

## CHAPTER II

### THE EMERGE OF ERITREA NATIONAL SERVICE

In the second chapter, the author is going to analyze the history of Eritrea national service. The author believes that it is important to understand the core constitution and value of Eritrea national service. It will explore the change in the policy regarding national service before, in and after the Eritrea-Ethiopia War 1998-2002. This chapter will also analyze the aim of national service according to the Eritrea's proclamation and Isaias Afwerki.

#### A. Eritrean National Service Before The Eritrea-Ethiopia War 1998-2002

Eritrea National Service was founded in 1991, but the military training officially started in July 1994. Before that, students, especially at university and secondary levels performed youth development work without taking military training. In the first proclamation of Eritrea National Service, the Proclamation No. 11/1991, the National Service mainly was targeted toward the youth and the unemployed for the time of 18 months. There were a number of categories exempted from National Service (Kibreab, 2014):

1. People who were engaged in industrial, agricultural and pastoral production
2. Licensed self-employed traders, except those who work in liqueur houses (*biet meste*), bars, hotels and nightclubs

3. Women who are in gainful employment, self-employment or who make a living by employing others are exempt from the obligation
4. Married women and single mothers
5. Sole breadwinners in families; and couples in honeymoon, i.e. until the honeymoon ends.

Those who are exempted from National Service are provided with relevant exemption documents so that the military will not arrest them in the accusation of being a deserter.

Isaias Afwerki, Eritrean president who has been in the charge of power since the independence era, as quoted in *Eritrea Profile* (1994) promised in his speech in May 1994 that the National Service would also help the nation to build ‘an army to safeguard Eritrea’s unity and sovereignty’, would have positive psychological effect on the youth and would inculcate ‘in them love of work’ and promote ‘persistence’ and ‘physical well-being’. The program was expected to bear a function as an instrument to transfer the values and characteristic of the ruling party, the EPLF (now PFDJ), to the new generations to preserve the legacy of the thirty years war.

Conscription into National Service primarily takes place via two channels; the education system and regular ‘round-ups’ (*giffa* in Tigrinya) of the population. Orders to report for duty are also sent to the parents of children no longer in school but those who sent their child voluntary is very rare.

The military training part of national service was mainly conducted in Sawa Training Centre, some in Kiloma Training Centre, and others in Wia Training Centre. It is also said that some training is held in Dahak Island. Sawa as the



Picture 2.1: Sawa Training Centre from Satelite

Source: UNITAR (2015)

main training camp is a home for almost 9000 conscripts, it is a full-fledged military city with all utility services, is regarded as the largest military camp in Eritrea, and is spread over 1,800 hectares (Shaheen, 2010). The government believes that Sawa is the place that can connect the relationship

among Eritrean youngsters who comes into the conscription from

all different corner of the country with different background.

Later in 1995 through the Proclamation 82/1995, the government changed the requirement and made it compulsory for all Eritrean between the age of 17 to 40 years old to participate in the National Service for 18 months, the exception only applied for those who were veterans from the thirty-years war and physically infirm people.

The 18 months of National Service mainly consists of six months of military training, in which the conscripts will receive intensive military,

physical training, rigorous political socialization and indoctrination, and the rest is active military service and development work under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense or other ministries, regional administrations or the firms of the ruling party, the Eritrean People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

The graduates of National Service are called *Warsai*, which in Tigrinya means heir or one who inherits the legacy of the struggle. The *Yikaalo* (former EPLF fighters) were said to be endowed with such qualities and values, without which independence 'against all odds' would have been inconceivable. The term *Yikaalo* means someone who is capable of doing a miracle.

## **B. Eritrea National Service In and After The Eritrea-Ethiopia War 1998-2002**

As already stated in the previous chapter that Eritrea was never absent of conflict, after the thirty-years-long war to gain the independence ended, five years later the Eritrea-Ethiopia war broke out in 1998. The main trigger was the dispute over border between the two countries. According to a ruling by an international commission in The Hague, Eritrea broke international law and triggered the war by invading Ethiopia. After the war ended, the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission, a body founded by the UN, decided that Badme, the disputed territory, belongs to Eritrea. Until today, the area near Badme is still occupied by Ethiopia.

Before the border war, the conscripts were demobilized after eighteen months as required by law. But as the war growing bigger than the government expected, they decided to remobilize citizen who were already done with their National Service time. Not only did the government remobilize those who had been demobilized, those who were drafted after May 1998 had not been demobilized.

This is in spite of the government's promise to demobilize 200,000 soldiers, including conscripts, after the signing of the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in December 2000 in Algiers under the auspices of the African Union and to some extent the United Nations, the European Union and the government of the United States (Kibreab, *The Open-Ended Eritrean National Service: The Driver of Forced Migration*, 2014). In the immediate post-Algiers peace agreement, the Eritrean government established a National Commission for the Demobilization and Re-integration Program (NCDRP). The NCDRP has carried out program planning with technical assistance and training from the UNDP, and cooperation from the World Bank to phase demobilization program of some 200,000 combatants was formulated.

In the first phase, some 70,000 soldiers comprising of the old combatants (*Yikealo*) and conscripts of *Warsai* were expected to be demobilized by the end of January 2003. In the second phase 60,000 combatants were expected to be demobilized by the end of July 2003. Due to

uncertainties concerning funding at the time, the government did not specify the exact time when the remaining 70,000 soldiers would be demobilized but the program was scheduled to end in 2007. The main funder of the planned disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) was the World Bank which budgeted a total of \$197.2 million for the plan (The World Bank, 2002). This works out to an average of \$985 per soldier for the 200,000 soldiers planned for demobilization. The distribution of resources for this budget can be seen in this following table:

Table 2.1: Distribution of Resources for DDR

| Component                         | \$ Millions  | %          |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|------------|
| Demobilization                    | 9,250,000    | 4,7        |
| Reinsertion (cash)                | 105,000,000  | 53,2       |
| Reinsertion (in kind)             | 15,000,000   | 7,6        |
| Reinsertion (NCDRP)               | 35,000,000   | 17,7       |
| Reintegration (sector programs)   | 15,000,000   | 7,6        |
| Special target groups             | 2,000,000    | 1          |
| Institutional strengthening       | 1,200,000    | 0,6        |
| Executive Secretariat (capital)   | 1,400,000    | 2,7        |
| Executive Secretariat (recurrent) | 4,000,000    | 2          |
| Contingencies                     | 9,393,000    | 5          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                      | <b>197,2</b> | <b>100</b> |

Source: The World Bank (2002)

But rather than fulfilling its promise and abide to the well-planned program, instead, the Eritrea government under the new label called *Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign* (WYDC) in May 2002 made the National Service indefinite.

Furthermore, in 2003 the government made it compulsory for the youth in all secondary school to complete their 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the training center as conscripts. Because of that, some students have begun to deliberately fail classes in order to remain in the lower grades. Government answer to this practice was that they simply pulled anyone of military age—18 and above—out of school altogether, even though it is normal for some students to take extra years to finish school because they are poor or work on family farms.

After one year in the national service the student must undergo examination to graduate from their high school. After the exams, students were given a month of home leave and then required to return to Sawa for their exam results and their assignment to national service. Eritrean students must score a minimum 2.0 General Point Average to be assigned to further education. Higher grade students are assigned to degree program and those with a lower pass mark are assigned to diploma program (Amnesty International , 2015). Those who do not score a sufficiently high grade to be assigned to higher education are immediately assigned to National Service. Those who pass the exam are assigned to one of seven government colleges.

The possible main reason the National Service has ostensibly become open-ended is because of the state of “no war no peace’ permeating the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. For example, the US State Department’s report (2010) on human rights in Eritrea states, “National service obligations are effectively open-ended although the government does

not acknowledge this circumstance.”

Human Rights Watch in its comprehensive report titled *Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea* (2009) states, “Some citizens were reportedly enlisted in the national service for many years with no prospective end date.” The report further states, “The government justifies its open-ended draft on the basis of the undemarcated border with Ethiopia.”

The truth is Eritrea government presented National Service as an existential matter for their country. They perceived that one of the pillars upon which the very existence of Eritrea stands, is the National Service. WYDC is rottenly similar to National Service just with different cover. Eritrean does not even bother to call it WYDC, as the basic rule and the enforcement was same as National Service.

Many controversies revolved around the government decision about the new National Service. For example, the exiled former Attorney General, Adhanom Gebremariam (2002), one of the groups of fifteen senior EPLF officials who publicly criticized President Afwerki in 2001, has labeled the indefiniteness of National Service as ‘slave labour’. As the conscripts in the National Service they have no rights to oppose the government. They even were not getting chance to choose their assignments or jobs, only given an allowance of 50 Nakfa (around \$3) per month, and after 18 months of training they will be paid with a low monthly salary between 145 – 500



Nakfa (approximately 30 US\$) even though rent for basic accommodation can be around 500 Nakfa per month. As a result, conscripts are often dependent on their parents or extended families and, particularly, on family members in the diaspora to survive. Other than that the conscripts also have limited and poor access to health care, are and not allowed to visit their family on a regular basis.

The government also tries to own almost every single of business in the country by transforming them into part of national service. So that, in essence, an Eritrean is conscripted, subjected to military training for six months, then assigned to any job by the state. Even before they join the national service they already had a steady job and after they finish the sixth months of military training they will be assigned in that same job but with lower salary as a part of serving the country.

In most cases, conscripts with low level or no education and vocational qualifications are assigned to serve in the army. Those with academic, professional and vocational qualifications are often assigned to work for the ministries, departments, regional governments, banks, modern farms owned by the state and/or the ruling party, the PFDJ within the framework of the national service. For example, a professional footballer was told to report for national service. When he finished six months of military training he was assigned to play football again, but as part of his national service. Before military training he had earned 3,600 Nakfa a month (\$220).

Afterwards, as part of national service, he was paid an allowance of 400 Nakfa a month (\$24) (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

At the beginning of the establishment of the national service, the people were voluntary coming to the army in hope that they can quickly back to their normal life, but as the indefinite policy issued most of the conscripts were brought forcibly. There are strict penalties for those who try and escape national service as well as for any Eritreans who leave the country without government authorization. The deserters' families are collectively punished if their relatives flee the national service, there are two punishments that often they receive; by being jailed or forced to pay fines.

In Human Rights Watch report (2009), they also interviewed an officer formerly responsible for chasing down the deserters. He said that since 1998, it's standard to capture a family member if someone flees the national service. The Administration will give the order to take family members if the national service member cannot be found. If the conscript disappears inside Eritrea then the family will be put in prison for some time until the child returned to the national service. If the deserters cross the border, then the family pays 50,000 Nakfa (about US\$3,050). If there's no money then it can be a long time in prison.

### **C. The Aims of Eritrea National Service**

In November 1995, Sibhat Ephrem, Eritrea Defense Minister, said that the National Service was multi-faceted. He believe that the independence

war took thirty-years to win because only the people who volunteer who was willing to fight for it. He doubts that the sovereignty achieved by Eritrea will last if the citizen is not trained to preserve it. Thus in his speech he said that, National Service was introduced to produce trained citizens who can ensure the survival and continuity of the country, create ‘morally sound citizens’, counter the depletion of the country’s human resources, promotes ‘work ethic’, and further to fill the ‘big generation gap’ created by the thirty years’ war (Kibreab, 2009).

Sibhat Ephrem speech was in line with Article 5 of Proclamation 82/1995, namely:

- i. Establish strong defense force to ensure a free and sovereign Eritrea
- ii. Preserve and entrust for future generations the courage, resoluteness of the heroic episodes shown by our people in the past thirty years
- iii. Create new generation characterized by love of work, discipline, ready to participate and serve in the reconstruction of the nation
- iv. Develop and enforce the economy of the nation by investing in development work of our people as a potential wealth
- v. Develop professional capacity and physical fitness by giving regular military training and continuous practice to participants in Training Centers;
- vi. Foster national unity among our people by eliminating sub-national feelings.”

Like what it has been said the previous chapter, Isaias Afwerki and the ruling party perceive the National Service as being the ‘school of the nation’, where a prototype of disciplined model citizen imbued with the national values and characteristics of the EPLF fighters in the thirty-years war is created and systematically reproduced. As the minister of defense said: ‘It is through the National Service that we intend to transfer the noble values developed during the armed struggle ‘steadfastness and dedication’ to coming generations.

According to Gaim Kibreab, in Isaias Afwerki sense, the National Service has the aims to (2009):

- (i) contribute to the country’s growth and development (*ibyet*);
- (ii) enhance national unity (*hadinet*);
- (iii) create a new society (*hadish hibreteseb mimsrat*); and
- (iv) transforms this country, in the long-term, into worthy of being called a nation (*nihawaru neza hager izi’a ab hager itibehalelu nimbzah*)

He stated that although the question of safeguarding national security (*wahsinet nay hager*) was taken into account when the National Service was first initiated, it was not the main aim which is quiet contradicted with the Article 5 of Proclamation 82/1995 that has been mentioned above.

In July 2006, Isaias Afwerki in Youth Festival stated that Sawa Training Centre was build not in the mind for military purposes but to ensure the nation’s continuity and pass over generational responsibility. Again, this

is contradicted with the reality in which the conscripts were taught to defend Eritrea as a necessary precaution in case of neighbor countries attack, especially Ethiopia.