# The distorted narrative, media war and Eritrea's culture of silence Part I & II



## Ruby Sandhu

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* We Eritreans believe that when you do what you believe, your actions speak loud for you  —  when you don’t do what you believe in then you have to speak louder to be heard —

I have had to resort to publishing this piece and inquiry as a blog as no paper entertains any perspective other than the sensationalised unhealthy narrative maintained as against Eritrea.

My reference to Culture of Silence and Eritrea is premised on an inquiry further to a number of discussions and focus groups with the Eritrean diaspora based here in the UK, Europe, USA and Eritrea on the prevalent narrative as against Eritrea. This was after my experience and travel in Eritrea meeting with senior officials, diplomats, Eritreans, businessmen and our shared experience of the narrative in the western media as compared to the reality on the ground in Eritrea. And it is from those direct and candid discussions that I am presented with an overwhelming awareness of the distorted and  unbalanced narrative as against Eritrea deliberately propagated by our western supposed free journalism, press and media.

My journey on Eritrea was initiated a couple years ago when I was retained by a client to evaluate the legitimacy of the Rehabilitation and Diaspora Tax (RDT) — see below. My preliminary and superficial research was premised on references to genuine human rights reports exacerbated by the mass media and sensationalised journalism. From this  emotive and judgemental space I concluded and with a clinical  approach to international law that Eritrea was indeed a despot lawless state and the North Korea of Africa.  This was me providing advice not grounded in any contextual understanding or any genuine research on my part, in fact actions from my silo of expertise as a lawyer and couched activism.

I later continued the inquiry in my role as the Vice Chair of the SIHRG (Solicitor’s International Human Rights Group). I had within SIHRG set up a working group on Business Ethics incorporating an inquiry on the implementation of the United Nation’s Guiding Principles on the state duty to protect and the Corporate duty to respect human rights and the provision for access of remedy through the appropriate grievance mechanisms in Eritrea.

It was after travel to Eritrea on that specific inquiry and on a number of occasions on different mandates that I returned to the UK to consolidate my thoughts and research which culminated in me disseminating my paper titled Eritrea through the lens of nation building, business ethics and sustainability to much criticism, that I resigned as the Vice Chair of the Solicitor’s International Human Rights Group as I was accused of whitewashing human rights. This was unfair as my work was premised on the work of Business and Human Rights.  There were a number of slurs and defamatory statements in the open media, certain MPs and MEPs refused to engage and I was turned in part like Eritrea into a pariah.

Subsequently I was re-elected back as a committee member of SIHRG and the itinerant individual and non lawyers who had spearheaded this campaign and not read my report were removed. However it provided me with an understanding of how emotive certain elements genuine and at worse subversive were on Eritrea. Subversive in regard to the attacks and shutting down spaces for engagement in the West. This caused me concern as you cannot with one hand state your rights to freedom of expression in Eritrea and then ensure through lobbying that all other perspectives or voices are removed from discussion especially in my country which is a functioning democracy. Eritreans would mock our  freedom of expression when Baroness Kinnock was able to silence other perspectives through her concerted  successful effort to close down open discussions with a holistic approach to engaging with Eritrea. An event that was organised at the House of Lords titled  “Building bridges for a Sustainable Eritrea’. This detrimental and manipulative approach and unhealthy subversive stance on non engagement is perceived by many Eritreans as a personal emotive vendetta against Eritrea creating further fractions as instead of an evolved approach to engagement — this is disappointing when there is potential for an evolved and intelligent approach as instead of simply acting from a reactive space of activism.

Further concern as to how our MPs and MEPs had taken a one sided reactive and biased stance on the issue. On a simple search of the media, MPs and MEPs discussion, debates and resolutions there is a predominantly repetitive and one lens narrative and further to the Commission of Inquiry Report, which one should note was specifically for the mandate of carrying out investigations on human right violations. There are concerns as to the methodology applied, individuals appointed, concerns of bias and lack of impartiality and the individuals / refugees interviewed and without access to Eritrea.  For us to engage with a sovereign state relying on COI is an irresponsible approach especially when we know that COI’s have been used as highly politicised instruments to target states on agendas other than genuine human rights concerns.

Eritreans are reminded of Mahatma Gandhi’s response to Katherine Mayo’s book “Mother India” when they consider the Commission of Inquiry’s report and its mandate.

This book is cleverly and powerfully written. The carefully chosen quotations give it the false appearance of a truthful book. But the impression it leaves on my mind is that it is the **report of a drain inspector sent out with the one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon, or to give a graphic description of the stench exuded by the opened drains**. If Miss Mayo had confessed that she had come to India merely to open out and examine the drains of India, there would perhaps be little to complain about her compilation. **But she declared her abominable and patently wrong conclusion with a certain amount of triumph**: ‘t**he drains are India**”.

It is the reference to the “the drains are India” on how the allegations by COI of systemic human rights violations are perceived by many Eritreans.   COI does not take into account the unique characteristics of the Eritrean journey, context and history underlying concerns as to the inherent motive, potential bias of activism from prior work as instead of genuine inquiry and concerns on human rights and importantly the **drains are not Eritrea.**

***That is not to say that there are not problems in Eritrea, I have not met one Eritrean who has intimated otherwise.*** Rather concern is also expressed on the need to focus on pressing issues of nation building whilst having to address the continued state of emergency with the failure of the international community to ensure that Ethiopia adheres to the Algiers Agreement and ruling of the Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission’s decision. This constant fear of aggression by Ethiopia, backed by the USA is why there is national service. Given the choice of nation building and national service or the western dream and consumerism as relayed through various media portals including satellite dishes or sophisticated marketing managed by mafia traffickers — well many young naive hopeful Eritreans choose what is the easiest option and if they have to lie to get asylum — well why not.

During my travels in Eritrea what was extraordinary was the number of satellite dishes even in the poorest of places and even where people resided in  straw huts.

Last year I had the opportunity to provide a lecture to over 500 students at the Asmara   School of Science and was able to speak to a number of students afterwards. What was clear is yes these students felt disconnected, yes they were disenfranchised from their government, yes life was difficult and yes these students had access to satellite and internet and the western dream was a strong pull for many of their friends, family and neighbours who had already undertaken the treacherous journey.

The Government already overburdened having to deal with a state of emergency with the border issue, food security (impacts of climate change), illegal and unjust sanctions, the politicised Commission of Inquiry, hostile media and defamation, regional problems with its neighbours acted as inherent blocks to the Government’s nation building process and left little or no room for engagement with the youth.

 This generation felt disconnected as theirs was a generation that had not fought in the trenches and when they looked at the lives of their parents and the sacrifices — well the western dream was too powerful pull to focus on nation building. Armed with good health, free education provided by the Government the generation felt ready to cross the divide.  I was aware that here I was with my Applemac computer, iphone, my attire — why would the young not want my life — after all I was nothing more than a second generation immigrant myself and the sacrifices my generation of children made as  latch key kids, babysitting siblings, helping more than usual from an early age with domestic chores whereas our English friends attended language, sports, music, extra study lessons, all this to support our educated parents goal of achieving the consumerist lifestyle which they did not have enough of in India and were drawn to in the western films that had already seeped into India. Given the choice, we too would have happily walked to the world of our friends that promised more than we were being offered - I could empathise. After all the grass is always greener on the other side.

I had asked them directly did they themselves know of any individuals who had left Eritrea - yes - all of them replied in unison — we all know someone and they laughed jovially — their body language was relaxed. Good grief I exclaimed were they aware of the risks that their friends and families were taking? Yes, of course one young student replied when another interrupted and said “**we get calls from our friends and relatives and they say  it’s not great here”**. Recently I went to see the play Calais at Barons Court Theatre and the experience was similar to what the students referred to of the stories they were being told of the holding places for these alleged asylum seekers.  The student continued “**we are told that they are cold, hungry and fear that they won’t get asylum**”.

I**then asked them solemnly did they understand the damage that their friends, relatives, fellow Eritreans were doing to their country by alleging fabricated stories on human rights violations, sometimes genuine but at the hands of traffickers and importantly on the back of genuine human rights violations.** Their reaction was mixed. Yes, and No. Many were not aware of the impact of their actions and others could not see the bigger picture and the implications. Instead some even naively were reported to arrive in the UK on the pretext of human rights violations (suffered at the hands of traffickers) and visit the Eritrean Embassy to register and pay the rehabilitation and Diaspora Tax.  Now these individuals in Europe who became aware of the prevalent narrative were caught as they were unable to come forward to confess which would mean deportation whereas the opportunity of staying meant that they were in a position to support their families in Eritrea. However the guilt would have been unimaginable.

At a coffee shop in Asmara I met with young Samsom Berhane Asefaw, a Public Service, Development Worker, aged 38 who was born and brought up in Eritrea. He too also had friends and relatives that had taken the treacherous journey out of Eritrea. He agreed that most of the Eritrean people were unaware of the western narrative as against Eritrea as the experience on the ground was so different.

When I asked him about the exodus of Eritreans he retorted “it’s an exaggeration”. It’s obvious, he said t**hat the high standard in the West is attracting the youth from the developing countries including Eritrea and with the preferential treatment being afforded to Eritreans - well it was obvious that was definitely a push factor for many young Eritreans to leave**.

Further that the distorted narrative in the West I referred to meant that the**preferential treatment provided for Eritrean migrants in the West was another pull factor for both Eritreans and non-Eritreans to take advantage of as well as the high lifestyle of the Eritrean diaspora**.

He further referred to the **no war no peace situation in Eritrea as against Ethiopia for the last 16 years as having a detrimental impact on Eritrea’s nation building as so much of the resources were being put into the national service to secure the border and the failure off the international community to demand that Ethiopia adhere to  the Rule of Law by complying with the boundary decisio**n.

Once again I asked him if he personally knew of individuals who had migrated “**yes of course**” once again the response was the same “**friends, relatives and neighbours, and  that the age was between 18-30 although he never heard of children leaving unaccompanied, that was something that was not normal in the Eritrean psyche**”. As to his view of the COI he was frank and said “**I believe most do not even recognise COI and those who know what COI documented (accounts of few hundreds nameless and faceless individuals)  simply denounce it, because it is  not authentic**”. This was certainly the case with the 10,000 Eritreans who had protested to the COI in Geneva and yet there was no mention in the mainstream media and neither was reference made to the over 40,000 petitions made by Eritreans to protest against the egregious allegations of systemic violations against women and COI as being grossly unjust and untrue.

I had spoken to two individuals of their experience of SAWA  where many of the allegations of torture and rape came from, albeit that there were hundreds of thousands of Eritreans who had been through Sawa. One was a young trainee at the Justice Minister’s office, who said it was a **very self actualising and empowering experience** and second this young man whose  response was:

**It is a professional Military Training Centre and does what military training centres do throughout the world and has a college for 12 graders which prepares them for their matriculation examination. I have not attended a military training in Sawa because I did my military training the climax of Ethiopia’s war of aggression in 2000. However, I stayed in Sawa for six months in 2012/2013 and later on work there as a teacher in different times. What I have experienced and what is depicted by COI about SAWA are diametrically different.**

My last question was what was his advice to the young Eritreans thinking of leaving Eritrea and those abroad. His advice — **that they should beware of the  sophisticated marketing machine of the human traffickers and smugglers who propagated the Western dream. To those abroad — do not hesitate to come back to your country Eritrea to be productive citizens, and particularly if you are living on hand outs from western social security systems, instead come and fight to be again useful citizens in Eritrea**.

This was what Ruth Nagash, a 42 year old employee of BMSC (a jointly owned mining operation as between Nevsun Resources Limited and the Government of Eritrea’s ENAMCO) was doing. She was returning to assist in the nation building process of her country. Ruth was an intelligent woman with an american accent and was the Training and Development Manager and a dual US / Eritrean citizen at the mine. Ruth was born in Eritrea and moved to the USA at age 10 because of the Ethiopian regime and instability in 1980s.  Her mother moved to San Jose California because she was an activist supporting the revolutionaries and her father remained as an undercover revolutionary as well as a high School director and then later became a manager of the food aid charity ERA (Eritrean Relief Association). Ruth arrived in the USA at the age of 12 years of age and went through the school system secondary, college and premed for undergraduates and then undertook Education, Administration and Leadership for MSc.

Ruth then volunteered for the peace corp to pursue her passion in community development that came about during the high school years volunteering in the local community soup kitchens and homeless shelters and spent two and half years in Jordan

She visited Eritrea in 1998 to visit her father in Asmara – this was the first time after independence and it was then that she noticed how much community work and development was needed to rebuild the war torn country and was inspired by her father’s comment that if you don’t come and give back to your nation then your nation will cease to exist and the revolution will have no meaning.

Asked why so many people were leaving Eritrea - she retorted, **well there are so many staying and also so many of the Eritrean diaspora around the globe who pay the Rehabilitation and Diaspora Tax known in the USA as the Citizens tax**. However she intimated a number of interesting perspectives which I am called to share here.

First she reminded me that the Universities here were premised on the Am erican curriculum and taught by ex pats from India, Kenya, Sudan and European countries and Russia as well as volunteer educators from the diaspora in USA and Europe. The curriculum magnifies the American dream with every reference to an American book including definitions of democracy, liberty and justice.  And there was no reason to change this as after all it was important that Eritreans were educated to be globalised and fit in the international system and of course it works — there is a high literacy rate in Eritrea. Eritreans are highly educated and intelligent individuals with an excellent command of the English language and I have many a time heard “you only need to tell an Eritrean something once”.

I asked why so many were using the asylum route? Ruth shrugged her shoulder, sighed and shook her head. **Eritreans are very protected in the Eritrean culture and they do not weigh the severity of the consequences as they have nothing to compare with. The state provides for education and subsidies food, fuel and other public services such as the use of a bus is 1 nafka. Eritreans who have left do not always tell the truth of how difficult the situation really is abroad because they are ashamed and so there is a misconception of the western dream and therefore young Eritreans continue to leave. And in order for the young to go to the West they will use the terminology human rights abuse not entirely understanding the implications of their actions.**

At a pragmatic level — she said that markets in developed countries are saturated with highly skilled workers and they then look abroad to work as they cannot find wok in their countries. Then in developing countries the markets re saturated relatively speaking with low skilled workers so they flow to the developed countries where there is a need. All of them chasing the dollar. So Eritreans from abroad come here as highly skilled workers and are paid in dollars and then Eritreans leaving here are paid in dollars. Cycles of migration.

Why then the Culture of Silence - why is there not more action - Ruth pointed to the Geneva and the petitions and how little impact that had because of a subversive agenda and the lack of free media in the western world and then said — “**We Eritreans believe that when you do what you believe your actions speak for you — when you don’t do what you believe then you have to speak louder to be heard**”. I silently wished for her sake that in a world of spin and PR, corruption, lies and scandals that Eritrea would find its way.

When the whole world east and west did not believe that we Eritreans could make our freedom happen and against the odds — we silently worked for thirty years known as the long struggle when the whole world did not believe that Eritrea could stand as its own nation we survived 25 years of independence and we will still  keep going. T**he dog barks but the camel (Eritrea) keeps marching.**

I certainly experienced that when I was in Eritrea, how unaware or deliberately refrained  from engaging on the perception of their country or Government by the western media, many Eritreans were. I understood in part why -  I entered a world where time slowed down for individuals to adapt to the culture of the coffee ceremony, the slow internet, infrastructure and capacity issues.  After all what Eritreans were experiencing was nation building, the focus on economic social and cultural rights, high literacy rate, the equality in regard to women, religion and ethnicity.  In all a poor but peaceful country with no extremism, no known cases of corruption, a classless society, a focus on environmental protection, social justice and equality at a national level on all aspects of development and where human capacity building was the highest resource second to the sustainable natural resource development the Government was engaged in  as part of its nation building and national action plan. This was the day to day living of the Eritrean basic survival. The frustration was how this never entered the western distorted narrative.

It was only when I returned to the UK that I reconnected to the prevalent and distorted narrative and the impending concerns for the human rights and future of the people of Eritrea and continued peace and stability in the Horn of Africa returned.

At a lecture that I chaired on Business Ethics, Migration and Trafficking in June of last year, with a focus on Eritrea I met with an extraordinary and inspiring young woman who was one of the panelists, Indira Kartallozi. Indira provided a moving and terrorising account of the implications of migration and at the hands of traffickers.

She described at length the sophisticated illegal billion dollar industry trafficking humans and human organs — a deadly business which had increased on the tightening of border controls as a major crime syndicate. That this marketing machine was active in reeling the impressionable youth to take treacherous journeys in the hope of the western dream and a better lifestyle. She provided examples of the cost of human life. **A Nigerian woman costs $40-74,000, children from Bangladesh for prostitution as low as $250, a male atheist in Saudi Arabia at a cost of $1670, a child from the UK could be purchased for £25,000. That a kidney could be bought for $120,000 as part of complex syndicate network and that this business was generating over $26 billion in revenues.**And to attract individuals, the western dream was sold in sophisticated packages that were being sold on **Facebook** and other **social media.**

As a Kosovan refugee herself, Indira recounted how she had fled her country to the UK, because she was an activist in 1992 and in search of the western dream and the western designer state. However she said that all of the human rights violations that she asserted in Kosovo as an activist was what she had experienced in the UK and on a daily basis including discrimination, gender inequality, social division, detention, poverty and victimisation.  The detrimental impact of the UN and the introduction of the Rule of Law by the EU and the ensuing implosion of her country and corruption post intervention was disheartening. That the Kosovan’s dream of a modern designer Western Kosovan country was shattered since the intervention without context or vision and importantly without inclusion of all stakeholders was a reeling disaster.  Corruption which was something that was not heard of when she was growing up was now rife and endemic in the new designer state Kosovo. That the UN administrators were referred to as colonial administrators who worked with criminals and that organised crime was now at an unprecedented scale. So from her own experience as a refugee she urged **that Eritrean activists look at the bigger picture and work in those spaces of engagement and collaboration that were afforded to them as instead of those who created divisive spaces.**

 The lessons learned and a message to the Eritrean audience was clear and loud  “**that no-one has your best interests at heart other than Eritreans yourself”**. To be able to bring change you need to open your minds — something I have implored with activists.

I have no intention of being a apologist, however in my work prior and with NGOs, as an activist, lawyer and a mediator what experience has taught me is that situations are far more complex and a continued linear and  polarised approach to engagement  is akin to ignorance and failing to learn form history. We only need to look around us as to see what has happened in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Tunisia - that is the route that unbridled activism has taken and the end result is egregious if not worse than the human rights that such activism intended to highlight and bring to the world’s attention. To continue to engage in this manner is a violation of the principle of Do NO Harm which is the first principle that an activist or human rights defender should avail him or herself of. The activist’s work should operate, of course but NEVER alone, never to be instrumentalised to spearhead agendas  of illicit regime change. This is a resounding message — one only needs to access paper after paper on the lessons learned in many international journals and institutes where activism and regime change has created more egregious human rights violations and failed states than a more balanced holistic and considered approach would have avoided. I am of course ignoring powerful actors such as geopolitics, subversive elements and other agendas - I am entirely unqualified to discuss this and more importantly will enter into conspiracy theories and therefore either be subject to further defamatory statements and slurs  and at worse discredited.

It is obvious that reference to Eritrea as not having the Rule of Law is a generalist  statement which does not address the Government’s signature and ratification of many international treaties including the Convention against torture which require the respect of human rights or the Government’s implementation of the accepted recommendations in the Universal Periodic Review as a form of continued engagement on these human rights issues or its progressive work on economic social rights as evidenced in the MDG and SDGs. Comparing Eritrea which is still in the process of nation building and lacks capacity and infrastructure requires priorities and  focus on  ensuring that the Eritrean people have access to health and food security. A lack of focus at this stage could create an implosion as happens in countries without the requisite transitional infrastructure in place. **As to genuine allegations of human rights violations of course these must be addressed and through due process but that cannot be the only narrative and process of engagement in respect to Eritrea.**

Reference to Eritrea as a country with no Rule of Law makes mockery of our failure to  respect International Law when states guaranteed the Algiers Agreement, the EEBC (Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission) which decided in favour of Eritrea as against Ethiopia on the boundary demarcation. Ethiopia continues to violate this and in their occupation of the town of Badme. Now the overwhelming hypocrisy is that the prevalent distorted narrative as against Eritrea does not address the truth or the reasons and key proponent of the migration to the West, that is the failure of the West to enforce the Rule of Law in regard to their obligations to ensure Ethiopia adheres to the Algiers Agreement and decision of the Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission decision.  Or the failure of the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group to find evidence beyond reasonable doubt of the Government’s support of Al-Shabab and therefore what is the imposition of illegal and unjust sanctions on a country which is one of the poorest in the world reminds us of the West’s approach to Cuba and that our boys take their playground games with them.

 Why?… ask fiercely bright postgraduate law students to a senior retired English judge at the School of Law in Asmara, does our Eritrean Government comply with the International Arbitration decision in regard to the Hanish Islands which was decided as against Eritrea and meant that Eritrea lost Islands to Yemen, is that not an adherence by Eritrea to International Law and yet the international community fails to respond to Ethiopia’s violation of the EEBC decision presided by the eminent jurist and lawyer Professor Lauterpacht.

This means that Eritrea is in a constant state of emergency with individuals conscripted to the national service to protect the border. Ethiopia is an American ally and concerns are expressed by the Eritreans that the illegal occupation of the town of Badme and failure of Ethiopia to respect the EEBC decision requires Eritrea put an enormous amount of resources which it can ill afford to do.

A community court mediator in Asmara asks why does the international community not respect the EEBC decision - I am afraid that my son who does not want to be conscripted to national service will try and escape by fleeing Eritrea without telling me and I am in fear of him falling in the hands of traffickers.  I was not able to imagine what it must feel like to be this young mother with a 20 year old son not knowing whether he will be home from one day to the next.

Mining is a key sector and lifeline for the development of Eritrea and therefore the Government takes a unique perspective where they have a 40% stake in the business, which is highly unusual. The Government believes CSR is the responsibility of the state to ensure that there is no dependency on corporations and that the state is driving the agenda as instead of the corporations and so Nevsun’s initiatives have locked into the existing Government’s action plans.

Further there is real impetus to ensure that mining revenue is distributed nationally as instead of just the region or area that the mine operates. Further Nevsun Resources Limited specifically refer to a safe environment, a highly educated workforce where education is provided for free by the Government. My earlier research highlighted the importance of the emphasis that the Government of Eritrea places on sustainability.

Further the activities of operational mining companies that have engaged with the Government of Eritrea refer to the fact that their mining contracts have never been revoked or assets expropriated or nationalised which is unusual as compared to the experience of many companies operating in African countries. That the Government of Eritrea premised the foundation of responsible mining through the implementation of the Colorado school of mines law, incorporated impact assessment, set up an impact review committee to quarterly manage the mine to ensure that there was development of health and safety, social impact and CSR to ensure that this was not a territory of cowboys with kick backs, corruption, slush funds and pop up billionaires. Imagine my surprise when I learned that  the president walks around in sandals in Asmara or that a senior Government official in the mining sector drives a car dating back from the 1970s with no motor value hardly befitting a greedy corrupt egotistical politician. Yet Transparency International continues to maintain a methodology which I have not been able to understand which has Eritrea at the bottom of the index. Eritreans speak directly simply and have a value system yet untainted by western consumption and consumerism — however I doubt whether they will be able to stop the floodgates of consumerism which the internet and social media has already facilitated  — the western dream.

Nevsun met with the Commission of Inquiry in Geneva and have consistently and through their actions emphasised the importance of human rights and carried out extensive due diligence and put into place checks and balances including the implementation of the Voluntary Principles of security and human  rights to ensure that there is no forced labour or human rights violations. As part of Nevsun’s constructive engagement they are aware of the impact that migration is having on the future of their workforce which the Government insists must have a majority representation of Eritreans. Importantly Nevsun are providing a template with the encouragement of the Eritrean Government for responsible and sustainable mining.

Another example of a play on the distorted narrative is what the Americans call Citizen  Tax and referred to appropriately in Eritrea as the Rehabilitation and Diaspora Tax (RDT). This tax is levied on the Eritrean diaspora as a means to rebuild the country and more importantly to provide the development of nation building. How is it that the revenue is in the millions and without any dissent and yet voice is given to the few for reasons which I am not aware decry protestation at that tax for Eritrean citizenship.

The Eritreans I speak to say they fought in the trenches and they learned how to fight that war but this was is now a “dirty” media war and they are being attacked on all sides. Eritrean’s  culturally do not engage in hype or spin and they do not easily trust anyone — knowing through experience they say  that individuals rarely walk their talk. They speak directly and clearly and do away with frills, understandable from generations who suffered at the hands of colonisation or as freedom fighters. And they say that that now the war is not in the trenches but a burgeoning media war for Eritrea’s natural resource potential and ports.

Intelligent engagement requires us to start from a genuine inquiry to the situation which requires a broad number of views. This requires us to step into the space ofnot knowing to a place of uncertainty away from rehashing a reactive linear, prescriptive and dogmatic approach premised on conditioning with little or no awareness of the context or reality testing of the trajectory of our actions. Individuals in democratic institutions are duty bound to represent the view of their constituents not just that of the activists otherwise that would be silencing dissent to the minority view — a practice of hypocrisy by the West at the extreme.

A progressive and pragmatic approach is taken by the EU as evidenced in the initiatives set out in the Eritrea - EU Cooperation 11th European Development Fund - National Indicative Programme 2014-2020, further supported by H.E Christian Manahl, Ambassador, Head of the European Union Delegation. This engagement recognises the fact that Eritrea is one of the poorest countries on the planet and therefore “constructive engagement” must be the premise of the EU’s engagement with Eritrea. A recognition that Eritrea is important to the peace and security in the Horn of Africa. A recognition of the undisputed success of the economic social objectives of the Government of Eritrea as provided in its exemplary work in the area of health and poverty alleviation and the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. That any discussion on  democracy, human rights, good governance and security in Eritrea are interconnected and interdependent and hence the importance of constructive engagement. That is a non polarised approach of engagement, that development and dialogue go hand in hand. Along with this the Government of Eritrea has engaged with the EU on the issue of addressing migration and trafficking.***Maybe we can take a leaf out of the EU’s approach to constructive evolved engagement.***

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# The Distorted Narrative, Media War and Eritrea’s Culture of Silence (II) media war and distorted eritrea Narrative culture

*— We Eritreans believe that when you do what you believe, your actions speak loud for you — when you don’t do what you believe in then you have to speak louder to be heard —*

By [**Ruby Sandhu**](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/distorted-narrative-media-war-eritreas-culture-silence-ruby-sandhu),

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At a coffee shop in Asmara I met with young Samsom Berhane Asefaw, a Public Service, Development Worker, aged 38 who was born and brought up in Eritrea. He too also had friends and relatives that had taken the treacherous journey out of Eritrea. He agreed that most of the Eritrean people were unaware of the western narrative as against Eritrea as the experience on the ground was so different.

When I asked him about the exodus of Eritreans he retorted “it’s an exaggeration”. It’s obvious, he said that the high standard in the West is attracting the youth from the developing countries including Eritrea and with the preferential treatment being afforded to Eritreans – well it was obvious that was definitely a push factor for many young Eritreans to leave.

Further that the distorted narrative in the West I referred to meant that the preferential treatment provided for Eritrean migrants in the West was another pull factor for both Eritreans and non-Eritreans to take advantage of as well as the high lifestyle of the Eritrean diaspora.

He further referred to the no war no peace situation in Eritrea as against Ethiopia for the last 16 years as having a detrimental impact on Eritrea’s nation building as so much of the resources were being put into the national service to secure the border and the failure off the international community to demand that Ethiopia adhere to the Rule of Law by complying with the boundary decision.

Once again I asked him if he personally knew of individuals who had migrated “yes of course” once again the response was the same “friends, relatives and neighbours, and that the age was between 18-30 although he never heard of children leaving unaccompanied, that was something that was not normal in the Eritrean psyche”. As to his view of the COI he was frank and said “**I believe most do not even recognise COI and those who know what COI documented (accounts of few hundreds nameless and faceless individuals) simply denounce it, because it is not authentic**”. This was certainly the case with the 10,000 Eritreans who had protested to the COI in Geneva and yet there was no mention in the mainstream media and neither was reference made to the over 40,000 petitions made by Eritreans to protest against the egregious allegations of systemic violations against women and COI as being grossly unjust and untrue.

I had spoken to two individuals of their experience of SAWA where many of the allegations of torture and rape came from, albeit that there were hundreds of thousands of Eritreans who had been through Sawa. One was a young trainee at the Justice Minister’s office, who said it was a very self actualising and empowering experience and second this young man whose response was:

It is a professional Military Training Centre and does what military training centres do throughout the world and has a college for 12 graders which prepares them for their matriculation examination. I have not attended a military training in Sawa because I did my military training the climax of Ethiopia’s war of aggression in 2000. However, I stayed in Sawa for six months in 2012/2013 and later on work there as a teacher in different times. What I have experienced and what is depicted by COI about SAWA are diametrically different .

My last question was what was his advice to the young Eritreans thinking of leaving Eritrea and those abroad. His advice — that they should beware of the sophisticated marketing machine of the human traffickers and smugglers who propagated the Western dream. To those abroad — do not hesitate to come back to your country Eritrea to be productive citizens, and particularly if you are living on hand outs from western social security systems, instead come and fight to be again useful citizens in Eritrea.

This was what Ruth Nagash, a 42 year old employee of BMSC (a jointly owned mining operation as between Nevsun Resources Limited and the Government of Eritrea’s ENAMCO) was doing. She was returning to assist in the nation building process of her country. Ruth was an intelligent woman with an american accent and was the Training and Development Manager and a dual US / Eritrean citizen at the mine. Ruth was born in Eritrea and moved to the USA at age 10 because of the Ethiopian regime and instability in 1980s. Her mother moved to San Jose California because she was an activist supporting the revolutionaries and her father remained as an undercover revolutionary as well as a high School director and then later became a manager of the food aid charity ERA (Eritrean Relief Association). Ruth arrived in the USA at the age of 12 years of age and went through the school system secondary, college and premed for undergraduates and then undertook Education, Administration and Leadership for MSc.

Ruth then volunteered for the peace corp to pursue her passion in community development that came about during the high school years volunteering in the local community soup kitchens and homeless shelters and spent two and half years in Jordan

She visited Eritrea in 1998 to visit her father in Asmara – this was the first time after independence and it was then that she noticed how much community work and development was needed to rebuild the war torn country and was inspired by her father’s comment that if you don’t come and give back to your nation then your nation will cease to exist and the revolution will have no meaning.

Asked why so many people were leaving Eritrea – she retorted, well there are so many staying and also so many of the Eritrean diaspora around the globe who pay the Rehabilitation and Diaspora Tax known in the USA as the Citizens tax. However she intimated a number of interesting perspectives which I am called to share here.

First she reminded me that the Universities here were premised on the American curriculum and taught by ex pats fromIndia, Kenya, Sudan and European countries and Russia as well as volunteer educators from the diaspora in USA andEurope. The curriculum magnifies the American dream with every reference to an American book including definitions of democracy, liberty and justice. And there was no reason to change this as after all it was important that Eritreans were educated to be globalised and fit in the international system and of course it works — there is a high literacy rate in Eritrea. Eritreans are highly educated and intelligent individuals with an excellent command of the English language and I have many a time heard “you only need to tell an Eritrean something once”.

I asked why so many were using the asylum route? Ruth shrugged her shoulder, sighed and shook her head. **Eritreans are very protected in the Eritrean culture and they do not weigh the severity of the consequences as they have nothing to compare with.** The state provides for education and subsidies food, fuel and other public services such as the use of a bus is 1 Nafka. Eritreans who have left do not always tell the truth of how difficult the situation really is abroad because they are ashamed and so there is a misconception of the western dream and therefore young Eritreans continue to leave. And in order for the young to go to the West they **will use the terminology human rights abuse not entirely understanding the implications of their actions**.

At a pragmatic level — she said that markets in developed countries are saturated with highly skilled workers and they then look abroad to work as they cannot find wok in their countries. Then in developing countries the markets re saturated relatively speaking with low skilled workers so they flow to the developed countries where there is a need. All of them chasing the dollar. So Eritreans from abroad come here as highly skilled workers and are paid in dollars and then Eritreans leaving here are paid in dollars. Cycles of migration.

Why then the Culture of Silence – why is there not more action – Ruth pointed to the Geneva and the petitions and how little impact that had because of a subversive agenda and the lack of free media in the western world and then said — “We Eritreans believe that when you do what you believe your actions speak for you — when you don’t do what you believe then you have to speak louder to be heard”. I silently wished for her sake that in a world of spin and PR, corruption, lies and scandals that Eritrea would find its way.

When the whole world east and west did not believe that we Eritreans could make our freedom happen and against the odds — we silently worked for thirty years known as the long struggle when the whole world did not believe that Eritrea could stand as its own nation we survived 25 years of independence and we will still keep going. The dog barks but the camel (Eritrea) keeps marching.

I certainly experienced that when I was in Eritrea, how unaware or deliberately refrained from engaging on the perception of their country or Government by the western media, many Eritreans were. I understood in part why – I entered a world where time slowed down for individuals to adapt to the culture of the coffee ceremony, the slow internet, infrastructure and capacity issues. After all what Eritreans were experiencing was nation building, the focus on economic social and cultural rights, high literacy rate, the equality in regard to women, religion and ethnicity. In all a poor but peaceful country with no extremism, no known cases of corruption, a classless society, a focus on environmental protection, social justice and equality at a national level on all aspects of development and where human capacity building was the highest resource second to the sustainable natural resource development the Government was engaged in as part of its nation building and national action plan. This was the day to day living of the Eritrean basic survival. The frustration was how this never entered the western distorted narrative.

It was only when I returned to the UK that I reconnected to the prevalent and distorted narrative and the impending concerns for the human rights and future of the people of Eritrea and continued peace and stability in the Horn of Africa returned.

At a lecture that I chaired on **Business Ethics, Migration and Trafficking** in June of last year, with a focus on Eritrea, I met with an extraordinary and inspiring young woman who was one of the panelists, Indira Kartelozie. Indira provided a moving and terrorising account of the implications of migration and at the hands of traffickers.

She described at length the sophisticated illegal billion dollar industry trafficking humans and human organs — a deadly business which had increased on the tightening of border controls as a major crime syndicate. That this marketing machine was active in reeling the impressionable youth to take treacherous journeys in the hope of the western dream and a better lifestyle. She provided examples of the cost of human life. A Nigerian woman costs $40-74,000, children from Bangladesh for prostitution as low as $250, a male atheist in Saudi Arabia at a cost of $1670, a child from the UK could be purchased for £25,000. That a kidney could be bought for $120,000 as part of complex syndicate network and that this business was generating over $26 billion in revenues. And to attract individuals, the western dream was sold in sophisticated packages that were being sold on Facebook and other social media.

As a Kosovan refugee herself, Indira recounted how she had fled her country to the UK, because she was an activist in 1992 and in search of the western dream and the western designer state. However she said that all of the human rights violations that she asserted in Kosovo as an activist was what she had experienced in the UK and on a daily basis including discrimination, gender inequality, social division, detention, poverty and victimisation. The detrimental impact of the UN and the introduction of the Rule of Law by the EU and the ensuing implosion of her country and corruption post intervention was disheartening. That the Kosovan’s dream of a modern designer Western Kosovan country was shattered since the intervention without context or vision and importantly without inclusion of all stakeholders was a reeling disaster. Corruption which was something that was not heard of when she was growing up was now rife and endemic in the new designer state Kosovo. That the UN administrators were referred to as colonial administrators who worked with criminals and that organised crime was now at an unprecedented scale. So from her own experience as a refugee she urged that Eritrean activists look at the bigger picture and work in those spaces of engagement and collaboration that were afforded to them as instead of those who created divisive spaces.

The lessons learned and a message to the Eritrean audience was clear and loud “**that no-one has your best interests at heart other than Eritreans yourself**”. To be able to bring change you need to open your minds — something I have implored with activists.

I have no intention of being a apologist, however, in my work prior and with NGOs, as an activist, lawyer and a mediator what experience has taught me is that situations are far more complex and a continued linear and polarised approach to engagement is akin to ignorance and failing to learn form history. We only need to look around us as to see what has happened in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Tunisia – that is the route that unbridled activism has taken and the end result is egregious if not worse than the human rights that such activism intended to highlight and bring to the world’s attention.

To continue to engage in this manner is a violation of the principle of Do NO Harm which is the first principle that an activist or human rights defender should avail him or herself of. The activist’s work should operate, of course but NEVER alone, never to be instrumentalised to spearhead agendas of **illicit regime change**. This is a resounding message — one only needs to access paper after paper on the lessons learned in many international journals and institutes where activism and regime change has created more egregious human rights violations and failed states than a more balanced holistic and considered approach would have avoided. I am of course ignoring powerful actors such as geopolitics, subversive elements and other agendas – I am entirely unqualified to discuss this and more importantly will enter into conspiracy theories and therefore either be subject to further defamatory statements and slurs and at worse discredited.

It is obvious that reference to Eritrea as not having the Rule of Law is a generalist statement which does not address the Government’s signature and ratification of many international treaties including the Convention against torture which require the respect of human rights or the Government’s implementation of the accepted recommendations in the Universal Periodic Review as a form of continued engagement on these human rights issues or its progressive work on economic social rights as evidenced in the MDG and SDGs. Comparing Eritrea which is still in the process of nation building and lacks capacity and infrastructure requires priorities and focus on ensuring that the Eritrean people have access to health and food security. A lack of focus at this stage could create an implosion as happens in countries without the requisite transitional infrastructure in place. As to genuine allegations of human rights violations of course these must be addressed and through due process but that cannot be the only narrative and process of engagement in respect to Eritrea.

Reference to Eritrea as a country with no Rule of Law makes mockery of our failure to respect International Law when states guaranteed the Algiers Agreement, the EEBC (Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission) which decided in favour of Eritrea as against Ethiopia on the boundary demarcation. Ethiopia continues to violate this and in their occupation of the town of Badme. Now the **overwhelming hypocrisy** is that the prevalent distorted narrative as against Eritrea does not address the truth or the reasons and key proponent of the migration to the West, that is the failure of the West to enforce the Rule of Law in regard to their obligations to ensure Ethiopia adheres to the Algiers Agreement and decision of the Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission decision. Or the failure of the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group to find evidence beyond reasonable doubt of the Government’s support of Al-Shabab and therefore what is the imposition of illegal and unjust sanctions on a country which is one of the poorest in the world reminds us of the West’s approach to Cuba and that our boys take their playground games with them.

Why?… ask fiercely bright postgraduate law students to a senior retired English judge at the School of Law in Asmara, does our Eritrean Government comply with the International Arbitration decision in regard to the Hanish Islands which was decided as against Eritrea and meant that Eritrea lost Islands to Yemen, is that not an adherence by Eritrea to International Law and yet the international community fails to respond to Ethiopia’s violation of the EEBC decision presided by the eminent jurist and lawyer Professor Lauterpacht.

This means that Eritrea is in a constant state of emergency with individuals conscripted to the national service to protect the border. Ethiopia is an American ally and concerns are expressed by the Eritreans that the illegal occupation of the town of Badme and failure of Ethiopia to respect the EEBC decision requires Eritrea put an enormous amount of resources which it can ill afford to do.

A community court mediator in Asmara asks why does the international community not respect the EEBC decision – I am afraid that my son who does not want to be conscripted to national service will try and escape by fleeing Eritrea without telling me and I am in fear of him falling in the hands of traffickers. I was not able to imagine what it must feel like to be this young mother with a 20 year old son not knowing whether he will be home from one day to the next.

Mining is a key sector and lifeline for the development of Eritrea and therefore the Government takes a unique perspective where they have a 40% stake in the business, which is highly unusual. The Government believes CSR is the responsibility of the state to ensure that there is no dependency on corporations and that the state is driving the agenda as instead of the corporations and so Nevsun’s initiatives have locked into the existing Government’s action plans.

Further there is real impetus to ensure that mining revenue is distributed nationally as instead of just the region or area that the mine operates. Further Nevsun Resources Limited specifically refer to a safe environment, a highly educated workforce where education is provided **for free** by the Government. My earlier research highlighted the importance of the emphasis that the Government of Eritrea places on sustainability.

Further the activities of operational mining companies that have engaged with the Government of Eritrea refer to the fact that their mining contracts have never been revoked or assets expropriated or nationalised which is unusual as compared to the experience of many companies operating in African countries. That the Government of Eritrea premised the foundation of responsible mining through the implementation of the Colorado school of mines law, incorporated impact assessment, set up an impact review committee to quarterly manage the mine to ensure that there was development of health and safety, social impact and CSR to ensure that this was not a territory of cowboys with kick backs, corruption, slush funds and pop up billionaires. Imagine my surprise when I learned that the president walks around in sandals in Asmara or that a senior Government official in the mining sector drives a car dating back from the 1970s with no motor value hardly befitting a greedy corrupt egotistical politician. Yet Transparency International continues to maintain a methodology which I have not been able to understand which has Eritrea at the bottom of the index. Eritreans speak directly simply and have a value system yet untainted by western consumption and consumerism — however I doubt whether they will be able to stop the floodgates of consumerism which the internet and social media has already facilitated — the western dream.

Nevsun met with the Commission of Inquiry in Geneva and have consistently and through their actions emphasised the importance of human rights and carried out extensive due diligence and put into place checks and balances including the implementation of the Voluntary Principles of security and human rights to ensure that there is no forced labour or human rights violations. As part of Nevsun’s constructive engagement they are aware of the impact that migration is having on the future of their workforce which the Government insists must have a majority representation of Eritreans. Importantly Nevsun are providing a template with the encouragement of the Eritrean Government for responsible and sustainable mining.

Another example of a play on the distorted narrative is what the Americans call Citizen Tax and referred to appropriately in Eritrea as the **Rehabilitation and Diaspora Tax** (RDT). This tax is levied on the Eritrean diaspora as a means to rebuild the country and more importantly to provide the development of nation building. How is it that the revenue is in the millions and without any dissent and yet voice is given to the few for reasons which I am not aware decry protestation at that tax for Eritrean citizenship.

The Eritreans I speak to say they fought in the trenches and they learned how to fight that war but this was is now a “dirty” media war and they are being attacked on all sides. **Eritrean’s culturally do not engage in hype or spin and they do not easily trust anyone** — knowing through experience they say that individuals rarely walk their talk. They speak directly and clearly and do away with frills, understandable from generations who suffered at the hands of colonisation or as freedom fighters. And they say that now the war is not in the trenches but a burgeoning media war for Eritrea’s natural resource potential and ports.

Intelligent engagement requires us to start from a genuine inquiry to the situation which requires a broad number of views. This requires us to step into the space of not knowing to a place of uncertainty away from rehashing a reactive linear, prescriptive and dogmatic approach premised on conditioning with little or no awareness of the context or reality testing of the trajectory of our actions. Individuals in democratic institutions are duty bound to represent the view of their constituents not just that of the activists otherwise that would be silencing dissent to the minority view — a practice of hypocrisy by the West at the extreme.

A progressive and pragmatic approach is taken by the EU as evidenced in the initiatives set out in the Eritrea – EU Cooperation 11th European Development Fund – [**National Indicative Programme 2014 – 2020**](http://www.tesfanews.net/eu-approves-new-development-package-to-eritrea/), further supported by H.E Christian Manahl, Ambassador, Head of the European Union Delegation. This engagement recognises the fact that Eritrea is one of the poorest countries on the planet and therefore “constructive engagement” must be the premise of the EU’s engagement with Eritrea.

A recognition that Eritrea is important to the peace and security in the Horn of Africa. A recognition of the undisputed success of the economic social objectives of the Government of Eritrea as provided in its exemplary work in the area of health and poverty alleviation and the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. That any discussion on democracy, human rights, good governance and security in Eritrea are interconnected and interdependent and hence the importance of constructive engagement. That is a non polarised approach of engagement, that development and dialogue go hand in hand. Along with this the Government of Eritrea has engaged with the EU on the issue of addressing migration and trafficking. Maybe we can take a leaf out of the EU’s approach to constructive evolved engagement.