

ERITREAN FESTIVAL IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA: A CELEBRATION OF ERITREANISM

Once again the Eritrean American Communities in the bay area cities of Oakland, San Jose, Santa Rosa, San Francisco and neighboring cities hosted a well-organized three-day annual Eritrean Festival starting from Friday, August 10, 2012 and ending on Sunday, August 12, 2012. It is to be recalled that the first Eritrean Festival for Eritrean Americans residing in the western part of the USA was held in Oakland 25 years ago and the city has hosted 22 of the 25 annual events held so far. The cities of Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Jose each had their share of hosting. At this year's festival, as in the past, all the hard work and sweat equity that were placed by the hosting Eritrean American communities in the planning, organizing and undertaking of the prideful event were certainly commensurate with the level of satisfaction and the sense of national belonging that all the participants evidently experienced during the festival.

The several tents that were set up at the venue for the daytime activities in which various Eritrean traditional costumes, artifacts, artwork etc were displayed as well as the colorful evening cultural performances by the young and old performers donned in traditional costumes were indicative of the fact that wherever they might be Eritreans were always committed to preserving and transmitting the Eritrean heritage from one generation to another. The various vendors too play an important role. All the t-shirts, accessories, CDs, DVDs, traditional attires and other merchandise that these vendors had brought to sell at the festival featured a meaningful and relevant content, whether it be a voice or design recorded, printed or inscribed on the item.

The culinary excellence proved how delicious the Eritrean food is, evidently devoured by the very many participants. The traditional Eritrean beverage prepared by these women too was tasty and quenched the thirst of many customers.

As for seminars and discussions, on Saturday there was a panel discussion about the prospects and challenges of peace in the Horn of Africa led by the following panelists: Mr. Glen Ford, executive director of Black Agenda Report; Mr. Ephrem Madebo, representing Ginbot 7 (May 7), an Ethiopian opposition group; Mr. Elias Amare, an Eritrean American activist currently based in Eritrea. The discussion was moderated by Mr. Issayas Tesfamariam, a researcher, university lecturer and blogger. Mr. Elias Amare, the first one to speak, explained at length how and why despite the many positive achievements being registered domestically and its contribution towards the maintenance of peace and stability in the Horn of Africa the State of Eritrea is being portrayed negatively. Mr Ephrem Madebo started off by explaining his personal connection with Eritrea by way of work assignment that landed him in Eritrean during the military rule. He further explained how the ruling minority regime in Ethiopia has marginalized the majority of Ethiopians since it assumed power, thus leading to the creation and/or revival of several opposition forces. He pointed out that change was inevitable in Ethiopia and that relationship with Eritrea will return to normalcy based on the principles of mutual respect for territorial integrity and peaceful coexistence. Mr. Glen Ford lauded Eritrea's principled and exemplary stance in pursuing a domestic policy of self-reliance and a

foreign policy that is aimed at maintaining regional and international peace and stability and cooperation based on equal partnership. He went on to explain that Eritrea is among a very few African countries that live up to the real meaning being independent whereas many others have deviated from that path. Finally, during the questions and answer session panelists addressed questions from the audience fully and satisfactorily.

Following the panel discussion Eritrea's permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador Araya Desta, gave an extensive briefing about the current developments in Eritrea and its immediate neighborhood, about the illegal and unjust sanctions placed against Eritrea and about the efforts which were being made to reverse them.

The discussion on Sunday focused on what needed to be done to proactively and positively portray Eritrea's image. One of the speakers was Mr. Issayas Tesfamariam, who talked about the need to shift from the strategy of defending the baseless allegations made about Eritrea to that of positive portrayal using our cultural values and tourist attractions as tools using the concept of what he described as "soft and smart powers". The other speaker, Mr. Elias Amare, focused on how and why we should use our ability to write as a tool in the fight for portraying Eritrea in a positive spotlight. He enumerated the steps that ought to be taken in composing brief, fact-laden, content/topic-oriented press releases and/or articles and dispatching them timely.

Overall, the festival was conducted in a relaxed environment that had a striking balance of business and pleasure. It was one in which old friendships were re-connected and new ones established. The three days came and went swiftly. But, the memories left behind will remain timeless. A great deal of gratitude is due to all the organizers, volunteers, vendors, panelists and attendants for making this splendid Eritrean festival happen.

Media Group
Eritrean Festival Organizing Committee