

REMEMBERING THE 1975 AND 1976 HARGIGO MASSACRES: HOW IRONIC THAT WE SAY NOTHING ABOUT THE RETURN OF THE ETHIOPIAN PERPETRATORS TO ERITREA?

(Part II)

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NOTE FOR READERS:

There are two corrections to be made in Part I.

I was corrected by some friends that Ustaz Ahmed Mentai was not among the victims of either massacre, but died a natural death in Jeddah. I checked with multiple residents, and my friends were perfectly correct. The second error is about the location of Hargigo. It should be corrected as “south of the port city”. My apologies.

Since this is a two-part article, we begin Part II by raising the question: ***Why is remembering the tragic massacres of Hargigo significant?*** Here we have a number of reasons to mention:

- It is fair, to begin with, and there is a national, moral, and ethical obligation on us to remember who the victims were because each one of them had an identity, and is a citizen, who died for a cause. If we speak about the massacres in general, it will look little gauzy, vague, and insubstantial.

But the sad thing in this case is that, we do not know all names because individual efforts by concerned residents cannot document things accurately and properly. Documentation needs skills, experience, time, resources, and a body that directs the process. It is clear that it was supposed to be done by the government, not individuals, but the government did not show any interest.

- Learning about mass atrocities is an important step to receive the shock, sensitize to inhumanity, and reach the conclusion that such tragedies should

not happen again, by swearing, “Never Again.” In other words, commemorations have an emotional appeal, underlining the loss of individual human lives, and what that loss represents for humanity. It is such awareness that contributes to the promotion of human rights, foster personal responsibility of citizens, and spur us to fight injustice.

- We need to talk about the massacres because many Eritreans, and certainly the international community, may not even know that such horrific tragedies have occurred.
- For better, or for worse, ours is the age of memory. As people living at this age, our present is built on monuments that primarily commemorate trauma. Commemorations, whatever form they take, are very important, and the erection of a monument is one of them. In this connection, it is appropriate to mention that it is a wry amusement that the ruling gang sees the one-eighth Eritrean, Alexander Bushkin of Russia, more important for Eritrea than the native Eritrean revolutionary leaders, who spent the most precious part of their lives in the national struggle, yet none of them has even a café called after his name, let alone to deserve a monument. Even the monument of Hamid Idris Awate, the founder of the Eritrean Revolution, was not erected in Asmara, where monuments of national heroes belong, but in Haykota, kept out of sight from citizens and visitors. The Atse is not for monuments of revolutionary leaders because he knows monuments are a form of symbolic reparation, justice for victims, acknowledgement, and tools for dealing with the past. These do not serve his personal agenda.

As a person who had followed the meeting, from the beginning to the end, I could be asked: ***To what extent did you find the accounts of the witnesses significant?*** My answer will be as follows:

- Survivors recounted horrific details of the massacres that were beyond shocking. All memories included extreme acts of violence and trauma, offering perspectives on difficult and unimaginable situations people had experienced during the massacres and collective violence. Theoretically, we need to remember two things. First, these testimonies were given voluntarily, and

were based on individual experiences and personal memories. Second, they were self-edited and must be understood and listened to, with these factors in mind. Yet, their credibility cannot be questioned by any means. After all, these are people whose lives had come with very close brush with death and danger. While teaching us about the past, they also taught us about memory too, forcing us to have a confrontation with the past, and reminding us that behind the numbers and the accounts are human beings.

- As a former history major, the descriptions of the brutality of the Ethiopian army I heard, reminded me of the massacres American soldiers committed on Vietnamese villages in 1968, specially the Mai Lai massacre, which was one of the most horrific incidents of violence committed against unarmed civilians during the Vietnam War. They also reminded me of what the Bosnia Serbs did to the people of Srebrenica in July 1995. I am not embarrassed to admit that these testimonies brought tears to the old eyes.

There is a nasty tendency we observe among some Eritreans, especially those who support the leader of the ruling gang, to the degree of cult worship. That tendency is limiting advocacy against massacres only to those committed by the Ethiopian army, and ignoring those committed by the ruling gang on the same people. To help this perplexed and misled group of PFDJ supporters with the basics about the rights of citizens, we formulate the issue into a question, reading: ***Should massacres necessarily be committed by an occupation army in order to be condemned and its victims commemorated?***

As the Americans honour the lives lost in the Pearl Harbour Attack of December 7, 1941, the 911 Twin Tower attack of September 11, 2001, and Boston Marathon Bombings of April 15, 2013, no matter who committed the massacres, we remember, honour, and pay tribute to all victims of brutal massacres, not only committed by the Ethiopian colonial army, but by the ruling gang in the post-independence period too. It should be noted here that being silent on the cold-blooded massacres committed by the ruling gang, while only remembering the victims of the brutality of the Ethiopian army, is total disloyalty to and betrayal of the victims of the Ethiopian massacres too. Shockingly, massacres after

independence continued to happen, and the oath “Never Again” has turned into “Again, and again”, as someone put it to describe the world situation.

The number of massacres committed during the post-independence period is so alarming that Eritrean historians have a lot of work to do by way of digging for the truth and documenting it. The pre-2001 massacres themselves are many, but until the present, the identified ones include those of Mai Habar, Dirfo, Qarora, and Dambalas-Qohain. These were followed by the massacres of Adi Abeto of November 4, 2004 in which 54 individuals were killed. Another massacre worthy of mention is that of the notorious Wia of August 2001, where Asmara University students were taken in mass. Wia is a place over 45 % centigrade in summer, a weather under which no highlander can easily survive, even with air-conditioners and modern facilities. Though it had been reported that 161 university students were killed by the heat, this is also waiting for serious research work. Nonetheless, the Massacre of Mai Habar of July 11, 1994 (<https://erena.org/challenging-isaias/>) and the massacre of conscripts in the centre of Asmara on April 3, 2016 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35977605>) are the most known even internationally.

The leader of the ruling gang reacted to the protest of Mai Habar veterans of the war of liberation and the resulting massacre, in his downright disgraceful manner, as usual, saying, “We cannot afford to slaughter sheep for you every morning.” His reaction, which people heard in stunned dismay and disbelief, reminds us of a 1986 novel, *Forrest Gump* (adapted into a film in 1994 with the same title), by Winston Groom, in which the main character, said something important. When he was repeatedly asked if he was stupid, he said, “Stupid is as stupid does”. By that he meant that ones’ actions indicate one’s level of stupidity. Atse Isias is a living proof of what this saying is all about.

Here are the questions about the victims, who were murdered in the Mai Habar massacres, and by extension in all other massacres. These questions are directed to those, who only focus on victims of the massacres committed by the Ethiopian army, and care nothing about the chain of post-independence massacres committed by the regime:

- *Isn't ignoring this massacre a divided and partial partisanship towards our people, or a serious deficiency in our humanity and patriotism?*
- *Is there anybody who can convince us that they deserve to die or be eliminated?*
- *As Eritrean citizens and as human beings, is their blood thinner than those massacred by the Ethiopian army in the pre-independence period?*
- *Is it possible for us Eritreans not to have a view whether it was right or wrong to slaughter Eritrean citizens?*
- *Some of them might have thrown some stones to the police, but were they dangerous, guilty of severe crimes, or unfit to exist in Eritrea?*
- *Did the regime do a great service for Eritrea by massacring these citizens?*
- *Isn't this massacre brutal enough to spark us to commemoration, and if possible to action?*

It should be made clear here that we are not talking about the Rohingya in Myanmar or the Uighurs in China, though as human beings they deserve our sympathy and support, but about Eritrean citizens. These Eritreans were either injured in the war of liberation and all of us are highly indebted to them, and should be responsible for their well-being, or are young conscripts who had enrolled to defend us as a people and country.

I think the examples raised above, are enough to show that massacres committed by the Ethiopian colonial army were followed by many equally brutal atrocities by the ruling gang after the independence of the country. That makes the ruling gang equally accountable for mass murder of the Eritrean people, though its response has always been denial, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This is understandable because we have never seen a butcher of his people admits his crimes. ***But does he care how would future generations read his legacy?***

Further, the Ethiopian army did not only commit massacres, but physical liquidations of individuals too. This is different from a massacre, which is killing indiscriminately, and in groups. Physical liquidation of individuals targets individuals, and is discriminating, in the sense that the person is chased with an intention of murder. This included extrajudicial execution, slaying, assassination, poisoning, disappearance forever, and slow-death in prison, like the G-15

members and all prisoners of conscience have been experiencing. The crime of physical elimination or liquidation is committed for two reasons: to exterminate actual or potential opponent or critics (Putin-like or Stalinist type of elimination) or for the purpose of spreading terror among the people, and ensuring their obedience and subservience. We do not need to give examples for an obvious matter because we know all methods listed above have been used in tens of thousands of cases. However, we ask each reader to remember the victims of physical liquidation, who are originally from the places he or she is familiar with.

Basically, every human life has a value, though large losses of life could disproportionately be more serious because they threaten the social fabric, and the viability of the society. However, as both a massacre of a group and a physical elimination of an individual are crimes against humanity, and are death by government, they are equally criminal, irrespective of numbers. When we talk about the general terms “massacres” or “mass murder” that is why we cannot avoid raising the elimination of individuals. If the physical liquidation of individual Eritrean citizens by the Ethiopian arm is equally concerning as the massacres by the same perpetrators: ***Are we justified to be silent on the elimination of individuals by the ruling gang through the same methods detailed above, though all are equally Eritreans and human beings?*** The answer is, of course, the same as the one given about massacres committed by the Ethiopian army and the ruling gang in the post-independence period.

To wind up this question, we can say that anyone who pays tribute to the victims of massacres and physical liquidation of individual citizens committed by the Ethiopian army and does not show the same compassion and love to the victims of the massacres, and other criminal acts by the ruling gang, has to question himself or herself if his or her love and compassion to the victims of the Ethiopian army are real. John Monroe sets the criteria for us. Let us see if we could meet his criteria. He says:

“To love your country is to desire to see it become the best version of itself, to point out its failures, to recognize how we each have been complicit in allowing its worst to persist, to work together to create a community in which every resident has all that they need- love, food, shelter, health,

peace, prosperity-and are truly treated as equals in every regard.” (***“What Does It Mean to Love Your Country?”*** Rachel L. Harris and Lisa Tarcha, Opinion, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/02/opinion/patriotism-america-2020.html>)

Coming back to the survivors of the twin massacres of Hargigo, we raise the question: ***What were the short-term and the long-term impacts of the massacres on the survivors?*** There are too many impacts to be considered, but to mention some, we can list the following:

- The first immediate impact is that, women were left without husbands, mothers without children, children without parents, and many boys and girls without siblings. These were people displaced from their homes too, losing all of their property, except the clothes they were wearing when the enemy hit.
- Though we know that the Hargigo families were left with vivid and uniquely disturbing memories and searing grief, we do not know what percent of the survivors of the massacres had developed Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and what percent developed Acute Stress Disorder (ASD). But experts tell us that survivors of massacres are at greater risk for mental health disorder than survivors of natural disaster. We see this in our own families.
- One good thing (maybe a bitter sweet) that helped the survivors of the massacres of Hargigo is that most of them settled in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Living in one place and in big numbers should have helped them promote connections and collective healing, speeding up their resilience. That definitely strengthened families and the community the most. This way, they could manage their distress without any mental health support, just comforting each other, and engaging themselves in meaningful and positive activities. This does not mean, for the young, the massacres did not shape their sense of safety and self-efficacy.

One more important thing we need to know: ***What is the observable reality of the survivors of Hargigo massacres now? Can we imagine their hopes and pains?*** It is easy to imagine the hopes and pain of one person and care about him or her. We see this over and over again, among Eritreans. But it is impossible to imagine the hopes and pains of tens of thousands of people, and offer a helping hand. This was the human nature captured by the well-known Roman Catholic nun and missionary, Mother Teresa (August 26, 1910-September 5, 1997), saying: “If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.” (<http://crimepsychblog.com/?p=1457>)

Most of the survivors of the twin massacres of Hargigo, currently living in Jeddah and other parts of the Kingdom, are jobless, many with expired residence permits and passports, unmanageable government debts (fines for late renewal), homesick, and dying of chronic diseases, frustration, depression, and hidden anger. These are problems only governments, with the interest of their people at heart, can do something about, as many African governments did, including Ethiopia and the Sudan.

Many governments reached an agreement with the Saudi authorities, and had the debts of their citizens cancelled, so that they could freely go home. That was later applied to all, as an incentive for foreigners to leave the country. However, these governments did not stop there, but took further steps, making plans for the return of their citizens home, providing them with free transportation, a generous package that exempted them from taxes, (to take their property home or take machines that could help them start a new life), arrangements for housing, and start-up funds for extreme cases. ***Is there any human being, Eritrean or otherwise, who does not praise and admire this logistical effort and envy those nationals for the governments they have?***

In contrast, the head of the ruling gang has been well-aware of what has been happening, has a vivid picture about the complexity of the problems this particular Massawi group, and Eritreans in general, are currently going through, and knows how horrible their conditions have been, but he grew a

callous heart towards the human pain, suffering, and plight of this community, as all other Eritreans in and outside the country: no empathy and no willingness to help. Add to that, his Consulate in Jeddah and Embassy in Riyadh, showing an insensitive and cruel disregard, have been milking these desperate people, under different pretexts, asking them to pay thousands, whenever they wanted to have their passports re-renewed, or tried to obtain any letter to update their immigration status. I know a father of many children, who had been jobless for over seven years but was asked to pay 40,000 Saudi Riyals. He told them that, he will not be able to pay that amount, even if he sells his children. Now imagine with Covid-19: ***What would be the situation of these Eritrean citizens?*** To be vaccinated, they need to have a valid residential permit or “Iqama”. Even those who have “Iqamas” need to earn a living to live and support their families. ***How do they survive under Covid-19 temporary layoffs or dismissals, in the absence of employment benefits that exist in the West?***

When the situation in Saudi Arabia became very unbearable, those who could afford, though struggling, moved to the Sudan with their families or moved their families only. Other choices those folks have considered were Egypt, Turkey, Ethiopia, and even Indonesia, a country not many of our people know in which continent it is. This shows that the survivors of the massacres, as well as other Eritreans, are moving from one place of exile to another, and the most depressing part is that some are moving far away from home, while others are moving to Ethiopia, where they are wanted by the two devils (the Atse and his crime partner Abiy Ahmed) to melt within the Ethiopian population. In short, the survivors of these massacres are citizens looking for solidarity and support for justice and survival. They are left in the cold, crying out for help.

Our last question would be: ***Is silence on the return of the Ethiopian army to Eritrea compatible with patriotism after they had committed so much atrocities not only in Hargigo but throughout the whole country?***

It is more than two years since we hear that the Ethiopian army has returned to Eritrea. Even the statements the Atse has been making, and all his interviews with Eri-Tv, since the “Peace” agreements with the Ethiopian Prime Minister, help

one infer that this is not a rumour. Since November 2020, we see a tangible and an extraordinary cooperation between the Ethiopian army and the Eritrean Defence Forces in the inter-Ethiopian war in Tigray, with enough indications that the merger of the two armies is soon to be a reality. The commemoration of the massacres of Hargigo on April 10, 2021 came under these circumstances. Whenever we commemorate any significant event, we always mention under what national, regional and international conditions it is happening. That is why the title of this piece is formulated as it is.

We cannot forget the past, as if nothing has happened. I read a story which I find very helpful to share because it triggers a debate about the patriotism of the ruling gang in Eritrea.

When the Americans decided to end the Vietnam War (1964-1975), they reached to an understanding with the Vietnamese for their two delegations to meet in Paris, a diplomatic effort which finally resulted in the Paris Peace Accord of January 27, 1973. Before the first meeting, the American delegation, which reached Paris earlier, received the Vietnamese delegation at the airport. When the head of the American delegation stretched his hand to shake hands with the Vietnamese head of the delegation, and all members of his group did the same, the head of the Vietnamese delegation did not reciprocate, but said: "We are still enemies, and our people did not authorize us to shake hands with you."

Accordingly, the return of the Ethiopian army to Eritrea, the cooperation we see between the two armies, and what every Eritrean currently fears would happen tomorrow, cannot be silent on. Atse Isias has no mandate to do that, and our silence is not helpful. It is very awful and disturbing.

During the commemoration of the twin massacres of Hargigo, nobody among the speakers raised this question, as if the commemoration took place under normal conditions. The same army that committed these massacres, is in Assab, Asmara, all major Eritrean cities and towns, and most probably in Gadam, the Eritrean Naval Base, a handful Kilometers south of Hargigo.

If we are realistic and thoughtful, we should not expect an Eritrean living in Saudi Arabia, carrying the Eritrean passport, and under PFDJ mercy, to raise the question of the return of the Ethiopian army or comment on it. The same thing could be said about all massacres committed by the ruling gang and extensively

discussed in this piece. I would expect that explicit patriotic stand from participants, having the citizenship of Western countries. I know most of the speakers from these countries, and I have no doubt that they are wonderful human beings, with good hearts and sufficient love for the country, but I criticize them for their unjustified silence. If one asks “why”, Leonardo da Vinci has the answer, *saying*: “Nothing strengthens authority so much as silence.” I would add to that, “It holds the voice of the oppressed people hostage.” I hope they can see the danger.

The victims of the twin Hargigo massacres, of all massacres across the country, as well as all victims of physical eliminations, no matter committed by the Ethiopian army or the ruling gang in Eritrea, are always alive in our homes and hearts. We will remember and honour them forever, while preparing to counter the rise of the current Ethiopian expansionism, urging all Eritreans to be very vigilant on the potential of a second Ethiopian occupation, the Atse and his crime partners are working day and night to re-instate, in one form or another. But one fact should be made clear: sooner than later, we will see the dark cloud lifting, and the day of the reckoning and accountability coming.

Eritrea’s brutal dictator may laugh at such comments, as Gadaffi of Libya, Hussini Mubarak of Egypt, Ali Abdu Abdalla Saleh of Yemen, and Omar Hassen Al Bashier of the Sudan, did before their inevitable fall. But it is impossible for him, as it was for them, to prevent the march of history and the inevitability of the end of dictatorships, no matter when. Finally, let me say, the day we see **HARGIGO VICTIMS’ FOUNDATION AGAINST MASSACRES** is founded and launched, is not far away.=====