**Ethiopia and Eritrea Peace Concord:**

**Reconciling with the past and the way forward.**

**Neamin Zeleke**

My Eritreans brothers and sisters present here at the Festival,

Distinguished guests and panelists

Honorable organizers of the festival,

Let me first express my appreciation for inviting me to this panel. The invited guest speaker was Andargachew Tsiege, Patriotic Ginbot 7’s Member of the executive committee and head of the secretariat. But he is unable to be here today because of challenges that came up and he had to travel to Eritrea at the invitation of the Eritrean government at the last minute. When the organizers first contacted me to participate, I suggested that Andargachew would be a fitting guest speaker at the panel as he has sacrificed so much in the struggle for the causes of justice, democracy and unity in Ethiopia more than any one of us, and therefore a man of higher stature to address the community at the Eritrean festival. That however did not work out, therefore here I am in his place to address you. But a word of caution is in order, I prepared my speech with a very short notice and did not have sufficient time to develop my thoughts and prepare a polished and coherent presentation to such a distinguished panel.

On behalf of the leadership and members of Patriotic Ginbot 7 movement, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate both Prime Minster Abiy Ahmed and President Issaias Afeworki. I commend them for their bold initiative and in a span of merely 20 days for ushering a new era of peace and friendship that has been absent between the two countries for 20 years. Events were moving very fast. It is a dazzling sight indeed to witness the jubilation, euphoria, outburst of love, joy and expression of raw emotions by Eritreans and Ethiopians. What we have witnessed in the past 20 days is nothing short of miraculous. After 20 painful and wasted years for both the Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples, the walls are blown away by wave of fraternal love and hope for a promising and bright future.

The people of Eritrea and Ethiopia have spoken loud and clear. They have publicly expressed their overflowing love for each other and hunger for restoration of peace and friendship. We were all touched in a special way by the unprecedented jubilation and enthusiasm expressed by the Eritrean people during the visit of Prime Minister Abey Amhed in Asmara and that of the equally overwhelming enthusiasm of Ethiopians during President Issais’ visit to Ethiopia. The warmth and spirit of love for each other we saw displayed in so many ways, even after 20 years of separation, is a testament. It’s a testament that our bond is stronger than the avalanche of insidious divisive propaganda, lies, hate, disinformation, and distortions. Our special multi-faceted ties–historical, cultural, sociological, and strategic-will always prevail, in the end. We are bound by blood, marriage, culture, our quest for peace, and hope for a better future.

The people of the two nations will always choose prosperity over despair, love over hate, and peace over war. Peace and love has finally and triumphantly prevailed. The people of the two countries have expressed their desire for cooperation over conflict, partnership over enmity, and have at long last prevailed in a spectacular triumph as seen in Asmara and Addis Ababa. We are now in a new chapter, a new beginning, a dawn of new hope and a new journey of enormous potential for peace and prosperity for Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the region as whole.

Let me also take this opportunity on behalf of the members and leadership of Patriotic Front Ginbot 7 to express our profound appreciation and eternal gratefulness for the government and the people of Eritrea. You were a friend, the only friend of Ethiopia and Ethiopians during our darkest hours. Indeed, Eritrea was the only country when almost all countries of the world turned their backs on the Ethiopian people as they struggled against tyranny, for justice and freedom. The tyrannical regime in Ethiopia was able to persuade or coerce every other nation to aid and abet its brutal security apparatus to suppress our voice and struggle of our people for freedom and dignity. In the midst of the desert we found ourselves, Eritrea offered us an oasis of safe haven. In Eritrea, thousands of our brother and sisters, your brothers and sisters, freedom fighters who fled repression in Ethiopia found shelter and aid. Eritrea has allowed us to continue our resistance and fight for justice, freedom, dignity, and peace. We thank you for allowing us to resist the brutal regime of a minority group and in our quest to bring peace, democracy and freedom to our land.

We, those in the leadership and members of our Patriotic Ginbot 7 movement, have done our modest share in standing at the side of Eritrea, starting from the sanction imposed against Eritrea in 2009 to the present.

In the past 10 years, our movement has used all available media and platforms, both to reach the Ethiopian people and the Ethiopian community in the diaspora, to educate the public, to create a correct understanding and awareness about the Eritrean government’s intentions in relation to Ethiopian armed resistance organizations based in Eritrea and Ethiopia. During these public meetings and media appearances, we have stated to Ethiopians that the Eritrean leadership operates based on the strategic interest of Eritrea as opposed to by hostile intentions or sheer enmity towards Ethiopian people. Using various platforms, public meetings interviews, and media such as ESAT (starting from an Interview ESAT journalists did with President Isaias and many other programs that put Eritrea in positive light) we have consistently and unequivocally defended Eritrea in order to combat baseless negative perceptions and animosity pervasive among large sectors of the Ethiopian public both in Ethiopia and diaspora. When it comes to the conflict between Eritrea and and Ethiopia, reality has always been the causality of misinformation and lies.

Admittedly, the reality is too complex for a speech such as this. We have recognized tens of thousands of Ethiopians who gallantly fought and died in Eritrea, true to their convictions and genuinely believing that Eritrea was part of Ethiopia. On the other hand, an equal number also fought and died for Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia. For Ethiopians it was matter of territorial integrity and separation of a united people. For Eritreans, it was a legitimate struggle to regain their independence. What ensued was the most distractive war ever waged in Africa. That is the reality my generation inherited.

I say “inherited” because I was born at a time when the dialogue had stopped and war was presented as the only option. Throughout my childhood and beyond, I witnessed the failure of successive Ethiopian regimes. In fact, the process started before I was born the dismantling Eritrea’s federation status that recognized the unique condition of Eritrea and its existence for over four decades under the Italian colonial rule, followed by its rule under British Military Administration. That fact alone makes Eritrea unique in contrast to the states of Ethiopia. The successive regimes did not create the space for open and frank discussion of this unique historical fact in considering the demand for independence.

Recognizing this historical fact and accepting the desire and wish of the Eritrean people is no easy task for the average Ethiopian. As an individual, I, too, have struggled with it until I finally came to terms with the reality. My journey to this state of acceptance was difficult and challenging. It was complicated by my family’s circumstances. You see, my father, the late Commander Zeleke Bogale was among the first and the most senior batch of naval officers in the Imperial Navy who later became the chief administrator the Ethiopian Marine Authority. My father spent most of his life in Assab and Massawa as a naval officer first and then running the ports at Massawa and Assab. He worked day and night to modernize not only the ports but also the infrastructure of the two cities. He also led the effort to build a third port, a maritime academy, and ship and boat building infrastructures at Haleb, 30 kilometers from Assab. Most of my father’s friends and colleagues, both naval and army have died in Eritrea serving in the Ethiopian army, air force and navy ( including , his course mates and friends commodores Beleke Belete, and Getachew who died while fighting in the epic battle for Massawa in 1990). There was no moment in my childhood and upbringing where I contemplated that my father might have spent his lifetime to improve a country that would separate from Ethiopia. But overtime, I came to realize that the reality as it exists is different from the belief I held growing up.

Having said that, it is important to recognize that many far-sighted individuals had attempted to get us to where we are today. Although their efforts did not succeed, it must be told to complete the story. In the midst of the conflict and carnage, some have tried to steer us in the right direction. Indeed, many Ethiopian heroes have also paid the ultimate sacrifice to make the peace and spirit of friendship we witness today a reality.

The day Dr. Abiy invited President Issaias Afeworki, I spoke to my childhood friend Derege Demissie, the son of the late Maj. Gen. Demissie Bulto, former head of the Second Army (SRA) in Eritrea. He reminded me this was his father’s vision. Many faulted Gen. Demissie for brokering peace with EPLF and agreeing to a cease fire while he was leading the effort to overthrow the dictator Mengistu Hailemariam. Derege said “those who witnessed the true horror of the war we aged against our brothers were convinced that the solution can never be more war. They were far-sighted enough to see where we would be today. But for every visionary, there are thousands who can’t see beyond tomorrow.”

What Derege said reminded me of the interview Maj. Gen. Fanta Belay, the highly decorated former Ethiopian Air Force commander said during an interview after he was captured by the regime forces following the Coup. Asked how he could negotiate with bandits, Gen. Fanta said, “We have to sit down with them and solve our problem.” I can name other Ethiopians who held the same view. Gen. Kebede Gebre, head of ground forces during Emperor Haile Selassie, Aklilu Habtewold, later Prime Minister, and others counseled against abolishing the Eritrean Federation. Gen. Aman Andom tried to solve the problem with dialogue. In each instance, the efforts were thwarted by the intellectual limits of our political leaders. These efforts went against the narrative of the regimes. War was also a tool to maintain power. But the victims of this short-sighted policy have been the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea; those who died and bled in the mountains and valleys of Eritrea, the streets of Asmara, Karen, Massawa, and other smaller cities and towns; and, yes, those who in the last few weeks, have come out to let out their suppressed emotion in public.

But we have now not only reached the cross-road, but have chosen the right turn. Having made this turn, we need to have a clear understanding of where this road is destined to take us. Patriotic Ginbot 7 articulated a strategic partnership for the two countries and people to live in peace and harmony. We have outlined a roadmap to create a conducive environment and vibrant relationship that would enable us to tackle the challenges we face—from accelerating our mutual economic development to combating security threats in the region, and, most importantly, building a framework for an enduring special relationship based on mutual interest and respect.

Ethiopia and Eritrea are two different countries. That fact must recognized and accepted by Ethiopians. The two nations are, however, unlike no other two nations. We eat, dress, speak act, like, love, dislike, laugh, cry, pray, dance, celebrate, mourn, and care for each other in the same way. We can’t even tell one another apart. So the question for us, going forward, is how we can celebrate this shared heritage and unique connection without encroaching on each other’s independence.

Patriotic Ginbot 7 has encouraged its members around the world to work closely with members of the Eritrean communities, community leaders, and Eritrean Embassies to bridge the gap by organizing joint platforms designed to bring Ethiopians and Eritreans together. We made an effort to attend social events including Independence Day, Eritrean festivals, and other events to create a common understanding between the two communities.

Our vision for the future of the two nations and what we publicly and boldly asserted to our fellow Ethiopians about Eritrea in the past 10 years has now started to materialize. We are very proud of our role not because Eritrea has been our friend during the darkest ours, , as the saying goes “a friend in need a friend indeed,” but rather because of the following two main reasons: First, we deeply believe that despite the tragic recent past that caused the sacrifice of tens of thousands of Ethiopians and Eritreans lives, and the suffering of millions in the ensuing stalemate, Eritrea and Ethiopia’s destiny are intertwined, their unique relationship for millennia, the many ties that bind the two people should be anchored on a new framework on the basis of deeper understanding, trust, strategic partnership based on respect and mutually beneficial arrangements. The nature of such relationship cannot be other than a far-reaching, visionary, and strategic partnership that would advance the interest of both nations for posterity.

Second, we firmly believe that this is the only way we can survive and thrive in this globalized world that is becoming more complicated and riddled with emerging fault lines in the region and beyond. This is the only way the two people can muster their potential in human and natural resources to combat their common and insidious enemies: poverty, economic stagnation, climate change, and alarming environmental degradation. We have to develop strategies and policies for sustainable economic development by combining our resources and engage in joint ventures, joint defense and security arrangements that ensures a safe and secure Horn of Africa. Therefore, we will be able to withstand threats that exist in the sub region- from extremism, to terrorism, to piracy in the red sea and the Indian Ocean, which are the life lines for trade and economic growth for our region. We have shared geostrategic and geopolitical interests in the region. It is only by engaging in such a strategic alliance that the two countries can overcome outside threats that will no doubt emerge in the short and long term due to regional and global interest in the region, both from state, and non-state actors. These were among the issues we have addressed, advocated in public in the past so many years.

Last but not least, ensuring that justice, freedom and liberties of our people is vital. Peace and stability will not endure and, once attained, cannot be sustained without the guarantees of justice and liberty to every citizen. So we have to also work to ensure justice and liberties to prevail and consolidate in both countries and the region.

The advent of peace and broad agreements reached by PM Abiye Ahmed and President Isaias have now ushered a new chapter and a new beginning for peace, stability, cooperation, and partnership. This change will allow both countries to shift all human, material, and financial resources currently deployed to maintain the prevailing “no war, no peace” status quo to programs and projects designed to improve the lives of ordinary people in the two nations. But there will be many challenges ahead. We will be confronted with many thorny issues that demand creative solutions with a win-win formula. We must sweat every detail to ensure that one party does not ride on the back of the other. Every step must be transparent and clear to the public. Care must be taken to avoid mistakes would trigger a reversal of the hard won peace and normalization the relationship.

In other words crafting an enduring and suitable framework for partnership and cooperation needs political maturity, learning from the blunders of political leaders of the past decades, never losing sight of the big picture, patience, foresight, and political wisdom, and nurturing the trust and support of the citizens of both nations. Trust is one of the primary casualties of the past 50 years of our checkered history.

We need to build a very clear process and joint bodies that would help to arbitrate and resolve disputes. Let us allow the people to lead the way through trade, socialization, cultural exchange, communication, and free movement of people. As President Issais said referring to the great potential for the depth and strength of the relationship among Ethiopia and Eritrea, the “sky is the limit”.

Thank you very much. Peace, harmony, and a lasting partnership for the Ethiopian and Eritrean people!

(*The condensed version was presented to the panel at Eritrean Festival under the title “The Horn of Africa: Quest for Peace Continues”.*)