

GADEM AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD SLEEP WITH ONE CLOSED EYE SINCE THE RELOCATION OF THE NAVAL BASE:

(PART II)

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We wrapped up **PART I** with the question: **Did the Eritrean Naval establishment refrain from doing harm to the local population of Gadem and its surrounding?** **PART II** picks up from there, answering the question.

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Reports we have been receiving from concerned patriotic citizens show that the population of the region of Gadem are living in fear and terror due to the criminal attitude of the navy authorities towards the population that is daily experiencing mysterious disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture, and unprecedented level of corruption. Though the forms of injustice committed on the population of Gadem by the Naval Base, as an instrument of violence of the PFDJ brutal regime, are too many to raise in this piece, we could cite only the following:

- Every citizen that has a camel (in fact, many have) is suspected of transporting smuggled goods or contraband, allegedly brought secretly in to the country in violation of the law, specially, without the payment of legal duty. This is happening though it is no secret that the navy have better access to

contraband goods and better means to transport them than the dwellers of the coast.

Subsequently, many arrests have been made, without any evidence, and even a citizen was recently shot by some navy soldiers in the presence of his mother in Zula, a town close to the region, after he has been chased from Gadem. This incident outraged all camel owners and the rest of the population, who protested until the navy authorities tried to calm the situation by giving some money to the family and promising to hire their other son, though the criminals were not brought to justice. This paradox reminds us of the hatred with which the Ethiopian TorSaraweeet used to hold camels in this particular region, as elsewhere, though their hatred could be understandable. What we do not understand is when the navy, a branch of the army of the regime that had honoured the camel as the symbol of the Eritrean state, hates this incredible animal. To see the implications of this incident further, we raise the question: ***What is the takeaway from this crime of murder committed on a citizen in a cold-blooded manner?***

As such crimes are happening in every corner of the country daily and in numbers we cannot even imagine, it shows that the life of an Eritrean is not treated as human. We just ask as the Romans did: ***“Who will guard the guards?”*** (Meaning: Who will watch the watchmen themselves?) In few words, it shows that PFDJ Eritrea is a country, where no criminal could be investigated, arrested, and persecuted. This state of lawlessness should not sound strange,

after all, Eritrea is a country where there is no constitution, and is like a runaway train without a controller (a train no longer under the control of a driver). Accordingly, the fact remains that all these crimes and morally reprehensible things that have been done during the three decades of hell, have to wait until this brutal regime succumbs to its final fate or collapses. This means that, as long as the PFDJ gang is in power, all criminals will go away with their crimes, but when the reckoning day comes, our people will not go easy on them: the whole criminal enterprise will be held accountable, starting from the leader of the gang, the butcher-in-chief. However, for now, we need to document the crimes in detail as much as we can, because for sure, a surprise is coming for the criminals.

- Another targeted group by the navy in Gadem are boat-owning fishermen, mostly coming from the surrounding, as far as the islands of Dahlak. These citizens are accused not only of contraband but of human trafficking too. Based on suspicion, arbitrary arrests and torture have become the daily routine, making the act of owning a boat intimidating and a cause for harassment and hardship, to the extent that people live overwhelmed by the fear of the unknown. To put it candidly, People are loudly asking: ***For how long are we going to walk while watching behind our shoulders?***
- As the navy are patrolling the coastline around the clock, no food supplies are reaching Gadem, let alone from Yemen, where our fishermen used to take their yield of fish to the nearest Yemeni market and buy foodstuffs that are not locally available, but from Massawa and the surrounding villages and towns too, declaring a total siege on the region. This siege has been coordinated with

the military base of the UAE at the Port of Assab, whose technologically advanced patrol ships guard our coastal line, violating our national sovereignty. The Emirates are relaxing their muscles on our people, as if Eritrea is no man's land and no government, while their islands (Abu Musa, and Greater and Lesser Thunbs) are occupied by Iran since 1971. *For more information on the military base of the UAE and the disaster it is causing to the region and the country, please refer to my article (**"ALLOWING A FOREIGN MILITARY BASE IN ASSAB: YIELDING THE HARD-EARNED NATIONAL SOVERIGNTY TO A FOREIGN POWER"**, www.toqoruba.org, May 19, 2017)*

The excuse for imposing restrictions on the movement of people and goods in the region, as is the case over the country, is Covid-19. Based on that, any movement in the whole coastal line has been banned, even for fishermen, boats are stopped, their cargo confiscated, and their owners are put in serious trouble. Unlike the Ethiopian administration, even local fishing, without using boats and for personal use or as a practice of a hobby, is prohibited for the first time in the history of the region. Any curious observer would ask: ***What does this mean for the local population?***

This means that a siege with the effect of causing mass starvation, that threatens the lives of the people of the region, is in place. From a private conversation with a friend, who is intimately familiar with what is currently going on in Gadem, I learned that people have already started to remember 1986 when foodstuffs became scarce and prices skyrocketed, but the Derg gave instructions that restrictions on contraband goods should be relaxed. This is a shocking contrast.

- Many young men from the destitute local population have been hired by the Naval Base as daily labourers, collecting fire wood, loading and unloading

trucks of food and other shipments of the base, and doing other menial and degrading jobs. The striking part is that they are paid not in cash, but in kind: grain, flour, tea and sugar, and devastatingly in a quantity described as “extremely shocking”, compared to their heavy labour. Here we are justified to ask: ***Are they taking us back to the medieval barter system? This is*** astounding in this modern world, but the worse is the irrational and bullying behaviours of the soldiers, who have been treating the local population in the same way Nazi officers or members of an invading army did. Consequently, the patience of our people is running thin, worriedly asking, with their veins bulging out with anger: ***When are we going to breathe the sigh of relief?***

- The naval authorities that have an upper hand in the administration of this coastal region accuse the Yemenis, against whom the Eritrean Government had joined the Saudi-led Arab coalition, of smuggling weapons to the region to destabilize the country. These PFDJ tactics of magnifying the external threat and fanning collective paranoia, that are their best operational environment, have been compounding the trauma that already exists, making the population look as if they are collaborators with the Yemenis against the government. The only crime of the local population is that they speak out and protest against the injustice committed on them by the military, whose conceit and disrespect to the local people have no bounds. To put it straight, these are destitute people who have no resources, energy, and even the time to think to do something against the government. They are against no one but with

themselves: their focus being nothing but a loaf of bread for their daily survival.

- Another source of income for some of the local population was the production of salt that constituted the main source of livelihood for some families. There were times when the salt from the region crossed to the Eritrean highlands, especially Akale Kuzay, in a lubricant trade. Now the production of salt has totally been banned by the government, and the navy imposes that ban, arresting, intimidating, and harassing those they think are violators of the ban.

All forms of injustice detailed above show that the region of Gadem is in the most dangerous situation in the history of the country, surpassing the conditions under the Derg administration. At the same time, the navy leadership, as a part of the inner circle of the Atse, did not show another side of them or that they are different from being a tool of the oppressive PFDJ regime that took it upon itself to make citizens economically anxious, frustrated, angry and insecure. In Tigre we say, 'Wad Dammu Kum Umu.' This is exactly the same as saying, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Here we are talking about a group that never understands citizenship rights and significance of community. Their privilege put them in a cave so that they do not see the anger of the people on whom they are committing so much brutality and injustice. Just to remind them that what goes around comes around, we would ask: ***Is it lost on them what had happened to the Derg generals who finally turned into street beggars in Addis Ababa?***

I have lived long enough to remember that the population of Gadem had never been so destitute. As the town in which I was born and brought up lies north of Gadem, everything I ate (except fish) and the milk I drank came from that region. Lamenting the current situation of the region, which used to be the land of milk and honey in the past, I would say in Tigre, “Ab Khyra Abeko” (I was raised with its resources).

My house was in the southern part of the town, where the main road to Gadem passed. I was in a position to see endless lines of farmers on foot, carrying their agricultural products and driving their goats and sheep, or leading their camels and donkeys loaded with grain, milk, butter, honey, corn, watermelon ...etc. These were my daily morning scenes in winter. Further, close to my house there were three broker families (maybe out of the seven in the town), locally called “Hader”. Farmers came with their sheep and goats for a couple of nights’ stay in the house of the “Hader”, until their sheep and goats were sold out with his help. Here the “Hader” who played the role of the middleman between the customer and the owner of the animals, skillfully moderated the bargain. Though it is over half of a century since then, the bleat of the sheep and goats are still ringing in my ears, and I feel that their smell is still solid in my nose, while the scene still stands alive in my mind.

To wind up this part, the nagging question to be raised is: ***How come that the farmers from Gadem who used to come in hundreds daily with their amazing agricultural products during the Ethiopian occupation in winter, turning the market of Hargigo into a place of bee-hive activity, could turn into destitute population, harassed, intimidated, scared, and forced to see their country as hell by the Eritrean army during the post-independence period?*** This does not tell us about the region of Gadem only, but is a common pattern in the whole Eritrea, Gadem being a representing example. The idea that the situation in Gadem is representative of the situation in the whole country is clearly put in my first paragraph on page two. This will lead us to the question: ***Why are we, as a nation, in this situation?***

In answering the question above, some would put the blame squarely on the cronies of the dictator, both military and civilian, who have enabled him to survive until now. As a matter of fact, there is no doubt that this group of opportunists put their interests before the rights and benefits of the citizenry,

and served him as effective tools to silence, oppress, and rule, though we know that working with the Atse is a part of a moral struggle. With this background in mind, it is a glaring misunderstanding to expect them to say “No” to their master or rebel against him, as their comrades-in-arms, who have been languishing in prison, honourably did. In fact, if Atse Isias tells them that the Earth is flat, they are going to agree without any question. The only thing remaining (God forbid) is the publication of a little red book: **QUOTATION FROM CHAIRMAN ISIAS** (tantamount to that of Mao Tse-tung) to be memorized by all. In few words, as long as their interests are protected, they will not have the backbone to do anything. Here it is logical and objective to ask: ***Why would one expect Atse Isias’s cronies to stand for the rights of the people when the people themselves are silent on the injustice committed on them? Who is the greatest threat to our cause: ourselves or Atse Isias and his cronies?***

Here it should be emphasized that the obvious and the inarguable answer is that most of us have been silent, failing to realize that what happens to one today will happen to us tomorrow. We kept silent on thousands of forms of injustice committed all over the country, starting from the Mai Habar massacre of 1994 to the last crime committed before posting this piece. This was candidly expressed by the quotation from the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, cited before the introduction above. To drive this point further home, we wind up our answer to the question with the quotation from the Russian novelist, philosopher, historian, short story writer and political prisoner, Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (December 11, 1918-August 3, 2008), who articulated it in more detail, saying:

“In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations.”

From the discussions in PART I and PART II of this piece, we could see in detail what is currently going on in Gadem represents a clear pattern of what is going on nation-wide. Though the form in which injustice has been committed could differ, according to each local situation, the content is the same: injustice is always injustice in any language. In other words, the relationship between what is going on in Gadem and what is going on in the country as a whole, show the dialectics of the general and the particular. To

define our terms from the perspective of social sciences, by the term “general” we mean the whole entity, and here we are referring to Eritrea as a whole, which could be broken into particular components, of which Gadem is one. In summary, through this piece, we could see the general (what is happening in the whole Eritrea) in the particular (the developments in Gadem), which is a small individual part of something larger. The conclusion is that Eritrea, as a whole, irrespective of regional, religious, cultural, ethnic, class (we mean the difference between the rich and the poor), gender and age differences, is living in the darkest time of its history. The question here is: ***Could Eritrea’s darkest moment in history change into a catalyst to new life?***

The fact that Eritrea, the home of the brave, lives in the most critical time of its history is a sign that something that makes sense would happen. But nothing happens by itself without an active role of citizens. As we do not need to open the Pandora’s Box (something that creates a lot of new problems we never expect) by blaming this group or that, or this individual or that, we simply say that all errors of commission and omission that have delayed the inevitable victory over the regime should go through a serious scrutiny and be immediately addressed. This is important because the lawless and corrupt regime, which knows us very well and knows our lines of fault, has been trying to make the best of our terrible situation, delaying the inevitable. This is the only way that could win us back, as justice seekers, the public credibility and trust.

The regime is a paper tiger (outwardly powerful and dangerous, but inwardly weak and ineffectual), as the Chinese say. It is very vulnerable because it has failed to learn the biggest lesson from world revolutions that harsh repressive measures have almost no stabilizing effect at all, but on the contrary, they would add fuel to the fire. Moreover, the Atse, who has always a screw loose, now that screw is looser, as his downright disgraceful behaviours during his visit to Jimma last week had shown, though none of his past behaviours during his visits to Ethiopia failed to amaze us, as it did all observers elsewhere. These visits, as a matter of fact, are gifts from God to our people: the more Ethiopians know him, the less they will respect him and wish to see him visit their country. That would mean more pressure on Abiy Ahmed, who is in his lowest level of popularity, to distance himself from Eritrea’s devil. This is to conclude that the rule of the game is, “Hit the nail when it is hot.”

As the final thing, I want to bring an issue we usually discuss among ourselves. It is the awful stench of the descriptions some of us unwisely give about one Awraja or another, falling into the trap of nasty generalization by directly or indirectly depicting its sons and daughters as the enablers of the regime. As such unfair stereotypes get under our skin, as a population of this Awraja or that, we condemn it loudly and clearly, as an act of divisiveness, no matter it is intentional or not (we do not measure things by their intentions but by the effects they cause on others), saying:

A scum can never and will never serve as a sample of any section of a society. When we talk about any Awraja, there are legal and moral responsibilities on us to avoid choosing the worst examples. We have to target the enablers by name, instead of generalizing and trying to unite them with the people with whom they have nothing politically in common.

