

BULLDOZING COULDAN HOUSES: A PART OF THE CONSPIRACY OF BULLDOZING THE ERITREAN DREAM

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"It is not only the dignity of the poor that is assailed when homeless people are driven from pillar to post in a desperate quest for a place where they and their families can rest their heads. Our society as a whole is demeaned when State action intensifies rather than mitigates their marginalization."

(Justice Albie Sachs of the Constitutional Court of Justice of South Africa, appointed by Mandela in 1994 and retired in 2009)

Bulldozing houses in Eritrea was not a crime that started in March 2015. Prior to that, Keren and Hashala were among those badly hit by the regime's bulldozers, leaving thousands of citizens without any shelter and with wounded dignity. Even our port city of Massawa, its centuries-old historical palace, and some of its houses, known to UNESCO as a part of the Eritrean cultural heritage, had their share of demolition before and after the turn of the century. Here we need to stop and briefly see the significance of the demolished houses and structure in the port city of Massawa.

*It is not an exaggeration to say that what has been demolished in the port city of Massawa could be considered a goose that could have laid golden eggs for local, regional and international tourism, given the wealth of history that makes it rich in architecture, dating back centuries. Here we are talking about houses and structure that should have been preserved for their historical and architectural value. One would ask: *Why do we need to preserve them?* If they have been preserved, they would have served as a point of reference for research and education, heritage, and most importantly, as a source of foreign exchange. The excuse given at that time was that Massawa will be re-built to be a free market zone. *Did that rhetoric see light?* We have no idea whether the project was originally proposed by experts after a sober and adequate study or was a poorly conceived personal "vision" of the self-imposed "President". Even if the project thought was economically more important than what we would benefit from those historical and cultural resources: *Couldn't they wait until**

they were ready for the project so that the people could use the houses in a country that faces a compelling housing problem? What was the need for the rush if the plans and the funds to execute them were not ready? On fact, as it turned out, neither the project they boasted about saw light nor we could preserve our historical and cultural wealth. Conclusively, it could be asked: Did Eritrea lose or gain by demolishing those houses and structure? Who is responsible for the vandalism of our irreplaceable historical and cultural wealth?

However, we did not hear much public resentment, echoing the voices of the victims, when the regime's brutal bulldozers demolished the port city and Amatare (in the vicinity of the port city) in the merciless heat of summer, then Keren and Hlshala had to face the same harsh fate. Maybe at that time we were drunk with the joy of independence that might have blinded our eyes and neutralized our sense of hearing against anything bad. But the bulldozing campaign carried out since March 2015 mostly focused on the highlands and was in mass, affecting the surroundings of the capital, Asmara, many towns and villages across the country (No complete list is still available because demolitions are in progress and are taking a barbaric manner). Probably, because it was carried out in mass since March 2015 that it went viral as a cruel and inhumane action, raising tensions and uncertainty among the people across the country, and the word spread through the social media and radio shows, specially Radio Erena and Radio Medrek. As a part of the on-going campaign, the most recent victim of bulldozing we heard about this week is Hlagaz (which the news has geographically put in Ansaba, following the unpopular territorial curve-up of Atse Osias, though the Eritrean people and the residents of the town themselves know Hlagaz as a part of Senheit). All in all, it is not surprising to see a government that is poles apart with its people show anti-people and anti-social cruelty. After all, nobody should expect the regime that has bulldozed the Eritrean dream altogether to spare civilian houses from bulldozing. It is a part of the whole package to demoralize, ruin, create chaos, and go to any length to erase anything good from the Eritrean soil or prevent any happy or peaceful day for the Eritrean people from coming up. On fact, the whole drama seemed to hook the Eritrean people in their daily worries and miseries so that they would not have time to think of rebelling against its oppressor. Nevertheless, this is a miscalculation and delusional: the more people are oppressed the more they would have the tendency to rebel. True, for some time they

may look succumbing externally, while hidden forces get at work silently, until things reach the threshold or the boiling point, leading to an explosion.

To give a comprehensive picture about the level of brutality in which the bulldozing was executed and how people were put in a nervous position, it is helpful to present some images and opinions from some Eritrean citizens, both victims and eye witnesses.

Eye witnesses in the neighbourhood around Asmara related that it was with sheer terror that they witnessed some of the malformed spectacle of the bulldozing of some houses, describing images of desperate women been pulled out of their houses while trying to collect the remains of their properties (imagine the level of poverty of our people and their ability to possess furniture or cooking utensils), and indicating that those images still haunt their memories. A friend in North America, whose sister (a former fighter) and her family (husband and a ten-year old son) were among the victims of such demolitions, had reflected significant frustration, telling that his sister and her family had finally to cross the borders to the Sudan with the financial assistance they had received from him and other family members because, as he put it in sour words, "their roots from the country were pulled out". My informant friend added that his sister, who he said has developed bald patches all over her head, losing clumps of her hair out of desperation, anger and frustration, could not answer the "how" and "why" questions of her scared and confused son about their house. This is a single instance, but the victims are thousands of families unidentified because the media could not reach them. Here we are talking about unidentified victims whom we are literally treating without an identity, history, and personality. Simply put, these are unknown victims, like those languishing in the Eritrean prisons and detention centres. What a tragedy is this in the age of the Internet, transparency, and accountability?

It is very painful to hear reports that most, if not all, of those demolitions have happened during the harshest days of summer in the lowlands (imagine 45 degrees Celsius in Massawa and its surrounding), and winter in the highlands (choosing the time of heavy rains); a matter nobody believes could be a mere coincidence. Some folks with whom I had discussions on the issue, are of the opinion that this type of shocking turn of events constitutes a gross misconduct of human rights. Some of them thought that human rights have been massacred, mowed and disregarded for no apparent gain or plans that would benefit the development of our cities and towns. The question every

Eritrean we hear asking is: Was this Eritreans were to expect in the post-independence Eritrea?

Moreover, whenever we hear about the bulldozing of civilian houses in any part of the world, the first thing that comes into our mind is the act of demolition as a method utilized by the Israeli Defense Forces in Jerusalem, Gaza Strip and the West Bank against Palestinians, forcing them to leave the country. This notorious Israeli bulldozing has been a demolition for security reasons or to punish the innocent families for the acts of resistance their sons and daughters had carried out against occupation. Does this mean that demolition of civilian houses and structure should always be taken in the Israeli way in terms of intention and the way they are executed?

On principle, housing is recognized as a fundamental human right in many constitutions of countries, where citizens are treated like human beings. This does not mean that bulldozing of civilian houses does not happen in the civilized world. It does happen and could be common in many places in the world but it mostly happens for a very valid reason and is implemented in a very lawful manner. The most common reasons and examples include the following:

- *To expand utilities such as gas, water or electricity, or to expand services by building fire stations, police stations, post offices, libraries, public transportation routes, cargo train trucks and neighbourhood public schools, or to establish modern commercial farms or industrial and agro-industrial complexes that would open employment opportunities for the people of the surrounding.*
- *Some older houses could have been constructed with materials that we consider today hazardous to health. These materials, for instance, include Asbestos, which was commonly used in flooring, ceiling or wrapped around duct work (cooling and heating system of the houses) and contained in siding (cladding material used to cover outside walls of frame buildings).*
- *Evictions of residents and demolitions of their homes could also occur for other health and safety reasons: to manage disasters such as earthquakes, floods, fire, security problems, and extreme weather.*

- *On cities like Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the city's historical buildings and landmarks have been bulldozed, and replaced with luxurious hotels, condominiums and shopping malls. Though this could be understood as merchandizing of Mecca, in principle, any demolition of historical and cultural heritage, whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist, cannot be seen short of being the promotion of cultural vandalism, wherever it occurs, and irrespective of who did it.*
- *There were examples of bulldozing that took place for security reasons (justified and unjustified, legitimate or illegal) and some as expression of hate or religious fanaticism in different parts of the world:*
 - *Israeli Defense Forces has razed 48,488 Palestinian structures (including homes) in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip from 1967 to 2015. This was done to scatter the people and avoid the strengthening of the resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian lands. Though this is against the international law, it is understandable for an occupier to do. Nevertheless, the inevitable question we cannot escape is: Is it acceptable for a "national" government like that of Eritrea to treat its people in the same way Israel treats Palestinians?*
 - *Buddhist temples, shrines and statues have been demolished by the Taliban in Afghanistan and by some fanatic Muslims in Bangladesh and some other places. Above all, religious structures, whether houses, buildings, shrines, temples, statues or others, that we do not separate from civilian houses and buildings, are a part of history and should be left alone or conserved in museums. As such demolitions are against human civilizations, they are prohibited by the international law (the comment on the demolition of structures in Mecca applies here too).*

- *Myanmar government has demolished hundreds of homes belonging to the ethnic minority Rohingya Muslims during counterinsurgency operations. This is also motivated by hate and is punishable by the international law.*
- *The French government uprooted a refugee camp with bulldozers on the border of the country's northern port city of Calais that housed some 3000 refugees who hoped to cross to Berlin. This measure was justifiable because the illegal refugee camp constituted a risk for the national security of the country. As a matter of fact, the refugees were moved to better facilities, ending the chaotic situation. In any case, it should be seen as a positive measure.*

The presentation above would lead us to the question: How are civilian houses and structures protected by law in countries ruled by governments; not gangs? Accordingly, many countries, including some in Africa, have sections dedicated to housing in their constitutions. Based on that, parliaments and courts have developed a complete set of legal rules that govern demolitions or evictions resulting from them. As most of the proceedings for the eviction of citizens from their homes or the demolitions of their properties are almost similar everywhere in the civilized world (be it Africa or elsewhere), with some differences arising from peculiarities of this or that country, we will take the South African legislation known as the Prevention of Illegal Eviction (PIE) from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act 19 of 1998, as an example. Our focus on African examples is to show to what extent Eritrea is desperately far behind the rest of Africa, let alone the civilized world.

Specifically, PIE is the primary legislation that governs, for instance, the eviction of unlawful occupiers from their homes or the demolition of houses for whatever reason it is (refer to the reasons listed above). It is exclusively the court which grants the municipality an eviction or a demolition order according to this law (PIE). Here the dispute could be with the government or even with a private business. But the law applies to both.

There are basic requirements that include proper notice to be served to the concerned citizens prior to taking action (reasonably three months; not ten days as the case in Eritrea). Besides, the South African justice system saw to it that PDE contains some principles, among which the following three are:

- *Alternative Accommodation:*

The central idea here is that under no circumstances citizens should be thrown into the street, forcing them to be homeless. Here the municipality or the concerned public authority is supposed to provide alternative accommodation to those who would otherwise face homelessness. This is a law of the country. As we are focusing on African examples: What do we learn from the Egyptian experience regarding this issue?

It is to be remembered that the Egyptian government of AbdulFatah Al CiCi had decided in 2015 to remove the town of Rafah (in North Sinai governorate) on the border with the Gaza Strip completely (we are not here to discuss the reason/s). That meant the demolition of about 2,100.00 houses and the evacuation of about 3,500.00 families. Along with that decision was the decision to compensate each family with 1,500.00 Egyptian pounds (equivalent to US \$ 210.00) to cover their expenses of temporary house rent (emergency housing), pending the payment of the full financial compensation for the demolished houses. This is the Egypt of counter-revolution, and we do not expect a fair compensation to be given, but unlike the barbarism and medieval behavior of the Eritrean regime, politics aside, we see some sense of humanity, lawfulness, and justice.

- *Meaningful Engagement:*

This is a principle which provides that the persons to be evicted from their homes (demolished or not) should be provided "...a meaningful opportunity to participate in the resolution of the eviction dispute." This is the way citizens are treated, but what the Eritrean gang has been doing to Eritrean citizens is by no means different from what an occupier or colonizer like Israel is doing to the Palestinians. Let alone to sit with them and negotiate, the heartless government police who supervise the implementation of the bulldozing of houses, push, kick, beat, degrade and humiliate the

residents, while bulldozers flatten their houses, with no respect to their properties inside the house. The scenario is similar to that of an invading army.

- *The Role of the Organs of the State:*

This principle states that any eviction which could lead to homelessness is not just considered a private dispute, even if a private business is the party requesting eviction. The relevant part of the state (most of the time the municipality) becomes a part of the legal process of eviction. *What role does the municipality play here?*

- *The first task of the government represented by the municipality is to provide emergency housing to the persons facing homelessness.*
- *The municipality investigates and reports to the court the potential impact of eviction/demolition on vulnerable people like children, the elderly, persons with disability, and single mothers heading families. Here they mediate between the concerned parties so that the victims would not be disadvantaged.*

The role of government described above is just the opposite of what the Eritrean government is playing, as the only adversary of the residents, their sole oppressor, and torturer. The quotation from Justice Albie Sachs above says it all, as if he was talking about the Eritrean government. *Should we ask Justice Albie Sachs to give Atse Isias, whose hostility towards human rights is well-known, a lesson in civics?*

In few words, the most fundamental requirement for any eviction or demolition of homes, regardless of the reason (common reasons as listed at the introduction), is that it can only occur in terms of a court order, based on a legislation, and that there is a responsibility on the judicial officer to consider all relevant circumstances before issuing the order. To drive this point home: *What are the circumstances the South African judicial officer considers before issuing an eviction or a demolition order?* These have already been raised but to sum up, the judicial officer considers the following:

- *Are there compelling reasons for the demolition? (examples of reasons are listed above in the introduction)*

- *Did meaningful engagement occur with those to be affected by the demolition, eviction or both?*
- *Were the needs of vulnerable groups (children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and single mothers heading families) adequately cared for?*
- *Are there alternative accommodations made available for the victims so that they would not face homelessness?*

The details above show the way residents are treated in the civilized world, including some African countries. In a nutshell, no demolition of a home or the eviction of its residents could take place according by the order of the "President", general, governor or any other thug or murderer. Could we see here the difference between being ruled by a legitimate government and by a gang?

*After reviewing everything we have heard and read about this type of violence, we could not answer the question as to: *What could prompt the Eritrean government to perpetrate such violence against its own people?* Of course, there is nothing relevant in the list we had detailed above on which one could put his/her finger as the reason/s for the demolition of houses in a country with serious housing problem, elevated to the alarming level of a crisis. For the sake of clarity, let us ask:*

- *Were there any utilities and services expanded, necessitating the demolition of houses in any of our cities, towns, and villages?*
- *Were there bridges, railways, industrial complexes, free market zone structures, or huge educational institutions and medical establishments or subways built on the space of the demolished houses?*

- *Were any of the houses demolished constructed with materials dangerous for health and safety of the residents?*
- *Were there projects like hotels, condominiums, and shopping malls that sprang up in place of the demolished houses?*
- *Were there any feared terrorist conspiracies that would force the government to dismantle some parts of a village, town, or city?*

None of the above or anything similar has taken place or existed. Though intent is difficult to prove, there are a lot of circumstances we need to consider. By and large, we ask:

- *Is it fear of people's uprising that is motivating this violence against the people?*
- *Is it hatred toward the people?*
- *Is it sadism that is behind the violence?*
- *Is it mental insanity that has reached new heights of absurdity?*
- *Could it be a combination of all these and others?*

Though the above concerns are not trivial but significant ones, I am tempted to leave it here, saying we need the key to unlock this mystery.

*The scenes and images of bulldozing civilian houses described above, have become common place across Eritrea, with hardly any day passing without one hearing wrenching stories of the unforgiving bulldozers ruining in minutes what had taken years to build. Of course, we have tried above to present why and how demolitions of civilian houses and structures and the evictions of their residents take place in a legal manner in the civilized world, including some African countries. Undoubtedly, knowing how things work in other parts of the world is deeply disappointing when we see that versus the anti-people and anti-social nature of the regime in Eritrea. Yet, this knowledge increases our determination and resolve to get rid of this monster and build a democratic Eritrea on the ruins of this brutal regime, giving us solace and strength. After presenting the dreadful images, an in-depth treatment of the tragedy and opinions about the bulldozing, and the shocking magnitude of the cruelty with which they have been carried out, we have nothing to add but wind up this piece with the question: *Could the Eritrean people find a better unifier than Atse Tsias and his gang?**

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