

**YEAR OF HOPE: FROM RUNNING TO FREEDOM TO RETURNING BACK HOME TO
RE-BUILD AND RE-CONSTRUCT**

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“No matter who you are or where you are, instinct tells you to go home.”

(Laura Marney, Scottish novelist and short-story writer)

Leaving home has never been new to Eritreans. Though there are no data available, we might assume that it could be traced as back as the 1940s and 1950s and the physical mobility was linked to the idea that individuals moved from Western Eritrea to the Sudan, from Semhar and Dankalia to the Middle East, and from the Eritrean highlands to the Ethiopian plateau, looking for greener pastures. With the advent of 1960s, we can say that the pattern changed from individual level to mass movements and the purpose from looking for a greener pasture to looking for safety or escaping from the Ethiopian army or forced by the scorched-earth policy. We have songs and oral traditions in all our regions and languages that need serious efforts to have them collected and documented. To the best of our knowledge, Eritrean intellectuals neither had the peace and the stability nor the resources to do something serious on that line, though we cannot speak about the lack of interest, as a factor. This gap is yet to be filled and we hope some intellectuals will shed light on this area.

To revisit this in detail, we can say that generations, specially from towns in Western Eritrea, including Agordat and others in the border areas, have been forced by lack of security to settle and live in the Sudan as refugees since 1960s and even before, dreaming of a safe return after independence. Nevertheless, the ruling gang made it impossible for them to return, through sinister designs that put serious blocking hurdles. The same thing could be said about those in Saudi

Arabia, including the majority who had been uprooted from Massawa and its surrounding after 1975-76 massacres, and their numbers could also be estimated in tens of thousands. The daily flow of Eritrean refugees to the Sudan has continued after independence to this date, affecting all regions of the country, with the Sudan becoming the spring board for those who are ready to take risks through the Sahara to Libya and from there through the Mediterranean Sea, or through the Sinai Desert to Israel. All in all, the Sudan and Saudi Arabia, as host countries, are the worst examples we can think of. In part, that is due to the great numbers of those who had moved to these two countries. Moreover, it is also due to the extreme miseries in which they have been living in the case of the Sudan, and the harsh or inhuman government policies and practices of Saudi Arabia.

Put simply, about half of the Eritrean population lives today in the neighboring countries such as the Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and other African countries, in addition to the Middle East, Europe, North America, Latin America, Australia, or all continents, without exception. To show that we would find Eritreans in any place we never expect, someone is reported to have said, "Turn any stone and you would find an Eritrean under it."

The foregoing presentation makes it necessary to briefly go through the concept of Diaspora, a word that has become a part of our daily conversations. The word "Diaspora" is so widely used in our region, even among the man in the street, especially in Eritrea and Ethiopia. In Eritrea, we hear that it is not a pretty word because the ruling gang associates it with those who are in opposition to its brutal and illegitimate rule. As to the origin of the word, it is believed to be Greek, and is derived from a compound word, combining "dia", meaning "through" or "over", and "spiro", meaning "dispersal" or to "sow". Similarly, some sources trace its first reference to the exile of Jews outside Israel during the period 8th-6th centuries BC. However, in our modern world, it is used generically to refer to immigrant communities permanently living in other countries, provided that they are aware of their origins and identities, and maintain some degree of contact with their countries of origin or home countries.

Taking all of the above into account, one would ask: ***Is there enough evidence that Eritreans abroad have their hearts back home and want to return?*** In fact, return intentions or reverse migration play a central role in a large body of the literature and artistic works of the Eritrean Diaspora that includes books, articles, poems, songs, paintings, plays, public interviews, and others; all showing that home is where the heart lies. In addition to these, there are live examples that show our people are not able to live overseas and their lives are becoming more complicated daily, due to distaste. Aside from the conditions of those living in the Libyan prisons, in refugee camps or illegally living in many places, whose miseries are not questionable, even those settled in the Middle East, Europe, and North America are on edge and are unable to relax. To give the worst examples from the host countries we think were supposed to be better off, we could cite the following:

- On January 1, 2018 a friend told me from Saudi Arabia over the phone that these days, whenever Eritreans meet, they do not ask about the health and wellbeing of each other, as they used in the past. In fact, our people remarkably spent longer time, specially our women, (about 15 minutes) in asking about the wellbeing and health of the person and his/her family, whenever they meet. Now things have changed. Accordingly, the question each one asks off-hand (as put in Tigre by my informant) is: ***“Eshe Egel Tegesso Tahasbo-Lekum?”*** (Where are you planning to move?) ***What does this show?***

Of course, while reasons for their out-migration to Saudi Arabia are relatively well understood, though they are not covered by the international migration literature, little is known why our folks are not comfortable there, except by those who have families or are at present following the situation. To fill this gap, it should be indicated here that the new immigration laws about expired residence permit or “EQAMA” , the taxes imposed on the bureaucratic process to have it renewed, and the progressively doubling fees for dependents, are unbearable to any foreign worker. They are more so to our people, who mostly have lower levels of education, and as a result, low-paid. The situation is worsened by the new hike of local gasoline prices and electricity tariffs that will affect all prices of commodities and services starting from Monday, January 1, 2018 (Refer to: Saudi Arabia starts 2018

with gasoline, power tariff hike and new tax, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/01/c_136864696.htm).

It is a common knowledge that the Ethiopian Government is lifting its citizens in tens of thousands and other nationals that have governments are going home, receiving considerable assistance from their home communities and governments. In contrast, our folks have neither a strong community nor a government that cares about its citizens. Further, most of them came in mid-70s as survivors of repeated massacres by the Ethiopian army, after all of their properties were burned, together with their towns and villages. ***Where should they go?*** For those who can afford plane tickets and have some relatives to receive them, their best bet is the Sudan, with all its difficulties. Though we know that our people do not see the Sudan as a good choice, moving to the Sudan has become a jack-pot that deserves envy and congratulations from others. However: ***How about the majority who cannot afford plane tickets, have big families, and no relatives in the Sudan? How many of us know that we have tens of thousands of Eritrean citizens who are put in such precarious situation? Is there anything we can collectively do as Eritreans to help these stranded families?*** In that connection, I strongly urge Eritrean human rights organizations and concerned Eritreans to give an urgent attention to this situation, and do the possible to make their voice heard by the international community, before we hear about serious human tragedies facing these Eritrean citizens.

The problem of our folks in Saudi Arabia was given a bigger space in this article due to its seriousness and the number of the people it engages, including women and children.

- Although we do not have data, the number of divorces in the Eritrean Diaspora communities is alarmingly high. Imagine: ***What does a broken family mean in terms of the impact of divorce on the kids and the community at large?*** There is another dimension that has complicated the family situation further. This issue deserves few remarks below.

Whenever I hear the daughter of a certain Eritrean I know is getting married, I have stopped asking: ***Who is marrying her?*** I had received a lot of shocks that made me hesitate to ask. I have no problem if an Eritrean girl or young man, for that matter, marries non-Eritrean because I strongly believe in diversity, but the question remains: ***“Nahadhedna Zeytakhaalna Mes***

Khale Khamey Gerna Neka-Aal?” (At the time it has become difficult for us to go along with one another, how could a marriage with a person of an alien culture be successful?). I do not have data to support my conclusion, but I rarely observe Eritrean marriages with persons coming from different cultures succeed.

- The number and frequency of reported crimes allegedly committed by Eritreans in Diaspora are getting remarkably alarming, and are not limited to behaviours by individuals but mass behaviours under the influence of alcohol too. Though the Eritrean fighting in Holland Christmas party (Zandam) this week is the most recent, it is not the only one we have heard about. No other readings for such behaviours could be made except the level of frustration, stress, and desperation leading to physical aggression. It is not an excuse, but it should not be underestimated that the bitter experiences they had at home, and those they went through during their long journey, until they reached their final destinations, are too serious and damaging to be ignored. At the same time, we need to ask ourselves as communities: ***Did we do enough to embrace, guide, and help them to overcome boredom, isolation, disorientation and annoyance, or help them cure from the psychological scars they came carrying?*** This is to say that blaming these young men and women for what they are doing is not enough, without going deep into the reasons that make them behave that way, help them to minimize hardship, and to maximize the positive impact of their stay overseas.
- Though it is difficult to provide an unambiguous definition for what constitutes a success or failure in this context, one would ask: ***How many Eritreans who are successful in their lives does each one of us know in the immediate neighbourhood he/she lives? Is that due to the lack of proper skills and knowledge to face the challenges and adjust, or distaste with life overseas?*** I would tend towards the second because Eritreans are physically overseas but mentally back home. “Addey Kemeles Eye” (I will return home), is the motto that destroys the desire to improve life. ***How do we adjust and improve our lives if we did not accept the realities surrounding us?*** Regardless of that, as it

is the choice of adults, who know what they are doing, we neither appreciate it nor criticize it.

- Another manifestation of dissatisfaction of life overseas is reflected by the question: ***Why do we see Eritreans, unlike other nationals in Diaspora, spending noticeably long hours chatting in Eritrean tea houses daily?*** I did ask some of them why they spend long hours daily outside the family, instead of using their time in more reasonable, meaningful, and productive manner. They tell me that such chats are worth millions of dollars in terms of psychological relief and comfort. I understand their problem, but, as a brother, I wish to see them engaging in more rewarding pursuits. To me, this is a manifestation that our people have not accepted life overseas and their hearts are back home: “Lubom Shafetu Eyu Zallo”. In other words, there is a psychological rebellion going on inside each of them.

From all discussions above, we can tell that the day of returning back home will be coming as long as people hope and are committed to see it happen, no matter what sacrifices that choice demands. Nevertheless, we need to work hard to speed up that day, which depends on how soon we are going to topple the ruling gang in Eritrea. Definitely, it will be a great relief and comfort to return home after the collapse of the ruling gang. This is so because we will be surrounded by the comforts of home and the people thrilled to see us. Even though this true, we have to realize that both we and our home environment have changed a lot. To put it differently, there are many factors that could make the honeymoon short-lived.

When some of our folks return home, they will have some complicated questions related to land and property ownership, originally inherited by the regime, but compounded by its wrong policies and practices. They will also face issues like unemployment, housing, schools for children, and issues related to learning local languages by the kids born or raised outside. Though we need to recognize the existence of the serious problems related to land and property ownership from now and take the bull by the horns when the time comes, they are beyond the

scope of this simple article, when looking into the question: ***What are the problems that would catch us with surprise when we return home?*** In an attempt to answer this question, I would list the following, leaving the serious ones aside:

- The realities of home or the imperfections and the annoyance that we had forgotten about will no longer be invisible.
- While living abroad we have developed a routine, we got used to new way of living, and have made significant friendships. It would be difficult to leave all these behind, which would mean reverse homesickness.
- When we return home, we may witness unpredictable changes in our friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbours, and environment. This would be a matter that may make us find ourselves confused, sad, disoriented, and anxious. In few words, we should be ready and strong enough to see and hear things that are not desirable.
- When we came to foreign lands, people of the host countries realized that we would be disoriented as foreigners, and were quick to offer help. On the contrary, when we return home, the people would expect us to be fully functioning members of the society, from the first day of arrival, and would unlikely see a reason to offer help. This is to say that reverse cultural shock will not be well-recognized by our people back home, and thus people will be less sympathetic to our adjustment needs. Therefore, as we had adjusted the cultural shock when we came to a foreign land, at home too, we will need to settle back into our native culture. Nevertheless, the reverse cultural shock will be shorter because we had already developed skills to deal with the challenges of cultural adjustment in the foreign culture. These tools, as transferable skills, will be very helpful when we return home.

To sum it up, going home could look easy for many of us, who think we grew up in that culture, know the language (s), are familiar with the daily living, and

have groups ready to help and support us. Nonetheless, it was made clear that after having a significant overseas experience, a lot of difficulties and stresses should be expected. That needs a long-time preparation, planning, and realism. Only a desire is not enough, but knowing the nature of the difficulties we will face will make it easier to cope.

I hope nobody will accuse me of being too naïve or too optimistic to worry about these problems too much ahead of the coming of the BIG DAY on which the ruling gang collapses and the bell rings for us to pick our luggage and head home. If our hearts are back home, we are determined to pull the gang from its roots, and we are in the middle of the struggle that we need to consummate, then no doubt that day is coming. Along the same lines, I would raise: ***Which is more meaningful- sitting idle until the time comes or planning and preparing from now for the problems we are going to face?*** Those who could see no meaning in raising these issues at the present time, I would take them like some ridiculing a father who buys clothes and other personal effects for his expected baby before it was born. Let us always hope for the best, and prepare for it in advance. In life, we get what we think of most. That is why it is said, “Everything that exists is created in someone’s mind.” In few words, once we learn how to think positive thoughts, we get positive results in life.

Our people back home have tasted the bitterness of multiple miseries and tragedies, grief, loss, and destruction in all aspects of their life and they know who is doing all that: the ruling gang headed by the thug-in-chief. At the same time, we, as Diaspora Eritreans, are burdened by the grief and tragedies our people are passing through, while we ourselves have tasted the bitterness of life overseas, and we know who drove us to that. Specifically, for our people back home and for us in Diaspora, the enemy is one and the same, yet we have not allowed it to destroy us. Hence: ***What does the New Year mean to us, as Eritreans?***

Before answering the question above, it should be made clear that January first is just like other days. It does not have a meaning of its own. It is we who give it the meaning we choose for it. Then the common answer to the question would be, “The beginning of something new.” If that “Something new” is the return back

home, as we could see it above, we need to be able to change something with ourselves to achieve that. In a nutshell, it is time for all of us, in and outside the country, to rise out of the ashes of grief and tragedies, and punish our enemy. That is our New Year Resolution. As none of us could do that alone, we need each other to lean on and make the year a new start for our new life.

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!