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ENTREPRENEURS, WARRIORS AND WANDERERS WORK TO BUILD TINY ERITREA, RICH IN  
POTENTIAL BUT SHADOWED BY YEARS OF ISOLATION AND A BLOODY WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE.

BYLINE: By JOHN BALZAR, TIMES STAFF WRITER

DATELINE: MASSAWA, Eritrea

BODY:

In the broiling coastal desert, a weather-beaten Red Sea nomad squats under a lean-to of tattered blankets. With curved dagger, he splits open a watermelon. The juice runs sweet and warm down the chins of his visitors.

After 20 years of wandering with his camels and his wife and daughters in Sudan, the leathery Rashaida tribesman has been drawn home by the unlikeliest of compulsions: building the new nation of Eritrea.

About 50 miles away, in the cool of 7,000-foot highlands, a California-educated Eritrean scientist relaxes in her new pastel restaurant. With manicured fingers, she offers king prawns and a delicate dipping sauce.

Eighteen years ago, she fled to Sudan, to Europe, to the United States -- to an education at UC Berkeley, a house in West Los Angeles, a research career at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. She too has been drawn home.

In an ancient land, a newborn country calls. From the desert, the glittering city, the foxhole and battlefield, from the terror and travail of the past, its people answer.

After decades under colonial rule followed by 30 years of one of the world's loneliest revolutions, Eritrea is the newest nation in Africa -- and surely, at this moment, its most spirited and expectant, a sharp contrast to the gloom that now shrouds so much of this continent.

The long war with Ethiopia ended four years ago this week, and independence was granted two years ago this month. With a tiny population of 3.5 million or so, Eritrea is a blend of national idealism, innocence, hope, sentimentalism, sacrifice, daydreams and determination -- disparate peoples emerging united from revolution with truckloads of Portland cement to rebuild from the ravages of war, and with reams of blank parchment on which to write a constitution.

"The price we paid for our independence is not very cheap," says Asefaw

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Berhe, a 59-year-old storefront attorney in the capital of Asmara. Casualties came both through battle and through the loss of perhaps one-quarter of the nation's population, which fled during the long fight. "Sixty-five thousand are dead, 15,000 handicapped, 1.1 million gone in our Diaspora. We have given our hearts and souls. And now, now we are really enjoying life."

Asefaw (Eritreans are properly referred to by their first names) serves tea. It is impossible to converse with someone here without accepting some show of hospitality -- tea, watermelon, prawns or even a feast of fresh goat.

"We have fantastic weather, you can see that. We have fantastic people. And in minerals, we're very lucky. If we can do this properly, this will be one of the richest nations in the world," Asefaw says.

Given the history of this region and this continent, the odds are unfavorable.

Eritrea is exhausted by war and backward as a result of isolation; its economic needs are desperate and the expectations of its people high. Despite the beginnings of outside investment and a fresh infusion of development aid -- the United States gives more per capita to this nation than to any other in Africa -- Eritrea is in a race to revitalize itself before the euphoria of revolution dissipates.

Factionalism and authoritarianism are twin curses of contemporary African politics, and Eritrea has known both. So it will be a supreme challenge for the Marxist-indoctrinated military leaders of Eritrea's revolution to hold themselves together for a successful transformation into a democratic society based, as they say, "on our history and culture and . . . supported by our people."

And not the least of worries in this inflamed frontier between Africa and the Mideast: Can young, wobbly Eritrea, half Christian and half Muslim, withstand the determined efforts of neighboring Sudan to ferment an Islamic jihad, or holy war, here?

Border clashes with armed Islamic crusaders from Sudan are now a monthly occurrence in the northwest, and Eritrea this spring responded by breaking diplomatic relations with its neighbor.

Those are Eritrea's anxieties. But they do not detract from what the country now possesses -- substantial peace, a powerful sense of possibility and a government that is credible both at home and abroad.

"It's a joy to be here at this time," says U.S. Ambassador Robert Houdek, an old hand in eastern and central Africa. "I'm building Peace Corps projects, promoting U.S. investments -- this is what good diplomacy is supposed to be, and I haven't had a chance to practice it in a decade."

Take the simplest of life's pleasures. Along palm-lined Independence Avenue in Asmara, with its low-rise architecture of Africa, Italy and Arabia, throngs of Eritreans emerge in the cool, dry evening air for walks, beer and coffee, secure from street crime and unmolested by beggars.

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People hold one another and talk and admire the lavender blossoms of the jacaranda and the crimson of the bougainvillea draped over old stone walls. The beat of African music pumps out of electronics shops.

On the coast, at Massawa, many buildings still lie in rubble, the result of heavy bombardment during the war. But already three tourist yachts are anchored in the harbor to explore the 300 offshore Red Sea islands unknown to outsiders for more than a generation. And the first tiny bands of outside visitors are returning to a region that was one of the great trading crossroads of the ancient world.

Even the most widely traveled people on the continent say there is no place quite like Eritrea.

"I have been to 41 countries here in 30 years, and there is a unique sense of peace and tranquillity here," says former U.S. Rep. Mervyn M. Dymally, a Los Angeles Democrat who recently traveled to Asmara to promote a U.S. foster care project for Eritrea's estimated 83,000 war orphans.

If the prevailing mood is pleasing to the visitor, imagine the feeling among residents.

Medhin Tekie was a law student in 1973, when Ethiopian soldiers occupying Asmara instilled terror with bullets and rape. "I realized I had to join the struggle," she says. "My mother told me if she was young, she would fight. I went."

Thirty percent of Eritrea's fighters were women. Medhin trained, fought, married, fought again when she was pregnant, suffered through famines, through times of no ammunition, worked and raised her son for 12 years in an underground pharmaceutical factory as jets bombed the hills.

Medhin had devoted 18 years to the cause. Then Asmara was liberated. "When we heard, we started crying -- for our friends who died. Before, when your friends died you didn't cry. Because you knew you would be next to die and there was work to do."

"I'm still a fighter," says Medhin, 36, at her home in Asmara. "Maybe I always will be. I just want to see a free country, a free Eritrea, to rebuild my country."

Once the Aksumite kingdom, later part of Abyssinia and often invaded in regional conflicts, Eritrea was taken by Italy at the end of the 19th Century and was a colony until the British captured it in 1941 and took over its administration at the end of World War II. In 1952, by resolution of the United Nations and over objections of many Eritreans, this territory less than a third the size of California was federated with Ethiopia (the former Abyssinia) under Emperor Haile Selassie.

In 1961, 11 guerrillas armed with seven Italian bolt-action rifles began the struggle for liberation. First they fought the emperor, who was backed by the United States. They grew in number and fought among themselves. Then they grew and fought the Stalinist military regime, which replaced Ethiopia's emperor and switched patrons from the United States to the Soviet Union. The United States withdrew from the region in the face of a Communist regime in Ethiopia and a

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Marxist insurgency in Eritrea.

Hardly anyone abroad supported the revolt, except occasionally some Arab neighbors. Eritreans captured from their enemy the equipment that won the war. The leftover tanks and trucks are evidence of a nation that fought both sides in the Cold War -- half have markings from the United States and the rest from the Soviet Union.

Today, two things are happening simultaneously. The outside world is recognizing Eritrea's potential. And Eritreans are realizing that their struggle is not finished.

A law was written this spring to encourage Australian gold-mining interests. The first exploratory oil leases with U.S. corporations could be signed by July 1. The offshore fisheries are thought to be the richest in the Red Sea, the result of decades of war during which no one dared venture into these waters. The Saudis are investing in sheep ranching. Tourism developers are talking big.

"Nothing has really taken place here for 60 years," says one Western diplomat. "I shouldn't call this terra incognita, but a lot of people are really excited. . . . It's hard not to be."

In African history, outside investment often has led to outside exploitation. This government says its lonely struggles have sharpened its resolve, and its skill, to resist. Its most novel weapon is the Red Sea Trading Corp. -- the business arm of the government's ruling political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

In part, the government is trying to regulate commerce by being a powerful competitor itself. A 12-year-old enterprise, Red Sea Trading now deals in tourism, construction, communications, electronics and retailing, while encouraging competing private investment.

For the most part, Red Sea Trading has used its muscle benevolently, sustaining local enterprise by buying into private businesses and stabilizing markets by undercutting private profiteers when certain commodities, such as cement, are in short supply.

And for Eritrea's future? Will it be dominated by a socialistic state conglomerate, a unique populist check on capitalism? Who can know? As local revolutionaries frequently say, "We have no model for Eritrea. We want no model."

But with no enemy to unite them in a single-minded cause, Eritreans inevitably will begin thinking about their individual lives. Government workers will someday want to be paid for their time -- which happens irregularly now. Former soldiers will grow impatient without a new role in society. Teachers and parents will want books in the classrooms. With most of the countryside already deforested, families will want gas with which to cook and the means to feed themselves.

"The battles for peace are more difficult than the battles for liberation," says former fighter Zemhret Yohannes, now secretary of the 50-member commission drafting the national constitution. "We have to realize that after 30 years

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fighting for self-determination, it will take decades to achieve economic reconstruction. I cannot deceive myself to believe the process will be easy."

Last year, disabled soldiers took to the streets to protest inadequate demobilization benefits, and three were killed as the army forcibly dispersed them.

Still, the Rashaida nomad, the restaurateur and 200,000 other repatriated exiles testify to Eritrea's promise.

"Of this, we know little. To us it is new," the nomad says of his dusty, struggling fields of melons and peanuts. Here a camel has no use, and camels are the Rashaida's treasure. An ox is what the man needs to pull the plow, and oxen are lowly creatures in Eritrea.

A village? The Rashaida people have cared so little for staying put that their tents are among the most unaccomplished of all Africa.

"We know the horizons. In a village there will be schools, doctors, a better life. Of this farming, we will learn. And we will learn to build."

A quest of the same essence sent 12-year-old Saba Gebremedhin fleeing Eritrea by foot in 1977, under cover of darkness, through the mountains to Sudan -- for a better life as a student at Fullerton High School in Orange County and pursuing an advanced degree at Berkeley.

And now she is back.

Pregnant with her second child, Saba and her husband purchased Asmara's Bologna Restaurant, remodeled in the style of a West Los Angeles bistro. They employ 29 people. She also teaches biology at the University of Eritrea.

"We wanted to make a difference. I knew that if I came back home with whatever I've learned, that would be my contribution to my country," she says.

"I can tell you life is good. You don't realize it until you come, just how different things are here. In the States, there is so much you want but you never have time to do. In California, we worked to live. Here, we work and then we find we have a time to live. And living has the quality of meaning."

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#### Eritrea Fact Sheet

Population: 3.5 million

Ethnic groups: Tigrinya 50%; Tigre & Kunama 40%; Afar 4%

Religions: Muslim and Christian

Chief crops: cotton, coffee and tobacco

Annual per capita domestic product: \$115\*

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\* 1992 estimate

Source: World Almanac

GRAPHIC: Photo, Independence Avenue in Asmara, Eritrea's capital, where strollers rarely worry about crime and beggars. ; Photo, On the coast at Massawa, buildings still lie in rubble after the war. JOHN BALZAR / Los Angeles Times; Map, Eritrea Fact Sheet, VICTOR KOTOWITZ / Los Angeles Times ; Drawing, Eritrea Fact Sheet, VICTOR KOTOWITZ / Los Angeles Times

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