**Eritrea at 22, Demonstration of United Stregth**

**Amanuel Biedemariam**

Trying to sum up Eritrea’s 22 Independence weekend, all the events, activities, festivities and emotions in one word or in a simple statement is quite a task. It is surreal and hard to believe, see or, imagine the collective joy Eritreans experience during the action packed weekend of celebrations.

For decades, Eritreans in the Diaspora have established activities that can bring-them the feel of home wherever they are. The Independence Day celebrations accentuate that feeling tenfold because Eritrean Independence is the result of long struggle, sacrifices and collective experiences expressed joyfully and colorfully. Year 2013, Washington DC Eritrean community did a great job in ensuring a joyful, safe and orderly participation.

This year, DC, Atlanta, Seattle, Oakland and Los Angeles were graced by the presence of high level Eritrean delegation led by H.E. Mr. Osman Saleh Minister of Foreign Affairs and Mr. Yemane Gebreab Head of Political Affairs of PFDJ and Presidential Adviser. The celebrations were then capped by a seminar that attracted huge crowds.

It is ironic and emblematic of the resolve Eritrea’s demonstrate and reminder of what Eritrea faces daily when on Independence Day, Eritreans were forced to gather in defense of their nation, at the Embassy of Eritrea in Washington DC on the very day that Independence was celebrated in Eritrea and globally.

On Friday May 24, hooligans dressed on black (expression of mourning) tried to storm the Embassy of Eritrea in DC. They came with eggs to throw at the embassy and to make noise in a solemn day when Eritreans were celebrating or about to as it were in DC. Obviously, these people are not happy about Eritrea’s Independence. Most were Ethiopians. Some are from Tigray born in Eritrea and the handful Eritreans were known regionalists and religious zealots supported by Ethiopia. Moreover, the hooligans were sent by Bereket Simon to balance out demonstration-news whereby Ethiopians were set to demonstrate on the streets of Addis and allover Ethiopia.

Eritreans responded to the spiteful and evil disturbance by blasting music that drowned the vulgarities and by dancing.  And as soon as the hooligans threw one egg hitting an elderly man, police kicked them out of the area, a well-deserved response.

It is spiteful to condemn entire nation for celebrating independence, a nation that was brought to life as a result of thousands of dear lives and it is also telling, to see these hooligans oppose the average Eritrean for celebrating a national event.

That in a sense was the kickoff to Independence Day weekend in DC. A fitting reality of what Eritreans regularly endure and overcome. Once Eritreans started their dances to ward off the enemies at the embassy, the dancing of victory continued until the end of the celebrations.

Countries around the world celebrate Independence Day. On May 30, one African country celebrated what they call National Day. The event took place in one of Washington’s marquis hotels. It was sponsored by the embassy and about 200 people attended.  The event was over in a matter of three hours. The country has a large presence in DC but that is how they chose to celebrate.

For Eritreans however, Independence Day is a special month long national event and it is an event celebrated by every Eritrean young and old. In DC it is celebrated over the Memorial Day weekend. The event started on Friday and ended on Monday after the seminar.

On Saturday May 25, thousands of Eritrean families picnicked at Fort Hunt Park in Alexandria, VA. It is heartwarming to witness a well-organized event where families can come together with friends; children can be children by playing on the playground, face-painting and playing soccer etc…  Parking was plentiful and orderly. Fort Hunt is expansive area that accommodated all the needs. In some areas people danced; YPFDJ set up a barbeque grill and served hot dogs and burgers. And interestingly, YPFDJ also set up a traditional coffee tent.  Valet parking was also provided. The event was warm relaxing, enjoyable and the love Eritreans show each other is simply out of this world.  The civility is a reflection of Eritrean maturity. The picnic is also representation of the nine Eritrea’s nationalities. It was a fun filled pick-nick full of memories. It was expression of what it means to be Eritrean.

The same night, the opening party was held at a downtown DC hotel where hundreds of youth showed up to celebrate independence.

On Sunday May 26, thousands showed up to celebrate the 22 years of Eritrea’s Independence. This was the main event. Invited dignitaries, activists, media personalities, embassy representatives from invited countries attended.  Terry McAuliffe, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate for Virginia also attended and addressed the Eritreans and said that, “if we helped him get elected, he will establish Eritrea Virginia trade relations.”

Prior to the event, all the invited dignitaries were treated to the Taste of Eritrea where they were served traditional Eritrean meals and coffee.

The dignitaries were in awe with the colorfully dressed beautiful Eritrean women that hosted the event for their grace and welcoming nature. They enjoyed the hospitality. Representative from the Russian Embassy and wife enjoyed the coffee ceremony so much that they took many pictures posing as if they made the coffee.

The dignitaries then joined the Eritrean delegation on the opening of the ceremonies and continued enjoying the celebrations afterwards. It was a packed house with hardly any room to move. The atmosphere was full of positive energy, colorful, fun and full of love. It is a testament to the good nature of the people and a vivid evidence of how united Eritreans are.

On Monday May 27, the long awaited seminar was conducted where thousands showed up to hear Minister Osman and Mr. Yemane’s presentations. The topics covered many issues. The Seminar and the Q and A session summarized the state of the State of Eritrea, diaspora politics, US Eritrea relations, the economy, constitution, human rights, youth flight and, many more issues were discussed candidly. To highlight some key points from the presentations and the Q@A session:

About US accusing Eritrea on human rights issues: The US possesses no moral authority to tell us about the rights of our people. Moreover, it is agenda driven and not based on the interest of Eritrea.

Eritrea US relations: We have no intentions for enmity towards the US. We would like better relation based on mutual respect and respect to sovereignty.

Answering about development, nationalism:

Why is there poverty in Africa? No nationalism.  Africans have failed to establish themselves as nations. Eritrea did not get the chance they got when African nations where handed independence Eritrea was condemned.  To the contrary Eritrea’s path was independent. The Eritrea that we are building will be advanced, sovereign and able to chart her destiny consistent with our history. We are in a stage where we are in the tip to ensure self-sufficiency in agriculture. That is when we can focus on exports

About Asmara: It will get its due attention because Asmara is too important to be overlooked since it is central. Hence, we will retain her beauty and develop her.

About the youth, Diaspora and new comers: we must focus on them and make sure they remain engaged.

One of the new comers who fled from Sawa said, “I fled from Sawa and seen hardships that I only know. But my Eritrawinet is unflinching and will go back to defend my country tomorrow if I have to.”

About constitution:  There are three aspects to the constitution. A) It focuses on Social Justice based on our principles. B) On the rights of our citizenry. Anything that stands against it and those that undermine those rights will naturally pay due price. C) Governmental and national.

 When we talk constitution we must ensure that we are not falling into the trap enemies set and set our own course based on our timeline and gave examples.

About the rapporteur:  it was politically motivated and should have been rejected by the organization. It was illegal and unacceptable from the get go and we will not buckle. In June 23 there will be meeting at the UN and will participate.

About Human trafficking, is not Eritrea specific. But in our case it is conspiracy. There are networks in Sudan, Egypt and we know individuals that are responsible. He also noted that there is one nation that bullied nations in order to take ownership of the issue and to manipulate it.

About youth born in the US and 2 %:  We have to strengthen our communities. We need to engage them and it is of utmost importance to focus in the ID's of Eritreans.

A lady told a story about the lies she was told to discourage her from sending her daughter to Eritrea. She was told there are people dying etc…

About the anti Eritrean groups: Minister Osman said this is part of Weyane’s agenda to create ethnic zones in order to divide Eritrea. He said, “Their main goal is Assab.”

By using the rights of the people in the region their aim is to divide up Eritrea along ethnic lines. This is article 39 replicated on Eritrea, a desperate last gasp for greater (Abay) Tigray. The TPLF believes it is the only way they can yet try to hoodwink the people of Ethiopia. The regionalist elements are perfect tools for TPLF.

Minister Osman also said that, it is time to weed out these criminal elements from our lives. He stated these are individuals going to Addis and scheming to hand over Eritrea. These are people going around and trying to create problems all around. And yet, Eritreans are simply accepting them in social gatherings as if nothing happened. He said they must be isolated from our circles.

Mr. Yemane also echoed the same sentiment by saying, we will no longer tolerate them and that we are going “on the offensive” regarding this matter. There is no need to take their insults and criminal activities any longer.

Summary:

We want to make sure that we continue to grow the right way by considering education and all the necessary human development steps. China took 30 years and they still have room to grow. We are showing great progress.  Over the last 15 years, we have weakened the entire machination against us but it does not mean we have won yet. We have to strengthen our resolve and with the understanding that Mekete is not only against the sanction, it is alive in the economy, social etc... The aim of the enemies is to exploit our resources by weakening us.

It is worth noting that the statements about the anti-Eritrean element parading as Eritreans received a sustained applaud. It showed that Eritreans were fed up and were eager to hear what Minister Osman said, “Isolate them.”

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the seminar, Mr. Yemane made a remark that summed up the 22nd anniversary of Eritrea’s Independence celebrations. He said, “Eritreans must realize how powerful that you are.”

 It is sometimes hard to translate Tirignya and capture accurately the meaning. Mr. Yemane made the remark to remind Eritreans that they possess proven powers and that they can utilize the unexploited powers.

The 22 Independence celebrations affirmed the unflinching unity, unwavering commitment and the true love Eritreans have for each other and Eritrea. At a moment when international schemes have reached feverish pitch, when the schemes aimed at breaking the will and unity of Eritreans reached unparalleled high; the faith Eritreans have on each other and the leadership blossomed as demonstrated during a serene weekend of celebrations that Eritreans enjoyed worldwide.

This by no means is deterrence to the enemies because the enemies are dead set to see the disintegration of Eritrea and the annihilation of the state of Eritrea. Years of aggression attest to that fact. However, and to their dismay, the people of Eritrea have become the oceanic tide that they need to cut through in order to get to Eritrea. That is the heart of Mr. Yemane’s comment. There are more unrealized powers Eritreans need to exercise to deal with the upcoming challenges. And it will take the collective resourcefulness and resoluteness of the people in and out of Eritrea to overcome the challenges. As always, victory is a must!

Zel Alemawi Zikri

Awetnayu@hotmail.com