

## Letter from MQX

### *Letesenbet - What is in the Name?*

*By Jihon  
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*“I have never seen anybody run so easy over 5,000 meters, run so fast, and at this level,”* the legendary Irish Olympian Sonia O’Sullivan was heard passionately speaking from the commentator’s box in Valencia’s Turia Stadium. Thanks to Covid-19, on that October 7 Wednesday afternoon, only 400 spectators- several of them athletes- were allowed in the *Estadi d’Atletisme del Túria*.

Flanked by a number of pacemakers to keep her in the loop, and all alone after the 3000 m mark with only the clock to run against, Letesenbet Gidey, 22, was going for the real beast: The World Record. *“She is a lovely flowing runner to watch... We know about her brilliant credentials in cross-country,”* the key commentator was shouting at the top of his lungs following her steady pace on the track. He was talking about her being twice World Junior Country Champion at 17 and 19 years of age (2015 & 2017), World Best at 15 km (2019), World Cross Country (Bronze, 2019) and World Championship in 10 K (Silver, 2019) and all the rest. *“She is the 9<sup>th</sup> fastest in history,”* he kept on reminding us. Her brilliantly styled run got her dream fulfilled. Reaching the finish line, Letesenbet clocked 14 minutes, 6.62 seconds thereby setting the fastest time in history and a new world record for the women’s 5,000 meters. The commentator who claimed that hers was *a performance of such art* was going to be, in his own words, *an inspiration to young women all across Ethiopia, all across Africa, all across the world*. He was gasping for air as he showered her with heaps of praise. She was beaming with smile. And carried the Ethiopian flag for that defining picture next to the scoreboard.

But, *the inspiration to young women*, that smile of innocence and victory could easily have been lost because of what happened to her three days earlier in Addis Ababa’s Bole International Airport.

Letesenbet arrived at the local terminal along with her coach, Haile Iyasu. They had just flown from Mekelle, in the northern Tigray Region, and were on their way to destination in Valencia for the World Record Day. Letesenbet knew the much-coveted Valencia was no easy feat. She was so rigorous with herself, trained so hard and waited for this day with tons of impatience. The countdown to that October 7 Valencia event was going so fast.

They both headed to the international terminal for the evening flight to Frankfurt and where they had a flight to catch to Valencia. It was about 6 pm. They were very well ahead in time for their connection flight at 20 minutes to midnight. *“We were really happy that we arrived very early to connect,”* Letesenbet says. They proceed to check-in with the lady in charge when a guy shows up and collects their documents. The guy definitely is airport immigration official. *“He closely examined my Covid-19 certificate*

printed on a Tigray Regional State Health Bureau stationery,” says Haile. “I think I knew it by then; I was anxious.” The guy refused to let them proceed to the gate. They wanted to know why. They decided, this time around, time, the athlete’s worst enemy, was on their side. They have close to 6 hours to solve what they thought was a misunderstanding.

The immigration guy kept on moving the goal posts several times.

First, he told them they couldn’t transit through Frankfurt “I just shared your document with the German embassy and confirmed that you can’t transit with that paper,” he told them. That couldn’t get him anywhere. He was lying.

The clock kept ticking.

He then concocted. The motive was beginning to be clear. That the visa they have (tourist visa) won’t allow them to enter Spain. They argued that they have travelled with same travel documents before. He was reminded that this was no ordinary lady. “Letesenbet had carried the Ethiopian flag high having won competitions worldwide,” Haile insisted. The immigration guy wouldn’t relent.

The clock kept ticking fast.

He came up with yet another argument. “You need to produce a letter from the Spanish Embassy,” he told them. He was holding all the documents from the event organizers, the Spanish government, etc.; all enough to get them going. “And only then can you travel, tomorrow.”

Valencia was straight ahead. Another day in Addis would simply jeopardize the months of training Letesenbet had undergone just for that day in Spain.

For the duo, it felt like the clock stopped ticking.

The immigration officer appeared to be the living form of institutional malice and archetypal bigotry, that stood between her and what we now know was to be the Valencia super-victory. A record that was waiting to be broken; and as it stood, only by her. A record that may take another decade to be smashed and, probably, similar number of years to put Ethiopia on the records’ map of athletics again.

In my last *Letter from MQX (Alien in Addis, 3 October 2020, NorthStarTribune and Aigaforum)*, I wondered whether this sort of blunder at the same airport targeting people to and from Mekelle was *an exception or some rule; or an exception that has become the rule, a regular occurrence that we have to live with?* But, exception or rule, this was no ordinary mortal on the guillotine.

The clock kept ticking super-fast. They were into a serious impasse.

It was 10:45 pm; and barely an hour to departure time. All passengers were already in. At that point, they decide to reach out to the matriarch of Ethiopian Athletics. Luck has to be on their side.

Enter Derartu Tulu.

The moment she received Letesenbet's call, Derartu does what a woman who made it to the top the hard way- fighting misogyny, possibly a good dose of prejudice- would. She dropped everything and drove as fast as she run in the prime of her life in athletics. It was just as unbearable for this first black African woman to win gold in the 10,000 m event in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. They could all feel her heart beating when she walked to their side of the hall. Derartu is from Arsi, the leading gene pool of classiest athletes in all of Ethiopia. And her appearance on the spot right in the nick of time was a bombshell. "If Letesenbet misses her flight tonight, I am going to resign," she tells the immigration officer. Her disposition was all too lucid; 'someone is going to have to pay for it.'

Then, all at once, everything started to fall in place.

In the fast disappearing minutes to departure, as they walked to the gate, headed for their seats- Letesenbet in business, her coach in economy- both were struggling to make sense of what was indeed nonsensical.

Waving good-bye and good luck to the departing after that crucial intervention, I can't say Derartu knew she was reversing the course of the impossible. That she indeed was enabling a young, 22 years old athlete smash a 12 year old world record in the 5,000 m race that was owned by none other than her niece, Tirunesh Dibaba, in 2008. The enabler of the demolition of a Dibaba world record in excess of 4 seconds! That, folks, is eccentrically poetic.

Fractions of a second after she hit the finish line, when it was all too clear that she actually has broken the record, Letesenbet raised her hands a little below her shoulders, the palms slightly facing each other, as if she has no clue what to do with them. But we do know what she was trying to do. Just beyond the finish line, she made a cross sign and went on to raise her hands, of course, in thanks, praising her God for job well done. Letesenbet, an Orthodox Christian, comes from Samre, in the south east of Tigray.

But while Letesenbet was doing so, elsewhere in Tigray region, mothers were raising their hands much the same way she did, but only pleading with their God to deliver them from what they believed was a curse. Harvest is yet to be. However, a good chunk of the region was carpeted by a swarm of locusts. They came, they settled, they devoured entire fields- of teff, corn and whatever they planted ("they are munching on eucalyptus trees," one posted on his Facebook page) as, following good rains, harvest was positioned to be bountiful- and they left. Only to come back; again and again. One locust attack after another, it was unlike anything they have seen before. Those mothers were as much connected to the earth that soon may abandon them. Their dusty faces displayed the amount of time they spent demanding forgiveness kneeling, rolling over sandy ground,

coarsely crying, in grief. A familiar sound of endless despair in the hope of salvation. Meanwhile, their courses confused by marching youth hell-bent on destroying the intruder, the swarms of locusts were behaving like moving targets. And they were coming, any time, in the direction of Letesenbet's village.

But that never seemed to bother the powers that be in Addis Ababa. "The locusts were a spoiler to the feel-good mood at the center," argues a friend who closely watches Palace overtures in the Ethiopian capital. Only early this week, Abiy Ahmed, the Prime Minister who keeps on forcing himself in office (despite his expiry of term) appeared in parliament (that shouldn't have been around) where he exalted (with a capricious tinge of smile) "the swarm of locusts for attacking in unison" (for having "best understood his *'medemer'*") and, by blanketing the sky, succeeded in destroying everything green on the ground. This is the first time he spoke about locusts and that's the tone and content of his diatribe in "parliament." No one, not even in passing, engaged him. Not even when he bluntly told them, "you can't ask me where I brought the money for building the parks from as you never contributed a penny for it." Good-bye to parliament's cardinal role in oversight!! Needless to say the number of people considering him illegitimate is on a sharp rise.

In our case, reports reaching here from rural Tigray tell stories of peasants going berserk with their hectares of crops destroyed; many only days from harvest.

Abiy who is "always ready to jump in stealing the limelight," the same friend says- "distastefully on tv every day"- indeed takes the plunge ahead of everybody else in congratulating Letesenbet. Sahlework Zewde- in case you forgot, the president- tweets basically the same message but makes, well, some error. Yes, an error by a long time foreign office public servant, which, even in corridor conversations, is punishable by a hushed but utter disgust. In her tweet dash, Letesenbet ended up becoming *Leteberhan*. Many thought it was a joke. Just before she corrected the name, a Tigrayan social media activist took a screen shot of her tweet, picked up where she left and, in response, wrote '*Thank you Engidawork Zewde,*' deliberately misplacing on her given name (as she did to Letesenbet). Cruel irony, shall we say, at its best?

The activist seemed to be taking the unfinished business he has with the divisive Ethiopian politics, the whole conversation *per se*, to another level. Just a week or so earlier, in the joint parliamentary session that was not recognized by Tigray Region but that she nonetheless addressed, the president never mentioned Tigray or the whole constitutional debacle engulfing Ethiopia. She talked about the rule of law, intentionally ignoring the eminent danger of collapse the Ethiopian state was facing; a wobbly federation the rest of the world was clearly observing. With lack of legitimacy from people within all the regional states, the unconstitutional deferment and extension of the government's lease on power, the Prime Minister was ruling with brute force by deploying the army in all hotbeds of rebellion that now seem to be everywhere in the country.

Just this week, the Chief of Staff announced that two more Command Centers would be added to the existing four. One of them will be operating out of Addis Ababa. The ‘primacy of rule of law’ that the President kept on repeating in her speech will likely be executed by the sheer force of the Ethiopian army here in Addis Ababa; a city that is boiling with all forms of silent protests. Abiy has put major opposition politicians behind bars giving them names- my favorite is *religious and national extremist* which the new Attorney General, unfortunately for his position, seems to like- and continues to imprison and intimidate journalists and several influencers, “smoke out” actors and buy the silence of many, very many public intellectuals. Irreparably damaged Woreda administrations- the basic units in governance- are in disarray. Abiy’s new party Prosperity Party, an amorphous organization that has no clear agenda or vision is forcing people, though unsuccessfully, to join its ranks. In effect, there is no government except for the semblance of it.

The day after her victory, Debretsion Gebremichael (the Tigray Region’s chief) came on his Facebook page and congratulated Letesenbet for having made it “*despite all the challenges that she faced!*” The Bole Airport debacle didn’t dissipate as yet. Almost instantly, one ‘Letesenbet Gidey’ cut in on his page and posted *Thank you my President!* as if he was the leader of an independent nation. This post can’t be verified, as the social media is replete with instances of phony stuff. But genuine or bogus, that impression gives a good picture of what many seem to subscribe to. Is Tigray a country already; or on the way to becoming one?

Soon after his congratulatory post, Debretsion is spotted with farmers in southern Tigray. The locust onslaught looked like it was beyond local capacity and preparedness. For days, there was no sign of support from Addis Ababa. Weeks earlier, the central government came official severing its relations with the Tigray Region. “Nobody knew what that meant until now,” a journalist who was busy trying to make head and tails out of that declaration of the House of the Federation through its Speaker tells me in total disgust. This locust invasion has become an existential threat that they have to fight all on their own.

Almost immediately pictures of desperation started circulating on social media platforms. And one, in particular, caught my attention. A profile of a grey haired, slightly balding old man kneeling with his hands gently stretched a bit up, is looking a little to his left. Far to his left, beyond the lines of cactus (sign that it is southern Tigray) that serve as a fence for the cornfield, is, I guess, his green meadow. Further down, where possibly his house made of stones as in a typical Tigrayan abode is, lies some grayish field. The picture doesn’t tell if it is harvested (unlikely, but probably- I can see a couple working on the field) or devastated by the locusts (possible, if not now, then very soon). The old man’s absolute loneliness, the desperation, again, is apparent even to the most gullible. He probably is the sole breadwinner who has to deliver; which, in the face of this colossal locust attack, is nearly impossible. And there is no time. In one landing, the locusts would demolish the entire crop field meant to feed his family the whole year and with some to be availed to the market. He is kneeling; his hands gently lifted up seeking some divine intervention in this region of many patron saints. Beneath that picture of the old man,

someone posted, “It (the international community) shouldn’t allow a politically motivated passive intervention with the intent of inflicting maximum damage to the people of Tigray to succeed.” He had inserted another picture of an upright woman in the backwoods, with a sash firmly placed around her waist, looking straight to the camera as if ready to march with determination. And that of Fetien Abay, the newly appointed President of Mekelle University, who was caught running and chasing locusts with a whistle in hand. Worlds apart, both most likely have now become the poster women of resistance to a center with hysterically exclusionary dispositions.

In an ironic twist, the day Letesenbet broke that record in Valencia, the state Minister of Agriculture (Mandefro) held a press conference in his office in Addis Ababa. In that conference, he announced “locust swarms are witnessed in various woredas of Afar, Somali, Amhara, Oromia regional states as well as Dire Dawa town.” You must have noticed Tigray was profusely missing in his list. It was as if it didn’t figure in the Ethiopian federation. But, at least three weeks before he sat to meet the press, unblocked by aerial boundaries and lines, the swarms of locust were crisscrossing the Tigrayan sky.

His statement, though, was gaining traction in what seemed a coordinated denial of support. Raya Kobo Communication Office (Amhara Regional State) reported that week chemicals were sprayed in several locations using planes. Farmers in Southern Tigray who sought the intervention of the planes in their locust-infested fields were reportedly told “that they didn’t get instructions to cross that line to Tigray.” A trans-boundary mess was matched by a deliberate infusion of delineated marks and borderlines. “The planes circled and went off south,” a resident of Waja, the southernmost town of Tigray bordering the Amhara region that I was connected with by a friend told me over the phone. “Helplessness is an understatement; it doesn’t explain it,” he added of the state of mind at that particular moment of farmers in that part of Tigray.

A drone bought by Tigrayans for the same purpose continued to be locked away for months in the stores of Bole airport customs; close to the spot where Letesenbet was nearly prevented from flying for her historic race. No amount of cajoling could soften the hearts of the authorities in Addis. “We consider it confiscated,” the region’s Agriculture and Rural Development Bureau chief Atinkut Mezgebu told a journalist this week. “If they are so bold in denying such a basic weapon so publicly debated to fight the locusts, imagine what they must have been doing underneath,” a businessman who is quietly contributing to the efforts in Tigray told me. Unhindered by the absence of drones, the locust swarm whose part breeding ground is somewhere in the deserts of the Afar Region, just next door, has this week hit the outskirts of the Regional capital Mekelle. Meanwhile, the Dire Dawa Agricultural Bureau publicized that it was using drones capable of carrying 10-20 liters. Not to be outdone and partly in an attempt to create confusion, Abraham Belay, the minister of science and technology, Abiy’s confidante and his most unsuccessful point man for Tigray, told the media that drones were employed for spray in the region. Soon discovered a lie, the news piece was removed from all sites that carried it.

With her business in Valencia over, Letesenbet packed and made it back to Addis Ababa on October 9<sup>th</sup> where Derartu and two others waited to welcome her. Derartu, in the modest group picture taken is seen smiling broadly and holding that banner of a *world record broken*. Coach and athlete can't thank her enough. She saw them off; she welcomed them home. "She is just like a mother," Haile, the coach says; and a very shy Letesenbet agrees, "indeed!" The same day Letesenbet returns home to Mekelle. But, in just a few days that she has been out in Spain, the locust infestation as well as the public's mood and reaction have soared by leaps and bounds.

Yes, the locust swarms have become the cursors of total trepidation that never go away. They have already covered large swaths of land across the region including many parts of Ethiopia beginning with the immediate south. And as if the coronavirus pandemic were not enough, they have stepped in reportedly *threatening the food supply of over 20 million people in our part of the African continent*. "East Africa is in the midst of a crisis that sounds like something out of the Book of Exodus," the National Geographic Magazine reported early this year. I find that revealing. Several hundred thousand peasants in Tigray alone are facing the eminent destruction of their crops. "And you are just looking at the beginning," say experts who are following the pattern in the swarms' movement. They will be around until March next year, we are told. Tadesse Yemane, the Chairman of the Board of Tigray Development Association, TDA (established in Washington DC in 1989) is generously graphic. "This swarm of locusts is 500 times more than we had last year," he said in a videoconference conversation last week. "We are not just talking about farmers having their crops destroyed; we are talking about the whole Region brought to nothingness. The threat is existential, and we are acting like a country now." Gosh, that sounds like Armageddon approaching.

Back in Mekelle, Letesenbet is on her home turf now. If her reception in Addis Ababa was muted, Mekelle's was considerably big. Greeted by quite a receptive crowd, she was paraded along main avenues in town in a convertible. "*She broke two records; one in Valencia, and another at the Bole airport when the immigration guy was defeated*" (and let her go), was a popular post by her fans trending on social media. But, Mekelle also seems like it has been deserted, losing its noise and vibrancy the last few days primarily because, you have guessed right, folks were out and about chasing the trespasser. "We are attacked from both sides- the locust swarm and the central government," a journalist based in Mekelle who closely follows the rise, and rise of Letesenbet tells me. "It is intense." Letesenbet was rather uplifting. "We are strong and we are (always) winners in any area of work we are deployed to; we will prevail," she told several young boys and girls as they joined her in a bus in Mekelle. They ululated, whistled, clapped. They needed that encouragement and energy, I guess, as they must have been travelling to show solidarity with the farmers that have become the targets of these dreadful flying objects. Letesenbet's act of socialization with the youth in this time of despair and alienation is merely an expression of camaraderie with the disenfranchised.

Ah! That disenfranchisement and desperation takes me back 47 years. To the conscientious, beautiful and dignified *Wajirat* men and women (I can still see the relative peasant affluence with the butter- they owned plenty of cows and goats- melting in their

tons of hair under the scorching sun) who, surprisingly solemnly, silently trekked to our village in Western Tigray; a part of the region that was spared of the 1973/74 famine. It wasn't locusts; it was famine generated by years of neglect that hit them real hard. (Some twenty years ago, Jonathan Dimbleby, the British journalist who first reported the famine, told me he was as vehemently shocked as if it happened that year.) When they migrated, made the long journey west seeking deliverance after they had lost their engagement with Mother Nature, and with their God, they found themselves helpless; tremendously weak. They parted with their villages that have turned dusty to the relative reassurance of Western Tigray. After all those years, I can still feel the pain on my mother's face when she handed food and water to dozens of them. With grace, they asked for help to get through the day- they definitely had travelled a very long way- and with the generosity of a mother in pain, the transaction was effected. I wasn't like someone giving, another taking; it rather felt like a dignified human/e connection; reciprocity in total silence. That a 100 or 200 thousand died at that point, mere statistics, could never be a substitute for that group of humans who forever remained etched in my mind as a kid.

With that and the 1984/85 famine that saw the grand march of the starving peasants, that trail of humanity from the bedrocks of Tigray to the Sudan- simply because the central government in Addis denied them help (sounds familiar)- on background, people here seem to be unambiguous about the future even in the face of colossal adversity. And that, those young people in the bus with Letesenbet agree, shall never happen again. I can faintly hear their '*We Will Win*' accompanied with ululation.

In the absence of support from the center that is progressively becoming more alien, the entire Tigrayan social machinery seems to have gone into the business of fighting locusts full time with countless submitting to the traditional means. The young soccer fans from the four or five main clubs got hold of hundreds (if not thousands) of *vuvuzelas* of various colors and shades (that Covid-19 has made it impossible for the soccer season to resume helped), countless others from all corners of the region got to work along with loads of whistles, small and big, white cloth, paper, bed-nets, chemicals sprayers, and masks and alcohol for the deployed, by organizing buses and other means of transport. There is a lot of burning tires along highways spawning clouds of smoke effectively snuffing them. (Even if meant to chase locusts, burning tires in the middle of the road in Oromia region is still considered a sign of protest; hence a sin reprimanded severely. In the last three years, you can tell Ethiopia has become audaciously paradoxical.)

The picture is now bleak and, therefore, a lot more worrying. The swarms are very well positioned to destroy what has been built in several decades in bringing resilient livelihoods across Tigray. Alerts on their movements are thus shared using various means of communication. Mobile phones are busy. Many agree they have descended full force that can only be tackled by a similar energy. Matching the local initiatives, Tigrayns in the Diaspora launched their '*Tigray Fights Desert Locust*' fundraiser a little over a week ago have now collected close to 800 thousand USD. They are headed to meet the 1 million USD target within days. The Relief Society of Tigray (REST), the prime grassroots local NGO that has made tremendous efforts in the drive for food security in

the region for the last 35 years is on the forefront of the onslaught on locusts. TDA has also become one of the leading actors along with regional governmental departments.

At one point last week, the swarms of locust moved west towards Axum where masses of people stood their ground to face them. They then made a detour along the way to Adwa. They were met by truckloads of people there too, young people as if going to war; a war against an enemy that offers no known battle plans. The swarm made a detour to the Eritrean border via Rama, the last Ethiopian town on that route. When and if they cross, the locusts are sure to face barren fields as Eritrea's productive young are either in the unending national service with whoever remaining in towns put on total lockdown (Covid-19 induced dictatorial tendencies in action: in Ethiopia, it is the indefinite postponement of elections and such) or in the refugee camps on this side of the border. A colleague stationed in Shire Endaselassie tells me, they were not only "ready to fight the swarm along with their Tigayan fiends but have actually deployed themselves in many locations across Tigray." And those in Europe and the United States have started a fundraiser they dubbed "*Eritreans for Tigryan Farmers.*" They have already raised over 45 thousand USD and counting. "The Tigrayans should look north of the Mereb to fix the problem," argues Yosief Ghebrehwet in one of his paltalk engagements this year. He wants to see the regime in Asmara removed. Evidently a fierce critic of the regime in Asmara, Yosief believes Eritrea has consumed its young and was driving itself to the point extinction. That country started generating refugees soon after the end of the last war in 2000, first through its narrow spillways and later by all means possible including the bribing of generals at the highest level.

Fate is one hell of a bitch too. Letesenbet was born a couple of months before Isaias Afewerki invaded Ethiopia back in 1998 by crossing into *Badime*, the now famous flashpoint. With the war over two years later, the southward migration of refugees started in full swing. There are now nearly 180,000 Eritrean refugees, most of them in the four camps in Tigray. Countless have crossed through Tigray either for their third country resettlement or, trusting their feet, beating the Sahara desert to cross the Mediterranean on rickety boats. We know the rest of the story.

Many Eritreans I know- unaccompanied kids, farmers, businessmen, students, and the learned who have put their hope on hold waiting- want to go home. Of course, Isaias Afewerki, has to go first. But the Gods don't seem keen on answering their prayers. His health issues which started with a cerebral malarial bout that had him airlifted to Israel back in the early nineteen nineties ("Had I known what I now know about him," the doctor who treated Isaias tells a friend who, for obvious reasons, shall remain anonymous, "I am afraid I wouldn't have done that." Save him, by draining his blood *'that was charcoal black.'*) continue to this day. The most recent being the expensive liver transplant he reportedly had undergone that limited him to salad for meals; a forced vegan, that is. In his outpost at *Adi Halo*, just outside of Asmara (where he rarely is in his palace), he spends most of his days isolated, facing the lagoon he has created by displacing ordinary farmers who used to grow vegetables for the market. In one of the pictures from their meeting last year here at his *Adi Halo* office, Abiy appeared like a subordinate taking notes and instructions. When he is not here, Isaias travels south. The

week Letesenbet returned to Mekelle, Isaias flew in an unmarked plane, over what many Tigrayans who have gone nationalist by all standards say is *their airspace*, to Addis Ababa for his three-day, *third official visit* to the country. And, unofficially, who knows-for the nth time?

That Monday morning of 12<sup>th</sup> October he arrived in Addis Ababa, we knew Isaias was not there to visit Abiy's vanity projects or get a sneak preview of the engineering department at the premises of Ethiopian Air Force (the architects of that marvel are now behind bars with no credible charges filed against them), or the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam that he famously argued was meant to throttle Egypt (Meles Zenawi must be rolling in his grave), or the chains of dams built along the Gibe River. "He and Abiy are extremely worried by the reemergence of Tigray as a crucial actor in Ethiopian politics today," Wondimu Asaminew, a lecturer of Political Science at Mekelle University told *Mekelle Foresight*, Tigray Television's interview show over the weekend. "They are joined on the hip." Wondimu, also a former Ethiopian diplomat (last as ambassador in Mogadishu), is now heading the Tigray Friendship Liaison Office; bashfulness aside, the equivalent of a foreign office. With the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) moving back to its region, Isaias had insisted that the "game was over." Meaning, the TPLF, its key adversary, was gone. But by overwhelmingly winning the election held in early September, Tigray's display of muscle flexing by becoming the only region in the federation that refused to be managed from Addis Ababa and, ultimately, stood tall was cause for sleeplessness both in Asmara and Addis Ababa. With the "peace deal" or "treaty" signed in 2018 and the contents only known to them, they recognize they are bound to glide and/or die together. Sure enough, at that point Isaias' days were numbered and saving him came along with the yearning to send the TPLF on a one way ticket to perdition. But while successfully saving Isaias, at least for now, the "deal" failed to send the TPLF down.

Isaias' frequent travels to Addis Ababa (including unofficial), of course, intensely reciprocated by Abiy, pretty much look like the waltz of connivers under influence in the dying hours of the night with the rest of the crowd forming a circle around them watching, very much anxious to see how that tango would end. Is that shaky tango with Abiy a signal to a possible duel with the Tigrayans on a totally different front coming soon? Whatever the denouement is, the three years of Abiy dallying with Isaias to dwarf Tigray, nonetheless, "*has all the hallmarks of treason*," Seyoum Mesfin, the longest serving Foreign Minister, told the same channel earlier in the year. This month, we are waiting to see whether the promised budget cuts along that line will force Tigray adopt a totally different course.

Again, for nearly three years, with Abiy Ahmed as a solid partner in crime against one he claims is his own, Isaias has pursued his dream of destroying the TPLF by providing Abiy with the blueprint to subjugate Tigray; the last one element in the list, whose box he checked, being changing the Birr currency notes. When he left mid last week, though, what we saw was happy façades with uncertain interiors. Eritrea is as closed as ever, a hellish prison and Ethiopia burning all over that no amount of park visits could provide the right mascara for its fast aging face in simmering conflicts.

In Mekelle, the people have continued fighting locusts and encirclement as much as they are debating the fate of Ethiopia as it were, along with their place it. And in Addis Ababa, the self-styled leader has phenomenally failed the test of leadership. Busy spending on and inaugurating parks and intensely alive on television every single day, he even screwed up big time at the one opportunity he had with his MPs to clear himself. He devastated their hopes by his inability to face the severe challenge the country faces in the drive to feed itself. Primarily because of locusts! There may never be harvest we hoped for this time around.

Despite the appeal the Global Society of Tigray Scholars (GSTS) and others are making, their hope for international support to fight locusts seems to be disappearing. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which was meant to help the sub-region navigate swiftly in situations like the locust infestation we are facing now, is gone. Isaias, along with Abiy have effectively shelved it, many argue. Aptly, “Where is IGAD?” asks Seyoum Mesfin, who was an influential actor in keeping it alive and well, in an interview a couple of weeks ago. Certainly, what remains is a carcass.

That day she broke the world record in Valencia, “*This is a long time dream,*” Letesenbet told the journalist, shy and smiling. “*Before it was Tirunesh, now I am; it is Ethiopia.*” Now, having resumed training in the hills of historic Maichew as fighting locusts continues across the region, she and her coach are eying the Olympics with utmost sense of focus. She dreams to raise the Ethiopian flag high again. But can another unfriendly reception at the Bole International Airport be a good omen; just as it probably was last time around they flew to Spain?

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*NOTE: Letesenbet and Haile’s October 10 interview with DW Television was helpful in the reconstruction of the Bole airport impasse*

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