

Independence day (22 years of glorifying freedom and being able to say I am from the free and beautiful country of Eritrea) has come and gone. June 20, the day we remember our fallen heroes for paying the ultimate price to bring and preserve independence has also come and gone for the year. But nobody celebrates Independence as joyfully as the people of Eritrea and no country remembers its fallen heroes as solemnly as Eritrea does. Independence day for Eritreans is more than just the birthday of our nation. It is a day of feeling triumphing overcoming all odds.

Over the celebration of the 22nd independence I watched a documentary of an Eritrean freedom fighter-surgeon by the name of Dr. Lainesh Ghebrehiwet. She grew in a comfortable life in Ethiopia and after finishing her high-school studies there she went to Eastern Europe to become a surgeon, dental and facial surgeon. However, like many of her Eritrean colleagues of the time, Dr. Lainesh didn't run after money or fame after finishing her doctorate, instead she rushed to serve her people fighting to liberate her people. On her quest to join the EPLF, she went from Eastern Europe to Italy to meet fellow Eritrean organizers and told them she wanted to go to Eritrea to join the EPLF. She was sent to the Sudan but when she arrived there she was told that life in the war was brutal and her background hasn't prepared her well and thus she would probably not make it. She insisted and told them nothing will deter her from serving her people and she can withstand any challenges that come her way. She was one determined Eritrean that wouldn't take no for an answer and finally she was allowed to join.

Once she reached Eritrea she was ready for all the hardship she would encounter. She was assigned to the medical unit as a reconstructive surgeon for those with facial and jaw injuries. Day and night she worked in reconstructing the faces and jaws of those that were badly disfigured due to war injuries.

It was difficult to hold your composure watching Dr. Lainesh narrate her story with the help of picture slides of the different cases she had encountered in the field. The different injuries our fighters were sustaining for the sake of freedom was beyond any imagination. In addition as a doctor Dr. Lainesh was also under a lot of stress to help these selfless young fighters. However, Dr. Lainesh was a very strong and talented surgeon. She was working and praying every second of the day that her next surgery would be successful. Some of her surgeries were indescribable as the person's flesh was practically gone. She was encountering situations that could trigger nightmares, but she still picked herself up and kept going. Many times she would spend long hours in surgery successfully repairing someone's jaws or facial features, and that person was required to stay a while to recover, but many of them would refuse to stay, and instead they wanted to rush to go back to fight against Dr. Lainesh professional advice.

She used to swear and scream wanting the young fighters wait until they fully recovered, but to no avail. Many will sneak out of their recovery quarters and go back to fight. She related one such a story of a young fighter who was required to stay, but he badly wanted to go back and fight. He pleaded with her to let him go telling her that if he was able to walk perfectly and move without any flaws, then he cannot allow himself to stay any longer while his comrades were outnumbered many folds by the Ethiopian army. But she refused. So they young man decided to ignore her advice and go to fight leaving here a note telling her that he is gone to the battle front and if God allowed him to survive the atrocious war, he would see her again, and if he died, she should know that he only did it to liberate Eritrea and he pleaded with her to forgive him. Unfortunately, he died in the war. Dr. Lainesh still remembers this moment. Besides the complex war injuries that she had to deal with these kind of stories and painful memories were also weighing heavy on her heart. Dr. Lainesh had saved so many young people's lives and many of them were able to survive the war and now have families and many more that she saved but who went back to the frontlines to fight another battle and fell saving Eritrea. She was as inspiring now as she was then as young surgeon.

Though Dr. Lainesh had the heart of a true Eritrean mother and was good at being a mother to many young fighters during the war, unfortunately, she has no children of her own. In her interview she tried to minimize her lost opportunity of having children comparing it with those that had lost their lives and those that had lost a limb or two, their hearing or sight. She said it was the cost she was willing to pay for the sake of Eritrea.

So as the 22nd independence celebrations and June 20 commemorations give way to our festival bonanzas, we should constantly keep in mind those that paid dearly for the sake of our nation. The fallen heroes, the war-disabled veterans, some cannot get up from their bed to roam freely in the country they helped liberate, some cannot see the joy of the people they help liberate, and others cannot hear the music of joy that is being played come every May 24 celebration. Equally we should also pause to recognize heroes like Dr. Lainesh who selflessly exchanged their own comfort for the comfort of Eritrea and were forced to let go the chance to have children so that they can give birth to independent Eritrea. Let's be grateful to all these and similar tegadelti that brought independence and those gallant warsay who are preserving independence.

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