



Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you on behalf of all members of the Citizens for Democratic Rights in Eritrea-CDRiE, for inviting me to take part in this important conference. It is indeed a great honour to participate in such an important event with such a respectable guests and audience.

The idea of trying to converge US and EU policies on the Horn of Africa which is the main aim of this conference is indeed a worthwhile effort. We in Eritrea know all too well how conflicting approaches by world powers towards our region can complicate matters and increase tensions and the suffering of our peoples. In contrast, a holistic approach towards the region can be very positive as was the case of the Algiers Peace Agreement. The Horn of Africa has for a long time been a victim of the cold war era.

Not only has the fall of the Berlin Wall some twenty years ago today, united Europe and brought democracy and rule of law where it lacked, but it has also had a positive impact on our part of the world. Again and some eight years ago, the US and the EU played a crucial role in bringing to an end the latest destructive war between my country, Eritrea and Ethiopia. We all remember the Algiers Peace Agreement. The international community was at its best, reflected in its unity of purpose and determination. We the people of Eritrea will always remember and celebrate appreciate the huge commitment the international community has exhibited in bringing pressure to bear on the two governments to sign the peace agreement. The signing of the agreement was a very important step towards bringing about a peaceful and lasting political solution to the conflict. But, In spite of all the efforts to reach the agreement it hasn't succeeded in bringing a lasting peace to the region mainly because the international community has so far failed to discharge its duty to oversee the implementation of the Algiers agreement. As the consequence, stability of the region is fraught with tension and resentment.

I have no doubt that even today; the coming together of the world powers in dealing with the problems in our region would have a positive and lasting impact. It was in this sense that one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century Albert Einstein said,

*"I never teach my pupils. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn."*

The US and the EU as the leading democracies of our world can play a constructive role. By working together and making the very noble values on which their

democracies are founded at the centre of their policies, they can facilitate the creation of favourable regional conditions that can enable us to tackle the problems that have been blighting the lives of our peoples in the region. Short sighted policies that reflect only geopolitical interests do not bring peace or stability anywhere in the world. By working together and respecting the basic rights of the peoples concerned, the EU and US can help us achieve sustainable peace. Peace in our war torn region is a necessary condition to eradicate poverty which is the major enemy of all the peoples of the region. This would no doubt help the efforts to bring about democracy, justice and rule of law.

In the rapidly globalising world, the effects of lack of peace in one part of the world can detrimentally affect the rest. A classic case is the unresolved conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia with all its repercussions including its negative impact on the already complex situation in Somalia. The thousands of refugees who are seeking protection here in Europe are the directly result of lack of peace and political stability. In Eritrea which is not only lacking basic rule of law, but the open ended compulsory military service has made life impossible to every citizen below the age of fifty and their families. In neighbouring Somalia, the situation is even worse. There is also the Darfur tragedy and deteriorating situation in the rest of Sudan. There is so much that the EU and the US can do together to make life better for the people in the region. But the lack of political will to enforce international laws and treaties has made the situation much worse and complicated.

The conflicts in the horn of Africa are so intertwined that it is ineffective and counter productive not to take a holistic approach. The need for a comprehensive approach to bring about a lasting settlement is long overdue. Countries of the horn are inhabited by people to whom boundaries do not mean a lot. They are linked by geography, history, culture and livelihood. More important, they share common aspiration- namely to live in peace and harmony. A comprehensive approach would certainly help bring about the much needed peace and stability to the people of the region and improve world security. After all, the Horn of Africa is of huge strategic importance to the rest of the world. Therefore Peace, security and stability in the region is in the interest of all.

In my country Eritrea, lack of peace is the single most important factor stifling every effort made at democratisation and nation building. The Eritrean government is using the unresolved border stalemate with Ethiopia as a pretext to maintain its grip on power and suppress freedom. Twenty years after its independence, my country is still ruled by a single party. The country has not ruled by a constitution, basic rule of law is totally absent; there is no freedom of expression and creed. To make things even worse, the economic situation has been deteriorating in the last few years to the point where Eritrea is today facing severe food shortage as is being reported by major world bodies such WFP and UNICEF.

On the other hand, it is also right to ask what we Eritreans are doing to change the state of affairs of our country where conditions are continuously deteriorating?

As you are all aware, there is total lack of freedom and basic rule of law in Eritrea today. This has especially been so after the recent border war with neighbouring Ethiopia. Ironically, the political space during the war was far better than when it ended. While it was hoped that the little political space which existed in Eritrea before and during the war would continue to progress, Eritrea was however plunged deep into an unprecedented authoritarian rule. Today, we are probably the only country in the world without any independent media. The once promising young Eritrean independent press is totally closed and all the journalists are behind bars since 2001. Our entire younger generation is still tied up to an endless national service. The human rights situation is appalling as is documented by various Diaspora based Eritrean Human Rights organisations as well as international bodies such as AI and HRW and others.

Under these conditions, Eritreans outside the country and specially those who live in the free world had no choice but to continue their peaceful struggle for change in Eritrea. In the last few years, these pro democracy movements have done a great deal both in exposing the gross human rights violations as well as raising the awareness among the people abroad and within the country.

It is in these conditions that the Citizens for Democratic Rights in Eritrea was formed almost a year ago. The launching of CDRiE was the culmination of long and intensive dialogue among concerned Eritrean activists and academics from various parts of the world and with different various religious and ethnic backgrounds. These discussions and exchanges of ideas which had lasted eighteen months were mainly centred on the most challenging issues facing Eritrea today. In January 2009, CDRiE was finally launched as a worldwide civic movement during a successful founding conference held in London, UK. The conference was widely reported in international media such as the BBC as well as in Diaspora based national news outlets. CDRiE is now working relentlessly with all other pro democracy movements to achieve peace, justice and democracy in Eritrea. Our aim is for political and national dialogue to be entrenched as a culture. We believe that dialogue is the only medium that would enable us to tackle the prevailing political stalemate in our country.

As we Eritreans move forward on the path of mobilising the Eritrean public in favour of peaceful democratic change in our country, we believe that much remains to be done especially in the area of civic education designed to promote the development and consolidation of democratic values. However, our efforts are hampered by lack of resources, something we believe that organisations in the major democracies of the world who promote democracy and human rights have the moral responsibility

to contribute. For us, this being a major obstacle, we look towards those who promote and encourage the development of democratic values. We believe that words must be matched with deeds.

There are also other areas where we believe the leading democracies in the world can play a positive role in enhancing the democratization process in our country Eritrea. One such area is the engagement policy the EU pursues towards Eritrea which we believe should be one that encourages the respect of basic human rights and good governance as stipulated in the Cotonou agreement, an agreement which governs EU cooperation with the developing world including Eritrea.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude my brief presentation by a quoting a famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle who said:

*"It is possible to fail in many ways...while to succeed is possible only in one way."*

Let us work together to find that way and we will surely succeed in bringing peace, justice, stability and prosperity to our beleaguered region. We in CDRiE are determined to do our best and work with others to contribute to peace, stability, democracy and prosperity to our region.

Thank you