

# Two letters on Eritrea and a reply

7 September 2001

Eritrea: two students die in government clampdown

I have read your article regarding the recent unrest in Eritrea with interest. Although most of what you wrote has been said by AFP, BBC and Reuters, you didn't bother even to check and at least mention the Eritrean government's view. This is very saddening.

I am posting the Eritrean governments view below, although it was addressed to Amnesty international, the views are expressed adequately.

Sincerely, JB, Canada

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On Eritrea, Do some homework first. "Yellow Journalism" in WSWs?

It would help your credibility if your "journalist" had done some background on the situation in Eritrea before they wrote their article on the problems Eritrea is having with a minority of the University of Asmara students.

Of course, your credibility on the situation in Eritrea is not very good anyway, for you have yet to mention a word on how over \$3 billion (this is admitted by the Ethiopians) in western imperialist aid was allowed to be diverted by the Ethiopian regime to arms purchases from Bulgaria and Russia.

If the west hadn't allowed this diversion there would have been no invasion of Eritrea, something you also have failed to condemn.

Why is it you have to attack the one country in Africa that is really "socialist"? The people overwhelming support their government, which is unique in the world, really. I have never visited a country that is as open and really "democratic", meaning the people freely and publicly state their positions and are encouraged to do so by the government.

I just returned from a visit to Eritrea and the night I arrived a prominent critic of the government was featured in a prime time 30-minute interview on government television. Another prominent critic of the government was given a major interview in the government published English language weekly, *Eritrea Profile* while I was there. Where else in the world do you see this?

What gives with you people, why are you so anti-Eritrean, they have suffered more to gain their freedom and independence than any other people in the world? Why do you attack them without bothering to do any real investigation of the situation? If you had any principles you would invite a reply to your "yellow journalist" piece.

Thomas C. Mountain

US Eritrean Peoples Friendship Association

**Reply by Chris Talbot**

The reply from the Eritrean President's office to Amnesty International, sent to us by JB, was not referred to in our article. This is simply because it cannot be considered a serious response. It is admitted that the two students died "due to climatic conditions in the make-shift camp", but no explanation is given of why they were being forced to work in those conditions. In relation to Students Union President, Mr. Semere, we are merely told that he is being held for up to 28 days, in accordance with the law, and that "he has not been fully charged." This is supposed to be "like most legal systems." One wonders which legal systems the President's office is considering? It is hardly surprising that Amnesty is pursuing the case.

As well as not referring to the official response in our article, we did not refer to the detailed account of the students' brutal treatment given by political opponents of the Eritrean regime: <http://www.awate.com/YEAR2/aredii.htm>

Neither letter refers to the resignation of the Eritrean ambassador to Sweden. This is hardly surprising for apologists of President Afewerki and the Eritrean People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) regime. The fact that an ambassador—presumably a carefully chosen member of the ruling elite—not only resigns but puts out an open letter on the Internet denouncing the government as a dictatorship can only be understood as a manifestation of a regime in a deep crisis. Our article placed the treatment being meted out to students in that context.

To consider the points in the second letter: Mr Mountain, as well as being a member of the US Eritrean Peoples Friendship Association, is billed as a "long time revolutionary activist and anti-racist educator" on the website Antiwar.com. An article written by him entitled "US Behind Invasion of Eritrea" appears there, dated June 15, 2000. Mountain tells us that over \$3 billion of Western imperialist aid was diverted by the Ethiopian regime into arms purchases and that they have admitted doing this. He does not tell us where they have made this extraordinary admission. Since Western countries officially expressed their regret that the war was taking place and announced a reduction in aid to Ethiopia, despite the threat of famine, such a revelation, if true, would surely cause great embarrassment to Western donors.

To be frank we question the validity of Mr Mountain's claim. In his article last year, he suggested that on the basis of "preliminary research", the US government provided the Ethiopian regime with at least \$460 million in aid over 18 months "in the form of hard, convertible cash". He then referred to an article in the *Economist* magazine claiming that Ethiopia had spent \$460 million on arms from Russia and former Soviet countries. According to Mountain, the coincidence of these figures is supposed to demonstrate US backing for Ethiopia. Why? Because Eritrea is "known for its independence from western aid institutions as well as for being the most efficient and corruption free society in Africa" and as a "role model for the rest of the world", and therefore had to be brought back under the dominance of the US.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently raised the neo-colonial ambitions of the United States, Britain, France and other major powers in Africa and throughout the globe. Unlike Mr Mountain, however, we have not made any claims in a light-minded manner without serious analysis and examination of the facts.

It is certainly true that the Western powers regard the Horn of Africa as a region of strategic importance and seek to gain control over the regimes there. The Sudanese government, for example, has been insufficiently co-operative with Western governments and came to be regarded—by the US at any rate—as a "rogue state". But to claim that Eritrea is being singled out by the West as "democratic" and even "socialist" (why the use of quotes Mr Mountain?) and that the West backed Ethiopia's invasion is patent nonsense.

According to USAID, the Eritrean government received over \$40 million in aid from the US government in 2000. The World Bank provides \$70-\$80 million in aid per year. Eritrea is a member of the International Monetary Fund and, according to its 1999 accounts, owed \$464 million to various countries, international banks and development agencies.

After coming to power in 1994, the PFDJ abandoned its use of Marxist rhetoric and embraced free market economics. It is committed to a privatisation programme, and its official literature appeals to Western corporations to invest and repatriate their profits. Whilst its economy developed faster than Ethiopia's before the war began in 1998, its annual Gross National Product per head was less than \$300. In other words it is a very poor, largely agricultural country, extremely dependent on Western support. Ethiopia's economy, although much larger in terms of population and area, shows a similar level of dependence on Western aid and loans.

Mr Mountain's portrayal of such an impoverished, dependent and tiny nation state as socialist and a role model for the rest of the world is a politically ignorant and demoralised outlook. The fact that apparently opposing views to that of the government are allowed in the media is taken to be the height of democracy. In answer to the question where else in the world this can be seen, we can reply: the United States, Britain, France, etc., etc.

Even if it were true that people can freely state their opposition to the government—and the clampdown on students shows to all but the most gullible that this is not the case in Eritrea—this is hardly sufficient for genuine democracy. Our position is that socialism and democracy can only be achieved if the vast productive potential of mankind, on a global scale, is placed under the ownership and control of the majority of the population, rather than that of a tiny wealthy elite.

A further point should be made in reply to Mr Mountain's letter. On the *World Socialist Web Site*, we have stressed the pernicious role of nationalism. It is, after all, only a decade since both the ruling parties of Eritrea and Ethiopia were national liberation movements, fighting on the same side, against the Soviet-backed Ethiopian regime. The conception such movements were based on—that a viable economy can be built up within national borders—has been rendered bankrupt in the present globalised economy. In consequence, nationalist and tribalist elites have increasingly mounted wars to defend their privileged positions and attempt to further their relationship with Western imperialism. The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea was one more tragic manifestation of this trend, following on from the catastrophes witnessed in the Balkans, Rwanda and the Congo, and elsewhere.

How did the impoverished nations of Eritrea and Ethiopia mobilise half a million troops, buy enormous amounts of modern weaponry on both sides, and become involved in trench warfare on a scale not witnessed since World War Two? Without in anyway minimising the role of Western governments, lucrative arms deals, etc., it is clear that such a mobilisation of the population—in which tens of thousands died and millions of dollars were raised by both sides from their respective Diaspora's throughout the world—could not have been achieved without whipping up the most frenzied nationalist propaganda. Mr Mountain, in claiming that Ethiopia is a tool of imperialism against the exemplary Eritrea, plays a shameful role in promoting the type of nationalist ideology that has been used to justify a needless slaughter.

Sincerely, Chris Talbot



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