

From the Mysteries of 'Siriye Addis'

By - Woldeyesus Ammar

The Eritrean armed struggle has its share of mysterious occurrences that to this day remain little told and little known to many of us. One of such perceived occurrences that continue to adversely affect mutual trust and reconciliation among many forces and segments in the society is the alleged killing by the ELF in the late 1960s of up to 150 Eritrean youth from Kebeessa. The incident under review is commonly known as the case of 'Siriye Addis'. The key source of the allegation was Nhnan Elamanan. Subsequent publications by the same author(s) continually hammered to make a point and make many believe that such a grisly killing actually happened. Yet, no concrete proof has been presented to show that the allegedly horrendous criminal act indeed took place and for the reasons presented in Nhnan Elamanan.

I am one of those who know very little about this incident, and no wonder that I am motivated to write this piece after reading Ogbamichael Tesfatsion's informative article of 21 April 2004 on the subject of 'Siriye Addis' (see Meskerem and Nhnarnet webs of that date). Ogbamichael's article quotes the entire section about 'Siriye Addis' from a book by Ghebremedhin Zerizghi (published in 1997 under the title of 'An Eyewitness Account') and posed important questions. I consider the quotation from the book about 'Siriye Addis' very important and I am translating it for those who may have difficulties in reading the Geez alphabet. But before doing that, I will give a brief explanation of some terms and events for the sake of those young compatriots who have no adequate background on this matter.

'Siriya' in Arabic meant a military unit of about 150 fighters in the Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA). It was known as Haili in Tigrinia and company in English.

Siriye Addis did not officially exist in the ELA as a unit under that name. The name was coined in later years to refer to a group of Eritreans who were reportedly recruited (mainly consisting of youth coming from Addis and other parts of Ethiopia) and secretly kept with Solomon Woldemariam in Seled, the Tsena-Degle area of Akele-Guzai province in the late 1960s. When it became aware of the presence of a group of newly recruited fighters kept in Akele-Guzai, the General Command (Kiyada-al-Ama) that was elected at the ELA conference of August 1969 at Adobaha, started to inquire about the issue and wanted to regularize the deployment of the new recruits.

Below is my translation of the section from Ghebremedhin's book that Ogbamichael Tesfatsion quoted in his recent website article that appeared under the heading of "Query to Ato Habtemariam Abraha". Ato Habtemariam, a veteran member of the liberation struggle who reportedly was a close friend of Solomon Woldemariam, alleged in his recent interview about the killing of "150 members of 'Siriye Addis'. He and others who may know more about the incident are being asked to help uncover the mysteries, if any, of 'Siriye Addis', and others because knowing the whole truth is definitely part of the required package of tools in building mutual trust and initiating reconciliation among mistrustful forces and population sectors. Ogbamichael Tesfatsion is asking pointed questions, and many Eritreans could agree with him. He is doubting the figure of "150" members in 'Siriye Addis'. He is also questioning if the number of persons alleged to have been killed by Jebha because of their ethnic and confessional identity (Kebessan Christians). The manuscript of Nhnan Elamanan dated November 1971, claims as follows: 1) 'over 100 Christian fighters were killed by Jebha between 1966 and 1967'. 2) over 200 Christian fighters were killed between 1969 and 1970'. The document alleged that the aim was keep the Christian within Jebha as a minority. Similarly, the Tigrinia publication of 1975 entitled, "Hafeshawi poletikawi tmhrti ntegadelti" (p.47-48) alleged that soon after coming to power in August 1969, the General Command killed over 250 Christian tegadelti ('Siriye Addis?') by gathering them at military training camps. It also disarmed and sent to the Sudan 400 selected fighters. Now the translation...

TRANSLATION of a section about 'Siriye Addis' from Ghebremedhin Zerizghi's book of 1997, 'An Eyewitness Account'.

"Soon after the Adobaha conference was conducted [in August 1969] and redeployment (mtiHnifats) of most of the fighters of the liberation army completed, the General Command (GC) [of the Eritrean Liberation Army] received news about the presence of new recruits that were kept at the area of Seled [Akele-Guzai province] and sent three consecutive messages to Solomon Woldemariam [who was with the group]. The letters called that the new recruits kept at Seled [without the knowledge of GC] be redeployed as per the resolution of the Adobaha conference and a decision of the GC. However, Solomon kept silent. After sometime, the GC sent fighters who arrested and brought Solomon [from Seled]. The new recruits were also brought and deployed on temporary basis in the environs of Keren, Halhal, Asmat, and parts of Maria Tselam. Sereke Bahta was appointed as leader of the new recruits/trainees; other fighters with military background were also assigned to train them. Sereke Bahta is still a devoted member of the organization

[ELF-RC]. After completing their military training, members of 'Siriyyet Addis' were asked by the GC to gather at Mai-Chewa in the region of Hagaz and Aderde in order to undergo redeployment (mitHinifats). All GC members arrived at Mai-Chewa at appointed time and observed the military drills staged by 'Siriyyet Addis'. The military drills were highly appreciated by the GC who also told the new recruits as follows: 'We are here today to inform you about your future assignments within the army. Each existing ELA company (i.e. siriyya/Haili) will receive six new fighters [of 'Siriyyet Addis'], and that will mean each ELA platoon receiving two fighters'. However, the new recruits of 'Siriyyet Addis' perceived that this plan was a trick designed to disperse them, and they refused to obey saying: 'We have been trained well; now give us weapons and deploy us as one company to any region'. The next day, a meeting between GC and the trainees continued [for ten hours] between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. It was becoming clear that the new recruits were not the source of the circuitous arguments. Issayas Afeworki was present at Mai-Chewa, and what was going on was an open secret. Also present as 'innocent' by-standers were Tewolde Eyob, Maasho Kibrom, Asmerom Gherezghiher and Zemichael. Members of 'Siriyyet Addis' were constantly interrupting the meeting with excuses of passing water ('nshinti'/going for toilet) and were consulting with those persons. Whispers and undercover consultations were rampant at Mai-Chewa. In the end, the GC started to be suspicious. At the same time, the new recruits of 'Siriyyet Addis' and their mentors discovered that the GC was apprehensive and aware of what was going on. Therefore members of the group ('Siriyyet Addis') were advised [by their mentors] to accept the planned GC redeployment plan and go to all corners of Eritrea. Within a month, the Eritrean field experienced waves of letters exchanged between members of 'Siriyyet Addis'. It was difficult to decipher the messages they were exchanging. Some were written in codes that included numbers and others in an alphabet having the appearance of Russian characters. However, a few messages written in Tigrinia were apprehended thus exposing hidden intentions; the letter-writers in general encouraged each other to 'carry on the plan as agreed'.

"When these messages were discovered, the GC had started to restudy the significance of an intelligence network uncovered earlier within the Tripartite Union. With the aim of finding a better solution in order to avert a serious danger to the revolution, the GC decided to bring all members of the so-called 'Siriyyet Addis' to one location. The first to be brought were 17 members of the group who were deployed in the Barka region. Until the arrival of their colleagues, the 17 new recruits were taken to Debir Sala (Mount Sala) and guarded by a 12-person security unit. The overall plan [of 'Siriyyet Addis'] was revealed when they started to implement it – that is, by attempting to seize weapons from their guards, kill whoever can be killed and then escape to Agordat [to take refuge with the enemy].

"[The 17 'Siriyyet Addis' members taken to Debir Sala] planned as follows: one of their members was to ask for permission to pass water and then seize a weapon. Another member was assigned to crush with heavy rock and kill on his sleep the leader of the security unit. Two of the group was to attack and overpower the two guards with automatic Bren-guns. At the start of their operation, the [plotters] crushed to death the head of the guards. One of the guards had his Bren gun tightly tied around his body, and he managed to kill his attacker. In this way, only one of the 'Siriyyet Addis' attackers was killed. The remaining 16 fled to safety and entered Agordat. Following this incident, news of the disloyalty was talked all over the field.[Following that incident], many members of 'Siriyyet Addis' deployed in several other places either escaped and gave up themselves to the enemy or joined Selfi Natsinet." End of translation.

P.S.

While reading the Tigrinia version of this quotation in Ogbamichael Tesfatsion's article of 21 April 2004, I remembered Mohammed Ahmed Abdu. Also at the same time, I could not resist imagining of Isayas and group at Mai-Chewa talking to members of 'Siriyyet Addis' with the aim of promoting a wrong line - that of "ethnic purity". The note below may shed some light on why this so called 'Siriyyet Addis' was wanted to stay as a separate group.

Mohammed Ahmed Abdu was prominent leader in the liberation struggle who died in Khartoum only a year ago on 14 April 2003. Between 1965 and 1969, the ELA was organized into divisions (kiflilat/manatiQ) that were created with the aim of mobilizing the population to join the liberation army through appeals to primordial affinities and regional ties. However, the regional commands were in principle expected to obtain at least one third of their fighters from outside their respective regions. (By the way, This phenomenon of regional commands or divisions (kiflilat/manatiQ), which was known for its less positive legacies in the armed struggle is, ironically, being revisited nowadays by certain elements and sections in the Eritrean opposition.)

Martyr Mohammed Ahmed Abdu headed the Tripartite Union (wuHda Sulasiya) that was formed before Adobaha. That short-lived partial union consisted of the 3rd, 4th and 5th military commands (manatiQ/kiflilat) of the ELA. Martyr M. A. Abdu was later elected as the Secretary General of the 38-member General Command (Kiyada-al-Ama) that emerged from the military conference of Adobaha of August 1969.

While the one-year war (1980-81) between the ELF and the EPLF/TPLF alliance was raging in Eritrea, I had a chat with Mohammed Ahmed Abdu in Beirut with the intention of writing in The Eritrean Newsletter an article about the adventurous past politics of Isayas Afeworki. The article was published although it omitted one important point on the request of the interviewee. It will say it now, though with regrets because the heroic fighter-leader, who is my source, is no more around to confirm it. The point was this:

Only a few weeks before the convening of the military conference at Adobaha, Isayas Afeworki approached and seriously asked Mohammed Ahmed Abdu to agree with him and allow him to establish and lead a military division composed

purely of Christians from the Eritrean highlands. Isayas opined that the 5th division to which he belonged would be more effective if it is let to be "a pure Christian and Kebessan force". Mohammed Ahmed Abdu did not agree, and literally begged Isayas not to pursue that idea. Mohammed Ahmed Abdu reminded Isayas that even the ill-conceived division of ELA into regional commands required at least one third of fighters to be from outside each regional command.

History has attested that Isayas Afeworki, a born loner, was not able to heed to that important advice from his senior commander, Mohammed Ahmed Abdu. Isayas carries on that absolutely negative trait to this day.

Regards

W. Ammar

Source::::::::::::::::::FACEBOOK