**Boston: A pillar of Eritrean patriotism!**

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**Introduction**

People from Eritrea, relatively speaking, a new nation in the Horn of Africa have been immigrating to the USA and other parts of the world since the late 50s and early 60s. For a very small number of privileged Eritreans the decision to immigrate was motivated by their desire to further their education or enhance their professional careers. As the war for independence intensified, the security conditions deteriorated rapidly. Inevitably, this resulted in increased human rights violations, including indiscriminate killings of innocent civilians, assassinations attempts, mass incarcerations and torture by successive Ethiopian governments. This pervasive dire situation forced a significant number of the population to seek refuge in virtually every corner of the world. By the mid-70s approximately 30% of the Eritrean population had immigrated to the Sudan, the Middle East and various parts of Europe, Canada and the USA.

Consistent with the custom of the Eritrean culture, Eritrean communities in the diaspora in general and the USA in particular, began to organize in order to activate and formalize their natural support systems. The main goal of these systems was and still is to provide the necessary material, social and emotional support during the first critical few years of the immigration experience. In retrospect, one can safely conclude that such early and informal but effective intervention played a significant role in facilitating the adaptation process of individuals as well as families. Specifically, Eritreans in Boston and its vicinity benefitted enormously from the activities of such natural support systems. Initially, these community groups were financially dependent on their members although most of their activities could have been eligible for support from state or community agencies.

In May of 1998, the weyane regime using a border conflict as a pretext declared war on Eritrea and conducted three unsuccessful military offensives. The Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) launched counter attacks and inflicted one humiliating defeat after another on the enemy thus leaving it with no other option but to sign a ceasefire and agree to the formation of “Border Commission”. In April of 2002, the Commission delimited the border between the two nations and Badme, weyane’s ostensible reason for its unprovoked attack on Eritrea, was confirmed to be located well within sovereign Eritrean territory. Although both parties had agreed that the decisions of the Commission would be final and binding, in keeping with its duplicitous nature, the weyane regime began to raise irrelevant questions, defy the Commission and obstruct the demarcation process. To this day, the regime continues to illegally occupy sovereign Eritrean territory.

The Eritrean community in Boston reacted immediately and condemned the weyane regime’s military adventurism and subsequent nefarious diplomatic and political activities. Following a series of productive meetings, the vast majority decided to stay engaged, vigilant and united in order to provide sustained financial and political support to the Government and people of Eritrea. However, a few but boisterous defeatist elements with sub-nationalist proclivities attempted but failed to derail the community from its patriotic path. Confronted by a decisive and effective reaction from the community, these intellectually insecure but arrogant individuals, became increasingly frustrated by their futile subversive actions. As a result, they left no stone unturned to instigate destructive political and diplomatic activities within the community. Furthermore, the self-proclaimed leaders of this essentially anti-Eritrean movement, unveiled their cloak by publicly and unabashedly apologizing for Meles’ fascistic actions and expansionist dreams in Eritrea and elsewhere. Needless to say, this potentially disruptive social and political development required that the community stay focused on its nationalist as well as sustainable community activities. Therefore, in 2005, to assert its efficacy and viability, it formed the Eritrean Cultural and Development Center (ECDC) and opened its center in the Massachusetts town of Somerville

For the last several years, this organization has been offering educational, social, recreational services and sports activities to a significant number of Eritreans in Boston and its vicinity.

**Organizational Structure**

The organization is governed by a board elected at the annual organizational meeting. It comprises of nine members each of whom is primarily responsible for coordinating and monitoring the activities of one of the standing committees. The day to day business of the center is coordinated by an executive committee consisting of a chair, secretary and treasurer. An ad-hoc auditing committee is also elected at the annual meeting to deliver an annual financial report and make the necessary recommendations to improve the financial status of the organization. The members have approved the formation of an advisory board to ensure that the organization gain from the experience and expertise of Eritrean as well as non-Eritrean professionals. Former board members may also be asked to serve in order to ensure continuity.

Through the coordination and supervision of the standing committees a variety of services including physical, intellectual and social programs are offered for the benefit of individual members, their families and children. The main goal of such activities is to facilitate the adaptation process and to meet the long term physical, intellectual and socio-emotional needs of the entire Eritrean community.

**1-The education committee**

This committee is responsible for organizing and facilitating instruction of Eritrean languages for members and non-members. Currently, due to resource limitations, it is offering a two hour weekly language class in Tigrigna only, one of the nine languages of Eritrea. The goal is to help children and youth achieve proficiency and thereby get introduced to the history, customs and traditions of Eritrea. Recently, the number of students has risen dramatically and plans are underway to seek additional human and financial resources to not only offer classes in other Eritrean languages but to include adult learners in the program. It is important to note that the teachers have been providing their services at no cost to the center for the last several years with the utmost dedication and professionalism. During a formal ceremony at the end of each academic year in May, the students receive certificates of achievement as a demonstration of their progress and readiness for higher levels of instruction. It is important to note here that the committee has been able to obtain a variety of instructional materials from the Ministry of Education in Eritrea at a nominal cost.

**2- The training and development committee**

This committee is responsible for organizing and coordinating educational and training workshops for the youth and adult members and non-members. The main goal of these workshops is to make a contribution to the personal and professional development of participants and to the organizational growth and effectiveness of center as well. The workshops are primarily conducted by Eritrean professionals, although a concerted effort is made to invite professionals from other communities and state agencies. Workshops on “Retirement and investment”, “Organizational effectiveness”, “Stress and Coping mechanisms”, and “Culture and Identity” have been offered. Additionally, topics relevant to the economic reconstruction efforts taking place at home are continually raised and discussed.

**3- The Tutorial Program**

In collaboration with the Phillips Brooks House at Harvard, the ECDC has been offering a two and a half hour weekly academic tutoring to middle and high school students. Additionally, our youth have and will continue to participate in the Harvard enrichment programs offered during the summer. The tutors, all students at Harvard, have been diligent and competent.

**4- The Sports Committee**

In collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club of Somerville and the Cambridge Schools this committee has been organizing and supervising a variety of sports activities including basketball, soccer, skiing and other in-door games. Presently, there are approximately 80 young children who participate in games and training once a week. Parents are actively involved in this program and have raised funds to provide the necessary sports gears and enable some of the teams to compete against other teams in and outside the state. The coaches and chaperones are all highly dedicated Eritreans with extensive experience in these tasks. Funds are being sought to hire additional professional coaches. Needless to say, in addition to their health, these regular physical activities make a positive contribution towards the children’s physical, social and cognitive development.

**5- Miscellaneous Activities**

In addition to the regular activities described above, the Center runs the following:

1. **Community TV Program**

Operated by volunteers and shown in Cambridge and Boston, this program enables hundreds of Eritreans in these cities to follow the news in their homeland, Eritrea and learn about its social economic and cultural developmental projects in. Additionally, it serves as an outreach mechanism to advertise events and activities organized by the center. Any other activities deemed consistent with the center’s goal and objectives are also advertised

1. **Annual Fund Raising and Dinner Party for High School Graduates**

The main purpose of this important social event is to acknowledge the hard work and accomplishment of our youth as they transit into an adult life and begin their long journey towards academic success and professional achievement. In addition, parents are recognized and appreciated for the sacrifices and protracted appropriate guidance they provided to the graduates during their critical stages of development. At the event, community members are asked to make financial contributions to be equally divided among all the graduates towards the purchase of books and any other school related expenses.

1. **Material and financial support to the vulnerable populations**

An admirable and exemplary tradition of the Eritrean community in Boston and its vicinity has been to consistently provide material and financial support to the children and families of our martyrs. Financial donations collected at social and traditional events are sent home and distributed to these families and children with the facilitation of appropriated government entities.

**Conclusion**

It is the hope of the ECDC that the long term cumulative effect of the activities described above will be to:

* Keep our youth focused on their education in order to pursue and achieve their future professional and careers goals.
* Develop a critical attitude towards and foil the continual attempts by the western media and Eritrean stooges to denigrate their country of origin, its culture and its leaders
* Make positive and meaningful contributions towards the future economic and social development of Eritrea
* Become competent, productive and law abiding members of society and benefit themselves, their families, community and their country
* Provide support for parents in their individual and collective efforts to keep their youth off the streets and protect them from adopting self-destructive and anti-social habits.

**N.B**.

Indisputably Eritrean nationals in Boston and its vicinity played a positive role during the protracted and difficult struggle for independence and beyond. However, as it was beyond the scope of the above article to delve into that admirable history, it only highlighted some of the recent organizational, political and social challenges they

faced and conquered.

**Wetru Awet N’hafash**