**‘Eritreafightscovid19’ fund raising campaign: not just a threat to the Corona virus**

The month of March in 2020 was an extraordinary time, where the entire World witnessed the fearsome spread of the COVID-19 virus, bringing the normal day to day activities of billions of people across the globe—to a grinding halt.

At the rate the virus was spreading, it was inevitable that it would reach Eritrea—it was a matter of when, not if. It was because of this that the government of Eritrea had taken precautionary measures like temperature monitoring at Asmara airport, weeks before the first case in the country was discovered.

As feared, Eritrea was not spared, with the first case of a COVID-19 infection reported on 21st March 2020. With the virus already claiming a huge toll in countries like Italy and Spain, with no sign of the number of victims of this pandemic going down, Eritrea closed its airspace to all passenger flights on 25th March 2020, in a bid to contain the spread of the virus. Soon after, more stringent steps like the closing of schools, business and other measures like the restriction of public gatherings were taken.

It was clear that the Eritrean government was taking the pandemic seriously and doing all it could to protect the nation. While the government was doing its utmost within the country, concerned Eritreans living abroad decided to do their bit by raising funds for the fight against the Corona virus pandemic in Eritrea.

In typical fashion, Eritreans rallied around and began to raise funds to help with the fight against the pandemic: they dug deep-very deep- into their pockets. Within a matter of days hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised, with some individuals donating prodigious amounts—after all, this was for their beloved Eritrea.

As the money to fight COVID-19 in Eritrea started to pour in, even in these economically uncertain times, it began to cause a wave of panic in the anti-Eritrea camp. As a result, those who had been so generous with their donations were vilified and accused of being part of some sort of fund raising ‘scam’ by members of this useless camp.

With each donated cent serving as a reminder of the failure of their corrupt and ineffective decades long campaign to dispel the unity of Eritreans and faced with awkward questions form their sponsors about their impotence, members of the anti-Eritrea camp hatched a plan.

The plan was simple—to stem the flow of funds to fight the pandemic by discouraging Eritreans from contributing. The first phase of the plan was to spread the idea that the Eritrean government was only interested in financial and not in material help. Ofcourse those who fomented this idea knew very well that in such cases, it would be impractical to accept material donations. Such donations would have to be co-ordinated as you might end up with incompatible equipment from various donors, compromising the fight against the virus. There is also the question of quality control, not to mention using local sources where possible. In short, there is a whole plethora of legitimate reasons as to why the most effective help in such cases is— direct financial help. But, like everything else the wolves began to put a negative spin on the Eritrean government’s stand—all part and parcel of trying to stop the fund raising campaign.

No sooner had the seed of doubt been planted in the minds of the Eritrean Diaspora, a certain Simon Marks, who masquerades as a journalist for the Voice of America (VOA), popped up with a hastily cobbled together article devoid of any shred of evidence— accusing the Eritrean government of not caring for the people, because it allegedly rejected a shipment of medical supplies intended for the fight against the Corona pandemic.

In an article entitled ‘*COVID-19 Supplies From Alibaba Never Reached Eritrea’*  that appeared on the VOA news website on 3rd April 2020, Simon Marks tries very hard to portray the Eritrean government as a callous uncaring entity, that is willing to standby and watch its citizens die of the virus. It is very surprising that that the VOA has chosen to publish an article bereft of a single credible source. Mr Marks, cites officials who do not wish to reveal their names, or in a desperate attempt to cloak the article in some semblance of credibility, quotes the Ethiopian Prime Minster’s spokesperson, but fails to mention where and when she made the comment (if indeed she did), or through which medium he contacted her, if he did indeed.

The article is rather simplistic: a sad indictment of the editorial standards at the VOA. The central theme of the article seems to be that Eritrea refused to accept a donation of medical supplies from the Chinese billionaire Mr. Jack Ma. In trying to convince the reader of this unverified matter, Simon Marks embarks on a flight of fancy and tries to put together an amateurish plot about Eritrea refusing landing rights to the Ethiopian airlines cargo flight that was supposed to have delivered the items. In his article, we are told that the aircraft was supposed to have delivered supplies to Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Kenya. We are also told and expected to believe, that when the Ethiopian airlines plane left its base in Addis Ababa, it had not yet secured landing rights to Eritrea and hoped that the permission would come through by the time it was ready to depart from Khartoum, Sudan—a mere couple of hours later.

Presented with such a story, anyone with a modicum of common sense and an awareness of the complexity of an operation that Mr Marks describes, would ask a few questions. The lack of permission would pose huge logistical problems for the airline, so much so, that it would not have embarked on such a mission on the off chance that it would get the necessary permission to land at Asmara. Logistical problems like, in what order do you load the plane? How much fuel do you carry? Etc.

Setting aside the oversimplification of the intricacies of air-freight, even the date the deliveries were supposed to have been done is wrong. In the article we are told that Ethiopian airlines carried out its delivery to Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya on 23rd March 2020. However, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation report clearly states that Kenya received its delivery on 24th March 2020. Moreover, from the television footage of the Ethiopian airlines delivery at the Jomo Kenyatta airport in Nairobi, one sees that the aircraft used had the registration ET-AXL— a Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner. A quick search of this particular aircraft’s flight history on websites such as Flightradar.com, reveals that the Kenyan flight originated from Addis Ababa and that the aircraft was nowhere near either, Sudan or Djibouti as the article claims, on 23rd, 24th  and 25th March 2020.

It might well be the case that medical supplies for reasons that have yet to be made public, were not delivered. But one has to question the motive of the writer when he makes the ridiculous and unsubstantiated claim based on the word of known anti-Eritrean elements— that the government of Eritrea does not care for the people, hence its rejection of the shipment of medical supplies .

The purpose of such articles is not to inform, but to deliberately mislead, by pushing a politically tainted point. It is quite clear that Simon Marks is blighted by ignorance of Eritrea. He is unaware that the members of the Eritrean government do not seclude themselves in ‘Green Zones’ or distance themselves from the society at large, behind high walls and razor wire. Therefore, it is in their own interest to fight this pandemic.

It is inconceivable that the Eritrean government, will stand idly by in the face of the Corona virus threat. The Eritrean government has a proven track record in successfully combating natural disasters as demonstrated its ability and readiness to fight against locust swarms, a Corona pandemic, drought and other natural calamities.

The one thing that is most telling about the real motive of the article, is the writers unwillingness to seek clarification from the Eritrean government on this matter. On 3rd April 2020, on the very day that article appeared on the VOA news website, Simon Marks wrote a series of tweets in which he seemed to be asking Eritrea’s Information Minster for clarification. But being the amateur that he is, he did not even wait for a response before he posted his article.

It is rather unfortunate that the VOA has chosen to hinder rather than enhance, the efforts of Eritreans to combat the Corona pandemic by providing a platform for the likes of Simon Marks to spew out their vitriol in a vain attempt to distract those engaged in the fight against the COVID-19.