

ERITREA: No famine... and that fact is not sitting well with some quarters

It seems the western media and its handlers are having a hard time swallowing another fact about Eritrea—they cannot fathom that there is NO famine in Eritrea, whilst its neighbors, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia are all experiencing drought and famine. Instead of congratulating the Government and people of Eritrea for mitigating the effects of recurrent droughts in the region with innovative and sustainable solutions, they have set out, once again, instead, to vilify and undermine this young nation and its magnanimous population. The harshest commentary have come from US officials and the hapless western media in tow, who find it impossible to utter a single kind word on issues related to Eritrea.

Let us take a look at some of the condescending comments:

- **“...Because it is a part of the greater Horn of Africa, we assume that conditions in Eritrea are probably quite similar to the drought conditions that we are seeing in other places – in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Somalia. Because we don’t know what’s happening, our understanding of the situation is limited, but we encourage them to be more open about their needs and the needs of their population...”-** (Johnnie Carson, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, 19 July 2011)
- **“...Eritrea, a nation of 5 million people that borders Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti, has also seen failed rains and widespread food shortages...refuses to acknowledge a drought has swept its territory. Satellite images show that the Red Sea nation has been hit by drought conditions similar to those in Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti...”** –(LUC VAN KEMENADE, AFP 28 July 2011 “ E.Africa faces famine, Eritrea suffers in silence”)
- **We believe there is a famine in Eritrea, but we’re deeply concerned that none of us know because they have barred UN agencies, barred NGOs. It has become a black hole in terms of governance and humanitarian ground truth. And the people of Eritrea, who must...most likely are suffering the very same food shortages that we’re seeing throughout the region are being left to starve because there is not access, there’s a clear cut denial of access by the government of Eritrea of food and other humanitarian support for its people. –(Susan E. Rice, US Ambassador to the UN 11 August 2011)**

But not all “diplomats’ are as vindictive. To his credit, H.E. Klaus Peter Schick, German Ambassador to Eritrea is not going along with the “famine in Eritrea” propaganda. Neither are ordinary citizens who are fed up with the constant abuse against Eritrea and its government.

Steve Kirkland, a Canadian citizen, responding to a recent article about famine in Eritrea and statements made by Johnnie Carson, the incompetent and vindictive US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, wrote the following on 23 July 2011:

“...Commenting as a non-partisan (Canadian) observer, I fully admire the independent stance the Eritrean people have taken in the face of adversity and vilification from much of the international community (much of it through sheer ignorance, in my humble opinion). For the last 3 months, I was in Eritrea and I can attest that there is no food shortages or food insecurities taking place. No one was saying anything as Eritrea went an entire year and half without food aid in 2010, all of a sudden, since Ethiopia starts begging the international community to feed their people, that Eritrea too must be starving? This is racist and condescending, as it assumes because Eritrea’s neighbors have failed and continue to fail that Eritrea too must fail. This is nuts and it’s politically motivated. This type of racist tones coming from Jonnie Carson is geared for ignorant readers in North America....If Eritrea is a “secretive” nation (as so the narrative goes to sell newspapers these days), then they do a pretty bad job with it because there are thousands of Europeans who live in Eritrea and tens of thousands of Eritrean nationals from the diaspora who visit throughout the year...I’m 38 years old, I’m an electrician, Canadian (caucasian) and I can attest there’s no food shortage or hunger taking place within Eritrea. In fact, after being in Eritrea 3 months and seeing what I’ve seen, I think other African nation should follow the Eritrean example and start to feed their population with their own capacity. When did feeding yourself become tantamount to unjust and a human rights abuse? This is racist to the highest degree and Jonnie Carson and his U.S. administration should be ashamed of themselves...”

The contempt and hatred that Johnnie Carson and Susan E. Rice, the US Ambassador to the United Nations harbor against the Government and people of Eritrea prevents them from making sound or prudent judgments about issues in the Horn of Africa.

The Eritrean Quislings League (EQL), a hodge podge collection of individuals with dubious and criminal backgrounds, runaway defectors, disgruntled ex-diplomats, pedophiles etc. etc. are today acting as if they are concerned about the very people they worked so hard to starve in to submission. It should be recalled that they, like the minority regime in Ethiopia, have campaigned to isolate Eritrea diplomatically and politically and have been calling for cuts in development and humanitarian aid to Eritrea for the last 12 years.

In 2002-2003, when the US-led international community decided to deprive the people of Eritrea food aid, the Government of Eritrea went out in the open market and bought over 300000 tonnes of food to feed the people, whilst the minority regime in Ethiopia was provided with plane loads of food aid to feed starving Ethiopians. Thanks to a sound food security policy and a hardworking population, Eritrea is faring better than its

neighbors this year. Today, not only is rain pouring in Eritrea...there were some places in Asmara, the capital, which saw snow for the very first time. That means the hundreds of dams, micro-dams, reservoirs, and wells will accumulate more water. Divine intervention...But let us get back to more of the misinformation and anti-Eritrea reports.

On 19 August 2011, there were two conflicting reports from the Washington Post about the famine in the Horn of Africa region. The first report (Associated Press, Updated: Friday, August 19, 4:49 PM) said the following:

“...UNITED NATIONS — The head of the U.N. children’s agency says more than 300,000 children in the Horn of Africa are severely malnourished “and in imminent risk of dying” because of drought and famine...The U.N. says tens of thousands of people already have died in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea and that more than 12 million people in the region need food aid...”

But just about an hour later, the Washington Post story had changed. Under the same headline, the second report (Associated Press, Updated: Friday, August 19, 5:53 PM) reported the following:

“...The United Nations says tens of thousands of people already have died in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti and has warned that the famine hasn’t peaked. More than 12 million people in the region need food aid, according to the U.N...”

This time, Eritrea was dropped from the list.

Not sure if UNICEF was weighing its statements carefully or if it was responding to the many complaints by Eritreans who are fed up with this lazy “cut and paste” reporting that has been used to malign and vilify the Government and people of Eritrea for the last 12 years. In any case, the western media can do its readers a favor and refrain from such deliberate and malicious yellow journalism. Speaking of malicious reporting...allow me to address one that is related to “famine in Eritrea”.

Most of us have read the Wikileaks cables that were authored by Ambassador Ronald McMullen, former US Ambassador to Eritrea. I don’t want to go into those scandalous cables just yet, but since we are talking about famine, there was one cable that mentioned famine and Eritrea. It was entitled, “ISAIAS ADMITS FAMINE PRESENT IN ERITREA; PROMISES UNICEF ACCESS”, and it was authored by CDA Melinda Tabler-Stone on 20 November 2009. In it, she writes:

“...In a surprising departure from his public pronouncements on the non-existence of hunger in Eritrea, President Isaias admitted to visiting UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Hilde Johnson that there is famine in the country and UNICEF’s help is needed. Johnson briefed Western diplomats on her November 17-18 visit to Eritrea

and her lengthy meeting with Isaias. She said Isaias promised UNICEF total access to the country for the purposes of conducting a nutrition survey and providing blanket supplementary feeding..."

When I read that cable, I had a few questions for UNICEF and Ms. Johnson. On 7 July 2011, I enquired the following of UNICEF. I wrote:

"...There is a Wikileaks document that mentions Ms. Hilde Johnson and her visit to Eritrea in 2009 and her meeting with President Isaias Afwerki. Is it true that he told her that there was famine in Eritrea? Did Eritrea ask for food aid? Were there any deaths? What about malnutrition in Eritrea? Did she visit any villages and hospitals while she was there? What did she see? I hope she can get back to me as soon as possible..."

A few days later I received a response and it said:

"...Thank you for your inquiry. This is to inform you that your e-mail has been forwarded to Ms. Johnson's office. She will reply at her discretion..."

I am still waiting for Ms. Johnson's reply...

But not all enquiries end up empty. Allow me to explain.

There was a 4 August 2011 article entitled, "PHOTO STORY: Drought and water shortages stalk Eritrea's refugee camps" by Matilde Gattoni posted on the ecologist websiteⁱ, part of the Guardian Environmental Network. In addition to some disturbing pictures, that article said that:

"...The situation has been exacerbated by the unresolved border dispute, resulting in economic stagnation, lack of food security and increased susceptibility of the population to various ailments including communicable diseases and malnutrition..."

On 5 August 2011 I wrote to Matilda Gattoni and asked the following questions:

"...When were you last in Eritrea and when were the pictures taken... Where in Eritrea did you find these "IDP camps" ...You state in your piece that "...These IDPs have fled three times in the last 10 years, each time because of renewed military conflict... Currently there is no Ethiopian occupation in Eritrea...Please tell me when the three conflicts took place, who were they with and I also want to know how you would explain the continued Ethiopian military presence in Badme and other sovereign Eritrean territories. If that is not occupation, what exactly you call it?..."

Imagine my surprise when Ms. Gattoni responded almost immediately to my email enquiry, saying the following:

“...I did not write the article, I'm a photographer ...”

I off course was not about to let it go so I asked her who wrote the article if she hadn't. She responded by saying:

“...God knows, get in touch with the magazine. You are not the first person telling me this, I have given them a few notes from the UN as I went with them in 2003, I am not a journalist but a photographer, they added a lot of stuff and I was not even aware it was published yet. Anyway to answer one of your questions I went there in 2003 and travelled a bit everywhere but mainly focused on a camp which was located next to the Ethiopian border. I forgot the name now...”

While continuing my conversation with Ms. Gattoni on the one hand, I decided to write to the entire staff of the online magazine (with the hopes that at least one of them would bother to respond). After telling them that I had contacted Ms. Gattoni and she had told me that she was not the author of the said article, I said:

“...Unless you can give me a plausible reason why and how such an article could find its way to your site, I have no choice but to believe that this is yet another desperate attempt to undermine the Government and people of Eritrea and their development efforts...Instead of applauding their success in building a sustainable, environmentally sound food security infrastructure, Eritrea has been unduly maligned for not stretching her arms and begging for food as the Ethiopians have...Instead of fabricating a story, why not go to Eritrea and see for yourselves...it would help your credibility and integrity...”

On that day, I received an automated response from all the addressees saying they were out of the office. It was going to be a long weekend.

On 8 August 2011, I got a response from one of the addressees and he said:

“...Thanks for your correspondence re: this story which has gone to several staff at the Ecologist...Whilst I look into the details surrounding the story I've removed it from the magazine website...”

I waited for about one day and checked to see if the article had really been removed. It didn't look like it was, so I wrote to him again and his response was:

“...The story has been removed from the site - is possible cached versions are still visible but it's no longer on the homepage or news sections, and the Facebook link has been taken down...”

He was right, but it took an entire weekend and some, to get this false story removed. God knows how many false stories were borne out of that story since. One question that remained unanswered is why? Why would anyone stoop so low as to bring a 7 year old story to make a case against Eritrea? To me, this is sheer desperation on the part of Eritrea's enemies who cannot stand to hear any good news coming from Eritrea. These prophets of gloom and doom have their work cut out for them...

There are reasons why the people of Eritrea are not in need of food aid today. Eritrea has a sound and visionary food security strategy that is working. Ensuring food security is one of the top national priorities and the cornerstone for sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction strategy in Eritrea. Introduced in 2004, Eritrea's food security strategy has two dimensions, a national food security strategy and a household food security strategy.

1. National Food Security: Food is available in market throughout the country from domestic production, commercial imports, or food assistance. The strategy for achieving national food security objectives rests on three pillars:
 - a. Enhancing the domestic food production capacity;
 - b. Increasing national capacity to import an adequate quantity of food supply;
 - c. Enhancing the effective use of food assistance to fill the supply gap during emergencies.

2. Household Food Security: All household members have affordable access at all times to the food they need for a healthy life. Objectives rest on three pillars:
 - a. Enhancing the Productive Capacity of Small Scale Farmers
 - b. Enhancing Household Purchasing Power
 - c. Public Assistance Programs Targeted at the Poor & Vulnerable

The Government of Eritrea has invested tens of millions in modern agricultural equipment and introducing modern farming techniques such as drip water irrigation, and has promoted the use of modern farming practices-primarily farm inputs (increasing fertilizer use, pesticides), use of improved pest control and reducing post-harvest losses. It has provided support for constructing hand-dug wells, reservoirs, pump houses, ventilated storerooms, and secondary earthen canals, purchased and installed motor pumps, generators, and pipes, prepared and cleared land, trained farmers in irrigation and appropriate farming methodologies; and provided seeds, fertilizer, chemicals and farm tools etc. etc.

The Government has also encouraged commercial farming, by introducing industrial crops, promoting the use of tube wells, and construction of micro -dams and small water storage facilities throughout the country etc. etc. Obviously, all this hard work and commitment has not been for naught. Today, the people of Eritrea are reaping the fruits of their hard work and sacrifice. Young and old, men and women have partnered with members of Eritrea's Defense Forces to rehabilitate and develop Eritrea's agricultural infrastructures which have had a huge impact on food security in Eritrea.

Johnnie Carson and Susan E. Rice can go right ahead and shed crocodile tears for Eritrea, but their concerns are misplaced. They both know, more than anyone else, that the real tears should be shed for the people of Ethiopia who have to live under a brutal dictatorship led by Meles Zenawi, leader of the minority regime in Ethiopia. There is NO famine in Eritrea and they better come to terms with that bitter fact. Today, Eritrea is NOT one of the countries that is suffering from famine or drought and any reports that purport to say otherwise ought to be considered malicious and self serving.

Finally, if there is anyone out there that has contacts with UNICEF, please let them know that I am still waiting for a response. I just want to know if what CDA Melinda Tabler-Stone wrote in the cable was exactly what Ms. Johnson had told the diplomatic community in Asmara, or if CDA Melinda Tabler-Stone had added a little flavor to spice up the otherwise boring gossip-like "diplomatic" cable...

The rule of law will prevail over the law of the jungle!

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http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/997576/photo_story_drought_and_water_shortages_stalk_eritreas_refugee_camps.html