

## Letter from the Community of Eritreans residing in Italy to the Italian Order of Journalists (ODG)

Dear President Vincenzo Iacopino,

the Community of Eritreans residing in Italy writes to inform you of the discomfort we have suffered for years because of the Italian newspapers and journalists who have targeted our country publishing, almost daily, defamatory articles on Eritrea. These incessant and cruel stories hurt us to the point that we have started to feel singled out and persecuted by the Italian media.

Dear President, if you counted how many times in the last two years the Italian journalists have abused the name of Eritrea, you would comprehend that our country - out of the 54 in Africa - is the main target of this morbid attention. That way you would understand our deep discomfort.

We are concerned about some journalists in particular for the aggressive tones and contents, which in our eyes almost sound as a declaration of war, while other newspapers appear to be mere propaganda tools of the government of Ethiopia. In our view, many are plainly unaware that the history of Eritrea unfortunately still remains linked to Ethiopia that, despite Eritrea achieved its independence in 1991, continues to illegally occupy sovereign Eritrean territories and constantly threatens a new war. Everyone is free to side with one or the other country but it is only fair that respectable and neutral media outlets would provide equal access to all opponents.

Unfortunately, Ethiopia that has chosen to be the armed wing of the US, continues to destabilize the entire Horn of Africa and it is with the support of its ally that for 13 years has refused to implement the UN Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) decisions which ruled that Badme, *causus-belli* of 1998, belongs to Eritrea. To add insult to injury: deceiving the UN, Ethiopia has also pushed for two sanctions against Eritrea accused of financing Al-Shabaab terrorism in Somalia. Accusations that were later proved to be unfounded. Matter of fact, Eritrea is the only secular state in the whole of Africa that has always struggled against every kind of ethnic-religious fanaticism. Obviously, the unjust UN sanctions have harmed the already damaged Eritrean economy that was only starting to recover from the 40-year-war that had destroyed the infrastructure and factories built during the Italian colonial period.

To those who say, "We write because Eritrea is the country that most exports immigrants" we answer that we do not want to deny this phenomenon. Eritrea is still a poor country, it is understandable that the young generations are trying to improve their lives and that of their families. The 18-month military service has been prolonged due to the illegal occupation of Eritrean territories by Ethiopia and the *no war no peace* situation that continues since 2000. Eritreans are migrating, but they are not the only ones to cross the sea, as many other from more "democratic" nations in Africa continue to take that route. We can recognize our people and it has always been clear to us that also people from other nationalities have claimed to be Eritreans to receive *prima facie* refugee status. The UNHCR wants to magnify the matter stating that "every day thousands flee" Eritrea, fortunately however, the reality is that millions of young people in the country continue to stand up to adversity and participate in the nation-building process of our country. During the Struggle for Independence too, many were abandoning the trenches at the first difficulty, but it was thanks to those who resisted that Eritrea was liberated.

When a nation is continuously targeted and defamed in the name of freedom of press, its community abroad express its anger and it is called to defend its honour and its land. For this reason, we have asked to meet journalists to discover the sources of their articles, but

so far, we have not had any feedback. Newspapers like *il Manifesto*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *L'Avvenire* and others arrogantly continue to rage and rub salt into the wound. The refusal to a much-needed debate make us think of some kind of xenophobia against us but we hope to be wrong because this type of serious discrimination should even be pursued by law. All that has been written would only lead us to hate your institutions, but we are a historic community, a serious and exemplary one, that loves the country that has become our second home for over forty years, continues to respect its laws and institutions. We are honest workers that in our small way proudly contribute to the Italian welfare. Many of us have acquired citizenship; we are a very well integrated community in the Italian society with many mixed marriages and children that proudly share both heritages.

With this letter, we want to ask for help to the Italian Order of Journalists to stop this media war that is killing us by using our tragedies and refusing to give voice to our pain. We will never cease to defend ourselves and looking to make our voices heard wherever we will find a chance to do so; to denounce all defamatory articles of journalists who go against their ethics and write by hearsay. We continue to invite anyone genuinely interested in discovering Eritrea to come and see the reality on the ground through their eyes rather than the deliberate misinformation spread. According to *Reporters Without Borders* freedom of press in Eritrea is non-existent, while Italy appeared on the 73rd place on the 2015 World Press Freedom Index that covered 180 countries. Therefore, we strongly believe Italian journalism could seriously teach us an important lesson by not censoring us any longer.

Unfortunately, the majority of Italian newspapers has not seem willing to publish the positives about Eritrea, but only to destroy the image of the country and discourage its communities. Yet, our country is not the evil place as it has been described, and we will never cease to repeat that.

Eritrea, which has strongly focused on the principle of self-reliance, is the only African country that does not receive Western "humanitarian aid" and is on target to reach all eight Millennium Development Goals through its own efforts alone and without borrowing from international moneylenders. Eritrea is the country that has reduced infant and maternal mortality, which has eradicated malaria and controlled HIV, that offers its students free education from kindergarten to University College and is working to achieve the last and most challenging of its objectives: food security. For this purpose is building several dams, aware that without water there is no agriculture without water there is no food, without water there is no life. Major dams have already been completed and have started to retain water. Evidence that can not be denied by any journalist despite how far they go from reality!

Eritrea that has often been described "worst than North Korea", an "open-air prison", or the "hell on Earth", is the one country that is working for the wellbeing of future generations, "forcing" the younger populations including students to the "hard labour" (as happened in 2014 with the planting of 4,000,000 trees to prevent desertification).

This is the country led by Isaias Afwerki, described as "the most violent dictator in the world", that instead of leading a luxurious life as many other leaders, walks through dust and mud in construction sites. Dictators like to build nuclear fallout bunkers, certainly not dams!

How can a leader that works so hard to ensure his people water and food become the dictator that hates his people this much? What is the truth? This is where it becomes essential for the journalist to have the intellectual honesty and a good dose of courage to investigate on human trafficking. We realize that our word might not have the same

weight of that of Westerners and likewise when Eritrea accuses the CIA of human trafficking America might just blame “the dictator”.

In a 2008 interview to Reuters, President Isaias Afwerki accused the CIA of human trafficking. One year later, President Obama in a speech to the Clinton Foundation Initiative, confirmed:

*"I recently renewed sanctions on some of the worst abusers, including North Korea and Eritrea. **We're partnering with groups that help women and children escape from the grip of their abusers. We're helping other countries step up their own efforts. And we're seeing results ...**"*

The efforts Obama mentioned are the refugee camps over the border in Ethiopia and Sudan and the so-called NGOs even run by Eritrean nationals (Wikileaks cable "Engaging the Eritrean Diaspora" revealed that former US Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen to Eritrea confidentially suggested the US should finance NGOs and organizations, especially in the Diaspora that criticized or opposed the Eritrean government). Soon after, for the first time, many Eritreans were managing NGOs and in no time the *Agenzia Habeshia* by “Father” Mussie Zerai, *Ghandi* by Alganesh Fesaha Gandhi, *HRCE* by Elsa Churum were created. Numerous websites of "opposition" groups also began to appear like *Radio Erena* run by Meron Estifanos.

These "holy" organizations, however, seem to receive funds from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Freedom House, Open Society Institute and the US State Department.

The promise of a better life abroad, or easy entry to the United States are among the main pull factors that have made many flee Eritrea to UNHCR refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan. Once here, sadly refugees find out that no safe journey awaits ahead; crossing the desert, facing tortures, kidnappings in Sinai and imprisonment in Libya are all part of the only way they can reach Europe.

Using these tragedies for their own advantages, the above mentioned “NGOs” get into work to contact those kidnapped to extort their families in the Diaspora, terrorizing them through phone calls and push them to pay thousands of dollars. The guardian angels will then follow the journey at sea of those who manage to climb on the boats through satellite phones, and call for help once they reach Italian sea.

Meanwhile, the numbers of children that arrive in Lampedusa – and that without any political conviction are granted refugee status - continue to increase. Unless we believe that children are persecuted in Eritrea, how can minors be considered political refugees? The warfare towards Eritrea is also implemented through the systematic strategy of luring the people out of their country. The truth is that the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has never ended, but only transformed over time.

Dear President, the Eritrean Community in Italy hopes that the Order of Italian Journalists lead by you does not side with one of the two parties in conflict but that remains neutral and balanced. We continue to extend our engagement and collaboration with all institutions in Italy and reiterate our determination to stop the human trafficking that has made us both protagonists and victims. Finally, we ask you and your respectable institution commitment to give voice to our pain for the genocide in the Mediterranean Sea to end.

Eritrean Media Committée In Italy

Spokesperson of the Community of Eritreans residing in Italy