

The “Grand Inquisition” of the UN’s “Commission of Inquiry” on Human Rights in Eritrea

By Daniel Wedi Korbaria



The COI’s “Grand Inquisitors”

From left to right – Mr. Victor Dankwa, Mr. Mike Smith and Ms. Sheila Keetharuth

It was a clumsy attempt by the UN’s “Commission of Inquiry” (COI) on Eritrea’s human rights situation, to make the world believe that its fantasy on Eritrea was reality, and that this “reality” is no longer a comedy but a tragedy. Suddenly, the "hearsay" has become indisputable facts, the witnesses of dubious origin have become the only "voices of truth," and its 550 witnesses have weighed more than the six million of the remaining Eritrean population.

In recent years, a uniquely new character has been designed for Eritrea at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva. This figure, which has been given the name of the Special Rapporteur for Eritrea, operates more like the "Grand Inquisitor" of medieval times. The new character was embodied by a woman named Sheila Keetharuth: investigator of human rights violations, an expert without cultural or professional titles to fill this role. For example, she has no authority to verify the authenticity of the origin of a witness who claims to be Eritrean. There is no doubt that to an outsider both Eritreans and Ethiopians physically resemble each other. For that matter, all the peoples of the Horn of Africa region are characterized by such physical resemblance. But Tigrinya, the language spoken both in Eritrea and in Tigray (Ethiopia), united and divided at the same time the two populations. In fact, though they speak the same language, the differences between the Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans and Tigrayans are as huge as those between Englishmen and Irishmen.

With the complicity of human rights NGOs run by Tigrayans or by Eritrean neo-unionists still loyal to Ethiopia, almost all the translators in Europe are Tigrayan Ethiopians because the Eritreans

considered "spies of the regime" were fired and turned away from centers for immigrants. As the only process by which Sheila Keetharuth had to gather information is through the use of mother-tongue translators, chances are high that her informants/witnesses whom she interviewed were Tigrayan Ethiopians when she visited the refugee camps in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia.

So, in Ethiopia who has translated in Tigrinya language for Sheila & Co? It's known that Ethiopian security agents have infiltrated the refugee camps where refugees who flee from Eritrea are hosted. These camps are completely run by the Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs¹ (ARRA) and not the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, which is the norm internationally. In fact, UNHCR has no control of these "refugee camps" and relies completely on ARRA. We know from reports by former Eritrean refugees passing through these camps that the Eritrean ID cards are falsified and/or forged, changing each time the photos just to increase the UNHCR's data that says "5,000 Eritrean refugees per month."

But the real question is this: "How much value can a Report² produced in Ethiopia have, which accuses Eritrea of "human rights violations?" Is it possible that Ms. Keetharuth and the COI don't know the history of the two countries and the recent "border war" of 1998-2000 -- a war that has never ended despite the Algiers Peace Agreement and the subsequent judgments of the EEBC (Boundary Commission of the United Nations) which established that the town of Badme, the *casus belli* of the war, belongs to Eritrea, and Ethiopia must withdraw its military presence without appeal? In spite of the international laws and agreements, Ethiopia still occupies these sovereign Eritrean territories. All the Eritrean inhabitants of Badme and surroundings were driven off their land and are living in tent camps set up by the government of Eritrea. They are farmers and shepherds who lived in that land for generations and no humanitarian organization has ever bothered to protect.

Is it possible that Ms. Keetharuth doesn't know that 400 residents of She'eb have been crushed and killed by Ethiopian tanks in 1988 during Eritrean war of liberation? Is it possible that Ms. Keetharuth doesn't know about the civilians bombarded by Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam's fighter jets in February 1990 to revenge the loss of the port city of Massawa³? His napalm bombs fell on the market, where the population of the port city had gathered in search of food after the granaries had been burned by Ethiopian soldiers before their surrender. Is it possible that Ms. Keetharuth doesn't know of the 70,000 Eritrean youth who died for the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopian colonialism and the 20,000 fallen to defend Badme and other sovereign Eritrean territories in the recent Ethiopian invasion? Is it possible that Ms. Keetharuth doesn't know about the Ethiopian colonial manner of speaking: "*We want the Eritrean land and not its population*" just to deny Eritrea's independence?

An international institution of the United Nations shouldn't travel to Ethiopia to prepare its report on Eritrea; its duty under international law is to pressure the government of Tigrayans to respect international law and to return the occupied territories to Eritrea. Badme and other sovereign Eritrean territories are to this day still occupied by the Ethiopian minority regime illegally.

It is true that Sheila Keetharuth⁴ had professional affiliation with Amnesty International, the dubious human rights NGO involved in “Arab Spring” style regime-change activities against Eritrea,⁵ which in the past has attempted to send to Asmara its spies and operatives disguised as nuns, priests and innocuous tourists with hidden HD micro-cameras.

"The main aim therefore of this Mission to Eritrea is to provide funding and help in setting up websites and computer centers where people can freely go and chat and exchange ideas and be able to be heard. As a start, ten such Centers will be enough to begin with in Asmara area and by December, we should have covered the entire country. "

According to its dispatch, Amnesty International was especially interested in its Eritrea mission:

"To sensitize the Eritrean population into knowing their very basic rights such as to use the internet, to chat freely, to exchange photos and to do social networking."

Since the OTPOR (Отпор! in Serbian Cyrillic, later renamed CANVAS) activist bloggers were invented in the mid 1990s in Serbia, online "chat" has become a fundamental human right. It is a priority for bloggers to begin a “color revolution” online.

The mission is still the same; the same characters are active on the frontlines who decide the Twitter hashtags as the famous "*Bring back our girls*", "*Je suis Paris*", "*Enough*", "*Refugees welcome*" or "*Open Migration*". A group of humanitarian activists that includes unsuspecting musicians, intellectuals, journalists, NGO activists and volunteers, photo specialists, and politicians sold to lobbyists of all colors: orange, purple, green, yellow, Femen, Pussy Riot, Anonymous , Occupy, etc.

Through the bloggers, Soros, Freedom House and the American National Endowment for Democracy (NED) have made revolutions and regime-change in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, etc. Subsequently Freedom House has exported the OTPOR/CANVAS operation from Eastern Europe to North Africa -- Tunisia, Egypt and Libya -- manufacturing color revolutions in the Arab Spring. Throughout, the mechanism was always the same: bloggers and mainstream media journalists had to amplify allegations of violations of human rights invented by the NGOs.

But because each cause has a corresponding effect, here come masses of migrants from all over the Middle East, Asia and Africa flocking to Europe. An international pool of highly-financed, super-equipped and strategically located activists on the battlefield, the Mediterranean Sea, has attracted the attention of young Africans, creating the effect of "pull factor." They beckon their siren cry: "Come, run away from those who torture you! Here you will find a paradise!" Subsequently, thousands of innocent migrant, enticed by this “pull factor”, have met tragic death by drowning in the Mediterranean.

And to the Europeans who could not make sense of this new “barbarian swarm/invasion of modern Boat People” they explain: "We have to accept them because they run away from war and persecution." In short: "Open Corridor" and "Open doors" for an "Open Migration" in an "Open Society"! "Get ready to embrace 1 million refugees a year for twenty years!" is the benevolent message that George Soros⁶ launched from overseas to Europe.

With the engagement of more humanitarian activists, more journalists and bloggers try to make digestible to the European public opinion that doesn't want more immigrants because in Europe there is no work and the immigrants ask for little in order to work. Towards this goal, they invent new words of communication. It is more appropriate to use "refugees" rather than "migrants" just to avoid that someone could erect fences and walls. “They are not illegal migrants but refugees!” became the motto of the European liberal leftists. To create this perception and make it palatable even to the most cynical and hard-hearted European they churn out numbers, shoot figures and cite statistics from authoritative sources, created ad hoc to justify the status quo.

The use of #datajournalism is fashionable and the equation “exodus = dictatorships” became a cliché. UNHCR is still the main character at the helm and directs this exodus caused by the strategy of regime-change against countries deemed to be "closed", happy to set up tents and provide refugee statistics with apocalyptic figures.

Here, then, at work are the big fish of the business of human trafficking in the 21st century. There are even NGOs with their own ships⁷ to load the survivors and ferry them to the mainland so that through word-of-mouth references others desperate get ready to undertake the perilous journey of hell. The NGOs do it all in the name of “human rights” and, as accomplices in this crime, they celebrate each other. By doing so, they prosper with substantial funding and continue to exist thanks to the misery of migration and the migrants. What would all these aid workers do if there were no migrants?

There had to be even religious cult-like groups such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide or Persecution.org ready to accuse a country like Eritrea, famous for being the cradle of monotheistic religions; a Christian country whose Christianity is as old as the Christianity of St. Peter's in Rome; a country with the first Islamic mosque in history; a Country in which all religions have coexisted for centuries in harmony and mutual respect; a country with a synagogue and an Indian burial ground. Every day, Asmara awakens with prayer in Geez of the Orthodox churches populated by Eritrean women and men dressed in white kissing the sacred walls; in the evening the bells of the Cathedral call the Catholic faithful to the Holy Mass at the same time as the muezzin of great mosque calls the Muslim faithful to prayer. Only in Eritrea will you see during the Eid holiday Muslims walking with pockets full of candy for all the kids playing in the street, and a bustle of Christians in the pastry shops buying cakes to visit the homes of their Muslim friends, just as Muslims would do at Christmas or Easter to visit with their Christian friends and neighbors.

Sheila Keetharuth must have been talking about a country called Eritrea in a different planet, because in her report about Eritrea's case she describes of a medieval country where there are *"extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, indefinite military conscription and forced labor and systematic women's rape."* And Eritrea doesn't even have the death penalty.

Recently, some Western journalists⁸ who went to Asmara are dismantling this line of defamation hatched by the mainstream media hired by Soros who for years have been telling lies about Eritrea. Now, thankfully, the truth about the country is slowly coming to the surface.

Meanwhile, Sheila Keetharuth seems to have taken matters personally, and seems to be angry with Eritrea for denying her an entry visa to be able to do her investigator's (or rather inquisitor's) job. She does not understand that Eritrea considers the visit of the UN's COI unnecessary, as the body has already rendered its judgment *a priori*. Historically, the UN as an institution has always committed injustices against the Eritrean people as far back as 1950 when the UN decided to have Ethiopia annex Eritrea. Sheila Keetharuth believes that the Eritrean Government, committing "the great refusal", has been disrespectful to her, to her profession and the role she plays which she thinks is so important for all humankind.

The great manipulator, however, knowing her pugnacity has joined the Ghanaian Mr. Victor Dankwa and the Australian Mr. Mike Smith (two other Commissioners who cannot recognize the difference between an Eritrean and an Ethiopian!) So she felt slighted.

And so, the COI trio returned from their inquisition trip to Ethiopia with a pile of papers where they transcribed 550 anonymous testimonies from witnesses who claim to be "Eritreans," alleging that they suffered serious human rights violations when they lived in Eritrea. Among them there's a girl who declares: *"When I am in Eritrea, I feel that I cannot even think because I am afraid that people can read my thoughts and I am scared."* Only those who are not Eritrean can say "people" instead of "my countrymen." Under normal circumstances, such a person would be deemed to be suffering from extreme delusional paranoia and in need of psychiatric treatment.

Other testimonies in the COI Report read like this:

"Even standing here talking to a white man, I am taking a risk. If you publish my name, I will be taken in 24 hours."

"In Eritrea everyone is a spy - local housewives, farmers, etc. So they know when you arrive and when you leave."

"You do not trust even your brother; he could still be part of the national security."

"People don't even get together for big birthday parties anymore."

"We lived in one house. We did not trust each other."

All descriptions worthy of the famous Orwell's novel, *1984*: Big Brother is listening to you and watching you! If it were not tragic it would be funny!

The intent and purpose of Sheila & Co is very clear: Setting the country up for the third and final sanction, the most infamous of sanctions that is for serious “crimes against humanity.” Sheila’s verdict is already written in the COI’s last report, insinuating that “possible crimes against humanity” may have happened. She is only waiting to get ratification for this outrageous accusation. This will prepare the groundwork for the infamous R2P,⁹ the Responsibility to Protect, which will give the go-ahead to NATO already prepared to intervene militarily in Eritrea under the pretext of saving its population.

Sheila Keetharuth does not care at all about this tremendous scenario which will definitely lead to the death of hundreds of thousands of Eritreans. For her it seems the only thing of importance is to see the downfall the Eritrean government that has mortally offended her: "How dare they!" It is a very personal war: Sheila Keetharuth against the Eritrean Government. But as the people are solidly united behind their government, in the end Ms. Keetharuth is against the Eritrean people.

She is against the 10,000 Eritreans who came from all over Europe on June 22, 2015, and demonstrated in Geneva, expressing loudly their stand that her Report was false and it has a hidden agenda against Eritrea. If she believes that 550 letters manufactured in Ethiopia are enough to intimidate Eritreans, she has miscalculated gravely. Undeterred, despite the fact that the Human Rights Council has renewed her mandate against Eritrea for another year, the Eritrean diaspora has proclaimed Action Day on January 10, 2016 to write over 20,000¹⁰ letters addressed to the COI and offer their testimony on Human Rights in Eritrea. Handwritten letters, and signed letters written on tablets, PCs and Smart Phones, and were sent by e-mail to the COI, in what would be a plebiscite of a great turnout to say unequivocally that they are ready and willing to give testimony whether they will be contacted by Sheila & Co.

"What do they want from us again? Why do not they leave us alone?" wondered some of the Eritrean women as they wrote their letters in Tigrinya characters under flickering light.

Commission of Inquiry
on Human Rights in Eritrea
Geneva
Switzerland

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Letter of protest to COI from an exasperated Eritrean mother (fig.1)

"To the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea" writes an exasperated Eritrean mother, in hand-written Tigrinya (fig.1): "You are the prosecutor, the witnesses and the judges! What can we tell you? Not just us, any sane person would understand that your accusations are false and have other objectives. The Eritrean people are all united; from different religions and nine ethnic groups they live in harmony and a civilized culture. We have a government that cares for our rights and those of our people."

Another woman complained upon entering the headquarters of the Eritrean Community to write her protest letter: "I found out about these outrageous accusations by accident. Why didn't you tell us?" It was precisely such women (and men) of all ages and walks of life, who rushed in great numbers to the Action Day at various Eritrean community centers worldwide to defend their country's honor and good name; Eritrean women have always felt on their shoulders the weight of the entire country and defended it honorably.

And yet the COI had the audacity to write about Eritrean women thus: "Discrimination and violence against women are present in all areas of Eritrean society. Women are not only at extreme risk of sexual violence within the military and in military training camps, but also in society at large, where violence against women is perpetrated in an environment of impunity."

The message coming through is: "In Eritrea you can rape a woman and get away with it!"

But this is an outrageous lie! Women are the pillars and backbone on which the whole Eritrean society rests, where women are the real protagonists of nation-building and development because they fought and gave their lives for the liberation of the country on a par with men. It is thanks to

these women fighters that Eritrea has banned the old harmful customs such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. It is thanks to these women fighters that Eritrea, among all African countries, can boast three women ministers in the Government. We should ask these gallant Eritrean women revolutionaries if they just allow that violence against women in Eritrea can be "*perpetrated in an environment of impunity.*"

With her constant bickering on the edge of gossip, with her resentments, accusations, slanders and lies, Sheila Keetharuth is forcing the Eritrean Diaspora to engage in an unfair struggle. Once again, Eritreans are expending all their energy, time and money to defend their country from her delirious attacks. In Geneva, patriotic Eritreans have arrived not only from Europe but also from the US, Canada, Japan and Australia. It costs the Eritrean Diaspora hundreds of thousands of euros to organize the "*Cycling Tour for the Truth, Peace, Justice and Eritrea*"¹¹ which started from Sweden and went through 8 cities in Germany before arriving in Geneva, involving a large number of Eritrean cyclist champions of today and yesterday and the technical staff and organizers accompanying them. And yet, Eritreans have willingly stepped up to the plate to defend their country.

For years Sheila Keetharuth has been forcing Eritreans all over the world to spend much in moral and materiel terms. When all these unwarranted attacks will be surely foiled and come to an end, Keetharuth and her companions will face a class-action lawsuit in which they will pay to the Eritrean people compensation for moral and material damages. To list just a few of the moral and psychological damages: the Eritrean Diaspora was diverted from family life and work, their precious time stolen from their family and children, who were forced to participate in the demonstrations undergoing grueling hours of travel. Those who could afford it paid a babysitter for the whole weekend. Sheila & Co have forced the elderly, women and young people to shout their anger against the false accusations on Eritrea under the scorching sun of June without rest from fatigue of a long bus trip that lasted all night.

It would have been easier for everyone if Sheila Keetharuth and the COI had agreed to accept the continuous meeting requests by the Eritrean Diaspora. But the Special Rapporteur ignored all those requests. She never wanted to meet any Eritrean who wanted to speak positively of his/her country. She was willing to give audience only to those few who denigrate and defame Eritrea! If Sheila Keetharuth has sworn revenge for the "great refusal" of the Eritrean Government, it is only fair that the Eritrean Diaspora in turn should demand recompense from her rejection?

The message of the Eritreans to the COI is very clear: "Stop! It is not at all like you want to tell it. We reject your false and baseless report on our country categorically."

In chorus the Eritreans say to COI:

"Leave us alone to work in peace. We just want to get back to our work and our families and not waste our savings that we need to help our loved ones. Don't rob

us of our energies; don't distract us in engaging on an unequal and infinite struggle. We just want to fight for the development of Eritrea. Let us dedicate all our efforts to rebuild our country that has been battered by decades of war. We do not ask for any aid handouts; we want to rebuild our country with our own hands and our sweat. Adhering to our philosophy of life based on self-reliance, we do not want to beg for your 'humanitarian aid.' How shall we say it in clear and uncertain terms to make you understand? Please accept, once and for all, our will to self-determination based on equitable cooperation. It is our legitimate right. Stop accusing us falsely of 'forced labor' or 'slavery' because all Eritreans collectively want to be the protagonists in the rebuilding of their country, the planting of its future trees of love and peace. We love our land that has been bequeathed to us in custody by our martyrs. Therefore we want to heal it from the wounds of war and respect it with our heart and soul; we want to develop it in an environmentally-friendly manner. Despite numerous obstacles, we have managed to achieve almost all the worthy Millennium Development Goals set by your United Nations: eradicating and controlling infectious diseases, offering free education to our young people, ensuring women's emancipation, ensuring drinking water even to the villages far away from the cities, building hundreds of dams, guaranteeing food security, etc. We also know that we can't claim total victory yet, but we are on the right track, and we know that victory is no longer far off. We only ask you to leave us alone. We are a people who are patient and peaceful, hard-working and with sound principles and cultural values. In our long struggle, we have made patience and resilience our virtues which have enabled us to fight and win an impossible war against all odds in 1991. Patiently and resolutely we will continue to fight for our dignity, sovereignty and development. And because of our innate virtues of resilience and patience, you are destined to lose the war you wage against us anyway.

You, Sheila Keetharuth, and your cohorts of the COI will never set foot in Eritrea even if you become greener!"

About the author:

Daniel Wedi Korbaria is an Eritrean author and screenwriter who lives and works in Rome, Italy, since 1995. As an activist he has published in several websites articles written in Italian and translated into English, French and Norwegian, among others: "*Scream of an African*," "*Jaccuse Human Rights Watch*," "*The strength of Yonas*," "*My encounter with 'Father' Mussie Zerai*," "*I've already seen this movie: Eritrea and the 'War by Media*."

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