

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

(PART I)

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“What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak... It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us.” (French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, June 27, 1884-October 16, 1962)

All reports coming from any part of Eritrea, the one man's state, over a range of issues have always been, without exception, very worrisome since the liberation of the country in 1991, and more so since the turn of the century. They have been about massacres, mysterious disappearances, illegal arrests, torture, rape, irrational collective measures against communities and villages (the most recent example being the residents of Guazene who were led to and still are in the concentration camp in the middle of a pandemic and without any consideration for age, and health conditions), demolition of public residences, enslavement of the youth in the name of national military service, creating conducive conditions that could lead to starvation, homicidal negligence of dangerous diseases, massive displacement of people, mind-boggling corruption, persecution of religious minorities, the release of PFDJ wolves everywhere to mercilessly snap and exploit the destitute population, taking advantage of their miserable life ...name it. Anything horrible, that comes to your mind, has been happening in Eritrea in broad day light, but very few have been reported due to the iron grip of the police state. In other words, all red lines have been crossed to the extent that no ruling gang of its kind in world history has worked so hard and so successfully to make a muck of things as this gang of criminals has been doing. In few words, there cannot be law and order when a gang dominates and oppresses all.

The reports we have been receiving about the coastal population in and around Gadem since the time of the relocation of the Eritrean Naval Base to the area,

are by no means jaw-dropping or surprising. We consider each new act of injustice committed on the local population of this coastal region or any other region for that matter, like adding colour to the painting, whose caption reads: ***PFDJ: THE SWORD HANGING OVER THE HEADS OF THE ERITREAN PEOPLE.*** In other words, here we are reporting another case in the long-list that puts the brutal anti-people regime before the people.

As general finger-pointing is not enough, we need to go beyond that by presenting facts that would enable us to give the best sense we can as to what is happening, discussing all acts of injustice committed on the local population of the region from the prospective of the nature of the regime, showing why things are taking this path, and suggesting what should be done. With this introduction we could get into the red meat, figuratively speaking. By “red meat” here, we mean something substantial that can satisfy a basic need or appetite.

Before we assess the impact of the relocation of the Naval Base to Gadem on the local population, we need to see what that region looks like. One would ask here: ***Why is the background information about the region of Gadem important?*** First, as Eritreans, we need to know about the country and the people we say we are proud to be a part of. Second, Gadem is the region where our naval force has its headquarters and the self-imposed leader of the country, the butcher, has a banker like that of Hitler. Last but not least, this background information would help us answer the central question of this piece: ***Was the relocation of the Naval Base to Gadem a benefit or a burden for the local population?***

Gadem is the region that shares borders with Hargigo and the port city of Massawa from the north, Zula from the south, the Red Sea from the east, and the chain of mountains (the Mountains of Gadem that extend up to Farara) from the west. The region is made up of rugged terrain, interspersed with valleys and seasonal reefs. The climate of the region is semi-desert: hot in summer and moderate in winter (almost like that of the port city of Massawa and its surrounding). There are no stable villages in the region except Airure, which could be considered almost an extension of Hargigo due to geographical proximity and family connections. The reason for the absence of stable settlements and villages is the lack of the resources of water except in winter. This explains why the nature of the inhabitants of Gadem is nomadic, with the inhabitants moving from one place to another, looking for food, water and pasture for their animals. This way, they go to the highlands, especially to Akale Kuzay (Hazamo) in summer and come back in winter to re-

establish their temporary villages or settlements in the region. Though nomadic pastoralists are the clear majority, there is a small number of families who practice farming combined with fishing, especially those who live very close to the sea. These are also poor but not destitute. They usually keep their families in Hargigo, where their kids go to school.

As concerned citizens about the miserable conditions of our people, we raise two key questions about the majority of the population of the region. These are: ***What does nomadic pastoralist life of the population of Gadem look like? Is this the way their life should continue?*** These two questions could be merged and formulated as one question, which is: ***What is the difference between nomadic pastoralist life and one of the real pastoralist?***

Though the nomads could have animals that are vital to their livelihood, becoming nomadic pastoralists (they produce milk, meat, and skin mainly for personal use), their strategy is not livestock raising. Further, they are in constant ups and downs in search of food, water, and pasture for their animals, and so they do not have a private space. Moreover, losing everything, again and again is very common because of the unpredictable weather patterns and adverse climatic conditions that could cause drought and other natural calamities. Add to that, their children are prone to malaria and other illnesses as they go up and down, with no opportunity for education, and the nomadic pastoralist families are usually destitute who usually need handouts to survive. Nevertheless, if they could find a reliable source of water, they could change into real pastoralists who could have a private space to live on and raise livestock (cattle, camel, sheep, goats...etc) to produce meat, milk, and skin not only for personal use but for trade too. Their animals could also be used as beasts of burden, earning some money. At the same time, they could practice some farming or trade with agricultural people for grain and other products. This would be a very radical social mobility. Put differently, a reliable source of water would mean everything for them, for their animals, and for their social mobility from nomadic life to one of a settled population, that could gradually build all basic infrastructure, eventually enabling them to live a more civilized life and contribute to the economy of the country.

To complete the picture about the region of Gadem and its population, a couple of sentences about the ethnic composition would be appropriate and helpful. In this

connection, it could be said that the majority are Tigre speaking, Saho coming next, and Afar third. Here something important has to be noted. The intermarriage between these ethnic groups and the process of assimilation (as is the case in the whole Samhar region) going on for hundreds of years would sometimes renders it impossible to draw a line of demarcation between Tigre, Saho and Afar. In fact, it is very uncommon to find a person who is not a breed of at least two, if not all of the three ethnic groups.

When the Naval Base moved to Gadem, any patriotic Eritrean who knows the level of the under-development, destitution (extreme poverty or the state of almost completely lacking in resources or means of support) and the basic needs of the region, would have welcomed it, had Eritrea been blessed with a government that has the interest of the people at heart, hoping that the relocation would benefit the local population in a number of ways. Just to spark creativity and resourcefulness to the discussion, one would ask the following hypothetical question: ***What would be the ideal expectations from the relocation of the Naval Base by way of benefiting the local population of Gadem and taking their needs into account?*** The rhetorical answer would include the following (I hope nobody would tell me that I am living in another planet):

- The naval force could drill wells for the population, creating the most important favourable condition for the establishment of permanent settlements. That would change the nomadic nature of the majority of the population into pastoralist farming, where they would be sedentary and do not change locations in search of water, food, and pasture.
- The Naval Base would help them build permanent villages, introduce electricity, build schools and healthcare establishments, while giving medical help to the most needy and complicated cases.
- The naval establishment could open job opportunities for them against reasonable remuneration (not work for food), and career opportunities for their sons and daughters who would aspire to join the naval force.

- The naval establishment establishment would make the kids of the local population feel that they have found Eritrean young men and women who could be their mentors, serve them as a source of inspiration, give them assistance to a better life and grasp of technologies, and encourage sport and academic activities in schools.
- It was also possible to organize literacy classes for the local population who do not read and write, and show films to the public, to raise their health and social awareness, and by doing so building a bridge between the military and civil sections of our society and eliminating misunderstanding and bias.
- Female officers could also start some programs that could empower women, helping their economic independence, introducing family planning, and upgrading their skills as mothers, wives, citizens, and members of the community.

It was our sincere wish that the Naval Base, as a branch of the Eritrean defence force, would realize the importance of the evolution of the nomadic groups, who are among the most economically disadvantaged in an economy, which is already very poor, and help their integration to the national development, and by doing so become a part of the program of capacity building of local communities and poverty reduction, as detailed above. However, as the navy is a branch of the army, which is the instrument of coercion of an oppressive regime, it would be wishful thinking to expect it to play such a noble role, whether in favour of nomads or the population living in cities, towns or villages. However, there would be a time in which our Naval Force would think on similar lines. That may not be too far.

This reminds us of the wisdom of the Buddhist monk or the spiritual leader of Tibet, Dalai Lama, who candidly said: "If you can, help others; if you cannot do that, at least do not harm them." Following this wisdom, the question remains: ***Did the Eritrean Naval establishment refrain from doing harm to the local population of Gadem and its surrounding?***

(PART II CONTINUES)