

Destructive strategies of the EPLF **regime to confiscate assets of the Red Sea** **Afars**

It is undeniable fact that the Red Sea Afars have paid the highest human and material price in the 30 years war of liberation. One can baldly say that the Red Sea area is the birth place of the war of liberation mainly due to its strategic location and the strong taste for liberty of the people. The Red Sea Afars are proud and humble people, with their eternal love for their motherland incomparable to none.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), in the 60s, used this strategic corridor for the movement of aid and armaments and for the smooth facilitation of military trainings. Although no clear and tangible evidences were found as to the benefits the Red Sea Afars had received from the ELF, the groups used this area without any limit and without any price to pay. Red Sea Afars, until the time when the ELF mass murdered civilians mainly the elderly, children and women, had strong and vibrant participation in the struggle that was going on. However, the people did not get what they deserved: at a place called Nabro, many civilians mostly innocent children, the elderly and women were mass murdered and buried in a barbaric manner. That was the response the people got from the so called “liberators”.

As a result, many Red Sea Afars were victims of forced migration to other places. Some of the blind measures taken by the so called political groups are:-

- The Ramlo (Ar’anu) forced genocide in 1968 by ELF,
- The 1974 direct and indirect mass killings by ELF,
- The 1968 genocide by the EPLF in 1968 in a place called Bori Asela.

The above stated facts indicate the true identity of the “liberators”. Although they might have political pluralism in other issues, their perspective on the Red Sea Afars made them one the same. One can strongly argue that their explicit and/or implicit intention on the Red Sea Afars did not have a fundamental difference from that of the ELF/EPLF.

The purpose of this article, however, is to reveal the true identity of the EPLF regime and its barbaric acts on the Red Sea Afars.

The 1994 referendum marked the birth of the Eritrean state, with new hopes and inspirations among the peoples of Eritrea. The Red Sea Afars, part of the Eritrean peoples, cast their ballot for the

state of Eritrea with a vote percentage of 95%, on tenterhooks that they would finally realize the taste of freedom. Moreover, the referendum for the was means, not the end for the Red Sea Afars: they wanted to see rule of law be respected, rights of nations and nationalities be respected on equal manner, and mutual cooperation and respect be appreciated across the nation. What the people have now realized is that it was a waste of time and hope.

After the rebel group grabbed power, it faded the peoples' hope for democracy and freedom and return imposed long lasting curtailment of movement and expression of opinions. What was considered worse was that all the mass killings and other barbaric acts were undertaken by "freedom fighters" and in some cases, the acts were worse than the previous military regime. What EPLF had brought about made the Eritrean people feel regret about the cost of the war of liberation.

The first groups of victims are the Red Sea Afars, who for the last 18 years were targets of systematic and inhumane acts of the EPLF. It is hardly possible to describe what the EPLF had brought about to the Eritrean people in general and to the Red Sea Afars in particular. However, the author will try to focus on two major areas of the systematic atrocities the EPLF is imposing on the Red Sea Afars.

Political arena

The Red Sea Afars inhabit the north eastern part of Eritrea, stretching from Ras Dumera in the north to Mt. Mousa Ale in the south. They live in the most strategic location of Eritrea, along the shore of the Red Sea, which is the gateway to the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Hence the name Red Sea Afars is used to differentiate from their cousins in Ethiopia and Djibouti. Figures indicate that most of the world's trade is transported through this strategic area. Moreover, colossal reserve of fossil fuel is found along this line and this makes it a first class trade route to the world. These diverse and rich resources brought "curse" rather than "blessings" to the original inhabitants by the regime which claimed that it stood for the causes of "its people". The regime undertook a systematic ethnic cleansing and horrific acts to eliminate the Red Sea Afars from their places.

In the first five years of the EPLF regime, the strategy was to weaken the ever-strong solidarity of the Red Sea Afars by dividing the whole region in two administrative parts: Northern Red Sea district and Southern Red Sea district. What was worse to accept was the grim fact that the regime divided the land with the cruel intention of waning peoples' original territory by mass killing and imposing strong sanctions to purge communication and by bringing other people from the Eritrean highlands. This was to "dilute" if not to eliminate the strong sense of opposition of the Red Sea Afars. The forced villagization program is an example to this.

Although the Red Sea Afars had a long established tradition of holding light armaments, they had no interest and time to undertake robbery and theft. However, the regime, without waiting for the response to the order to subdue small arms, sent its troops to the remote parts of the district and inculcated terror among the people. Those who opposed the measure were imprisoned and some of them were brutally murdered.

To take 100 percent control over the Afars' assets and market transaction, the regime at first claimed it would encourage free market economy in general and the salt market in particular. As a result, it collected sufficient information by encouraging Afars to open LC and other banking services. Afterwards, the mafia-type wing of the EPLF controlled the market behind and every transaction was dominated by the regime. The regime took the wrong impression that the "economic mighty" of the Afars in the future would put the regime in a fragile situation. This led to the confiscation of Afar's assets and freezing of their money in banks. The regime went as far as weakening the vibrant trade transaction with the Yemen.

Destroying culture and identity of the peoples was another strategy followed by the EPLF regime. Through its ideological and military institute, SAWA, the regime tried its best to eradicate Afar-af, the native language of the people and replace it with Tigrigna, the official language of Eritrea. Red Sea Afar students were systematically denied of access to universities and colleges; the only access they were granted was to Teachers' Training Institutes (TTIs) and those persons were enrolled in areas where there was no electricity and other basic services were "luxurious" to find. In the name of crafting a capable and vibrant generation, the regime offered primary education (1-4) in Afar-af and the remaining grades had their respective impositions for Afar students. The original letters the Afars had been using for more than three decades were completely changed with something tough to understand and as some scholars refer them "alien" to the people. This had created a barrier to establish communication with Afars living in Ethiopia and Djibouti.

Here, one can see the double-edged blade of the EPLF intention. On one hand, the regime wanted to twist the hand from the back and destroy the language and identity of the people and create identity crisis and on the other hand it wanted to its cruel purpose forcefully, by destroying whoever it is that stood along its way.

The above grim reality looks much grey when one observes the health situation of the Red Sea Afars. One can find a growing number of cases of easily curable and preventable diseases like malaria, cholera, TB and others. Medicines are ordered without any proper diagnosis and the famous tablet is "paracetamol". Only military personnel get the best treatment and one needs to pay more than 50,000 Nakfa to get out of Eritrea for treatment. The other option is to wait for death.

Food rationing and sanction are the other destructive measures imposed on the Red Sea Afars. It is a known fact that the people own an area that is inhospitable for agriculture, and the only food source is the sea. The regime, however, banned any engagement on the fishing activity of the people and imprisoned those who trespass it is recessed the order. Only those who have special licenses from the regime can they enjoy fishing and most of them are Tigrigna speaking sympathizers of the regime. The Red Sea Afars are now idle and starved to death.

The livestock wealth of the Red Sea Afars are depleting from time to time for various reasons. Although there is a huge food-for-aid scheme program in other parts of the country (this, by itself, is highly debatable for the simple reason that the regime is selling most of the aid it receives in the name of the people it is receiving), the Red Sea Afars are bound to get 50 kg of wheat in exchange for two

goats and 100 kg for a camel. This is plummeting the livestock capital of the people. One can here see the clear discrimination of the regime on the people. Free movement is considered as trespassing and their lands have been encroached. This eventually leads to the migration of the people for their safety and leave their areas supporters of the regime.

Forced migration

Although it is evident that most Eritreans are migrating out to neighboring countries in flocks, the case of Red Sea Afars is far from imagination. The Afars live in the area stretched from Dahlak archipelagos in the north to the Assab peninsula in the south; various efforts are being made by the EPLF to minimize their numbers in the official statistics to claim that they are minorities in the nation. Sometimes, the statistics put the figure as low as 2% or as high as 5%, while credible sources claim that the actual number is up to 562,000, which is 15% of the total population.

In the name of rehabilitating the infrastructure, the regime is now shifting the age old route stretching from Massawa to Assab to those places that have no villages and people. The systematic deprivation of basic rights of the people is now bearing unwanted fruits in the sense that new villages are being established along the shore and people from the Eritrean highlands are settling. As a result, Afar towns are becoming economically, socially and politically inefficient through the “invisible hands of the regime”.

The settling of Tigrigna speaking highlanders in originally conceived as Afar areas has led for the eventual evacuation of the Red Sea Afars from the area. More than 30,000 refugees are now found only in Ethiopia as a result. Close number of refugees are living in Yemen, and around 15,000 reside in Djibouti. The number is escalating from time to time.

On the other hand, the whereabouts of those who, for various reasons, have returned to their area remains mysterious. Some say the number can reach as high as 10,000. Although there were efforts to return refugees to their land, insignificant number of them has actually returned and many more are flocking away from “Adey Eritrea”.

Referring to the prisons, one can say that EPLF prisons are nightmares to civil right activists. Almost all inhumane and banned prisoners’ handling systems are implemented in Eritrean jails. What is worse, prisons are built in hostile and arid areas that are virtually difficult to contain prisoners. Others are built underground in areas where the heat is more than 35oc, whose number and condition is highly restricted to outsiders. These are the kind of prisons that the Red Sea Afars “spending their time” under the EPLF regime. Human rights agencies and activists insist that the number of jailed Red Sea Afars could reach as high as 10,000. Most of those are insane, who are only waiting for their death calmly. The presence of courts is beyond imagination: nobody knows who is jailed and who is freed. Everybody knows for sure that it is not permitted to request for the whereabouts of lost relatives once they are taken by EPLF military personnel.

Various unspeakable torturing techniques are employed up on prisoners by the regime. Tying up of arms and legs with electric wires, pulling out of nails, and other barbaric acts are implementing on the people. In addition, putting prisoners in dark places for a long time, burying people alive and other measures are taken on those unfortunate people.

It is up to human activists and friends of the Red Sea Afars to air the plights of the people to the world and reveal the atrocities of the regime.