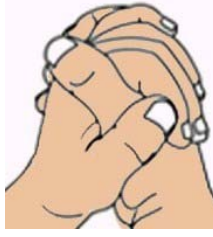


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حزب الشعب الديمقراطي الارتري
مكتب الرئيس

ERITREAN PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC PARTY (EPDP)
Chairman's Office

***EPDP Statement at
Socialist International, Africa Committee Meeting***

Niamey, Niger, 17-18 March, 2013

Distinguished Meeting Participants,

We, the delegation members of the Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP), an organization in exile opposed to the regime in Eritrea and struggling peacefully for democratic change, feel greatly honored to be attending as guests of this African Committee meeting of the Socialist International. We fully appreciate that peace; democracy and security are themes of utmost importance to our less fortunate Sahel region which includes distressed states and peoples like our Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, S. Sudan and Mali. In this introductory statement, bear with us to take the liberty of briefly explaining:

- The sad situation of our young country and its people;
- The absence of effective outside support for peace- and democracy-building through empowering non-state actors in cases like Eritrea, and
- A few notes about the EPDP and the status of other Eritrean forces opposed to the repressive regime in Asmara.

A Glimpse into Today's Eritrea

At the end of a costly 30-year war for self-determination of the former Italian colony of Eritrea, our people and their friends hoped to see a model new country emerging in Africa. Unfortunately, what Eritreans experienced in the last 22 years has been far different from their long-awaited dreams for peace, security and democracy. The country was turned into a one-man dictatorship from the start and still remains without a constitution, without an elected government, without freedom of press, religion, association; without freedom for domestic mobility ... and the people are being subjected to all kinds of abuses one can think of.

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All known human rights organizations characterized the regime as one of the most repressive in the world today. It leads Africa, and sometimes the world, in being the number one jailer of journalists and violator of basic human rights of its own people by turning the country into an open prison. The shocking picture of cruelty in today's Eritrea can be illustrated by mentioning the case of 35 top ex-government officials and journalists who were incarcerated in September 2001 and kept incommunicado ever since. Information obtained in recent years from their isolated prison in a desert area hinted that at least half of those 35 had already died because of maltreatment and medical neglect. The rest were either blinded, paralyzed or suffer of mental disorders. It is estimated that the prison population in Eritrea's over 300 dungeons is in tens of thousands.

With nearly quarter of a million men and women in arms, Eritrea is - per capita of its six million people - the most militarized state in Africa today – some say in the world. Nearly 500,000 Eritreans have acquired training in handling weapons during the past several decades. Military conscription and a so-called national service, initially reported to last only for 18 months, had become perpetual and deprived the nation of its work force for 20 solid years. As a result of the various monstrous policies of the one-man dictatorship, Eritrea has gone down the drain in every aspect of life: economic, political and social.

Understandably, the political repression and socio-economic collapse have caused a mass exodus of people into exile, especially since 2001. Well over 250,000 refugees are currently sheltered in squalor-ridden refugee camps in Ethiopia and the Sudan while other tens of thousands have been dispersed in many countries, including over 35,000 who entered Israel in the last three years. Many Eritreans died in the deserts or drowned in the high seas. An estimated 10,000 Eritreans were affected by hostage takers asking huge ransoms. Not less than 3,000 refugees were estimated to have disappeared in the hands of human traffickers between the Sudan and the Egyptian Sinai, and are feared to have been victims of human organ harvesting.

In short, the Eritrean people are facing untold tragedies, but the worst may still be in the making. The society is collapsing fast, and ramifications of that total breakdown are highly probably to affect the peace and security of the entire region, to say the least.

What Can Be Done to Help Eritrea and its People?

We proudly recall that peace-loving and progressive forces, including members of the Socialist International, played historic roles in supporting the struggles for liberation of peoples from colonial domination and from human abnormalities like the apartheid system in South Africa. But the case has not been the same when peoples tyrannized by their own "liberators" needed outside support.

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The concerned peace-loving and democratic forces did not come to the rescue of peoples taken hostage by extremely repressive rulers who proved to be worse than the former colonizers. The known reason is the long-established principle of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states. Nevertheless, this reasoning alone should not have prevented solidarity and support of democratic forces to non-state actors in countries where intolerable abuses prevail. But this is the unfortunate situation today. .

We are convinced that Eritrea and the region as a whole will not enjoy peace and stability - let alone to make progress in building democracy - as long as the regime of President isaias Afeworki stays in power. That is why we dare talk about the need of support for non-state political actors opposed to the repressive regime in Eritrea and thus help promote the themes of this meeting for peace, democracy and security in our region.

In this regard, we would appreciate if this meeting could pass a recommendation to member parties and affiliates of the Socialist International suggesting the missing support for democracy and peace building for non-state actors trying to bring about change in a repressive state. The recommendation can, for example, be generalized and phrased as follows:

SI members and affiliates to identify democratic forces and civil society groups in states where extremely repressive regimes, like the one in Eritrea, rule and give those non-state actors support for capacity-building for democracy thus empowering them to bring about positive change through non-violent and people-centered struggles.

Dear Meeting Participants,

The situation in Eritrea is very pressing because what is taking place is a societal breakdown that can have much wider negative ramifications. Change is overdue in Eritrea. In the meantime, implementation of the following measures could be much helpful towards a solution:

1. **Release of Prisoners:** This meeting to make a call on the Eritrea authorities to bring political prisoners to a court of law or release them soon;
2. **Constitution:** A call on the regime to implement a constitution it ratified in 1997.
3. **Border Decision:** The SI Africa Committee to lead a new proposal towards making pressure bear on Ethiopia to accept without precondition the final and binding arbitration decision on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border dispute as a step towards depriving the Eritrean regime of an excuse in keeping the Eritrean people hostage to the border problem.

4. **UN Sanctions:** To recommend to SI member parties to actively support the implementation of the targeted UN sanctions on the Eritrean regime.
5. **Education/Training for Refugees:** The SI to pressure on UN and EU countries to initiate urgently needed education and training packages for young Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and the Sudan who lost their educational opportunities in prolonged war trenches. The aim is to provide the young refugees with necessary skills that would benefit their country in the future. This would entail establishing vocational training centers in the Sudan and Ethiopia. Resources for such projects could be acquired from the grants that have been suspended from reaching the regime in Asmara due to its bad human rights record.
6. **Action on Human Trafficking:** The other burning issue is the need come to the rescue of thousands of Eritrean refugees taken hostage by human traffickers in the region. Egypt, the Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia could be pressed to take necessary action through the support of regional and international organizations, including the UN and the EU.

The EPDP and the rest of the Eritrean Parties in Exile

We are pleased to introduce our Party, the Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP) which is a unique party in the Eritrean arena. As you could get the details in the Party Profile available at this meeting, It is a merger of parties originating from the former two mainstream Eritrean liberation movements (the Eritrean Liberation Front or ELF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front or EPLF) that fought for three decades against Ethiopian occupation. The Party is today led by prominent liberation struggle era figures from both the ELF and the EPLF, among them the former Eritrean Defense Minister, Mr. Mesfin Hagos who left the regime in 2001. The Party is almost the sole political force in the Eritrean opposition that advocates a non-violent means in the struggle to bring about change. The EPDP is an all-inclusive national party working to mobilize all the diverse segments of the Eritrean people for change. It champions the promotion of human rights and rule of law in a state of institutions that can positively contribute to peace, security and democracy in Eritrea and the peoples of the entire region.

Beside the EPDP, there are many other Eritrean political and civil society organizations in the diaspora struggling for change and democratization in our country. But all these opposition forces, including our party, are affected by the lack of effective external support mentioned above. This is a problem that needs to be addressed by friends of distressed peoples and their dysfunctional states. And hoping that these brief notes will give you some picture of the Eritrean situation, we reiterate our wish for a success to this important meeting on issues of paramount importance.

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