

Zenawi's 'Southern' delegates humiliated in Atlanta: By Haile Larebo (Ph.D.)

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It is in Atlanta on 3 June 2007. A meeting is secretly called by individuals Meles Zenawi sent overseas as 'delegates' of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Regional State (in short, what I would call Southern, in place of the cumbersome official acronym SNNPRS!). I've taken up my seat at the Southern meeting. The delegates are touring United States and the Middle East.

The agenda? They said it was to solicit and discuss the "best development strategy" with the natives of the region's Diaspora Ethiopians, bring to their attention the "ongoing economic development" and appeal to them to take advantage of the current golden opportunity in investing their resources and, therefore, play a significant role in this environment which, to use the words of one of the delegates, "is conducive to drastically transforming" the region's economy and society. Notice my use of the word 'secret' in my description of the nature of the meeting. I did this deliberately because the meeting was not publicized and most of the audience, including myself, was called by individuals who have contact with the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, DC or the southerners working with it. My initial reaction was to dismiss outright any participation but, after a long thought, I decided to attend with the view to at least register my dissenting and critical voice.

As the event was organized by word of mouth, there is a glaring absence of the so called 'non-southerners', a situation further exacerbated by a conspicuous void of both intellectually refined and openly outspoken southern individuals. One of the well-known southern critics later told me that he was aware of the delegates' presence in Washington D.C. but nobody informed him of their Atlanta meeting. This happened in spite of his extensive network with the leading southern community members and organizers. However, the organizers' effort to keep the matter within the confines of their loyal southern faithful misfired when the local **Mahdere Andennet Radio** broke the news on its Saturday program. However, a combination of short notice, distance of the meeting site, and a conflict of schedules brought only a few of these unwanted people to attend. On the other hand, as I later learned, the radio announcement deterred many wary southerners from showing up. However, the presence of those few uninvited attendees (perhaps 'intruders' would be an apt description) made the meeting more interesting as it discredited the delegates' presentation by highlighting the most repellent and revolting features of the regime and its atrocities, and gave to the gathered devout and predominantly God-fearing audience a totally different, if not diametrically opposed, perspective.

The meeting, scheduled to start at 2:30 P.M., began at about 4:00 p.m. This allowed the place to swell with the constant trickle of audience which, I assume, was coming largely from attending church service. Since some of the organizers were leaders of a certain religious sect, my assumption was that the majority of the audience belonged to this same group. In all, it could be said that there were between 60-70 attendants, seated on 200 or so chairs arranged in a row, with each row either fully, or partly occupied or empty.

Before the meeting, I did some research on the profile and background of the speakers. Surprisingly, I found that most of them were unknown figures with the exception of one who appeared as the delegation's front-man and leader: Mr. Haile Mariam Dessalegn. He chaired the meeting and also gave the closing statement. His manipulation of the meeting's agenda, his skill in sophistry of distortion of facts presented by the audience, including myself, neatly seemed to fit his profile that I uncovered in the course of my brief research.

Mr Haile Mariam presently works in the "Office of the Prime Minister as an expert of the SNNPRS." He came to prominence under Mr. Abate Kisho, one of the first disgraced leaders and presidents of Southern. As a minister of this regional state, Mr. Haile Mariam attempted to forcefully impose on the historically proud Walayta people WOGAGADASO, a new language of EPRDF's invention. The Walayta resisted and Mr. Haile Mariam presided over merciless and massive killings, detention, torture and harassment of ordinary people, teachers and students alike. Eventually, the Walayta won but only after a massive amount of money to a tune of \$40,000,000 had been spent in vain on program that caused untold atrocities, human suffering, and destruction of property. Yet the development helped Mr. Haile Mariam to build up his profile, making him the rightful successor after Mr. Abate Kisho's demise.

Mr. Haile Mariam is reported to have played a prominent role when the Hadiya people chose an opposition party at the 2001 election. Many were detained, tortured, dismissed from government employment, punished with heavy fines, or ruthlessly killed. He is also reported as being the instigator of conflicts between many southern nationalities, among which that of the Gedeos and Gugi people was the most abhorrent. Thousands were killed (with their bodies left in the fields), uprooted and exiled in this inter-ethnic conflict that involved massive destruction of property and crops. It was one of the most atrocious and inhuman tragedies that devastated southern Ethiopians.

However, it was the [Awassa Massacre](#) that stuck with Mr. Haile Mariam's name, earning him the ignominious title of the "Butcher of Awassa" for his unscrupulous onslaught of the Sidama peasants who came out in peaceful demonstration against an unpopular government policy in Awassa, the Southern's capital. The massacre was the cause of his undoing as the subsequent world outcry forced Meles' regime to remove him from his post. As the rumor goes, Mr. Meles's wish to repay for his generous service with an ambassadorial position abroad was thwarted by Mr. Haile Mariam's limited qualification and unattractive background. However, reward came in the form of a position that he seemed to cherish much when he introduced himself as "the advisor in the Prime Minister's office on Southern affairs."

Mr. Haile Mariam seems to epitomize in many ways the kind of personalities that are in the service of the present regime. These are the type of men who shuttle between Ethiopia and Western capitals as advocates of democracy, promoters of development, and spokesmen of their fellows in their respective ethnic groups.

The meeting opened by Mr. Haile Mariam who, after describing his own portfolio, introduced the rest of the delegates, in all numbering about seven or so, including the chair and three speakers. The motley seemed to have at least one member of the Southern's dominant ethnic groups: Hadiya, Kambata, Sidama, and Walayta.

The first presenter was Dr. Shiferra Tekle Mariam, a member of the present Parliament from Hadiya region and Minister d'Etat of Health at the EPRDF government. He gave a bird's-eye view of the general economic progress that the country made since the takeover by EPRDF in 1991. He moved swiftly from one sector to another, aided by a staff member who, seated in a front chair, highlighted for him apparently the most important points. The highlights and the speakers's points did not often match. Yet, the presentation seemed well-organized. The eye-catching bulleted points, and intense use of high-powered technology gave a picture of a healthy and vibrant economy at work. For those unfamiliar with the Ethiopian situation or laymen, uninitiated in the complex world of economic development, the presenter appeared to suggest that EPRDF-charted economic plan is practically transforming Ethiopia into an Africa's economic giant, somehow making it on a par with Asia's Singapore or Taiwan. One of the points stressed almost ad nauseam was the building of 26 or so universities out of only two that EPRDF inherited. However, Dr. Shiferra avoided mentioning that most of the so called universities were either already operational or in the pipeline for an upgrade to university status even before the EPRDF's takeover, and that such an upgrading was only delayed due to the destructive EPRDF's proxy wars that sapped the country's manpower and material resources. Later on, members of the audience criticized the educational quality, the material infrastructure of these universities as well as the regime's unmitigated failure to provide employment to those who completed their training

Dr. Shiferra spoke in Amharic even though the bulleted material was in English. For me, the presentation appeared as the work of some ivy-towered bureaucrats, prepared for the consumption of foreign aid donors and diplomats who would in turn be convinced enough to reward the regime with generous financial help. I am not sure whether most of the audience, especially those who had a difficulty understand English had benefitted from his talk at all. His Amharic was mostly adulterated and 80 per cent of his phrases in each sentence were English. I am not sure of others, but to me it caused more annoyance, constant irritation and, at times, even disgust to a point of losing any interest in it. Sentences, such as **"chegrun solve lamadreg, developmentun to expedite and facilitate long gize yeteyeqal.,"** were common. I often wondered, asking myself how I could have graded the person if he were under my tutorship for communication skill and efficient delivery. I concluded in my own mental conversation that he would have been quite lucky to get two points on the scale of one to 10, with ten being the highest mark. My mind boggle at the thought of how this type of people become leaders of their community or occupy a prominent position with such an abysmal potential to communicate effectively and discuss issues with their constituency, where most of the people barely have any idea of English language. I am sure Dr. Shiferaw is much less fluent in his own Hadiya language than in Amharic! Anyhow at the discussion session, his presentation was subjected to severe criticism, and his Amharic patois was no exception.

The second delegate, Makureya Hailu, spoke on the EPRDF government's investment policy, plans and major areas of such an investment. After he gave a general picture for the rest of the country, he dwelt extensively on the Southern's commendable achievements and the opportunities available to the southerners in Diaspora These points were further expanded and elaborated by the third speaker, the President of the SNNPRS - Mr. Shiferra Shigutte. Mr. Shiferra began highlighting the fact that until the coming of EPRDF regime, the southerners had never enjoyed the fruits of their hard work. To put in his own words, the southern people "was a mere producer and never a beneficiary" as all past regimes used them for economic exploitation and

political oppression, but since 1993, the south had taken once and for ever a complete control of its own economic and political destiny. For him the crowning achievement of all this development was the 123 seats in the Federal Parliament and the 2 billion Birr budget EPRDF allocated to the SNNPRS. Yet he failed to elaborate that most of the government portfolios are in the hands of those who only have 33 seats in the Federal Parliament (TPLF) and the role of the representatives from the Southern, including that of himself, is simply to clap hands and work as the TPLF's spokesman. The two speakers stressed the allocation of ETB 2 billion budget for the Southern as something never done or heard in Ethiopia's history, yet they did not explain where all that money went. The presentation was concluded by highlighting that the country, in general, and Southern in particular, are in a "momentous transitional stage," and at a "historical cross-roads," with drastic transformation under way, and by appealing to the Southern Diaspora to take advantage of this unique opportunity to invest in their region.

The presentation, however, made a few things clear. In spite of their persistent claims of being interested purely in economic matters and keeping out of politics, the speakers constantly portrayed EPRDF's regime as the herald of good governance, democratization, accountability; they described the scope of the present government's economic policy as a work toward increased "popular participation," "transparency," and so on. They characterized the imprisoned Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD-Kinijit) leaders as individuals or groups who wanted "to overthrow the system," or "opponents of the law." These and other comments on the state of post-election 2005 developments, and the government's atrocities and brutalities that accompanied them, clearly revealed their true identity and the scope of their mission. However, they seemed to have suffered utter humiliation and embarrassment when they were forced to retract much of the political comments they made during the presentation when later the audience rebuffed their argument. However, when they took their turn to elaborate on the audience's comment, they made several politically provocative statements, and yet they gave no chance for challenge or rebuttal by those who consistently raised their hands, shaking their heads with disapproval. It did not take long to establish that these men, like their predecessors, such as Mr. Addis Legesse, the delegate of the Amhara Region, and Mr. Abdulla Gameda of the Oromia region, came on a government planned clandestine mission to divide and weaken the Diaspora and discredit the opposition.

After the presentation, the chair opened the floor to the audience, asking for comments, suggestions and questions. He gave numbers to those who raised their hands, and in all about ten registered. Each of them launched a scathing attack on the speakers' report, and, understandably enough, none of them spoke in appreciation or support of it. Time and space will not permit me to bring each of these comments beyond providing a brief summary of the most important points.

Members ridiculed the delegates' statistical data as unreliable, and brought to their attention that the Meles Zenawi regime had massaged them to suit its political purpose. A few highlighted that the speakers have a confused understanding between economic 'development' and 'growth', and were ballyhooing the regime's most tenuous progress as a prodigy of achievement, and giving to the plans all the quality of performance. It was stressed that most of the country's budget (at least 40% as presented by the delegates themselves) consists of foreign loan and, under the present regime, this and other valuable domestic resources are being siphoned off by a few individuals, who are either government executives, party officials, their cronies or proteges, and people with influence and connection, whereas the living

standard of the people had worsened beyond expectation, with millions of fellow Ethiopians exposed to famine, diseases, government atrocities that are unparalleled in the country's history. Many stressed that over 8 million or so are dependant on foreign handouts, and some diseases, such as tuberculosis and malaria, which were almost extinct previously, have reemerged, reaching an epidemic proportion and devastating the country as a whole, including the capital, Addis Ababa. They pointed out that over 40 per cent of unemployment rate (compare it with the USA's 4 per cent) and the subsequent steady flight of the youth to every corner of the world, risking their life in search of basic subsistence, contradicts the regime's wild claim of a rosy picture. Some of the commentators supported their argument with detailed statistical figures taken from the world's leading institutions and reliable media outlets whose universally accepted economic indicators placed Ethiopia in the bottom category of the world's nations.

Considerable comments and criticisms directed were against Mr. Shiferraw's misleading representation of Ethiopian history, in general, and the southern reality, in particular. The delegates were technically lectured on Ethiopian history and the role the south played in it. They were told that there hardly existed any substantive difference between the life of the ordinary southerners and the rest of fellow Ethiopians under the previous regimes, that the south had, at least educationally, benefitted than other parts because of the missionary presence. Using an example from Meles Zenawi's interview by a foreign journalist where he was reported to have extolled his own ethnic group and, to the amazement of the interviewer himself, dismissed the southern and other Ethiopian nationalities as worthless entities, one member stressed TPLF's profound contempt toward the southerners, its derision of south's glorious historical role in Ethiopian history. This same commentator rebuffed Mr. Shiferra's preposition, telling him that the southern people are "not in control of their destiny" but rather "under the tight grip of oppressive TPLF dictatorship and its local southern stooges." The commentator said the true elected representatives of the southern people are either killed or languishing in prison, and the people are living under the constant rule of terror. Others, reminding him of the uprising led by Walayta, Hadiyya and others, lectured him on how the southerners led a sustained struggle against EPRDF, setting an example to the rest of the country.

One member agreed with Mr. Shiferra and other delegates that the south, like the rest of the country, is "at a historical crossroads," but he made a clear distinction by emphasizing that the Ethiopian people had practically made their Declaration of Independence from EPRDF's oppressive rule. This, however, took place not in 1993, as the speakers allege but when on the eve of 2005 election, four million of them filled the streets of Addis Ababa, thousands of others demonstrated in every major city of the country in peaceful protest against the regime, and then astounded the world with their overwhelming votes for the opposition.

The delegates appeared shaken when I myself challenged them to explain how they came to occupy their present positions since hardly any of them were elected by the people they claim to represent. I specifically addressed this question to Mr. Haile Mariam Dessalegn, Mr. Shiferra and Mr. Gebre Krestos, the administrator of the Kambata and Tembaro Zone. However, I never got an answer. I also brought to their attention my own impressions of profound popular bitterness against the present regime when I toured part of the south in 2001. I reported to them how the people in those areas described the EPRDF regime as the most corrupt, criminal and rapacious, and its officials as thugs and muggers.. By contrast, they portrayed the Dergue's era as the golden age with considerable feats of modern infrastructure,

matched only by EPRDF's penchant for destruction of any useful work. I departed from this premise to remind them that their attempt to describe their regime in the most possible bright light at the expense of the Dergue and others was not new. They were simply following a well-charted path of the Ethiopian ruling class where each succeeding ruler summarily dismissed the achievements of its predecessor and extolled only those of his own, which often were either tenuous or purely imagined.

After the comments from audience ended, the delegates took over . They were totally on defensive and, for most part, hostile. There were occasional distortion of facts and this only once at an early stage caused an outrage as the enraged members of audience technically rose up from their seats and verbally threatened the speaker after their repeated attempts to voice their opposition to his misrepresentation fell on the chair's deaf ears. Things appeared to be moving out of hand when the chair appealed for order, sanctimoniously preaching about abiding by democratic rules. He was told that they will not keep quiet as long as he continued to abuse his privileges and misrepresent the facts. The issue was Amharic language and definitely a sensitive issue. Mr. Shiferra had enraged the audience by completely distorting a comment made by one of the commentators on the southerners' refusal to comply with the government's divisive linguistic agenda, when they adopted Amharic as working medium among the diverse southern nationalities. The chair had little choice but to address the issue. Mr. Shiferra, who appeared totally shaken by the situation, gave in and the tempers cooled down. Mr. Shiferra was not an exception in the art of this form of misrepresentation. He was outshone by his own chair who, instead of discussing the issues, engaged himself in a tirade of abuse, and personality attack. He even made a ridiculous question to this writer, asking why he did not open school when in 2001 visited part of the south instead of 'politicking'? I would have given him the right answer then but, as a chair, he never gave me a chance in spite of my repeated requests. The session ended rather unceremoniously, as the speakers hastily left the platform, and Mr. Haile Mariam refused to entertain any further comments or questions by one or two early commentators who were still in the room while the rest had left long ago.

Concluding, it could be said that the voice of the critics, though disorganized and small, appeared to have frustrated the delegates and their mission. They were badly outmanoeuvred and outwitted by the unexpected turn of events. Their opportunistic and largely faith-based audience did not say a word in their support or defense beyond its periodical clapping of hands.

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(Source:- Ethiomedia)