

**Stockholm, Sweden:** Together with veteran freedom fighters Ato Herui Tedla and Ato Mohamed Berhan Blata, members of the Board of Directors of the Forum for National Dialogue (FND), Ambassador Andebrhan Welde Giorgis conducted a public seminar on *Building a National Democratic Movement for Political Transition in Eritrea*, on Saturday 16 December 2017. Here below is the brief statement presented as a talking point for the discussion.

### **Building a National Democratic Movement for Political Transition in Eritrea**

Let me begin by extending you warm greetings.

It is a real pleasure for me to have the opportunity to speak here, together with fellow veteran freedom fighters, Ato Herui Tedla and Ato Mohamed Berhan Blata, on the present situation and future prospects of our country and people. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of the seminar.

By way of introduction to our discussion, I would like to present a brief explanation regarding the organisation and outcome of the Conference on Transformative Collaboration (CTC) convened in Frankfurt, Germany, during 20-22 October 2017. It was originally planned as a more inclusive follow up of the National Consultative Conference (NCC) held in Nairobi, Kenya, in November 2015. It is common knowledge that the conference had to be postponed several times for various reasons.

On the first day, the new 25-member FND Board held its maiden meeting. During the following two days, the Conference on Transformative Collaboration, in which 42 representatives of political organisations, civil associations and activist individuals participated, conducted its national dialogue and concluded its deliberations by issuing a Memorandum of Understanding. Although the content of the Memorandum of Understanding was not as all-embracing and as forceful as anticipated, it nevertheless signifies a big step forward in the process of building coalescence of views among the Eritrean Diaspora political opposition.

With this brief introduction, and before delving into the main topic of our discussion today, namely, *Building a National Democratic Movement for Political Transition in Eritrea*, I would like to underscore that the attainment of national independence and the sustained existence of a sovereign State of Eritrea is a great historic victory that affirms the legitimate right of the Eritrean people to self-determination.

We all know that the independence of Eritrea represented a brilliant victory achieved at the expense of (1) a protracted, difficult and arduous armed struggle; (2) a huge sacrifice of the finest of Eritrea's youth; (3) an extensive destruction of Eritrea's national economy; (4) a heavy damage to the standard of living of the Eritrean people; and (5) a massive disruption of the family life and social fabric of Eritrean society. Following independence, however, the Eritrean people have, unfortunately, been unable to establish a democratic system of government that vindicates their sacrifices and fulfils their aspirations for peace, justice, development and prosperity. Having exercised *the right to self-determination as a nation* through a referendum, the Eritrean people have been denied the opportunity to exercise the *right to self-determination*

*as a people* via a free national election to dislodge the dictatorial regime from power and constitute a government of their choice.

The dictatorial regime's betrayal of the fundamental objectives of the armed struggle and the aspirations of the Eritrean people for freedom has brought about the wretched misery afflicting the people and the country. As if the bitter suffering is not enough, we are, as an old Tigrinya adage states that "chaos in the market avails an opportune situation for a thief", witnessing the conduct of an extensive campaign of vilifying the value of national independence, deprecating the sacrifices of our martyrs, and maligning the commitment of our heroic patriots. It should not be overlooked that the main objective of this hostile campaign is to undermine the legitimacy of our people's just armed struggle.

I would, before addressing the subject matter of our discussion today, thus like to reiterate that (1) Eritrea's independence is a great historic victory of the entire people of Eritrea achieved through the hard struggle and huge sacrifices of our freedom fighters and people; and (2) it is our sacred duty to defend the continued existence of a sovereign State of Eritrea like the pupil of our eye. It is important not to overlook, forget or deprecate the value of Eritrea's assumption of its rightful place among the international community of free nations. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that it is the authoritarian regime, and not independence, which is the cause of the dismal reality, the extreme suffering and abject misery afflicting our people today.

At a time when the objective and subjective conditions for change in our country are ripe, it is the responsibility of all pro-democracy Eritreans to (1) dislodge the authoritarian regime and establish a government of transition; (2) ensure that the newly established government would accomplish democratic transition; and (3) constitute democratic governance that would save the country from sliding downhill and the people from the plight of suffering and misery. In stating this, it is extremely essential to recognise three things, namely, (1) that bringing about an orderly change is a difficult task; (2) that the process of political transition to democratic governance following the change would be even more difficult, complex and complicated; and (3) that its effective execution would require great foresight and prudence.

What is of greatest importance to us here is (1) to believe that change and democratic transition are possible in Eritrea today; and (2) to have confidence that change and democratic transition would inevitably come about through hard work and struggle. Sustained hope, conviction and confidence are decisive factors that operate to bolster resolution and fortify perseverance, so essential for victory.

A preparatory period, or a period of transition, with a definite timeframe would be necessary to change the old regime, with all its rules, institutions, procedures, etc., and establish a new government in its place. The transitional political process must embody change and continuity at the same time: change of the authoritarian regime and continuity of an independent sovereign State of Eritrea. Furthermore, it would be essential to establish, build and reinforce functional institutions in order to consolidate the new regime.

In most cases, political transition is a process that results in the replacement of a backward, oppressive regime with an advanced democratic regime. Nevertheless, it is imperative to

recognise that the process may vary in content, structure and outcome. Why? Because we can expect three possibilities or scenarios in a reality like ours.

This means that the new regime could be:

1. Similar to the old regime, with a slight change of form or appearance;
2. Worse than the old regime;
3. Better than the old regime.

Of the three possibilities, what we want to happen, and the objective that we fight to bring about, is a governance system that governs in accordance with a constitution, adheres to the rule of law, follows democratic principles, respects the rudimentary rights of citizenship and guarantees fundamental human rights.

Awareness that changing the authoritarian regime or bringing about democratic transition in Eritrea could face several domestic and regional challenges, and proactive preparation to overcome their negative impact, would be decisive for the success of our common struggle.

First and foremost, we can identify six main domestic challenges to change and democratic transition that emanate from the nature of the regime. The authoritarian regime is characterised by (1) absolute dictatorship, (2) extreme predation, (3) extreme wastefulness (4) extreme dysfunction, (5) extreme malevolence and (6) extreme impunity.

**1. Absolute dictatorship.** The present regime is an outright dictatorship that has usurped absolute power; that possesses no functional state organs or government institutions; and that prolongs its rule through resort to violent force.

**2. Extreme Predation.** It is a predatory regime that, having monopolised the country's natural, economic, social and cultural resources, devises various pretexts to plunder state assets and extort money from the people.

**3. Extreme wastefulness.** It is a profligate regime that squanders the nation's productive manpower, the revenues from the extraction of the country's natural resources, and state assets and public finances at whim.

**4. Extreme dysfunction.** It is a dysfunctional regime preoccupied with self-aggrandisement. It is a defunct regime that has failed to provide for the basic necessities of the people. It is an obsolete regime that administers a reprehensible coupon economy in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an abominable regime characterised by rampant corruption.

**5. Extreme malevolence.** It is a malevolent regime that nips any good initiative or positive development in Eritrea in the bud. It is an extremely mean regime that deliberately expands and deepens poverty in order to prolong its hold on power.

**6. Extreme impunity.** It is a ruthless regime that has trampled the basic democratic, civil and human rights of the people underfoot. It is a lawless regime that rules through the use of brutal force, without any due process or moral compunction.

In addition to the six main domestic challenges listed above, we should also beware of possible geopolitical challenges associated with the situation in our region.

Our region, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea Basin, has an important strategic location. It has, for a long time, been characterised by wars, strife and instability; its constituent countries have been afflicted by constant domestic crises and reciprocal conflict; and its peoples suffer from a general state of economic backwardness and abject poverty. It is very important to beware of, and proactively prepare to ward off, the potential negative impact of this geopolitical reality on the struggle to bring about change and democratic transition in our country.

Given these domestic and geopolitical challenges, working to change the old regime in a way that guarantees the stability of the State of Eritrea and ensures democratic transition constitutes the primary task of Eritrean pro-democracy forces at the moment. In the final analysis, change and democratic transition should secure the following objectives.

1. The continued existence of an independent sovereign State of Eritrea.
2. The safety, stability and security of the State of Eritrea.
3. A Government of Eritrea with new a structure, democratic composition and content.
4. The administration of transitional justice to provide closure for victims and promote national reconciliation.
5. Consolidate transparent and accountable institutions of political and economic governance that embrace the democratic representation of the entire Eritrean people, in all of their diversity, and functional social services that cater for the basic needs of the people.

It seems to me that the time has come to build a national democratic movement capable of working, with competence, to accomplish these essential tasks. To make due contribution to this process, Eritrean Diaspora pro-democracy forces must, first and foremost, move on from futile bickering about yesterday and abandon the negative politics of grievance and rivalry. They must adopt a constructive perspective work to:

1. Cultivate a shared vision and common action through inclusive dialogue.
2. Crystallise democratic change through Eritrean ownership.
3. Strengthen the democratic resistance at home.
4. Beyond change and democratic transition, be equipped with national conscience and perseverance, to enhance contribution to the process of state reconstitution and national construction.

In order to achieve its objectives, it would be necessary for the democratic movement to, at a minimum, adhere to the following basic principles and core values:

1. Since Eritrea is the shared homeland of all Eritreans, ensure a future State of Eritrea that avails each citizen equal rights, equal obligations and equal opportunities.
2. Establish a constitutional government. A constitution is the foundation of the rule of law; the guarantee of fundamental rights; the repository of the people's sovereignty; and the source of all legitimate authority.
3. Constitute an inclusive democratic government that represents the entire people of Eritrea, with special protection for women and minority rights, and is put in or out of power with the free will of the people.
4. Introduce a decentralised administrative system that allows the people to manage their daily life as they deem fit and have a voice in the political, economic, social and cultural decisions affecting their livelihood.
5. Improve the livelihood of the people and deliver prosperity through the formulation and implementation of a macro-economic framework that mobilises the productive potential of Eritrean manpower and kick starts economic development.
6. Cultivate new regional relations based on peaceful coexistence and good neighbourliness and focused towards political cooperation and economic integration that guarantee the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Eternal glory to our martyrs!