



**IF WE GIVE UP ON OURSELVES, WE HAVE NO PLACE TO GO!**

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**I grew up in a crowded home in a non-typical town in rural Ethiopia. Non-typical because my town had two schools—one public the other private; it had a hospital and a clinic; it had a regularly scheduled bus transportation system that ferried people back and forth to the provincial capital as well as the third biggest city in the country at the time; and it even had two diesel generators for power though not everyone had a power line connected to their homes. When the generators were both on, which wasn't often, the thunderous noise could be heard all the way to the east side of heaven!**

**My siblings and I were extremely lucky. We had the opportunity to choose; we attended school instead of growing up as hired hands on some farm; and as luck would have it, we grew up in a land and at a time when conflict was at a minimum. My teachers included personalities like Mildred Heistand, Ato Haile Fida, Martha and Robert H. Garber, Ato Samuel Sultan, Ato Samuel Bekele, Ato Kidane Mekonnen and Ato Taye Beshahwured. Most had a baccalaureate degree in hand, and the rest were graduates of the teaching academies of the time. I state all this not as a point of exclamation or satisfaction, but to point out the role luck plays in ones life. I state it as well, as a recognition that my wanting to ascribe equal opportunities and equal access to all as some universal standard will not be sufficient to make it so. The Ethiopia of the 1970s and after does not resemble the one in which I grew up and remember. The challenges of the youth today are inordinately complicated and beyond my abilities to fathom.**

**Those who had the opportunity to go to school did so with the intent of finding some government job once they were done. As a typical member of my generation, I aspired to go to high school, get admitted to the university, and if fortune shined on me, head overseas for more education but come back to the country to seek one of those coveted government jobs for the educated. And if there were to be any scars at all, it would be as a result of an accidental run-in with my own whip rather than from the hands of an immigrant-bashing bigot**

in some foreign land. Those who left Ethiopia in those days left with the expressed intent of coming back just as those who left before them did. As a result, there were not too many documented cases of Ethiopians leaving their country and staying overseas as refugees. For example, it is said that there had not been a single documented case of Ethiopians coming to the United States and requesting refugee status up until the 1970s.

Things have changed drastically now, and so has the world around us as well. Globalization has made the issue of where one resides somewhat irrelevant as long as one comes with talent, potential, education or a highly desirable skill. The airplane made distance irrelevant, and communication technologies made sound ideas more important than ideology.

Ethiopia of today seems to be a country where an able-bodied young person aspires to leave the country either for economic or for political reasons. One witnesses thousands of young girls with head covers lined up at Bole International airport awaiting flights to some destination in the Middle East. Most of these girls are between the ages of 14 through 16, and some look even younger. Most can't even read the airport signage system; and I suspect most are functionally illiterate and completely unaccustomed to modern life. While these travelers are known to the government and are sanctioned by an authority of the government, there are others who leave the country illegally—most of these, under the noses of the *killil* authorities. It is believed that most who migrate illegally, end up in the Middle East for permanent stay there, or are on their way to a third country. As a result, the number of Ethiopians residing outside of the country is estimated to be close to two million.

### The Current Predicament

As a prelude to the following section, I will state one proposition: every country has a sovereign right to restrict, control or in general, regulate who moves into or out of its rightful territory. This is true of a refugee-heaven like the United States; "The Kingdom from Hell" like Saudi Arabia; refugee-friendly countries like Sweden, the Netherlands, Ethiopia or any other country in the world. The other side of that proposition is that those who immigrate are expected to abide by the laws, honor and respect the customs and cultures of the host countries. So why have Ethiopians found a united voice regarding the predicament befallen their kin in the Middle East—particularly, in Saudi Arabia? The answer, I am afraid, may be found in the examination of the most recent past.

Asked, "Who was coming after him?" a man replies, "My past: every dark, miserable day of them". I will not add more to what has been stated by many regarding what has taken place during the past few weeks with Ethiopians in the Middle East, particularly, Saudi Arabia. What is true is that Ethiopians

have paid a very heavy price for their presence in Saudi Arabia, and most of it is repulsive, revolting, outright criminal, and beyond the simple requisite of human decency. No single entity has articulated the migrants' quagmire as the politically derided Diaspora. It spoke with one voice, and in doing so, not surprisingly; it exemplified the adage 'my brothers' and sisters' keeper'. I say not surprisingly, because those in the Diaspora understand too well that when there is contempt for one of us, there is contempt for who we are and for all of that we represent. And if one contemptuous individual succeeds, others may feel that they are equally fit to disrespect and harm. That is the lesson of what transpired in Saudi Arabia. Though the Saudis have expelled foreigners from other countries as well, they felt they were immune from their own laws in harassing, abusing and raping Ethiopian women. It is the shame of the decade—one we could have anticipated had we been paying attention. Now, we are left to behave like a frustrated people who couldn't express ourselves except in anger, dismay or despair.

After the fall of the monarchy, but not necessarily because of it, Ethiopians began leaving in droves. Most migrated to the Middle East, where the demand for daily laborers and domestic workers was massive. Others migrated to the United States, Europe and Australia. As happens with immigrant communities from anywhere, the prevalence of work attracts more workers, individual workers then begin pulling in relatives and friends, and soon immigrant communities swell up in numbers. The murderous *Derg* regime in Ethiopia was impervious to the needs of the bulging numbers of the young as long as it supplied it with military recruits for its then massive army. While the *Derg's* policy on immigration was restrictive, most left the country illegally, by foot or by boat, to escape military conscription or even death. The Red-terror campaign was so horrific that many felt that they were just lucky to flee.

After the fall of the *Derg*, the policy changed to an insensitively articulated policy of a right to immigrate, and captured by the derisively intended phrase of "*mengedun cherk yargilachihu*" (a sarcastic 'good luck'). Official policy was 'open migration' provided one had the necessary papers (which generated revenue). To enable open migration, the government even created opportunities by entering into agreements with Middle Eastern countries, and tolerated the existence of broker agencies that facilitated such migration. Some argue that the government's policy was benign meant to create job opportunities for the large number of unemployed youth, while others suggest more sinister motives. Needless to say, the result is that massive numbers of people left the country, both legally and illegally, to any number of foreign lands.

If it were individual well being that government policy had in mind, it should have put in place economic and social policies appropriately fit for fourteen and fifteen year old girls in accordance with the labor laws of the country. What is disheartening, however, is that the developmental state economy of

today (others call it crony capitalism) or the socialist ideology driven economy of the *Derg* have generated too few private sector employment than would otherwise be sufficient for a growing population such as that of Ethiopia.

This was not just limited to official policy. The policy of open migration was even articulated by opposition politicians. When Temesgen Zewde, a respected opposition politician, recently wrote 'let these women go', he was consigning the little girls leaving Ethiopia, by way of declaring a right to travel, to a grim zone of struggle, abuse, rape, and maybe even death (as recently took place in Saudi Arabia). In my opinion, the 'right' to immigrate is not absolute. Rather, it is conditional. At the very minimum, it requires the concurrence of a third party.

It is not just government policy that bears blame for the large number of migrant Ethiopian populations around the globe. The public, who enjoyed the large amount of remittances by relatives, was by and large, sympathetic as well. In addition to the Ethiopian public, those in the Diaspora must also share responsibility. Everyone is entitled to his or her own dreams. Some of us measure our success by the positions we have achieved. The rest of us measure success by the level of improvement we have made in our lives and those of others. All are worthwhile goals and dreams. But often times, highly uneducated or undereducated but restive friends and family members are encouraged to leave their homeland in search of better opportunities without a clear understanding of what awaits them in their selected host countries. Most do very well indeed. But there are always obstacles and challenges, which are minimized by foreign-residing relatives and friends.

The biggest challenge and obstacle is the fact that when societies are under stress, they tend to find others or some one to blame. Immigrant populations are usually the first to blame. Human fears and human desires have not changed for thousands of years. For example, when the US perceived it was in danger during WWII, it put the constitution aside and interned Germans, Italians, and Japanese residing in the country legally (Crystal City, Texas!). The unknown is either grand or to be feared. Such seems to be the case with Ethiopians in the Middle East. One difference, however, is the fact that Ethiopians have additional handicaps: the handicap of color, insensitive and contemptuous host country views, and the handicap of being pawns in a larger political puzzle. Who knows if the Saudis, by their treatment of Ethiopians, were attempting to lend a hand to a fellow Arab country whose official policy is to destabilize and distract Ethiopia from its own stated goals of development and resurgence!

At a time like this, Ethiopians need leaders who are both visionary and inspiring and not just relegated to saying 'they can come home', as sincere as that appears to be. There is now a golden opportunity to mend the problem of illegal immigration. Ethiopians need a "Menilik", who when threatened by a

European foe inspired his people by exhibiting the correct balance of humility and courage in his call to battle: *I have never mistreated you. Your country is in danger. Those of you, who are able, follow me. Those who can't follow me to battle, pray for me!* (Paraphrasing). They need a "Haile Selassie", who when confronted with internal, self-serving arguments for religious extremism simply quieted things down with just seven words: *"Religion is personal, country is for all"*. Similarly, today Ethiopia needs someone who would say: this country will be built with courage, patience and unceasing dedication and passion. No one will stop us. I implore you not to give up on your country. If we give up on ourselves, we have no place to go!

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