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## **Fostering Interaction of People of Ethiopian Eritrean Divide**



***People to People Relation Conference Participants***

Young scholars and spokespersons of popular associations held a conference on 6 April 2013 to underscore the embarrassing anomaly of 15 years of separation caused by the conflict between the Eritrean and Ethiopian states. First of its kind, the conference was organized by the Ethiopian International Institute for Peace and Development (EIIPD) and was held at Addis Ababa Hilton,

The EIIPD, as a policy research institute focusing on peace, democracy and development in the Horn Africa region and its environs, took the initiative [n order to assess the influencing role of contacts between separated people in tearing down the wall that had been created due to political differences. The hopes and expectations entertained as motives for organizing the conference as an initial forum for

more to come in order to highlight popular sentiments about the need to consider interests and desires of the people to continue with their ages of relations of people of the same racial stock in all its dimensions, to give public diplomacy a chance to play the constructive role that has eluded formal diplomacy. The two governments have found no way of narrowing their differences and, sadly due regard for the interest of secure relationships of the people is yet to be demonstrated.

This first conference confirmed the desire of the people on either side of the divide to communicate and interact freely and to keep alive the historical harmony in the new context of two-state neighbourhood. Most participants appreciated such kind of public discussion as an indispensable tool to normalize relations between the two neighbouring states. It was termed as crucial and timely in a situation of extreme tension where the failure of external arbitration has left the two states in a deadlock and collapsed diplomatic channel. Action by the people, participants stressed, to reinforce grassroots relationships can prevent impending catastrophes. The young participants from Eritrea described their amicable contacts in Ethiopia as an eye-opener, in contrast to the anti-Ethiopians propaganda with which they had been fed in their homeland. Fortifying people to people relations is considered an important inward looking tool that will enhance peace, harmony and cooperation. It is good for the paramount interest and desire of the people to communicate the way they had lived with it for generations. We should recall that residents of Eritrea under colonial rule were not deterred from joining the keith and kin in Ethiopia as well as from normally travelling to be ordained as priests at Axum “the Vatican” of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith.

On the Ethiopian side, some confidence building attempts are observed as contribution to promote fraternalism which the participants from Eritrea appreciated in their prepared presentations. In 2011 the Ethiopian government introduced a new durable solution for Eritrean refugees called an “out-of-camp scheme”, an initiative which allows Eritrean refugees residing in Ethiopia to live anywhere they choose across Ethiopia and even attend universities, provided that they sustain themselves financially or live through the supports of relatives. This was noted as plus input to strengthen the relations between the two states.. Furthermore, the Ethiopian university scholarship offers that started in 2010, for Eritrean refugees, is a noteworthy contribution.

Ethiopia’s recent action of releasing Eritrean political prisoners also indicates a strong desire to revamp relations between the two brotherly sides. The Ethiopian government has also established an office under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that is accountable for facilitating and promoting the protection, reimbursement and follow up of Eritrean properties and issues. This further implies that despite a temporary glitch in their relationship, the Ethiopian government and people have a strong desire to rectify and make good all that has been damaged. The sincere goodwill that exists between the citizens, if enhanced through people to people relations can contribute to the stabilization of political tension and normalize abnormal relations.

***“in my long experience as an Eritrean refugee in Ethiopia I have never considered myself as a refugee and this is because I share all the privileges like a citizens of Ethiopia...”***

## **Summary of Proceedings**

Six presentations were discussed during the half-day conference and the presenters were from both

Ethiopia and Eritrean sides. About 100 participants attended the conference and they represented Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, Eritrean scholarship students at Addis Ababa University, research institutes, civic organizations, academic institutions, students from Addis Ababa University, local and international media outlets and other invited guests.

Among the presenters, Saliha Ibrahim, who is deputy chair person of Eritrean refugee union living in Ethiopia spoke under the title “Opportunities and conducive environment to strengthen the relations between the two fraternal peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea”. She said “even during the 1998 border war between the two countries people to people relations continued and refugee flow from Eritrea to Ethiopia was not interrupted. The culture of hospitality and historical attachments contributed to caring for one to the other and till today that affinity has pulled the two nations to remain in the same line”. Furthermore in relation to her experience as refugee in Ethiopia she mentioned that “in my long experience as an Eritrean refugee in Ethiopia I have never considered myself as a refugee and this is because I share all the privileges like a citizens of Ethiopia. This implies that there has been strong bondage between the two fraternal people. Even though the two governments are in no peace and no war situation the Ethiopian government is committed to strengthen people to people relations and we strongly believe that our brotherly Ethiopian people and government are good for us” she added.

Samson Isak, Eritrean refugee and third year scholarship student at Addis Ababa University psychology department. Presented a paper under the title “Prospects of people to people relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea: Eritrean Youth Perspective”. In relation to Eritrean Youth flow to Ethiopia he said, “If you are found crossing Eritrean border towards Ethiopia the Shabia will shoot you to kill. If you are found crossing to the Sudan’s border you will be imprisoned. However, Eritrean youth prefer coming to Ethiopia and risking their lives and even families encourage their children to come to Ethiopia. This is because the Eritrean youth are highly privileged in comparison with other countries’ refugees in Ethiopia”.

In addition he said “listening to Amharic music in Eritrea has been officially prohibited for the last 11 years but Eritrean youth love listening to the Amharic music. This indicates that there is conducive environment for people to people relations along with other opportunities available for us”. However, there are issues that the Ethiopian and Eritrean youths jointly need to work together. “There is misunderstanding and information gap in Ethiopia toward Eritrean youth and we should work hard on those areas,” he added.

Merkeb Negash from Jima University, who is a lecturer in International Relations, spoke on: “the role of public diplomacy in mitigating conflict between two states: experience from Middle East and Asian countries”. He said the two Middle East and Asian countries have been in worst conditions, different in context from our case; however people to people relations changed the attitude of the respective states towards each other and now Pakistan and India share the same travel documents. On the other hand Israel has recognized the right Palestine to statehood as the result of pressure from popular opinion, Merkeb said. In our case there is a better opportunity to strengthen people to people relations,” he added.

Tesgaluel Weldekidan discussed and reflected his personal experience on the relation between the two fraternal people. The theme of his talk was “opportunities and conducive environment to foster people to people relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea” He said, “the existing conducive environment to foster people to people relations between the two states should be exploited for betterment of the two fraternal people”.

Yemane Nagish, editor of political column at the Reporter newspaper, discussed “the role of media in fostering people to people relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea”. He said “media have crucial power to play the role in fostering people to people relations but its contribution has been weak and insufficient”.

Selhadin Eshetu, director and founder of Empower Africa, presented his paper under the title “Prospects of people to people relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea: Ethiopian Youth Perspective” in which he said there are unexploited opportunities to strengthen the people to people relations between the two sides. On the other hand there is misperception towards Eritrean youth. The sources for misperceptions are miscommunication between the two sides.. It is very important on our side addressing issues that have created misperception towards Eritrea”

There are many things that will serve as input to foster people to people relations between the two fraternal peoples. For instance, in terms of language, the two countries speak same language, namely Tigringna, which is written in Semitic language with the same alphabet. Another link between the two countries is the fact that the Tigrigan peoples, who inhabit a region north of the Mereb in Southern Eritrea, and south of the Mereb in Northern Ethiopia, belong to the same ethnic group. Ethiopia and Eritrea also have a large Orthodox Christian population and a substantial Muslim community who live in peaceful coexistence. Moreover, both countries share the crucial need for stability so as to manage the diverse ethnic groups (more so in Ethiopia than Eritrea) inhabiting their respective countries.

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*People to People Relation Conference Panelists*

## **Enduring Point of the Initiative**

The conference was moderated by a senior civil servant, one time Mayor Brhane Deressa, who put into context the value of the implications of peoples' movement towards addressing the prevailing anomalies with respect to the artificial separation of people due to some political hic ups and encourage the stakeholders to consider the continuation of such exercises. It was thus agreed to stimulate contacts that promote the desires of the people to stay together. The event generated broad media response in a way that encourages repeating such constructive exercise.

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