

# USMAN SALEH SABBE

Notes Of A Talk With Usman Saleh Sabbe On The History Of The ELF

Khartoum/April 4, 1983 (Transcribed from notes taken during the talk)



*(Günter Schroeder, a German historian and political analyst, had been writing about and closely following developments within the Eritrean liberation struggle for over three decades. And not only that: he possesses a rare collection of first-hand information on the Eritrean liberation struggle some of it in the form of interviews with over one hundred Eritreans, most of whom played key roles in the struggle. In the absence of sufficient books authored by those key actors in the struggle, it is gratifying that such a valuable record exists. The other good luck for us is that, unlike others, Günter Schroeder generously shares his documents with any interested Eritreans to use it in their different ways.*

The 1st Executive Committee of the ELF was formed in Cairo in April 1960. It was end of 1961 in Kassala and tried to go inside the field to meet Awate but it did not succeed. Then it went around in the Middle East to get weapons but they were not successful.

1961 an Egyptian journalist wrote a number of articles on Eritrea and Awate.

Prince Abdul Kerim Al Chatawi from Morocco was in Cairo. He had made a revolution on 1921. He was defeated in 1927 and was exiled to Madagascar. In 1948 he was deported from there to France but escaped in Suez. We met him. This man advised us. Said we have to break out of this circle. The Arabs will only support you, when you are already operating by yourselves. He drew up a plan for us. We gave him a map and he pointed out for us the use of attacking small posts.

I went to Jeddah to raise contributions among the Eritreans, raised about 1.000 SL bought 5 British rifles for 500 SL each, 7 pistols; 500 bullets, 10 hand grenades for 10 SL each, the pistols were 75 SL. We brought these things across Sudan by diplomatic passport of Somalia. That took place in 1962, in April.

The weapons arrived inside in May. I tried to see Awate but Awate had already died. Then we planned to continue to use his name and kept his dead a secret.

There was an attack on Aqordat in July 1962, 22 people died. Also attacks on a number of small posts, such as near Halhal. There 2 guns were captured, another post in Barka, 3 guns captured. We bought ammunition in Sudan. We had few followers here, most were with ELM. We had a meeting in the field in December 1962.

Sudanese soldiers went inside February 1962. It was facilitated by Awate. Altogether in the first group there were 9 persons They did it on their own, collected money for families with some help. They were unhappy because they did not want to fight in the south (first group: Tahir Saleh was organizing in Kassala, Azaz, Haj, Tiyara, Adem Shenab, Baduray, Omer Mehamed Omer Gendifel, Hamid Jima, Mehamed Omar Aden).

They were in contact with Awate. The Eritrean Sudanese Soldiers, some of them were Jebha, others were Harakat. They asked for arms from Idris Mehamed Adem.

Awate wrote a letter to Idris Mehamed Adem as early as 1960. Inside they thought Egypt and other Arabs would help them to revolt.

Awate did not follow a call to Aqordat. From June 61 to September 61 he was in contact with people in Kassala, he came to Kassala and asked for arms, there they collected some bullets among themselves. After returning to Eritrea he discovered that he would not be allowed to keep his arms. The Ethiopians send Umar Mehamed Hassasn, Minister of Justice of the Eritrean Administration to speak with him. They asked him to come to a village near Haikota but he did not go as he knew they were going to arrest him. The Ethiopians were informed about his connection with Jebha.

There was a big gathering in Sayedna Mehamed Ali's village. He was considered by Beni Amer as a saint, had a shop in Mogolo. The gathering was in 1961, over 2.000 people present, Awate was there and made an oath to fight against Ethiopia and to kick her out. This cover was a religious meeting. It gave Awate support to make a revolt, Sayedna Mehamed made propaganda for Awate, has 2.000 followers, outside support etc, to boost his support. Meeting later became known to authorities. Finally Awate left his village with 10 followers and 5 guns. After some days joined with a group of shiftas led by Ibrahim Mehamed Ali. Awate gave them an ultimatum either to join him or to be killed.

The Ethiopians were horrified when they heard about it as they were taken in by the propaganda. Therefore they send 700 men of the anti-shift field force which made their HQ in Haikota. They tortured people when they were not informed about anything. Thus they contributed to drive the villagers to Awate.

Tedla Bairu's brother Mengistu was involved in fighting inside. In May 1962 Adem Malakin, he is in Cairo now, he was with us before, managed to get 7 handgrenades and one automatic rifle, a sten gun. Mengistu send these arms from Addis including one American M-1-rifle. Many followers of Harakat in Addis changed to the front. They left Harakat because it did not fight.

In December 1962 the first meeting between outside leadership and fighters took place in the Gash area in a place called Bargeshish. In this meeting we had the first conference of fighters. I was the only outside leader present. I reconciled the groups and we had first elections. The fighters then were 43 people, armed with fire weapons were 18, ten with rifles, 4 or 6 had Italian guns, the others had swords. (Mehamed Era of Awate was a swordman. His gun did not work, and the Ethiopians advanced on him. He wounded

several Ethiopians, before he was taken prisoner. He was executed in Asmara, the first fighter to be executed.) They elected a 5-member committee headed by Abu Tiyara and with Omar Azaz, Haj, Tahir Saleh (Awate group) and Kubub Hajaj, ex-Italian soldier, expert in repairing guns, Awate-group ) as members. We divided the group into 3: 18 people mostly from Awate's group and led by Abu Tiyara as the head group, two smaller groups under Omar Azaz and Haj respectively. The headquarter group was told to keep away from dangerous places and to organize supplies and recruits, the other two should organize the guerrilla fighting. The end of the meeting was December 21, 1962.

The fighters only travelled in night as anti-shift field force was everywhere. January 14, 1963 saw the first successful attack. They ambushed patrol of 13 police and took 11 guns, but Haj was killed. They ambushed another police force and took 7 guns, later a border post and captured 5 guns. In September 1963 they made in broad daylight an attack into Haikota. A bus with Sudanese tourists came from Asmera. They stopped it outside Haikota, left the passengers there, took their clothes and turbans and went with the bus inside. They were 15 led by Gendifel. The bus stopped in front of the police station. All of a sudden they jumped out and captured the two guards. Then in 15 minutes they captured the whole station and took about 50 guns including two Bren machine-guns.

After that they attacked all police posts between Keren and the border. By mid-1964 they were about 250 armed men, most of the arms were taken from the Ethiopians.

Their army participated for the first time in 1964. Then the Israelis also intervened and trained commandos.

Eritreans in Saudi-Arabia bought arms. At this time the Sudanese Government was against us.

By mid-1964 20 people were trained for the first time in Syria, among them Romadan and Umaro. They brought 20 Kalashnikovs back. They first smuggled them to Jeddah using diplomatic passports. Then they smuggled them across to Sudan by boat. 6 were taken by the Sudanese, 14 reached inside Eritrea.

In October 1964 a change took place in Sudan, as Abboud was toppled. We began to bring in arms through Khartoum using our passports. In 1965 we got the approval of Prime minister Khalifa to bring in two planes with arms from Syria. Unfortunately the Minister of Interior was a Southerner who sided with Ethiopia, also the Foreign Minister was against ELF. We had to smuggle them into Khartoum without their knowledge. We kept the arms here in Khartoum in Burri. The PM did not want to order the Minister of Interior in writing. But the whole thing was discovered and the ammunition captured. 9

people were jailed including two Sudanese Ministers. After some days the Prime minister made a public declaration in favour of the ELF but the next day Khalifa fell and Sadiq took power. I was expelled from Sudan and could not reenter into Sudan until 1975.

Then we smuggled arms from Aden, we bought a boat with money from Faisal, it cost 3.500 SL. We brought the boat to Latakia. 1966 we smuggled about 30 tons by ship to Eritrea, also in 1967 and 1969. We got it to Aden and smuggled it across by ships. 1969 about 500 guns from China via Syria to Aden by plane, then by ship to Sudan, camel to Barka.

In 1962 the Executive Committee was dissolved by myself and Adem. After dissolving it, we two drew up a draft for a constitution in which a High Council had the highest responsibility. This High Council should be formed by a congress. When we came to Jeddah to get some money for the congress we received there a letter from Kassala asking for ammunition therefore we bought ammunition instead of having a congress.

Since that time we made grave mistake of not organizing a congress which led later to the problems. We wanted to strengthen then fighters but did not create a proper organisational structure.

In July 1965 we went to Kassala, and we met there with about 60 cadres and fighters, old soldiers and recruits from Syria, some cadres from Sudan, Idris and Glawdiyos were also there. There was a desire to make a conference but we had no funds at all, we were in abject poverty, we had to borrow money to pay for our food. So we remained with a sort of cadres conference. We decided to organise first the fighters, as then there were already problems in Barka. Dinai had replaced Aby Tiyara as military leader. There was a problem with the highlanders. The Beni Amer fighters did not want to leave Barka.

I suggested to create 4 zones in Eritrea to facilitate expansion and administration We were afraid of creating regionalism therefore we decided that the forces in the regions should be mixed, 1/3 from the region, 2/3 from the other regions. The training should be carried out in one training camp. Trainees should be appointed to regions by Revolutionary Command in Kassala.

Unfortunately the Revolutionary Command, most of them were from the Western Province, six, one from Massawa, Highland and Saho each, could not function because

a) absence of top-leadership in an organized way as High Council practically did not exist. Only myself, Idris and Glawdiyos were active and came to this conference. Meha-med Sa'd, he was a kind of deputy of the High Council and not a proper chairman of the

Revolutionary Command.

Glawdiyos in the name of the Command created a lot of problems in terms of regionalism and nepotism. He gave priority to the 2nd region and refused to give support to Highlanders and Easterners. By 1966 we had the problem openly. He created the 5th division but he appointed people from the 2nd division to the command (Weldai Kahsai ). As I could not come and Idris was weak Glawdiyos was left alone as he was in Kassala all the time.

b) The Revolutionary Command was away from the field. It was always in Kassala but never went inside. It had internal quarrels along tribal and religious lines, it created a vacuum inside and leaders of the regions became actual leaders of the fighters and like local warlords.

In 1967 Ethiopia followed a scorched earth policy in Western Province and people fled to Sudan. The regional system proved to be completely incapable. Regional leaders began to quarrel. They had a meeting in September 1967 in Anseba which failed. In June 1968 a meeting in Anseba did not succeed completely. It wanted to abandon Revolutionary Command in Kassala completely. In September 1968, the 1st and 2nd division did not attend the meeting scheduled. Azaz died and Dinai refused to come on directives of Glawdiyos.

As leader of the 5th division Osman Hishkal from the Beit Juk was appointed after Weldai left. He had 27 Christians and Jabartis killed in 1967 as they left a store unprotected and the Ethiopians took the arms.

Isayas was in cells of Jebha in Addis Abeba. I came to know him in Damascus. Glawdiyos appointed him to go to China. He is from the village of Tsolot near Asmera.

The General Command went to me, it asked me to sign a statement saying to have a conference in three months time. I refused to sign it, as I wanted to consult others first. It was in October 1969, Glawdiyos was behind it. Umaro sent a letter to me claiming that General Command wants to make a coup.

I called a meeting of outside forces to Amman. but Idris and Glawdiyos and others refused. The slogan was to discuss foreign politics but I had also other ideas. One month later that we heard of the arrest of 6 General Command members from our side.

Umaro came to Sudan, Romadan came with him. People who made the coup came to Iraq. This coup was planned in September 1969 in Iraqi embassy in Khartoum. Farouk

Hamadalla Awadalla, Baathist Sudanese connection, he was killed in the Coup 1971, and Muhammed Suleiman Khalifa, who died in an aircrash in Jeddah 1971, were there.

Baathist plan was to use Eritreans as support base for coup in Sudan. Encouraged the youngsters to make coup against us as we were against these plans. They worked through the trainees from Iraq and Syria.

We went to Iraq in January 1970. Abdalla Idriss, Tesfay Tekhle and Mehamed Abdu went to Iraq to ask for help. I and Romadan (he was elected to be secretary of the General Command when he was outside) and Mehamed Ahmed Yassir (now head of military office of ELF-PLF) met with them and 5 Iraqi Baath-leaders. GC people denied that they had arrested people. Iraqi Interior minister said they have made a coup and you have to accept it. Then we refused and decided to have a new organization. Sudan was then pro-General Command. We had our base in Aden. Fighters escaped from the GC and came to Sudan. We rented a charter plane from SUSCO air company, we had 6 flights in DC-6 with 100 fighters each.

February 28, 1972 the ELF attacked Obel in Barka area and liquidated them, They captured Adem Saleh and Ahmed Aden Umer and put them into prison until 1975. The rest of them came as individuals to our organization. They were about 50 people. Then Abu Tiyara and his Maria group left PLF and linked with Obel in Sahel to fight the ELF. Until 1973 stayed like that.

Umaro wanted to stay in Dankal for 6 months to build up a force. Each tribal group sat under its own tree. Abu Tiyara wanted to move as fast as possible to Sahel where there were people, he wanted to go to his own tribe. Umaro wanted to stay and finally to go to the Massawa area. Abu Tiyara could make much broader alliances with Christians, Danakil and Jabarti, he was clever in making alliances. He tried to outsmart Umaro, he said Umaro wants to kill the Highlanders in the desert. Abu Tiyara took 200 to Aden. 150 remained and tried to follow Umaro.

Ali Said Abdalla was at this time in Pakistan in prison for highjacking. His uncle was one of those imprisoned in 1969, he was in the field since 1964. Musa Rab'a is from Sahel and was trained in Cuba or China. Abdalla Musa came in the 60s and was from the Tiyara group. Mehamed Sa'ad was Chairman of the Revolutionary Command 1965-69 and is now with the Ajib group.

Obel was started by Beni Amer. The leader of the 1st division was Mahmud Dinai. Obel started in September 1970. They made a meeting in a place called Obel in December 1970. They met there more or less as 1st division, mainly Beni Amer. Osman Ajib, Ha-

med Aden Saleh, Ahmed Adem Omer, Ahmed Mehamed Ibrahim from the General Command were as leaders. They were not happy with the dominance of the 2nd region and of the Saho group of Mehamed Ahmed Abdu. They thought of themselves as being the main force of the front but loosing ground. They were also against raids to suppress EPLF and were in contact with Abu Tiyara. Thought of making a coup, had 9 companies with 150 fighters each, they had a majority of the force of ELF then.

In this meeting they decided to release the arrested 6 members the General Command, to establish links of dialogue with us and to contact Idris Mehamed Adem who was not a member of anything and to contact me to met Idris and offer him to lead the front. Because of the division only Syria and Iraq accepted them but not others as their propaganda was full of communism at that time.

They wrote a letter to Idris in which they explained their policy but Idris showed this letter to Glawdiyos. He informed his people in the General Command and thus they were exposed before they took any action. Their plan was to call for a meeting of the GC and then to arrest them all.

Other members of the GC then called for a seminar at Awate. In this seminar they were exposed and bargained with them concerning a General conference. The other group succeeded. Those who refused the conference became few and took the name of Ubel. These 4 members of the GC stayed with the refusers. Only few fighters, about 150 stayed with them, they called themselves the Eritrean Liberation Forces. Ajib and one other were represented in Beirut. They were in clash with each other, with Romadan and Isayas. They Were small splinter groups.

Abu Tiyara landed with two ships in Sahel and went to Maria. We presumed Umaro and Ala group are to come together as otherwise we will not supply them with arms. They had a conference. Isayas refused to come as he had only a small force. Mistrusting the Muslims Mesfin Hagos withdrew from Umaro. The conference was in Embaderha in Sahel. A 5-member council elected: Romadan, Hamid Tataw (from Abu Tiyara group ) (came from Sahel), Jemaa, Abubaqr Mehamed Hassan (from Arkiko), Ali Se'id Abdalla (Arkiko).

Romadan and Abdalla came to Beirut in end of 1971. I at that time came back from the UN and asked why Isayas had not joined. After a lot of talk we virtually detained them in the hotel and threatened to withdraw all help unless they unite. We asked them to get Mesfin, Omaru and Isayas and the Obel group. We had a discussion for two weeks. After 6 months a conference should take place to unite them into one organisation. Until then any outside help should be divided into three parts. A five member group of us called



Foreign Mission were to represent outside.

We left Beirut to Aden with passports we got from Libya that time. When we reached Aden we heard about the attack of ELF in Sahel and Danakil. Then strategy to withdraw to Aiet in Sudan. After that ELF attacked always. When they returned to Eritrea they formed a committee of the three organisations and appointed Isayas as Chairman of the Provisional Administrative Committee. It had at first 6 members then expanded to nine. They could not make a conference because of the civil war. It went on until 1974 when it was stopped by the popular movement from Asmara and vicinity.

Ali Said Abdalla returned end of 1970 from Pakistan. He belonged to the Akab-group which was formed in 1969 as an answer to the Ethiopian scorched earth policy. 15 people formed it in Damascus, the name means punishment. We trained them in Palestinian camps. The attack in Frankfurt was the first one. They left with the plane from Beirut, they left explosives under the chair and took a plane back after 15 minutes. One team went to Addis to bomb a bank, another team to explode the railway, a third team to Karachi. That one was caught, 3 people were sent for 1 year to jail. In Rom it was not successful, the bomb exploded when the man set it. Other attacks in Madrid, Ankara, Paris (Ethiopian Embassy).

Cairo founders of ELF:

Ali Mehamed Aden Akte shifted later to PLF, last year pro Abdalla Idris, now in Kassala, from the Bilen, student in Cairo;

Mehamed Se'id Umer now working in Abu Dhabi, student in Cairo University, from the Maria

Suleiman Mehamed Ahmed Cairo, later Gulf where he is now

Mehamed Saleh Humed studied law in Cairo, now with ELF-Abdalla director of information in Damascus.

Taha Mehamed Nur.

11 or 12 members of 1st Executive Committee of the front, of ELF.