



## **ERITREA'S PLEA FOR DECOLONIZATION**

### **Indifference of Major UN Security Council Member States**

By

Zeraslasie Redie Shiker  
DIP 405  
November 28, 2007

#### **I. Introduction**

Eritrea, from the 1940s to 1991, had employed political and military means to liberate herself from successive colonial rules. Simultaneously, Eritrea continuously urged for international support to this end. Successive Ethiopian Governments through these decades claimed that Eritrea was part of Ethiopia and should remain so. The global community on its part, dominated by U.S. and Soviet Union geo-strategic interests, declined to listen to the voice of the Eritrean people, but supported the position of Ethiopia. Consequently, initially Eritrea was forcefully federated with and later was annexed by Ethiopia.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the indifference of major UN Security Council member states, mainly U.S. and Soviet Union, to Eritrea's plea for decolonization. To this end, the paper presents brief historical background of Eritrea. In addition, it discusses on deliberations of Allied Powers meetings and UN General Assembly sessions on the fate of Eritrean, held from 1946 - 1950. Moreover, the paper discusses on how Ethiopia, with U.S. and Soviet backing, from 1962 - 1991, hindered UN involvement in Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia. The paper concludes, with the liberation of Eritrea, in 1991, UN was allowed to engage in the issue because U.S. was left with no alternative solution to the problem. And, it urges the Security Council not to repeat past mistakes but act impartially to solve the current Eritrea - Ethiopia border problem.

#### **II. Background**

Before the coming of European colonialism into Africa, local rulers administered the territory now called the State of Eritrea. From the sixteenth to mid-nineteenth century various foreign powers tried to conquer and at times succeeded to rule parts of Eritrea temporarily, among them were Ottomans, Portuguese, and Ethiopia.

However, in 1890 Eritrea was proclaimed Italian colony. In 1941 British took control of Eritrea from Italy. Contrary to Eritrea's quest for self-determination, in 1950, UN because of U.S. pressure adopted a resolution federating Eritrea with Ethiopia. Yet neither the sponsor nor the UN did condemn the unilateral dissolution of the federal arrangement and subsequent annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia, in 1962.

Armed Struggle was launched in 1961. And parallel to the ongoing struggle, the Eritrean liberation movement had tried to resolve the problem through peaceful political means. But successive Ethiopian Governments, encouraged by U.S. and Soviet Union, declined to respect Eritrea's right for self-determination. In 1991 Eritrea was militarily liberated, and in 1993 it obtained independence, following UN monitored referendum.

### **III. International Meetings on Eritrea – Ethiopia Relations**

Since the beginning of Eritrean quest for self-determination, as noted below, several multilateral meetings were held to discuss the issue. However, geo-strategic interests of the countries who initiated these peace talks, not the wishes of the people of Eritrea, controlled the direction and outcome of the deliberations.

#### **Allied Powers meetings**

In 1946 the U.S., Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and France met in London, among others, to discuss the future status of Eritrea. In that meeting, Ethiopia delegation claimed that Eritrea was part of Ethiopia conquered by Italy and requested to get it back. Emperor Haile Selassie, during his meeting with President Roosevelt of the U.S., in 1945, promised to cooperate if Ethiopia allowed occupying Eritrea.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. had military and communication bases in Eritrea, in Massawa and Asmara respectively. Nonetheless, because of conflicting interests of the Allied Powers, the meeting of London decided to send an enquiry mission to study the wishes of the Eritrean people.

The enquiry mission, which visited Eritrea from November 1946 to January 1947, instead of consulting with the general public, met political party leaders and people's representatives nominated by the British Administration in Eritrea; even though the colonial administration maintained that the Eritrean people lack political maturity and were not prepared for independence.<sup>2</sup> However, contrary to the colonial assertion 55.2 percent of the people which met with the enquiry mission demanded Eritrean independence.<sup>3</sup>

Like the enquiry mission, the ministerial meeting of the Allied Powers which was held in Paris, France, in 1948, could not agree on the fate of Eritrea.<sup>4</sup> For example, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ghebrehiwet, Mismay. *Ageb! Gebenat Megza'etn Mekete Hzbi Eritran*, 185.

<sup>2</sup> Tesfay, Alemseged, *Ay'nfelale*, 253.

<sup>3</sup> Tesfay, Alemseged, 258.

<sup>4</sup> Tesfay, Alemseged, 265.

Soviet delegation, which was expecting victory of communism in the then Italian politics, proposed Eritrean independence but to be presided by Italian trusteeship rule. The United States, which was opposed to the Soviet position, recommended giving parts of Eritrea to its friend, Ethiopia; and after one year, to decide the fate of her military and communication bases in Eritrea. On the other hand, Britain was prepared to put Eritrea under the trusteeship of its ally, Ethiopia. Because of these contradicting interests the Eritrean question for decolonization was referred to the UN.

### **UN General Assembly sessions**

The Eritrean case for decolonization was raised three times at the UN, respectively in 1948, 1949, 1950.<sup>5</sup> In all these deliberations the political leaders which represented Eritrea, excluding a pro-Ethiopian political organization, demanded independence after some form of international trusteeship. Both political groupings were against Eritrean partition. Nonetheless, proposals made by major Security Council member states controlled the UN deliberations. For instance, in 1948, British proposal aimed at partitioning Eritrea between Ethiopia and the Sudan dominated the UN General Assembly discussion. This alien agenda had U.S. and Ethiopian support, but was opposed by countries like the Soviet Union and Italy. The latter two countries, among others, supported Eritrean independence following Italian trusteeship.

Similarly, the British agenda for partition and the United States plan designed to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia had controlled the UN General Assembly deliberations of 1949. Meanwhile, the global organization, due to proposals of other member states to respect peoples' right for self-determination, had decided to send UN enquiry commission to study the demands of the Eritrean people. But recommendations of the members of the commission varied from Eritrean independence, to federation with Ethiopia, to union with Ethiopia.

The Western world – particularly the U.S. and Britain - was suspicious that the Soviet Union might use independent Eritrea to spread its communist ideology through Africa, as well as undermine their economic interests in the Red Sea.<sup>6</sup> Consensus was thus reached among these countries and their allies to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia – then a friend of the West. UN was therefore pushed to adopt a resolution federating Eritrea with Ethiopia, in 1950. In 1962 the federal arrangement was unilaterally dissolved by Ethiopia and Eritrea was annexed. However, neither the countries who imposed the federal arrangement nor UN condemned the illegal action of Emperor Haile Selassie. Worst, these countries in collaboration with the Emperor blocked Eritrea's efforts to raise the case again in multilateral diplomatic forums, including the Organization for African Unity (OAU now called African Union) and the UN. None of these organizations, through the reign of the Emperor, did condemn Ethiopia's crimes in Eritrea, mass killings, burning of cities and villages, displacement and migration of people to name few.

---

<sup>5</sup> Gebrehiwet, Mismay, *Ageb*, 172 – 207.

<sup>6</sup> Tesfay, Alemseghed, *Ay'nfelale*, 484.

## Meetings of Berlin

Ethiopia, with the coming of Mengstu Hailemariam in political power, in 1974, had forged strong alliance with the countries of Eastern block, especially with the Soviet Union. Substantial military, economic and political assistance was therefore extended to Ethiopia till the collapse of the patron. The position of these countries on the Eritrean question was similar to the former Ethiopian ally, the U.S. Ethiopia's alliance with the Soviet Union, against Eritrean people's right for decolonization, was exposed in the Soviet guided Berlin meetings, East Germany, February – June 1978.<sup>7</sup>

In these peace talks, Eritrea represented by the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), among others, demanded that Ethiopia respect the Eritrean people's right for self-determination, and allow participation of international observers at the meetings. Nonetheless, Ethiopia and the host country were opposed to the Eritrean proposal. Their proposal was regional autonomy for Eritrea. Worse, Berlin had warned that the Eritrean liberation struggle was against communist ideals in Ethiopia.<sup>8</sup>

## Atlanta and Nairobi meetings

During the falling down of the Soviet Union, former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, brokered meetings between Eritrea and Ethiopia were held in Atlanta, U.S., and Nairobi, Kenya, in September and November 1989 respectively.<sup>9</sup> In Atlanta, the EPLF reiterated its position announced in 1980: UN supervised referendum to decide the status of Eritrea. Also, it demanded participation of international observers, including UN and OAU, at the peace talks. On the other hand, Ethiopia was opposed to the idea of referendum, and participation of intergovernmental organizations at the negotiations.

President Carter, like his U.S. and Soviet predecessors, viewed the Eritrean war of liberation as Ethiopian internal matter, so that UN had no authority to seat in meetings related to this issue. Revealing this stance, President Carter, during his private consultation with the Government of Ethiopia, promised to prevent UN from participating in the meeting of Nairobi.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, his arguments at the Nairobi meeting were against the participation of the global organization.

## Washington and London meetings

On the eve of Eritrea's liberation, the United States, like what it did in 1952, tried to impose federal solution on the Eritrean people. This plan became public at the U.S. mediated Eritrea – Ethiopia meeting held in Washington, in 1990.<sup>11</sup> Ethiopia was comfortable with the proposal though Eritrea was against.

---

<sup>7</sup> Saed, Alamin Mohamed, *Hidghet Zeyefikd Mesel*, 69 -98.

<sup>8</sup> Saed, Alamin Mohamed, *Hidghet Zeyefikd Mesel*, 78 – 9.

<sup>9</sup> Saed, Alamin Mohamed, *Hidghet Zeyefikd Mesel*, 149 – 75.

<sup>10</sup> Saed, Alamin Mohamed, *Hidghet Zeyefikd Mesel*, 161 – 90.

<sup>11</sup> Saed, Alamin Mohamed, *Hidghet Zeyefikd Mesel*, 203 – 10.

Following the failure of this meeting, the EPLF launched new peace initiative, among others, urging for UN peacekeeping to replace the Ethiopian colonial army stationed in Eritrea, and UN monitored referendum to decide the fate of Eritrea. The U.S., by ignoring this proposal, initiated a meeting in London, on May 26, 1991.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, Eritrea got liberated on May 24. Simultaneously, the Ethiopian armed opposition groups, supported by the EPLF, took control of Ethiopia. The meeting of London was held as planned but it left the U.S. with no alternative solution to the problem. The door for UN engagement on the Eritrean question for decolonization was therefore opened.

The Transitional Government of Eritrea, formed in 1991, to back Eritrea's military victory with international legal recognition urged for UN monitored referendum to decide the status of the people of Eritrea. Ethiopia and the international community, including UN and the OAU welcomed the initiative.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, in April 1993, 99.8 percent of the Eritrean people voted for independence. In the same year Eritrea joined the UN.

However, in 1998, again war broke between Eritrea and Ethiopia, now because of border. UN mandated border commission, the Eritrea Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC), gave its final and binding verdict in April 2002. Eritrea accepted the ruling, but Ethiopia is requesting to renegotiate it, which is a clear violation of international law. And as such, peace security and development of the two countries in particular, and the countries of the sub-region in general is under threat.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

Eritrea's history of decolonization, among others, uncovers national interests of Security Council member states hinders the work of the UN. The U.S. and Soviet Union to further their geo-strategic interests and friendship with Ethiopia, from 1946 - 1991, used the UN against the Eritrean people's right for self-determination. UN was able to conduct the Eritrean referendum in 1993 because no alternate solution to the Eritrea – Ethiopia problem was left at the disposal of the Security Council – particularly the U.S. Though late, UN intervention had resulted in a lasting legal solution to the problem: Eritrean independence.

However, presently the Security Council is showing similar indifference to the Eritrea Ethiopia border problem. For peace, security and development to prevail between the warring countries and among the countries of the sub-region the UN Security Council must act impartially. It should enforce border demarcation on the bases of the final and binding award given in April 2002. International efforts aimed at normalizing relations between the two countries should follow demarcation.

---

<sup>12</sup> Personal conversation with Eritrea's current ambassador to Nigeria, H.E. Mohamed Ali Omaro. He was Ambassador to Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Kenya, as well as Representative of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) to the Sudan in the 1980s and 1990s. October 13, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Conversation with Ambassador Mohamed Ali Omaro.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Said, Alamin Mohamed. *Hidghet Zeyefkid Mesel*. 2001. Reprint, Samara: Hidri Publishers, 2002. Written in *Tigrigna*, one of the working languages of Eritrea.

Ghebrehiwet, Mismay. *Ageb! Tarikhi Eritra Mebel Oisra Zemen: Megzaetawi Gebenatn Mekhete Hzbi Eritran*. Asmara: Red Sea Press, Inc., 2002. Written in *Tigrigna*.

Personal conversation with Ambassador Mohamed Ali Omaro, current Ambassador of Eritrea to Nigeria. He was Ambassador to Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Kenya, as well as Representative of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Provisional Government of Eritrea to the Sudan in the 1980s and 1990s. October 14, 2007.

Tesfay, Alemseged. *Ay'nfelale: Eritra 1941 – 1950*. 2001. Reprint, Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 2002. Written in *Tigrigna*.