

The Brussels Conference: A Democratic Right

By Habtom Yohannes¹

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The coming days a conference will be held in the Belgian capital Brussels on the policies of the United States (US) and European Union (EU) towards The Horn of Africa in general and our country Eritrea in particular. In this article, I will refer to this Brussels Conference 2009 as (BC-2009). The purpose of this article is an attempt to redress the erroneous reporting by some Eritrean websites and the subsequent actions taken by some compatriots and Eritrean organizations. The Eritrean peoples and their friends have the right to be informed impartially and correctly. It is only this kind of reporting that will help our peoples to make their own mind and decide on their own future. Even though, I am part of the Task Force², I will try to be as objective as possible in this article. It is my firm conviction that only truth and nothing but the naked truth itself is the powerful weapon against dictatorship, misinformation and chaos. Accountability is a common good but I am not accountable to every Eritrean in the street. I act because I am an Eritrean. I represent myself and I have the full right, as everybody else, to speak on behalf of my people, my country and myself. Let others judge me on the fruits of my work.

First of all let us all agree that organizing a conference is the democratic right of every citizen and organization in a democratic society. The organizers are not obliged to ask for a permission from a democratic government or organization to come together whenever they will and wherever they will as long as they do not transgress the law. It is the democratic right of the organizers to invite certain speakers, to set the agenda and to work with whomever they wish. This democratic right is unthinkable under the present Eritrean Government and other dictatorially ruled nations. I never thought that personalities and organizations that pretend to struggle for democratic rights would oppose a peaceful conference for peace and democracy in our region. However, I respect their right to oppose as long as this is not accompanied with threats and propaganda based on misinformation. What are the facts about the BC-2009?

Who hosts the BC-2009?

The Brussels Conference 2009 is not hosted by the European Union. The European External Policy Advisors (EEPA), an independent non-governmental organization (NGO), based in the Belgian capital Brussels, hosts this conference with the active help and participation of the

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² The Task Force is not an organization but a group of Eritreans under the inspiring leadership of Kassahun Checole who met first in London to assess how they can better put Eritrea on the agenda of the international community and the EU in particular. Meriem Ommer, Kassahun Checole, Mehret Gebreyesus, Dawit Mesfin, Dr. Daniel Rezene, Habtom Yohannes and this group was later expanded to include Abdulrahman Sayed (Bohashem), Tsedal Yohannes, Selam Kidane, Noel Yosief and Meron Estifanos (Exclusion?). These Eritreans have diverse backgrounds and are active within the Task Force on individual basis and don't represent their organization within the Task Force or its activities.

Task Froce, a group of Eritreans with diverse backgrounds. See footnote for more details. EEPA is not an EU-institution! I can understand that some reporters might get confused by the name “European” in EEPA, but there are many independent organizations with the term “European” in their names; take the European Islamic League (ESL) of the Libanese-Belgian Abou Jajah for example. If somebody is in disagreement with the way ESL is organizing its conference, then that somebody must address its letter to the ESL and not to the European Union or the European Commission. Misinformation breeds misinformation and can even lead to diplomatic disaster. One such example is the letter of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA)³ signed by its chairperson, Mr. Tewelde Gebreselassie. He better writes another letter asking the European Commission for apology for associating the European Commission with this “divisive” and “exclusionist” conference; “a step to intervene in the internal affairs of...”. The letter is internally and externally a diplomatic fiasco. Other individuals have followed suit without checking the facts and have been writing articles that are full of assumptions.

Who Are The Task Force?

Again the European External Policy Advisors (EEPA) is an independent ngo with the energetic Dr. Mirjam van Reizen as its founder and director. Van Reizen is not new to Eritrea and her friendship with Eritrea and Eritreans is not of yesterday. There is not democratic law that forbids cooperation and coordination of activities based on long time friendship. Kassahun Checole is someone who invests in friendship and who leads by example. Thanks to his endeavors, some Eritreans on individual basis met in London in March 2008 to think about their own country and their own people. Did they to ask for permission from the Eritrean Government or opposition groups? After some months they started their activity and engaged the European Commission and the European Parliament. The first EU-hearing on Eritrea was organized in the European Parliament under the Chairmanship of Mrs. Glenys Kinnock, Member of the European Parliament and a long time friend of Eritrea. Different issues on Eritrea were raised and debated in the presence of a representative of the Eritrean Government, different international organizations, and members of the European Commission and the European Parliament. The Task Force put Eritrea on the agenda of the European Union, and demanded accountability from the European Union for its policy towards Eritrea. This first EU-hearing was in the first of July 2008.

Some months later, on September 18, 2008, a second EU-hearing on Eritrea was organized, where the undersigned was one of the speakers. Mrs. Anna Gomes, member of the European Parliament, chaired the hearing that was organized by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). Two representatives of the EDA (Eritrean Democratic Alliance), namely: Ato Adhanom Gebremariam and Ato Bashir Ishak attended the meeting and had the chance to address the gathering. Both the aforementioned representatives of the EDA thanked the organizers and the European Commission for putting Eritrea on the agenda but there were no accusations of “exclusion” or “intervention in internal affairs of the EDA/Eritrea”.

Again the involvement of all individuals of the Task Force was individual and not organizational. Mrs. Selam Kidane is of Release Eritrea and NECS-Europe (Network of

³ <http://www.meskerem.net/0711EDA9-01SE.pdf>

European Civic Societies in Europe) and Noel Yosef is of EHDR-UK and NECS-Europe. But their involvement until this BC-2009 is personal and they do not represent any of their organizations. The same goes for Meron Estifanos (EMDHR of South Africa) and Dr. Daniel Rezene of CDRIE and EMDHR-South Africa. All the members of the Task Force have been active on personal level and they do not represent any of their movement or political party. Ato Woldeyesus Ammar of the Uniting Parties (UP) and member of the executive council of EDA (Eritrean Democratic Alliance) and Ato Suleiman A. Hussein, the current Chairman of CDRIE are the only invited Eritreans representing their respective organizations.

Ato Suleiman A. Hussein and Woldeyesus Ammar are invited guests and are not members of the Task Force. The Task Force is formed of the following persons:

1. Mrs. Meriem Ommer,
2. Mrs. Meron Estifanos,
3. Mrs. Tsedal Yohannes,
4. Mrs. Selam Kidane,
5. Ato Kassahun Checole,
6. Wro. Mehret Gebreyesus
6. Ato Dawit Mesfin,
7. Ato Abdulrahman Sayed (Bohashem),
8. Dr. Daniel Rezene Mekonnen,
9. Ato Noel Yoesief,
10. Ato Habtom Yohannes

All are active within the Task Force on individual basis. Not all the above-mentioned personalities had close contacts with Kassahun. One can even say that others brought some of them in contact with Kassahun. Mrs. Anna Gomes has nothing to do with the Task Force. She is just an European Member of Parliament (MEP).

I agree with Ibrahim Tada⁴ that our society needs to be more vigilant than before. How can a society become vigilant without good information and how can the people get impartial information without professional journalism based on facts, double-check and accountability? When reporting and even commenting, a journalist should be dictated by an internationally accepted ethics of journalism and not by his / her own prejudice and assumptions.

If a reporter writes a story and the people concerned approach him/her to rectify the erroneous part of the reporting, the reporter should accept his mistake and rectify it. That in itself is part of professional journalism. So far I have given many examples of what is wrong in the recent Gedab-reporting regarding the BC-2009. This doesn't make the website less reliable. Awate.com has been one of the credible, professional and bold Eritrean websites. We should cherish it and at the same time criticize it constructively whenever the need arises.

⁴ <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/5354/5/>

Accountability? Yes, but to whom and when?

It has become a fashion to demand for democracy, accountability, inclusiveness and transparency in season and out of season. Accountability is good but who should be accountable to whom and when? A serious organization, political or otherwise is first and foremost accountable to its board of directors and its constituency. Let us first pull our own strings before talking in the name the Eritrean peoples and the Eritrean nation. I can tell you that nobody within the Task Force has the pretension to represent a group of Eritreans let alone the entire Eritrean people. Let us work and let the people judge what is lasting and what is artificial. I wish you all success with the meetings you are organizing. If you invite me I will consider your invitation and if you don't invite me, I won't get mad at you. It is your right to invite or not invite.

Reactions are welcome at fithi7@gmail.com