



Part II

Mr Yemane Gebreab's rebuttal to the Commission of Inquiry Report on Human Rights in Eritrea (June 2016) does not reflect factual reality on the ground.

Introduction

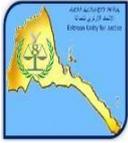
In this piece we aim to highlight some of the discrepancies of Mr Yemane's rebuttal to the COI. In particular we will address the issues of Human Rights, Eritrean asylum seekers, the Eritrean constitution, women under PFDJ, religious freedom, cultural erosion, supporters of the regime, and the regime's policy of division and impoverishment of the Eritrean society. In order to make it more convenient for readers it is published in 3 parts and it ends with concluding remarks.

Part I explored the extent to which the PFDJ regime violated Human Rights, it refuted Mr Yeman Gebreab's claim about the number and motive of Eritrean asylum seekers, and the Eritrean Constitution.

Part II

In order to break down society, break women

Young women are particularly hit hard by the lawlessness and destructive policies of the PFDJ regime. Eritrean women have been subject to gender related abuses including rape and other forms of sexual violence. This inevitably has wide ranging ramifications on their lives and on the Eritrean society in general. Study shows that 'some of the most frequent psychological symptoms [of rape] are anxiety, sleep disorders, nightmares, apathy, loss of self-confidence, depression and, in more severe cases, psychosis. Self-loathing and suicide are not uncommon responses' [13]. A responsible government would protect its women from any form of sexual violence. Unfortunately rape and maltreatment of women is one of the marks of the Eritrean regime, no matter how the regime tries to spin the reality. In the absence of any laws to protect them, women in Eritrea live in a dangerous 'environment of rape' where they are exposed to any sexual violence at the hands of military men who have absolute power over them. The regime forces every young woman in the nation to undertake military training. Before they complete their high school, both genders are expected to go to Sawa military camp – away from home. That is where their nightmare starts but it goes on indefinitely afterwards [14]. Women and underage girls are sexually harassed, forced to serve married military men, raped, coerced to agree to sexual activity against their will - and often with men old enough to be their fathers. It is disheartening to learn that some of the girls and young women try to pre-empt unwanted pregnancy by injecting anti-fertility medicine which often carries side effects such as excessive or



constant bleeding. Following incidences of rape, many girls and young women try to abort the foetus by themselves, with no medical help. As a result they end up with fatal infection - especially because they cannot talk about it for fear of reprisal and due to the social stigma associated with unwanted pregnancy. When these women and girls die their families are not told of the true causes of their death.

Many of these victims carry the scar of those horrible abuses which restrict their prospect of healthy sexual relationships; others lose their mind as a consequence of the traumas they experienced. Their misery is made worse by the rampant extrajudicial detentions where they are abused further without recourse to any legal process. Given this harsh reality, victims should be encouraged to seek professional therapeutic support such as Counselling. If that is not available they need to be encouraged to share their experiences with someone they trust. We have come across victims who kept their traumas unaddressed for up to a decade and more due to lack of services and encouragement. These victims need multi-dimensional support, which we hope Eritreans will be sensitive to victims who display the above symptoms and empathise/sympathise with them.

In the Eritrean traditional Codes and Bylaws women were protected against any form sexual harassment. If the PFDJ did not dismantle these laws, women (and indeed all citizens) would have been living with their dignity intact. In case of rape, a woman did not need any witness or evidence other than her own words. The onus was on the accused (man) to prove his innocence. `ንጻል ኣፋ ኢዩ ምስክራ` ኢሉ ምስል ደቀንስትዮ ዝከላኸል ዓንቀጽ ኣብ ኩላተን ሕግታት እንዳባ ተመዚቡ ይርከብ [15]. In a stark contrast: under PFDJ regime if women report an incident of rape they are accused of false claim and are victimized further. One of many examples, a young female nurse, escaping from Eritrea, has recently given poignant testimonial of crimes perpetrated against women. Her account clearly shows that sexual violence in Eritrea is systematic [16].

Women's misery starts at Sawa military training camp which every young woman and man must go through. There are many other reports which clearly indicate that there has been widespread and systematic sexual violence against women [17]. It is astonishing to see the Eritrean traditional legal codes and practices have been replaced by the PFDJ's lawlessness where rape is being perpetrated by those who are supposed to prevent it. It seems that there is normalization of abuses against women. Perhaps this is why Mr Yemane said that he could count the rape incidences with his fingers. We do not have hard evidence whether he personally abused women, but it is safe to assume that he is aware of the many young women raising children whose fathers they do not know, because the rapists are complete strangers to the victims and they have no mechanism to trace them. He must know some of those who killed themselves as a result of rape and other harsh treatments at the hands of his officers. We believe that



an independent body should be instituted inside Eritrea who can investigate all these crimes.

Many of the victims of sexual violence are unlikely to start up their own families as a result of the way the regime treated them. It seems that Mr Yemane Gebreab's regime is determined to destroy the spirit of Eritrean women and their role and contribution to the Eritrean noble culture. If the PFDJ regime continues to destroy women in the way it is doing, their role in instilling family values and the chances of passing their cultural heritage to their children is diminished. A society with weak shared cultural values is easier to control by the regime. This has had major ramifications for the Eritrean society and it will affect us all for many more years to come. We are alarmed that the regime is trying to hide its true intentions and is trying to cover its practices as if to insult the intelligence of close observers. If the regime does not change its current practices, and its policies towards women (towards every citizen for that matter) and towards family values, socio-cultural heritage, and most importantly to the rule law, the Eritrean society will face long lasting problems.

Many close observers of the current situation are familiar with reports such as the following extract: 'Female conscripts are reported to have been subjected to sexual abuse including rape. [...] some of the new female recruits were selected by commanders for sex under duress, through being threatened with heavy military duties or being sent to the battle-front during the war or to a remote and harsh posting, or being denied home leave. In some cases, this may be termed rape or possibly sexual slavery because, although it may not have consisted of physical violence, it was coercive within a command and discipline system where women had little or no opportunity to resist. There was no mechanism for complaining to the military or civilian authorities, and when complaints were made, no action was known to have been taken to stop and prevent this practice, which appears to have been widely known [18].

It is reported that many Eritrean victims 'attested to the rape of other women besides themselves, signalling the possibility of a systematic practice. They claimed abuses including detention (short and long term), beatings, forced abortions (and attempted abortions), forced heavy labour, forced ingestion of drugs, death threats, degrading treatment, continuous sexual violence and rape, as well as possible forced pregnancy and sexual enslavement. [...] Refusal to submit to sexual abuse was punished by detention, torture, humiliation and ill-treatment: including underground detention, binding of hands and feet and placement in stress positions, suspension from trees, limitation of food rations, and exposure to extreme heat and insects, shaving of the head, etc. Furthermore [...] they described being forced to perform domestic duties, including washing clothes, cooking, and preparing coffee, in addition to continuous sexual violation, thereby signalling a possible case of enslavement. [...] Other women selected suicide as a mode of escape from the sexual violence' [19]. For these things to



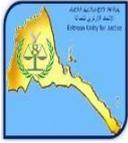
happen the regime must be an accomplice or utterly unfit to govern. Mr Yemane may try to have us believe otherwise but every Eritrean knows the facts on the ground. This must perturb every Eritrean man and motivate him to act as a man!

Traditionally, it is men's responsibility to protect Eritrean women from any form of violence. Unfortunately the regime has weakened that spirit under harsh military discipline, and many forms of intimidation. Thus rendering men unable to defend their daughters and their sisters. In the current climate the regime has given de facto permission to its men to violate women's dignity in different forms. In these sad moments we call upon all Eritrean women to converge and be a stronger voice for the voiceless women. We believe that you can be a formidable force and contribute to regain the dignity and respect the female gender deserves to enjoy. If you coalesce and address this issue, you will be able to empower other women as well as your fathers, your husbands and your brothers to regain their manhood bold enough defend their daughters and their sisters.

There is one myth about Eritrean women which Mr Yemane's taped into. It says that about 30% of EPLF fighters were women, and that this was a sign of empowerment. Subjecting women to physically demanding tasks should not be desirable under normal circumstances. It must be the last resort. Women would be empowered if their rights were respected, their needs were met, and they were given equal opportunity in their daily living. If the regime was honest about women's empowerment, it would put a law in place to ensure that women are protected against all the abuses they have been subjected to. Gender equality is in terms of dignity not in physically demanding military tasks such as combat. Women would be dignified if the policies of the regime would not put them in an environment where they are constantly harassed and violated. A simple scrutiny of the pre-independence era does not show glorious days of women's rights (or that of ordinary male comrades) as portrayed by the regime. A number of insiders have given their witness about the practices of what is called a 'secret party' within the EPLF. One of the privileges accorded to members of that secret party was to get any woman they fancied. One testimonial in this regard is by an ex-member of that secret party, Mr Yemane Tekhlegergish [20]. The extent of sexual harassment under the EPLF/PFDJ leadership in the past 40-50 years begs researchers to make authoritative study.

We must demand that women are released from all forms of military service immediately, and that they are protected by law. We will not accept Mr Yemane's denials when we see massive evidence in front of us to the contrary. Never will we be satisfied with his empty words until women's (and that of every citizen's) rights are respected.

Part III will touch upon religious freedom, cultural erosion, supporters of the regime, and the regime's policy of division and impoverishment of the Eritrean society.



References

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- 14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAsHQh8YnQ>
- 15 [Codes and Bylaws of Eritrean Regions & Counties \(ሕግን ሥርዓትን ናይ መሬት ዓደብ\) compiled by ዘርአ-ያዕቆብ እስጢፋኖስ፣ ወልደማርያም ኣብርሃም፣ ኢንጅር. ገሪማ ገብረመስቀል። ደቀንስትዮ ከይዕመጸ ዝከላኸል ዓንቀጻት ኣብ ዝተፋላልዩ ቦታታት ይርከብ እዩ። ሕጊ ኣድግና ተገለባ ቍ. 95፣ ሕጊ ኣድከመ ምልጋእ ገጽ 54፣ ኣብ ሕጊ ሎጎ ጭዋ ቍ. 69፣ ኣብ ሕጊ ሰሐርትን ላምዛን ወቐርትን ዳምባን ቍ. 13፣ ኣብ ሥትዓት ካርነሽም ገጽ 10 ወ ገጽ 16 ተመልከት።](#)
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