belete Kabtuh Yimer, Shibeshi Haile, etc., among the countless.

Does Isaiyas really want the Meles regime to go and vice-versa, and why? My answer is not really. Why should they? I'm not in to conspiracy theory here. I'm just talking simple logic and the plain truth.

To answer this we need to understand the psyche and political frame of mind of Isaias in regards to how he sees himself along with the inherent hate he has for Ethiopia. There is something I never could ever understand. Why is that, especially knowing the fact that Isaias is a Tigrean & a Gondere as much as he is an Eritrean - as far as his family tree is concerned. (I'm always amazed at how, when they are involved in ethnic politics, people with multiple ethnic backgrounds are more radical in their thinking and more merciless and vicious in their acts especially against other ethnic groups. Does that emanate from an inferiority

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

complex & self doubt that they are out to prove to the rest as to how loyal & who they truly are? It's just an observation. I leave that to the professionals in the appropriate field).

I am only hoping that, beside their earnest desire to remove the Meles regime "by all necessary means", proponents of seeking assistance from Shaebia have adequately answered those questions. But, especially given the destructive role Isaias and his regime play at the behest and in support of destabilizing forces, his inherent desire to be 'the uncontested strong man of the block', his sense of insecurity borne out of fear of a big neighbor he cannot control, the political entanglement he finds himself in, be it domestically, regionally or globally, and his vicious track record, devilish sophistication and extensive experience in manipulating and using individuals and groups to fulfill and achieve his objective, I'll answer unequivocally that it's in Sheabia's strategic interest and it alone will be the beneficiary of such "cooperation" with anyone in the opposition. And this will only be to the delight and benefit of Meles & Co. and to the detriment of the country. A result definitely not to our liking and not commensurate with the tremendous efforts many patriots are putting into or their very intent.

As much as Isaias may have a personal problem or even hatred for Meles and vice-versa, they need each other's presence, as what each dictator does to each people is used as an excuse, and each person as the bogeyman. As far as I understand it, Meles and Isaias support each other, not through conspiracy as some may believe, but through deeds. Meles doesn't want Ethiopians to have democracy and their freedom, and he does that the best way he knows how, by brutalizing them. The same thing is true with Isaias. They both understand that denying the people their freedom by creating an environment of perpetual fear and sense of hopelessness, and pitching one group against another and putting the blame on others – the opposition or foreign powers that are 'threatening the national interest', etc. beside the means they have and the will to use them against the people, is what sustains their misrule.

Therefore, each by doing what he does to the people, all the while ostensibly working and vowing to topple one another by supporting each other's opposition, do support each other as tension and suppression in each undermine the collective effort of the people to rise up in unison for their rights to be respected. Democratizing one could have a ripple effect on the other. Each one makes sure that the other remains brutalized and subjugated. Unfortunately for them, that in it-self is unsustainable, people can't remain subjugated forever.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

It is in the best common interest of Eritreans and Ethiopians to work hard to free themselves from both dictators. That is the way we can repair broken ties, renew our trust, work for a brighter future, where guns will fall silent and citizens, instead of living in foxholes or forced exile, will have the opportunity to be productive and be able to compete in the global economy. That is the way to go about building durable relations among Ethiopians and Eritreans, not coddling with each other's tormentor.

I cannot express forcefully enough my deep sadness and outrage at the demeaning humiliation of our compatriots - both Ethiopians and Eritreans - especially our women by some Middle East and the Gulf area Arabs. And all that is because of lack of opportunity in their country. This has got to stop immediately! Unfortunately we cannot expect that to happen with the current governments in power.

In addition to what I have outlined above, here are my reasons why I consider cooperation with Isaiyas & his regime to be toxic, ill-advised and an unhelpful endeavor that would and could adversely affect our struggle for a united and democratic Ethiopia, and the options we have at our disposal.

* First and foremost, **Ethiopians have the power** and the dogged determination without the interference or help of any kind from Isaiyas and his regime, not only to remove Meles & Co., but also to bring about a democratic system to their country. We have ample power – called **people power** - that we can rely on to bring about the change we want and deserve. This is the power we have, but because of our inability to stand united miserably failed to direct our full energy and efforts to.

I'm not talking theory here. What does Gibot 7, 1997 (May 15, 2005) attest to? Did we need Isaias or anyone else for that glorious popular victory? Of course not. I'm sure people will justifiably say that, that was then and situations on the ground have changed, it is because people were unarmed that Meles was able to blatantly steal the election and continues to brutalize and terrorize our people. It's partly true. I said partly because the main reason for the reversal of the people's victory was not for lack or absence of arms. It was simply because of lack of organization with determined and gutsy leaders at the helm. Can we forget what transpired just after the Sene 1 massacre? The so called tri-party (Kinijit, UEDF and EPRDF) treaty of Sene 3, 97 was signed giving all reasons and excuses for Meles to intimidate the people of Ethiopia and unleash his reign of terror.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Why did the National Conference planned for Meskerem 20 & 21 to be followed by support demonstrations throughout Ethiopia and world wide for Monday Meskerem 22, and above all the abrupt and cowardly annulment of the stay-home call without even consulting the leaderships of Kinijit and Hibret take place, dashing the hopes and aspirations of Ethiopians to have a government of their choice for which they did all they were asked for and paid dearly?

Therefore, the reason Meles stole elections and stayed in power is neither because the people of Ethiopia are, as some ignorant folk would attempt to accuse them of being, cowardly and selfish and unwilling and unable to say 'enough is enough', nor the people have accepted Meles as their destined leader nor because they were not armed. The only reason that enabled Meles & Co. to grab power and to continue to terrorize our people is **lack of firm and principled unity** among the opposition and a glaring **absence of leadership** that has the foresight, the stamina and the fortitude to lead the people of Ethiopia to the inevitable victory. Let me be clear. There are individuals in several organizations, like, among others, Engineer Hailu Shawul and W/t Birtukan for example, with unquestionable courage and good intentions. My contention is that I've yet to see real leaders who are tolerant, deliberative, accommodating and strategically thinking that could unify the people and lead by example. This remains to be the sticking point.

It is therefore my contention that what sustains Meles & Co. to continue to stay in power and continue to terrorize our people - beside having an army and security that he readily, willingly and mercilessly uses to suppress our people to the level not even imaginable under a foreign occupying power - is **lack of a resolute, unified and credible opposition** that wins the trust of the people and renews their hope to stay the course. The people of Ethiopia did all they were asked for when they saw hope in a unified opposition.

Neither the extent of the already unbearable suffering of our people at the hands of a ruthless dictator, nor hollow promises, nor bravados nor having more organizations will by themselves be enough to give our people hope for a better future and encourage them to rise up against their tormentor. All our people need is a **broad-based credible organization**, unambiguously **unified and national in scope and in structure** with trusted leaders, nothing else.

No question, Ethiopians despair over the conduct of the fractured opposition and do not wish to see another group to usurp power. They are justified in being wary of some groups, specially those groups with known stated objectives that are dreaming to come to power at the back of Isaias' tanks, deja vu.....

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

It is my contention, therefore, that looking for cooperation with and assistance from EPLF at least at this time and in the absence of a credible unified opposition is a wrong approach and an ill-advised undertaking, if not something that has to be avoided altogether. This is testament to our position of weakness as opposition groups - a position that is rooted in our failure to properly appreciate let alone put in motion the main agent of change – the power of the people, a unified people. And that in essence is because we continue to highly, but wrongly, underestimate the formidable power of our people.

Some contend and wrongly assume that cooperating with anyone and declaring armed struggle can rally our people and give them hope. And they further postulate that doing so by itself encourages the opposition to come together and forge unity. I find such arguments intrinsically illogical and reckless.

Why do we look for shortcuts that end up taking us to the abyss? The shortest distance is not always what we see or what appears to be to the naked eye. Let us not underestimate ourselves and above all the indomitable power of the people. The power is within us, only, and only if we submit ourselves to a noble cause higher than ourselves or that of our groups - the unity of Ethiopia and the freedom of Ethiopians.

No power, let alone the ones like that of Meles or Isaiyas, can rule over a determined people like Ethiopians if they can find the right leadership.

This is my challenge to all. If you believe in the supremacy of the Ethiopian people to whom, and to whom alone, power belongs, if you sincerely want human rights, freedom and democracy, let's just for once, close individual files, stop politicizing ethnicity and religion, put our individual programs aside and commit ourselves to working for the common good and the common good alone, and see if we cannot be, not only a formidable force to be reckoned with but a force that will earn the trust of the people that will reignite their hope once again, a force that could shorten the misery of our people in the shortest possible time – much faster than Isaias Afewerki's tanks. Call me whatever you want, but I know it can be done. My challenge is not only to leaders, it is to every Ethiopian. If organizations do not heed the call of our people, we need to stop the help each one of us is giving to individual organizations until real principled unity is attained.

If we fail to do that and opt to continue on the same track we have been on for so long, there will not be a solution, and in fact that will only give comfort to the dictators. I think it was Einstein who said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results".

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Do we really see any change, be it in our political deliberation, discourse, thinking, organizational structure or tactics and strategy in the last 18 years? I have seen the same game being played over and over again, only the players are different.

An organization gets formed with great fanfare, only to be followed by splintering and further splintering, infinitely; alliances are formed, the same thing; alliances of alliances get formed, and counter alliances and groupings, and more, and more of them.... And when there inevitably is a problem within an organization or alliance, no time to sort out why and look for narrowing the gap and solving the problem... No. Other mini splinters will be formed until all wither away, or a couple of people or in some instances single individuals will cling to the name and claim they are the alliance or front, group, etc... (I remember one individual who claimed to be the chairman of an organization formed by over 38 entities and when everyone left the organization in question, the 'chairman' continued to call himself to be the head of the practically non-existent organization for many, many years).

Oh, mode of struggle? Yes, that too, we have heard marching armies on the verge of victory by many, too many to count. For all that our people are asked to raise funds, and they do. But, no single organization I know of has accounted for the money. We have seen and heard all.

But it has to be abundantly clear that this in no way is meant to underestimate the genuine efforts by many dedicated and selfless patriotic Ethiopians who have been and still are engaged in politics and some in armed resistance, nor is it intended to deny them credit for their sacrifices and immense contributions to the struggle.

Therefore, I believe, as much as we hold Meles to account for the suffering of our people, we, in the opposition need to first recognize our dismal failings in getting our acts together, self-examine and assess why, determine neither giving up nor going it alone is the option, understand that the interests of the country and our people are beyond that of the individual self or group, commit oneself to the collective good, and adopt the concept of putting country and people first. I believe that the regime is mainly there as a direct result of the ineptitude and lack of political maturity of the opposition and its leaders. Accountability starts at home. Let's recognize that. Let us just pause, reflect and come together.

* Secondly, it is **dissuasive and divisive**.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

As we have seen so far, because of Isaias Afewerki's predisposition (*mens rea*) to and practical anti-Ethiopian activities and his destabilizing role in the region, cooperation with him is counterproductive, and especially anything that has to do with military activity has to be avoided.

In addition to disappointing the people of Eritrea, association or cooperation with Isaias and his regime will have disadvantages on three fronts:

a) *Impact on the military*:- The most obvious domestic reason is how the EPRDF government, as any government would do, can use it to discredit the opposition and even use it as a pretext and excuse to harass and imprison members and supporters of the opposition as 'enemy collaborators' thereby directly affecting opposition efforts. This is especially true in view of Isaias Afewerki's destabilizing activities in the region, particularly in Ethiopia.

But the more serious one is what I consider to be more critical, the reaction of the military - denying a very important support that has to be sought by the opposition.

If we wish, I believe we do, Ethiopian Armed Forces or at least their members in significant numbers to side with the people in our fight for democracy and unity, we should have no direct relationship of a military nature with Isaias and his regime, and other hard core enemies of Ethiopia, new or old, historical or accidental under any circumstances. There is no greater **dissuasive factor** for any in the military from cooperating with the opposition more than this. Getting the support of the military is not only critical for the opposition, but conversely it is critical and a high value component whose support the regime wouldn't wish to lose at any cost. Therefore our loss of the possible support of the military would not be any ordinary loss, but something the support of which the regime so badly and desperately needs and without whose support cannot survive.

b) *International support*:- We all know how governments, especially in the west perceive the current Eritrean regime of Isaias Afewerki – a destabilizing element.

No one in the right mind would expect to garner any support, even temporary, if association with the Sheabia regime is well established. Once again this will give Meles and his administration a needed reason and ammunition to discredit the opposition.

c). *Divides the opposition*:- We understand, at least in theory, how critical the unity of the opposition is for our struggle to succeed. We should still strive for bringing the opposition together as that is the only way forward. But, as we have

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

seen with the formation of AFD, any direct role or involvement of Sheabia inevitably drives a wedge between the opposition, especially between unity forces and those who are not. Any direct or even indirect involvement of Sheabia in the affairs of the opposition, especially one of a military nature, is definitely very divisive.

Therefore it is self-defeating, reckless and suicidal to allow Isaias and his regime to meddle in our (the opposition's) affairs.

What are the types of assistance that EPLF is supposedly able to give? It is said that it includes weaponry & military training, monetary and political/diplomatic.

Let's examine each one briefly and the need for it.

1. Weaponry and training:

Arguably EPLF has, thanks to the Dergue, a lot of weapons, especially individual weapons that it is willing to dispose of and can gladly afford to give for the asking.

But the question is what for and who is going to use them? Obviously it is the opposition that is determined and ready to mount an armed struggle that the weapons are needed for. Let me be as clear as I can be. I don't oppose armed struggle, in fact I am for it in principle. I believe defending one-self and society at large, when the need is there, is a right. Ethiopians have a right and a justifiable cause to be armed and be able to defend themselves against a murderous regime that knows no bounds to its brutality and has no intention or desire to tolerate peaceful dissent. Therefore, it is more than understandable for Ethiopians to be organized and armed in order to defend their rights as human beings, and to look for ways and means to be able to do so.

The question I have in this regard is this: What kind of armed resistance are we talking about? Is it the type all the rest – EPLF, TPLF, OLF, EPRA, etc. had – 'rural to urban' - or a new kind, appropriate to the times and realities we are in, whatever that may be?

My argument is this, if we are that determined and have the resolve to embark on such an endeavor, we can have enough arms inside Ethiopia proper. And curiously, did we ever ask ourselves, despite all the military assistance OLF is supposedly getting from EPLF, why is it unsuccessful? This of course without considering the problem it has with the people of Ethiopia for its unfortunate real or perceived anti-Ethiopian unity sentiment.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

As far as training is concerned, I find it insulting. If any in the opposition is serious about launching an armed struggle, it does not need EPLF trainers to train its freedom fighters as there are countless Ethiopian professional soldiers and officers in every field and at every level that could do the job more effectively with passion and assured dedication.

As someone with a military background, I know quite well the psyche and attitude of a person in uniform sworn to think and always act by putting 'country before self' to defend the unity of the country and the sovereignty of its people. It is, therefore, in this prism and from this perspective we have to see and think of the actions and understand the reactions of people in uniform in general to concerns and events related to national security.

I hear people asking why the military is allowing itself to be used as a weapon of oppression to this government or that government? We need to understand that the military is at the service of the government of the day. Needless to say, members of the armed forces are also members of the society. Therefore, they know what the government does, feel the pain, understand and share the resentment of the rest of the population. But to side and stand with the people as an institution is very hard but not an impossibility, provided that there is an **unshakeable trust, confidence and assurance that what they swore for to uphold – the territorial integrity and unity of the country and the peace of the people - are safe and not tampered with or jeopardized in anyway.** But until that stage is attained, there will always be individual members of the armed forces, small groups or even units switching sides and taking the people's side or dissociating themselves from the government. We have seen this in recent years, including the defection from EPRDF and joining OLF of one time Dergue corporal and later EPRDF general Kemal. Although, understandable given the prevailing highly charged environment of politicized ethnicity, his defection was purely on ethnic basis which, in all honesty, I found disturbing and disheartening. (Over thirty years ago, I did what he did, but ours was an Ethiopian unit with the dogged determination to uphold our professional oath from a different direction, and remains to this day to be just that).

We have to understand the agony of people in uniform over the ever worsening situation and suffering of their countrymen and countrywomen. As in the rest of the society, people in the armed forces also sincerely and seriously want this government to go, wish Ethiopia to be free from dictatorship and, except few corrupted and misguided ones, are ready to side with the people. But

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

there is one major pervasive factor more than any other that dissuades them from doing so and indeed compels them to stay on the side of the government, albeit unhappily. And that is if the alternative (the opposition) is indeed or even is strongly suspected of cooperating with the enemy of the country, be it Isaiyas and his government or Al-Shabaab or any other. That is a universally accepted psychology and mindset of people in uniform, and in our case especially of those who have Ethiopia at heart.

There is one thing that has to be unambiguously clear to all in the opposition. If we want the people in uniform especially those in active duty to be on the side of the people of Ethiopia, we can NEVER have a discernible relationship with EPLF. This undoubtedly is something the dissuasiveness of which can not be overemphasized. It is foolhardy to think otherwise.

To put it in context, it is worth sharing here an anecdote in my personal experience. In late 1968 (Eth. Cal.) we in the Ethiopian Airborne detachment that was stationed in Asmara were forced to cancel our last coup attempt against Col. Mengistu because of one concern, and one concern alone. There were a couple of units who did not want to go along with our plan and we determined that a shooting confrontation would be necessary or even inevitable. The fear was not that they will put up any resistance of significance, but our major concern which determined the fate of the whole plan was the very fact that there'd be shooting exchanges among the troops will be exploited by "secessionist bandits". To make sure that did not happen, I along with Corporal Zewdie went to see our contact – comrade-in-plot – in the Air Force to request and convince them to fly their jets and keep a 30 kilometer radius security zone around Asmara and to do all they could to discourage and deter any "bandit" from attempting to exploit the infighting and compromise the safety and security of the city. We deemed this precaution necessary in order to make sure that we did not inadvertently and carelessly allow secessionists to disturb the peace and make us responsible for it and for working against the security interests of the country. When, after an hour of discussion, we failed to garner the cooperation we sought from the Air Force, we had no choice but to annul the plan. The concern for national security was exceedingly weighty and more important than our eagerness and determination to remove Mengistu.

That same mindset of putting 'country first' is almost universal as anyone in uniform could attest to.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

One more vivid illustration and one that is directly relevant to the issue at hand is what transpired after the ill-advised coup that resulted in the death of the brightest-of-the bright of Ethiopian Armed Forces, to the detriment of the nation. (I'll discuss this a little more later).

Senior officers, the most prominent among them, the much respected, loved and incontestably one of the ablest commanders, General Demissie Bulto, were murdered in a grizzly manner by their own soldiers, nor for love of the cowardly & spineless Mengistu or to protect his regime or anything else, but because of one reason and one reason alone – that of being falsely accused of collaboration with EPLF. A general of his caliber, one admired, respected and loved by his colleagues and subordinates alike, the one general in whom troops had their hopes was killed at the hands of his own soldiers because they wrongly were led to believe that he was in cahoots with the anti-Ethiopian enemy, EPLF. Needless to say, let alone the truly patriotic General Demissie, none of the murdered had any ties of any kind whatsoever with EPLF.

At different times Ethiopian nationalism has been questioned, assaulted and highly underestimated by foreigners and some demented individuals and mercenarily-minded domestic groups.

Soon after Emperor Haile-Selassie was overthrown and the Dergue regime was obviously on shaky grounds, Saeed Bare is said to have gleefully told his cabinet that the time for Somalia to 'claim one of her stars' has arrived and he was not going to need much of a military force to do that, all he'd have to do was send unarmed camel herders to occupy and claim that "lost star".

We know what the reaction of the entire Ethiopian population was when, after having realized that sending unarmed camel herders were not to be, Saeed Bare started his naked aggression against Ethiopia. And all the while people did not as such support Mengistu. We have also seen the reaction of Ethiopians when Sheabia started its unprovoked aggression of Tigrai. Did people react the way they did because they supported Meles and his regime? Of course not, in fact the people of Ethiopia rightly believed it was, ironically, the policy of Meles that allowed and enabled Sheabia to use Ethiopian weapons to be used against them. Did that prevent them from distinguishing the difference between Sheabia's aggression and their fundamental disagreement with TPLF & Meles? No. I know people may legitimately ask, well that was a long time ago before Meles killed so many innocent and brutalized and continues to brutalize Ethiopians on a massive scale. The answer is yes. But, the fact remains the same. The question is not who is in power, but what each stands for and why?

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Many, including Major Dawit, as illustrated in his article, argue that Meles is the main enemy. There can be no one in his or her sane mind that would defend Meles as far as his vicious brutality is concerned, but what I don't understand and what people who argue as such fail to convince is, how the removal of Meles **with the help of Sheabia** is good for Ethiopia. It's not only 'Yezinjero Konjo"...thing, both brutal dictators, but why would anyone in the right mind think Isaias wants or is for Ethiopian unity is beyond me.

Had Isaias been a democratically elected leader, that would have been a different story. To his demented way of thinking, only instability and tension in Eritrea, in Ethiopia and the region, not a democratized Eritrea and stable Ethiopia, sustain his regime.

2. Monetary/Financial:

There is no question that the opposition is faced with a regime that has the nation's coffers and international financial aid at its sole disposal. Finance is indisputably a major problem for the opposition. Everybody knows it and especially those of us who are involved in politics can unanimously attest to it, we live it.

Then the question is how much money is sought or can one believe EPLF – a government with very limited resources - can afford to give, in the hundreds of thousands, in millions? But before we get the answer to it let's see what Ethiopians in the Diaspora contributed so far. Ethiopians in North America alone contributed over a hundred twenty thousand or so US Dollars for the All-Party Conference that formed United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) in 2003. During the 2005 elections, over a hundred fifty thousand US Dollars was raised by UEDF alone. How much was raised by CUD supporters for the 2005 elections, during and after the release from detention of CUD leaders? And how much money have Ethiopians contributed to each segment of CUD since the unfortunate division? And do we know how much money was and continues to be raised at different times for different groups who claim to have or have undertaken the effort of mounting armed resistance against the regime? In millions! (I did not include the fundraising efforts by regional or ethnic-based groups. I'm just talking about unity forces only). Can the financial help sought and expected to be received from EPLF equal the amount of what Ethiopians can raise? No way!

The most important factor in this is that, whatever money EPLF may give will inevitably have strings (visible or not) attached to it, whereas the money voluntarily raised by Ethiopians has none, and in fact has 2 advantages.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

One is that no strings are attached to it except expected accountability on the part of the organizations receiving the money, and secondly and more importantly the fact that this allows and gives the opportunity for Ethiopians to participate in the process, making them direct participants in the effort. (This very idea, by the way, was the reason why the All-Party Conference Organizing Committee deliberately and astutely decided to depend on Ethiopians and Ethiopians alone to finance the undertaking).

It can be confidently said that Ethiopians, especially in the Diaspora, have given their money generously whenever asked. Given their proven record, knowing their love for their country and their burning desire and unwavering commitment to see change in their country, there is no doubt in my mind and am fully confident that Ethiopians will and are able to generously donate their hard-earned money to the on-going struggle for justice, equality and unity and the effort to remove the obstacle to these ideals - the tyrannical ethnocentric regime of Meles & Co. I contend that Ethiopians can contribute more money than what the opposition can expect from Sheabia.

But, their contribution no doubt will be unyielding and beyond imagination if and when they get a **unifying organization** with steady, level-headed, determined, reliable, visionary and **trustworthy leadership**.

3. Political/diplomatic:

Admittedly, there are areas where Isaiyas' EPLF government could lend a limited helping hand in the sphere of diplomacy, and in the political arena. In this regard, there is a proven fact that the Eritrean regime has played some helpful roles in some instances. But, although understandable and to be expected, EPLF's political or diplomatic assistance as in other areas, invariably and consistently, has always been when it saw the end game benefitting it greatly.

Given EPLF's track record of impeccable networks and effective modus operandi in some neighboring countries, it could lend a helping hand to some members of the opposition in facilitating travels especially to some mid-east and Gulf area countries.

Now we need to see and carefully examine what possible political and diplomatic assistance the opposition may seek from EPLF and what EPLF could deliver.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

This has to be contextualized to current realities of EPLF's standing in the world. Acting the way Isaiyas Afewerki's EPLF government does as regards to the aiding and abating of fundamentalist movements in the region, it is highly questionable that any group associated with it would be seen favorably by any power, especially the ones referred to as western democracies. I'll leave it at that.

To justify cooperating with the regime in question, some may legitimately argue, and I have come across a few, who say 'ok, all that could be true. But regardless, we know what we want, all we need is just be able to get started and to be on our feet. Once we get there how can EPLF be hurting us or our cause? And TPLF did it to attain their objective, OLF did it is doing it, so does ONLF, EPRP did it, etc., are doing it, what's the fuss about it?'

(As far as I know EPRP didn't cooperate with EPLF. Its EPRA founders passed through them in transit to Assimba. One of the reasons EPRP lost its fight with TPLF was EPLF's direct military assistance to TPLF, triggered by EPRP's refusal to accept the notion of Eritrean independence).

I find this argument hallow and especially incomprehensive when it comes from pro-unity individuals and groups. That is just mixing apples and oranges – Dubana Qel! We are talking about us, unity forces, not others whose agendas or strategic objectives are totally different and opposed to ours.

Finally, knowing the track record, the behavior and overall strategy of EPLF, cooperating with it the way some are trying to do at this point and time, will complicate things more, aggravate the internal political situation by strengthening secessionist elements, incapacitate the **national (Ager-Agef) opposition** and render it useless or even put the responsibility for the ensuing undesirable developments and consequences squarely on its shoulders.

I consider a military cooperation or for that matter political association of any sort with EPLF a losing strategy. I call EPLF a zero multiplier. No matter what the amount, the result of it would always be zero when multiplied by zero.

When closely and carefully examined, therefore, the facts belie the false sense of benefits some think Ethiopians may get out of cooperation with Isaias & his government. Cooperation just out of desperation has a negative impact of strategic significance. Considering Isaias Afewerrki as a stalwart ally of Ethiopia and Ethiopians is the height of folly.

Some may wrongly interpret my argument as one that opposes armed resistance. As I mentioned earlier, I'm not against armed resistance, per se. I am

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

a proponent of and truly believe in the fundamental right of people to bear arms. But I don't support **arming factions of people** who are to be manipulated to eventually align on tribal or ethnic lines and kill one another. Some may naively think that things will be alright once Meles is gone and the main agenda item now at hand is doing all we can to getting rid of Meles 'by all means necessary'.

I have to say it again: my argument against seeking assistance from and cooperation with Isaiyas and his regime, obviously does not include groups with secessionist agenda as a stated objective, like ONLF and to some extent OLF. That is a different paradigm.

I wish they didn't do it for the sake of the people they claim to stand for, the people of Ethiopia in general and the region, because at long last they will realize the futility of being accessory to a destabilizing force.

To be blunt, I have no qualms with these groups and understand better their closer cooperation with Isaias and his regime. It is only natural and befitting their strategic objective - an objective not limited to their desire to see the Meles regime go. They see the removal of Meles as a conduit and something that would lead to their separatist objective, whereas unity forces see the removal of Meles and his regime as a necessary step for the people of Ethiopia to establish a democratic system of government in a country that remains united.

Unity forces have obviously no problem with Ethiopia but Meles & Co., whereas for some like the ONLF Ethiopia itself is deemed to be the problem. This is the crux of the matte people fail to see. That was the clear difference we had with AFD and will continue to be the case with any would be AFD that some are in the process of wasting their precious time forming.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE MAIN TURNING POINTS THAT DETERMINED OUR COUNTRY'S FATE?

What led us to where we are continues to be a contentious matter with obviously differing and sometimes contradictory interpretations. I am not going as far back as why a country whose frontiers extended far greater than it is now, a country that had people who erected the obelisks of Axum, who built the rock hewn churches in Lalibella and elsewhere, a country whose genius people developed indigenous alphabets uniquely Ethiopian, a country that symbolized

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

freedom, etc. is now a desperately poor country whose very unity is made uncertain. I leave that to the appropriate historians. I am limiting my observation only to the very recent history instead - the last twenty to thirty years only – with the intention and for the purpose of just seeing the immediate impact our generation's actions have in deciding the fate of our nation.

Ethiopian Unity and Eritrea:

Arguably, the list of reasons that led to where we are and for our state of affairs could be very long. The question of Eritrea was inevitably one of the top few items in the list that directly decided or greatly influenced the fate of the country. As far as I am concerned it will continue to be one of the constants in Ethiopia's very being for a long time, if not forever. It is also true for Eritrea; Ethiopia will always play a dominant role, if not a determinant one, in its existence.

Therefore, it is only understandable if events in Eritrea or Eritrea itself become the first one in this short list of events that determined Ethiopia's fate at least in the last three decades.

Without minimizing or denying in any way the heroic sacrifices of countless EPLF - and yes ELF fighters - during the decades old struggle they deemed right and worth dying for, the realization of seeing an independent Eritrea, I'll cite three major factors that directly contributed to and enabled that to happen, with impacts that enabled Eritrea to be where it is now and for Meles to take control of the Ethiopian ship of state with consequences that continue to reverberate.

I expect former Essepa and Dergue officials to break their self imposed silence and have the courage to come forward and tell the people of Ethiopia about what kind of destructive policies, directives and practices, especially in the military apparatus, the government of Mengstu Hailemariam had.

As I said earlier, I hope people who had been in position of power will have the courage to take responsibility and account for the policies of the regime that are fundamentally contributing factors, if not the major ones, to the situation our country finds itself now. They owe it to their country, its traumatized people, to future generations and at least to their children and their grand children to do so.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

1. Wrong policies and Idiosyncratic and Inept Leadership:

The total and unequivocal ineptitude and bankrupt copious policies of the Dergue regime coupled with the obduracy and lunacy of Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam is the first and most important reason that, to the detriment of the nation, enabled and propelled EPLF and TPLF to be where they are now. This implicit factor may not need to be seen in detail here

(There is no denying here to the fact that immense sacrifices were made by all combatants and no disrespect in any way is intended at those who paid the ultimate price for the causes they truly believed in).

Of the numerous blunders, egregiously faulty policies and destructive measures of Mengistu and his junta, that played determinant roles and caused irreversible harm, I'll only mention one example relevant to the Eritrean equation here. It has to do with one of the junta's first decisions and acts at the outset of its brutal rule which I find to be a game changer.

At the start of 1969 (Eth. Cal.) three of my colleagues and I met a high level ELF official named Hadish WoldeGhiorgis, a former member (a sergeant) in the police force commonly called the 'commandists' and who worked at Radio Asmara, and one of the hundreds who defected and joined the movements. During our conversation with him he continued thanking Colonel Mengistu. I asked him why so? He pointed to a single picture hanging on the wall of the peasant's house we were in. I said ok that is General Aman Mikael Andom's picture. He nodded and continued that soon after the general's speech at Saba stadium in Asmara, fighters simply started to trickle back to their villages, leaders were confused and did not know how to handle that pervasive attitude, and he said that he was ashamed to admit it but he himself started to question the correctness of his decision of joining the movement. Again pointing to the picture, he said Eritreans all of a sudden became enamored with him and proudly started hanging his picture in their homes. And he said, wherever they went Eritreans started asking them boldly "our son – Wodna- is in power. Now what?". Well he said the moment Mengistu killed the general and Eritrean youth were found strangled in Asmara, it was a big relief resulting in a sudden reversal of the situation in favor of the movements. They had too many would be fighters joining them that they had difficulty training them at once. Then he asked if we understood why he is grateful to Mengistu. We got his point.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

2. Dergue's decision to vacate and abandon Tigrai:

Of the many glaring blunders and misadventures as it relates to the struggle between TPLF/EPLF and Dergue, the decision to totally vacate Tigrai ranks at the top.

This decision made no political or military or any sensible sense at all. That decision made, not only Dergue's inevitable demise a certainty, but also enabled TPLF to grow in leaps and bounds allowing it to entrench itself in the province, helped greatly its march southward to be much easier, and made Eritrean independence more than a probability.

I find this decision to be the stupidest, most nonsensical, militarily and politically suicidal and criminal blunder of huge proportions on the part of the Dergue.

By vacating Tigrai, there was no justification or military logic to leave well over a hundred thousand troops in totally cut off Eritrea. The idea and ensuing effort by the regime to supply the troops in Eritrea with food, military equipment, etc., via air and sea was a logistical nightmare and indeed folly and eccentrically irrational.

Because of these unsettling developments and the danger the country clearly faced, and knowing too well that Mengistu was totally unable or unwilling to grasp the seriousness of the situation – owing to his ignorant obsession to "crush" the 'bandits' and his blank boastfulness about "solving" the problem of Eritrean once and for all - some of us, former members of the military, decided to do something. We tried, of course indirectly, to make some top people in the military establishment aware of the trajectory of the overall danger and suggested to move at least half of the troops in Eritrea and redeploy them in Tigrai. We believed that by so doing TPLF would be forced to roll back its fast southward advances and EPLF would be compelled to adjust to such measures giving a breathing space to the military to recalibrate its strategy and enable it to claim the initiative it lost.

To our disappointment, but not surprise, nothing was done. I suspect that no one dared to even entertain the idea. As we know most were yes men who cowered before Mengistu. That decision arguably was a turning point where the defeat of the Dergue was imminent, the victory of both EPL and TPLF more viable, and the fate of the country was precariously put in great jeopardy.

The decision to vacate Tigrai, ostensibly was made by Legesse Asfaw, a sergeant of no discernible military knowledge and maturity. But it is unfair to throw the blame at the individual alone.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

3. The Ill-Advised & Ill-fated May Coup:

It is for the first time and officially that I'll have to say just a little on this point because Major Dawit in his article mentioned it in a different light. I had chosen not to say anything until now.

As far as I'm concerned that ill-advised coup d'état was, for all intents and purposes, responsible for the culmination of one saga and the starting of a new nightmare for the country and its people – this was the last straw that broke the camel's back.

As one of the four officers who initially formed The Free Ethiopian Soldiers Movement, I am compelled to share just a little about the movement and the failed coup.

The very reasons for organizing the movement and its intended purposes were three-fold.

a). Facilitate humanitarian aid to POWs: Our first mission was to help the tens of thousands of Ethiopian prisoners of war get the humanitarian assistance they needed and deserved. The Dergue regime was adamant and unwilling to accept its soldiers were held as prisoner of war and shamelessly and blatantly considered those captured soldier in EPLF (and later TPLF) prisons as 'defectors' and 'enemy collaborators'. The regime's recklessness and its leaders' spinelessness in this regard alone can only be described as something beyond what commonsense dictates.

That made the International Red Cross's task very difficult and the lives of the POW's untenable. Prior to coming to the US and the formation of FESM, I personally made several trips to Kessela to discuss the POW's situation with EPLF people. At the time the organization I belonged to, Ethiopian National Democratic Front – ENDF (successor to Ethiopian Patriotic Democratic Organization – EPDO -Ager-Wodad), believed that many among the tens of thousands of Ethiopian POW's in EPLF prison camps would be more than willing to join us in the armed struggle we were waging, and we had concrete and actionable information to that effect. Nonetheless, EPLF did not allow that to happen.

b). Recruit POWs: All the while we get humanitarian assistance to reach the POW's, we'll ask for access, if possible unfettered access, to the POWs to be

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

able to co-opt from among them those who'd be willing and able to join us. We planned to recruit from among the POWs and form a highly mobile fighting force comprising only of military personnel.

c). Work to undermine and remove the regime: The last one was to work within the military establishment in a clandestine, careful and systematic manner with the aim of eventually organizing a revolt against Mengistu by the armed forces and removing the inept and corrupted government.

We were convinced that only a force from within the military establishment could be in a position to topple the Mengistu regime, fend off the accelerated advances of TPLF and EPLF, and at the same time guarantee the territorial integrity and unity of the country. The urgency to do that was made more compelling for us because of emerging facts that western powers, who until then were supportive of Ethiopian unity, had started to overtly support both fronts. (As to the reasons leading western powers, especially the United States, to support these fronts all the way to enabling them to assume power is a discussion to be had. Hopefully, I'll have my own input to the discussion).

Soon, the committee overseeing and coordinating the activities of FESM grew to 9 - of those 2 are no more alive. And its mission gradually evolved and discussions about the idea of coordinating and mounting a coup d'état against Mengistu began in earnest.

I was of the opinion (and had put it in writing) that, given the overall political environment in the country, the tenuous situation within the government, especially in the military establishment, a coup d'état against Mengistu cannot succeed unless;

a) It was supported by the Russians; which obviously was not even a choice, and
b) Mengistu is physically eliminated. Although I don't support extra judicial killing under any pretext, this was the only option, given the fear, suspicion and mistrust of one another he managed to instill in his subordinates, it was difficult to get people to act together against him unless they were sure he is not around any more.

We knew that many officers were undeservingly elevated to senior ranks simply because they were Mengistu's yes men.

Because of the multi-layered structure in the military establishment and the maniacally ruthlessness of Mengistu, suspicion, self doubt and despondency

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

were rampant. It, therefore, was only logical that he should be taken care of for the sake of saving the country. And that ought to be the first thing to do if the coup were to succeed, I believed.

Additionally, it was my firm conviction that we (the Committee) had to agree on three areas of great importance if the coup were to succeed.

a) This endeavor should be absolutely secret and what we called secessionist groups (anti-Ethiopian unity forces), EPLF, TPLF and OLF **should under any circumstances, not even remotely,** have any knowledge of it.

b). No foreign intelligence services of any country should know about it, let alone be involved. (I soon learnt how naive of me that was).

c). The Committee has to carefully compile a list of people in the military establishment and the government who could possibly be asked to be involved in coordinating the coup at different levels, and make that each one of us does not give any indication about it, be it on friendly, familial or any other basis except those selected and approved by the committee. And with that in mind, I gave the names of three people that should never, never be informed about the secret plan or be asked to join in. They were General Tesfaye Gebre-Kidan, Colonel Tesfaye Wolde-Selassie and Colonel Fisseha Desta. I gave my reasons as to why, to the trepidation and consternation of some who knew these people and to the furor of my dear comrade and friend, the late Colonel Alemayehu Asfaw.

The reason for not letting anti-unity forces know about it may need a little elaboration as it is the main and an on-going contentious point worthy of getting our full attention.

It is only logical and commonsensical to understand these groups, especially EPLF, and what they would do all they can to make sure that the coup did not succeed.

As astute and assiduous as EPLF leaders are believed to be, knowing too well about the organization's capacity to infiltrate Mengistu's government at all levels and the ever increasing political and other support it was receiving from the international community, and Soviet Union's ever decreasing support for the Dergue, the level of frustration & despondency of the people, the expansion of the war to the hinterland of the country at a faster pace than anyone thought possible only a year ago or so by TPLF with the indispensable help of EPDM, and

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

successive military setbacks the government was sustaining, etc., it is safe to assume that EPLF knew the rusted Mengistus regime was irreversibly in deep crises and on its way out.

There was only one aspect in this equation that was working against EPLF's seemingly good fortunes. The new effort by the new overall commander of troops in Eritrea, General Demissie Bulto - one of the most brilliant, highly respected, capable and irreplaceable professional senior military officers in Ethiopian Armed Forces. He had the foresight and the courage to challenge the existing chaotic state of affairs in the military, and started reorganizing, rigorously retraining and reintroducing strict military discipline to the troops under his command, top to bottom. New approaches, tactics and strategy were being readied to conduct the war effort professionally and more effectively. The trend was tested about a month or so before the ill-feted coup d'état in Deke Mehari where Shaebia sustained heavy losses to the level it had not seen in several years. I have heard some comments with deep feeling of regret and demonstrable anger from military personnel who were in Eritrea at the time that the situation in Eritrea, at least from the military stand point, would have been drastically different with a more than good chance of reversing EPLF's recent gains in Ethiopia's favor, had General Demissie had three to six more months. It is impossible that EPLF would not have sensed this gathering danger.

It is only logical to conclude that EPLF knew too well, even without the possibility of drastic reversal of the situation on the ground, any government that replaces the obnoxiously nefarious and much hated Mengstu and his regime would have better public support and would be a much tougher enemy to contend with.

Therefore, no one in the right mind within EPLF - when they are at the gates of Asmara and sharing the rations and munitions of Ethiopian troops and in a relative position of strength - would ever want that coup by the military to succeed and wish to fight for decades more against a government with more popular support and better military readiness. It just did not make any sense to me. That was why I insisted as forcefully as I could that under no circumstances, no ifs or buts, should anti-unity forces and especially EPLF know of the plan. I sincerely believed that doing so would only benefit EPLF with grave consequences that would further muddle the political landscape and jeopardize the very unity of the country we all love.

As was evident in the proposal I presented to the Committee about the

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

transitional government FESM envisaged to form, it was clear that FESM aimed at forming an inclusive government that'd have garnered the support of the population (of course including Eritrea population), all the while giving priority to the security of the people and the territorial integrity and unity of the country, with a commitment to politically engage armed groups, EPLF, TPLF and EPDM.

When some in the Committee deviated from the aims, objectives and clear mission of the Movement that I thought and firmly believed was totally counterproductive and dangerous, I made my concerns and differences known to all and dissociated myself from the Movement.

Regrettably, what ought not to have happened - although done in good faith and with honest intentions - happened resulting in Ethiopia losing the cream of the cream, the brightest and the ablest of its generals to the gallows of the toxic criminal Mengistu Haile-Mariam, enabling EPLF's march for independence much easier and TPLF's advance with little resistance from a demoralized army that lost its most competent military commanders through death and imprisonment because of that very coup. Because of that coup, EPLF's dream for independent Eritrea was made much easier and became more tangible, deciding the fate of the nation the way it did.

THE WAY FORWARD:

1. For Ethiopians:

I may need to go back a little bit to examine briefly our recent past to show our collective blunders, dismal failures and missed opportunities. I believe that if we fail to reexamine our past in a sober and deliberative, even-handed and fair manner, we'll be condemning ourselves to keep repeating the same mistakes with much graver consequences to the detriment of our country and its long suffering but proud people. I find it inexcusable and unacceptable that those of us in politics, both in the opposition and government, as individuals and as groups, seem to be increasingly unable and shamefully unwilling to pause and reassess our respective roles and contributions to the continued misery of our people and current state of affairs of our country. There is no question that most of the mistakes are honest mistakes, made out of acts of good intentions. I have yet to come across any individual or group – be it nationality-based or national in scope, in government or in opposition camp - who has the honesty, the courage, the wisdom, the foresight and the fortitude to openly and critically evaluate and assess their journey, and especially those in decision making capacity, self –exa-

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

mine and take full responsibility for any and all decisions made and actions taken or for failing to take appropriate action/actions resulting in and contributing to the death or injury on anyone, negatively impacting or hurting the interests of a certain community or communities, the people as a whole and the country itself.

(In my modest way, I resigned from a five member EPRA leadership committee when I could not agree with the decision of the party. I wrote to the organization a multi-page letter about my disagreement and the reasons for my resignation. I found it my duty and responsibility not to be in a leadership position all the while I believed wrong decisions were made. But of my own free will, I remained in the organization as a regular fighter. As far as I know I was the only one to have done that – resign, make the reasons known openly & in writing and remain in the organization as a regular member at the same time).

It's not uncommon for any group that struggles for a country's better future to find itself enmeshed in the tactical and short term objectives rather than the long term and strategic ones, thus loosing focus and knowingly or unwittingly shortchanging the more vital and critical aspect of the struggle. It is particularly true to the opposition that is national in scope and nature.

During Emperor Haile-Selassie's time and that of the Dergue's, the strategy of the struggle was mainly focused on the singular issue of "getting rid of" the government of the day; against the monarchy it was "getting rid of the 'feudal' system" and against the much hated Dergue, it was, and justifiable it seemed, "getting rid of the Junta **at any cost**" - without first critically and carefully weighing the consequences by adequately answering the 'what then' question. Despite the idealism, the tons of good will and intentions, there was no ample preparedness, due regard and careful scrutiny of the impending possible consequences of removing the existing system in the face of the overall complex domestic, regional and international situations. The main focus was on removing a force deemed to be the 'arch enemy' of the people at any cost. And because of that lack of strategic thinking and singular focus on the short term objective of 'removing the existing system AT ANY COST', the national organizations failed to see the need for working together, even on a limited scope for the greater good of the nation and its people.

On the other hand almost all secessionist and ethnic-based organizations, at times in concert and direct cooperation with foreign powers, worked in tandem and coordinated their anti-Ethiopian and anti unity efforts to fulfill their stated strategic objective.

In the final analysis, the former, because of lack of cooperation on their common strategic objective, they lent their passive support to the latter. This was mani-

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

festated by the preference of the Dergue to ignore TPLF and instead intensify its attack on EPRA and EDU while these organizations were in a bitter fight against TPLF that clearly had a secessionist agenda at the time who considered Tigrean members of EPRP/A and EDU as 'deserters of the Tigrean nation', derided and disdainfully called them 'Abai-Ethiopia' and Amara lackeys'. Needless to say, members of those organizations of Tigrean extraction didn't budge a bit let alone be swayed by such narrow thinking. (I always carry the fond memory of one of my dearest friends and comrades-in arms Fitsum Birhan Abraha. Fitsum's own younger brother, Mulugeta Abraha, was with TPLF. Fitsum refused to see his 'narrow nationalist' brother whereas his brother Mulugeta swore that he'd be the one to kill his 'Abai-Ethiopia' brother, we later learnt. Sadly, both died in their separate ways; Fitsum became a martyr in Ibnat (Gondar) and Mulugeta was killed by his own organization, TPLF).

There was a time when the people of Tigray, unlike anywhere else in the country, had an 'accidental opportunity' to taste a quasi multi-party democracy of sorts. At one time there were three opposition armed political groups – Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP/EPRA) and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) roaming the entire width and breadth of Tigray. And this in addition to the Dergue that was mainly confined to Mekele and few towns. Until the TPLF got direct military assistance from EPLF and an indirect assistance from Dergue - by way of its continued military campaigns against EDU and EPRP/A that impacted them greatly and unwittingly or by design - enabled TPLF to rid Tigray of both organizations.

The age old ineluctable argument and recalcitrantly divergent viewpoint that, on one hand nationality-based organizations are unnecessary, or in fact are the problem because 'they stand to divide people and hence are instrumental in preventing a unified struggle' that could be the key to victory, and on the other the belief that anyone questioning the wisdom and viability of such movements are the ones that are the problem as they are 'chauvinists that stand for trampling upon and denying group rights, aiming at perpetuating subjugation', has to be seriously, soberly and dispassionately addressed as it is unwise and detrimental to ignore it altogether or 'to go along the tide'. I believe we need to be frank with ourselves and have the courage to honestly and openly confront **the issue** head on - **not people** - that keep driving us further apart.

Can the argument be as simplistic as that, and shouldn't we have sober discussions on the issue without embarking on a dead end blame game?

Have nationality-based or linguistic-based movements (groups and

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

organizations) really become an impediment and hindrance to the realization of the collective aspirations of the Ethiopian people and their dream for justice, equality, freedom and progress as citizens of a nation? And conversely, have national or multi-nationality (Ager-Aqef) organizations failed or are unable to really understand and sufficiently address the core issues and legitimate concerns of all Ethiopians specifically in regard to linguistic (ethnic) groups?

Some of the leftist era ideologically-driven political thinking that was inculcated in the minds of each one of us who was old enough to take part in the student movement that challenged Emperor Haile Selassie's reign and that of the military junta, no doubt has bearing on our present day conduct, be it in the opposition or the government. It is mainly a generational problem rooted in what we acquired in our formative and adult life. Therefore, we should not be surprised at some of the similarities in our (people in government and the opposition) frailties – obstinacy, self-righteousness, arrogance, intolerance, inflexibility etc., and in our conducts – militancy.

The mantra and wholesale 'acceptance' by the left leaning student movement and leftist organizations that "national (*nationality*) questions are democratic questions", and the labeling of anyone who questioned the correctness of that line of thought as 'reactionary' and libeling them as 'chauvinist' - consciously or not - continues to influence our thinking as regards to ethnic relations resulting in the present unhealthy political discourse permeating our society.

This ubiquitous feeling may have caused a sense of an internalized rage, indifference and apathy among people in the opposition rather than evoke our sympathy. But I believe that this is an ineluctable issue deserving sober, thorough and careful scrutiny and analysis.

If we deny our people the opportunity to have open and frank dialogue and discussions of issues, and if these issues are not addressed with the frame of mind of **finding common ground and with the ultimate goal of creating a system of government of the people's free choice** benefitting all, we will be losing sight of the danger that keeping our people apart would and could entail. Especially under the prevailing circumstances where people are pushed in to 'their corners' and are made more vulnerable to be radicalized, it is irresponsible of greater magnitude not to act appropriately and soon.

Open, objective and frank discussions can lead to better understanding of people's feelings of past and present injustices, assessing common problems and present dangers, enabling us to focus more constructively on our collective

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

future and that of generations to come. Not doing so not only denies us the opportunity to work on and chart our collective and shared future, but will invite disaster. These issues are mostly emotional issues that if not discussed frankly and in the open, will only intensify in deepening differences and creating more misunderstandings, resentments, political turmoil and discord among our people. And it is poignantly worrisome when seen in the currently prevailing context. As diverse a society as Ethiopia is, and as ever worsening as the overall situation is, and the fact that the unfortunate disposition of people to be radicalized is real, should give us a pause, and a serious reason to be reflective.

I truly believe that we can have the wisdom and the foresight to approach the debate by taking the following steps I humbly suggest.

First and foremost **we, as individuals, need to** bring change to and on ourselves, before attempting to change society. It will only be cynical, hypocritical and impractical to be expecting to change the situation in our country – no matter how solid our individual devotion and dedication – if we don't rid ourselves of tactical, narrowly defined and rigid political thinking and attitudes of dogmatically doctrinarian nature. How many of us have abandoned our ethnic and religious biases, the political thinking we grew up with, or our attitudes towards others who, at one time or another, had disagreed with us?

How can one expect to change society if an Essepa member continues to see a member of Ehapa or an EDU member sees a member of TPLF, etc., the way he did thirty years ago – with utter hate & suspicion? Therefore, I believe that there will be no point in talking about changing our society for the better without first changing ourselves. That is one of the reasons why we need national reconciliation – to create the political space where the past will be dispassionately revisited and amply addressed, the current will be exhaustively assessed and the future will be sufficiently explored in view and for the purpose of a shared future.

Secondly, we should **cease and desist from politicizing ethnicity**, have a demonstrable commitment to take it out of our political lexicon altogether. The toxicity of ethnic-based and religion-based politics is better tackled before it is given the chance to show its ugly face - its infectious and fatal face.

In this regard, I believe that one of the numerous egregious mistakes the current regime made is its reckless and irresponsible experimentation with ethnic politics; by formally and legally politicizing ethnicity in a distorted way to the

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

extent of making it the basis of state and governmental structure. The ethnic-based government structure and related ethnocentric policies of TPLF have damaged our social fabric, greatly marred societal relations and changed the political dynamics of the country.

This policy of ethnicity on a governmental level was not only unnecessary but also recklessly dangerous as it creates an environment of disunity and division among citizens leading to ethnic-based sectarian strife with a grave potential of tearing the country apart. Whatever the intent, it is a non-workable and unbeneficial risky undertaking that TPLF disingenuously imposed on our people. Especially in view of TPLF's direct control and micromanaging practices, it brought neither the devolution of power it purportedly envisaged, nor freedom and equality to the people. (In furtherance of that archaic policy, the government so deviously manipulated the 2007 census to artificially lower the number of the Amara population).

It's my conviction that we'd have much less problems and more understanding among societies and peoples in this troubled world of ours if only religion and ethnicity were not politicized. Both aggravate existing (real) or perceived problems and create new ones that are even harder to extricate one-self from.

Thirdly, we need to form three independent councils - no political persons with known and discernible ethnic or regional political stance and sentiment are to be members – to work specifically on the issue:

- a). *Council of Elders* (at least one from each linguistic group),
- b). *Youth Council* (Council for Common Future - CCF), and
- c). *Council of Experts* (comprising mainly of scholars and professionals in the field of development, environment, law, administration and national defense).

The first, Council of Elders, serves as a bridge to the past, whereas the second - Youth Council - as the bridge to the future, which will focus on the shared and collective future, for it is all about their future and not the past the focus should be; and the third one -Council of Experts, is burdened with the responsibility of presenting workable solutions to a functioning vibrant democratic society, by focusing on, but not limited to, national security, national peace and reconciliation, democratic constitution, government structure, good governance, poverty reduction and food self reliance in no more than five years, etc.

I suggested to exclude politicians of ethnic or regional nature altogether for

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

the obvious reason that they are part of the problem as they come with preconceived notions and inflexible and boxed view points that look backwards, and limit or even curtail seeing things in a progressive, forward looking manner and with an open mind.

It is my sincere belief that our struggle for justice and equality would be made much easier and our collective cause served better if only we see ourselves first as ONE people fighting for the common good, and we address our diversity from the stand point of our UNITY and not the other way around.

It's not uncommon to hear blame thrown at nationality-based groups, especially the ones with stated objective of secession, for creating the environment of suspicion and mistrust among our people. Proponents of this belief further decry that politicizing ethnicity and the prevalence of nationality-based groups, albeit maladroitly, is enabling the regime to stay in power because, they say, such groups by their very nature create division among people which denies the people of the country the opportunity to stand united against common problems and a common enemy, thus being instrumental in perpetuating the misery of the people. I personally may not go thus far, but our experience, be it in Tigray with TPLF and elsewhere with others may bear truth to this school of thought.

We know that the idealist youth during the Emperor's time dreamed of and fought for a better & prosperous society where equality & justice could flourish. And during the Dergue, desirous of a more just society with a progressive agenda, the youth paid the ultimate sacrifice fighting against a ruthlessly brutal and totally inept military dictatorship. Many sons and daughters of Ethiopia, for one reason or another, opted, or circumstances forced them, to join groups with secessionist agendas, some with questionable ties to Ethiopia's historic enemies that gave some legitimate excuses to dictators to cling to power by claiming that because of these "fifth columnists" the country was in danger of fragmentation.

For various reasons, such ethnic-based sectarian movements, I believe, have undermined the collective effort of centrist Ethiopians of all backgrounds who aspired to form a just society benefitting all citizens regardless of linguistic, regional, etc., identity.

The extent to which ethnic-based organizations have played in keeping the flame of division among our people burning resulting in suspicion and discord among our people may not be difficult to gauge. It is especially true since TPLF

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

usurped power some 18 years ago.

We know that the more divided people are the more fertile the ground is for dictatorships to flourish and could be instrumental to sustain their stay in power by pitching one group against the other, hence keeping people in constant fear and perpetual poverty.

We also all know, as it is evident from the pronouncements of different groups that no single organization or not even a few, could bring about the much needed and long overdue durable **positive change** to our country. It is my conviction that divided opposition with a 'go it alone' mentality cannot even topple the regime of Meles Zenawi let alone tackle the complex fundamental issues of the country in a durable and fair manner.

Whatever happened to us, the opposition, I do not know. Unable and unwilling to get our acts together, we seem to be circling the wagon. Several Coalitions, Unions, Fronts and Alliances for the aim and purpose of serving as common platforms were formed, the most serious undoubtedly was the formation by 15 political organizations - literally all of the relevant ones in the opposition except OLF - of United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), and later, of course, the CUD. At the beginning there was Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces, COEDF. Some pop up every now and then to be soon forgotten without any accountability.

Of the many problems for our seemingly chronic inability to having a viable and reliably functional broad-based national unity force, there are two that stand out.

The first one is lack of a defined ideological base – the *raison d'être* – with concrete, objective and unambiguously discernable **strategic goal or end game** that sees beyond the immediate, say now Woyane (TPLF/EPRDF). I have not come across any opposition who does not wish to see the current government go. But it is for **different end games**. That is where the problem is.

I am of the opinion that agreeing to work together with any one for the **sole** immediate goal of removing the current government is foolhardy and unwise. For some of us in the unity camp that is a tactical exigency and only a stepping stone towards the aim and effort of forming a democratic constitutional system of government, and can never be taken as a strategic goal - what I call Li'ile-Gibb (ለዕለ-ግብ). That was the reason behind UEDF's serious disagreement with and vehement opposition to AFD.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Some so naively and recklessly think that all solutions lie in the removal of Woyane, and put all their efforts in and cooperate **with anyone and everyone including avowed enemies of Ethiopia and its people** regardless of their strategic interest, cry foul and even have the nerve to call those who counsel against such futile and dangerous endeavors and appeal for caution all of a sudden to be 'woyanes'. It is just like bringing the more dangerous predatory Asian pythons (venomous snakes) to kill rats in a house.

Let's aim high. We can have both if we don't shortchange the strategic goal for the tactical. Therefore, if we desire - no doubt we do - to have a **reliable and effectively functioning NATIONAL organization that the people of Ethiopia can trust, accept and be comfortable with to follow**, and one that can not only formidably and effectively challenge the regime and be able to get rid of, but is ready and capable of taking the country out of an impending mess, assure its territorial integrity and unity, and ultimately create an enabling environment for the people of Ethiopia to empower themselves.

The second one is a structural problem and a demonstrable lack of commitment to give priority to the common effort by relegating the interests of individual organizations. This was what about seven of UEDF member organizations did by forming Timret, calling for much closer ties among members and putting resources and giving more priority to and focus on the collective effort.

It is obvious that we can't expect different results by forming a common platform and still each organization doing individually what ought to and should be done collectively. **The situation calls for not only a unified action but that unified action to be based on a firm ground of a UNIFIED STRATEGIC NATIONAL GOAL with a UNIFIED and UNIFYING approach.**

I'll return to this issue some other time.

It is now obvious that, because of the appalling brutality and level of repression by the regime, and disappointments in the conduct of the opposition, our people are understandably showing signs of disillusionment, apathy and aloofness. There, in fact, is a sense of resignation befallen our people. But no one can blame the people of Ethiopia for all that. The responsibility for the state of affairs of our country and its people squarely lies on people in politics, both the regime and the opposition. There is no question that the Meles regime has the lion's share of the blame if only it thought of itself as a national government - a national government that, obviously, has not only the power but the huge

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

responsibility for the safety, security and wellbeing of all the people of the country. Sadly, the people who are now in power – because of their repulsive behavior and distractive conduct – cannot be seen as having love of the country and respect for its people, and thus lack any demonstrable sense of responsibility and accountability.

Hopefully in the not too distant a future, I'll say more on the above points at some length and now try to address the issue at hand.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm not against armed resistance, per se. I am a proponent of and truly believe in the fundamental right of people to bear arms. But I don't support arming segments of people where sectarian and ethnic-based organizations are playing the "vanguard" role. As we have seen in many places too many times, the prevalence of such armed groups exposes people to have the misfortune of being manipulated to eventually align on tribal or ethnic lines and kill one another with disastrous results of displacement and massive massacre of the innocent.

Some may naively think that things will be alright once Meles is gone and the main agenda item now at hand is doing all we can to getting rid of Meles 'by all means necessary'.

It is not new for the Diaspora to hear from some people every now and then that they have decided and are ready to mount an armed struggle. Almost invariably, those who come out of the blue and adopt such a policy are neither ready, willing, have the intension nor are able to involve themselves in the actual struggle and in most cases their reasons for doing so is not supported by facts and not always altruistic. I even doubt if they really know what it means and what it takes to wage an armed struggle.

Unfortunately, people especially in the Diaspora, who are totally and justifiably dejected by the vicious brutality of Meles & Co., and who really, really want this brutal ethno-centric regime to go, and go soon, are vulnerable and exposed to be easily manipulated by anyone lauding armed struggle. And as fate has it, most, if not all, who wage war from afar, are masters of manipulation and recklessly irresponsible demagogues who give rosy scenarios about the viability of armed struggle, the strength of their "advancing army", the ostensible cooperation they have with the armed forces, the wide-range popular support they have, and all that without having a demonstrable and credible end game. The best they say is 'let's get rid of Meles now and we know what to do next'. Getting rid of Meles

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

alone cannot be an end game. The problems are far too complex, the stakes so high, that we cannot gamble our collective future by adopting and following simplistic approaches and empty promises. As Ethiopians we need to always ask and get satisfactory answers as to what the end game is.

This reminds me of the fool homeowner who was worried about a mad dog in his house. This homeowner got incessant counsel from a deviously-minded erstwhile enemy of his in the neighborhood that the simplest and the best solution for the homeowner to do was to simply burn down his house if he wanted to get rid of the mad dog and he was willing to supply the means, the fire and gasoline. And what is more? It was winter!

You know, if what we think to be the solution to a problem is bound to cause more problems, it is no solution at all. An anemic patient who definitely needs blood transfusion will not knowingly get blood from an AIDS patient just for the sake of getting blood. Or one cannot in the right mind try to prick his eye with a dagger just to remove a dust particle from his eye. Or one doesn't allow his brains to be removed to cure a headache. We can't cause a permanent damage in order to or in the process of solving a temporary malady. Ethiopia is too precious an eye, we need to take extra care of it. We cannot tinker with its national security and unity.

I may not yet call the on-going efforts by some and the hoopla with Isaiyas "a pact with the devil", but it is worrisome and caution is in order.

People's struggle for justice, equality and unity can only be realized, if and only if we can approach the issues at hand in a non-sectarian and a not-to-narrowly-defined manner and see them from a societal prism. Let us think big. The narrower we go the more difficult the escape route becomes. Especially in a global and ever flatter world, it'd be foolhardy to think of just a segment of a society, be it in ethnicity, region, religion or any other dividing factor.

It's my conviction that there can be no true equality, no justice for all, no durable unity unless we depoliticize ethnicity or put more emphasis on us being one people and less on our ethnic identity in the political sense. Our objective should be our unity and how to perfect it further. If we are united as individuals with inalienable rights, we can succeed to perfect our unity, but if we start as a group first and see our unity only as second, we have the recipe for discord, alienation or worse, ethnic strife.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

In a bizarre "shoot first and ask question later" kind of thinking, some think it wise for each group to be recognized as separate first, and work to bring them together later. They say let each group first have its own tent and the collection of those small tents **could** form the big tent called Ethiopia. 'Tear down first to sew them back together' – (Kedo-Mesfat) - kind of thinking. What kind of big tent could one ever be able to make out of small tents?

There can be no collective redemption if we don't think as one people first and take out the ethnic equation out of our political calculus. It' will, sadly and unfortunately, be to the detriment of the nation and our collective future that we may opt to politicize ethnicity. Looking at Somalia is enough. We can't find a more homogenous society than Somalia. They have neither equality nor democracy and freedom. The solution to our political problems and social ills doesn't necessarily depend on being "ethnically independent".

Divided people - especially in a rough neighborhood (region) rife with all kinds of tensions - are vulnerable, exposed to instability, nepotism, corruption, dictatorship, insecurity, exploitation, and perpetual fear of losing independence as such situation is bound to invite occupation in the guise of protection from a rowdy neighbor or neighbors. For all good reasons and for all intents and purposes, **I see no alternative for all Ethiopians other than their unity, but, unity where all are truly equal in all respects.** Arguably, only some ego-centric and reckless elites may probably benefit from such unfortunate circumstances of the people.

It is my belief that if we give up politicizing ethnicity and come together to form one national organization with a wide range and comprehensive platform capable of addressing all issues relevant to all groups, not only we can do away with Meles & Co. and what he stands for - division, oppression, terror - in the shortest possible time, but also the people of Ethiopia will have a tremendous opportunity to break the cycle of dictatorial rules, to build democratic institutions, to form a government of their choice where justice, equality, rule of law and unity will reign supreme, and will have the capacity to effectively end poverty, hunger, dependency, illiteracy, chronic diseases, etc.,
But this can only be realized if:

a). We all **stop politicizing ethnicity** and think ourselves first as people, Ethiopians with shared values, with inseparable future and common destiny, and

b). **Coordinate our struggle** to form a democratic system of government of our unfettered choice under one-man-one-vote principle - a government of the people, by the people and for the people of Ethiopia.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

The situation in our beloved Ethiopia is so complex and dangerously at breaking point and the people are crying, above and beyond, for the opposition's unity. Enough of political placation! Enough of jostling for non-existing power! Enough of bickering! Enough of small thinking, political immaturity and impetuosity! Let's all say country and people first! Ethiopia and Ethiopians are deserving of human rights, dignity, freedom, and yes of living united. We all need to coordinate our efforts, and soon before it is too late.

Some say that we can form a government by bringing in all groups, national, multi-national and anyone in between.

My simple question is, do you like what you saw in the last 18 years of Meles Zenawi's rule? The answer invariably is of course no, we don't. Then I ask people to tell me the difference between EPRDF & any government that replaces it with the same structure? If there is no difference between them, then the problem is not the principle of the current structure but the individual, Meles – the messenger not the message. Wouldn't that then mean our problem is Meles the person or where he came from? That would only be an absurd, a ridiculous and a devious conclusion.

No one has thus far given me a satisfactory answer to my simple question, which is; 'What'd be the difference between an ethnocentric regime led by TPLF and one led by, say OLF, which, given all indicators, will only be able to assume power with the direct help, manipulation and guidance of EPLF, and with the cooperation and instrumentality of some naive, misguided and power mongering groups and individuals?

That precisely was why EPLF formed AFD and, seeing the danger UEDF and other mature, centrist and nationalist Ethiopians fought hard to undo it. EPLF never ceased its determined effort to reorganize another AFD with new faces added to the old ones, as seems to be the case in play now.

I believe in the indomitable power of the people. One of the many fundamental differences we in UEDF had with ADF was the denial by all (except CUD delegates who were in the main mute on this question) that the people of Ethiopia acting as one people won over TPLF/EPRDF. OLF delegates in fact had the audacity to claim the Oromo people didn't participate in the 1997 (2005) elections! I understand their frustration that the people they purportedly represent not only fully participated in the national elections but were the majority voters. That was a clear testament to all that the Oromo like any segment of Ethiopian society, if and when given the opportunity, will opt for inclusive democratic process and unity. That was a rejection of ethnic-based politics, loud and clear!

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Obviously, admitting that fact was too bitter a pill to swallow for OLF officials.

With that in mind, now the question to those who claim to be multi-national that are in cahoots with the EPLF to form yet another AFD is this: If Meles & Co. brutally stole the elections and reversed the victory of the people – victory that was gained because people stood united and acted as one - how would they envisage to convince OLF, ONLF, and all other self proclaimed liberation movements to accept this fact and the unity and the supremacy of the Ethiopian people? What methods and mechanisms do they have that would enable them to persuade them to give up what they "achieved" by force? What alternative do they have if they refuse and start ethnic cleansing as that is what their programs calls for "... getting all occupiers out of... "? Do they feel that they have the moral obligation and the accountability for what ensues because of their instrumentality?

The very reason for the continuation of the ethno-centric tyrannical rule of Meles & Co. is neither because of his wisdom or strength, nor the lack of assistance to the opposition from Sheabia. This is caused as a direct result of lack of a unifying national organization.

I recall a proposal that was put forward a few years ago to UEDF by Hibrehizb (before it merged with EDU and became EDHUM) that envisaged a new kind of transition where passions and emotions will get time to subside and give way to a formation of a genuinely democratic system based on one-man-one-vote principle transcending ethnicity or region in a non-ethnic arrangement. I found the idea fresh and constructive and plan to expound on it soon.

2. For Ethiopians and Eritreans:

As I tried to illustrate the intricacies of the problems the people of the region, Ethiopians and Eritrean do not only share past history, they have unbreakable bondage and inseparable future. Their division will only invite more division and subdivision within each, condemn them to continued hardships under maniacal, small thinking, gun totting toxic dictatorships.

As was mentioned earlier, the main and **unavoidable problem for Eritrea is its viability to be a nation - a viably functioning democratic one.** This viability to nationhood is especially critical under the prevailing circumstances. I have no doubt in my mind that the brutally muffled and shuffled people of Eritrea under Isaias understand this better than anyone else.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

If some Eritreans, especially the elite, considered Ethiopia to be a big prison when they were part of it, I hope they now realize that they have opted for and forced the people of Eritrea to live in a solitary confinement in a maximum security prison instead.

It is a well known fact that Eritrea has never been a country that stood by its own. Given the history of lack of self government as a nation, and the deep seated ethno-religious divide of the society, it is not hard to imagine the insurmountable difficulty to forge oneness in Eritrean society, especially under a ruthlessly brutal dictatorship of the type they have now under Isaias Afewerki.

What kept Eritreans together, voluntarily or not, at one time or another has been **colonialism** under Italy & occupation under the British which relegated all citizen of Eritrea to a subservient class of people and which systematically saw the seeds of division that gave calculated comfort to colonists knowing that the people they colonized were kept divided, the **anticipation and earnest wish to be decolonized** during the "Ethiopia or Death" popular movement and the new **untested hope** federation would usher in under Emperor Haile-Selassie which, unfortunately, did not come to full fruition, the **state of war and conflict** under the later part of the emperor's reign and the whole of Mengistu's rule which Eritrean groups used to rally Eritreans behind and singularly focus on their **dream of independence** from Ethiopia.

Given the political and social realities of the region where religion is being radicalized, it is safe to assume that discord among the populations of the region especially in Ethiopia and Eritrea could only dramatically and exponentially escalate. This fact is more a reality, even an inevitability for Eritrea than for Ethiopia, because of historical reasons and multiple greater foreign influences. Historical, because Eritrean society has known and was exposed to religion-based political alignments since the days of colonialism. To add fuel to the fire, sadly, Isaias Afewerki's enterprise of aiding and abating of fundamentalist groups in Somalia and Ethiopia, whether inadvertently or not, has a direct bearing and an inevitable negative influence on Eritrean radical elements.

With poverty on the rise, displacement, disillusionment and disenchantment among citizens rampant, compounded by the absence of political space where an open dialogue is nonexistent (because of a ruthless dictatorship), radicalization and civic strife are only to be expected to increase, along with it, of course, the level of oppression resulting in disastrous societal implosion and collapse, impacting all Eritreans the extend of which would be too traumatizing and grizzly to even contemplate.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

I know some will see this as unwarranted alarmism and scare tactics. But that is a reality waiting to happen unless a solution is sought, and I believe Ethiopians could and should play a positive role in that. Just like we in the Ethiopian opposition believe Meles & Co. for being accountable for many of our problems and an impediment to our progress in all spheres and our collective better future, Isaias and his dictatorial regime are reasons for the trauma and untold suffering Eritreans are subjected to.

So what should be done?

1. Freedom and Democracy for the People of Ethiopia and Eritrea:

If we, Ethiopians, believe Eritreans are our brethren deserving to be free, to have peace, human rights, civil liberties and human dignity, then we cannot associate ourselves with their torturer who traumatizes them mercilessly. Therefore, yes there should be relations with Eritrea and Eritreans, but not with their tormentor. How would we Ethiopians feel towards Eritreans who'd be praising, cuddling and doing business with Meles? Would working in cahoots with Isaias foster good relations we want with Eritreans at large? I don't think so.

Some may think Isaias to be an Eritrean problem and not theirs without clearly understanding the link between our freedom and that of Eritreans'. They say all they care about is whatever they can fetch from him (Isaias) to 'enable them to get rid of Meles'. I find that kind of argument to be lacking in substance and devoid of principle, immoral and hypocritical. I've tried to address this earlier and do not wish to repeat it here.

Ethiopians are fighting against Meles & Co. for our human, democratic, political and economic rights, for justice and unity. Human rights are universal and Eritreans also deserve them, and we should realize that they are fighting for them too.

One thing people on both sides of the Mereb could contribute to the democratization of both people is to desist from being used as pawns for each dictator and fight the dictators' fight.

There can be no development in Eritrea to the level commensurate with the work etiquette, commitment, creativity and the overall potential of Eritreans with a dictatorship that attempts to run a country depending mainly on the Diaspora for its finances, as it did during the 3 decades of fighting for 'independence'.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Ethiopia cannot be at peace nor can it assure its stability if Eritrea is under maniacal dictator of a bygone era who is in constant search of an enemy to put the blame on for all the problems and the misery of his people only caused by his misrule. It is in Ethiopia's best strategic interest, whether as a reunified country with Ethiopia or remain as divided, to make sure Eritrea is at peace with itself and stable. Some may naively think that "what happens in Eritrea is not and cannot be Ethiopia's problem, they have opted to be independent, therefore we need to leave them alone, let them figure it out, etc.". But that attitude is dead wrong.

In a region where radicalism is on the rise at a very alarming rate and pace, it is very irresponsible to contemplate Ethiopia's peace and security separate from that of Eritrea's, whether we like it or not our peace, stability and security are increasingly inseparable.

If we believe that it is in the best overall Ethiopian interest Eritrea has to be at peace with itself and stable, then what has to be done?

We can only extrapolate Eritrea's peace and stability in the context of the freedom of its people. Whether we want Eritrea, in whole or in part, to be reunited with Ethiopia, now, in 10 years or 20 entirely depends on the free will, democratic decision and desire of the free people of Eritrea in conjunction with that of the democratized Ethiopia and equally free people of Ethiopia. As much as lack of freedom and democracy in one can have an unavoidable impact on the other, so also is the influence of the prevalence of them in any one of them.

I, therefore, argue that, because of the fear of influence democracy and freedom have on people in general, neither Meles nor Isaias wants democracy and freedom for their respective people. Freedom and democracy are anathema to both. And it is precisely why, I believe, that both dictators are related in more than one thing, they have the same mindset of insecurity and a disposition to intuitively be subsumed by fear of free people. Fear and insecurity drive and propel them to remain what they are, vicious dictators, until the end.

In their futile effort to cling to power, both Meles and Isaias are oppressing and terrorizing their people all the while and paradoxically working to undermine each other's regime, knowing too well that their brutality on the people, each in his own way, by itself greatly undermines the people's effort to be free. Therefore, the seeming support each is giving to the other's opposition can only be seen as a smokescreen and a balancing act to enable them to stay in power. Their apparent preoccupation to a degree of obsession of one trying to replace

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

the other with more amenable people should be seen from the perspective, the goal and the concrete results, and not the pronounced intentions of the dictators.

Is each other's support of the other's opposition helping or hurting them? I'd say it helps them. It is a cost effective way of keeping people divided and unable to work against their tormentors as unified as they should and could be. This can only be possible if and when they have people who can be used as pawns to do their dirty work.

2. Peace and Stability in the Region:

Neither Ethiopians nor Eritreans nor Somalis can expect peace and stability in the region as long as these two dictators are in power. It is a well established and undeniable fact that what Isaias Afewerki does in the region is counterproductive if not outright destabilizing.

Isaias Afewerki's involvement in aiding-and-abating radical elements is beyond comprehension and truly regrettable. The first victims of this business of arming, financing and giving shelter to radical elements for the **sole purpose of undermining Ethiopia** are Eritreans. The impact of the influence of those hard line fundamentalists he is now aiding and abating in Somalia and Ethiopia on some Moslem Eritreans is unquestionably real. This could lead to further deterioration of the already tense relationship between Eritrean Moslems and Christians resulting in chaos and bloodshed with its ripple effect on Ethiopia to be immediate. When seen in the prevailing very tense situation of Moslem/Christian relations in Eritrea, with the unfortunate potential to explode anytime, what Isaias is doing is, to put it simply, insanely playing with fire.

It is in the interest of Ethiopians and Eritreans that both, especially for the opposition, while each fighting for their freedom against their respective dictator, to work together and coordinate their efforts in every possible way as their situation is interconnected.

The absence or presence of freedom of Ethiopians and Eritreans, the stability and security of both or absence there of in both and that of the region is directly linked to the removal of the two dictators or failure to do so.

3. Security and Long Term Development:

Eritreans have seen it all; the degrading system of colonialism under Italy,

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

occupation by the British, much eagerly anticipated and short-lived federation, a province of Ethiopia under the monarchy and military dictatorship and for the last almost two decades as a "free country" under an absolute dictatorship.

As seen earlier Eritrea has a fundamental problem of viability of statehood especially in view of the prevailing highly militarizing and radicalizing situation of an ever increasingly volatile region, absence of freedom and democracy and the specter of religion-based and regionalist conflict within Eritrea proper, increasing tension with Ethiopia, etc.

Many, especially the young and the elite, no doubt hoped, expected and greatly anticipated, what 'independence from Ethiopia' could usher in. They, like their Ethiopian kin's, never even once had a chance to live in a democracy. They both are now in a bitter fight for their democratic and human rights and for their survival.

The likelihood for Ethiopia and Eritrea to reunite in the very near future is more fertile now than it ever was. It is in the political, economical and security strategic interests of both Ethiopia and Eritrea to reunite as one country - an objective to be realized and a hope to be fulfilled through a democratic process.

One cannot ignore the critical importance and NEED for Ethiopia to HAVE, or OWN ITS OWN seaport or ports. But this should not necessarily be interpreted to mean 'reoccupation' of Eritrea. Not at all.

Some are resigned to "accepting the new reality" of 80 million Ethiopians being landlocked and see the importance and usefulness of having a sea outlet from the singular issue of commerce and trade. And because of that assessment, they believe that can be achieved by using other ports - Djibouti, Berbera, Port Sudan or Mombassa or can negotiate with Isaias to use Mitsiwa and Assab. To that end, some are irrationally exuberant over a phrase Isaias used in his recent interview with two Ethiopians; "the sky is the limit". People are taking that phrase out of context and trying to convince us that Isaias is ready to "allow" Ethiopia to use Assab. That was not the context of his use of the phrase, nor does it mean anything.

Let us be very clear on this whole issue of outlet to the sea. I base my argument for sea outlet on two main factors.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

a). Commerce and trade:

Eritrea's greatest asset, beside its hard working and creative people, is unquestionably its vast sea coast and the port facilities especially of Mitsiwa and Assab. But truth be told, the utility and commercial value of these ports is greatly reduced, practically rendering them to be less useful to Eritrea, if Ethiopia cannot use these port facilities to their full potential. At what capacity level are they functioning now? Who is using them and for what purposes? It is to the benefit mainly of Eritrea and Eritreans if Ethiopia with a population of 80 million, and counting, can use them.

Given Eritrea's isolation, especially the unhealthy relationship it has with Ethiopia, thanks to Isaias and Meles, has prevented the use of those ports, denying both Ethiopians and Eritreans the chance to have a robust development and from prospering together in peace. It should be recognized that it is Eritreans that are at the losing end more than Ethiopians.

It is in the best economic interest of Eritrea if Ethiopia uses these ports, or at least Assab. Therefore, any measure to that effect by Eritrea cannot be taken as a favor for Ethiopia. Doing so is not only to be welcomed but should be done to the mutual benefit of both, but more so to Eritrea. The dogged obstinacy and unreasonableness of Isaias in that regard alone is hurting Eritreans more than it does Ethiopians. It is to Eritrea's detriment that those ports are not being used by Ethiopia. The commercial usefulness of the ports of Mitsiwa and Assab, or Assab alone, and the benefits associated with that to the mutual economic development and progress of Ethiopians and Eritreans can not be stressed enough.

b). National Security:

Ethiopia has a legal and a legitimate right to have sea ports or at least a sea port, without question Assab, not only for commerce and trade, but mainly and more importantly for NATIONAL SECURITY reasons.

But the larger issue of security as it relates to both sides in the context of the geopolitical topography of the region should be closely looked into.

We know too well, and I have been arguing this for a very long time, that threats to Ethiopia's national security and its territorial integrity have been and continue to be directed from three directions – from the Red Sea in the north, The Nile line in the west and from the Indian Ocean, Somalia in the east. It is

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

particularly true with the Red Sea. Invariably, Ethiopia's progress, peace, security and stability have been directly and more acutely impacted whenever it lost its historical and legitimate control of its Red Sea coast. The demise of Axum civilization is directly linked to our loss of control of the Red Sea. We lost our people in Midre-Bahri, the now Eritrea, to foreigners with subsequent repeated threats of occupation of the hinterlands of Ethiopia, because we had lost our control over the Red Sea, etc.

It is worth remembering what kind of role even tiny Djibouti played during the Italian occupation of our country. Djibouti (the French there) prevented Ethiopia to import defensive weapons we paid for, denying our people the chance to better defend themselves against fascist occupiers and exposing them to more humiliation and hardship at the hands of fascist invaders.

The need and the right for Ethiopia to have sea outlet was not even lost to the newly created United Nations. Although the overwhelming decision through a UN sponsored and conducted democratic referendum of the people of Eritrea to reunite (be federated) with Ethiopia was undeniably the most important one, Ethiopia's need for and its right to have a sea outlet was an additional reason for United Nation's decision to do so.

We have seen the negative effects of losing our ports even to Isaias and his regime, where we witnessed sabotage after sabotage on Ethiopian traders, even when relations at least with "Woyane" were good.

My counsel against having any kind of agreement with Isaias regarding sea outlet is not limited to the doubt and legitimate concern I have about his reliability. Although I could have a justifiable reason for being suspicious of him, given his records and the very nature of his government, my argument remains to be one of **the legitimate right** for Ethiopia to have HER OWN port, not to be dependent on the 'good will' of an individual or government whose stay in power, never mind the temperament and other factors, is very questionable and unreliable. As sea outlet is a national security issue, we cannot compromise it by putting it at the mercy of anyone else.

Given the current volatile situation of the greater Mid-East-Red Sea-Horn of Africa and the aspirations of many regional powers – Iran, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia – to acquire nuclear weapons and the nascent trend of radicalized fundamentalism, aggravated by the presence of a totalitarian regime and the prevalence of internal socio-economic chronic problems, it is extremely difficult for Eritreans to sustain an independent Eritrea. It is extremely difficult if not impossible for a dictatorial rule to overcome the pressures borne out of and

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

directly influenced by regional and internal edgily tense situations and to maintain a unified and peaceful Eritrea.

Eritrea needs strong armed forces, especially naval force, to defend its territorial waters and its borders with the Sudan and Djibouti. Eritrea needs to have a strong economy and a unified people to guarantee that. It is an irrefutable fact that Eritrea, because of its limitations to be able to support itself, heavily depended on direct subsidy from Italian colonizers, British occupiers and successive Ethiopian governments. At this critical moment in time where militarization coupled with radicalization and religious fundamentalism are rising at an alarming pace, the need for having a strong military is real. But that requires a relatively large and stable economy which is an improbability for Eritrea to have even under a democratic government.

It is therefore in Eritrea's economic and security strategic interests to have a unified economy and a unified military command structure with Ethiopia, and in the mean time and soon for Ethiopia to have and maintain a strong military, especially a strong and large navy on the Red Sea. Eritrean economy cannot in anyway support as strong and large a navy as Ethiopia could have. When seen in the context of the recent piracy problems in the area, the need for a large naval force is critical. And that could be relatively easily done with Ethiopia and Eritrea as one than by Eritrea alone.

I will argue that it is not only in commerce and in trade that Eritrea can benefit from good relation with Ethiopia, but its security and, indeed, its very survival is better guaranteed by Ethiopian presence on the Red Sea with ports under its full authority and control. Eritreans under the prevailing circumstances can only expect their tenuous situation to even worsen.

My argument is that both greatly benefit from their unity. Deciding to remain separated, especially under undemocratic rule, such as the one they have, will only invite more problems with the danger of implosion and total collapse of the state with further division and never ending sub-division of Eritrea.

It is difficult to imagine an economically and militarily strong Eritrea under the circumstances. No economic development or sustained growth can be realized if Eritrea opts to go it alone. The benefits of reunification, or at least that of a federal arrangement giving Ethiopia a rightful and uncontestable ownership over Assab, clearly outweigh the current status as two entities.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

Reunification or any other arrangement where the people on both sides could live in peace is not only desirable but critically important to assure stability, and in the case of Eritrea, its very survival.

We can take three simple steps to accelerate the process.

First change of attitude and approach:- Eritreans and Ethiopians alike should realize that the current situation of stalemate and tension is untenable, they have to avoid suspicion of one another and see a compatriot not an enemy in each other, recognize our shared values and common destiny, be cognizant of the fact that the more we focus on our differences the more favorable the situation for our misery to continue becomes, remember that no one is closer to Eritreans more than Ethiopians and vice-versa, know that working with each other's tormenter is no solution, and understand that we have the same aspirations to be free, we need to decide to be committed to working together for our collective goals and never lose sight of the ugly reality of radicalization and sectarian conflict. Let us just drop our fixation with what did when to who in the past, for our collective future is more important than whatever transpired in the past and that for no fault of the people on either side.

Second mechanisms of rapprochement:- I suggest this to be done on many levels. Elders' groups, intellectuals and scholars, religious groups, women's groups, youth groups, etc. ought to be formed by both sides with the sole aim of coming up with common solutions.

In this regard, I am delighted and encouraged by what Drs Daniel Kindie and Tesfatsion Medhanie are doing. We should be involved in that effort and lend them our unreserved support and cooperation.

I don't doubt that opposition to the rapprochement between Ethiopians and Eritreans will not be limited to Isaias and Meles. We should rather expect both overt and covert, mild and vehement opposition on many levels from many, many quarters, both domestic and foreign - under a litany of excuses and pretexts, for **they fear what our unity ultimately signifies.**

The possibility, even the probability, of a new round of civil war with an increased magnitude in the Sudan, the possible intensification of the already chaotic situation in Somalia with possible spill over to Kenya, the more than possible inter-religion and sectarian conflicts in Eritrea, the continued dangerously tense situation and political turmoil in Ethiopia, over population, chronic economic problems and poverty, ever decreasing and fast depleting of

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

natural resources, foreign involvements in the region on a degree never seen before, are all worrisome, real and unsettling developments that should be a matter of great concern to all in the region.

It is in the collective strategic interests of especially Ethiopians and Eritreans to be seriously concerned about the dangerous developments the signs of which are already in play. All intellectuals, concerned citizens - especially women's groups, religious leaders and the youth - should start to caucus, to open dialogue, start to rebuild bridges of contact to smoothen relations between the two communities, cooperate whenever and wherever possible to accelerate the democratic change we all long for and deserve, and do all we can to prevent the looming danger from unfolding.

CONCLUSION:

Detailing the litany of Meles Zenawi's atrocities and his brutality against Ethiopians alone – however intense the campaign – is not sufficient and will not bring about the change we need and deserve. As immense and egregious as the blunders of Meles Zenawi are, and as severe and intolerable as his ethnocentric dictatorial rule is, telling our people about these and other miseries will not suffice, because our people already know that as they are living that dreadful life. What is needed and is required of the opposition is a unity of purpose, a purpose with firm commitment that gives priority to country and people over our individual self, group or region.

It is really astounding that too many among us, especially in the Diaspora, are in the dangerous, at least unhelpful, habit of lending and withdrawing their support, applauding and condemning too quickly by being either emotionally charged in reacting to events and news of the day irrationally and without thoroughly, critically and seriously examining facts, without asking critical questions, being deliberative and seeing all sides. This is more unsettling especially when organizations are the ones doing it.

Some may not agree with me or even find it offensive, but I am of the opinion that our country and people are in short supply of people in politics who think big. This is true in both the people in power and the opposition. By thinking big I mean, being above the fray, thinking beyond our individual self, group, organization and linguistic (ethnic) group, the capacity to demonstratively approach things from long term and strategic vantage points, the ability and wisdom to put our people and country first.

Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

In sum, as situations stand now, any group deciding to work with EPLF should unambiguously understand that it is availing itself to fighting EPLF's dirty wars.

No matter how wonderful our individual programs or our dreams may be, we cannot end the misery of our people if opposition groups, especially unity forces, continue to be disunited and do not have the foresight, the courage and the determination to come together and form a broad-based organization – at least a coalition – as quickly as possible. Neither the prevailing go-it-alone tendency nor the-enemy-of-my-enemy type of unprincipled cooperation will be of any help. That is futile and irresponsible to the core. As the saying, 'Loyalty to my country begins where my loyalty to my party ends' goes, so should we demonstrate our love to our country by behaving and conducting ourselves as such.

I have no illusion that every opposition group will heed the call and come together at least now. But, I caution all that failure to do so will be utter disregard for the plight of our suffering people, and in the face of the looming dangers to our country and people, irresponsible of the highest degree. If we don't act in unison, the responsibility for the continuation of the untenable situation in our country will not be Meles' and his regime alone, but each one of us in the opposition.

Ethiopians deserve human rights and human dignity. They should not be asked to sacrifice their human dignity for survival. We need to cooperate, at least we owe them that.

Let us not let our people down once again by failing to aim high and to work together. Let us pause and reflect before taking the next step alone and decide to walk or run together.

Ethiopia can only depend on no one else but her sons and daughters for her salvation. Let's look for the means to our redemption no further than in ourselves and in each other. We have the power to stop the madness in our country, to bring positive change to our country, to have democracy and a government of our choice, to get our people (ourselves) out of degrading poverty, to develop our country and assure its unity and territorial integrity. We can only do that if we cease and desist politicizing ethnicity and religion, if we are tolerant with one another and see a compatriot – a father a mother, a brother and a sister - in each other, if we feel the pain and suffering of any Ethiopian anywhere as our own, if we see the big picture and avoid small and short term thinking, if we value our loyalty to our country and people more than that of our organization or group.

**Cooperation With Isaias Afewerki: A Pragmatic Necessity For Ethiopian
Opposition Groups Or the Height of Folly?**

By Ayal-Sew Dessye
Sene, 2001 (July, 2009)

No one can claim that the situation is hopelessly out of hand therefore can't do much or does not directly affect him or her. It is everybody's business to be concerned about and to do all that is possible to stop the insanity of the brutalizing our people, denying of human rights and human dignity and the looming danger of creeping and encroaching inter religion and ethnic conflicts with consequences of greater magnitude.

As Dante said: "The hottest place in hell is reserved for those that in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality"

May God help us all!

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Sene, 2001
July, 2009