

## A Historic Monday

Action Group for Eritrea – February 2010

On **Monday**, the 22nd of February 2010, tens of thousands of British Eritreans and other nationalities from the Horn of Africa and friends of Eritrea took part in demonstrations held in different cities across the world to protest against the UN Resolution 1907 (2009).

It is to be recalled that the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1907 (2009) imposing sanctions on Eritrea on the 23rd of December 2009 without presenting any credible evidence at the behest of the American and British governments.

At a time when Eritrea's territory is unlawfully occupied by Ethiopia, it is a travesty of justice that Eritrea was targeted for sanctions by the UN Security Council. These historic demonstrations were a reflection of the outpouring of anger and resentment for the way the UNSC used fabricated lies as a basis for the sanctions.

It is not difficult to imagine that Eritreans would be upset by this sanction. However, not many expected to see such a passionate remonstrance on the day. The organisers in the UK were overwhelmed by people wanting to make the long journey and be part of this historic day. It got to a point that registration had to be stopped as the logistics became difficult to handle in the time available. Many were disappointed that more coaches were not prepared and those who were left behind due to mix-ups were understandably unhappy. Some made it by hiring mini-buses and others took flights from Gatwick, Luton and other airports around the country.

The coaches departed from three locations in London. Seven coaches left from Kings Cross where a BBC reporter witnessed the departure and interviewed many of the participants for an hour. Participants from the UK came from different parts of the country including Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester. Many youth defied threats made by anti-Eritrean elements and took part. Many who were unable to travel also donated money to the cause.



Departure point – Kings Cross

Demonstrators came from all walks of life and included a group of children who were managed by Senait Tekle, teenagers, the youth, the middle aged and the elderly. Many took two days off work. The children were provided with a letter explaining in detail why they had to miss school for two days. It was interesting to note that the children were quite conversant and fully aware of the injustice that is perpetuated against Eritrea and the significance of their participation in the demonstration. All their poems, colouring and songs reflected the purpose and the role they want to play in defending their country of origin.

The youth also took their responsibility seriously. They displayed the Eritrean flag with pride in their necklace, earrings, wristband and t-shirts, and were happy to use the opportunity to show their patriotism. They were also on their best behaviour, always courteous and ready to help. Haben Ghirmay, born and bred in the diaspora, begged her parents to let her go on the trip for days before they relented. She knows of family members who died in defending the country and felt that it was her responsibility to ensure that they did not die in vain. "Each generation of Eritreans has contributed to make Eritrea a reality and it is my duty to stand up for Eritrea when the need arises", she said when elaborating the reasons why she felt the urge to protest.

A man with many ailments braved the journey against the advice of his doctor. When asked why he had to endure pain and risk his life, he said he would count it as a blessing if he dropped dead on the day as he could not stomach the naked injustice against his country. He apologised for being selfish in his thinking as his action could have caused problems to the organisers had he fallen ill.

Mother Abrehet is a well known passionate elderly lady who walks around with the help of a stick and needs the occasional support from people around her. The organisers were

concerned that she may struggle to make the arduous journey, but they knew that nothing would stop her. On the return journey when most succumbed to exhaustion, Mother Abrehet still had the energy to go on. A well designed postcard made by Eritreans from Sweden to be sent to Obama from all over the world sold like hot cakes in the ferry crossing between Dover and Calais. Mother Abrehet and her friend spent days on end praying for Obama in the run up to the US election and had a day of fasting and prayer on the day of the election. She thought that God had answered their prayer when he was elected and that peace and justice would prevail in the Horn of Africa. Her elderly friend, who sat next to her, nodded in agreement. She demanded that a message that depicted her disappointment be added on the 'Postcard to Obama'.

Mothers who joined the trip came prepared with all kinds of food to ensure that no one went hungry. The organisers provided enough water and drinks for free. DVDs of best known Eritrean songs and films were also provided to entertain passengers in the 16 hours trip. The journey was filled with laughter and joy. Coach No. 4 had the best comedians who left their fellow passengers in stitches with their never ending jokes and the occasional dose of messages. People sang patriotic songs and others came forward to give speeches of defiance. The youth were in Coach No. 9 and reminiscence of the old days, the camaraderie and the can do attitude was all too evident.



Entertainment in Coach 4

Geneva has never seen anything like it. Eritreans and their friends from all corners of Europe descended on it by coaches, trains, private cars, mini-buses and planes. The town was invaded for a day and looked very colourful with the Eritrean flag flying high in every corner of the city centre.

The police were dispatched to direct the many coaches arriving to the town from different direction. At times, they were taking them in circles around the city to keep the traffic flowing. People came from about 14 countries in Europe including Norway, Austria, Sweden Denmark, Italy, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and from as far places as the Middle East. Eritreans in Switzerland did a good job in welcoming participants and serving refreshments. On arrival to the airport, people were welcomed with a free train ticket and provided with direction to the venue of the demonstration.

The demonstration created an opportunity for people who had not seen each other for years to meet and renew old friendship. Cafes near the starting point at Parc Des Croupettes by the main train station were all filled with demonstrators with the Eritrean flag wrapped around them.

As the time approached for the march, demonstrators were lined up behind the flag of the respective countries they came from. The whistles, horns, drums gave the march a carnival atmosphere. Most had a blue cap with 'Annul Unjust Resolution 1907 (2009)' written on it.

The 1.5 km long route of the march took from Parc Des Croupettes to the main square opposite the UN headquarters. As the demonstrators at the front of the march reached the destination point, there were still many people at start. Roads and train routes were blocked for a long time until the demonstrators passed. The Associated Press reported that 5000 people participated, quoting the police. Some had also estimated the number to be 15,000. The police had registered 110 buses with a capacity ranging from 48 to 78 seats. With an average seat of 60, those travelled by registered coaches is approximately 6,600. Allowing for people who travelled by the over 45 mini-buses, unregistered coaches, private cars, trains, plane and Eritreans who live in the surrounding areas, it is reasonable to assume that the number was in the order of 10,000.



The long march....



The long delay...

At the square in front of the UN headquarters, the protestors made their voice heard by chanting and shouting at the top of their lungs. There were big banners and thousands of placards in display. Many people came with their own placards with various messages. Some of them read 'We denounce the sanction on Eritrea', 'no Sanction based on lies', 'Stop US historic injustice against Eritrea', 'No Evidence – No Sanction', 'We are the government' and 'Ethiopia out of Eritrean Territory', People also chanted repeatedly using megaphones - 'UN – Shame on You', 'US – Shame on You', 'No more Lies', 'Never Kneel Down', 'Awet nHafash' and 'embi nEgeda'.

The crowd were entertained by seasoned musicians like Oqbay Mesfin, Kahsay Berhe, Rmdet Alem and Alamin Hasebela with timely and fitting songs. Yonas Tesfazghi, Ahmed Mahmoud of London and others took to the podium in turn to read messages and poems. Solidarity statements were read from various organisations. The message from World Federation of Democratic Youth stated "the organisation stands side by side with the youth and people of Eritrea to denounce in its strongest terms these unholy, unjust, inhuman sanctions and appeals to other peace loving progressive youth from around the globe to join the international campaign to vilify these sanctions against Eritrea and demand the urgent and unconditional lifting of the sanctions".

Duale Yusuf, representing the Somali community in London, said these sanctions were not only imposed on Eritrea, but also on the people of the Horn of Africa. He reaffirmed that the Somali community stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Eritrea. A representative of the Ogadeni community expressed his delight in being there protesting against the sanction after having travelled for over 15 hours to support the people of Eritrea and highlighted the atrocities the Ethiopian government is committing in Ogaden. Lwezi Kinshasa of Uhuru News from Congo said when you touch one of us, you touch all of us and called for Africans to stand together. Martin Zimmerman and Dr Albert Zuberbuehler, long time friends of Eritrea, denounced the sanctions in the strongest term. They testified that they have never seen anything like the demonstration in the city. A solidarity message from the Youth wing of the PFDJ and the National Union of Eritrean Women Europe Branch was also read by the respective representatives.

Thousands of fliers in English and French were distributed around the city centre. The flier details the reason for the demonstration and called on all peace loving people to take action against the sanctions.

A Sheik who travelled from Eritrea to be part of the demonstration had a display made of rotating wood that gave different messages that denounced the sanctions each time it turned. When asked why he felt the need to protest, he said, "those who perpetuate injustice always get tired in the end, but those who are victims of injustice never give up fighting. I have fought all my life and I am not about to stop now".

Two Sudanese who travelled from Italy had the Sudanese flag flying high. "We cannot just stand and watch when the people of Eritrea are subjected to such cruel injustice", said one of them.

A young mother recalled the time when her father used to take her on a long journey to such demonstrations in the 1980s protesting against the UN's complicity in Ethiopia's occupation of Eritrea and felt the need to pass on the spirit by bringing her six year old child to Geneva.



Delegates handing in petition letter

Halfway through the demonstration, a three person delegation led by Dr Tewelde Weldekidan of London submitted a two page letter and boxes of petitions containing the signature of 116,000 people. In his speech, he confirmed submission of the letter and congratulated all participants for a great achievement.

The weather forecast in the days before the demonstration was poor and people were bracing themselves for a cold spell, but on the day, God was smiling at the demonstrators. It was sunny and beautiful day.

The way the demonstration was organised is quite impressive. Each country in Europe was given a task to perform by an ad hoc organising committee. These tasks include letter writing, producing flier, printing, demo-caps, placards, banners, dealing with the police and authorities, media, refreshments, security, protocol, etc. Each country was responsible for its own needs such as co-ordination, transportation, first aid, entertainment, etc. The dedication and discipline of the youth who did most of the work shows that they are more than capable of fulfilling their obligations. The demonstration has proved beyond doubt the effectiveness and capability of the youth to organise such big events and mobilise the public in such a short period of time to respond to the call of duty. Indeed, Eritrea has a bright future.



Eritrea's future in firm hands

The event has also helped in bringing people together to foster stronger ties. There were pledges made and groups formed. For example, young Eritreans from Birmingham were inspired by the trip to form a new group known as 'Hidri group'. They raised enough funds to sponsor a family of Martyrs. Similar groups were also formed in Sweden and other countries.

It was noteworthy that there were no police present along the entire route of the march or the square except few who were trying to keep the roads clear. This showed the confidence that the police in Geneva had on the discipline of Eritreans. With thousands of angry youth, there were no reported cases of mischief or disturbance. The demonstration passed peacefully and the place was left clean and tidy. The indomitable Eritrean spirit lives on.

The demonstration which was broadcast live to worldwide audience ended at 6:00 pm and people gradually made their way to their coaches to return to their respective homes. The general feeling was one of having accomplished their duty to their beloved country. The Action Group for Eritrea is pleased to have played a small role in making the event a highly successful one.

Pictures courtesy of: Meadna.com, Alenalki.com, S. Ephrem, S Marcos, F.Selomun, A. Aregai

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