

Excerpts from an Interview with Abdulla Idris, head of the Eritrean Opposition Fronts Alliance

"The war has nothing to do with the Eritrean people."

The Reporter; March 31, 1999

Abdulla Idris, head of the Eritrean Opposition Fronts Alliance, spoke to the "Al Khaleeg" newspaper on 23 March 1999. Excerpts:

What are the aims behind establishing the Eritrean Opposition Front Alliance?

Ten different Eritrean organizations met with the intention of strengthening the struggle against the regime of the popular front; and we the representatives of the Eritrean National Factions, being keen to achieve the unity, stability and progress of our homeland, and believing in our people's values and struggling traditions, and for achieving the Eritrean people's aspiration for a free life, have convened and signed the formation of the Eritrean Opposition Fronts Alliance. It represents all the Eritrean people.

What are the constants and the starting points of the EOFA?

We in the EOFA have basic constants from which we proceed, which are preserving the national unity, endorsing the principle of justice and equality between all the classes of the Eritrean society. The most important of these constraints is endorsing the principle of freedom of religious beliefs and public liberty, whereas Muslims have the right to seek legal decisions from their religious (Sharia) law, as it is also the right for Christians to seek legal decisions from the teachings and norms of their religion.

Moreover, all the organizations which are involved in the EOFA reached the agreement that both "Arabic and Tigrigna" languages are the official languages; and democracy which is based on the political multiplicity to be the system of ruling in Eritrea; and co-existence with the neighboring countries on the basis of mutual respect and common interests.

Is it possible to hold negotiations with the Eritrean government?

Of course, we know Issayas and his regime as we have been burnt by his fire and were linked to him since an early time. Whereas I was the first to receive Issayas and he used to work under my management in Region Three in 1968. Many negotiations and meetings were held between us, and according to my experience, Issayas is an unstable person, and the faithful is not bitten from the same hole twice. Accordingly, we consider negotiating with

Afeworki a waste of time; the principle of negotiating with Afeworki's regime is rejected.

The EOFA involves Islamic Eritrean Organizations which may threaten Eritrean Unity. What is your comment on that?

The formation of the alliance by ten factions reflects the wish of all the Eritrean Organizations to work together and live in peace and stability. All Eritreans are totally convinced by paying respect to all the racial beliefs and affiliations, and removing all sorts of injustice and implementing justice and equality. This safeguards from the occurrence of any oppression to any group. Whereas the alliance represents all Eritreans, so there will be neither an oppressor nor an oppressed, and rights are granted for all. I believe that the regime's policy is what gave rise to fundamentalism.

Have you a specific concept in organizing the relations with Ethiopia in respect to the utilization of the Eritrean port by Ethiopia?

We believe it is important to organize the relations between the two countries through agreements. We need Ethiopia to utilize the Eritrean ports, as the crisis has revealed the importance of Ethiopia's utilization of the Eritrean ports. By not utilizing them, Eritrea loses a lot of economic benefits, and there must be a complementary between the two states which requires laying agreements which organize the relations in all fields to move the wheel of cooperation. We are sure that the confidence crisis which emerged from the current circumstances can be overcome and dealt with.

There is one reality before the two sides, which is the existence of common interests, and it is difficult for one party to do without the other. We will learn from the regime's experiences and mistakes, and we will do our best to avoid the mistakes it has committed.

What is the nature of your relations with the West, particularly America?

It is strange that America deals with all the opposition forces in the region, and it extends assistance to them. We as a front of the oldest political powers in Africa, have a wide base in Europe, and relations with the Americans themselves on the Congress Members level. However, they have constraints in their dealing with Eritrea, limited within the framework of individuals. America is aware that we are the vanguards of democratic powers in the region, but there is a secret which we do not know till now, and a clear disregard to us by the Americans who sided with the regime in Asmara. What is really amazing is that Washington is indifferent to the human rights violations in Eritrea.

How do you explain Eritrea's acceptance of the African proposals after they have previously rejected them?

The regime in Asmara believes only in the logic of power, so when it is militarily defeated, it accepted the proposals to find a justification for its defeat. And we consider it a political and military failure.

What is your concept of the settlement of the existing crisis between the two countries?

We are ready to find a just settlement for the dispute on condition that the Afeworki regime is removed, because it is the real problem and the main cause of the crisis.

What is the miracle which happened so that you become united after failing for the last thirty years to find a container to assemble you?

Many things took place in the last eight years of Afeworki's regime which put Eritrea in the direction of the wind. Our people are facing a real challenge which threatens the very existence of Eritrea as an entity, transformed it to a county suffering from internal conflicts, and created enemies in all directions. It is demanded from us as a front to take precaution against this danger and save Eritrea from the risks which encircle it due to the erroneous policies. All the national forces unanimously agreed on the first step and the accord on a national version which gave birth to the EOFA which bears its historical responsibility of preserving the Eritrean entity which is now threatened more than any time before. Our priorities are regaining confidence in the neighboring countries, and that Eritrea intends to live in peace with its neighbours. We want to limit the problem in Afeworki and collaborate towards removing him.

You declared the formation of a transitional government. What are the bases and duties of this government?

Yes, a transitional government will be formed when Afeworki's regime is toppled through all possible means. Then, the EOFA will elect a joint supreme command which lays a periodical program aiming at establishing security and stability, and organize general elections on the basis of the political multiplicity after dissolving the ruling party, confiscating its properties, and legally prohibiting its activities.

The transitional period, the duration of which is set to be three years, comprises taking action for returning the Eritrean refugees to their homes, enabling them to settle and provide decent living for them, and combating general corruption which is spread by the cadres of the People's Front, and never establish any military bases in Eritrea.

What is the EOFA's position with respect to the current conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea?

As an Eritrean National Force, our position is clear. The Ethiopian and Eritrean people are linked by ancient ties, and every problem may be settled amicably between the two countries. In fact, the dispute is created by Afeworki's regime due to considerations related to hegemony and the hegemony mentality, and imposing the trusteeship policy on the region's states. We are also quite convinced that the war has nothing to do with the Eritrean people, but is connected with the superiority complex from which Afeworki is suffering.

But there are claims that Ethiopia intends to annex Eritrea to it?

This is an illusion woven by Afeworki's imagination. The Ethiopian government does not think about expansion and it is not of its principles. It accepted the rule of the referendum and Eritrean self-determination. Unity can never be achieved by force and compulsion. We have confidence in the good intentions of the Ethiopian government, and Eritrea is in no danger from Ethiopia. However, the danger for Eritrea comes from Issayas and I do not believe that there is any Eritrean who believes Afeworki.

You are accused of subordination to the Sudan and the Arab countries. Your comments?

We were never subordinate to anyone at any time. If we were subordinate to anyone, we would not be as we are now. I do not deny our excellent relations with the Sudan and the Arab countries. In fact, those have been our friends but we were not instruments for them. These are words for history.

How does the contact between Khartoum and Asmara affect you?

The Sudanese government has the right to contact, as this is a sovereign decision concerning the Sudan. We are convinced that these contacts are not on our account, and the rumors which are spread by Afeworki's regime stating that there is a swapping operation for the extradition of the oppositions of each country to the other, and that Asmara's regime refused. We considered them lies. We know that Asmara's regime will not hesitate to sell anything, whatever it is, for the sake of its interest, and from the characteristics of the regime, offering anything in order to remain in power. Its contacts with the Sudan aims at tactically neutralizing it in its war with Ethiopia, and are endeavors to besiege the Eritrean opposition.

Lately Asmara declared that Addis Ababa has overcome it with Israeli and American aid. Your comments?

The strange thing is that Afeworki accuses others of suspicious relations with Israel. I did not expect that the Asmara regime would accuse Ethiopia or others of having relations with Israel which the regime used to consider as its ideal and strives to implement its experiment

in the region by applying its logic. He also said that he will defeat Ethiopia of a large population, as Israel had defeated the Arabs in spite of its small population.

It seems that there is a secret: why did Afeworki reverse after his defeat, and what is the reason for involving Israel's name in the conflict between him and Ethiopia? Why did he try to avail the factor of the Arab hate for Israel, against Ethiopia?