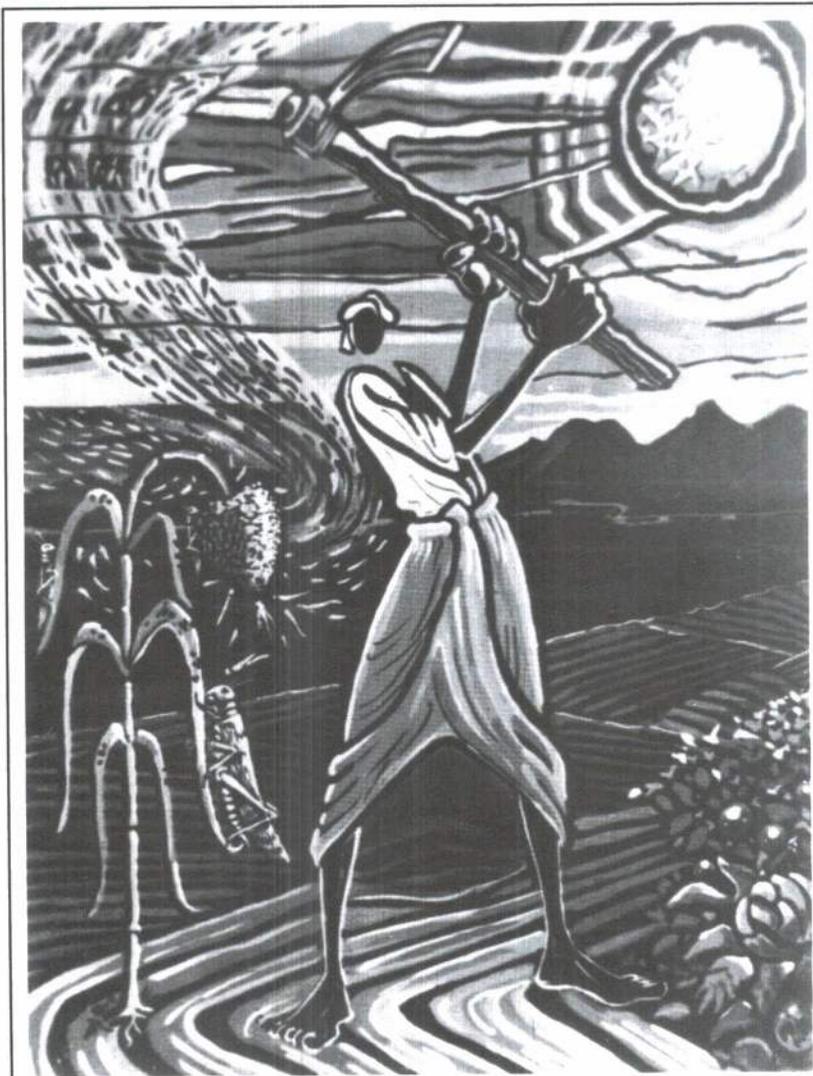


ERITREA

Africa's Newest State



Michael Adonai, tempura, 1992

On May 24, 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) entered Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. After thirty long and difficult years of armed struggle to gain their independence, it was a truly joyous occasion for the Eritrean people.

City residents danced in the streets throughout the evening for weeks afterwards. Eritreans who had left their homes and family to join the liberation struggle and those who fled to displaced camps in the country and abroad as refugees were reunited with parents, children, siblings, neighbors and friends – often for the first time in ten or twenty years. All joined in the general celebration of a new life as a free people.

Referendum

The EPLF formed a Provisional Government and arranged an internationally monitored referendum on Eritrea's future. This referendum, held April 23-25, 1993, allowed Eritreans, including

those living abroad as refugees, to decide their future themselves. At the end of the voting, the United Nations Special Representative to Eritrea, Samir Sanbar, announced that the UN Observer Mission found the referendum "free and fair at every stage." Over 99% of Eritrean voters chose "yes" for independence. In the following days, Eritrea was recognized as Africa's newest state by other countries and the United Nations.

The Eritrean people reached this point, making the needed sacri-

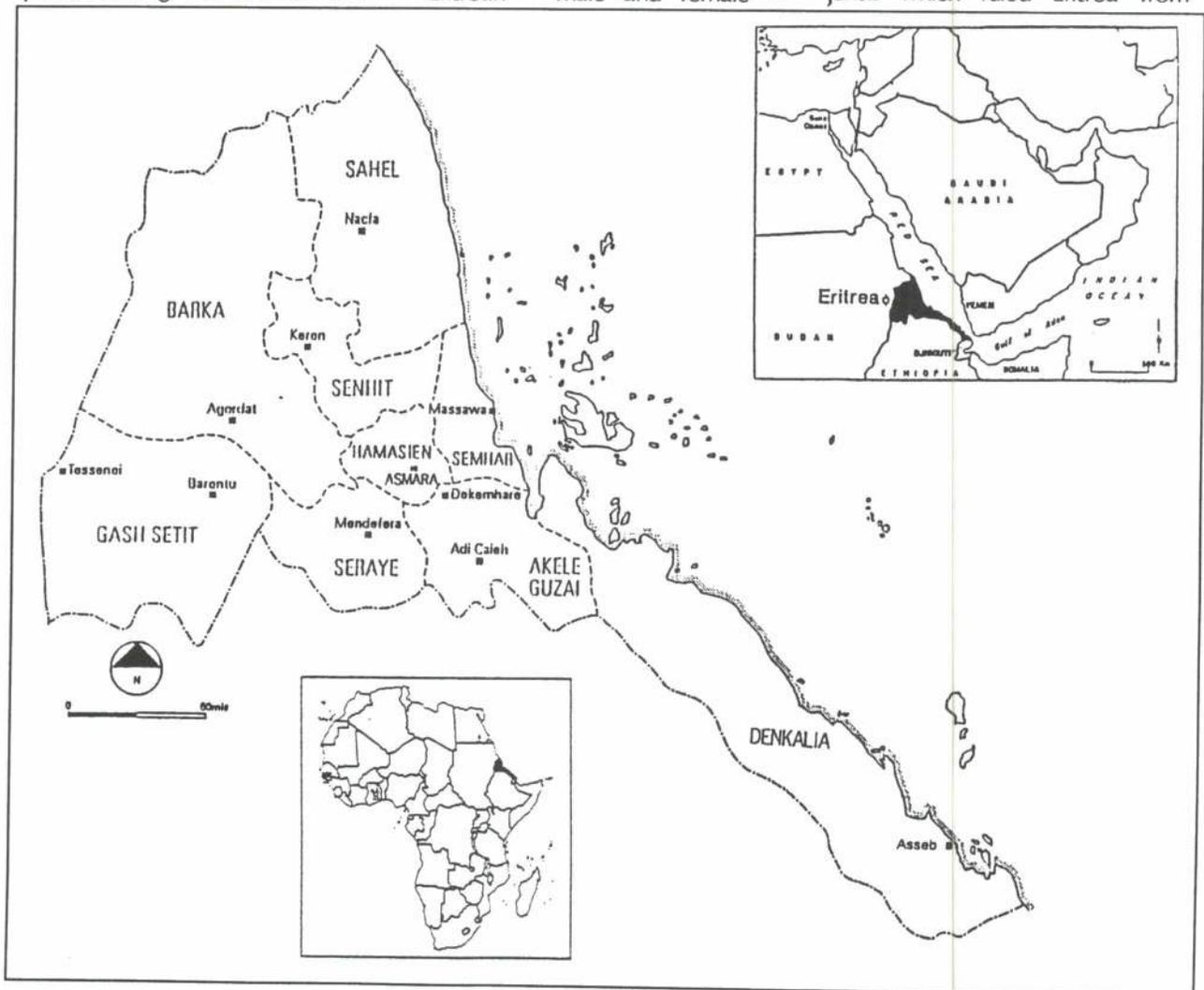
fices and persisting in their struggle over the decades, despite heavy losses and lack of major international support. They succeeded because they had a just cause, were committed, and relied primarily on themselves and the development of their abilities.

EPLF's military efforts contributed greatly to the final victory. In addition, the emphasis on unity among the country's various ethnic and religious groups, self-discipline and persistence, and the effort to involve every Eritrean - male and female -

also played a major role. These factors made it possible for Eritreans to endure and succeed despite the odds against them. Eritreans are now using these same attitudes and abilities to rebuild their country.

Reconstruction

Thirty years of warfare against a much better armed, internationally supported colonizer left Eritrea in ruins. The country's industries and its infrastructure were either never developed to begin with or were destroyed in the war. The Ethiopian military junta which ruled Eritrea from



the mid-1970s onwards nationalized everything – not only industries and services, such as banks, but even individual homes. In addition, Eritrea, mainly an agricultural country, suffered from repeated drought since the early 1980s. Eritrea's farmers are the backbone of the economy. As the first page painting by Michael Adonai shows, they continue to face recurring problems of drought and locusts which destroy the fruits of their labor despite their best efforts. As a result, two thirds of the population depends on food aid for survival.

Refugee repatriation is also a big issue in Eritrea today. About 3/4 million Eritreans were forced to flee the country during the war. About half a million in neighboring Sudan want to return immediately. Both urban and rural communities lack basic facilities – homes, clinics, elementary schools, roads, drinking water, etc. Given the serious problems providing basic services now, what will be the impact of the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees?

Today Eritrea faces the awesome task of undoing the damage of war and drought. One of the poorest countries in the world, it must begin to move forward. At home and abroad, Eritreans are asking how they can build a better life for themselves and their families now that independence has been gained.

While the war ended in 1991, EPLF fighters continued to serve without salaries, for only food and a place to sleep. They have been active in removing land mines, rebuilding roads, constructing dams, planting trees, teaching basic literacy and numerous other public works. It is only since summer 1993, two years after the war ended, that fighters have begun demobilizing and return to their communities. This process will be completed in the coming year.

The government has committed itself to a market economy and privatization. The process of returning homes to their owners is almost entirely completed. Some factories have already been sold and others are in the process of valuation and sale. Across the country, programs are underway to improve the farming and livestock sectors. Efforts are being made to develop fishing and tourism as new sources of income for the Eritrean people. Infrastructure (roads, phones, electricity, etc.) and basic social services such as health and education are being repaired or built from scratch.

Reconstruction and sustainable economic development are also keys to ensure the flowering of democracy. Many Eritreans lack the resources and opportunity to properly feed, clothe, house and educate themselves. If these basic concerns overwhelm their daily lives, if they are illiterate or cannot afford a radio or news-



Area, Location and Climate

over 48,000 sq. miles in northeast Africa. The mountainous highlands are temperate. The eastern coast and western lowlands are warm.

Population – 3.5 million

Capital – Asmara

Nationalities and Their Languages

- Afar - Afar
- Bilen - Bilen
- Hadareb - To Bedawi
- Kunama - Kunama
- Nara - Nara
- Rashaida - Arabic
- Saho - Saho
- Tigre - Tigre
- Tigrinya - Tigrinya

Religions

equally divided between Christians and Moslems with some animists

GDP per Capita – c. \$115

Life Expectancy – 46 years

Adult Literacy Rate – 20%

Way of Life

about 80% rural, farmers or pastoralists

Major Products and Resources

sorghum, wheat, barley, corn, cotton, oil seeds, legumes, fruits, vegetables; sheep, goats, cattle, camels; fish; gold, copper, iron ore, potash, sulfur, textiles, hides and leather products, processed foods, beverages, plastics, construction materials, glass, pharmaceuticals

paper, how will they become active, conscious participants in the country's political life? Can true democracy develop?

Additional Resources

- Against All Odds** by Dan Connell
(Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press
(RSP), 1993)
- Emergent Eritrea: Challenges of
Economic Development** edited
by Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis
(Lawrenceville NJ: RSP, 1993)
- Eritrea: A Colony in Transition** by
G.K.N. Trevaskis (London: Oxford
University Press, 1960)
- Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics**
by Okbazghi Yohannes (Gainesville:
Univ. of Florida Press, 1991)
- Eritrea: Revolution at Dusk** by
Robert Papstein (Lawrenceville NJ:
RSP, 1991)
- A Painful Season and a Stubborn
Hope** by Ababa Tesfagiorgis
(Lawrenceville NJ: RSP, 1992)
- A Short History of Eritrea** by
Stephen Longrigg (Oxford:
Clarendon, 1945)
- Women and the Eritrean Revolution:
The Challenge Road** by Amrit
Wilson (Lawrenceville NJ: RSP,
1991)

Eritreans have done much to revitalize a devastated economy so they will be able to stand on their own feet tomorrow. Despite the significant progress made in reconstruction over the past three years, much remains to be done, not only economically but also politically.

Democratization

Eritrean political parties – with their demands for independence – first appeared in the 1940s during Italian rule. They were crushed and many leaders and activists driven out of the country or assassinated by order of the Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, who wanted control of Eritrea. Since then, Eritreans

have had few opportunities to experience modern democratic political processes.

During the liberation struggle, the EPLF organized democratically elected councils at the village level in the areas it controlled. Anyone over 18, no matter their ethnic origin, religion or sex, could elect others or be elected to office. Elections were new in themselves. Women's participation was the biggest change. About one third of EPLF fighters were women. They set an example for growing female participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country.

After the war ended in 1991, the Provisional Government held elections at the village, district and provincial levels throughout Eritrea. The referendum provided another opportunity for people to gain experience in democratic procedures. Now, the process is moving another step forward.

In March 1994, the National Assembly established a Constitutional Commission. The members include Eritreans from every ethnic and religious background, young and old, even from the refugee communities abroad. Women make up 48% of the commission's members.

The Constitutional Commission is responsible for seeking the views of the population, at home and abroad, about the structure the

Eritrean government should have and the rights and obligations of its citizens. The commission will also consult international jurists and examine the constitutions of other countries. Within two years, it will prepare a draft constitution to be considered for ratification. This will be followed by multi-party political elections.

While the process will be time consuming, care and thoughtful discussion now will ensure that the Eritrean people develop a constitution and government that will serve the best interests of all Eritreans for many generations to come.

As a new state, Eritrea has tried to build positive, mutually rewarding political, economic and cultural relations with its neighbors. In fact, its closest relations are with Ethiopia, the former colonizer. Eritrea is also working to revitalize regional African organizations. These relations are important in maintaining peace and stability in the region. This will benefit everyone.

Despite their difficult situation, Eritreans have begun a new struggle: building a peaceful, prosperous, democratic country.

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