

An Open Letter to Canadian Foreign Minister, Baird.

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A few days ago I read an article written by one Niamh Scallan on The Star.ca website entitled "*Baird eyes shutting down Eritrean consulate in Toronto*" and would like take this opportunity to set some records straight in regards to this article.

First and foremost, I believe that it is prudent to explain a few facts about this 2% tax that Eritreans living outside of Eritrea are required to pay. This tax – called "The Recovery Tax" was brought into effect by a Proclamation of the Transitional Government of Eritrea (TGE) soon after the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopian occupation in 1991. When, after a brutal thirty-year liberation struggle, Eritrea became free in May 1991, its infrastructure had been totally destroyed; it had no working factories, no exports and more than half of its almost 4 million population was living in exile – the majority of whom in refugee camps in neighbouring Sudan. Against this backdrop of destruction and lack of infrastructure and basic services, the TGE through its Community Offices in different parts of the world where the Eritrean Diaspora lived, conducted a series of meetings constantly informing its citizens of its plans to rebuild the country. One of the issues raised was how those living outside Eritrea could contribute to this process. The TGE proposed a "Recovery Tax" of 1% of the net income of Eritreans living abroad. The Eritrean Diaspora present at those meetings felt that 1% was indeed a very small amount and even though they were living in exile, they should and could do more to help their brothers and sisters living back home and support those who had sacrificed their lives to give them this freedom. So higher figures were proposed and finally it was decided to make it 2%. Based on this feedback, the TGE went and issued the proclamation making the 2% Recovery Tax law in Eritrea. (It is worthwhile noting here that after the unification of Germany in 1990, West Germans have been paying a "*sondersteuer*" – special tax – for the recovery of East Germany and this tax is *still* collected from every "Wessie" – West German - and although it started at around 12% it is now much higher than that.)

As can be seen from the above, The Recovery Tax was not imposed recently but came into effect in 1992. Since the Liberation War was fought and won on the principle of "Self-reliance" it made no sense for the TGE to then fall into the debt of foreign aid (Canadian included) after independence. As such, it called upon its own citizens to contribute whatever they could to rebuild the shattered economy and social fabric of the country. As Eritreans living abroad will testify, it was an honour and a privilege to play in a small way, a role in the building of their country. Some went back and provided free and voluntary services, others contributed by paying their 2% tax on time and without grudge.

When relations soured with Ethiopia and war broke out yet again in 1998, most western countries, spearheaded by the US and its allies including Canada, sided with Ethiopia. We can only surmise that the principle of "self-reliance" doesn't go down too well with the West. That being the case, as far back as 1998 when Eritrea was fighting once again for its survival, calls were made by the then US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (current US Ambassador to the UN), Susan Rice, to try and stop Eritreans from paying their 2% tax in an effort to make Eritrea kneel down and fall back under Ethiopian occupation. It didn't work back then because Eritreans all over the world, not only

paid their 2% recovery tax, but also dug deep into their pockets and sent donations to their government to help it not only fight the enemy at the gate but also make sure that basic services – i.e. schools, hospitals, food supplies, etc. were not disrupted. In what can only be described as a miracle, Eritrea's economy, although badly bruised by sanctions, war and unfair treatment by so-called donor-countries and agencies, managed to survive with no little thanks to the solidarity and support of its citizens living abroad.

At times, it has been estimated that over 75% of the Eritrean government's budget was covered by remittances from its citizens abroad. When it came to the survival of our beloved nation, we gave and we felt honoured and privileged to be part of this historical event! We were never coerced or forced to give.

Once the guns were silent, the Recovery tax – as its name implies - was used to build schools, hospitals, bring water, sanitation and electricity to villages, and at the same time keep the economy going. Unlike other African countries in the region who are burdened with so called "Development Aid", our roads and schools and dams and irrigation projects were built by ourselves and by our own contributions. For example, it is common knowledge that when a couple of years ago, a famine of huge proportions was declared all over The Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia and parts of Kenya), Eritrea was enjoying bumper crops due to the irrigation projects that were implemented in the preceding years. All self-financed by Eritreans, it should be noted.

All these facts are not hidden and can be corroborated independently. Which is what Foreign Minister Baird should have done before jumping on to the "Susan Rice bandwagon" and claiming that the "Recovery Tax" was being used to fund terrorist activities. Since when is nation-building classified as a "Terrorist Activity"?

The conclusion made and the accusation levied against Eritrea by the Foreign Minister, is based on the "findings" of the UN Somali Monitoring Group which is headed by a Canadian who as we speak is in danger of being stripped off his position as leader of this group by the UN Security Council because of his bias, ineptitude and unprofessional conduct during the production of the report. Since when have such dubious UN reports been the basis of Canadian Foreign Policy? Is it because this particular "monitoring" group was led by a Canadian? Perhaps a close friend of powers that be in Ottawa?

Coming back to the report, one should also note that this report, which in complete contravention to normal protocol, was leaked to the press even before the Government of Eritrea got a chance to see it, has been found to be full of inconsistencies and outright lies. Despite that, it did conclude that "Eritrea's influence in the Somali conflict was insignificant". Interestingly revealing about the so-called report, is the fact that it was published on the UN Secretary General's web site as an official UN document and the following day was taken down, apparently because it was not too damning of Eritrea! The US and Ethiopia (Eritrea's arch-enemy in the region) had apparently complained about it. A different version was subsequently reposted on the UN official website. All this shows how inconsistent and at times childish unprofessional the authors of the report have been.

With this background then, why is Canada's Foreign Minister falling into the trap of trying to stop Eritreans from helping their own country? Should we rely entirely on the food-handouts that Canada and other countries dump on Africa? If the Eritrean Consulate in Toronto has been accused of

coercing this “Recovery Tax” from its citizens, shouldn’t proper diplomatic channels be followed to investigate the issue? Shouldn’t we Eritreans be asked if we have been coerced into paying this tax? Why is the Consulate assumed guilty until proven innocent based on a report whose very veracity and accuracy is being questioned by the UN itself?

As an Eritrean-Canadian I have been paying my contribution on time and happily because I have seen what my money has been used for back home. I have seen the infant mortality rate falling dramatically; I have read UN reports that Eritrea is one of the few African countries that has a chance of meeting the Millennium Development Goals; I have seen the road infrastructures that have been built and I have never heard of a delay of Civil Servants pay unlike in other African countries who are huge recipients of foreign “aid”. In short, to use a quotation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, *“I have been to the mountain top and seen the promised land... I may not get there but I know that as a nation we will get there someday.”* That is why I pay my taxes knowing that it is going for a good cause. Even when I was unemployed, I gladly paid. Not because I was coerced or forced. *On the contrary, the staff at the Consulate knowing I was unemployed told me that I did not need to pay until I got a job!*

As a legislated tax in Eritrea, citizens of the country are required to adhere to this law. If I don’t pay my taxes in Canada I will be prosecuted and sent to jail. Is that coercion by the Canadian government? Can I refuse to pay taxes to the Canadian government if I oppose the war in Afghanistan and do not wish my money to be used to support that war? Of course not! Then why, Mr. Foreign Minister, do you have double standards and why are you meddling in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation trying to build up itself? If you have proof that families of those who “refused” to pay were being singled out back home, then please bring it forward because even the Americans haven’t been able to come up with that one.

The law states that those citizens who fail to pay their “Recovery Tax” will not be provided with consular services until such time as they pay all arrears they owe. The Consulate in Toronto does not tell anyone to pay their 2% tax. In the thirteen years I have lived in Canada, I have never seen a notice to that effect. Those who want to pay, do so. Those who don’t are not asked to let alone forced to. However, if they require consular services, a pre-requirement is payment of all tax dues. When they want to travel to Eritrea – and there are those that do so regularly on their Canadian passports – then they are free to do so and we have not heard of a single case where someone was arrested for not paying their 2% tax. Not receiving consular services for not paying a legislated tax, I believe, is far more lenient than the prison sentences one would face if one failed to comply with a Canadian tax legislature.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate that I and countless other compatriots will continue to pay our national dues whether the Canadian government bows down to US pressure and closes our consulate or not. If we have to transfer it or send it home directly to our government then so be it. It is our right! We hope that sanity will reign in Ottawa and the more-than twenty thousand Eritreans living peacefully in Canada will not be denied their right to consular services by bullying tactics.

God bless Eritrea and her People!