



Non-Conformist Eritrea

*Since time immemorial, there have been non conformists and disruptors - they have made us look at the world through a new lens and progressed our evolution as a species. Captured as the **David and***

Goliath myth. Today's Goliath is a system where

we continue to perpetuate policies which neither respect the planet, its ecosystem or its inhabitants. And a world where the disparity as between the "have" and the "have nots" is widening and where to pacify the masses we have senseless media, consumption and consumerism - entirely detrimental - as it is unsustainable to ours and the planet's well being. In summary we have "intelligence" and "cleverness" but we remain at times as a species bereft of wisdom and within a debilitating context.

.....

This article is a ground reality perspective which debunks the current perception we have of Eritrea in the West. Terms such as Dictator, Forced Labour, the legitimacy we provide to the work of NGOs irrespective, mechanism deployed in the UN and the media. I hope this engenders a more progressive and more participatory dialogue on Eritrea as instead of the one which is from a distorted lens.

.....

Eritrea sits in a part of the world where impact by climate change will be severe, where food and water security, and the ensuing impact on health will continue to be of concern. Where her neighbours are militarised by western powers for strategic interests - where the loss of civilian life has been excruciating - to wars, to trafficking by subversive policies and to the lure of consumerist havens - where our western meddling has created havoc, civil strife and fragmented states in the name of democracy. We therefore need non-conformists to take us away from sleepwalking into the egregious patterns of our past and especially to disrupt the narratives and fallacies captured by our Goliath systems.

.....

Our use of adjectives and media towards Eritrea are inflammatory and loaded. "Dictator", "Regime", "climate of fear" juxtaposed with the "North Korea of Africa"; terminology which provides no bridge to engagement or reflects the truth or the ground reality in Eritrea. Instead it has facilitated a polarised approach to engagement and by

activists - tearing friends and families apart when they should be working together on rebuilding the country and resisting deliberate divisive foreign policies and captured narratives.

Trusted sources close to the Eritrean **Dictator** aptly referred to as the President of Eritrea - say that the President is a simple man, lives in a modest apartment - not the Presidential Palace, that he eats, dresses and travels very simply. That the President has a keen focus on ensuring the sustainable, pragmatic development of Eritrea, acutely present to her context and history. That the priority areas of focus are territorial sovereignty, the creation of dams to address the pressing need for food security, healthcare and education provided for free - to ensure the populations well being. And through internalising characteristics of self reliance in the young through national service and the schooling at the Sawa military training camp. The training at Sawa asks of its youth - *what can you do for your country Eritrea as part of its nation building aspirations and goals.*

.....

The fallacy on **Forced Labour** through national service and for nation building therefore requires addressing. A country's context is critical to any form of engagement otherwise the perception is that of a neo-colonial lens replicating and rehashing first world policies which in the C21st aren't working for us and are not evolutionary or fit for purpose and destroy localised indigenous wisdom vital for the pragmatic and sustainable development of a country such as Eritrea. In short our foreign policy approach to intervention and *lens for engagement* with developing countries has been from an elitist-liberal, globalist-homogenised agenda creating nation states which are not truly accountable to their people. Eritrea's psyche is premised on the long struggle and fight for independence. Today nation building through national service is seen as part of that concerted effort, as part of the continued fight for the economic development of the country. As Mrs. Senait Lijam, a representative of the National Union of Eritrean Workers states in her presentation at the UN side event in collaboration with the UNDP on 25th October 2016, "*as a country that emerged out of a long and difficult struggle for human rights, the promotion of human rights has been the linchpin for the policies of the Eritrean government*". Recently in March 2018, the Minister of Information, Mr Yemane Ghebremeskel confirmed that the Government had introduced the new improved salary scale for national service which was being implemented in phases. That

the beneficiaries of the first phase were the new national service members enrolled in the civil service and in the army. That the baseline was 1800 Nafka for those without secondary education. 2,500 Nafka for Post secondary certificate, 3,000 Nafka for those with a diploma, 3,500 Nafka for first degree holders and for advanced degrees of five years or more 4,000 Nafka. That the second phase of the salary scale and with retroactive applicability was for existing members of the civil service and new entrants with second degrees and PhDs. That the disparity and imbalance and increase in the previous salary scales were being addressed and on a continuing basis. For a young and developing country the people are an important resource along with the sustainable exploitation of natural resources for nation building.

.....

Next is the fallacy with respect to the work of **NGOs**. We in the West do tend to afford an irregular amount of sanctity to the work of many NGOs and as being beyond reproach. However from my direct experience in the last 25 years, working for and with NGOs and iNGOs, is that NGOs *can and have* been used as a front for subversive activity especially when they are provided platforms for unbridled activism and from a particular *lens of engagement*. NGOs are constituents in a process and are stakeholders. For this reason neither they nor any other constituent in the process should be allowed to dictate a narrative as certain individuals and NGOs have done with respect to Eritrea. This has created a distortion to engagement with Eritrea through a captured narrative in our media with an objective and obvious trajectory to destabilise a peaceful and stable country and thus heinously violate the human rights of the Eritrean people and the principle of Do No Harm. This is not an evolved approach to engagement and are simply ruses, tactics, games and “*cleverness*” bereft of wisdom.

Further this sort of activism is a stain on the work of genuine human rights activism with due care and responsibility. What Arundhati Roy refers to as the **NGOization** of politics where such subversive NGOs alter the public psyche. Obviously NGOs are accountable to their funders and NOT to the people they are representing and further these NGOs engage without political or historical context. She specifically refers to them as the “*secular missionaries of the modern world*”. **For a poor but deeply proud, resilient and peaceful country the activity of such NGOs have turned the people of Eritrea into victims in the western eye, awaiting rescue by western intervention. This is**

exactly what the Eritrean struggled against and now this new diabolical warfare.

That our “clever” strategy for regime change in Iraq, to rehash modernity’s template and consumerist haven in the guise of human rights specifically through only one lens and whilst western national interests in the form of natural resources were being secured was a profoundly “evil” and subversive act. We know now from the Chilcot Report that to support the case for action for war - there was a doctored set of facts premised on “ingrained beliefs” by the intelligence community which was “flawed” A recipe which we use again and again with respect to engagement. That 200 patriotic British souls lost their lives to a conflict that was not ours. Further the Chilcott Report refers to the fact that by 2009, 150,000 Iraqi souls lost their lives and a million were displaced. Of course these figures are nearly 10 years old and lives continue to be lost. There were of course many lessons learned but this does not help the people of Iraq or the war torn and fragmented country it is today. So we need to learn from history.

.....

Case in point on such activism. I was disturbed at the way two activists Elsa Chyrum and Helen Kidame, both of whom have never visited Eritrea, participated at the

Enhanced Interactive UN dialogue event on the 12th March

2018 at the Palais des Nations, under different NGO mandates to their usual ones. How was it that these two individuals and through the number of NGOs that they operate under the mantle of, all with the same purpose of repeating content on Eritrea and over a number of years, thus creating an *echo chamber* - were provided space at the Interactive Dialogue? How was it that other stakeholders including foreign companies and NGOs with actual ground experience in Eritrea were NOT PERMITTED to engage at the Interactive Dialogue despite requests from the Eritrean Permanent Mission to Geneva? How was it that the selection of panelists and decision on the participation was made in close consultation with the sponsor, that is Djibouti? That Djibouti is in conflict with Eritrea is well known and yet the UN Human Right Council secretariat was guided by Djibouti’s rejection of Eritrea. In addition to Djibouti’s action here - Djibouti supported Susan Rice the former USA ambassador to the UN on sponsoring a resolution for a country specific mandate on Eritrea in July 2012 and the establishment of the COI in 2014. Further former assistant secretary for African affairs Herman Cohen often refers to the fact in his media outreach that fourteen members of the

UN security council had considered lifting sanctions against Eritrea, since no evidence had been found to contradict this - but Susan Rice threatened to veto that resolution. The border skirmishes, that is violating the territorial integrity of Eritrea were a direct result of USA support and policy of Ethiopia. This is a geopolitical agenda as against Eritrea and continues to take place in the halls of the UN.

Surely this defies the purpose of the interactive dialogue as being a **genuine discussion**; balanced, open and honest to the General Assembly Resolution on the *importance of ensuring universality, objectivity and non-selectivity in the consideration of human rights issues, and the elimination of double standards and politicisation... and that all human rights must be treated in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing and with the same emphasis.*

Chyrum and Kidane spoke at the Interactive dialogue, not as representatives of their many known NGOs on Eritrea, which include Eritreans for Human and Democratic Rights in the UK (EHDR-UK), East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP) and Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE) but as anonymous representatives for IFOR (International Fellowship of Reconciliation) and the Centre for Global Non killing respectively. Further both Chyrum and Kidane's affiliation to these organisations remains tenuous. My concern is why these individuals can operate with the same rehashed accounts and narrative through an umbrella of NGOs that have been set up for that specific focus, objective and purpose on Eritrea. Participation of and consultation with NGOs is *to ensure that it is the most effective contribution of the NGOs involved.* I am disappointed that the noble work of IFOR and the Centre for Global Non Killing was simply used as a mantle to rehash existing information, agendas and statements. Importantly Chyrum could easily have utilised EHAHRDP which has consultative status but then it has been criticised as activism with a regime change agenda. After all these individuals were directly instrumental in the creation of the UN Commission of Inquiry in 2006 when more fit for purpose non politicised regional and sub regional mechanisms to address the issues in Eritrea *could and should* have been utilised. Dr. Mansoor Mirza, UN Eritrea Policy Specialist in his presentation at the UN in New York on 28th October 2016 referred to the *UN Programme to Support the Government of the State of Eritrea (GoSE) on the Implementation of the Universal Periodic Review [UPR] and Human Rights Mainstreaming* [that a]...*“Human Rights Working Group and a UPR Coordinating Body consisting of relevant ministries, government bodies and national civic associations had been established... the GoSE has*

also produced 2 key documents on UPR and human rights mainstreaming - Plan of Action 2016-2017 and Framework for Action 2015-2018. ...the project represents a significant opportunity to support vital human rights work in Eritrea and that GoSE remain committed to the UPR process and strengthening human rights in Eritrea”.

No doubt as a result of this politicised manoeuvre and the lack of fairness, watching the Interactive Dialogue, it was clear and obvious that the Eritrean Permanent Mission decided best that it would not attend the staged set up. When these strategies are utilised to disengage developing countries we do the United Nations and our democratic institutions a great disservice as representatives of the common people.

.....

Impartiality I have the utmost of respect for genuine human rights defenders. The COI fact finding mission on international human rights and humanitarian law specifically provides for the independence and impartiality of the Special Rapporteur and as mandate holder to be without reproach. It is also important to ensure that the background of the candidates, **prior public statement or political or other affiliations** do not affect their independence or impartiality **or create perceptions of bias**. It is of concern that there was potential contact through affiliations at the EMHDR (Eritrea Movement for Democracy and Human Rights) and the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria with key individuals and activists often referred to as regime change agents and that they were used in compiling sources for the COI Report along with ESNMS (Eritrean Solidarity Movement for National Salvation), the Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change - North America (EYSCNA). Thus this entanglement raises acute concern with many Eritreans and in the diaspora and with respect to the “*perception of bias*” and politicisation and therefore the *credibility, reliability, impartiality and legitimacy of their [COI] operations and how they [COIs] are created*¹.

Critique of the COI Distinguished and highly respected Eritrean Harvard anthropologist and social scientist, Professor Legesse expressed additional concerns in a paper that he authored Critique of the Human Rights Commission on Eritrea which he prepared for a public meeting at the House of Lords on Eritrea on the 18th June 2015. He

¹ Nesbitt, M. Taking the (International) Rule of Law seriously: Legality and Legitimacy in United National ad hoc commissions of Inquiry. University of Toronto, Faculty of Law. 2013.

travelled to London specifically to provide this presentation and at the last minute the Lord who was hosting this event cancelled the meeting as the same Eritrean activists network had leaned heavily on the host. Another space was located and once again the Professor was prohibited from holding a public meeting as the activists called ahead and cancelled the venue. I was pained to see a senior elderly highly respected professional being carted around London trying to locate a venue to speak. Professor Legesse's paper which is publicly available cites the methodological deficits of the COI Report and at page 8 as (i) the dangers of anecdotal research (ii) failure to do a compare of asylum seekers (non genuine ones will have every reason to exaggerate) and asylees (iii) no representative sample and lack of transparency (iv) lack of quantitative survey needed for generalisation. Further at page 9 of the paper Professor Legesse makes recommendations that:

1. The COI report should be transparent and verifiable;
2. Partisan evidence from a hostile nation should be excluded;
3. Internally Displaced Persons and expellee families should be included in the study;
4. Unlawful recommendations about the border demarcation should be removed;
5. National Service: nationwide mobilisation for defence: model for small nations; and
6. The impact of the boundary crisis on Eritrean society as result of the failure of the implementation of the EEBC.

Professor Legesse then concludes with “*The COI cannot credibly contribute to the realization of individual rights in Eritrea if it insists on legitimizing the gross and persistent violations of peoples' rights in Eritrea by Ethiopia. It is a violation of the fundamental principles of human rights law to advocate for the realization of one set of rights at the expense of another set, as the COI has done: all human rights have equal standing. That principle applies to the COI and to the Human Rights Council that created it, as it applies to the rest of humankind*”.

Importantly the purpose and mandate of the UN is for peace and security and COI should therefore naturally be for the purposes of contributing to peace and security and assisting in the nation building process. This is not a prescriptive exercise. If it is conducted devoid of context and ground reality and especially when you look at the egregious violations in the region, one has to ask why was Eritrea chosen and not Ethiopia with its level of discontent and human rights violations? - One only needs to look at the level of instability, civil unrest and famine experienced in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan. This is the politicisation of the mandate. Further Eritrea has been referred to as one of the least corrupt countries in

Africa and determined to develop sustainably as compared to Ethiopia. Unfortunately the impact of donor development aid from the USA to Ethiopia has created opportunities for the elites, has led to corruption, maladministration, brutality, money laundering and the establishment of an unaccountable ruling elite in Ethiopia.

.....

Another fallacy is the legitimacy given to the western **Media**. Certain journalists like Martin Plaut have been at the epicentre of a campaign against Eritrea and at times are guilty of snowballing manipulated and fabricated narratives including the more recent Al Daii school. In June 2016 he provided a picture of a 2014 Albanian Did al Adha prayer and stated that this showed that a number of Eritreans were demonstrating against the Eritrean regime - he later deleted the tweet when an Eritrean was able to locate the infringement. At the recent side event in Geneva in March 2018 he tweeted that there was a march against the mining companies presenting at the event. Research showed that the demonstrations had nothing to do with the event. Alongside the Dutch academic, Mirjam Van Reisen, an article was written in November 2015, where they stated that the UN Security Council considered Eritrea a threat to regional stability as well as claiming Eritrean support to Houti rebellion in Yemen - both of these references were found to be wholly incorrect. The UN Security Council never made such a reference and neither has the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring group found evidence that there has been Eritrean support for Al-Shabaab. Earlier in January 2014 he announced that there was a military coup taking place in Asmara and used this statement to launch #Forto2013 a social media campaign which demanded an end to the distorted narrative on national service. He was later forced to retract his story as being incorrect. And in June 2013 a tweet was made from his account that stated that Eritrea voted against the Palestinian state at the UN. He removed the tweet when it was brought to his attention that he had made the claim prior to the UN general Assembly vote.

I have witnessed how journalists with the best of intentions visit Eritrea, experience a cognitive dissonance with what is presented in the media and the ground reality and are prevented from writing the truth because of the editorial censorship and “agreed narrative” that pervades our western “free” press. Others refuse to believe what they are experiencing, that is the said dissonance, and set about qualifying their prejudice with facts obtained by deliberately asking leading or misleading questions open to manipulation. Human rights

violations requires redress however through that process it is important that we do not create more violations of human rights. **The end never justifies the means.**

.....

Ground Reality Eritrea has made remarkable developments in human rights and in the face of little or no aid and has done so from what works and is sustainable in the long term and fit for purpose for Eritrea - that is laudable and certainly non conformist to the approach taken by many other African countries. There has been a visible backlash with respect to modernity's template on Ethiopia. The billion dollar aid packages have not created an evolved approach to development but civil strife as the decision for development was not premised on indigenous experience and intelligence but a western template which remains unsustainable for Ethiopia's development. No doubt activism is premised on an important aspect of human rights however we would be well advised to work on the proper mechanisms which we have recourse to. Eritrea has made a number of concerted efforts on the UPR mechanism, improvement on its relations with European countries and in the migration and development cooperation areas, sought new alliances with the Arab and African partners as well as discussions with IGAD and the AU. Further Eritrea remains committed to the UPR process. Mrs. Lijam stated in 2016 at the UN in New York *Eritrea continues to take its own initiatives to protect and promote human rights, it is engaging and co-operating with various international organizations and countries, including: UN Agencies in Eritrea, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, African Commission for Human and Peoples Rights, European Union and European countries, South-South cooperation.*

Further experience of the ground reality was provided in March 2018, when the Eritrean Ambassador as Head of the Eritrean Permanent Mission to Geneva organised an event involving mining companies and a long standing NGO in Eritrea, the Ireland Eritrean Development Fund, titled **Demystifying Eritrea: Mining and Human Rights**. It was attended by other Permanent Missions, NGOs, journalists , researchers and academics. The speakers spoke with authority and bridled passion on the deliberate distorted narrative, the ground reality which was nothing like what was presented as chapter and verse by the western media, the resilience, development focus, stable government, strong focus on health and education, gender equality and no experienced corruption, the honesty and nation building aspirations and character of the Eritrean people. That as businesses Eritrea was a stable

government with over twenty five years of independence, with no change of contract in that time, and that Eritrea was the fastest growing economy in Africa at 7% GDP prior to the border war and the only subsaharan African country to meet its millennium development goals. That there had been a massive reduction in malaria, material mortality, HIV/AIDs and improved access to portable water and near double adult literacy rates. Later I spoke to a journalist and an academic who echoed the same sentiments. There was a question from an NGO premised no doubt on genuine concerns of human rights in Eritrea but filtered through the distorted lens of media and reports and importantly from research conducted outside of the country. She was right to raise those concerns but she was wrong to do so without understanding the context and visiting Eritrea.

.....

Allegations During the various mandates that I have visited Eritrea on, it is clear that Eritrea’s culture, predicated on its history is to take the higher ground and not to engage or respond to spurious allegations or hyperbole. Hence the silence.

With respect to the recent allegations of the killing and wounding of civilians at the **Al Diaa school** - hyperbole was initiated by RASDO, a subversive regime change entity which went viral. The Government of Eritrea has not widely disseminated their account that is *an unruly group chanting sectarian and inflammatory slogans proceeded to Liberation Avenue and to the Ministry of Education where they began to throw stones and attack the police. As a result of which warning shots were fired to disperse the crowds. Individuals responsible were arrested as normative police actions.* This had nothing to do with what was alleged in the western media as an issue pertaining to lack of freedom of expression, association and religious freedom. The Minister of Information, Mr Yemane Ghebremeskel in his tweets confirmed that Eritrea as a secular state would not allow extremism and as echoed by the Managing Director of Eritrea’s Mufti Office *“Islam and Christianity have co-existed in harmony in Eritrea since ancient times. As such externally induced religious extremism has no space in our country”*.

COI’s statement of a **climate of fear** is inconsistent with the ground reality. It makes me recall directly the disparity as between the desk top research and the ground reality. Visitors, tourists, businesspeople refer to a sense of community and as between the various religions, humility, grace, resilience despite the severity of issues around capacity, infrastructure and development. How simply the Eritrean people, the diplomats lived - the

classless, egalitarian and honesty on which the society was predicated on. This was something we in the West should allow to flourish and support, not try and destabilise.

The COI report makes reference to the **Judiciary**. There have been a number of delegations including iNGOs, and the UN who have met with the Minister of Justice, High Court judges, lawyers, law school students and community court judges - the latter which is the fabric and foundation of grassroots Eritrean society with respect to resolving disputes. The Minister of Justice is clear that justice has to be available to all and that the intention is not to create a system which means that the majority are bereft of access because of an elitist system limiting access to justice for all. So these meetings were exchanges with respect to best practices not the wholehearted adoption of western methodology and practices. This was not paying lip service to justice but a genuine desire to create a system that served all Eritreans.

And then of course there is the issue with respect to the **Sanctions**, or best termed as an “arms embargo” which has a detrimental impact on the optics with respect to investment and of course engagement. Our western methodologies, tick box compliance exercises ensure that foreign businesses will not invest in Eritrea unless they go and visit the country and meet with senior officials. Eritrea has legal grounds to address the validity and legitimacy of the sanctions - the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG) have failed to find evidence to support the continued sanctions and the sanctions should therefore be removed. However they are politicised and like the EEBC require the USA to revisit their policy with respect to the Horn.

Migration In June 2009, President Obama signed an Executive Order 1349 putting Eritrea in the league of “human trafficking” nations and imposed a series of financial sanctions. However this executive order did not take into account the earlier executive order of February 2009, where the USA allocated asylum rights for 10,000 Eritrean youth who deserted the National Service. Naturally Eritreans were given visas into the USA and the traffickers were availing themselves of this opportunity. This was an extraordinary and subversive initiative by the Obama administration. Further in 2004, the US Government employed the services of the UNHCR to encourage the entire Kunama language group in Eritrea to seek and obtain asylum in the United States. For a poor developing nation this was a tactic to haemorrhage the youth from the country.

National security. How is Eritrea to defend its borders against Ethiopia with the policies and measure in place against Eritrea. Eritrea is a population of 3-4 million and Ethiopia has a population over a 100 million. Ethiopia is supported by the USA as a strategic partner in the Horn and there is a real security threat evidenced directly, not only from the militarisation of the region but also the border skirmishes and Ethiopia's continued violation of the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) decision by maintaining occupation of sovereign Eritrean territory. Further Ethiopia's belligerence has been fuelled by the actions of the USA, in January 2006, the US Assistant Secretary of State visited the occupied Eritrean town of Badme through Ethiopia and without the knowledge and authorisation of the Eritrean Government. To add insult to injury a "referendum" was proposed to decide the future of "Badme". How can the West condone such behaviour in direct contravention of a judicial ruling and then advocate the Rule of Law.

.....

Conclusion Eritrea is non conformist and focused on human rights as priority including the right to [sustainable] development. She does not fit into our neat western templates, systems and methodologies which are heaving under the strain of our continued Cartesian approach to the world. Any engagement with Eritrea has to start with "context". Context not only of that facing our planet, that is climate change, destruction of habitats, food security, water scarcity, forced migration and displacement but also the historical, regional and country context. The thirty year long struggle, a ravaged economy, burgeoning infrastructure and capacity issues, the play of sanctions and divisive foreign policy and Eritrea's desire to strive towards a fair and sustainable country for all her people - leaving no-one behind.

We need countries like Eritrea, as disruptors to the global system, to place first human rights on the agenda but not from modernity's template but from a country's macro micro context. The universality of human rights requires that we recognise the laudable achievements the Government of Eritrea has made in sustainable economic development not recognised through the lens of the worst of modernity's consumerist template of high rise buildings, superficial consumerism, wage slaves, spun narratives, elections not fit for purpose, corruption and humanity's erosion of meaning of value and purpose. Engagement on

human rights must be through the non politicised mechanisms available to address human rights and to address the need for capacity building.

In conclusion, at the UN Human Rights Council 37th session in Geneva, a number of country Permanent Missions wisely made reference to engagement with Eritrea to be in accord with what the UN General Assembly resolution provides, “...*promotion and protection of human rights on principles of cooperation and genuine dialogue and aimed at strengthening the capacity of Member States to comply with their human rights obligations for the benefit of all human beings.*” And critically for us in the West, ensuring peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

.....

March 2018. Ruby Sandhu.

The author has worked on a number of mandates on Eritrea including self funded, as part of iNGOs work and with companies internationally.