

Meles Zenawi and **Eritrea**

By *Negussay Ayele*

This commentary on PM Meles Zenawi and Ethiopia is prefaced by three citations below that will put what PM Meles Zenawi has done and is doing to Ethiopia and Ethiopians in some historical perspective. The first statement in 1887 is by Tigrayan Emperor of Ethiopia, Yohannes IV, on Ethiopian sovereignty over Massawa, hence Eritrea. The second statement, in the same year, is by the heroic Ethiopian governor, also from Tigray, of Mereb Melash (today's Eritrea) and founder of Asmera, on his resolve to resist Italian colonial encroachments into Ethiopia's Red Sea coastal areas. The third statement is by Mr. Meles Zenawi, another person from Tigray? who wiped out thousands of years of Ethiopian history, negated what his forbears asserted a century earlier about Mereb Melash, and made a gratuitous case for severing the coastal region of Eritrea from Ethiopia. His statement was issued in 1987 on the Centenary of Ras Alula's grand victory over Italian colonial incursion in Dogali, near Massawa.¹

"...Massawa is Ethiopian and I have neither the intention nor the power to alienate any territory which properly belongs to Ethiopia." 1887.

Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia, telling British envoy Portal about Italian presence in Massawa.

"The Italians can come to Sehati [near Massawa] when I go to Rome as governor" 1887.

Ras Alula Abba Nega of Tigray, Ethiopian regional governor (1876-1888) of Mereb Melash (named Eritrea by Italian colonialists in 1890) and founder of Asmera, also speaking to Portal.

"The notion that Eritrea was or is part of Ethiopia is without historical merit, and one that remains a fairy tale." 1987 [My translation from the Amharic]

Meles (Legese) Zenawi, Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) capo in his political tract on behalf of EPLF: The struggle of the Eritrean people, from where to where! 1987, Page 8.

¹ For more on Ras Alula and Dogali see my "Ras Alula and Ethiopia's Struggles Against Expansionism and Colonialism (1872-1897) 1987; Cf. also Portal, G. My Mission To Abyssinia, 1892

In Part I of this commentary series, a brief profile was posted earlier at www.ethiopians.com on what Ethiopian educator Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam—jailed by PM Meles Zenawi and dozens of other innocent Ethiopians—has done for Ethiopia and Ethiopians at large during the past half century. And now in Part II, we shall turn our attention to what another person with an Ethiopian name, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (hereafter PM Meles), has done and is doing to Ethiopia and Ethiopians at large for over three decades. Those who read Part I will recall that the general theme that informs the commentary as a whole revolves around three questions. (1) Do the two individuals—Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam and PM Meles Zenawi share the same notion of Ethiopia and the same vision for its future? (2) What are the respective deeds of the two vis-à-vis Ethiopia? (3) How and why is the current relationship between them, one of *prey* and *predator*?

Meles and the Primacy of EPLF-Eritrea's Causes at a Glance

For reasons that will be evident in the following pages, this part of the commentary will focus on Eritrea, the be-all and end-all of Meles Zenawi and his TPLF's reason for being and doing *what they have been doing in and to Ethiopia to this day*. In fact, Meles Zenawi in particular and TPLF in general see or visualize EPLF-Eritrea first and foremost rather than Ethiopia. For all intents and purposes, Meles has virtually been a mercenary to EPLF-Eritrea's Issayas. Even if, for opportunistic reasons, Meles and his TPLF may occasionally see a grudging need to refer to Ethiopia, it is through the prism of a larger more robust EPLF-Eritrea--as represented in the title of this commentary. Meles and his TPLF gang cut their teeth under the tutelage and shadow of EPLF since the mid-1970's and have retained an perennial loyalty to Issayas and the Eritrean secessionist cause—despite the post-1998 EPLF-TPLF intra-Tigrayan sibling rivalry, recently spilling even into Somalia.²

- EPLF and TPLF gave primacy to EPLF's desideratum for secession, including the capture of Massawa from Ethiopia sacrificing several thousands of casualties in the process. In fact, EPLF could not have succeeded in severing Ethiopian people and territory without the total servile support and sacrifice of Meles and his TPLF during the second half of the much touted "30 years" war. Meles and his TPLF did this even as their relationship with Issayas and his EPLF were, for the most part, that of master (EPLF) and servant (TPLF). Big bully Issayas also did some spanking occasionally like blocking

² Cf. "What is with Ethiopia's Rulers" April 04/2006, Awate.com; Abiy Araia "The rise of an Eritrean clique from the womb of TPLF" Ethiomedia.com July 2001; Fekade Shewakena "The competition of the TPLF and EPLF for good looks" March 2007; Sally Healy and Martin Plaut, "Ethiopia and Eritrea: Allergic to Persuasion" Chatham House report, January 2007 for various views on contemporary EPLF-TPLF sibling tensions and allegations.

convoys of food aid by international donors in the late 1980's from reaching TPLF camps in Tigray.

- Meles, who let Issayas have the whole of Eritrea severed from Ethiopia and was willing and ready to give more Ethiopian land to EPLF-Eritrea quietly, annexed large chunks of land from Gondar and Wello regions to create greater Tigray. Viceroy Meles would dare not tamper with territory in EPLF-Eritrea claimed by Issayas, but he can do what he wishes with land in the rest of Ethiopia.
- They issued a position paper stating that Ethiopia's history, like Eritrea's history, is only 100 years and that both were formed at the same time. What the EPLF-TPLF cabal set out to do here was to resuscitate and reestablish the grand design and agenda of colonial and then Fascist Italy to carve out the coastlines of Ethiopia, thereby controlling its access to the sea and the outside world until the whole of Ethiopia was weak, dependent and vulnerable enough to be colonized. Although they are having some hiccups, this is the design of choice by Issayas-EPLF and Meles-TPLF.
 - The two culprits coordinated their external policies in the London "Talks" in 1991. They orchestrated the charade known as the "Transitional" Conference in Addis Ababa and the "Provisional" entity in Asmera to camouflage Eritrea's secession and issue a "charter" to make room for others in the rest of Ethiopia, if necessary.
 - Meles Zenawi and his TPLF cronies did nothing and said nothing in protest when, in 1991 the EPLF pilfered the properties of over 200,000 Ethiopians—mostly Tigrayans—and then summarily evicted them from EPLF-Eritrea and dumped them across the Mereb river, with hardly clothes on their backs. Some TPLF elements even justified EPLF's action.
 - In the early 1990's, Meles Zenawi and his TPLF goons unleashed a reign of terror in Ethiopia to make sure that no one challenges their Eritrea policy; they hunted and eliminated surviving unionist Eritreans in Ethiopia; they killed young Ethiopian University students who tried to peacefully protest the impending secession, and they dismissed upstanding and leading professors like Professor Asrat Weldeyes and other academics from the University for the same reason.
 - They maintained a dual EPLF/TPLF interregnum in Ethiopia to enable the EPLF to hunt and eliminate any vestiges of pro-Ethiopia sentiment by Ethiopians of Eritrean birth as well as to pillage Ethiopia economically to the bone in order to build EPLF-Eritrea in the early 1990's and, in time Tigray as well; agricultural industrial, educational, financial, power and other resources and installations were hauled northwards *en masse*; For a while, EPLF-Eritrea was

even recorded as coffee exporter. *Teff*, the grain staple for Ethiopian bread (*Injera*) was available in Eritrea, which does not produce it, at a cost five times cheaper than in the rest of Ethiopia. For a while, EPLF-Eritrea, a non-coffee producing area, had even been registered as a coffee exporting concern.

- They supported the 1993 sham 'freedom or death' EPLF "referendum" with absolutely NO Ethiopian say or participation; Meles Zenawi as the putative "head of State" in Ethiopia even wrote a letter to the UN requesting it to officially and quickly legitimize Eritrea's secession.
- In 1993, Meles's TPLF supporters danced alongside EPLF-Eritreans in the streets in Addis Ababa and other centers in support of Eritrean secession to the shame and consternation of Ethiopians. Meles had earlier on said that he would not infringe on the territorial integrity of EPLF-Eritrea by claiming Ethiopia's Assab because independence is not divisible. Obviously, Ethiopian freedom and territorial integrity is divisible as far as he is concerned.
- Apropos to the folk saying, "no honor among thieves", the two greedy anti-Ethiopia culprits, Issayas and Meles, had a temporary fallout towards the end of the 1990's. The former wanted more than what he already took and thereby embarrassed and exposed his protégé. In yet again another of his spanking acts, Issayas triggered military confrontation in Badme along the Mereb River. Meles had been preaching that the secession of EPLF-Eritrea means perpetual peace for Ethiopia. Meles had allowed Issayas to arm to the teeth with Ethiopian armaments and aircraft all along while his side of the equation was not prepared for the EPLF's sudden onslaught using Ethiopian planes and heavy mortars supplied by Meles and his TPLF.
- To bail himself out of the jam he was in, Meles Zenawi appealed desperately—*a la* the 1896 Battle of Adwa--to "Ethiopian" nationalism that he had all the while been denying and denigrating. Naively, Ethiopians did just that. After casualties in excess of 100,000 and total military victory over the EPLF forces, Meles gratuitously reaffirmed EPLF-Eritrea's political and territorial *status quo ante* and would not recover Ethiopia's people and Asseb coastline along the Red Sea when he was in a position to. But then, Meles's mission has never been for Ethiopia but for EPLF-Eritrea, and even when the opportunity of reclaiming Ethiopia's access to the sea in the wake of EPLF aggression, he could not bring himself to do it. In an act of unforced error, he declared the war over and withdrew his forces. Although the rumor mills were rife with noises about this power or that entity warned that the forces should withdraw, there is no evidence that Meles was asked, pressured or

forced to withdraw without ameliorating Ethiopia's landlocked status just to satiate Issayas' desideratum to restore Italian colonial dreams and territories at Ethiopia's expense.

- This total subservience to EPLF-Eritrea by Meles Zenawi even caused the first open fissure within the TPLF ruling clique but he remained undaunted as he put his Tigrayan challengers in jail where some of them still languish for challenging his excessive pro-Eritrean policy while most quickly recanted.
- In December 2000, Meles Zenawi argued vociferously—lying through his teeth—that defunct nineteenth century Italian colonial "treaties" were valid bases for border demarcation between TPLF-Ethiopia and EPLF-Eritrea because they would validate EPLF's position on the matter; Meles Zenawi, in fact, went much further than that: He did something no person claiming or purporting to be "leader" of a country or head of a sovereign state has done: He went to Algiers, signed an agreement that he would abide in advance by a dubious commission's border demarcation determination, no matter what, knowing full well that he had stacked the cards against the interests of Ethiopia. Meles knew very well that EPLF has nothing to lose and everything to gain in such determination based on defunct and illegitimate colonial "treaties." He just wanted to hide his behind under the cover of some international body's ruling that was deleterious to Ethiopia's national interest.
- For the last six years since the infamous Algiers agreement between the two ruthless capobandas in Northeast Africa, the peoples in the region have chafed under the ruthless tyrannies of EPLF and TPLF with no settlement in sight and no relief from their misery, repression, poverty, insecurity, murders, incarcerations and intimidations, crimes against humanity and stolen elections, to boot.
- In these intervening years, the two *shiftas* have been engaged in shadow sparring by way of organizing and/or encouraging opposition elements in each other's capital and in the wider region; the difference in these feigned exercises is that Issayas appears to be more serious and more adept at it than Meles because the former has nothing to lose and everything to gain anyway, whereas with no commitment to Ethiopia *per se*, Meles gains more time to extend his tyranny in Ethiopia by just sustaining the state of no war, no peace with Issayas without having to face the imponderables of what might happen if, his EPLF compass and guru is either toppled from power or altogether eliminated.
- The state of psychological tension between these two mendacious, haughty, greedy, treasonous and desperate dictators has recently involved actual military intervention and the threat of intervention

in Somalia with all that that entails and forebodes especially for Ethiopia. Issayas has already dabbled in intervention and threats of intervention in the region, but it is unprecedented for Ethiopia or for someone to do it in the name of Ethiopia. It remains to be seen, sooner or later, what Issayas's threat of intervention on behalf of the erstwhile Islamists or Meles's aligning with Col. Abdullahi Yusuf and his Transitional Government will mean for the future peace and stability of the region. One crucial point to remember, however, is that although it is claimed and widely reported as an Ethiopian intervention, it is not an Ethiopian intervention but a Meles/TPLF intervention in the name of Ethiopia. On the other hand, there is no such distinction with respect to Issayas and his EPLF/Eritrea. When all is said and done, what remains is the fact that yet again EPLF-Eritrea is still the horse that pulls the TPLF-Tigray wagon of Meles Zenawi.

- In the run-up to the May 2005 elections in Ethiopia, Meles and his TPLF made not mentioning the Eritrean problem in general and Ethiopia's access to its own seashores on the Red Sea as an issue in the campaign, a condition for participation by Ethiopian democratic parties (erroneously called the Opposition). The international observers and interlocutors also colluded in this anti-Ethiopian position and pressured the parties to promise the same. The rest is history.

The 1960's and early 70's witnessed the emergence of a number of armed rebels or political *shiftas* (not to be confused with crass banditry the term is also applied to), as they would have been perceived traditionally in Ethiopia. In the latter part of the twentieth century they called themselves "liberation" movements—hence the nomenclatures Eritrean Peoples "Liberation" Front (EPLF), Tigrayan Peoples "Liberation" Front (TPLF), Oromo "Liberation" Front (OLF), Somali Abbo "Liberation" Front (SALF), etc. This was copycat phenomenon, in part patterned after the plethora of genuine liberation movements all over colonial Africa, Asia and other parts of the world. It was also a function of the influence of notions of "national self-determination" in the larger context of Marxist class struggle, which many groups found useful to articulate their causes and access political and material support from Cold War socialist camp sympathizers and consummate their desiderata. To maximize their chances of achieving the territorial secession--which they called "liberation" of Eritrea from Ethiopia—the Eritreans encouraged and spawned similar movements in Ethiopia-at-large, thereby forcing the central government to overstretch militarily. And, the tactic worked.

As will be evident hence, the EPLF formed the TPLF and these two then supported the OLF and other rebels. Armed struggle—political *shiftenet*--against feudal and/or minority domination, economic exploitation, and cultural

or religious indignity is a time-honored tradition in Ethiopian history. The aim was to end perceived injustices, to ameliorate the wrongs and, more often than not, to supplant one ruler by another. And sometimes, political *shiftenet* may occur from naked ambition for power often couched in putative claims to dynastic pedigree. In fact, a number of rebels overthrew incumbent rulers and took the throne or seat of power. In the latter part of the nineteenth century Ethiopia, for example, one recalls rebel (political *shifita*) Kassa Haylu of Gonder who defeated the disparate warlords of the "era of princes," and emerged as Emperor Tewodros II in 1855. Likewise, another *political shifita* Kassa Mercha from Tigray, rebelled against Emperor Tekle Giorgis and assumed the Ethiopian throne as Emperor Yohannes IV in 1872.³ There is a fundamental difference between the tradition of political *shiftas* in Ethiopia in earlier years and the contemporary *shiftas* (aka 'liberation') armed fighters.

The old political *shiftas* aimed at uniting and strengthening Ethiopia *qua* Ethiopia as they had it and tried to make it capable of warding off continuous challenges from neighboring expansionists and distant imperialists. Those who took the helm of power were not exactly democrats nor did they claim to be, but they all claimed they could keep Ethiopia independent as a whole. The new political *shiftas*, on the other hand, are bent on either breaking up Ethiopia into smithereens, wherein each "liberation" warlord has his fiefdom or—as is the case today--one warlord tries to make the rest of the country prostrate and serve the interests of his minority tribe as far as his monopoly of deadly force allows. Other than that, the independence of Ethiopia, the integrity or unity of Ethiopia, the dignity and self-reliance of Ethiopia, the economic development of Ethiopia, the democratic governance of Ethiopia or the rights and needs of Ethiopians at large is not in the dreams, wishes, agenda or objectives of these modern political *shiftas*. It is in the context of such historical and contemporary Ethiopia's political milieu that we begin to examine *shifita* Meles Zenawi's rise to power in Ethiopia, his total devotion to EPLF-Eritrea at any and all cost to Ethiopia as well as what he has been doing with that naked brute power in the last quarter of a century.

For all intents and purposes, the public persona of Legese Zenawi (lately known as Meles Zenawi) can be traced back to 1974 when he—as did Isayas Afewerqi from Eritrea before him—left Haile Sellasie I University in Addis Ababa. He went to the bushes in Tigray to join the guerrilla group, Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)--a virtual clone of Afewerki's Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF)⁴ Tigray (south of the Mereb river) and Eritrea (north of

³ For a general view of power struggles in recent Ethiopian history see Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*, 2001; Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 2002; Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, 1975

⁴ *En Passant*, one notes that these two individuals from that predominantly Tigrayan region share more than anti-Ethiopian political passion. Eritrea's Mr. I. Afewerki traces half his lineage to south of Mereb river Tigray while Mr M Zenawi complements him by being half Eritrean from north of the Mereb.

the Mereb) extending to the Ethiopian Red Sea littoral, have a long historical status in the millennia-old making of the identity and civilization of Ethiopia. The region as a whole is mostly Christian and Tigrinya speaking. It also constitutes a crucial Ethiopian arena in its bloody struggles of resistance against perennial invasions by nearby expansionists including Ottomans, Egyptians and Sudanese Mahdists as well as against persistent British, Italian, French colonialists threatening its sovereignty and/or territorial integrity. As this writer has observed in earlier writings on the subject, whereas the mandate for earlier generations of Tigrayans on both sides of the Mereb river was '**ETHIOPIA OR DEATH;**' for the generation of Issayas Afewerki, Meles Zenawi and their ilk it has been and continues to be '**DEATH TO ETHIOPIA.**'

The 20-year old Legese /Meles was recruited by Issayas Afewerki's EPLF from the very beginning of his participation in the TPLF. It did not take long for the two Tigrayan guerrilla movements to coordinate their struggles against Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Sellassie's rule and then under the Derg led by Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, which emerged following the 1974 peoples revolution in Ethiopia. And so, Meles Zenawi always cared more for Eritrean secession than any other. He was a dedicated understudy of his guru Isayas Afewerki and with his help, Meles managed to carry out a purge of TPLF cadres who cared more for the unity and stability of Ethiopia in justice and democracy than for Eritrean secession. Once he took control of the Tigrean Front with the help of Eritrean elements, Meles took charge of the propaganda and publicity functions of the TPLF. One searches in vain for any positive writings, campaigns or speeches with respect to Ethiopia by Meles and his underlings during their guerrilla tenure in TPLF in the 1970's and 1980's. On the contrary, Meles's mission was first and foremost to demonize Ethiopia, deny its history, trash its flag and mimic EPLF's preposterous anti-Ethiopia lies with the intent of destroying Ethiopia. The syndrome recalls a Swedish saying: "The death of one is the bread (or life) of another." By contrast, his early mission was to glorify EPLF-Eritrea's secessionist cause and to sacrifice Tigrayan blood, sweat and tears for that cause.

This total and gratuitous pro EPLF-Eritrea predilection on the part of Meles, as we shall see, is a very important dynamic in shaping his persona during his guerrilla years. It is also the key to making sense of his consistent anti Ethiopia actions as the ruthless and treacherous despot in Ethiopia since 1991.⁵ Although a "Marxist-Leninist" wing of TPLF issued a manifesto calling for creating a Tigrayan republic carved out of Ethiopia, the idea was quickly squashed for three reasons. One was the realization that Tigray could not be a viable or secure state separated from the rest of Ethiopia, especially while coastal Eritrea remained as part of Ethiopia. Another reason is that since much land, foodstuff and resources are in the rest of Ethiopia, it made sense to aim

⁵ For more, see this author's commentary "Sow the Wind! Reap the Whirlwind:EPLF-Eritrea and TPLF-Ethiopia Today" www.Ethiopians.com, 2000.

at establishing Tigrayan hegemony (along with EPLF-Eritrean) and exploit Ethiopia. But, for Meles and Issayas, the immediate and most important priority was to achieve the secession of Eritrea first. Therefore, even when EPLF and TPLF evicted the central government forces from Tigray in 1988-89, it was more a means to an end than an end in itself. Meles and his TPLF flunkys were always more spirited and dedicated to EPLF-Eritrean causes than most Eritreans as well as Tigrayans. More to the point, *Meles has always cared more about Eritrea than about Tigray or Ethiopia and Ethiopian causes—and in reality, if not in rhetoric, he still does today.*

The tandem vision, mission and mandate of the capos of EPLF and TPLF has been to glorify, host high and develop EPLF-Eritrea and Tigray south of Mereb with one hand and degrade, devastate and destroy Ethiopia *qua* Ethiopia, with the other hand. The attainment of the former depends on their controlled success of the second mission. A corollary to this schema is the fervent and ruthless exploitation of Ethiopian resources as well as the setting in place of mechanisms for the disintegration of Ethiopia to ensure long-range minority Tigrayan supremacy over the region. Consequently, Ethiopia and Ethiopians have been held hostage for a decade and a half so far, in order that EPLF and TPLF can attain their political, economic and security agenda with no effective challenge or resistance—peacefully or otherwise--by Ethiopians. At a time in 2001 when relations between TPLF and its Oromo clone, OPDO were getting sour, Mr. Meles scoffed at then OPDO leader and titular “head of state” Dr. Negasso Gidada that he was OPDO when on one side of his coin and OLF—that had been demonized by TPLF—on the other side, meaning that his loyalty to Mr. Meles is suspect. One can apply the same metaphor to Mr. Meles himself and say that one side of his coin (tails) would be TPLF and the other side (heads) would be EPLF. His loyalty to Tigray may be suspect but his loyalty to Issayas and EPLF-Eritrea is still secure.

The first major work Meles came up with in 1987 was not about Ethiopia or even about Tigray but about Eritrea. In that year he issued a long tract titled The Struggle of the Eritrean People—From Where to Where!⁶ We have seen above how in one sentence of the book he attempted to nullify millennia of time-honored Ethiopian history in Northeast Africa as a “fairy tale.” In the same passage he goes on to pontificate with convoluted logic:

“The fact is that at the very moment [i.e. 1890] Ethiopia emerged as a state, Eritrea, which was not part of Ethiopia, was also created as a state by Italian colonialism.”

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The 331-page work was issued in 1979 (Ethiopian Calendar) to make a case for Eritrean secession (independence) and to forge a joint Eritrean and Tigrean struggle against “colonial” and “oppressive” Ethiopia. See page 8 ff. for the complete statement.

The obsequious and servile position of Meles vis-a-vis EPLF was not limited to tracts and words. In fact, throughout the 1980's the Eritrean EPLF and the Tigrayan TPLF movements carried on their guerrilla struggles in tandem against Ethiopia, including the campaigns in the late 1980's to evict the Derg forces from Megele in Tigray followed by the capture of Massawa in Eritrea—all the way to their ultimate control of Asmera and Addis Abeba in May 1991.⁷ While paying a very heavy toll in Tigrayan life and limbs, the EPLF and TPLF successfully synchronized their strategy and tactics. They concentrated on uprooting the Derg forces from Tigray first, thereby eliminating 90 percent of the strategic depth, ordnance cache and launching pad used by central government forces against EPLF rebels in Eritrea. This then enabled the two guerrilla movements, particularly the TPLF, to carry out the capture of Ethiopia's Red Sea naval base of Massawa, Eritrea in 1990.

When the true history of this critical period in Ethiopian history and the relationship of TPLF and EPLF emerges two stark realities will be evident. One is the fact that without mutual support for one another neither guerrilla movements could have attained their goal of controlling Asmera and Addis Abeba in May 1991. The corollary to that phenomenon is the scores of thousands of TPLF Tigrayans sacrificed as cannon fodder for the EPLF-Eritrean secessionist cause from 1975—especially the late 1980s--through 1991. Meanwhile, untold numbers of Ethiopian soldiers who had surrendered or had been captured, including officers, were led westwards to "freedom" in Sudan by EPLF and TPLF, but in reality to be herded at gunpoint without water, food, shoes and hardly any clothes on their backs. They wallowed in the scorching heat by day and exposed to the frigid elements by night. The EPLF/TPLF elements watched with morbid glee as the Ethiopian captives fell down one by one and were plucked by scavenging fowls (*Amora*) in the day and ripped by beasts at night while still alive.⁸

EPLF and TPLF complemented their internal joint struggle with a contrived political/diplomatic cover during the May 1991 London Peace Talks organized by US Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen. The parties to the Talks were the EPLF and TPLF on one side and representatives of the Ethiopian government (Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) on the other. This will have pitted a Tigrayan minority against a central government that claimed to represent the vast majority of the Ethiopian people. While other longtime political opponents against the central government expected and requested representation to the Talks, only the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) which claimed to represent a substantial segment of the Oromo people, one of the

⁷ For more on what transpired during this period, see John Young: Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The TPLF, 1975-1991 (1997). Tadesse Tele Salvano, Aay Missewa (Amharic) (1997 Eth. Calendar).

⁸ See Amora in Amharic by Geday Bahrishum (1985, Eth. Calendar). On the political aspects of the EPLF-TPLF strategic collusion, see the expose Talaqu Sera (Amharic)—The Big Conspiracy 1990, by two prominent TPLF members who explain the nature of the patron-client relationship of EPLF and TPLF, and why they later left the organization.

two—the other being the Amhara—largest cultural groups in the country--was co-opted to participate in the Talks mainly as a token sit-in. This ploy gave the perception that the opposition to the central government was more diversified and not limited only to a Tigrayan cabal of EPLF-Eritreans and TPLF-Tigrayans. For reasons that cannot be exhausted here, a series of adjoining events including the priority issue of airlifting 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel safely that figured in the decision-making tactics of the United States convenor. The upshot was that talks between Prime Minister Tesfaye Dinka of the central government, Issayas Afewerqi of EPLF, his understudy and protégé, Meles Zenawi of TPLF and Lencho Leta of OLF never took place in London.

One critical question that lingers at this juncture of the London proceedings has to do with why Prime Minister Tesfaye Dinka pulled out of the Talks. One need go no farther than Ambassador Cohen's own rendition of the episode. On the eve of the convening of the anticipated formal four-party Talks, Mr. Cohen was meeting with each delegation separately to iron out agenda matters. US Charges d'Affaires Robert Houdek in Addis informs Mr. Herman Cohen in London that he had just talked to the Acting Derg President, the late General Tesfaye G.Kidan who informed him that he no longer could keep order in Addis Ababa and that "something had to be done to prevent destruction and civilian hardship" Without consulting with Mr. Tesfaye Dinka, the Ethiopian Government Prime Minister and the leader of the delegation to the Talks right there in London, Mr. Cohen and his team "considered options" and:

"It seemed to us that the only way to restore order in Addis Ababa was for the TPLF to enter the city before, rather than after, the peace conference. I asked to see TPLF Secretary General Meles Zenawi who had received the same alarming reports. Although he had pledged not to enter Addis until after the London conference, I said, we would have no objection to the TPLF's moving in and restoring security for the population. Meles agreed. I told him that I would make a statement on the Voice of America and the BBC informing the Ethiopian people that the US Government had recommended this action."⁹

Ambassador Cohen made the announcement in short order, which, of course, was broadcast forthwith. Oddly and sadly Mr. Tesfaye Dinka was shocked and embarrassed to hear the announcement with the public in the hotel lounge

⁹ Such crucial aspects of the recent political history of Ethiopia have yet to yield a substantive analytic study. For starters, the reader can consult the views of Mr. Herman Cohen, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, the architect of the "soft landing" as he called it, of EPLF and TPLF in Asmera and Addis Ababa by way of London and Khartoum towards the end of May 1991 in his book Intervening In Africa: Superpower Peace Making in a Troubled Continent (2000). It is also instructive to consult Stephen Specter, Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews, 2005 on how the allied drama was played out in the circumstances.

where he was staying. Mr. Cohen relates that "after he heard the news" thusly, Mr. Tesfaye "came to see us and vigorously protested our decision to break the earlier agreement precluding a military entry into Addis...." After some tête-à-tête, says Mr. Cohen:

"Dinka left to call his acting president. Upon returning, he stated that Gabre-Kidan denied suggesting that we invite the TPLF to restore order. In view of our action, Dinka said, he would denounce the conference as a farce and walk out. We were thus left with a conference of military victors, but that did not mean there was nothing left to discuss. On the contrary, Ethiopia's political and economic future was at stake."¹⁰

The OLF had little to nothing to say, and in the event, it was used and eventually discarded. With the central government fast disintegrating in Addis Ababa and Col. Mengistu himself self-exiled in Zimbabwe, the EPLF and TPLF were in a strong position militarily and politically to follow their script, dictate terms and determine their destiny in Addis Ababa and Asmera--with a nod from Mr. Herman Cohen.¹¹

The next phase in the evolving charade performed by Issayas Afeworki and Meles Zenawi moved from London to Asmera and Addis Ababa. The anti-Ethiopian treachery by the two fronts now transited from the trenches of warfare to political forums in Addis Ababa. Interlocutor Cohen provided the framework for transition to EPLF/TPLF control of Ethiopia and the secession of Eritrea in the form of what he called "United States recommendations and observations" with an aim, as he put it in his book, to:

- (a) Lock the military victors into a democratic path, (b) delay an Eritrean action on independence until passions cool, (c) warn the new

¹⁰Cohen, Ibid. Some comments are in order here. Ambassador Cohen is to be congratulated for reporting some of the inner aspects of crucial decision-making in delicate and life and death matters. It is also curious why it was that acting president Tesfaye GK would tell what he is alleged to have told the American Charge without telling his own Prime Minister representing him in London for the Talks. Though perhaps not on the same level of seriousness as the points noted, another related question is why it did not occur to Ambassador Cohen to have reached Prime Minister Tesfaye Dinka right there in front of his nose and check out the 'developing story' in Addis Ababa with him and perhaps give him a chance to check it out with AddisAbaba before he embarrassed, blackmailed and nullified the Ethiopian Prime Minister and then conferring only with Mr. Meles and Mr Issayas? Perhaps, superpowers are virtually omni powers when it comes to third world countries like Ethiopia and so the patronizing view is that even local officials and leaders will not understand all the vagaries and nuances regarding even their own politics.

¹¹ Mr Teferra Haile-Sellassie, then Ethiopia's Ambassador to the United Kingdom and formally a party to the London Talks, has also published The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1991 (1997) who touches on those events. Professor Mesfin Welde Mariam, now in M. Zenawi's gaol was also in London with others and he relates some of his conversations with EPLF's Issayas Afeworki in the Amharic book he published just before he was incarcerated. See his Yekehedet Qulqulet ((The Slippery Slope of Treachery--my own translation), 1997 (Eth Calendar). Among other things, he states that in a letter he circulated to Euro-Americans, Mr. Meles Zenawi accused him of ('the crime') of "opposition to Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia."

rulers that human rights abuses and undemocratic practices would preclude foreign assistance, and (d) remind everyone that international relief remained a high priority.¹²

Sarah Vaughn, of the Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University, who published a study focused on the events of the July Transitional Conference in Addis Ababa, cites Mr. Cohen describing how his own role in London changed. He claims that his role was transformed as a function of the dramatic TPLF/EPLF military victories over the armed forces of the Derg, enabling the 'insurgents' to jointly occupy Addis Abeba and Asmera.

"The final part of the London meeting began with the United States no longer in a mediation role between the government and the insurgents, but in a de-facto advisory role for the three opposition groups (i.e. EPLF, TPLF, OLF) about to inherit all military and political power."¹³

Buoyed by the political blessing by the superpower of consequence, *shifita* Meles and his EPLF mentors now focused their attention on conjuring mechanisms for transforming their joint military victory into political acquiescence in Ethiopia. The EPLF and TPLF had been busy cobbling clones in part from among captured and imprisoned Ethiopian soldiers as well as supporting the OLF, which had been around since the days of Emperor Haile Selassie. For example, OPDO (Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization) was formed in 1989 comprising Oromo members of the Ethiopian armed forces as TPLF's own countervailing front to OLF. In short order, Meles formed several such paper mache veneer entities, which were then lumped together and named EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) in 1989 to make it sound like an Ethiopian formation and thereby hoodwink the outside world by camouflaging the reality that the only ruling political *shifita* front is the minority Tigrayan TPLF. EPRDF is nothing but a Trojan horse for TPLF. During the months of May and June 1991 all kinds of tribal, nationality, regional, religious, institutional groups were encouraged and manipulated to form puppet political units, with a view to participating in the forthcoming conference of "Council of Representatives of the Transitional Government." As a high-ranking TPLF figure, Sebat Nega, admitted in an interview with Vaughn: "We picked organizations from all over—two from here, two from there. One day Haelom telephoned from Awasa to say that he had just come across another one..." Mr. Meles Zenawi has a knack at times to blurt out the truth inadvertently. One such occasion was at this July Conference when he reminded his pawns:

¹² Cohen,, *ibid.*.

¹³ Sarah Vaughn, The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: its origins, history and significance, Edinburgh University Centre of African Studies, 1994. The necessary deals and synchronized actions were undertaken among the US Government, International Jewish Agencies, the State of Israel, the Derg (prior to the departure of Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam) and the TPLF to ensure—as noted above-- thousands of Ethiopian Jews safely from Addis Ababa in little more than a day before the TPLF/EPLF hordes entered the city on 28 May 1991.

“None of us at this Conference are here because of the democratic will of the people but, as in the case of TPLF/EPDRF, because of our military victory over the Derg and in the case of some of you, because of perceived support for the struggle.”¹⁴

One Conference participant who spoke out on the nature and limits of the EPLF/TPLF instigated and controlled July Conference, was surgeon Professor Asrat Weldeyes, who declared that the gathering was not authorized or mandated by the Ethiopian people to make momentous decisions of national interest such as the secession of Eritrea. As is well known, Meles and EPLF/TPLF made him pay for that stand with his dear life.

The Addis Ababa Conference of, by and for unelected, unmandated, unrecognized and unpopular, “representatives” was designed to rubber stamp severing of Eritrea from Ethiopia and acquiescing to the suzerainty of Meles’s TPLF in the rest of Ethiopia. Meles and his minions had short-run (tactical) and long run (strategic) goals in concocting this Conference. The short run goals included lulling the outside world, especially the United States, into perceiving that the EPLF and TPLF are keeping their word to hold a conference announced in London by them and by the American representative. It also absolves the American representative from charges of wrongdoing in sponsoring and facilitating the “soft landing” of the two Tigrayan/Eritrean *shifita* fronts in Asmara and Addis Ababa. The main contours of the draft guideline for a “Transitional” regime in Ethiopia (also known as “Provisional” regime in Asmara) had been worked out between EPLF and TPLF already, and aspects of it were revealed to their junior partner, the OLF, before the Addis Ababa conference convened in July 1991. The other political objective of EPLF/TPLF in convening and masterminding this “conference” was, of course, to “legitimize” the secession of EPLF-Eritrea as a popular act endorsed by Ethiopian “representatives.” The public issuance on July 22 of what came to be known as “Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia”—perhaps a better term for it is “Transitional Chariot”—was designed as a propaganda scheme to give Meles and his TPLF regime a semblance of orderliness and “constitutionality.” For the record, the “Charter” was replete with perfunctory democratic principles and internationally recognized human rights provisions to impress foreigners. In reality, however, it was all but thrown into the dustbin as soon as the meeting was over and was not worth the paper it was written on.

While Mr. Meles continued his now overt, now covert, pro EPLF Eritrea stance that determined his ultimate decision-making goals, priorities and choices to this day, the means with which he was set to achieve them, became

¹⁴ Cited in Ibid. Cf. For more on the issue, see this writer’s book: [In Search of the DNA of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Problem](#) (2003) for more on the issue; Cf. also West, Lillian “Ethiopia and Eritrea—Apprehending the Algiers Agreement” [Deki-Alula](#) website, March 7, 2007.

more and more stark and deadly over the years. And now we turn to another facet of Meles/TPLF modality in organizing, managing and executing the policies of his regime in Ethiopia. Doubtless, political *shifta* Mele and his TPLF as well as EPLF, regard their military victory over the Derg and removal of Col. Mengistu Haile-Mariam in 1991, as one of their major accomplishments. Needless to say, much of Europe and the United States also helped along the way and seem to be indebted to these guerrilla movements who described themselves as the “generation that shook mountains.” There was also a sigh of relief among Ethiopians at the demise of the increasingly moribund and bankrupt Derg regime, accompanied by guarded hope that there might be a brighter future for Ethiopia after the Derg. As one scans the last 16 years of Meles-TPLF hegemony in Ethiopia, how can the period be apprehended and characterized especially vis-à-vis the Derg that it supplanted. One of the first commentators on the Derg and the TPLF is Professor Getachew Haile. As early as 1992—eight months into the first year of the TPLF regime in Ethiopia—he had written a prescient and perceptive two-part article in Amharic entitled **“Ethiopia’s Journey from Derg I to Derg II”**¹⁵

“ Given the fact that Derg I could not have been overthrown except by the use of force, TPLF/EPRDF could not be faulted for doing just that and taking over. In the circumstances, TPLF (Derg II) also cannot be criticized for assuming state power “unelected” at that moment. However, what elicits public opposition is its autocratic assumption of state power, instead of limiting itself to facilitating a transition to a system of popular governance. To make matters worse, it continued to deny and cover up its eagerness and positioning for perpetual despotic rule.” (Personal translation from the Amharic).

As these lines are being written, the Ethiopian people have gone a step further asking themselves which regime has been worse for the vast majority of Ethiopians. To paraphrase what Historian and long time commentator on Ethiopian affairs, Dr. Alemu Eshete, who has been quoted saying “*then Mengistu killed Ethiopians; Meles is killing Ethiopia.*”

What inspires, propels and justifies TPLF actions in Ethiopia? Is it principles, human concerns, civic values, political beliefs or moral suasions that motivate Meles and his TPLF? In grappling with the puzzle, this writer tried to broach the matter a decade ago, in a piece titled “*Ethnic Policy in Ethiopia Today: What Naft Can Do,*”¹⁶

¹⁵ The article is printed in his collection of various pieces under the general title of Democracy and Ethiopia (1993). See Getachew Redda, ‘*The Dergue killed Ethiopians, the new rulers are set to kill Ethiopia*’. *Ethiomediamedia.com* 03/05/07.

¹⁶ A version of the article came out in Ethiopian Register May 1997. Cf also in the same issue the Editorial “Mellesism: An African Time Bomb;” Worku Aberra, “Ethnicism: The ideology of a Worari State” in the same issue.

“Like preceding regimes, EPLF/TPLF captured the reins of power in Ethiopia by force of arms, *naeft* (i.e. the barrel of the gun), and they remain in power in Ethiopia by (or because of) their monopoly of force of arms. The EPLF/TPLF did not win militarily because they were right politically, but they are asserting themselves to be right politically because they have won militarily.”

It is important to point out that it is not the access to arms or willingness to use it that is at issue here. What is at issue is the *monopoly* possession of arms by the Meles and his TPLF that has disposed and enabled them to carry on unspeakable atrocities, deprivations, murders, human rights abuses, intimidations, tortures, incarcerations, breaking up the country, stealing elections, impoverishing rural populations, mass killings of minority groups and compromising the national interest of Ethiopia for the sake of EPLF-Eritrea—to name a few. Would the TPLF regime do all this and more, most of which has been and is being corroborated by outside monitoring groups and organizations, if they did not have a monopoly of force? The likelihood is that they could not have done so. Still, this facilitating and even stimulating factor of monopoly of arms is a necessary but not a sufficient behavior determinant in and of itself.

Like “wars to end all wars” that never end, Ethiopians have been victims of what I characterize as ‘*culture of violence of generations begetting the violence of culture*’ syndrome. What is especially tragic and traumatic about the violence perpetrated by Meles and his TPLF on the people of Ethiopia at large today is that it is happening in the 21st century, its end game being the destruction of Ethiopia, its peoples, history, cultures, and literature by a tribal Tigrayan minority that was once a nucleus of its formation. That is why so many innocent Ethiopian democrats, professionals, academics, journalists, patriots, entrepreneurs, engineers, activists, writers, have been thrown in **Kaliti** and other jails. It is a slow murder of a nation in broad daylight.

March 20, 2007. Professor Negussay teaches at UCLA. His recent books are [Ethiopia & the United States, the Season of Courtship, Volume 1](#) and [In Search of the DNA of the Ethiopia/Eritrean Problem](#).

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