

EU CONFERENCE ON ERITREA SAID A SUCCESS

Michael Abraha

The Eritrea-centered meeting under way in Brussels has been described a "huge success" by the conference spokesman, Abdurahman Sayed. He says EU and US delegates agreed on consolidating a coherent policy on Eritrea and the Horn of Africa Region. They also underscored the need to engage the Eritrean opposition and civil societies, according to Sayed.

The two day conference comes amid increased international pressure against Eritrea to end its gross human rights abuses and its involvement in piracy and terror ridden Somalia.

Mr. Kjell Bondevik, Former Prime Minister of Norway, told the conference Monday that the UN "must establish a commission of inquiry to investigate human rights violations in Eritrea".

Also addressing the EU conference was Ambassador Anna Gomes who called for "Smart Sanctions that hurt the people in power and not the people of Eritrea"

On the eve of the conference, Michael Abraha had a phone interview with **Abdurahman Sayed, Executive member of Citizens for Democratic Rights in Eritrea (CDRiE)** and spokesman for the Brussels conference. **Michael first asked Sayed what the conference aimed to achieve.**

The EEPA (Europe's External Policy Advisors) has enumerated the aims of the conference. They include: ensuring voice for the Eritrean Diaspora in policy discussions in building alternative approaches towards democracy in Eritrea; clarifying that EU and US policies on Eritrea originate from the same objectives; and promoting understanding of the danger an illegitimate and unaccountable regime poses to the regional peace and mobilize for a joint solution of common problems in the Horn Region.

ON THE CRITERIA USED TO CHOOSE PANELISTS FOR THE CONFERENCE:

First, it should be stated that Eritrea's interests are well represented at the Brussels gathering. Speakers were invited on individual basis depending on caliber and performance. This applied to Eritrean, US and EU representatives. On the Eritrean side, professionals like Professor Bereket Habte Selassie, Professor Gaim Kibreab and Dr. Daniel Mekonne were called upon as panelists because of the constitutional and other academic ideals and principles they have been articulating over the years in the service of the Eritrean cause. Woldeyessus Ammar is invited to address the gathering as a political leader, prolific writer and veteran journalist, well-versed in international affairs and diplomatic relations. Committed to the objectives of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA), Ammar is also Chairman of the Joint Leadership Committee of three major parties within EDA. Other speakers were invited because of their civic activities or human rights advocacy work. Our only motive is to make the best contribution at this crucial EU conference. This is the first Eritrea centered conference of its kind and we want to give the best performance on behalf of the Eritrean case. Nobody has the intention to promote any particular agenda or any particular individual or political or social group. No entity or individual should feel left out.

THE ROLE OF DIASPORA ERITREANS IN MAKING THE EU CONFERENCE POSSIBLE

Our current group, which we refer to as the Brussels Task Force, has been working with EEPA on lobbying EU policy makers for the last year and half. In July 2008 we visited the EU, and had a hearing at EU parliament, met with EU officials where we discussed EU relations with Eritrea and emphasized the need to have effective control mechanisms in place to ensure that the Eritrean people are the real beneficiaries of any development aid, that the Eritrean government is held to account for its record on respect for human rights, and democratization. We also called for release of all prisoners of conscience, and the need to hand over power to an elected body. These demands were in line with the Cotonou Agreement, which governs EU relations with Eritrea.

ERITREAN GOVERNMENT REACTION TO THE CONFERENCE

There hasn't been any direct or official Eritrean response or reference to the meeting. However, the Eritrean Ambassador has given an interview to a Belgian News Paper in which he claims that Eritrea is the "best country in Africa".

THE REGIME'S PRECONDITIONS - SUCH AS THE RESOLUTION OF ITS BORDER DISPUTES - BEFORE IT CAN ALLOW DEMOCRATIZATION AND BEGIN TO RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS

We believe the border issue should be seen separate from Democracy and democratization. The PFDJ regime may use the border or any other issue as a pretext to prolong their illegitimate grip on power. But we are clear as Eritrean human and political rights activists that the issue of Human and Political rights should and must not be subjected to any conditions. We are also clear that the border and other issue of conflicts should be resolved by peaceful means. The EU is obliged by the Cotonou Agreement to emphasize to the Eritrea authorities the need to respect human and political rights of the Eritrean people without any pre-conditions.