

Answers to Nharnet Vistors' Questions
by ELF-RC Chairman Seyoum Ogbamichael, Part IV
January 18, 2005



Question 5: Lately you and other members of the leadership of your organization met with the Prime Minister of Ethiopia in Khartoum. It was also reported that you are in Ethiopia as I formulate this question. What brought about the renewal or improvement of the relationship between Ethiopian government and your organization? Does this renewed relationship affect your stand in regard to the call for acceptance and implementation of the international border ruling? Some see the 5th point on the 5 point peace plan put forward by Ethiopia as a precondition and you have stated that the peace plan is a positive step forward. How do you reconcile the two?

The Chairman: Let me elaborate. It is true, as reported earlier, a delegation of the ELF-RC led by myself held a meeting in Khartoum with Mr. Melles Zenawi, the Prime Minister of The Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It is also true those talks have resumed during our current visit to Ethiopia. By and large, the meetings have assumed their importance in the light of the unfolding developments in Ethio-Eritrean relations and the need for exchange of views about the crucial issues that have imposed themselves on the arena. Top on the agenda was the question of peace and border demarcation.

The talks we had with Mr. Melles were frank, responsible and friendly. We took up all aspects of the issues of crucial importance. In those meetings we had the opportunity to obtain the explanation the prime minister had to provide and his government's interpretation of the five-point peace plan as endorsed by the Parliament. We as well availed of the opportunity to express our concerns and observations about aspects of the peace plan and developments that could lead to renewal of hostilities and cause damage to the long-term relations between our two countries, to which the Prime Minister addressed and elaborated on. I have to say that we found our talks very interesting, useful and highly positive.

We have had comprehensive discussions on the border ruling within the context of the comprehensive Ethio-Eritrean future relations, taking into consideration the various factors that have bearing on the issue on all levels. One may take or leave the Prime Minister's interpretation of the 5-point peace plan or the Prime Minister's inbuilt agenda for the proposed give and take, which he said is not a precondition. The fact remains, though, the Ethiopian Government has made the peace option and ruled out war as an alternative solution to the tension that has so far been left to play between the two countries. This is very, very important from ELF-RC view, and all peace-loving circles for that matter. **It addresses the fears and concerns we had about a variety of threats that the**

specter of war constituted to our people's fundamental interests in safety and stability. It is therefore our moral, human and national duty to encourage the peace option and make our input to build on it.

On the issue of actual implementation, long before we met the Prime Minister, and when our relations were at their worst, we were for talks between the two governments, talks that would facilitate the process of demarcation and address the possible consequences of demarcation on the other. We have made this clear in many an occasion. The talks are necessary to address the problems that would surely ensue as a result of the demarcation. A sizable portion of our people shall wake up one day to find themselves on the wrong side of the border, thus the ensuing identity crisis and related problems. Equally thousands of Ethiopians shall after demarcation overnight find themselves on the other side of the border, and thus the attendant problems. Both peoples are already feeling the pangs of the coming painful surgical operation that shall amount to amputations. The two governments are required to rise to the level of responsibility about their peoples' lot and future; they should sit down for talks not as a precondition but as a necessary mechanism to address matters of vital concern to their peoples. In other words, they should use the long lost opportunity for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the first place, to save what could be saved even now; i.e. in terms of alleviating the consequences of demarcation to our two peoples living in the border areas.

To come to the core of the issue of discussion, basically, ELF-RC position remains the same, as has repeatedly and pointedly been clarified in a series of statements we issued in this regard, and in particular in the statement I issued following Mr. Melles' announcement of his government's acceptance, in principle, of the border commission's ruling. We strongly demand and push for implementation, as the ruling is final and binding and a basic element in the consummation of the objective of peace. We are for talks not as a precondition but as an important mechanism of facilitation and opportunity of addressing the resultant problems before they occur. The question is not just a matter of loss or gain of chunks of land; what matters most are the people involved and their future.

To come to the issue of renewal of relations you pointed to, the objective of ELF-RC relations with Ethiopia or any country for that matter is to promote and share peace, stability and cooperation.; this is based on mutual interest served by mutual respect and non-interference in each other's exclusive affairs. We can maintain relations with Ethiopia while arguing about other issues of difference, when they occur. In fact we should maintain relations and channels of communication so that give and take could always be there and intact. We had no other preconditions for that before, and we do not have one now. We have highlighted and criticized encroachments in this regard in the past, without losing sight also of our duty to have them rectified through talks, as we are doing right now, and make sure they do not occur again. There is no eternal dead end to developments and relations with any, let alone with Ethiopia. Likewise, the Ethiopians have not at this juncture tried to force anything down our throats, and the ELF-RC is very, very allergic to such attempts when and if they happen. We are confident we shall use the communication and normal relations we are renewing with the Ethiopians to promote understanding, good neighbourliness, and make the concerns of our people heard in the Ethiopian circles, governmental or otherwise.

As opposition forces we all stand to benefit by normal relations with our neighbours, and we as ELF-RC are solidly qualified to ensure that those relations serve the long-term interests of the Eritrean people and not narrow organizational purposes which could prove unholy.

We remain firmly against war, against any encroachment on the sovereign rights of our people and our country's territorial integrity in any manner. We are firmly against any attempt at circumventing the process of border demarcation, against any hint at bending our independence of opinion and decision by any quarter and as firmly as ever. Our compatriots should rest assured that our organization shall, true to its principles and its record, say a loud and unequivocal "no" when and if, God forbid, that happens again. We are not here to trade with those national interests and rights that we consider and uphold as sacred.

I want to share this with my readers; they may take it or drop it altogether. The perception we have about current Ethiopian intentions, and the understanding we have attained, do allow and encourage normal and workable fraternal relations of solidarity and on the basis of mutual respect and the common good. So much damage has been wrought on the relations of the two peoples in the remote and recent past; we do not allow ourselves to add more to that. To the contrary, we shall make the necessary effort and sacrifice to reverse the hate, bitterness and rigidity that we already have in abundance. We shall make one more sincere try and build on the understanding reached, and build positively. We know it is not easy, but in our opinion that is the responsible and right thing to do.

Answers to Nharnet Vistors' Questions
by ELF-RC Chairman Seyoum Ogbamichael, Part III
January 12, 2005

4. Question: Why do some Eritrean politicians insinuate that the ELF-RC has for long been nearer to the EDP than to other groups? What is happening? What do you respond to those who go as far as alleging that your organisation is close even to the PFDJ?

The Chairman: It is preposterous; the ELF-RC cannot become everything contradictory. Would you be surprised if I tell you that certain individual Eritreans and circles are making a living out of smear campaigns they wage on the opposition, and particularly against the ELF-RC? The PFDJ in particular and other quarters with vested interest in weakening or isolating the ELF-RC do sponsor such work in the hope of safeguarding their illegitimate interests or promoting their individual or group agenda. It is not just politics that is going on; another war which we tend to take less note of is as well underway to undermine the basis and credibility of the opposition and its leaders. We do follow that. This is not however to say that all those who direct their criticisms against the ELF-RC or the opposition in general are PFDJ collaborators. We should be wary about such a generalization. Many well intentioned compatriots do direct criticisms at how we handle issues; they are entitled to do so and we do benefit a lot from their input and their contribution.

By and large, though, there are areas and aspects of our relations among the opposition that need to be made clear. Eritrean opposition forces on and off keep on throwing stones on one another. This has a lot to do with the seeds of mistrust that we Eritreans have in one form or another, to a lesser or greater degree, helped to sow among ourselves. I do think much of those doubts and sensitivities turn out baseless and irrelevant when it comes to close scrutiny and real work. Nonetheless, the main issues at stake and the position of the organisation should be made clear for all concerned.

Let me give you some of the background that could have been exploited to lead astray some of our compatriots and used to mislead them into hasty, erroneous and unhelpful conclusions. There is no denying the fact that the ELF-RC was more welcoming of the developments that led to the emergence of the EDP movement, as it was convinced this would be in the best interest of our people's democratic opposition. I was all the years wondering how, for example, Hailemariam Woldetensae, whose convictions and heartbeat I knew well, would tolerate the imposition of a dictatorship or rather a tyranny on our people and allow himself to make an accomplice of so colossal crimes. I was wondering also why Mesfun Hagos who was all along a thorn at the side of Isayas' excesses and arrogance, did not come to the open and say his "No". At long last the big "No" came by and in clear terms. Well, to begin with we started to give positive signals and sought from the outset to encourage the developments and the emergence within the ruling PFDJ of a wing that challenged the dictatorship and called for change and democracy. At the time a lot of questions were raised among the opposition as to whether or not the now EDP has broken its "umbilical cord" with the PFDJ. I think it was legitimate to question that at that early stage, particularly so as the opposition has been exposed to untold machinations from the part of the regime; there is nothing wrong with the caution that we believe should always be there. But caution and suspicion do not amount to work. While maintaining caution, and despite reservations, we in the ELF-RC kept encouraging the development with all the means and through all channels at our disposal. We took the initiative to cooperate and encourage the group's members, the persecuted journalists and the students. The work was responsible and well done. The ELF-RC underground did a superb job. Our efforts included also efforts at diplomatic level to solicit protection and ensure their safety. We focused on the US and EU in that regard.

Elements of the group were arrested, others had to flee, and a record number of ex-PFDJ veterans disassociated themselves from the regime after the crackdown of September 18 2001. Those who fled and disassociated themselves set in motion an opposition movement of their own. The ELF-RC was the first to welcome their move, meet them, give them confidence and encourage them to draw closer, acquaint themselves with the coalition charter and the member organisations, in the way of joining the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces. We insisted that they meet and discuss with the allied organizations before passing judgment based on prejudice, the very thing we were keen on tackling.

At that stage, though, circles within the opposition, basing on mistrust that was always there, disseminated rumours that we in the ELF-RC were keen on strengthening our position within the Alliance by drawing in our compatriots in the now EDP. That was superfluous guesswork and no less responsible, as the ELF-RC had no such weakness problem that needed to be addressed to in such a manner vis-a-vis other member organisations; The ELF-RC has been very strong with or without relations with newly emerging forces that at the time were in their formative stage.

Contrary to those insinuations, though, all we wanted to do was give confidence to the new movement so it might go ahead to challenge Isayas at his power base, and win traditional EPLF supporters over to the side of the opposition camp. On the other hand, we recognized what we believed the epoch had in store for the health of the Eritrean political future. We recognized the real possibility of narrowing the historic ELF-EPLF divide characteristic of our arena through fostering understanding and close cooperation between the ELF-RC and the now EDP, with democratisation as the shared agenda. We believed and still do this as the best opportunity to do so. All that time, we had Isayas' in mind and were fully convinced we were rendering service to the opposition camp, and the Alliance in particular. No matter how much we kept them aware and updated about the intentions of our contacts, we were slandered about and time and again stabbed on our backs by quarters we least suspected would mistake our motives. That was very painful indeed; as there existed no ground for legitimate fears other than narrow and misplaced calculations. Despite all those unhelpful insinuations and rumours, we have not flinched an inch from the line of action we have drawn; we have resumed contacts with the EDP, as we do with other forces in the arena, with the aim of coming to a reasonable basis of understanding needed to chart a programme of joint national work. I think our compatriots should to the contrary be concerned when they discern the absence of such a bond among the opposition groups and not vice-versa. I do not think responsible Eritreans who aspire to serious national work would see anything negative in the rapprochement between the ELF-RC and the now EDP. It should be Isayas and company who should worry about that.

The excesses that you mentioned and that are rumoured about, may for some time confuse a few vulnerable and less equipped Eritreans, but are bound to evaporate in the heat of real, genuine and responsible national work with which we all along identify ourselves. Such allegations do get smashed as they are falling against the bedrock of ELF-RC record. Those few who with all ill intention and definitely with assigned unholy mission try to insinuate that the ELF-RC is close also to the PFDJ should know that they are simply saying there exists no opposition in the Eritrean arena, as the ELF-RC stands out as an undisputed national democratic force that has consistently, unequivocally and steadfastly kept flying the flag for democracy and stood against the dictatorship since day one of its imposition and sought to rally political and popular forces to effect radical change. Ours is the people's organisation that lit and kept shining the flickering candle of hope in the midst of darkness

that engulfed the country when the promises of the revolution were broken and our people's aspiration came to be frustrated. Those quarters that keep on fabricating and spelling out allegation after allegation against the great ELF-RC must have not a hidden but an open agenda against the future of the nation itself. They could fall into the category of paid elements who serve quarters that target our patriotic organisation in particular and the opposition in general in order to promote their agenda, be it perpetuation of the dictatorial rule in place or other strategies that could be in the making.

Whatever the allegations and betrayals (and they were always abundantly available), the ELF-RC proper remains the soul of the nation and the incarnation of its legitimate human and democratic aspirations, the force best prepared to make social harmony, national reconciliation and democratisation a reality through the promotion of serious and responsible dialogue and joint national work. ***Deep in its conscience, the nation does sense the assurance of the constant factor that the national democratic line of the ELF-RC constitutes in the midst of all the divisions along lines that threaten the very core of what Eritrea is all about.***

Many in the past tried this business of smear campaign against the ELF-RC. But time has attested and the nation has witnessed that the very elements who try to pollute the atmosphere and sow seeds of confusion by throwing their fabricated accusations against the ELF-RC and other honourable opposition groups, were the first ones who rushed to Asmara and waited at the doorsteps of Isayas' office for attention and assignment to serve his agenda, while my great organisation and its valiant members and supporters stood steadfast against all the winds, storms and odds, machinations and smear campaigns to keep the flag for change, democracy and harmony fly higher and higher and over an ever widening space.

I have a lot to say about those; my books are overflowing full about their stories. But this is not the time for that; I would prefer to use the time we actually lack and the narrow opportunities therein on the ongoing work for unity which has overriding importance and pressing urgency for the betrayed nation.

Answers to Nharnet Vistors' Questions
by ELF-RC Chairman Seyoum Ogbamichael, Part II
January 03, 2005

3. Question: Given the state of the opposition and the discouraging indications of possible change in the position of neighbouring governments, do you think the regime in Asmara can be removed anytime soon? Isn't it true also that an economically weakened and politically suppressed people cannot be expected to pressurize a regime to fall. See what it took to remove Saddam or Milosevic.

The Chairman: Indeed, that is the gloomy picture we have on the surface of the Eritrean political scenery with the sense of despair that it reflects. Objectively, though, I do not visualise change as just a single act, whereby one would see the dictator tumbling down and his institutions crumbling at one single blow at a definite point in time, which is also inevitable. I see instead real substantive process of change in the making and building up to bring about that, and a steady progress of preparedness for a stable and successful transition. I can see the tyranny in Eritrea in the midst of a process of disintegration towards final demise. With each passing day, the support the dictator and his rule had among the people has eroded rapidly; his isolation in the region has become near total, his credibility has hit bottom and here you have a tyrant presiding over a failed state in total isolation, and numbering his last days. Yes, our people have been systematically weakened and impoverished and clearly seem to lack the resources to effect change, as you provided. But this very situation also has a crucial objective aspect and an important ingredient that would compound with the hopefully developing subjective element within the body politic of the opposition, thus the ignition point that makes change inexorably impose itself as an objective necessity.

A close reading of the reality underneath that semblance of control tells the story. Eritreans have now started to look into the future and have grown more conscious that they still have to make it. Opposition is expressing itself in a variety of articulate ways. The elements of change are there, though apparently in a mute or latent form due to the reign of terror. I am convinced that a credible unity of the opposition is about to be put in place to dissipate the mist of confusion and rekindle the slumbering hopes and thwarted aspirations our betrayed nation has for long reserved deep in its conscience. Those elements of change have visibly grown clearer and stronger than ever and keep on surfacing in many forms. The once divided Diaspora is now united on the issue of change and the need to accelerate it; the repeated waves of protests against human rights violations and massacres by the regime attest to that. Our people at home are far more united in their demand for change. Neighbouring peoples have shown a stronger solidarity with the plight of our people. The tilt in world public opinion towards our position as well has grown considerably. I believe that our neighbours, too, have had their share of bitter experience and the lessons drawn from that; they would not squander the gains represented by the deep-seated brotherly relations and long-term common interests they have with the legitimate struggle of the Eritrean people. Our neighbours know too well that Isayas's regime is no credible partner for peace, stability or genuine cooperation. I believe they won't exchange the gains so far achieved for ephemeral interests; and so would no doubt refrain from befriending an outlaw regime that is bound to leave the arena, and leave it for good, to give way for genuine regional solidarity on all levels. However, if any circles in the region for one reason or another still entertain the illusions of the past, they shall soon be disappointed when they

discover there is nothing left they can share with Isayas but fiasco and ignominy.

However, this should not mislead us into taking change for granted. The dictatorship is not bound to take a free fall of the sheer weight of its crimes. The opposition should advance to the centre stage and bring its weight to bear on the arena to make this happen. Right now, the conspicuously missing link in the whole picture and in the process of change is concerted action by the political opposition that should unequivocally rally around the central objective. Of course, the opposition should in doing so reserve the right to maintain the exclusive space it is entitled to in tackling its own homework on its own, as it has matured, come of age and become considerably sensitive to the urgent need for joint national work. In the meantime, and in addition to Eritrean solidarity, consummation of the struggle would require the steadfast support of the region's peoples and the understanding of the international community which could be forthcoming.

Yes, it took a lot to oust die hard dictators, as you provided; but I am confident that we Eritreans have not yet lost faith in our capabilities; I still believe we can take care of our own dictatorship on our own and with hopefully the solid moral and material support of our neighbours and all friends who share our concerns and who stand to benefit by the creation of a united, democratic and peaceful Eritrea that we aspire to and struggle for. Indeed, the dictatorship shall soon be no more, now that it has lost almost all elements of its existence. Even if it is artificially kept in a life-support system to serve non-Eritrean and non-popular interests, the truth remains it has exhausted its time and shall soon be no more; the arena shall once again be open and the coming challenges shall once again test our maturity and wisdom. I am confident we shall measure up to the challenge and emerge victorious.

Answers to Nharnet Vistors' Questions
by ELF-RC Chairman Seyoum Ogbamichael, Part I
December 30, 2004

1. Question: Where do you think we Eritreans as a people stand at the end of 2004, and what needs to be done to move us forward?

The Chairman: We Eritreans have been suffering of the tragic consequences of the policies of oppression and plunder and systematic subjugation the like of which we as a people have never seen before. The nation has literally been betrayed, humiliated and decimated by the dictatorship. Look, our people's very right to life and safety has been summarily violated and terror made the rule of the day. The core of the nation's personality has been severely damaged and the basic elements that make up the social fabric of the nation have been the principal targets of the tyranny. Life in Eritrea has been damaged beyond recognition; the sons and daughters of the betrayed nation have continued to be systematically subjected to dehumanizing measures and continued process of dispersal. The dictatorship has sought to strengthen itself by weakening the people, enrich itself by impoverishing the citizens, and prolong its stay in power by divisive tactics and war policies, holding the country hostage to terror and blackmail.

This situation has to be radically changed, and changed soon. To emerge from this hell, our

people need to recover confidence in themselves and in one another, and above all, confidence in the future. Our people need all that and leadership. The creation of a strong, united and focused political opposition with defined objectives, clear joint vision and mission is imperative to offer exactly that. The basic elements of change should be enhanced and activated to ensure that the dictatorship is removed soon and that matters of destiny are back in the only safe hands, the people's. A lot of work has been going on within the opposition camp to attain that objective in the way of attaining victory in unity and we are entering the New Year with enhanced optimism and rekindled hopes.

2. Question: Many Eritreans do acknowledge the fact that the ELF-RC has never ceased making efforts to bring about concerted national action. When one attempt failed it has always started a new one, never giving in to despair; that is great. But how should the opposition reorganise itself at this crucial times? How can the ELF-RC current proposal for an all-inclusive umbrella organisation work? I think the idea of a united front was in the past misconceived and mishandled. How about if it does not materialize; are we lost? What do you think we can learn from the past in this regard? Does the ELF-RC still entertain the idea of one organization, one leadership as a still viable formula, as some quarters in the opposition seem to do?

The Chairman: Basically, we in the opposition happen to espouse to a lesser or greater degree different political programmes, or different shades of similar programmes emanating from different visions about future Eritrea; Even those groups that on paper seem to champion identical programmes, differ in the historical, political or social background of the persons rallying around them, as well as in tactical issues and matters of performance. Such shades of differences and groupings may erode with time bringing us to a stage when our pluralism undergoes some streamlining.

In the meantime, though, we find ourselves at a juncture in our nation's history wherein we have to tackle a common task: the removal of the tyrannical PFDJ regime and establishment of democratic system of governance. This constitutes the immediate and overriding challenge that has inexorably imposed itself and kept crying for a solution. We all have vested interest in the removal of the dictatorship and in opening up the arena for democratisation. The ideal and even realistic way of doing so is through rallying around the immediate common objectives and marshalling our energies to consummate them. Now, when it comes to the options available for the setup that best accommodates our differences and offers us the highest focus on the issues at hand, a national united front of forces is, in our opinion, imperative.

As was mentioned by the honourable reader, the slogan of united front is very familiar to our arena, but not the setup, as that never saw light at the Eritrean arena. We cannot talk about a successful or otherwise united front in the past, as none was experimented in whatever form. However, it is not to be denied there is that residue of a negative perception about the call for a united front as dealt with during the armed struggle. I think we need not grow allergic of the label, if it reflects a viable formula of what we need to come up with. In the last analysis it is the short and long term programmes that matter and not the label.

During the national armed struggle the ELF-RC called for the formation of one organisation, one liberation army under one leadership as opposed to the idea of a united front, and we meant it. Ours, though, was not so much out of calculated opposition to political pluralism as a system of governance, as it was out of justified fear from the dangers involved in military pluralism. ***In those years what we all had in mind was always the armed national organisations***, and not simply political parties as we do today. The idea or concern could but go astray if it were allowed to extend into the political realm and assume a one-partist outlook which is not acceptable. The overriding consideration then was that in the reality of an armed national liberation struggle by a small country against a far superior regional force with overwhelming resources and the support of global powers, military pluralism within the Eritrean liberation struggle would lead to internal strife, bleeding, and subsequently create cracks in the body politic of the revolution, thus weakening the chances of defeating the enemy; that was it; and that was what actually happened. We should not fall into the pitfall of assessing an event or a position or outlook out of its historical context and the concerns of the time and in retrospectively puristic stance. Moreover, we should not in my opinion even today entertain the impossible and obviously dangerous idea of maintaining military pluralism in the opposition camp. This would have the country sliding down the road to civil war and possibly fall prey to unholy designs by quarters that would stand to benefit by our divisions in the post-Isayas era.

To facilitate the process for joint national work, we think mergers could be the best option for organisations with the same or similar political platforms; it would be a good contribution to the health of political life and offer the opportunity of more streamlining in the political map of the country. With regard to organisations with a solid *raison d'être*, a justification for independent existence, such as one or more basic agenda not championed by others and admittedly reflecting differing visions and programmes about tomorrow's Eritrea, should but join hands under the umbrella of a united front of any form as an objective necessity to facilitate the removal of the dictatorship and jointly consummate the tasks of transition to a democratic system of governance.

Our proposed formula for the unity of the opposition revolves around this idea. For that we need to rally around fundamental issues of consensus in an atmosphere of harmony and mutual respect, to the suspension of issues of obvious difference. With this in view, we at the ELF-RC have put forth concrete proposals and are prepared for the initiation of joint discussions that should soon lead to concerted national work under the umbrella of a united front. This we believe should organise national work and constitute a guarantee for the success of the movement and set in motion the long-delayed delayed process of reconciliation and salvation. We do not, however, fanatically stick to one formula or name to the exclusion of what other setups might have to offer. With this attitude, we are disposed to listen and try to recognise and take in the best in all that could be tabled.