**Eritreans Roam Pennsylvania Ave and Celebrate 21 Years of Independence**

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On May 23rd, President Isaias Afwerki, along with President Omer Hassan Al Bashir of Sudan walked for more than a mile in Godena Harnet. They walked greeting the thousands celebrating Eritrea’s 21st Independence in the streets of Asmara at night, turning a spirited celebration into frenzy. That was the kickoff to Eritrea’s Independence weekend. It was also a message to the whole world that Eritrea is unlike the picture they like to paint it. It is a peaceful country, with a president embraced and protected by his people free to walk with another leader in the streets, at night.  It was a start to a purpose-filled celebrations-week for Eritreans around the world.

In 2008, the late Congressman Donald Payne of NJ, a good friend of Africa and a man of peace; campaigned the Eritrean community in the Metropolitan DC area on behalf of the then candidate Senator Obama. Congressman Payne told Eritreans that candidate Obama will be good for peace, justice and, promised Obama will take a new direction to restore America’s name globally. He told Eritreans Obama will work to implement the EEBC decision. Unfortunately, President Obama continued the flawed US policies to the disappointment of Eritreans and certainly Congressman Payne.

In Washington DC, Eritreans gathered early on May 25, 2012, in front of the Whitehouse Lafayette Park to demonstrate against the flawed US policies and the UNjust illegal Sanctions against the people of Eritrea that Washington thought, campaigned for and implemented. They gathered to express their unhappiness with President Obama’s broken promise of change. Most importantly however, Eritreans gathered to show that they are one with their people and their president at home and, to express their unity.

Eritreans carried many signs with different messages that addressed their concerns and feelings. The demonstrators chanted loudly, “Obama, where is the change?” They roared demanding justice and end to the illegal sanctions. Thousands of school age kids touring Washington were exposed to young Eritrean-Americans leading their people, handing flyers and educating Americans about Eritrea. From the Whitehouse, the thousands of Eritrean-Americans then headed towards the US Capitol in an orderly fashion.

Pennsylvania Avenue is one of the most significant streets in the world. It is a spot where Martin Luther King Jr. gathered his followers on Freedom Plaza before taking them to Lincoln Memorial where he gave the famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Pennsylvania Avenue is also known as Inaugural Route because after every inauguration, American Presidents walk on Pennsylvania Avenue greeting their supporters. It is by far one of the most surreal, beautiful and historic streets in the US.

On Friday May 25, Pennsylvania Avenue belonged to Eritreans. Eritreans managed to block the entire stretch starting from 15th and Pennsylvania to the Capitol in one of the busiest Memorial Day holiday weekend. It was magnificent to witness disciplined Eritreans march adorned with Eritrean flags that beautified the US Capital. They marched chanting the slogans they carried with “Justice” as the main theme defiantly in the true Eritrean spirit. However, the exuberance and the spirit exhibited by the mothers; the energy the youth brought to the street while leading their parents was historic.

That spirit was carried to the Capitol grounds where all the demonstrators gathered. That is where 10-year-old Saron Yohannes, a daughter of a martyr, read a poem telling us all that we are family. Many made inspiring comments and poems. And after all the walking and standing, the crowd was still seeking for more, then  the organizers played patriotic music and the crowd danced with renewed energy and lingered as if looking for more. Eventually the crowd dispersed after remembering the martyrs. The scorching heat was no match for the Eritrean spirit.

The next day Saturday May 26th Eritreans gathered in huge numbers for annual picnic in Fort Hunt Park. It is uplifting to see kids huddled in groups laughing and enjoying hot dogs and burgers while their parents sat in tents and under shades adorned with Eritrean flags. It is gratifying to see the love Eritreans display and, their desire to want to spent time with each other as Sarron Yohannes Said, as one family. They stayed until sunset when darkness dispersed them one more time.

The next day, Sunday May 27, thousands of Eritreans gathered in Convention Center DC to celebrate Independence Day in grand style. The hall that embraced the celebrations is massive. However, it looked small relative to the people that gathered to celebrate.

During Eritrean festivities, there is consistent pattern that has become tradition which is a reflection of Eritrea people. It is symbolic, yet a reflection of Eritrean values to see Eritreans young and old dressed in traditional outfits that represent the nine ethnic groups of Eritrea as they walk into the stage to open the festivities. They dance slowly with Eritrea represented by a lady adorned with Eritrean flag leading the way followed by her children dressed with beautiful Eritrean flag-colors. Central to all this is the presence of Eritreans dressed in a way that remembers the fallen heroes by dressing like Eritrean independence fighters. What is more startling is the fact that those that put-on the outfits are a product of the struggle and have personally felt the impact of the struggles for decades.

Eritrean celebrations are real and they mean a great deal to those that celebrate it. When one looks at those who walked to open the celebrations, here is Ghenet a widow of the recent Weyane instigated war of aggression, with her thirteen your old daughter in the lineup dressed as a fighter as Tegadalit (fighter) hoisting Eritrean flags as they led the dancers  into the stage to open the celebrations.

Eritreans are used to celebrating victories after a hard won battle and sacrifices with dances and music. That tradition serves Eritreans well by helping them rejoice their victories, coping with loses and, to reset in order to tackle the challenges ahead. That was true for all the battles Eritreans fought. The celebrations that took place in DC could not be looked at differently because Eritreans are fighting daily battles to restore the dignity they earned through Independence. Today, Eritreans are fighting a different type of fight and winning.

This year many dignitaries were invited to celebrate Eritrea’s Independence. There were representatives from the Embassy of Sudan and others. However, the presence of the major Ethiopian opposition groups was a testament to the hard work of both peoples willingness to collaborate for the betterment of the future of the region. Amongst the dignitaries included were: Ato Neamin Zeleke, Secretary General, Alliance for Liberty and Justice in Ethiopia, (ALEJE)  Ato Ephrem Madebo, Head of Foreign Affairs for both ALEJE and Ginbot 7,  Ato Teha Tuko. Head of Organizational Affairs, OLF (General Kemal’s). Wro. Lulit Mesfin. Director of Government Affairs, Ginbot 7, Foreign Relations Department, Ato Ahemed, Washington DC area representative, OLF.

Conclusion

These celebrations, engrained in the Eritrean way of life, have become second nature that some Eritreans take for granted. Year after year, Eritrea comes to celebrate together, to mourn and enjoy each other whenever the occasion calls for it. This year however, it felt different. The enemies tried to thwart, to threaten and scare Eritreans into hiding in order to stop or discourage them from gathering to celebrate in the fashion that they do year after year naturally. They bragged to have attacked Eritrea. The US Department of State gave travel warnings designed to discourage Eritrean families from traveling to their country to celebrate Eritrea’s 21st Independence Anniversary.

All their attempts failed. To the contrary, the actions of the enemies emboldened Eritreans to strengthen their resolve and commitment to their people and government. It strengthened their unity and bond appreciably. To see the love Eritreans have, to witness the hunger to come together and experience the unreserved joy of Eritreans is unique and difficult to describe to an outsider. Eritreans enjoy one another in serene and humbling way year after year in purpose. If history is a guide and if history can tell something, there is one reality about Eritrean that will never change, Eritreans will always unite around their country, revel the moment and enjoy the journey knowing that they will always come victorious at the end.

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