In the battle to empower people – Kassahun Chekole is simply an inspiration

By Petros Tesfagiorgis Tuesday, 24 January 2012

A conference to honour the Achievement of Kassahun Checole

The conference took place in Washington on 18 November 2011. Dr. Araya Debesai one of the organizers and the chair sent me the report of the event and a video to refer to. Dr. Araya said, "The Conference, attended by 80 people, went very well. It was beyond our expectation".

My congratulations go to the organizers as they have ushered in a new culture of recognition to those who has made significant contribution to society. It is profoundly important to raise such awareness in Eritrea, a country, in short supply of such wisdom. The idea was initiated by Nunu Kidane – a relentless activist for justice and Pan Africanism in America.

On Asmarino.com dated 24-12-2011 Dr. Araya's article chronicled Kassahun’s life. He was born in Edaga Arbi, Asmara, where he did his elementary and high school studies.

I quote from the report of Dr. Araya, “After spending over 2 years at Addis Ababa University, where he was a student activist against Haile Selassie's feudal regime, he moved to the US in 1971 where he earned a bachelor’s degree in Political Science and African American Studies and M.A. (Sociology). Kassahun Checole was one of the founders of the first graduate program in African Studies in Latin America.

The conference has defined what Kassahun is:

The testimonies, recollections of the speakers and the messages of those who cannot make it in person and the presence of many distinguished writers, professors, human rights activists, educationalists, veteran freedom fighters, friends and relatives has defined what Kassahun is, a revolutionary and freedom fighter for justice, peace and democracy. His chosen weapon in the struggle is the power of the pen.

On the video I saw Kassahun happily embracing and kissing the guests one after the other, it was a blessing to see him together with his wife Nevolia Ogletree and their daughters Senait and Kidan.

I have recognized many people I know. Ms. Wangui wa Goro from London. Dr. Ephraim Issac whom I met in Asmara around 1999 at the moment in time when he was active shuttling between Asmara and Addis Ababa trying his best to put pressure on PM Meles Zenawi and President Isaias to make peace. He asked a meeting with Citizens for Peace in Eritrea (CPE) to discuss what we can do to get Ethiopian and Eritrean civil societies to work for peace. CPE believed peace must not be left to politicians alone; the people must raise their voice for peace. And it is in that meeting in the presence of Prof. Asmerom Legesse, Tewolde Estifanos and other CPE members that I came to know him and his peace effort. I recognized Mohamed Hassan from Ethiopia who co-authored with Professor Asmerom Legesse a book named, "Oromo Democracy". In early 80th Mohamed Hassan, Dr. Solomon Inquai, the late Abdulmegid Hussien and the late Mary Dines were producing a newsletter in London on the various struggles in Ethiopia. At that moment in time EPLF and Mass Association in UK had close working relationship with Ethiopian movements such as EPRP, OLF and TPLF. There was also Dan Connell, an authority on Eritrea and Dr. Bereket Habte Sellasie, the leading Eritrean statesman and the writer of many books and the well known Ethiopian film maker and a professor at Howard University, Haile Gerima.

The banning of freedom of Expression and its consequences:

It is within the context of the Eritrean reality of today where freedom of expression is banned that Kassahun’s work in spreading knowledge and information becomes inspirational.
The ban not only denied the population to tap the wealth of knowledge essential to their social, political and economic advancement but also eroded the self-esteem the Eritrean people had and the good values they cherished in the past. It is a blow to the historical depth of the people of Eritrea in politics and the armed struggle and the richness of their culture.

Kassahun must have been far sighted to push for the expansion of press to inform the international community about the just struggle of the people of Eritrea. His belief in acquiring knowledge is profound, his train of thinking sensible, deeply rational and far sighted. He must have a strong intent in the relationship between knowledge and people’s power.

On the other hand the collateral damage of banning the private papers and imprisoning all the editors by PFDJ on September 18, 2001 is colossal.

Even singers and song writers, artists cannot survive in Eritrea of today if they express the pains and suffering of the people, which they should have done so. It is heart breaking to witness the famous poet the late Dr. Reesom Haile – Alewana Alewuna-, before his death, could not go back to Eritrea from Europe because he was a member of the G-13.

To sum up, the PFDJ by banning the freedom of expression has condemned the population to backwardness. A nation without free press is a nation amputated. The saddest story is that because of the ban the Eritrean people have suppressed their voice to oppose the indefinite national service of the youth that gave rise to the exodus to exile resulting to massive brain drain.

Recently the PFDJ held a conference in Nakfa for the youth, as they are the future of Eritrea while the PFDJ are denying them that future. A perfect example how the youth mostly living in freedom in the West are being played in the hands of PFDJ disinformation propaganda machine.

The proliferation of Ignorance:

The purpose of banning freedom of expression is to keep the people ignorant so that they would not be able to connect the pains and suffering of the population to the repressive policies of PFDJ. PFDJ managed to blame all the ills befalling the people of Eritrea to the "threat of Weyane invasion" and its "mentor and backer" the USA. Demonizing "Weyane" has served PFDJ as a scapegoat to hold the youth hostages and subject the population to gross human rights violations which is incompatible with social and economic growth.

The strategy of Divide and Rule:

The repressive power of PFDJ is not maintained through fear and disinformation (the main tool of disinformation is TV-ERE with its tentacles all over the world) only; it is also through Divide and Rule policy.

Divide and rule tactic is a combination of political, military and economic strategies that enables and maintain power by breaking up concentration of powers into chunks that individually end up with less power than the one implementing the strategy. Divide and Rule is a tool for dictators designed to create disunity among the people. PFDJ has mastered it and even it has contaminated the opposition in Diaspora who spends most of its time bickering on secondary contradiction on religion, region, and ethnicity basis rather than focussing on the present challenge.

The present challenge in Eritrea:

Many people have risen up to the challenge and started the battle against ignorance. The websites such as Asmarino.com, Assena.com, Awate.com, Sallina.com, TV/Zete of Sweden etc and radio's such as Assenna, ERINA and Wegahta have done a lot to raise the level of awareness and to expose the gross human rights violations against the people. It is a war against ignorance. Some of the slogan goes,
"inform, educate, empower". More than that, they provided free media access to all those writers, commentators and chronologists. However small the number, they carry with them the Moral Authority over the empty repressive ideology of PFDJ.

Likewise, the various human right organisations, the unsung heroes, have done lots of work to help the Eritrean Refugees in Libya, Egypt and in the death camps in the Sinai where their body parts are harvested and sold to criminal gangs.

The activities of the youth organised around "Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change” and EMDJ of South Africa is very significant; they are making a lot of difference. Let's face it, it is the youth in Diaspora who are better situated to link up with their contemporaries inside Eritrea who would eventually rise up to the challenge and bring democratic change in Eritrea.

However the battle to empower the people and re-claim the right to freedom of expression has yet to be won.

In the struggle for Eritrean Independence and Pan African Movement Kassahun has shined:

In spite of being the longest war in Africa's history which has been going on since 1961- the struggle of the Eritrean people for self-determination lacked international attention for many years. At that time Emperor Haile Sellasie was taken as the father of African Unity and has managed to isolate the Eritrean Liberation Fronts by painting them as Arab puppets in the pay of petro dollar to dismember Eritrea from Ethiopia.

In late 70s and 80s, that has changed. Eritreans in Diaspora, mostly students began to play a pivotal role in winning political, diplomatic and financial support for Eritrea.
The Eritreans were organized around unions such as students, workers and women in the country they were living.

It is at this critical period that Kassahun Chekole emerged. He became a member of the “Eritreans for Liberation in North America.” in charge of publication. It was clear that the main stream publishing houses in the West were not interested to publicise the struggle in Eritrea and the rest of Africa.

Kassahun believed that it is futile to depend upon the main stream western publishing houses to inform the International community about the justness of the Eritrean case and that of anti-colonial struggle raging in Africa. He said, "We have to do it ourselves". He rose to the challenge and joined a small team that produced a paper about Africa,“ a paper which has small circulation among students. At that time I visited New Jersey, USA and stayed with him for a couple of days and witnessed his work place which was an incredibly small room. In 1983, Kassahun founded the Africa World Press in Trenton, N.J. with a mission to publish books on the history, culture, politics of Africa and the African Diaspora, including Eritrea. Two years later, he added the Red Sea Press. I call it the pride of Africa. Nowhere has the idealism and sense of duty been as strong, principled and inspiring as in the case of Kassahun Chekole.

It is a dream come true where writers, historians, politicians can get their work on Africa published and disseminated internationally. Thus it enabled the international community to listen to the voices of struggling people of Eritrea and the rest of Africa. It is a mission of empowering people.

His dream goes further. He wanted to replicate the Red Sea of America in Eritrea with the intention of making it to serve Africa wide. He started the post independence journey by organising, in collaboration with other optimists such as Dr. Reesom Haile, a conference titled "Against all Odds" to help the government to establish economic and social policies that would lead Eritrea to peace, social and economic rehabilitation and prosperity. Among the speakers was the Kenyan writer and critic, Ngugi WA Theong the author of the famous book called "Petals of Blood".
He had a role as well in the Brussels Conference organized by Professor Doctor Mirjam van Reisen who sent a video of her talk to the conference. Professor van Reisen is the founding Director of Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA). That shows Kassahun's wide network in Europe in addition to his network in Africa and Latin America.

In building a publishing company in Asmara, he was refused to go it alone and was forced to enter into partnership with People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), together they built the biggest printing press in Eritrea “Sabur printing press” But he lost his partnership and his Red Sea book shop in Asmara because as a member of G-13 he signed the historic letter to President Isaias. A letter had Isaias took it in good face and acted on it, would have saved him from the mess he is in and from the mess Eritrea is in today.

The present challenge concerns equally the Diaspora who supports the PFDJ:

The attitude of many Eritreans in the Diaspora who support PFDJ is mind boggling. They are supporters indeed but to fail to ask, to stop the forced labour, to bring prisoners to court, to put an end to the banning of freedom of expression, to honour freedom of worship and to implement the constitution had made them an accomplice to repression. By not asking the right question, which they are best placed to do so, they have forfeited their personal dignity and self-respect. They have constituted as a section of the Eritrean society lying to itself. The supporters are living in denials they are not "Living in Truth". “Living in Truth” is a phrase which belongs to Vaclav Havel, the President of Czechoslovakia, who died recently. His essay The Power of the Powerless, written when he was an artist silenced by the communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia, remains a text for our time wherever power for its own sake is usurped by oppressing the people. PFDJ and its supporters in Diaspora never realize that the power of the powerless is a power that will explode at any time.

All these are the challenges presented to all the people of Eritrea, whether they are supporters or opposition, whether they live in Eritrea or in exile, makes no difference because nobody can wish away the challenges it is there waiting to be resolved. It may be resolved by peace or force. I wish by the former.

USA Pan African Link with the United Kingdom:

On seeing in the video Ms. Wangui wa Goro who flew from London has unleashed my memory back to the 80th, a Pan Africanist and an ardent supporter of the Eritrean struggle and the EPLF.

She sang a beautiful song and recited a poem. It reminded me of the support of the Senegalese poet Ahmed Sheik and Pitika Ntulli of South African who were always doing poetry in support of Eritrean and Azania (South African) during Eritrean social evening in London in the 80s. In 1991 those artists organised an evening of music and poetry at Africa Centre – Covent Garden – London to celebrate the independence of Eritrea.

Their slogan was “Eritrea is free; the people have spoken” Yes Eritrea is free but the people have yet to speak.

It is Professor Jordan Gebremedhin and Kassahun who asked Abdurrahman Babu to get in touch with members of the mass associations, EPLF and Eritrean Relief Association-UK (ERA) in the UK when he moved from USA to the United Kingdom in the 80s. It is through him that Eritreans got actively involved in Pan African activities in the UK.

I do remember the nostalgic revolutionary days when Kassahun used to come to London to promote the books he published. London has always been the World's centre of information and all liberation movements had offices or presences in the UK. Tekie Fitzehazion, Jordan Gebremedhin and Kassahun used to come from USA, and visit the Public Record Office at Kew Gardens to access records on Eritrea during the British Administration. At that moment in time they had the opportunity to meet and discuss
with Central committee members of EPLF such as Ermias Debesai (Papayo) and Amdemicael Kahsai and also socialize. At times there was competition of who prepares the most delicious dinner. The best cooks were Amdemicael Kahsai and Abdurrahman Babu. Abdurrahman Babu, ex-cabinet minister of Tanzania under Julius Nyrere, not only was the leading Africa Statesman, but with lots of experience to share with.

He used to recount his meeting with Chou En Lai of China and Malcolm X and others with an amazing sense of humour. I am glad Abdurrahman is not around to see a different Eritrea from what he believed to be, an Eritrea that shines in Africa.

The Kassahun legacy:

Pan African activities have become the commitment of the whole Kassahun family as highlighted in the great speech of Kidan Kassahun in the conference, I quote.

"My sister, Senait, and I consider it a blessing to have been raised in the pan-Africanist spirit, with our mother and father defining the world in a way that embraced our identity as children of Africa coming up in the US"

At the end Kassahun thanked all those involved in the event. He did an honourable job by dedicating the event to several of his close friends who recently passed away such as Prof. Tekie Fesshatsion, Professor Jordan Gebremedhin and several of his friends from the Pan African Movement.

The Way forward:

I honestly believe that the pains, the sufferings and the hardship of the people of Eritrea unleashed by PFDJ have given us, people of Eritrea, no choice but to work hard to gain new perspective to reclaim our values of justice, peace and human rights.

Those of us in the Diaspora have to live up to the other dimension of the challenge presented to us by PFDJ as well. That is to address the problem of Eritrean refugees all over the world. It is to this end that a high profile international organisation named INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION OF Eritrean Refugees (ICER) is formed. "ICER was founded on a mission to highlight, advocate and address the plight of Eritrean Refugees everywhere." Asmarino.com dated 10 August 2011 "ICER Report to UNOHCHR on Eritrean Refugees in North Africa and Middle East.

This is very good news. However the proliferation of local NGOs to help refugees are essential and will save a lot of time and resources if they coordinate their work with ICER.

NGOs can help the Eritreans refugees meet the challenges and opportunities of life towards self-confidence, personal growth and professional achievement. Local NGOs can also collect and send clothings and educations materials to the refugee camps in Ethiopia and the Sudan.