

## Q & A: Eritrea's food shortage amid calls for UN sanctions

By Michael Abraha

Eritrea is in the spotlight again following the killing on September 17 of 17 African Union peacekeepers in Mogadishu by Al-Shabab militants who the African Union and the UN allege are supported by Eritrea. AU member states are pressuring the UN to sanction the Eritrean government. In July, an AU summit in Libya unanimously voted to punish Eritrea for "escalating" the Somali crisis. Meanwhile, the World Food Program has been denied access to Eritrea and has expressed concern that food is not reaching the most vulnerable – especially children and pregnant women.

To sort out and comment on these and other issues is Wolde Yesus Ammar, exiled head of one of the opposition groups, the Eritrean People's Party. He first looks at the increasing AU impatience and outrage against Eritrea.

**Ammar:** The outrage against the one-man regime in Eritrea is real. Since its creation 18 years ago, the Eritrean regime has continued to flout all rules of the game expected from a sovereign state accepted in the international community of nations to behave as a responsible actor. And as you very well know, the outrage against the regime in Asmara is local, regional and international – and for very good reasons.



To limit my response to your question, Africa is outraged because the belligerent regime of Isaias Afewerki has already done enough damage to his own people as well as to peoples of the entire region. It has been proven many times by UN monitors and others that the irresponsible regime in Asmara has been stocking and adding fuel to the conflict in Somalia for many years now. That regime repeatedly ignored calls of regional and international bodies not to violate the arms embargo to actors in Somalia. Today, even the regime's buddies in Tripoli and Khartoum could not condone what Isaias is doing against the best interests of peoples and member states of the African Union. In a word, Africa is outraged because the regime of dictator Isaias has long remained a factor of instability and conflict in a region with over 150 million people. Limiting the damage is overdue, and the Eritrean, African and world-wide outrage needs to be pursued to its logical conclusion.

**Q:** How will sanctions affect ordinary Eritreans?

**A:** It is well understood that sanctions adversely impact on the lives of ordinary citizens when trade relations with the outside world are cut; when all means of communication are suspended and diplomatic relations severed. The world has witnessed sanctions having a crushing impact on ordinary citizens in Iraq and other places. Sanctions do have increased harshness when applied in a poor country like Eritrea that depends for literally everything on import of goods and services. But, hold on!, the Eritrean people have lived under undeclared sanctions for long time now. The absence of good relations with neighboring peoples is sometimes worse than much publicized UN sanctions. The people of Iraq suffered enormously because the politics of Saddam Hussein led to the shutting down of borders with neighboring peoples in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Turkey and Syria. Likewise, the Eritrean people already suffered, and are still suffering, because of the regime's self-inflicted sanctions on people-to-people contact and trade with Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen and until recently, the Sudan. Commerce and trade relations with their neighbors are vitally important to the poor Eritrean people and their almost inexistent private sector than trade relations with Japan or Germany or America. Therefore, our people are already under nameless but still suffocating sanctions caused by the callous regime itself.

Sanctions, like war, have to be applied as a last resort and when everything has failed to avert a real problem. In the case of dictator Isaias and his party (PFDJ), all local, regional and international attempts made in the course of the past two decades to correct the malaise in our country have failed. Thus, the time appears to have come to resort to a severe action against the regime. However, while declaring international sanctions, one will have to look into minimizing the collateral damage on the population. The UN system has acquired some experience in this field and it can take measures to soften the burden on the population while sharpening the edge of the total embargo in ways that can harm the very core of the PFDJ military/security apparatus. The UN system can further develop new mechanisms which some call 'smart sanctions', and make sure that humanitarian assistance is properly channeled to the needy people in Eritrea who are not getting it now.

**Q:** The last known UN estimate was that two thirds of the Eritrean people depended on external food aid. This was based on international field reports. Now the World Food Program says it has been denied access to the people to determine the level of food shortage in Eritrea. Politics seems to be standing on the way in matters strictly humanitarian. Why?

**A:** It is true that two thirds of the Eritrean people are in urgent need of external food support. It is also true that many international NGOs that could have helped Eritreans in many ways were denied entry into the country and many others expelled from Eritrea on unjustifiable

allegations. Likewise, the UN agencies in Eritrea, including the WFP, have been denied free access to the country. One can easily see that the international community is not properly addressing the Khmer Rouge-type of politics of insanity of Isaias and his small clique. In November 2008, a joint delegation of my party and that of the Eritrean Democratic Party submitted a memo to concerned UN agencies in Geneva and another memo to the EU alerting them about a hidden hunger in Eritrea which was being covered up by the regime. People continue to die of hunger in Eritrea and the regime does not care about it. The UN agencies know that on a weekly basis hundreds of Eritreans are crossing the border to neighboring countries because of economic hardship.

WFP is now telling the world that it could not have access to Eritrea to assess the already existing food shortage there. And what is the use of knowing the magnitude of the problem if WFP will not be allowed to distribute its supplies to the people? Eritreans are living under a tragic humanitarian situation that requires a stern measure to resolve it and save lives. In other words, Eritrea requires a coordinated humanitarian intervention by the international community before it gets too late. The regime there must be told by the UN Security Council that it can no longer overlook its disregard to take care of its own people who are now quietly dying and being dispersed in the surrounding region. The talk of imposing sanctions on the regime in Asmara should, therefore, be accompanied by a humanitarian intervention program slated to distribute basic food supplies and services to the very needy people in Eritrea. The Security Council can, and should, send 'UN Guards' or some other force to look into the implementation of the humanitarian program. Otherwise, it is meaningless for the UN and the international humanitarian community to say that the regime has denied access to a dying population – and stop there.

**Q:** A great deal of Eritrea's food aid comes from the European Union. Does the EU have a means of ensuring that its aid is reaching the needy?

**A:** The European Union cannot be sure if its humanitarian supplies and other project support grants are reaching the Eritrean people. The regime suspects everybody, including its own functionaries. And if PFDJ cannot trust the apolitical WFP, how can one expect it to trust and give free access to monitors and officials of the European Union to see if their support is reaching the needy people? It is unimaginable.

The EU was among the first to be 'harassed' by the Eritrean regime back in 2001 when the dean of EU ambassadors, Italy's Antonio Bandini, was expelled from Asmara following a mild EU ambassadors' protest against human rights violations in Eritrea. The EU is still talking of "keeping an open window with PFDJ" and ceaselessly supports it for hardly understandable European self interests – no more, no less.

**Q:** The government hopes it will start collecting income from gold and other minerals next year. How will this new source of revenue impact Eritrean politics?

**A:** Any factor, including revenues that can strengthen the regime in Asmara, will directly contribute to worsening of conflicts and instability in the entire region, as has been the case since the coming to state power of the ever belligerent Isaias in the early 1990s. Remember the hostilities of the past (1994 with the Sudan, 1995 with Yemen, 1996+2008 with Djibouti, 1998-2000 with Ethiopia) without even referring to what the Asmara clique has done in its early days for change of regime in the Congo and its continued tampering with the conflict in Somalia. Latest reports also indicate that the regime is starting to meddle again in the complicated North-South politics of the Sudan and in is supporting extremists in Yemen.

Therefore, it will be everybody's responsibility to see to it that Isaias Afeworki does not get any more access to increased revenues from mineral exports from Eritrea. Today, the Eritrean population is a ticking bomb ready to explode. Our people inside the homeland as well as those in the Diaspora do not expect the PFDJ to change its entrenched behavior, and any additional resources will not be used for any purpose other than the regime's futile militarist adventures. I expect a popular explosion in Eritrea in the event of this regime starting to export gold from Bisha, Zara or Emba-Derho. The Eritrean opposition camp will also re-organize itself to see to it that the regime does not get access to added resources for increased political suppression of our people.

**Q:** There has been talk in Eritrean Diaspora media about how to deal with religious and regional issues in a future secular Eritrea. There does not seem to be enough separation of state and religion in the country today. The government appoints heads of the Christian and Moslem faiths, for instance. How do you view the government's involvement in religious matters, and what role should religion play in Eritrean politics.

**A:** The one-man regime in Eritrea is in absolute control of everything in the country, including our long-established religious denominations and intuitions. The ongoing aggressions of the regime against religious institutions are nothing but to be condemned in the strongest terms possible.

There is no way to let religion-based politics to take grip of a future Eritrea. All Eritreans deserve a secular (or call it a civil) state that respects all religions and religious institutions which can contribute in many ways in the daily life of our people without becoming part of the government itself. The talk in Eritrean Diaspora media that you mentioned in regard to

religious and regional issues in future secular Eritrea deserve to be handled in a responsible manner and not in a way that can easily polarize our fragile setting. However, I see this question to be very important and can be treated in a separate interview between us two to which I am willing to submit myself. And Thanks a lot for today's interview.