Awate

By Bereket Berhane Woldeab  Having lived in Addis-Ababa for almost four years as an Eritrean refugee with urban status, and having strong “shaebia” sentiment, and being a member of the silent Eritrean majority, I had still many misgivings about the handling of the NCDC, but decided anyway to attend on the fourth day after the conference was started.

The conference was held in the elegant post graduate studies Kera camp of the Addis-Ababa University (AAU), which lies at a safe distance from the hustle and bustle of the Ethiopian capital. The facility with its beautiful and well tended gardens and lawns, sports courts, elegant conference rooms, neat dining hall, a café with wireless internet facility, and comfortable and spacious living quarters would have passed for a four star hotel. It was an excellent venue for such a session requiring the full and undivided attention of its participants.

The conference brought under one roof a very diverse character of people, a few of them I would not even have thought of meeting even in my wildest dreams. There were early 1960’s veterans of ELF mingling with Sawa national service graduates; ELF and EPLF who have lived through the tragic fraternal wars of the 1970’s exchanging niceties and sharing jokes; ex-ELF die-hards still seething and crying for blood; old royalists vying for elusive power; refugees from Ethiopia exchanging experience with their Sudanese counterparts; serious academicians and internet wizards glued to their laptops in the breaks between session and after session; bearded Islamic scholars and politicians bemoaning degradation of their religion; old and young political activists from all the minority groups; Jeberti’s crying for recognition; journalists interviewing anyone who has a story to tell; human right activists enumerating the endless list of abuses perpetrated by the Eritrean government; a sprinkling of poets waiting for inspiration; veteran and new con artists sniffing for opportunity; and a few  banal characters acting and behaving as if they came to the NCDC only to take advantage of the free ride and impatiently waiting for the conference to end so that they can enjoy the sensual pleasure Addis has to offer.

If for nothing else, the above list by itself is proof enough that the organizers did indeed try to reach every segment of Eritrean society. Almost 30 parties represented! I never knew we were

that rich in political parties. If you break that into per capita population, I think we can make it into the record books, besides producing refugees, of course. It seems we Eritreans are doing nothing except turning out parties overnight-literally! The only glaring and yawning absence was that of the EPDP.

Likewise, the issues covered by the NCDC were almost an exact replica of the spectrum of the participants. Personalities, beliefs and sentiments were glaringly exposed in the smaller discussion groups. There were five of these, each consisting of around 60 people. The lecture halls in which these groups gathered, sometimes in sessions that went past midnight, were in for a nasty surprise. The vociferous exchanges and the heated discussions that went on were a far cry from the disciplined academic lectures they were used to. Old hatreds found expression in vitriolic words. Long suppressed rage spewed forth angry remarks. Islamists put forth the unfair share of their injustices compared to their Christian compatriots. Ex-ELF fighters cried for vendetta against their old enemies. Federalists yelled for a return to the old Awraja system of administration. Constitutionalists debated the merits of the 1952 constitution vis-a vis the 1997 constitution; historians who wanted to rewrite history gave semi lectures on how they want the pat to be documented; ethnic minorities described how they want a future Eritrea to look.

Every participant seems to have some ‘expert’ opinion on every issue discussed, ranging from socio cultural and geopolitical to economic issues, from the mundane to more sophisticated issue requiring expert counsel. Grizzled old politicians with doctorate and masters degree on their laurels couldn’t resist the urge to give length and haughty professorial lectures, and they were mostly tolerated and sometimes booed. There were many walkouts, and in some of the groups pandemonium broke out and sessions were aborted only to be continued on the next day.

In between sessions, at lunch times, and late into the wee hours of the morning in sleeping quarters, much horse trading went on, with wizened party leaders trying to catch the unwary,

and garner support for their respective parties.

But, usually, common sense and reason prevailed and towards the end emotions and trifles were set asunder and there was consensus agreement on almost every issue discussed. And, this was in no small part due to the deft and patient guidance of the commissioners in charge of facilitating the discussion sessions. The final result of the deliberations of the NCDC can be found in the final press release for anyone with interest.

As for me, I have come away with a great lesson, a lesson I hope that the silent majority and ardent supporters of the government in Asmara can also learn from. The NCDC organizers have gone to a great length to represent the wide expanse of Eritrea in its breadth and length, and also tried to address many of the ailments affecting our beloved country. Hurrah for a job well done!

There is no perfect government in planet earth, and Eritrea being a young country, some of the mistakes of our government we could have forgiven. But these are not mere innocent and simple mistakes. They are very grave ones. I don’t have to enumerate them here.

Suffice to say it here that we Eritreans have sunk to a depth at which restatement of the obvious has become the first duty of reason and conscience bound citizens. Our present rulers are enacting scenes in our midst that would have made unsavoury characters proud, with lies becoming truthful, murder respectable, and efforts to give pure wind an appearance of solidity.

As they say, absolute power makes absolute delusional. And, since the ruling elite have mistaken our silence for agreement and happiness, the only avenue left for sensible men and women is to flee Eritrea in order to preserve one's own sanity, decency, and integrity.

Let's stop for once this mud slinging at each other, calling of names, writing in euphemisms behind the cover of pen names, proselytizing as nationalists. Our dear martyrs deserve a lot better than our pathetic response and actions. With a spirit of the 1940's sage Eritrean politicians who brought Eritrea back from the brink of disaster, let's allow common sense and reason to prevail in our midst. For God's sake, we are all Eritreans after all and we all have a stake in its future.

What does our beloved Eritrea have to show after almost 20 years of independence?

Being a refugee myself, I will limit my answer to this issue. It is a very sad reality, but while the seemingly festive annual Expo festival is going on in Asmara, Eritrea is faithfully and unwaveringly shedding off its unhappy lot into an uncertain refugee life, while Eritreans in the Diaspora ('Belles', as Asmarinos call them) flock in for their yearly pilgrimage in the opposite direction. Unaccompanied children who have just learned to walk and run and septuagenarians with weary, unsteady, faltering steps are giving up on Eritrea and taking one last look on their ancestral land before embarking across Eritrea's porous borders. The latest UNHCR figures are simply mind boggling. The recently opened camp in north Ethiopia called Adi-Harish Camp is filling up at an astonishing rate just weeks after being opened, after the Mai-Ayni camp was bursting at the seams and declared closed for new arrivals.

You can check the facts by browsing concerned sites.

For how long can this haemorrhaging continue? It just baffles me! I am a daily viewer of Eri-TV and I usually have difficulty controlling my anger when I see the image of a paradise that the channel wants to export to its audience at home and abroad. If Eritrea is even a diminutive percentage of what Eri-TV wants us to believe, why then are multitudes of Eritreans choosing the life of a refugee.

Ask why the thousands of Kunamas who have evacuated their villages in entirety to set up camp at the refugee camps in North Ethiopia.

Ask that to the young Saho politician from the Buya valley around the red sea cost, whom I had met at the NCDC and came to appreciate much?

Ask the first round Sawa veteran from Mai-Temenay, who after being deported three times from Malta, Libya, and Egypt, respectively, yet still managed to escape from Eritrea for a fourth time, and now lives at the Shemelba camp. But his ordeal had taken its toll and he is now mentally deranged, and will not be able to answer your question in a coherent way.

Or ask better still the two young girls from the Shime-zana valley near Senafe town, who were shot at by Egyptian security forces while attempting to cross into Israel. One lost her whole left leg, the other suffered a bullet that traverse through her forehead. Luckily for the latter, she survived without any sequel except for an ugly inlet and outlet scar. They both now live in Addis after being repatriated from Egypt.

Ask that to the young boy from Geza-banda who is now wasting away in the hospitals in Addis after having lost the function of both his legs and the ability to control his bowel and bladder after suffering an ailment at the Mai-Ayni camp.

Or ask that to the young Jehovah's witness who left behind a wife and only kid in Eritrea, but is fortunate enough to win a free scholarship provide by the American Team for displaced Eritreans.

Or ask that to the 'AMCE' engineer who was forced to close his private firm in Asmara, and now works in the informal sector here in Addis, boiling with anger inside on having to return back to an Addis that didn't like the ''colour of his eyes''.

The list goes on and on…but the story is almost the same. Eritrea has simply become a country without future and hope for most of its citizens.

he NCDC, with its many failures and glaring deficits, attempted to address these multitudes of grievances, and this is a call for arms to the silent majority and avid supporters of the government in Asmara. This is a call for you to show that you really care. This is a call for you to condemn the state of affairs in Eritrea. This is a call force change for the good through what you have shown you can do superbly in your February demonstrations in Geneva and other western capitals. Use your cohesive fabric, voice and purse strings for a good cause, for a platform that calls for change. Join the process the NCDC has just started or come up with yet another better alternative.

This is not time for nonsensical squabbling and trifle exchanges. Our beloved Eritrea is crying for change. Eritreans of every colour in the ethnic, religious, political, etc…spectrum must pay a very closer attention to the zeitgeist. Those who finish a revolution are rarely those who start it. The zeitgeist is saying loudly and clearly that IT IS TIME FOR CHANGE. And time is of the essence. Who was it that said…space I can recover, but time never.

Let me finish on a lighter tome with the following two remarks:

1. With the ending of the NCDC, the post graduate students returning back to their elegant campus will be aghast when they see the carcasses of cigarette butts strewn all over the grounds, and tobacco juices caking walls of lecture halls and corridors. In between sessions and after sessions, young and old alike were seen busily smoking and chewing away their favourite brands. An unwary observer seeing the plumes of smoke rising from the ends of lighted cigarettes might have been forgiven for thinking that this was a gathering called for by Big Tobacco Money to forestall growing anti-smoking trends. A stark warning to health activists. As for me, I am giving up smoking as of this day.

2. During the procession held on the opening day of the NCDC, in between shouts of ‘’down to the PFDJ’’ the marchers were screaming in Arabic something that goes like ‘’Isaias is a coward’’. Amidst the marchers an old ELF ex-commander was heard wryly remarking to his ex-comrade-in-arms: “are you hearing what they are shouting? They are saying Isaias is a coward, eh?! A ruthless ‘coward’ who thrashes his enemies and still looms large.’’