

## SOME FACTS ABOUT THE IROB (1)

Oct. 25, 1998

by Souba Hais

*Irob is one of the Ethiopian territories invaded by the Eritrean armed forces this year. When news of the invasion broke, I observed that many Ethiopians, including Tigrayans, did not know anything about Irob, even its existence. After almost five months, there is not much change in this regard. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide some information about the people and the location. It will also discuss the current condition of the people after the invasion.*

### **LOCATION, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION**

The Irob people occupy a small, semi-arid, mountainous region with a wide altitudinal range in which almost all types of crops can be potentially cultivated. Irob is located in Agame, northeast Tigray (Ethiopia). The territory is bordered by the Hado people's land to the east and north-east, by Dabra to the north, Shumezana and Suruxso to the west, Sae`se` to the south west and the Afarland to the south-east and east. The Hado/Hazo and people of Dabra (Dabrimela) are predominantly Muslims and speak the Saho language. The Afars are Muslims as well and, of course, they speak the Afar language which is very similar to the Saho language. The Irob neighbors to the west are Tigrigna speaking Christian highlanders.

The Irobs who live in this geographic location speak Saho. Many other Irob descendants who live in the rest of Agame and some other places have adopted the Tigrigna language. Irob is an ethnic community made up of three sub-groups: Adgadee-Are, Bouknaitee-Are and Hasaballa. Adgadee-Are and Hasaballa are predominantly Tewahido Christians, while Buknaitee-Are is Catholic.

### **BACKGROUND**

All of the three Irob groups claim to be descendants of one man, Summe. According to the oral history of the people and several written records, Summe's father, Neguse (King) Werede-Mehret, is believed to have come from Tsira'e in Kilite-Awla'elo, Tigray more than 700 years ago. That is around the time when the so-called "Salomonic" dynasty took control of political power of the Ethiopian empire from the Zagwe dynasty. It is recounted that Werede-Mehret, himself a local king, was a descendant of Emperor Yitbarek of the Zagwe dynasty. Neguse Werede-Mehret and his followers left their ancestral land probably for political reasons related to the change of political power in Ethiopia. In fact, for many centuries, they isolated themselves to this remote, militarily strategic, mountainous region keeping their distance from the political center.

When the Ethiopian political center moved from Shewa to Gonder, some Irob leaders such as Ona Tensa'e and Ona Kumanit (Some say his son Tesfahanis) traveled to Gonder likely to get a firsthand account of what was happening and to, accordingly, establish some type of relationship. It is narrated that the two men returned with "Gamma," a

traditional symbol of the blessing of the Emperors, demonstrating that the local authority of the individual who received the 'Gamma' had been approved.

When the Irob people came to the new land, they brought with them the Christian religion, which they have kept to date. Near the site of their first permanent settlement, in a locality called Halalisse, they built a Christian Church dedicated to St. Mary and they named it Kidane-Mehret (Covenant of Perpetual Mercy). The local residents still call the site Summ'e Massoare (the Church of Summe). It is said that they gave the name Tsira'e to the mountain overlooking the site of the first permanent settlement in the memory of their ancestral land.

At the time the Irob people settled in the geographic location they inhabit now, their new land was unexploited and fertile. Therefore, they enjoyed a comfortable life for centuries. Their economy was based on agriculture and pasturing.

Until a few decades ago, Irobland was a source of the best quality of honey, livestock and dairy products that used to dominate the regional markets. During the last three decades or so, because of drought and other factors, the region rapidly became one of the poorest spots. The problem is rooted mainly in the ecological and environmental conditions. Deforestation is almost complete in this mountainous region. The rare rainfalls, which usually come in the form of sudden heavy downpours, the irregularities of the surfaces and centuries of poor farming practices have combined to facilitate the erosion and depletion of the soil. The rainfalls and floods have carved much of the topography, changing it into rows of hollows and hills. The gravel, sand and topsoil have been washed away, exposing the bedrock to the surface in many parts. Besides the degradation of the terrain, the holdings of cultivated land per household are very small and unproductive.

From this brief description of the land one can easily visualize the condition of Irob farmers. During the last decade or so the people farmed by terracing the hillsides. The land needs continuous maintenance so that it is not swept away by eventual sudden downpours. Now that the farmers are dislocated from their villages because of the invasion, the hard work of terracing or maintaining the hillside lands has been aborted. This year's unusually heavy rains have compounded the problem.

## **CULTURE**

The Irob lived for centuries between two culturally different societies: the highland Christians whose economic life is mainly based on agriculture, and the lowland Muslims whose economy is mainly based on pasturing. This geographical location allowed the Irob people to have socio-cultural interaction with both groups, hence, a combination of both highland and lowland cultures are manifested in the Irob culture and way of life. There are some cultural norms and ways of life the Irob people have in common with lowlanders with whom they share their language (Saho). However, they are much more connected with the Christian peoples of the hinterland than they are to the lowland people of the region. Religion, cultural food, folklore, marriage customs, social organizations etc., are almost identical to those of Tigrigna speaking highlanders with special historical

and cultural bonds with the Agame people, with whom they share the Woldu-Subagadis customary law, foods like Tihlo, and drinks like the original Maess/Miess etc. Even though both highland and lowland cultures are reflected in Irob society, their culture is not a simple mixture of the two.

**During the course of a relatively autonomous existence for many centuries, the Irobs waged enormous struggles (including wars) to defend their identity, and developed certain unique socio-cultural norms. Some of the values that differentiate the Irob people from their neighbors on either side include: their relatively democratic consuetudinary laws through which they resolve issues and disputes in their community, their electoral system, relatively democratic familial relationships, active and socially recognized role of women, etc. It is a society with its own myths, legends, and historical mode of existence. It is also one of the most homogenous and harmonious groups in the whole geopolitical region. Irob, therefore, is a society with relatively advanced social values, whose group characteristics and identity not only must be recognized and respected but also deserve assistance to prosper.**

## **EDUCATION**

The history of modern education in Irob is strictly related to the Catholic Church. Catholicism was introduced to central Irob (Buknaiti-Are) in 1845. As soon as the Catholic missionaries established roots in the locality, they built a school (Lideta) in Alitena in 1845. By 1850, it was legally recognized by Dej. Woubie, native of northern Gondar and the then governor of Tigray. The curriculum included Geez, Amharic, primary science, and mathematics. Latin, French, philosophy, and theology were taught in higher levels.

Lideta School has had many interruptions related to religious persecution in its long history. However, it continued to flourish and eventually became one of the oldest academic centers in the empire. It provided modern education for students from different parts of the country.

It is documented that in 1914 alone there were about 500 students in the school. However, obstacles related to religious persecution continued and, therefore, on May 4, 1916 a senatorial council, composed of the leaders of Buknaiti-Are and the clergy, held a special meeting to discuss appropriate measures to be taken to obtain redress for their faith and their school.

They concluded to send a delegation to the capital to present their petition to the highest authority of the nation. Accordingly, a delegation composed of four prominent Irob natives and a French missionary was chosen to go to Addis Ababa. They were Mr. Adoumar Halibo, Mr. Menelik Woldegiorgis, Abba Tesfaselasse Woldegerima, Abba Gebreigziabiher and the French missionary. When they arrived they were fortunate enough to converse with Lij Eyasu (the heir to the throne) in July 1916. On July 28, 1916, Lij Eyasu officially decreed that there should not be any persecution against them because of their beliefs. He sent the official decree bearing his stamp and signature to the

governor of Tigray and gave a copy to the delegation. Since then, obstacles diminished and Lideta School functioned in an ameliorated way until the time of the Italian invasion of 1935. When the Italians occupied Ethiopia they expelled from Alitena the foreign teachers who were French nationals and closed the Lideta School.

In 1919, the school sent a group of students to Italy for higher studies. Among them were Dr. Abba Hagos Fessuh of Dawhan, Irob, well known scholar and founder of the Catholic school of Dessie, and Abune Haile-Mariam Khasay of Adigrat, the first native Catholic eparch for all of the Ethiopian Empire and founder of the excellent Tsineta School of Adigrat. Some years later, it sent another group. Among them was Dr. Abba Woldemariam Khasay of Dayya, Irob, who later (in 1959) started from scratch the current Lideta School, which had been closed and abandoned from the time of the fascist invasion of Ethiopia.

As I mentioned above, the Lideta School was reopened in 1959 and flourished again thanks to the Catholic Diocese of Adigrat. Especially due to the particular endeavors and commitments of Dr. Abba Woldemariam Khasay, Abune Yohannes Woldegiorgis, and other concerned Irob priests and laymen. By the time of the Eritrean invasion, Lideta had been elevated to a secondary school level, and there were about eleven elementary level branches all run by the Catholic Church. There were also some elementary schools built and run by the Ethiopian government. All schools in the area occupied by the Eritrean armed forces now have been looted and destroyed, leaving Irob children deprived of any kind of schooling again.

The beneficiaries of the original Lideta School were not only Irobs. Many students used to come to Alitena, not only from the adjacent regions, but also from Showa and other far away regions. For example, Abune Asrate-Mariam Yemru, the second Catholic eparch of Ethiopia, was from Showa and received his education in Alitena. Monsignor Gebremichael (Shiferraw) Mekonnen the most prominent Amharic speaking Catholic priest from Gonder who served mostly in Addis Ababa also was educated in Lideta School of Alitena.

The graduates of Lideta played an important role in the modernization of Ethiopia in various fields. Abba Tesfa-Sellassie Wolde-Gerima of Adgadi-Are, Irob, translated the chronicles of Emperor Menelik II and some other Ethiopian government's official documents from Amharic into French. Azmatch Ayele Sebhat, also of Adgadi-Are, Irob, played an important role in diplomatic and defense matters. It was he who was in the forefront in establishing an ambassadorial level relationship between Ethiopia and France and founded the Ethiopian embassy in Paris. He was also one of the most prominent patriots during the war of resistance against the Italian occupation. Many other graduates of Lideta School contributed in several ways working in the developing bureaucracy. Others contributed in academic fields by establishing various educational institutions in many parts of the country.

## **POLITICAL BACKGROUND**

From the time the Irob people settled in their present land until the early 1800's, they kept full autonomy from the central governments. However, they always recognized the nationhood of Ethiopia and pledged cautious allegiance to the highest leaders of the nation.

In the early 1800's, one of the Irob leaders, Dej. Subagadis Woldu became the strongest man in Agame and was competing to incorporate the whole of Tigray, including what now is known as Eritrea, under his rule. In fact, he succeeded and ruled the entire region from 1818 to 1831. The question of how to deal with the case of this ambitious rising leader raised some problem among Irob people and leaders. The dilemma was between acknowledging full recognition and authority to their hopeful brother and putting their autonomy in jeopardy, or being an obstacle to his success by opposing him. Hasaballa, Subagadis' tribe, and Adgadee-Are, whose compatriot and leader Belata Fessuh had become adviser and right hand man of Subagadis, preferred not to oppose him. The leaders of Buknaitee-Are in central Irob, instead, did not want to give-up their autonomy. Their determination to guard their autonomy contrasting with Subagadis' ambitions was bound to lead to conflict.

Haneita Tsaéru and Haneita Kumanit were the most prominent leaders of Buknaitee-Are at the time. Haneita Tsaéru, the top elected leader of the region, was a friend of Dej. Subagadis and used to meet him on occasion. Haneita Kumanit, instead, was suspicious of Subagadis and therefore kept himself distant from him. As Kumanit suspected, Subagadis, in a very tricky way, arrested Tsaéru and started a war. Kumanit had been on guard and with his followers overpowered Subagadis' warriors, arrested his chief of staff, and liberated Tsaéru.

**Subagadis had to give up the venture of putting central Irob (Buknaiyta) under control by force. After some time he invited the leaders for a compromise and negotiated solution. The Irob leaders welcomed the invitation with three major preconditions, the most important of which was Irob autonomy. Subagadis accepted all conditions and both sides reached a compromised solution. I am not going into detail about the war or other aspects of the compromise. But it is worth mentioning that Subagadis agreed not to interfere in internal matters of Irob and that the leaders elected by Irobs were going to be recognized by the central government. The Irob leaders in exchange recognized his authority by promising to pay him symbolic taxes twice a year. This agreement had been respected until fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.**

Before the Italian invasion of 1935, Irob was a self-governing region ruled by its elected leaders, highest of whom held the title of Ona. The last election in which Ona Desta Woldegiorgis and Ona Gebray Inday were candidates had been held just before the

invasion. The Italian fascists ignored the results of the election and appointed their own man who ruled for about four years, i.e. until the end of Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

When the country was liberated from the Italians and Emperor Haileselassie was reinstated the central government started to appoint Irob administrators. The first central government's appointee was short-lived Fetawrari Giday who was killed in a local conflict before he had even established an office. This coincided with the Woyane uprising of 1941. After the Woyane movement had been put down, Emperor Haileselassie's regime decreed the disarmament of Tigray people and the region was put under strict control.

The second man who was appointed by the central government to administer Irob was Kegne-Azmach Embaye, who partially enforced in the region Emperor Haileselassie governments' policy of disarming the people of Tigray. After him, Basha Bisau/Bisheu, who was of Irob origin but neither spoke the language nor resided there, was appointed. When Basha Bisheu was nominally Mislene (local administrator) of Irob, a brilliant young Irob man who was employed in the central government's bureaucracy in Meqele, capital of Tigray, asked on his own to be transferred to Alitena to work there as a Vice-Mislene. He was the son of lastly elected Buknaitee-Are leader, Ona Gebray, and his name was Woldu Gebray. This meant less salary and lower rank than the position he held, but he was determined to work for his people. Within a short period of time, he became very popular, not only because he was fair and just but, above all, because he worked hard and efficiently to safeguard the so far surviving aspects of Irob autonomy. He successfully defended to his death the semi-autonomous woreda status of Irob.

Immediately after his death, Irob was merged to the neighboring woredas of Gulo-Makada and Suruxo. It was deprived not only of its traditional autonomy and the right to elect its leaders, but even of its woreda status until the current EPRDF government re-instituted, at least, its woreda status.

Something we cannot bypass when we talk about the political history of the Irob people is their participation in the anti-colonial struggle of the Ethiopian people. The Irob elders narrate that many Irobs participated in the wars fought against Ottoman expansionists, for example in Gura'e, and in Adwa and other places against Italian colonialists. During the fascist invasion, Irob patriots lead by their indigenous leaders such as Azmach Ayele Sebhat of Adgadi-Are, Dej. Kassa Sebhat of Hasaballa, Ato Fessehaye Gebray of Buknayti-Are, fought the Italians from their base in Assimba.

During the years of struggle against the internal dictatorship, the Dergues' regime, the Irob people fought side by side with the Ethiopian opposition groups such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) etc. By the way, none of the Eritrean movements advanced into the Irob region during those years or before.

Irob, despite its physical location by the border area, in essence, is a core part of Tigray. In fact, most Tigrayan leaders who played important roles in regional and national

politics were fully or partly Irob descendants. Just to mention a few randomly: Dej Subagadis, Emperor Yohannes IV, Iteghie Denqesh, Ras Sebhat, Shum Agame Desta, Ras woldemichael, Ras Araya, Dej. Hagos, Dej. Derso, Dej. Maru, Dej. Tedla Abaguben, Shum Agame Aregawi, Dej. Belay Weldiye, Dej. Kassa, Azmach Ayele, Dej. Gebreselassie B.G., Dej. Zewde Gebreselassie, Betwedded Hailemariam, Fitwrari Tessema Tesfay, Major Biru Sebhat, Colonel Gebray Gebrezghi, Colonel Adhanom, Colonel Abraha Adagis (Yeogaden Anbesa), Dr. Abraham Demoz, Dr. Tesfay Debessay etc.

The purpose of bringing the last paragraph to attention is not to go into any detail regarding the personalities mentioned or historical events related to them. But to emphasize that the Eritrean claim to which I will come afterwards in this paper has no historical foundation when it comes to Irob peoples' socio-political association or historical background. **Concluding this part we can say that the political history of the Irob people encompasses two equally important aspects: defense of internal autonomy and respect for the unity and sovereignty of the Ethiopian nation.**

## **THE ERITREAN INVASION**

The Irob land was invaded at the end of last May. The invasion and the subsequent cruel treatment of the people have not received enough coverage especially by the news media. The first journalist who reported the invasion to the world is Voice of America (VOA) reporter Mimi Sebhatu, who happened to be in the area the day the Eritrean armed forces invaded the Irobland. Irob communities in Addis Ababa and in North America issued some statements pointing out the atrocities the invaders committed and are still committing against the Irob people, and underlining that Irob has never been part of Eritrea in any time in history. The most important account issued by an outsider is the one written by Dr. Anne Walters-Byare and circulated through the Internet. Another subsequent article is Mr. Wray Witten's report that takes accounts of other Ethiopian territories under the Eritrean invaders, interviews done with the administrators of Irob-Woreda, statement by Adigrat Catholic Church, etc. All of them revealed that the Irobs in the occupied areas are subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment from forced citizenship to expulsion from their homes.

Imprisonment, harassment, beating and killings of helpless civilians including priests, rape of women, and the desecration and looting of churches still continue. Eviction of residents from their homes, destruction of houses and the looting to Eritrea of precious wood which are used for the ceiling of Irob houses also continues. The remaining wood is being recklessly used up by the invaders for cooking and warming purposes. Personal and community properties such as farming and terracing tools, construction materials and household goods have been stolen. Health centers and schools are being ransacked. The EPLF government is also engaged in a systematic cultural destruction and stealing historical valuables.

The people are expelled without being allowed to take with them any of their household properties. Their domestic animals and beehives are left behind and are slaughtered and vandalized by the invading soldiers. Dispossessing people of all their property is one of

the worst violations of human rights mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property."

The evictions are conducted during the months of unusually harsh rain and cold and have been ordered without any advanced notices, arrangements or provisions. The people who are thrown out of their homes are mostly the elderly, the disabled, women and children that were left behind when able people left the area earlier to escape the war. The evicted people are suffering in the cold mountains without any shelter or food. The conditions of those who escaped to other areas are not much better.

Some evicted women are having babies in the wild groves. The infirmed are dying because of the hardship and they do not get the traditional religious funeral ceremonies. Graves are usually built in the lots around the churches, which is impossible now as they are under the control of the invaders who converted the residences of the pastors and parochial schools into their lodgings.

Will Irob villages, which have been the bedrock of a stable society, ever again be places people can resettle in? It seems very difficult. The invaders are not only looting whatever is available but also systematically eradicating all bases the Irob can rely on for future return and placing landmines everywhere in the villages.

During the sowing season, the invaders prohibited the Irobs from planting their crops unless they accepted forced Eritrean citizenship. Those who refused were uprooted. Those who somehow managed to plant are forbidden from harvesting what they grew. It is not difficult to foresee what the fate of these people will be.

Without a doubt, all of this will make it extremely difficult to rehabilitate the displaced Irobs when the invaders eventually leave the occupied areas.

As no international and neutral forces or journalists can get to the occupied areas, the full range of atrocities being committed by the Eritrean armed forces cannot be fully revealed. The sketchy information that we have comes from those who managed to escape to Adigrat and other towns. All types of human rights have been violated extensively and it is escalating. People who were amassed in Alitiena after being eradicated from other Irob villages were told, in the beginning of this month, October 98, to leave immediately. Unless pressure is brought to bear on the Eritrean invading forces, they will not desist from committing more violations against the inhabitants of the occupied Ethiopian territories.

The aim of the Eritrean invaders seems to be to eradicate Irob and other invaded peoples for their expansionist objectives. The international community, in general, and the Ethiopian government, in particular, should take urgent measures to stop the Eritrean government's madness. Humanitarian organizations, the Red Cross and other concerned agencies also should do whatever they can to help the displaced people who were dependent on food aid even before the invasion. **The Eritrean government who**

**instigated war against four neighbors during its existence of only five years must be stopped before it commits more barbarity.**

## **ERITREAN TERRITORIAL CLAIM IS BASELESS**

The Cabinet of Ministers of the Eritrean government in its meeting held on May 20, 1998 mentioned Alitena, the heart of Irobland, among the Ethiopian territories that it claimed. It was a few days after the Eritrean armed forces invaded the environs of Yirga Triangle/Badimme in northwest Ethiopia. In their statement issued on that day (May 20) the Cabinet ironically stated, ... "the government of Eritrea regrets and condemns the use of force to resolve problems as it believes that the solution lies in negotiated and peaceful means." Exactly ten days later the same government invaded the Irob region.

Before last May, the Eritreans never officially claimed Irob during the referendum or on any other occasion. On the contrary, they had been affirming in clear terms that Irob is part of Ethiopia. In one of the chapters of the school manual prepared by the government, where they explained about the Saho and other Cushitic languages spoken in Eritrea, for example, we find the following passage:... **"Saho is also the language of the Irob people who inhabit the north eastern part of Tigray in Ethiopia."** In another geographic manual prepared in Tigrinia and that contains all localities and small villages of Eritrea in detail neither Irob nor any locality in it are mentioned.

Professor Asmeron Legese of Eritrea in an interview he gave to the VOA's Amharic service last month (Sept.'98) affirmed that his government occupied Irob region not because it claims it but for other purposes. The Eritrean officials' statements have been contradictory regarding the Irob region. In private they tell you that they occupied the Irobland not to stay but for strategic purposes and that eventually they will withdraw from it. When asked in interviews or in official statements, either they do not answer or they simply say Alitena is in Eritrea, singling out one locality in the center of the region out of the whole area. When asked precisely about Irob and Zalanbesa in an interview he gave to VOA a few days ago, Eritrean foreign minister Haile Woldensae first said that Alitena is Eritrean, then, when he was asked on what bases he could say so, he said that as borders in those areas have never been properly delineated there could be mistakes and if arbiters tell us that certain territories do not belong to us, we will respect that.

**Anyway, Irob has never been part of Eritrea and any claim by the Eritrean government, therefore, is baseless. It has never been administered by or paid taxes to any administration located in Eritrea, be it before the Italian colonization of the region (Eritrea), during the colonial period, during the British military administration of it, during federation or after. Even when fascist Italy occupied the whole nation of Ethiopia, reincorporating Eritrea into it, the Italians administered Irob through the town of Adigrat, not through Adiqeyih or any other administrative center in Eritrea.**

**Another very important point is that during the territorial conventions held between Italy and Emperor Menelik, the two sides agreed that Irob had been and is part and parcel of Agame, therefore Ethiopia. The Irob leaders played important roles in this by presenting the historical background of Irob to the authorities of both sides. A delegation lead by Belata Naizghi of Adgadee-Are traveled to Adwa to meet Dej. Gebre-Selassie, the head of Ethiopian territorial commission, to brief him about Irob's case. Other Irob leaders like Ras Sebhat Aregawi and Shum-Agame Desta Sebhat did as much by personally contacting the commissioners of both sides. Thus the Irob leaders succeed in keeping the entire Irob region intact in its traditional administrative province of Tigray and it remained so till current shocking invasion.**

The Irob people paid heavy sacrifices fighting the colonialists to remain Ethiopians. They have long refused any attempt to make them not Ethiopians. There will never be peace in the area unless the aggressors completely leave every part of the forcefully occupied territories. **No bargains and no divisions of the Irob people will be accepted.** The invaders should not be fooled by the Irob people's refrain from counter actions during the last five months, leaving the handling of the matter to their government.

The Irob people have never bowed to foreign attempts of domination and will never in the future. The routine behavior of EPLF leaders invading other peoples' territories and suggesting negotiations will not work for them with the Irob, in particular, and the Ethiopian people, in general. The Eritrean leaders know this very well and that is why their army is not acting like a national army claiming the territories and the inhabitants as part of their country, but as a mere gang of bandits who have come to kill, ravage and steal. All they are doing is systematic destruction of everything the countryside people need to run a normal life. Any normal government, when it has any justification for its claim, tries to gain the support of the concerned people. What the Eritrean government has demonstrated so far is the exact opposite: underestimation of and disrespect for the people. When president Isayas was asked in an interview with VOA couple of months ago, if he would accept the will of the concerned people, he answered: "The farmers and the shepherds do not know their borders." It is disappointing to hear such a statement from someone who lived with the countryside people for decades. Those who know the real borders in detail and where they belong are, in fact, the local people more than anyone else.

Journalists and others who wrote about the "disputed" territories also manifested the disregard for the people. What they underlined was the quality of the land: "scorched land," "rocky land" etc. **Nobody showed a concern for the plight of the people. In my opinion the priority should be given to the will of the concerned peoples. There is nothing worse than telling someone, under point of gun, "from now on we give you another identity and another citizenship." No human being, in general and no Ethiopian in particular can take this. It is one of the worst violations of human rights.** Even animals prefer to live in the environment they are used to. The same people currently ruling Eritrea and suppressing other peoples' fate had been, for decades, asking for a referendum for their cause.

Besides the basic factor of the deprivation of identity, the cruelty of the Eritrean army is unprecedented, at least in that part of the world. Even Italian fascists did not boot out elderly and disabled people from their homes in the cold and rainy season. **The worst thing the Italian fascists did to the Ethiopian people was the use of illegal poisonous gas. The Eritrean rulers who started the war by dropping cluster bombs on school children and other innocent civilians will not refrain from using similar weapons if they can acquire them.**

The Eritrean government, after it occupied the Ethiopian territories that have never been part of Eritrea, argued that there are clear international borders between the two countries and that Ethiopia has violated them. The reverse is true and the international community knows that even if it has been irresponsible for not having condemned and pressured the invader to withdraw.

The Eritrean rulers have been also circulating the colonial map and asking for arbitration based on it. They are talking about the map drawn according to the “agreements” signed between Menelik's Ethiopia and colonial Italy, supported by the imperialist powers of the time. Whatever validity they may have had, those agreements were violated by Italy itself more than half a century ago. In 1935, when Italy occupied the whole nation of Ethiopia, reincorporated Eritrea into it, and created new internal demarcations for the Ethiopian Empire it voided the previously “agreed on” borders as it had been doing from the very beginning. Starting from the day Italy set its foot in Eritrea, it encroached upon previous agreements until the day it left defeated. The whole scheme of the Italians, after all, was not colonization of Eritrea, per se, but using it as a temporary station for their larger plan to colonize the whole nation of Ethiopia, of which Eritrea had been an integral part. They demonstrated this at the end of the 19th century when the Italian armed forces attempted to occupy the whole country. Fortunately, they were stopped by being defeated in Adwa and other places. Again in 1935, Italy, totally ignoring the so-called “international treaties” and borders, occupied the whole nation and reincorporated Eritrea into it. Those one-sided agreements signed at the gun point of colonial powers that had coordinated a conspiracy against the only independent nation in Africa should not be valid. Not only because they were nullified by Italy itself in 1935, but also because Ethiopia, with Eritrea included in it, was already an internationally recognized nation (see the 1884 Treaty of Adwa/Hewett Treaty). Hence, colonial lines, viewed by the OAU as the only solution for African nations, whose “legal” boundaries were created by the colonial powers, should not have been the same for a sovereign nation that pre-existed the colonial repartition of Africa. **After all at the time the African nations agreed to respect boundary lines created by colonial powers in 1964 Eritrea was not colony of anyone, it was just 14<sup>th</sup> province of Ethiopia.**

**Another point is that after Italy was defeated in Ethiopia to which it had reunited Eritrea when it occupied the entire nation of Ethiopia, it never administered separate Eritrea again. Therefore, the EPLF leaders' highly orchestrated claim that they are the heirs of a country that belonged to Italians is legally questionable. The case is not as clear as they may think. Therefore, sticking to the colonial maps will not help anyone. Instead of colonial maps, the parties would have done a better job**

if they tried to resolve the dispute by taking into consideration the traditional affiliation and will of the inhabitants of the “disputed areas.” The maps drawn without any scientific bases or appropriate physical knowledge of the localities will never be a solution. On the contrary, they will cause endless disturbances and instability in the region. Borders east of Belesa had not been delineated anyway. The questionable colonial treaties are not sufficient legal bases to create an international border in this case. More importantly they must not be used as a pretext to invade the rest of Ethiopia. I am not at all against the Eritrean independence as far as it is the choice of the people. However, the claim should not be based on inconsistent and legally arguable colonial footings. The destiny of peoples should not be based on illegalities and above all the colonial legacy should not transcend the historical bonds and actual choice of the people.

If Isayas is left to proceed in the direction he has been marching so far, I will not wonder if he comes out claiming new territories based on post-1935 Italian internal demarcation of the Ethiopian Empire. Bear in mind that the border of “LA GRANDE ERITREA” is not limited at Mereb. He must be stopped! And the Eritrean people should not applaud whatever step Isayas takes if they want peaceful coexistence with the brotherly people of Ethiopia.

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- 1) *This article was written in October 1998 and was published in the Ethiopian Reporter and Ethiopian Review magazines. The article has also been posted on dagmawi and a number of other websites. Now it is being posted on this website per request of some Irob friends. I took the occasion to make some minor adjustments to the article. The main content is not changed though. The Eritrean occupation forces are not there now and over all current socio-political condition may not be the same as it was in 1998; however, the article has not been updated in that regard. Nevertheless, most of the subject matter and issues encompassed in the article are still valid.*

Suba Hais (May 2011)