

## **TPLF at 40: The Camel Swiftly Marches While a Few Dogs Still Bark**

**By Mezgebe Gebrekiristos, February 6, 2015**

Preparations are underway, and rightly so, both in Ethiopia and in the Diaspora to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) since its inception at Dedebit. “Lekatit 11”, as the Tigray people and supporters of the TPLF fondly call it, has been commemorated every year for the last thirty nine years by all walks of life. But this year’s celebration is unique in that more attention is given to Dedebit—the birthplace of the TPLF. For instance, a group of Ethiopian artists and other personalities have visited the place recently and held illuminating discussions with government officials who participated in the struggle. Such live sessions were timely and must be consistently done in the future for there is so much valuable history to learn from a place that was the epicenter of the struggle.



*From left to right: Dr. Kassu Elala, Haleka Tsegay, Addisu Legesse, and Ambassador Seyoum Mesfin—getting ready to share their experiences with the artists during the recent visit to Dedebit*

The recent visit to the TPLF birth place, Dedebit, and the subsequent panel discussions, have helped in boosting awareness among the general public the immense sacrifices that were paid by the selfless individuals commonly known as ‘Tegadeliti’ on our behalf. Their sacrifices paved the road to today’s Ethiopia where the rights of all nations and nationalities are respected under the law of the land. Gone are the days of torture and mass killings in the form of “Red Terror” by the very government that is supposed to protect the public.

However, the visit has sent shocking waves through the spines of few individuals who were the sole beneficiaries during the previous regimes. No wonder why the very mention of the word

Dedebit creates unprecedented nightmare in their lives. As a result, counter to their claim to know it all, these hate-mongers often mistake Dedebit for “dedeb” and are quick to label their critics as “graduates of Dedebit University.” By doing so, they hopelessly think--in their little minds—that they can silence the voices of open-minded people. For His greatness, when Jesus Christ encountered such people He asked His Father for forgiveness on their behalf, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Consistent with the Bible reference, forgiveness is in order for these detractors –with a little elucidation that is: Hence, this 101 on Dedebit. Hereafter, to illustrate my point and in line with the critics metaphor, I will reference Dedebit as a Practical University where many talented men and women graduated with full honors.

### **Dedebit: a university for the selfless individuals**

On February 22, 1975, Dedebit Practical University was opened for business with only few dedicated students. Unlike conventional learning institutions, Dedebit didn’t have lecture rooms, dormitories, formal libraries, and designated lecturers. At Dedebit University, the sky was the class room; the bush was the dormitory; the stone was the pillow at night; the local people were the library; the portable blackboard was the exercise book; the students’ blood was the ink to write history; and the students themselves were the lecturers. The admission criteria were not merely good grades, but perseverance, self-control, dedication, motivation, courage and, more importantly, self-sacrifice. As a result, admission rate was low at the beginning due to the stringent admission requirements.

Grading was tough: there was no chance for failure, because the stakes were so high. Self-evaluation was a very common practice in the teaching and learning process, yet amazingly unbiased. Due to the shortage of personnel, there was no specified field of study per se: Students were expected and trained to be all rounded professionals who can handle an array of problems.

Though certain, at Dedebit University, graduation day was not known—with an open-ended number of credit hours. There were no semesters and no summer breaks for the students. School was on 24/7. This very nature of the students earned them the powerful name in struggle for freedom, “Tegadelti.” On the basis of rigorous course work, sharp mindedness, and the contribution of their efforts to the improvement of humanity, justice and equality, all “Tegadelti” have earned the highest degree a teaching institution can offer. I would also further argue that all Tegadelti could be nominees for the Nobel Prize for their outstanding contributions to peace and stability in our country and beyond. And, if this is what the detractors unwittingly mean when they say “graduates of Dedebit University”; so be it.

Yes, there was also tuition for attending Dedebit University, but the currency was not money: It was life itself. Contrary to your typical university loans, however, there was no option taking advantage of the grace period after graduation, nor was there a payment deferment option during difficult times. Students were ready to pay the required fees from the time they joined the school

and never complained about the high cost of education.

From those humble beginnings, and tough circumstances, present day democratic Ethiopia was born. On May 28, 1991, Dedebit University laid a cornerstone for the proliferation of governmental and private universities throughout our country. Consequently, our country is home to more than thirty colleges and universities, and counting. If this is the weakness of Dedebit University; so be it.

In August 1994 a constitution that guaranteed the rights (up to secession) and equality of all nations and nationalities was ratified with the help of the “Dedebit University graduates” for the first time in the history of our country. If this is what ESAT calls one of the shortcomings of Dedebit University; so be it.

Ethiopia, for the first time in its entire history, has held four consecutive national elections that were hailed as free and fair by world renowned election observers such as the former U.S. president Jimmy Carter thanks to the sacrifices of the Dedebit University graduates and others. If this is what the doom-sayers consider as a drawback; so be it.

On April 02, 2011, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who himself is one of the early graduates of Dedebit University, laid the corner stone for the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) with the ultimate aim to eradicate the proverbial poverty once and for all from our country. Such an endeavor, that is both an immense source of national pride and an important producer of hydroelectric power, has never been tried by previous leaders who ruled Ethiopia. If the hate-mongers mean dedication to one’s country when they think of graduates of Dedebit University; so be it.

Ethiopia is blessed to have leaders with high caliber and resilience. I am happy to announce that most of these talented leaders are graduates of Dedebit University. Due to good governance and sound economic strategies, Ethiopia’s economic growth is now in the double digits. Not to mention, the quality of leadership of Dedebit’s graduates is a testimony to the university’s par excellence. If this is what can be achieved by a graduate from Dedebit University, I would be the first to apply for admission to the school. Who wouldn’t, if it were not a little bit too late?

Finally, if the act of making sure the “derg” and the born-again “dergists” are not going to come to power is synonymous with the word “Dedebit”; so be it. After all, this was the goal “Dedebit” was set to achieve in the first place some 40 years ago. If this turns out to be a nightmare to the enemies of united and strong Ethiopia, that is too bad. It is here to stay for generations to come. As the old adage has it,” The camel marches while the dogs bark.” Way to go TPLF and eternal glory to our martyrs!!

For constructive comments, the author can be reached at [emaa\\_go@yahoo.com](mailto:emaa_go@yahoo.com).