

One Nation Conference  
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## **Main Tasks of the Transitional Period**

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this conference. In reaffirming my solidarity in struggle with the national objectives of *One Nation*, I would like to express my best wishes for the successful conclusion of this important, timely conference.

When we speak about the tasks of the transitional period, we are taking change for granted. Change in our country, however, is yet to come. I would therefore briefly remark about the human condition of our people and state my views concerning the coming and crystallisation of change in our country before speaking about the tasks of post change.

### **1. The Present State of the Eritrean People and the State of Eritrea**

The sovereign independence of the State of Eritrea is the product of the efforts and sacrifices of the entire people of Eritrea. National independence is a great historic victory of the Eritrean people achieved through the sacrifices of our martyrs and the toil, sweat and blood of successive generations of Eritreans. Every Eritrean must be proud of the resolute historical struggle and bear the noble national responsibility to work wholeheartedly to safeguard the continuity of the sovereign independence of Eritrea made possible through the precious sacrifices of tens of thousands of martyrs.

During the past quarter century, a colossal tragedy has befallen our people under the caprices of a predatory regime. Tragedy at different levels: at the level of the individual citizen; at the level of the family; at the level of the society; and at the level of the country. The regime has presided over the trampling of the Eritrean citizen; the breakdown of the family; the disruption of the very fabric of Eritrean society; the depletion of the nation's manpower; and the regression of the country. Our people fought for freedom, democracy and justice. In an ironic twist of history, however, they ended up with servitude instead of freedom; dictatorship instead of democracy; injustice instead of justice; poverty and want instead of prosperity.

It is a sad commentary that today, 28 years after independence, the living conditions of our people are at their worst level since the end of Italian colonial rule. Whether in the cities or in the countryside, our people lack elementary security of life and adequate supply of basic necessities. Relegated to a wretched state of extreme poverty, they suffer from acute shortages of food, potable water, housing, electricity, medicines, etc.

The physical appearance of our people and the façade of our cities and ports portray an image of misery. Our physical and social infrastructure lies in a state of decay; our economy is in shambles; and our country is impoverished in spite of its relatively rich resources. The PFDJ's mismanagement and absolute monopoly have squeezed out the private sector. Agriculture, industry and services have been decimated. The predatory regime, in collaboration with unscrupulous foreign investors, continues to misappropriate the proceeds of the highly lucrative mining sector.

Eritrea today is littered with the shards of broken expectations, broken promises and broken hopes of freedom, justice, and progress. The Eritrean people continue to endure the caprices of a dictatorial regime; suffer from the scourge of oppression and violence; and our youth continue to flee the country en masse, facing abuse and landing on harm's way everywhere in transit countries.

The malevolent regime that does not like to see anything good of Eritrea and the wellbeing of Eritreans has, in practice, operated to drive out our youth in droves, decimate our people and destroy our country. It suppresses, crushes and abuses all Eritreans without distinction. There is no section of our people or part of our society that the predatory regime particularly represents, cares for or victimises. As such, all Eritreans must resist in unison and do away with it.

Today, the objective conditions for change in our country are ripe. The sustenance of the State of Eritrea and the security of the Eritrean people demand change and democratic transition. However, it is important to recognise that changing a predatory and divisive dictatorial regime like ours is not an easy task, and that the process of political transition to a democratic government following change is even a more difficult and complex task. The implementation of effective change and stable peaceful democratic transition require careful preparation and prudent execution. The transitional political process must, at the same time, embrace change and continuity. It must, on the one hand, herald change of the dictatorial regime and, on the other, ensure the continuity of the State of Eritrea.

Change in Eritrea is primarily the business of the Eritrean people. We must own and solve our problem ourselves. Looking for a solution from others is both wrong and futile. International support for and solidarity with our just struggle for change and democratic transition is very important. Essentially, however, change must be rooted and grow in Eritrea, brought about through Eritrean ownership and effort, and ensure national security and social stability.

Patriotism deficit undermines the credibility of political opposition. In our struggle for change, we must distinguish between the interests of the State of Eritrea and those of the government of Eritrea and adopt a clear patriotic stance on all regional and international issues concerning Eritrea that advocates for the interest of the people and the country and exposes the regime. Irrespective of the prevailing differences of view and organisation, unity of purpose is the main instrument in our national struggle. We should thus firmly challenge all sectarian, provincial and *agent provocative* activities that undermine the unity of our ranks or external interference that dents the ownership of our decision and the independence of our policy.

The lack of freedom of expression and the denial of the right to establish a political party or form a civil society association in our country have confined overt political opposition in the Diaspora. Nevertheless, external political opposition can make a significant contribution to the process of change and democratic transition by working as a complement and catalyst rather than as a substitute of the covert domestic resistance.

To conclude my introductory remarks and move on to the main subject of my address, let me encapsulate, in three sentences, the shared vision we should have about the Eritrea we wish to build post change. (1) The citizen is the basis of a nation; there can be no nation without the citizen. (2) Safeguarding the dignity, the right, the freedom and the opportunity of each citizen would safeguard the dignity, the right, the freedom and the opportunity of all citizens. (3) The

Eritrea of the future we wish to build is an Eritrea that is based on a constitution, governed by law, and safeguards the human dignity of its citizens; guarantees all citizens equal rights, equal freedoms, and equal opportunities; and institutes democratic governance, embeds justice and creates prosperity.

## **2. The Main Tasks of the Transitional Period**

### **2.1 Implement the Constitution and Lay a Legal Foundation**

The Constitution of Eritrea drafted with broad popular participation at home and in the diaspora and ratified by a Constituent Assembly in 1997 is the only legitimate national constitution of an independent sovereign State of Eritrea. As such, it can serve as a stopgap to lay the basis for a constitutional order during the transitional period while leaving the amendment of its obvious shortcomings and defects to a legislative body to be constituted at the national level. At the conclusion of the transitional period, an Eritrean National Assembly duly constituted through a free and fair election on the basis of universal suffrage will have the full legal authority and the clear legal modality to amend the shortcomings and defects or to completely change the Constitution. At the same time, it would be possible to introduce, at the start of the transitional period, temporary amendments in accordance with a possible declaration of a state of emergency that might be required to safeguard the security, safety and stability of the State.

### **2.2 Immediate Release of All Political Detainees and Prisoners**

The immediate release of all political detainees, prisoners of conscience, jailed journalists, ordinary citizens imprisoned without due process, etc., would be one of the first steps to be taken by the newly established transitional government.

### **2.3 Rectification of the Programme of National Service**

The rectification of the Programme of National Service would require, *inter alia*, the revision of the 1995 Proclamation of National Service; the demobilisation of all active compulsory national service conscripts with full compensation; and the provision of proper occupational and technical training to enable them to reintegrate into the civilian economy, obtain gainful employment and manage their livelihoods. Prohibit the illegal practice of rounding up the youth for national service. Deploy national service conscripts in the construction of physical and social infrastructure and the improvement of the environment in accordance with the priorities set in a properly drawn up plan of national development.

### **2.4 The Right of Return of All Eritrean Refugees**

Ensure the inalienable right to return home of all citizens who, since the mid-1960s, have been forced to flee their beloved country due to war, turmoil, abuse, oppression, suppression, etc., and seek refuge elsewhere. Prepare the legal framework to facilitate the exercise of the right of return to the home country.

### **2.5 Ensure the Security, Peace and Stability of the State**

Taking into account the strategic location of our country at the intersection of the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, a volatile region characterised by wars and conflicts; the geopolitical rivalry and active military presence of several big powers around the Red Sea Basin; the precarious alignment of forces and shifting mix of regional and international

alliances; and the unstable domestic situation and expansionist ambitions of certain immediate contiguous neighbours; it would be essential to pursue a prudent domestic and foreign policy that safeguards the continued sovereignty, security, peace and stability of the Eritrean state.

## **2.6 Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation**

The modern history of our country has witnessed considerable internecine conflict. (1) During the armed struggle, there occurred civil violence within and between the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), the ELF and Eritrean People's Liberation Forces/Front (EPLF) that caused extensive bloodshed and loss of life which have yet to find closure. (2) During the era of independence, both the Provisional and the Transitional governments of Eritrea have committed 'systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights.'

We Eritreans must discuss the matter and make a strategic decision whether to seek retributive justice or restorative justice during the period of transition. Would we give vent to revenge or focus on reconciliation with each other? The pursuit of which path would best serve our interest to heal the wounds inflicted during the armed struggle as well as since independence?

Generally, transitional justice is a process through which the victims of crime, abuse and violence find redress and closure and the perpetrators of crime, abuse and violence show remorse, make amends through compensation or get appropriate punishment. Its objective is to redress past crimes and abuses and introduce a new political system that embraces everyone, respects the rights of citizens, obeys the rule of law, operates in a transparent manner, is accountable. Its outcome would promote national reconciliation, harmony and stability.

## **2.7 Reorganise the Security Sector**

The security sector comprises the instruments of violence, namely, the defence, security, intelligence and police forces; prison guards, the *kebele* system and the courts. The regime maintains its rule by suppressing any popular opposition through the use of the security apparatus. Generally, the security apparatus in dictatorial regimes is contaminated with crime and corruption. It would be impossible to secure democratic transition without cleaning up the mess and reforming the security sector.

Revise the legal mandate, rationalise the command and control system and reorganise the personnel of the security apparatus. Build a lean professional national army - ground forces, air force and naval force - trained in the tactics of modern warfare, equipped with advanced weapons and mandated to protect the Constitution of Eritrea and defend the people.

## **2.8 Build State Institutions**

Eritrea is characterised by corrupt governance and weak institutions. Most citizens with professional expertise or technical skill are in jail, frozen or in exile. The remaining citizens resident in the country who possess productive physical or intellectual capacity are in a constant state of unemployment.

Under the prevailing circumstances in our country, bringing about change, laying down a solid foundation for the establishment of a democratic government during the transitional period and

building functional ministries, authorities and agencies capable of effective execution of their statutory mandates and delivery of the required services would be a difficult challenge.

### 3. Conclusion

The list is long. To conclude, we must beware that time is of the essence; we should stay focussed on the main task; and prepare to work hard to accelerate change and contribute our share, as per our respective capacities and professions, to ensuring democratic transition. Especially the youth. Sovereign independence was made possible through the bitter struggle and immense sacrifice of successive generations of youth. Similarly, a constitutional democratic regime can come about only through the struggle and sacrifice of the youth. As heirs and builders of tomorrow's Eritrea, Eritrea's youth, at home and in the Diaspora, have a historic responsibility to play a leading role in achieving this task.

Let consciousness, commitment and unity be your principal weapon. Experience teaches one fundamental truth: rival voices cancel out each other; a divided force benefits the enemy; a unified voice spreads a big echo; a cohesive force overcomes an enemy. The lesson is expressed in a proverb of our forefathers: '*Brothers united chase an enemy away.*'

Thank you for your kind attention.

Eternal Glory to Our Martyrs!  
Long Live an Independent Sovereign State of Eritrea!  
God Bless Eritrea and the Eritrean People!