

A Witness Account
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During this brief presentation, I would like to mention a few points that highlight the problems that Eritrea is experiencing today in general and the plight of my own family in particular. I would like to inform the audience that I, due to my circumstances and limited knowledge on pertinent matter, have purposely avoided to present an explanation as to why those problems have come into existence. Instead, I will briefly touch on what is lacking in the areas of democracy, human rights and justice and then share with you the story of my family. Allow me to start with the question of democracy in Eritrea.

In Eritrea, before and after independence, the democracy theme was always endorsed by the leaders of the liberation struggle who eventually assumed power in post-liberation Eritrea. Let alone the fighters, the public was very well versed on the values and principles of democracy. In fact, that was one of the reasons why the general public, with the democracy dream in sight, fully supported the struggle. But much to our dismay, that dream was not fulfilled.

A few years after independence, presidential elections that were planned for 1997, and later postponed to 2001, never took place. The elections committee made all the necessary preparations in drafting the law on political parties which was later discarded before it was even distributed among the so called national assembly members for approval. And so Eritrea, with the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the only party which is allowed to operate in the country, at the forefront, continued to march as a one-party state. Basically, Eritrea fell into the hands of few party members who are strictly controlled by the president. Those who wanted to introduce change were barred and a number of prominent ex-fighters were indefinitely put in jail.

The President, who continuously rebukes the concept and tenets of democracy, in other words, as if Eritreans are clueless and do not deserve to enjoy their democratic rights, he continues to defy and discredit universally accepted democratic values. I can confidently say that the government preaches the value of democracy on one hand, and then it questions, rather vainly and conceitedly, its tenets and its 'misplaced values' in societies like Eritrea. Simply, the government is responsible for repression and for hindering the development of democracy in our country.

On the question of human rights, one can confidently say the violations are continuing unabated in Eritrea. As the majority of the Eritrean people lives in fear and remains gagged from expressing their opinion, the leadership continues to exercise its power as if it is above any law in the country. Until now, the government has not allowed opposition parties, independent civil society organizations or faith groups to operate in the country. There is no recognizable rule of law or justice system, civilian or military. Of course, one hears about the special court a system which emerges and submerges periodically whenever the government deems it necessary. Detainees have no means of legal redress and judges are unable to challenge or question arbitrary detentions as the government continues to violate human rights. Basically, constitutional and legal protections of human rights are neither respected nor enforced. There are thousands of detainees languishing in cells, containers underground

prisons, residential villas, ware houses without due process of law for years. They have no right to see anyone, in isolation, even their loved ones as close as their husband or wife and kids. My sister, Aster Yohannes, a veteran fighter of the liberation war, is one of the thousands victim of such rule since Dec 2003.

To talk about my sister is the most difficult part of my presentation. It is difficult because I am not strong enough to tell you the story without being emotional. My sister, driven by her motherly instincts, decided to return from the US to be with her children who were already suffering from the unjustified imprisonment of their father. You may know that Aster's husband, Petros Solomon, a renowned veteran fighter and former high government official, fell into the hands of the government a year after Aster left for the US to pursue her studies. Realizing that her children were left fatherless, she, not knowing what awaited her back home, decided to go home and be with her children. On December 11, 2003, as her children waited in the Asmara airport to welcome their mother, whom they had not seen in almost four years, Eritrean security took Aster away as she stepped off the plane. She has been in prison ever since, to this date it is 10 yrs her kids growing without their mothers love and affection. The plight of my sister does not finish there; her three kids are also detained since June 2009.

The punishment Aster has sustained since her return, the cruelty her loving husband has been subjected to, the trauma her children have been put through, cannot be described in words. The abuse and loss of human dignity the family members have suffered from, the fear that has been instilled in their friends and relatives is simply too much to list in this brief presentation. No one, apart from people like me who live in the comfort of my home, not within reach of the government's tentacles, can mention their names publicly. We have no information about her well being, when will she be brought to court of justice, what is she accused of. There is no day of visitation by loved ones; there is no office or responsible delegate to inquire about a prisoner. It is forbidden to ask the only choice we have is suffering in silence. The more the government attempts to blackmail and erase her name and that of her husband from public memory, the more miserable I become and wonder the psychological effect to her kids and my mother. I simply do not have the energy to fight back. I am growing more and more resigned as the suffering continues. Aster needs help, her husband needs help, her children need help, and Eritreans need help. If it is not you who else will help my sister? The story of Aster and her family is the story of Eritrea. Eritrea needs help.

I believe it is time that the European Union and the US stood firm to rescue whatever is left of Eritrea. You know that the deceptive nature of the government is far too obvious. I know the government plans to stay in power for as long as it takes; and certainly it has no plans to democratize the country, improve human rights, and install a justice system that is fair in the foreseeable future. The EU and the US, who are aware of the fact that my sister and others are silently suffering in the country, need to make a well informed decision in their dealings with the Eritrean Government. In the mean time, I will continue to pray that one day I will be able to see my sister free and reunited with her family to live a happy family life.

Thank you.