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*Eritrea Symposium 2022*  
**Need for a Shared Vision for a Stable Transition**  
Ambassador Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

**Keynote Address**

Dear Participants of Eritrea Symposium 2022,

Warm greetings. Welcome.

Thank you for coming here from all over Europe, Canada, and the US to participate in this important and timely Symposium. We are gathered here under the theme of the *Need for a Vision for a Stable Transition* to discuss the situation in our beloved country and seek common ground for joint action to help crystallise change and democratic transition that assures our people freedom, justice, and prosperity.

Our country Eritrea occupies a highly strategic location at the north-eastern rim of the Horn of Africa (HoA) and at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East. Eritrea's location at the nexus of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, adjacent to the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, and at the southern flank of the Strait of Bab el Mandeb through which much of that oil passes, lends it great strategic importance.

The turbulence of our times and the volatility of our region heighten this strategic importance and attract the interest of major powers, turning the region into a sphere of fierce geostrategic, geopolitical and geoeconomic competition for military and naval bases, natural resources, markets, and investment. A realignment of global forces towards an evolving new world order poses a challenge to the unipolar world and US hegemony in the Horn of Africa. Intensifying Sino-American rivalry adds a new factor of potential regional instability.

China has moved to establish and strengthen its presence in the region through its *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) and the provision of generous loans, infrastructure development, foreign direct investment, and trade. Russia has started to rebuild its diplomatic and military presence and establish itself as a key player in the region through political solidarity, security cooperation, trade, and investment. The EU has launched its *Global Gateway* (GG) initiative to support infrastructure development across the world through connectivity projects in the digital, climate and energy, transport, health, education, and research sectors to reset and strengthen Europe as a global actor.

Meanwhile, Eritrea continues to suffer from underdevelopment, extreme poverty, and climate change. The authoritarian regime rules through brutal repression marked by rampant corruption and wide social and economic disparities between the few *haves* and the many *have-nots*. Extreme climate change devastates the environment, ruins livelihoods, and degrades the human condition in the rural areas where subsistence farming and nomadic pastoralism are the

mainstay of the local economy. The combined effect of these manmade disasters causes mass impoverishment, weakens traditional social safety nets, and disrupts the fabric of society.

The Eritrean people had high hopes and great expectations that independence would usher in a better life of freedom, justice, democracy, and prosperity. In an ironic twist of history, victory in the armed struggle produced the exact opposites in peacetime. Eritrea today is littered with the shards of broken expectations, broken promises, and broken hopes.

Post-independence, a once progressive liberation movement atrophied into an authoritarian personalist regime, betrayed the original aims of the struggle, and securitised the Eritrean state. It violates the basic freedoms, liberties, and rights of the people with impunity. Lacking access to essential necessities and terrorised by brutal repression, the people suffer from a state of deprivation verging on perennial misery and insecurity. Denied proper family upbringing, normal education, and hope of a better future, Eritrea's youth flee the country to escape repression and the scourge of indefinite national service. The human capital flight saps Eritrea's brain power, negates its productive potential and undermines its development prospects.

Capitalising on its strategic location, adequate natural resources and a hardworking industrious people, independent Eritrea has a great opportunity for development. However, the regime's imprudent policies and malevolent practices have produced a worsening state of economic regression, political isolation, and diplomatic disengagement. Its wrong policy choices and squandered opportunities have forfeited Eritrea's potential to grow into a prototype democratic state, a vibrant regional hub of industry, commerce, and services, and a prosperous society.

The fundamental problem in Eritrea is the absence of the rule of law and the exercise of the rule of man. The arbitrary and capricious rule of man shuns due process. The timely application of the Constitution of Eritrea (1997) was expected to initiate a new democratic dispensation and sanction the exercise of legitimate state authority based on the rule of law. However, a deliberate decision to cast the Constitution aside has subverted the effort to create a constitutional state and democratic governance founded on the rule of law.

The Constitution determines the structure, defines the authority, specifies the functions, and delimits the powers of the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of the government. It guarantees the fundamental freedoms, proclaims the basic rights, stipulates the duties of citizenship and requires the state to safeguard them. Despite certain defects, it is designed to serve as the legal foundation of the Eritrean State, the repository of the sovereignty of the people, and the source of all legitimate authority. It vests supreme legislative power, including the issuance of proclamations, the promulgation of legislation on domestic and foreign policy, the ratification of international treaties and agreements, in the National Assembly.

Today, Eritrea has the only government in Africa that operates without a functional constitution or parliament. No bond of a *social contract* binds the people and the state. The suspension of the National Assembly; the emasculation of the judiciary; and the Special Court's arrogation of the powers of the High Court have reduced the government to a single decisionmaker. The autocracy obstructs political, economic, and social development and undermines the effort to achieve the people's legitimate aspirations for freedom, justice, and prosperity.

Exercising absolute power without constitutional or institutional constraints, the president uses the state apparatus as an instrument of suppression to control all aspects of national life. He obstructs any attempt to build viable state structures and functional institutions to give himself free rein to impose arbitrary rule. His abuse of power violates the rights, freedoms, dignity, and lives of the people without recourse to redress. Dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver public goods and services. To cap it all, he is one of very few despots in the world to deny Covid-19 vaccine to the people amid the deadly pandemic.

The application of the Constitution, amendable by an authorised national representative body in due course, would end the rule of man and crown the rule of law. It would avail the Eritrean people, in all their diversity, equal freedoms, equal rights and equal opportunities in every aspect of the nation's political, economic, social, and cultural life. The need to apply the rule of law, establish democratic governance, and bring about political and economic transformation has thus become imperative.

Earnest endeavour is needed to harness the widespread popular discontent with the predatory regime, build coalescence and lend agency to the forces of democratic resistance to crystallise peaceful transition to constitutional governance. Engaging in inclusive dialogue helps us build mutual trust and unity of purpose based on a common understanding of our past, a mutual appraisal of our present and a shared vision of our future.

The Diaspora opposition must beware that Eritrea faces dire existential threats from two fronts. First, the policies and practices of a predatory regime that drive the national economy down, the poverty of the people up and the youth out. A malevolent dictator is emptying Eritrea of its people, especially the youth, and jeopardising its future.

Second, the territorial ambitions of our southern neighbour over our country or parts thereof, be it in the form of Greater Ethiopia or Greater Tigray, that make Eritrea's sustained deterrence capability an existential necessity. To make the insatiable ambition a reality, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in particular, targets Eritrea's greatest assets. The TPLF's systematic attack is subversively and openly directed against the national identity and the national unity of the Eritrean people, against the legitimacy of Eritrean nationalism and, in the final analysis, against the very existence of the sovereign State of Eritrea. As a prominent legal scholar, Dr. Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis, JD, clearly reaffirms:

*[A]ny claim of ownership of the Red Sea coast portion of Eritrea or ownership of the Port of Asseb is a direct affront to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Eritrea. Claims for Eritrea (or any territorial pieces thereof), based on historical background or cultural similarities, were already litigated, and settled when Eritrea emerged as an independent sovereign state in 1993 with internationally recognized boundaries.*

It is thus time that Eritrean opposition activists stand with the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Eritrea and diaspora politics breaks out of the vicious cycle of divisions, polarisation, and fragmentation; finds its compass; and focuses on the urgent task to bring about a new democratic dispensation at home. Several groups and media outlets should backtrack the *red line* and stop being tools of foreign forces hostile to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea. They should stop being mercenaries and *fifth columnists* in the name of

opposition to the authoritarian regime. They should recognise and accept that change in Eritrea is an internal Eritrean affair, that it will come about from within via Eritrean ownership and decision, and that the destiny of Eritrea lies in the hands of the Eritrean people.

Otherwise, genuine political opposition is about advocating an alternative vision backed by an alternative programme. A vision of hope, freedom, justice, opportunities, and prosperity for the Eritrean people. A programme of building a secular, citizen-centered government; forming participatory, accountable, transparent, and democratic governance; reviving the national economy and building Eritrea's human capital; ensuring national unity and social harmony; and pursuing peaceful coexistence and reciprocal cooperation with our neighbours.

Let us then aim to end the malevolent regime and its dysfunctional governance system; get our act together and work to strengthen the agency of our people at home and abroad; and create conscious coalescence to help catalyse autonomous change and stable transition to a constitutional government that guarantees the fundamental rights, basic freedoms, and prosperity of its citizens.

In gathering us here, *Eritrea Symposium 2022* aims to strengthen our solidarity in pursuit of a *Vision for a Stable Transition*.

The *Eritrea Symposium 2022* will focus on five interrelated thematic panels, namely:

1. Regional Conflict Dynamics and Sustaining Eritrea's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity
  - 1.1 Navigate the Conflict Dynamics in the HoA
  - 1.2 Sustain Eritrea's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity
2. Empower the People's Agency for a Seamless Progression to Democratic Transition
  - 2.1 Empower the People's Agency in Democratic Change and Transition
  - 2.2 Seamless Progression of Change into Democratic Transition
3. Overcome Divisions, Polarisation, and Fragmentation in the Diaspora
  - 3.1 Identify Underlying Causes
  - 3.2 Find Practical and Workable Remedies
4. Build Common Ground Based on a Shared Vision of a Democratic and Just Eritrea
  - 4.1 Build Common Ground Based on a Shared Vision of Democratic Governance
  - 4.2 Fight for Justice as a Basis for Conscious Coalescence among the Eritrean Diaspora
5. Build Conscious Coalescence to Catalyse Change and Democratic Transition
  - 5.1 Coalescence in Political Activism
  - 5.2 Coalescence in Media Work

Each panel comprises a moderator and two presenters, followed by open discussion.

Eternal Glory to Our Martyrs!

Long Live an Independent Sovereign State of Eritrea!

God Bless Eritrea and its People!

Thank you.