

## Minister Woldenkiel-A thoroughgoing gentleman in the service of the people



The air seemed heavier and it had little to do with the weather outside the Eritrean Civic and Cultural Center (ECCC) Eritreans in the Washington metropolitan area came to pay their respects to the late Minister and veteran fighter Woldenkiel Ghebremarim, who passed away suddenly on 4 August 2013 after conducting a working tour in the Gash Barka region of Eritrea. The candles scattered on the tables flickered amidst the petals as a lone pair of *Shida*, the black rubber sandals worn by Eritrea's freedom fighters, sat still, beside a framed picture of the late Minister.

Adorned with beautiful all white wreath of orchids, carnations and roses, the book of condolence sat next to the roped white blanket, *Twiyu NeSela*, a staple of the Eritrean fighter. Everything was there to remind us of the *tegdalay*, the tireless fighter that Minister Woldenkiel was.

And so they came, taking their seats and waiting their turn, to sign the book and share their thoughts about a man known best for his over a half a century long service on behalf of the Eritrean people. The tears flowed as it was all that they could do to express the deep sorrow and pain that we all felt. The tears helped ease the sense of helplessness, inability to prevent death-the inevitable. They felt robbed of yet another great leader, it all seemed so unfair. They lined up and collected their thoughts as they prepared to sign the book of condolence. What would they say of his unflinching commitment, dedication and perseverance? What would they say about his extraordinary love for his beloved nation and her people? What would they say; could they say, about the magnanimity of our loss?

The Eritrean Community in DC came together to express our deepest sympathy on the Minister's untimely passing. He may have been only 72 years old, but the proud nation could celebrate a very an extensive and distinguished life in the service of his people. After all, the measure of a life well-lived is not in how much money one has or possessions accumulated in his or her lifetime, as these selfless men and women, lifelong fighters who continue to serve Eritrea have none to show, but rather through the lives they touched and the sorrow they leave behind. If the global outpouring of sympathy for the family of the deceased Woldenkiel, is any indication, and it most certainly is, Eritrea can proudly and confidently say that his indeed was a life well-lived.

Long before the sound of guns was heard, long before Awate fired the first bullet, long before the People's Front was organized, the sounds of liberty beat in Wolday's heart...Fanusey Qisen...don't look back, keep marching forward...don't fret, rest in peace for your contribution is immeasurable...that was just an excerpt from the moving poem written by a young Eritrean to honor the Minister.

As I sat and watched and listened as some rose to speak about their encounters with the legendary fighter, I found myself regretting missed and forever lost opportunities. How many times did I run into him on my travels to Eritrea, exchanging polite pleasantries, without ever sitting down to share more? If only I had known what I now know about his life and history-which is truly also the history of Eritrea and the perpetual quest for true freedom.



Over the years, his walk got slower, his soft voice softer, and his head covered with hair that was almost all white and grey. I often wondered, many times loudly, why he couldn't take a break, enjoy the remainder of his life with his family...share his lifetime's worth of knowledge and experiences...maybe write a book. He deserved to rest...but would he?

It took his death for me to realize that he was actually doing just that...sharing by example, living an exemplary life of service, doing what he loved best, with not just his immediate family, but with his extended family-the entire Eritrean people. How could he rest in a world where wicked enemies of Eritrea, internal and external, "like the troubled sea...cast up mire and dirt". His was an honorable calling, to fulfill the aspirations of his people; he had to lead them through the difficult struggle for independence, and the equally daunting journey of nation building, laying foundations for a sound future. He had to...he had so much more to do...

Minister Woldenkiel traversed Eritrea's mountains and hills, crossed her rivers and her open plains in the service of the people. He was just 18 when he decided to commit himself to the just struggle of the Eritrean people...As we light a candle in his name and say our solemn goodbyes; we acknowledge and honor his immeasurable and eternal contributions to Eritrea and her people. At his funeral conducted at the Martyrs Cemetery in Asmara, Eritrea's capital, the 72 years of a life well lived, and 54 years of service, were represented by his comrades, his beloved family and the hundreds of thousands who came to honor him...and so many more heroes walking amongst them.

As for writing a book, he may not have had the chance to do that, but his incredible life is etched in the memories of his comrades, his family and the thousands whose paths crossed his. Several spoke at the memorial event in Washington, DC. An elderly gentleman, visibly shook while telling of a chance encounter in the field-Amberber in 1989. He spoke about a conversation that seemed to be about an hour long, but was actually turned out to be an all nighter. Another young fighter shared his memories of the late Minister and comrade. He spoke of his extreme respect for the people of Eritrea everywhere, of his passion for work that he was a teacher, a leader, and an honest man. There was much to tell, but....he choked and forced the tears back.

Another gentleman speaking about the life of the legendary fighter said that he had to be “blessed” to be able to serve for 54 years. He said he felt an overpowering sense of pride and asked each one to dig deep in our hearts and ask ourselves if we were worthy of the sacrifice. What are we doing to defend Eritrea’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and the dignity of her people? Are we living up to the solemn promises made to our beloved martyrs or are we losing sight and getting diverted by trivial sensational issues that undermine the peoples unity and the cherished , tried and true principles of Hizbawi Gimbar? It was time to re-calibrate and get back in line to, work hard and sacrifice, in order to achieve our dreams and aspirations -to make Eritrea a country worthy of the enormous sacrifices paid...

My mind wondered back to the words of Mr. Woldemichael Abraha Eritrea’s Minister of Transport and Communications, another one of Eritrea’s esteemed sons, as he delivered the eulogy and the official tribute on the life of Eritrea’s son. Mr. Woldemichael said that the late Minister was one of Eritrea’s acclaimed and exemplary fighters. That he was committed, dedicated and modest; a humble gentleman endowed with a keen intellect...beloved and perceptive, a gallant man borne out of the Eritrean people’s struggles. With sadness in voice, he said that as the mourning nation comes together to lay his lifeless body lay in the ground, to bid him farewell forever...his untimely death has brought forth no ordinary grief to his beloved nation and buried with him was an endless fount of history, of a life lived in service, in greatness.

That was the painful truth...

So as we continue in our nation building efforts, no matter what obstacles are placed in our paths, no matter the challenges, no matter the time it takes, let’s remember his tireless lifelong service and pledge to walk a few centimeters in his formidable shoes...we owe it to our beloved Martyrs who gave their lives for us.



Kubur Minister, may you rest in peace and may your comrades, family, friends and your grieving nation, find solace in the memories of your exemplary life... knowing that their loss is felt by all.

Zealelemawi zKri nsuwatna

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