

Ethio-Eritrean border debacle and the Irob condition

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Irob is a minority group located in northern Ethiopia. Despite relatively small population, the Irob minority have been at the forefront of regional and national politics of Ethiopia. The Irobs fought against foreign aggression alongside other Ethiopians and participated in modernizing Ethiopian politics, education, and administration. Despite this, the Irob community is now in danger of being divided into two hostile countries in the pretext of so-called border demarcation. Due to the Ethio-Eritrean 'border' war, prolonged neglect by national and regional governments of Ethiopia, and other human induced as well as natural problems, the community finds itself in an exceedingly difficult situation. These and other ongoing devastating conditions at home urged me to write this article.

Irob is the ancestral home of many prominent Ethiopian leaders, such as Dejazmach Subagadis, Ras Sebhat Aregawi, Emperor Yohannes IV, and Dr. Tesfaye Debessay who was the leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Starting with the Zemene Mesafint (Era of Princes), the Irob family of Shum Agame Woldu Kumanit dominated Tigrayan politics. For example, Dejazmach Subagadis, Ras Mengesha Yohannes, Ras Sebhat Aregawi, Shum Agame Desta Sebhat and many others including Emperor Yohannes IV- Great emperor of Ethiopia who died in Metemma fighting for his country, are ancestrally from Irob minority. Besides that during the Italian invasion, Irob patriots, lead by individuals such as Dejazmach Ayele Sebhat and Dejazmach Kassa Sebhat (not brothers) contributed to the anti-Italian resistance movement from their base in Mount Assimba.

In more recent times, many Irobs, such as Dr. Tesfaye Debessay, Ato Geray Tesfay, etc. played very important role in the struggle waged against the feudal regime of Emperor Haileselassie I and the subsequent dictatorial junta led by Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam. Irob! It is the land which gave birth to dedicated individuals such as Dr. Tesfaye Debessay who was dynamic Ethiopian hero. Dr. Tesfaye Debessay was open minded, intellectual, and persistent Ethiopian nationalist.

Moreover, the Irobland, particularly around the Assimba and Aiga localities, served as a base for several Ethiopian nationalists and revolutionary movements, including the EPRP and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF). Mt. Assimba, in Irob, is a historic mountain where dynamic and legendary EPRP started its military armed struggle against the corrupted system of rule. The Irob region, like Aiga was also the location of significant battles during the Ethio-Eritrean border war (1998-2000) which ultimately lead to the removal of occupying Eritrean forces from the region.

Irob people are known to provide one of the first schools in Ethiopian educational history. The history of education in Irob is strictly related with the Catholicism introduced to central Irob (Buknaiti-Are) in 1845. As soon as the Catholic missionaries established roots in the locality, they built a school (Lideta) in Alitena. By 1850, it was legally recognized by Dejazmach Woubie, native of northern Gondar and the then governor of Tigray. The curriculum included Geez, Amharic, primary science and mathematics. Latin, French, philosophy, and theology were taught in higher levels. The beneficiaries of the original Lideta School were not only Irobs. Many students used to come to Alitena, not only from the adjacent regions, but also from Showa, Harar and other far away regions of Ethiopia. For example, Abune Asrate-Mariam Yemru, the Catholic eparch of Ethiopia, was from Showa and received his education in Alitena. Monsignor Gebremichael- Shiferraw- the most prominent Catholic priest from Gonder who served mostly in Addis Ababa also was educated in Lideta School of Alitena. The graduates of Lideta played important role in the modernization of Ethiopia in various fields. Abba Tesfa-Sellassie Wolde-Gerima of Irob translated the some

official Ethiopian documents into French. Dej. Ayele Sebhat, also of Irob, played an important role in diplomatic and defense matters. It was he who was in forefront in establishing ambassadorial level relationship between Ethiopia and France and founded the Ethiopian embassy in Paris. He was also one of the most prominent patriots during the war of resistance against the Italians. Many other graduates of Lideta School such as Dr. Abba Weldemariam Kahsay and Abune Yohanes Weldegiorgis, contributed in several ways working in the developing activities of Church and country. Others contributed in educational and academic fields by establishing various educational institutions in many parts of the country.

Irobs are not Eritreans! They are very nationalist Ethiopians. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi knows that well and in depth. The Irob people currently are facing two enemies: Issayas and Meles. The two leaders are dividing Irob minority into two parts because of the political problems they have had with Irobs in the past, as most Irobs were and are against their secessionist views. The two leaders and their administrations are against the Irob people because the Irobs have always been determined and courageous Ethiopians who developed close relationship with other nationalist Ethiopians.

Today the Irob people find themselves in a very dangerous condition and it will be worse if the rather hasty "cut-and paste type" of The Hague Border Commission's Ruling (April 2002), that partitioned Irob territory into Eritrea and Ethiopia, is rigidly implemented, without modification. In its desperate search for the non-existing River Muna, the Commission has irrationally renamed valleys such as Midiriba and Barbare-Gade only to impose new identity on the Irob minority (despite their strong objections), dislocate their households and expose them to Eritrean Government reprisals, a government whose occupation they bitterly fought in the 1998-2000 war. The Hague ultimately benefited neither the peoples of Eritrea nor of Ethiopia nor the goals of the UN's four year-old costly peacekeeping mission. It is not a matter of sheer territory; it is all about people's destiny and their fundamental human rights to life, protection and security.

The case of Irobland is very volatile. All hell will break loose if Irob people are divided based on some fictitious line on the ground that is purposely done to divide Irob minority. And I mean real hell! The idea that any part of Irobland can be part of Eritrea is ludicrous. It will never happen. The 1993 "referendum" was not held in Irobland because Irobland has never been part of Eritrea and Issayas knew what the outcome was going to be. The Irob people are united to continue fighting for the retention of their Ethiopian identity and Citizenship more than ever before.

There is a universal consensus that all individuals are entitled to certain basic rights under any circumstances. These rights include certain civil liberties and political rights, the most fundamental of which is the right to life. These principles have not been applied in the Irob case. But the Irob people should not be excluded from those universal human rights. Irobs, like all others, have the right of survival on earth. However, none of these seem to matter to EEBC and the Ethiopian government. They seem to be bent on forceful division of Irobs into two countries, perhaps to weaken them and punish them for being true Ethiopian nationalists. If Irobs are forced to be divided into two countries, then their fate will be losing their historical identity, bond, culture, and integrity.

Irobs in the Diaspora must stand up; to do whatever they can to safeguard the rights of our people; no one will do if not us. We Irobs will not be surviving with our dignity, identity and respected culture if current situation doesn't change for Irobs economically, politically, socially, culturally, etc. especially, if the danger of division worrying the Irob people is not reversed. We must unite and work hard if we want to make a difference. If we are divided regarding the Irob unity we will all fail. The choice we make today will affect us tomorrow. So let us do our best today crying for our voiceless Irobs back home. As Albert Einstein said "You were not born a winner, and you were not born a loser. You are what you make yourself be." We are

like other people of Ethiopia such as Tigrians, Amharas, Oromos, etc. so our rights should be respected and seen as other Ethiopians.

We are single Irob nation. We can never be divided into two hostile countries by breaking the international law that prevents a minority from being divided. Dividing such a tight community into two hostile countries will not only loosen the bond among us, but will inevitably lead to the disappearance of our beloved community. Before we develop our language and focus on the development activities on the land of Irob, Irobs should struggle in order to remain together undivided in the same country, Ethiopia. Therefore, Irobs and concerned Ethiopians should struggle for the minority rights that are given by the international law in order to remain together undivided which in turn prevent the minorities from disappearing.

The writer strongly appeals to and challenges all Irobs at home and abroad to put pressure on the Ethiopian Federal Government and the local government of the Regional State of Tigray to look closely into the futurity, desperate and destitute situations and problems that the Irob people are facing today. The responsible authorities must first secure territorial integrity and peace so that they can stay alive and be safe and secure! The Ethiopian Government must openly state that the Hague decision is Null and Void.

Forcing people to change their identity and citizenship, or expelling an entire population from their land, making them leave behind everything they rely on for survival, is the most horrible criminal act. No one has the right to dictate the citizenship or nationality of a people, or force them to be landless refugees by granting their land to others without any valid justification. Nobody including Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has the right to award Irobland to Eritrea or to any neighboring state or country. Prime Minister Meles and his government should represent and work for the Ethiopian people. They should not be in the business of disintegrating the nation of Ethiopia, and giving away to another country the historical Ethiopian territories including the Irobland. The current Ethiopian government did not provide necessary information about the Ethiopianess of the Irob people and their land to the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) and the EEBC delimited the border carelessly without even visiting the region and without paying due attention to the right of the Irob people. So both these groups are responsible for the crises the Irob people find themselves in now and for eventual disintegration of the Irob people.

What will be the fate of the Irob people who are not more than 40,000 in number if divided into two hostile countries? This is done knowingly and purposely by both Ethiopian government and EEBC by ignoring all facts that demonstrate the Ethiopianess of the Irobland. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the EPRDF leadership know very well that Irobland is undisputable Ethiopian territory. But the Ethiopian government until today didn't provide any concrete evidence on the Irobland case. One can only conclude that they are purposely doing so to weaken the Irob people. Besides that they have detained the strong leaders of Irob district who can stand for the land and people. The Irob leaders who have been sentenced for long time detention including life imprisonment have been very popular men, who courageously defended their country during the 1998-2000 Eritrean (Shaebia) invasion, and thus earned trust and followings among the Irob ethnic group. They were also the ones who could unite and mobilize the Irob people against decisions to cede land of Irob to Eritrea in the disguise of settling the Ethio-Eritrean border dispute. They could help secure the sense of common identity and enhance self-confidence among the Irobs. It looks like that the scheme behind the division of the Irob people by the leadership of Mr. Meles Zenawi, was and is to weaken the Irob people and get rid of their powerful voice so that he can award the land to Eritrea without any resistance.

In addition to all of that no single developmental infrastructure has been built in Irobland by the current government so far if not to save structures destined to serve the present regime's bureaucracy. There are

no employment opportunities in the district. For this reason, the Irob youth who don't see any hope of survival in their native land are immigrating to all directions of the globe.

The following are some facts about Irob.

1. Irob has never been part of Eritrea or administered by Eritrea, or by its colonizer, Italy. The entire region of Irob, undivided, remained in Ethiopia after Italy was ejected from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Irob, undivided, remained in Ethiopia during the British administration of Eritrea. Undivided Irob remained part of Ethiopia until April 13, 2002. The Boundary Commission, which did not even visit the area, decided to partition it without any justification and evidence. The Commission decided that significant part of the Irob district remained in Eritrea by dividing the minority group into two countries violating the international minority law. The Commission's report reads: "the impact of Ethiopian administrative activity has been weaker, and the impact of Eritrean activity stronger, in Northern and Western fringes of the Endeli projection (absolutely trumped-up story) and that therefore Ethiopia has not established its effective sovereignty to the required degree over those areas. The treaty line should therefore be varied so as to place only the more southerly and easterly parts of the Endeli projections in Ethiopia (Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission Decision, p. 54)." It is shameful that the EEBC is made itself complicit in this kind of conspiracy of dividing the Irob ethnic group into two without even visiting the locations physically to consult the victimized people to know if Irob-land was ever part of Eritrea in history. I simply call it negligence of justice, carelessness and irresponsible act from the commission. Reading from the EEBC deliberation, it undoubtedly looks that the Ethiopian Government didn't want to present the facts about Irob to the arbitration commission. This forces me to qualify it as an act of some conspiracy with purpose with some sort of insanity. Global communities shouldn't watch this human rights abuse and the infringement of minority rights enshrined in the international laws happen. The Irob minority should not be denied the right of self determination.

2. After the defeat of Italy at the end of WWII, Britain maintained control of Eritrea. During the British administration of Eritrea, Irob, of course, continued to be administered under Ethiopia. The British administration had no effect in Irob in any form. If Irobland was part of Eritrea, it would have been mandatory to see Irob-land under British administration in that given period.

3. During the Eritrean federation, the Irob people continued to be administered under the provincial administration of Tigray, Ethiopia.

4. When a "referendum" was conducted for the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia the Irobland was not included in the scheme. Because as Irob has never been part of the Eritrean province, there was no reason to do so, and of course no body raised the question of including the Irobland in the so called referendum. Hence, no Eritrean or foreign observers ever stepped in Irob region during the referendum, as this has never been Eritrean territory.

5. During the military rule of Ethiopia, the Irob region became a rebel stronghold for many, Ethiopian rebel groups such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) but none of the Eritrean liberation forces were present in the Irob region. We never saw or even heard in history, Eritrean liberation forces ever stepped in Irobland any time before the Eritrean invasion of 1998.

6. During the Eritrean invasion, the Eritrean army managed to destroy and/or confiscate all properties that belonged to peasants, churches and the regional government. They planted mines everywhere, including houses, schools and churches to make sure that even if peace ever come, the Irob people would never have a safe environment to go back to. No government that genuinely believes in reclaiming its lost territory

would ever engage in such a destructive method by burning properties, schools, clinics, mining the land, houses and even places of worship. This by itself is strong evidence that the Eritrean claim was not and is not genuine. It indicates that the claim is baseless. The purpose of the Eritrean occupation of the Irobland was not territorial claim but totally different strategic objective for the Eritrean regime to exploit the Ethiopian economy.

7. However the regime in Addis Ababa that claims to be Ethiopian government totally failed in defending the Ethiopian territories and the sovereignty of the country, not only concerning the Irob region but in all fronts. It is ridiculous. It failed to present the necessary evidences on the Irob case and other invaded areas that have been sovereign Ethiopian territories since time immemorial. Could it really not find facts showing Irobland's Ethiopianness? What happened to the tax revenue, census, court cases and the names of local authorities that administered the area that had been kept in Mekelle and other administrative centers that have been available even to individual researchers? Is the Ethiopian government really unable to demonstrate Ethiopia's sovereignty over the Irob region and other Ethiopian territories invaded by the Eritrean armed forces? It is unbelievable! How ridiculous! It was just 100% unwillingness and betrayal. It is very simple to present concrete evidences as I have mentioned above. It is the area where the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) itself, which is the main component of the current government, had bases in the region and was very active in the area when it was waging guerilla war against the military regime. After it came to power in 1991, it ruled the area until the Eritrean invasion and the following two-year occupation. It also continued to administer the region after the Eritrean Army had been expelled, thanks to the Ethiopian heroic defense forces. Is the Commission referring to that period when it says the impact of Eritrean activity [was] stronger? Is it then approving the invasion and condoning the changing of the border by force? Otherwise, can the commission really identify the period that the Eritrean administration had stronger and effective power over any specified Irobland? Give us a break! No! No authority from Eritrean side ever administered the Irobland.

Having all these facts, it is absolutely unfounded to say that 'Eritrean administration was strong while Ethiopian was weak in the territory' as stated by the Commission in its document. The baseless statement by the irresponsible lawyers supposedly representing Ethiopia is mind boggling to Ethiopians. Many lawyers with respectable qualification in the field have reacted with great surprise as to how the case was handled and more must be said about it. But the most ridiculous thing is the role played by the Ethiopian government. Was it really unable to present its case or it was unwilling to do so as many people including myself believe? The Meles Zenawi's government must take full responsibility regarding this historic crime. The Commission should have taken into consideration the international law that protects minorities. And the world community should have intervened and revised the ruling when a group composed of not more than five individuals unfoundedly divided a minority, in the danger of extinction, into two hostile countries. Besides, the Ethiopian government has been totally negligent because it should not have tolerated such a decision and should have repealed it.

The strong powers like America and other western countries' leaders should protect human rights and minority rights as is stated in the law. When someone unfairly passes a decision that will eradicate the minority whose number counts only in a few thousands of people from their land knowing that they will disperse and eventually vanish. The minority rights advocates should intervene and cry for justice of the victimized people such as Irob minority. The minority rights enshrined in the international conventions must be given adequate attention and must be worked for its impartial implementation. It is obvious that Irob minority will be disappearing if this commission's decision is ratified. The decision will negatively affect our being and our culture, bond and unity. We Irobs must stand for our unity and International community must be urged to support the struggle of survival of the minority in question. We must not wait until the bounding stones are put at the border at dark when things and conflicts become calm for a while.

Is it morally right and justifiable to force the Irob people, whose civil and human rights were horrendously violated by the aggression and forceful occupation of Eritrea in 1998, to be awarded to the aggressor, Eritrea? Is such a decision morally and legally acceptable? Is it morally right to force any people against their will into a way of life which deprives them of their God-given rights to live peacefully with their families and relatives in their native land? Is it morally right and sound to force any people to change their citizenship for undesired citizenship of another country? This ruling, if implemented, will cause divisions and separations within the Irob families and war and agony in the region.

The Irob people will resist this evil trick to give away their land and identity and will fight to remain Ethiopians. Fundamentally, people must have a say as to who they are and we Irobs made sure that our say was written in blood to defend our Ethiopian Irobland. We shall for ever remain Ethiopians and forcing Irob people into Eritrean nationality is no better than forcing a rape victim to marry her rapist.

In the name of justice, freedom, human dignity, as well as in the interest of safeguarding sustainable peace and stability in the Horn of Africa region, I urge the United Nations, the international community, and all democratic nations not to keep silent and urge wipe the tears of the voiceless Irobs that are subjected to disappearance because of their forceful division into two countries.

At this critical moment, I would like to sum up by declaring that: even if The Hague fails to reconsider its fatal decision today, and the current Ethiopian government fails to uphold its duty of protecting its citizens, the Irobs will be compelled to retain their rights to Ethiopian identity, peaceful or otherwise. Irob people have already taken a stand as a community not to be treated as hostages of interstate power politics and even begun protesting to the international community. Thus, I take this opportunity to call upon the Regional and Global political actors to act more responsibly on the destiny of Irob people.

May the Almighty direct the responsible bodies in his infinite wisdom to do what is equitably right for both Eritrea and Ethiopia and people at the border zone such as Irobs! And may God the Almighty grace our long-suffering people with peace and prosperity.

Reference:

1. *Eritrea - Ethiopia Boundary Commission Decision*
Regarding Delimitation of the Border (p. 54)
2. *Some Facts about Irob;*
A Paper Written by Souba Hais, Oct. 25, 1998
3. *Nuovi documenti, p. 376; Abba Tekla Haimanont: Abouna Yacob, Paris, 1914, p.91*

