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Eritrea Symposium 2018: The Imperative for Common Action

Keynote Address

Ambassador Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

Selam, Good morning,

Dear Participants,

Let me begin by welcoming you all, fellow partisans of justice, who have come here from different countries to participate in this important timely symposium. I thank you wholeheartedly for coming here on the eve of this auspicious Christmas and New Year holiday season, postponing your private and family affairs, to discuss together the imperative for change and democratic transition in our home country, Eritrea; the importance of strengthening our common struggle for justice; and the significance of all-round preparations for change and democratic transition.

The convening of this symposium at this critical juncture, which finds the sovereignty of our country and the future of our people at a crossroads, has a special significance. The principal objective of *Eritrea Symposium 2018: The Imperative for Common Action* is informative and educational, complementing the work of the last few years to develop *joint action* based on a *shared vision* of a future *democratic Eritrea*. In brief, this symposium aims to:

1. Promote a common understanding of the present situation in our country;
2. Strengthen a shared vision of a future democratic Eritrea; and
3. Generate a common recognition of the present challenges and opportunities for democratic transition in Eritrea.

In other words, the symposium aims to explore an effective strategy and identify alternative means that enable us to meet the challenges and use the opportunities in order to achieve our national objectives.

We are all aware of the sequence of sudden events, driven by external geopolitical interests, that have unfolded in the long-troubled relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia at an astounding pace during the last few months. Initially, the peoples of both countries, and the Eritrean people, in particular, warmly welcomed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship.

Peace and stability in our region, peace with our neighbouring countries, and peace with Ethiopia is what the Eritrean people at home and abroad have been yearning for. The people of Eritrea, more than most peoples the world over, know from experience that war is legalised blanket destruction and mass murder. That war and mayhem become history and that peace, stability, justice and tranquillity prevail is thus the greatest wish of the Eritrean people.

However, the initial celebratory mood that met the accord to restore peace and normalise relations has given way to serious concerns among many Eritreans at home and abroad. In short, the dealings between the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, which lack transparency and accountability, normal protocol and proper legal procedure, manifest signs of a dire threat to the sovereignty of the State of Eritrea and the security of the Eritrean people. There is serious concern among most Eritreans that the frenzied happenings driven by the fitful whims and short-term interests of an erratic tyrant lack any semblance of government business; have no guarantee of sustainability; and could result in a repetition of the recent history of war and hostility.

The peace that our people want is one that expedites the clear demarcation of our borders and ensures the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea. The peace that our people want is one that enables a realm of freedom, rights and justice to prevail in our country. The friendship that our people wish to have with our neighbours is one that safeguards the interests of the nation, people and citizens; encourages domestic direct investment; utilises Eritrea's natural and human resources first and foremost for the improvement of the standard of living and quality of life of the Eritrean people; and generates equitable relations and mutual benefits in all aspects of national life. Above all, it should be a friendship that safeguards the sovereign independence of the country and the security of the people.

In brief, the peace and friendship accord that our people aspire for is one whose detailed contents are publicly known; safeguards the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity; follows proper government-to-government procedure; and retains indubitable legality. Thus, the Eritrean people and all Eritreans of goodwill hold that a viable peace and friendship agreement must have transparency, accountability and legitimacy and embrace all Ethiopian political forces.

The people of Eritrea fought for over half a century and waged 30 years of armed struggle for freedom, democracy, justice and prosperity. In an unfortunate historical paradox, however, the original aims of the political and armed struggle have been betrayed; the brutal suppression of a lawless authoritarian regime has deprived the people of all fundamental rights, including the right to have rights; and forced them to lead a miserable life of extreme poverty and dire want. This paradoxical reality is the outcome of the betrayal of the present regime. Adding insult to injury, capping the earlier betrayal of the original objectives of the historic struggle is a new spectre of treachery threatening Eritrea's sovereign independence.

The state of 'no war, no peace' that the authoritarian regime has used as a pretext for not establishing a constitutional government, for imposing indefinite national service in violation of its legal limits, and for setting up an undeclared *de facto* military administration, is now over. At the same time, the 'sanctions', which it has used as an excuse for the regime-inflicted devastation of the Eritrean economy and the misery of the Eritrean people, have been lifted. However, Eritrea today, just as in the last two decades, remains a terrestrial inferno where its people are unable to live in peace, security and prosperity.

Even though the unconditional implementation of the 'peace treaty' has been declared, sovereign Eritrean territory remains under Ethiopian military occupation while we are told that 'boundary demarcation is not important'. The UN sanctions have been lifted. Yet, Eritrea and the Eritrean people continue to languish under the sanctions imposed by the current regime. There is no sign or prospect of change in the regime's political direction, treatment of domestic affairs or economic management. Quite the contrary, the present regime, whose leader's malevolent nature does not allow it to bring about positive change, on the one hand, and whose belief that he cannot continue to stay in power without inciting hostilities, is already busy preparing military training camps for the Sudanese opposition and interfering in internal Ethiopian affairs to fan the flames of civil war and strife and use Eritrean youth as cannon fodder in the internal wars of our neighbours.

Whether we like it or not, change in Eritrea is coming soon. The question is, however, are we prepared for it? What are pro-democracy Eritrean forces doing to accelerate change? We must think of how to ensure that the current regime becomes the last illegal and unjust regime in Eritrea. Let us take a glance into our contemporary political history. Why did the political struggle of the Eritrean people in the 1940s and 1950s fail to attain the right to self-determination? Why did the armed struggle degenerate into civil war? Why has a dictatorial regime emerged during the era of independence? Why has the betrayal of the original objectives of the armed struggle happened? Why are we facing the threat of treachery of our hard-won national sovereignty? We must ponder, examine and find answers to these questions.

Lacking strategic leadership, our national political struggle is characterised by discord and filled with liquidationist views and practices. The discord may be manifested in the form of religion, region, nationality, etc. Irrespective of its form, however, sectarianism creates an opportune

condition for a policy of ‘divide and rule’ whose inevitable consequence is collective suppression. It is apparent that we have not learned from our experience. For the reality of Eritrean diaspora politics is wrecked by the lack of strategic leadership, liquidationist mindset and practices, and sectarianism. The use of white lies, outright slander, diffusion of poisonous divisive propaganda, etc., has become a normal tool of certain political merchants and sectarian elements. In all earnest, we must think of how to get out of this tradition of liquidationism, slander and sectarianism; adopt a national perspective; and embark on a new path of civic nationalism.

While the suffocating and oppressive situation in Eritrea, the evolving rapprochement in the historically troubled Ethio-Eritrean relations, and the emerging geopolitical dynamics and new realignment of forces in the Red Sea Basin confront Eritrea and the Eritrean people with dire challenge, they also avail a rare window of opportunity. Capitalising on this golden opportunity in pursuit of shared objectives requires:

- (1) Transcending the politics of grievance and rivalry;
- (2) A paradigm shift in perspective and practice;
- (3) A fundamental rethinking of our approaches and priorities;
- (4) Coalescence of views and pulling of resources.

In short, having a common understanding centred on a collective objective and undertaking joint action based on a shared vision are decisive for realising a new Eritrea of freedom, democracy, justice and prosperity.

Since time is not on our side, we need to get our acts together and be ready to work hard to accelerate change and contribute our share to ensure democratic transition. Especially the youth. We must beware that the sovereign independence of the State of Eritrea came about through the bitter struggle and huge sacrifices of Eritrea’s youth. A constitutional democratic Eritrean regime would, likewise, come into being through the struggle and sacrifices of the youth. As the chief advocates of justice and the heirs and architects of the future, Eritrea’s youth, at home and abroad, have a historic responsibility to play a vanguard role in this the performance of this task. Your principal weapons should be consciousness, commitment and unity. Experience teaches a basic truth: Discordant voices cancel each other; a divided force becomes an easy enemy prey. Concordant voices reverberate far and wide; a united force overpowers an enemy. The lesson is: When brothers unite, they rid themselves of the enemy.

The two-day symposium that we are opening today has six (6) sessions:

1. Rule of Law and Human Rights:

- The foundational principle of the rule of law;
- The fundamental concept of inalienable universal human rights;
- The complete absence of the rule of law and the violation of basic human rights with impunity in Eritrea.

2. Building a Secular Civic State:

- Separation of state and religion, education and religion;
- State non-interference in religious affairs;
- Safeguarding the right to religion, freedom of faith and worship;
- Building a participatory political system that guarantees each citizen equal rights, equal freedoms, equal opportunities and equal democratic representation.

3. Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation:

- The adoption of restorative versus retributive justice;
- Balancing the need for:
 - Closure for the victims of crimes and wrongs;
 - Atonement for crimes and wrongs committed by perpetrators; and
 - National reconciliation and social peace.

4. Strategy for Democratic Transition:

- Effecting democratic transition in Eritrea:

- Peaceful resistance;
- Violent Struggle
- Combination of peaceful and violent resistance.

5. The Role of Youth in Democratic Transition:

- The decisive role of youth in the process of change and democratic transition in Eritrea;
- Youth as the primary productive force;
- Youth as the principal advocate for justice;
- Youth as the harbingers, heirs and builders of the future.

6. The Imperative for Common Action:

- Promoting a common understanding of the modern history and present condition of our country and people;
- Cultivating a shared vision of the Eritrea of the future;
- Engaging in effective joint effort for change and democratic transition.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Eternal Glory to Our Heroic Martyrs!

Long Live an Independent Sovereign State of Eritrea!