

The Forgotten People: Eritreans in the World's Eyes

By Alexander G.E. Tekie

As the world watches the current crisis in Kosovo unfold through intensive daily media coverage, particularly by major networks in the US and Europe, one can only wonder why the same attention is not given to the crises in Africa. The military intervention by NATO allied forces, including the United States, to avert Milosevic's genocidal campaign towards the Kosovo Albanians, can only be characterized as an exclusive European mission to resolve Europe's problem. This is not, by all means, to subvert or undermine the suffering of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo but to give some perspective as to how the super powers are responding to other similar crises in the world. Today, any crime against humanity, in any part of the world, regardless of this nation's political or economic interest, should not be tolerated.

Most Americans, perhaps most of the world, do not know about the mass genocide that took place in Rwanda and the civil war in the Southern Sudan that has left more than a million and half people dead. And now we can add to this list, the recent border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea that has emerged into a full-scale war. The most recent conflict (using the most sophisticated hi-tech weapons) has already claimed thousands of lives while world superpowers are watching silently.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian Government is engaged in a systematic "ethnic cleansing" campaign against ethnic Eritreans living in Ethiopia, while the world is busy with the crisis in Kosovo.

On March of this year in a news conference held at Pennsylvania State University regarding the House Bill titled "Hope for Africa," the Reverend Jesse Jackson said:

Milosevic appears to be a fascist hell-bent on his way to the highway. We cannot stand by morally and allow this genocide to take place. I wish the energy spent now bombing at night was a search for Milosevic himself. But if we are driven to save the dying in Kosovo, we can save the dying in Eritrea, Nigeria and Congo. We've lost more lives in Sierra Leone than Kosovo.

It is not surprising that very little attention is given to the countries in Africa experiencing crises similar to those involving the Kosovo Albanians.

The world political and economic paradigm can be characterized as a "have" vs. "have-not" policy with major world powers deciding how affairs are prioritized. This has been clearly demonstrated by the United States economic and political involvement in Africa. The international community and the superpowers ignore the current conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, because the economic and political interests involved are insignificant to them.

Historical Background

Much of the world does not know about Eritrea, or even know where Eritrea is located on the map.

About the size of Florida, Eritrea is situated on the Red Sea, bordering the countries in the Horn of Africa: Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti. In 1993, this small country, with a population of 3.5 million, gained its independence after winning one of the longest and the most brutal civil wars ever fought in Africa.

From the 1880s to 1941, Eritrea was an Italian colony. Then the British ruled Eritrea from 1941 to 1952. In 1952 the United Nations, under the leadership of the United States, unanimously decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, without the consent of the Eritrean people.

In 1962, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia unilaterally dissolved the federation and forcibly annexed Eritrea as one of the provinces of Ethiopia, in violation of United Nations Resolution 390(V), which made Eritrea a self-governing autonomous federation.

After the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974, a self-styled Marxist leader, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam continued to suppress Eritrea's quest for independence by deploying the largest military force in Africa against the Eritreans. During this time, 64% of Ethiopia's national budget was devoted to the war.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Mengistu's ability to continue the war was put to an end with the withdrawal of Soviet support. It should be mentioned that during the 30 years of Eritrea's struggle for independence, virtually no country helped Eritrea because they were labeled as "rebel" or as "guerrilla groups" by other countries.

In 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) marched to

the capital city of Eritrea, Asmara, declaring full victory. Eritrea gained its long-awaited independence from Ethiopia at a cost of 250,000 lives.

If we look back at the immense human suffering and the enormous crimes committed against innocent Eritreans during the 30 years of civil war, one can only wonder and ask the question "where was the rest of the world when such crimes were committed?"

What went wrong?

Once again, Ethiopia is waging war against Eritrea over a border dispute. In May of 1998, Eritrea requested international intervention to demarcate the borders, which were not clearly defined after Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia. The current Ethiopian Government responded to Eritrea's request by bombing cities, villages, and killing innocent people. This war-weary population of Eritrea was stunned by these inhumane acts but it did not stop there. The Ethiopian Government is currently engaged in a systematic ethnic cleansing campaign by hunting out any person whose ethnic background is Eritrean. This includes both Eritrean nationals as well as Ethiopian citizens with Eritrean heritage. These crimes are committed against Eritreans, without any due process of law, under the pretext of preventing a "security risk to Ethiopia's territorial sovereignty." What began as a border dispute has evolved into an armed conflict and "ethnic cleansing" comparable to the events in Kosovo.

In an attempt to get international attention, the Ethiopian government accused Eritrea of ill-treatment and human-rights abuse of Ethiopian nationals living in Eritrea. Human-rights groups, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International, Africa Watch and the United Nations Commission for Human Rights found no evidence of expulsion or deportation of Ethiopians from Eritrea.

"At least 22,000 Ethiopians have returned to Ethiopia from Eritrea since May, most after losing their jobs and being rendered destitute as a result of the hostilities, and some in fear of reprisals. No evidence was found to support Ethiopia's allegations that 40,000 of its citizens have been seriously ill-treated and forcibly deported from Eritrea since May 1998." (Amnesty International report, January, 29 1999)

A February 1999 report called *The Uprooted* written by Professor Asmarom Legesse (director of research for Citizens for Peace in Eritrea) documents the way the deportation was conducted by the Ethiopian Government and detailed the stories told by the deportees themselves as they arrived at various parts of Eritrea:

The deportees who have come to Eritrea are in a state of disarray and it is not possible to present a normal sociological picture of them. Their homes and family lives have been shattered. They are now trying to pick up the pieces and start anew. The adult population we have surveyed consists of 70 percent males, 30 percent females. These individuals are mostly household heads or individuals who came to Eritrea alone or with part of their families. They are now living as "dependents" attached to other families.

The same report outlined the constitutional rights of Ethiopians regardless of their ethnic background:

According to the current Ethiopian constitution, no Ethiopian can be deprived of his citizenship or deported out of the country under any circumstances. If a citizen commits a crime, he or she can be punished in other legally instituted ways but not by deportation. In Article 33(1), the present (1995) constitution of Ethiopia states that "no Ethiopian may be deprived of his (her) citizenship without his (her) consent."

Ethiopia's ethnic-cleansing efforts have apparently superceded its constitution. The vast majority of the deportees (83.3%) are Ethiopian citizens with Eritrean heritage. Their homes, properties, livelihoods, and their lifetime investments have been confiscated by the Ethiopian Government.

Today, more than 56,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians with Eritrean origin have been deported from Ethiopia. Amnesty International representatives witnessed the cruel and inhumane action committed by the Ethiopian Government against ethnic Eritreans.

"Women, some of them pregnant, children, the elderly—even hospital patients—are now being arrested and detained in the middle of the night. People of all ages, from babies to pensioners, are imprisoned in harsh conditions for several days before being forced to board buses under armed guard with only one piece of luggage each—if that—and

being dumped at the border. Families have been split up, the male heads usually deported first, and his wife, parents and children weeks or months later. Deportees have had to abandon their homes, possessions, businesses and other property with no guarantee of ever recovering them." (Amnesty International report, 29 January, 1999)

On August 6, 1998, the US State Department, in a token gesture, gave the Ethiopian Government written warning regarding the detention and expulsion of ethnic Eritreans in and from Ethiopia. This statement from the US Government has not stopped or otherwise impacted the Government of Ethiopia from continuing its systematic ethnic-cleansing campaign. Today, over 5,000 Eritreans are in prisons, concentration camps, and detention centers waiting for their deportation. In addition to this, about 1,000 Eritreans are believed to have disappeared without any trace.

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations have initiated superficial efforts to stop the current border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea by simply giving written statements and warnings to both countries to stop the war. These organizations have also supported Ethiopia by ignoring criminal acts that are committed by the Ethiopian government.

Despite the apathy of international agencies, Eritreans in the Diaspora have been heavily engaged in trying to bring the current crisis to the attention of the world community. On March 26, 1999, Eritreans all over the world (including US, Canada and Europe) held a peaceful demonstration in the hope of bringing the Eritrean situation to the attention of the world community. Nothing happened. Today, many people are shocked by the silence of the international community, particularly, the United States, since its political influence could bring an end to this unnecessary conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

What Can Be Done?

First and foremost, immediate attention should be given to the over 250,000 displaced Eritreans victimized by the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Currently, the Eritrean Government is overwhelmed by the displacement of ethnic Eritreans. The Government has limited resources to provide deportees with housing, employment, and food. Eritreans all over the world showed their full support to the Government of Eritrea by quickly responding to the needs of the deportees. However, the continuous deportation of ethnic Eritreans from Ethiopia is beyond the financial capability of the Eritrean Government. Eritreans in North America and other places in the world are trying to help the deportees by doing fund-raising events—carwashes, selling lottery tickets, etc., to alleviate the overwhelming burden that is put on the Eritrean Government.

Eritreans in Michigan are playing a vital role in the relief efforts supported by various non-profit groups in the United States and Canada. If you live in Michigan and want to contribute to the relief effort for the displaced Eritreans, you can send your contribution to:

Eritreans and Friends of Eritreans Association
P.O. Box 293
East Lansing, MI 48826

Financial support from any group or individual in the United States or Canada can be sent to:

Eritrean Development Foundation
1111 Fourteenth Street, NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202 408 6995/6

If readers are dismayed and outraged by the actions of the Ethiopian Government, they can get involved by advocating on Eritrea's behalf to the various human-rights groups in their area. They can also get involved by contacting their federal and state representatives. There is also a nationwide petition prepared by the Eritrean Development Foundation to President Clinton and to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The purpose of the petition is to force the Ethiopian government to accept the call for an immediate cease-fire and to implement the OAU Framework Agreement for peaceful resolution.

If you want to obtain a petition card, you can contact:

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