

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Eri-UK Friendship Forum, London UK: Reportage

London UK: June 2, 2011

On the occasion of Eritrea's 20<sup>th</sup> year of Independence, the Eritrean Embassy in London organized Friends of Eritrea Independence Day event on May 24, 2011. The event, which was part of the program "**May in Honor of Independence Day in the UK**" that encompassed a series of events during the month of May, was held at the Victoria Plaza Hotel.

The event which kicked off with one minute silence in remembrance of the Eritrean Martyrs of the independence struggle in Eritrea. Miss Zala Zia, a friend of Eritrea and a Global Media Consultant, delivered the welcome speech and introduction of the programme. In her eloquent speech, Zala outlined the importance of Eritrea's independence and the need to celebrate the occasion with the friends of Eritrea. She also gave a brief description on the importance of the Eri-UK Friendship Association launched last year and the need to take concrete steps to formalize it this year.



The day's programme encompassed three important parts and started with the 'Eyewitness Reflections of Eritrea's Friends Visit'. This was highly expected by many the reason being Eritrea not only has a lot to talk about, there seem to be so many that have a lot to say about Eritrea in various contexts. The old age cliché of: 'seeing is believing' came to many minds as the first speaker Dr John Slater took to the stage.



Dr John Slater, a specialist doctor and a great friend of Eritrea since the Liberation Struggle, and who had the chance of supporting the EPLF during the Liberation Struggle gave an amazing story on **The Long History of Friendship**. Dr Slater referred to Eritrea as his homeland and gave an elaborate presentation of his involvement during the Liberation Struggle in which he supported the first immunization programme in the mid eighties. His

recent visit to Eritrea with his whole family and the opportunities he got to visit many places and institutions indicated that he is very attached to Eritrea and its progression as a viable and sustainable nation. In his deliberation he continued to stress the determination of the Eritrean people and their hospitality. Furthermore, he highlighted the remarkable potential of Eritrea in the tourism industry alone, with all the various landscapes, historical sites dating back thousands of years and of course the coastal line and its stretch from the north down through to the south. Dr Slater's closing words were, "If you haven't already you really should visit Eritrea, it's the place to visit"



Dr Francis Roberts was next up, and discussed the expansion of Higher Education Learning in Eritrean from his 6 months experience in the Institute of Science and Technology. Dr Francis's outline on the day to day life and activities including the interaction with students and lecturers were presented in a concrete and lively way which highly impressed and motivated participants on the emerging and growing progress of human resource development in Eritrea. He indicated that although there are short comings at the institution in terms of equipment and books, but he proudly expressed his surprise in the standards of the education that was available, and drew comparisons that the education on offer was equivalent to that of a an American College, having lectured and studied in America himself. He further admired the young Eritrean postgraduate students who, in his words "hold the future of Eritrea in their hands". Dr Francis was particularly impressed by the appetite for Higher Education by the students and their linguistic skills. He also raised the Government's political commitment to expand and improve higher education and promote free higher education in the country.



The second part of the programme was **"Eritrea in the eyes of Children.** A young UK born Eritrean child named Yonatan Negusse delivered a strong speech on what Independence means to him as an Eritrean child. Yonatan began by congratulating the people and state of Eritrea on this occasion and went on to reflect the past hurdles the country and its people have overcome, but also stated that there will be more challenges which as usual will be overcome by the determination, sacrifice and hard work of the Eritrean people and Government. Yonatan suggested that Eritrea's Independence should be shared with the world as it is not only such a unique story but a remarkable achievement against all odds, which was difficult to measure. Many among the audience were astonished by his level of

consciousness and the articulate manner in which he delivered his speech. As everybody was digesting his words, he then went on to suggest that the question to ask should be: "what am I doing to help make tomorrow better?" His final remark was that's a question that Eritrean youth always ask themselves with considerate thought just as the past generations did to achieve Independence.



A young girl, Eleanor Asmara John who visited Eritrea with her family also gave an appealing presentation on her encounter with the Adi Ugri school students (with her brother and sister). Eleanor gave a remarkable comparative analysis and the powerful genesis of education since the armed struggle and to the present date. She used stimulating photos of the "Revolution School" established during the Liberation Struggle to make her analysis. Eleanor presented the development outstandingly but her climax observation was "remarkable progress from the days of the struggle but still inquisitive in 2011".

In the last part of the programme Ambassador of the State of Eritrea to the UK and Ireland, Mr Tesfamichael Gerahtu also gave a presentation under the theme "Eritrea: 20 Years of Dignity".

The presentation focused on four areas, namely issues of sovereignty and national security, the resilience of the Eritrean Economy and the effort made to build national capacity, political and diplomatic visibility and the policies and practice on regional peace and security. The Ambassador updated the guests on achievements registered to date, current situation in Eritrea, prospects of growth and the overall situation and development in the Horn of Africa. This was followed with questions from the guests, and the Ambassador giving sufficient answers.

Having had two speakers present their reflections on visiting Eritrea, the audience were also treated to DVDs showing of Africa's best kept Secret, Eritrea. The first video highlighted Eritrea's development in the past 20 years. The tourism promo was also very concise and touched upon many of Eritrea's qualities ranging from cultural diversity,

socially harmony, physical landscape, history and of course the prosperous and potential full future. The event concluded with a cultural performance with the Eritrean youth displaying the traditional show that reflected their identity and origin and the guests were handed artifact gifts from Eritrea.

At the end of the proceeding Zala Zia indicated that the Memorandum of the association will be circulated soon to all participants and discussion will be arranged in the near future. Those interested to be members of the group also filled forms of membership.



Various comments and reflections made by participants after the event reflect the importance of the forum and the need to consolidate it. Zala Zia in particular posted the following statement in Face book after the event:

*" It was an absolute pleasure to be asked to speak at and moderate the UK-Eritrea Friendship Forum on the Occasion of the 20th Independence Anniversary.*

*I was so proud to be part of, what is being called, 'a movement' to build partnerships between the UK and Eritrea. Under the title 'Perfect Harmony, For National Dignity' we came together to show our support for Eritrea.*

*We must not forget that this country is JUST 20 year's old- and the level to which they have succeeded in developing the country's core foundations such as health, education, economic stability and social harmony is an absolute phenomenon!*

*It was wonderful to hear first-hand, the various initiatives that the government is putting in place to ensure the future generations will be looked after when it comes to resources, agriculture, fishing and farming etc. It is this type of foresight and responsibility that has set Eritrea so far apart from other developing nations.*

*As a friend of Eritrea, it is upsetting to hear about the continued threats to national peace and security - to a country that I have come to know as utterly incredible, with its beautifully spirited people, its outstanding achievements in health, education, policy, economy and social harmony and it's inspirational culture - I cannot imagine how frustrating it must be for Eritreans themselves.*

*However, if anything it makes me more committed to doing whatever I can to support them. I am proud to be a friend of Eritrea and I pray for their continued development and will continue to do what I can for this great country and their beautiful people."*

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