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Ruth MaClean of The Guardian, in her article, "It's just slavery: Eritrean conscripts wait in vain for freedom", politicises the issue of migration and misrepresents Eritrea and its institutions, and insults the intelligence of her readers. It also promotes and justifies dangerous flight by Eritrea's youth who have been lured with false promises of greener pastures and open asylum. This letter will not address the Guardian's history of anti-Eritrea reporting, but will mention just a couple of issues with the recent report by Ruth MaClean, which regurgitates unsubstantiated allegations against Eritrea and misrepresents its people, and the youth in particular.

Eritrea is a country in the Horn of Africa where states are subject to severe pressures due to demographic changes and deep social and political cleavages. It is also a country that is now emerging from a 20 year long conflict with Ethiopia. Eritrea has also been targeted by media and NGO networks and has been fighting a vicious and orchestrated vilification campaign that targeted the youth, especially those in service. Eritrea's small population and its meagre resources have had to be mobilised for defense and development. The 9 year long illegal UN sanctions and attempts to isolate the country diplomatically, economically and politically have also negatively affected the country's development and security. The July 2018 rapprochement with Ethiopia will give both countries reprieve and pave the way for stable peace.

The National Service Program in Eritrea was prolonged because of the border conflict with Ethiopia and now the two countries are beginning the normalisation of relations with the border being opened and there is free movement of goods and people. That does not however mean that those in National Service can abandon their posts and leave the country illegally. Contrary to what is presented in the article, Eritrea's National Service program offers education and training for all its members. The Guardian's MaClean is not responsible for Eritrea's defense and security and is in no position to dictate the terms of the National Service Program, a sovereign right. As a young country National Service in Eritrea helped to create a common shared experience among the youth. With prospects for peace in the region, the experience should continue to be positive in its contribution to nation-building.

MaClean in her article, relies on and prominently features individuals and groups with a long history of anti-Eritrea activities, displaying the Guardian's arrogance and bias in its reporting

about Eritrea. By using Helen Kidan, a member of the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights, as one of her sources, further undermined the Guardian's credibility, integrity and ability to produce fair and balanced reports about Eritrea. Had McClean done her research on EMHDR, she would have discovered that it is one of the notorious anti-Eritrea Diaspora based groups which has been disseminating false information on Eritrea since its founding in 2004. Its members are avowed regime change activists who have used human rights as a pretext to advance their illicit political agendas against the Government of Eritrea.

The sudden mushrooming of western funded "human rights" and "democracy" groups in the Diaspora since the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia has impaired the emergence of a robust and responsible civil society in line with Eritrea's rich history and culture. The partnering of such groups with international NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Christian Solidarity Worldwide amongst others, is very telling of their motives. A look at a posting by Helen Kidan about her work with CIVICUS exposes the political motivation behind EMHDR's activities vis a vis Eritrea and its leadership. Kidan Stated:

"...This work with Civicus is crucial as there is no independent civil society inside Eritrea, and this makes the Eritrean situation unique. Therefore, training Eritrean human rights defenders in the diaspora is very important in supporting the humanitarian situation of Eritrean refugees but also being able to support Eritrean people after the fall of the regime....As Eritrea was in a thirty-year war for independence from Ethiopia, during this period the civil society collapsed, and people became militarised..."

Ms. Kidan's statement about Eritrean society, one with a long history of civil society groups, exposes her lack of knowledge about the function of a "civil society", and ignorance about their instrumental role in Eritrea in varying sectors, especially in education and healthcare. The Guardian should endeavor to provide context for its reporting on Eritrea and stop relying on hearsay and from using dubious individuals and groups as sources.

In Eritrea, a strong partnership exists between government and civil society organisations. This dynamic and promising relationship is deep rooted and the relationship has its foundations in the period of the armed struggle for liberation where civil society, contrary to what Ms. Kidan stated, rallied alongside the liberation front and played a crucial role in the successful struggle for independence. Civil society in Eritrea is a result of colonial, liberation and post-liberation social conditions. A focused, nation-centered civil society, which goes beyond divisive politically motivated sub-national interest and one that does not undermine Eritrea's sovereignty and territorial integrity, one that responds to nation building remains vital. There are several civil society groups in Eritrea with varying mandates. Suffice it to mention a few; the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, National Union of Eritrean Women, National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, Peace-building Center for the Horn of Africa, Eritrean American and Canadian Returnees, Eritreo-German Cultural Center, African Strategies, Red Sea Institute, Biddho, etc.

In addition, there are many Diaspora civil society organisations that have close links with those in country. For example, the National Union of Eritrean Women with over 300,000 members has chapters across Europe in the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, France, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland, and over 36 Chapters across North America and the Middle East. The conventional and Eurocentric notion of civil society does not provide adequate understanding of the reality in Eritrea.

The Guardian also chose to regurgitate Amnesty International's distorted narrative on Eritrea. The researcher, an Ethiopian, with an obvious bias against Eritrea, completely misrepresents the National Service program in Eritrea and the Warsay-Yikaalo School in Sawa. Contrary to the narrative presented, 2003 was the first year in which the Eritrean Educational Transformation began. 12th grade education in Sawa began in the 2003/2004 academic year when the Eritrean school system transformed from 11 years into 12 years of schooling and schools were obliged to accommodate one more grade. This was very difficult due to lack of additional classes and overcrowding.

Sawa enrolled those students who completed Grade 11 and it offered Grade 12 courses to qualify them for Secondary School completion. During that time the Eritrean Defense Forces Training Centre moved from Sawa to another place, which meant a considerably large amount of resources and facilities were left in Sawa. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education decided to use these facilities and solve the problem of space and resource limitations in the regular secondary schools by moving 12th Graders to Sawa. In addition, it was more efficient to use the very limited human and material resources in one place for all 12th Graders than trying to scatter them into 80 secondary schools which was impossible at that time. Therefore, the decision to send 12th Graders to Sawa was taken to maximise the utilisation of badly needed resources. The outcomes of the program, however, went beyond maximum utilisation of resources. Some of the opportunities it created include:

- Equal learning environment for all learners who came from all corners of the country (rural, urban, remote areas, poorly resourced schools, elite schools)
- Sharing of experience
- A sense of self-confidence and independence on the part of the learners
- The development of many intended positive values and social skills such as: cooperation, tolerance, hardworking, respect of others, dealing with others, understanding of different cultures and languages of Eritrea
- The development of the sense of competition and the appreciation of excellence, etc. and the marked improvement in the achievements of students can be attributed to these positive outcomes.

Sawa became the melting pot of all the ethnic groups and helped to strengthen the feeling and spirit of national unity. By referring to this educational and socialising of Eritrea's youth as being "militarised" by the Guardian and its sources is an insult to the cultured people of Eritrea, and white washing of militarisation. The people of Eritrea have borne the brunt of militarisation by successive Ethiopian regimes and their western sponsors and the decaying equipment strewn across their nation is a reminder of its brutality and destruction.

The Guardian should endeavor to provide accurate and balanced reports in the future and refrain from such distorted reports that misrepresent Eritrea's reality, as they are of great disservice to its readers.

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