**BACKGROUND TO THE ERITREAN NATION AND THE NATIONAL SERVICE. (Part 10)**

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Before discussing Eritrean asylum seekers or economic migrants, it is important to provide a background to the Eritrean nation and why its youth are fleeing. Eritrea is a medium size nation of about six million people, located on the eastern corner of Africa. It occupies a strategic location, at the entrance to the Red Sea with 9 colourful ethnic tribes and splendid weather-- throughout the year. It’s shape is that of a triangle or an axe shaped with a long handle and its coast stretching 1200 kilometres.



Eritrea's geographical position makes it an attractive place for many foreigners to set foot in the country and that is why many colonizers steer their eyes in order to occupy her. However each time these outsiders try to occupy it, they faced fierce resistance or (wrath) of the Eritrean people and all occupiers were forced to leave the country to its rightful owners the--- Eritrean people--- the free holders of Eritrea. The last colonizers were the Ethiopians who occupied it for three decades, but after a protracted 30 year war of independence, Ethiopia, like other colonizers had to vacate the country. Eritrea belongs neither to the North or Central Africa, it is not of the Nile Valley, nor mainly of the Red sea. It has been ruled by the Turkish, the Egyptians, the Italians, and the Ethiopians. It's neighbours are Ethiopia in the South, Red Sea, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, to the East, Djibouti in the South East, Sudan to the North and West. Eritrea became an independent country in May 1991 but two years later it held an internationally recognized referendum and was officially recognized by Ethiopia and the rest of the International community in 24 May 1993. Eritrea will celebrate its 25th silver independence anniversary in May 24 / 2016. In the last few years there has been a lot of negative publicity about Eritrean asylum seekers/Economic migrants risking their lives to come to Europe as we have seen on our television screens. But what are the main reasons many Eritreans leave their country, there are several reasons and these are as follows:

 The Eritrean National Service.

 Ethiopia as the epicentre of Migration and destabilizing of the Eritrean Nation.

 Incoherent European open door policy towards Eritrean and Ethiopian asylum seekers.

 UK home office policy in mistakenly classifying Ethiopian refugees as Eritreans.

 (See TESFANEWS April 24 20160)

 The UN Report on Eritrea directly or indirectly encouraging Eritreans to seek asylum.

 All of the above mentioned reasons are inspiring even Eritreans born and lived for decades in the middle east, Sudan and those refused work permit or asylum in Israel to take advantage of the situation---flocking to Europe to seek asylum. I don't blame fellow Eritreans or Ethiopians in taking benefit of the loose system of European policy towards asylum seekers. That is why the flood gates to Europe are left so wide open and European policy makers are now panicking in trying to close the loophole of asylum seeking.

 **THE ERITREAN NATIONAL SERVICE**: Yes one of the main reasons for Eritrean youth to flee the country is the national service. national service in Eritrea is compulsory. It was introduced mainly to defend the country from any outside aggression. It commenced when Eritrea became an independent country. Ever since, national service remains obligatory in Eritrea, but after the flight of many young Eritreans from the country the government has now reviewed its policy on national service and have now said that they have reduced it to less than two years starting from November 2015. The National service in Eritrea does not apply to every one for instance, children in school up to grade 11, pregnant women, married women with children and elderly people over 55 years. In the past there has been what is called “Round Ups”. The idea is simply not to drag everyone they arrest to the army, the idea is simply to take them to a kind of police station or clearing house where every one is screened and once it is established who is who and once this is clarified then every one is returned to where they belong.

For instance, if a young person turns out to be a student, they show their ID card and once the army has done its checks, any student caught up in such round ups can go back peacefully to carry out their studies and truancy or unauthorized absence from school in Eritrea is illegal as it is here. The only time national service becomes reality for Eritrean youths is that when they complete year 11 then it becomes mandatory for any anyone to do Year 12 at Sawa Military and Academic Training Camp. Note also each youngsters is provided school certificate if they pass or fail at the end of each year. In year 12, if any young person scores good grades they can go to higher education institutions/colleges but we only have about Nine higher educations, colleges therefore it becomes very difficult to find a place for every Eritrean to go to higher institutions.

It is not a secret that, if they cannot get good grades to go to higher colleges or institutions, then young Eritreans end up joining the army, navy or government offices for many many years with little salary and it is at this point that young Eritreans began to flee their country. Simply because many feel that they need to be inspired, they need to be educated, they need to make a good living, they need to have a job and in short-- they want to better their lives. It is at this critical juncture that our youth began to plan their way to leave the country. For those who have relatives and friends abroad and for those who are able to pay thousands of dollars, it becomes easy for them to pay their way to countries of their choice. Moreover, they would definitely make determined efforts to cross borders to countries like Ethiopia which can be crossed in few hours, and Sudan perhaps in a few days.

*One thing that need to be understood here is that majority of Eritreans leave their country, not because they want to abandon their country or disliked of their country, they just want to improve their lives, want to make a decent living, help themselves their parents and the country they helped liberate from the invasion of Ethiopia*. In most instances many of those who are granted asylum in Europe or America even go to the nearest Eritrean Embassy, write a letter of apology and make payment of 2% Development Tax; as this is required for those who have left Eritrea illegally and want to return to the country for a short period, or want to inherit land or own property. After visiting Eritrea, they are free to return to the country that offered them asylum. However if any Eritrean who lives in Europe want to go to Eritrea to visit they can do so and are not obliged to pay Development Tax. The Development Tax specifically applies when one require councillor services or if one require representation back in Eritrea to buy/sell/ inherit, or land registry--------- then Development Tax is applicable.

For example one of my relatives who left Eritrea illegally to go to Israel and then he worked there for three years but he was then told that he must leave Israel by the authorities. They gave him about $2000 to leave Israel so he went back to Eritrea rather than to risk going through the Mediterranean. He is now in the process of applying permission from the Eritrean Government to work in the Middle East. As for those who have been actively involved in trying to bring regime change in Eritrea, obviously they may not go back to Eritrea and they may not go to Eritrean Embassy to regularize their papers. It has to be understood that Eritrea is a poor country and does not have oil and if any Eritrean returned to Eritrea, the government can not provide them a job and the number of jobs available in the country are limited.

But the view that returning Eritreans would be shot dead killed by marks men, tortured, beheaded or killed by firing squad is complete fabrication. The most they will be asked to do is to join their previous unit in the army, navy or do some job but no one is killed and if this was the case, the European ambassadors, non governmental organizations would have reported it. In other words, the idea that Eritreans returning home were killed every Friday at Asmara Liberation Square is absurd. *Yes when young people leave their country and apply for asylum, what does any one expect them to say, Eritrea is Garden and Roses. No if they say that their asylum would be refused. So they have to say the un sayable--- in order to make their asylum application acceptable.*

 So I don’t blame any one for saying anything if it would entitle them to refugee status because that is the only way to get asylum in Europe or America, but the view that that Eritrean Government would kill anyone on sight if they returned from Europe or there are child soldiers in Eritrea is false or an exaggeration the least to say. The problem as will be seen later is that European policy makers are making the asylum issue very confusing and as there is no any clear distinction as to who is an Asylum Seeker, an Economic migrant or an asylum shopper? That is why many are risking their life to come here to Europe to try their luck.

 As far as the National Service is concerned, so long as Ethiopia keeps on threatening Eritrea and so long as the border remains unmarked physically with pillars, then Eritrea have no choice but to keep its army and people on alert. It has to be understood that Ethiopia still remains the biggest threat to the Eritrean nation and it is doing its level best to isolate, weaken Eritrea using international institutions and other means to bring regime change in the country and is still in occupation of Sovereign Eritrean territory. Hence Eritrea has no choice--- but to remain vigilant.

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