

Brig. General Kemal Gelchu Interview with Eritrean TV

August 10, 2006

Brigadier General Kemal Gelchu was commander of a division of the Ethiopian Army, which is stationed on the border with Eritrea. On August 9, 2006, along with “hundreds” of officers and men, he crossed the border into Eritrea to join the forces opposed to the government ruling Ethiopia. His interview with Eritrean Television reveals the reasons for his abandoning the government, the plight of the Oromo people and soldiers in the military, and his commitment to the struggle against the government. He is an Oromo and a veteran of the struggle against the Mengistu regime. He is indignant at the betrayal of the Oromo people’s struggle for equality by former allies, the group that is currently in power in the country. He also reveals unequivocally, how the government stole the votes and later on used the military to crush any opposition to its action.

General Kemal Gelchu has a strong message to the Ethiopian military and people and to the rest of the world. His decision to leave the camp of the government in Ethiopia is momentous. It comes at a time when the government’s power is dwindling and the crutch it leans on, the military, is deserting it. General Kemal’s action constitutes a turning point in political developments in Ethiopia.

In translating the interview, which was in Amharic, attempt has been made, to the extent possible, to adhere to the text and context of the Amharic version. Any deviations are responsibility of the translator and not the interviewee or interviewer.

This translation is unofficial and unauthorized.

Question

What was the compelling reason for your coming to Eritrea?

Reply

I thank you in advance for the opportunity to express my views.

The reversal and betrayal of the aspirations of the struggle of the Oromo people, which we participated in starting from the time we were young, is our main reason for coming

here. The Oromo in Ethiopia, similar to the other people in the country, are very important for the survival and existence of the country by virtue of the area they inhabit, economic power, and size of population, Incalculable injustice was visited upon the Oromo people by the various ruling classes of the past. Our desire in the struggle was to remove these injustices and to have a country of equality where there is no second class citizenship for some and a privileged position for others. We formed coalition with other movements at the time with the belief that they shared our vision and goal.

However, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (T.P.L.F.) had a hidden agenda that they pulled out after seizing political power in the country. They declared the Oromo people as enemy number one and started excluding Oromos from political and economic mainstreams in the country. In general, the Oromo people are being subjected to inhumanities and injustices that are not normally committed against citizens of a country. Students are shot and executed on the streets for demanding their freedom and rights. Many people and members of the intelligentsia are being imprisoned. People with wealth have their property plundered. The injustice has no limit. But it has to stop at a certain point and time. Also, we do not want to be seen on the side of the barbaric government even for a minute.

Our obligation as citizens is to struggle for the rights of the people. Personally, as an offspring of the people, I have to do whatever I can as an individual. Our coming to Eritrea is based on the belief that the people's struggle, which was cut short and reversed, has to reach its logical conclusion.

We all tried to bring the necessary change peacefully. However, the problem was getting worse with time. So much so that people started looking at each other as enemies. Joint struggle to change the situation peacefully has become impossible. Consequently, it is prudent to look for alternative strategy of struggle. That is why I came to Eritrea.

Question

You are saying that you have made a lot of effort. Could you discuss some of this effort? What was the reaction of the Woyanie (the party in power in Ethiopia)? Did they welcome your ideas?

Reply

No. There was no welcoming of the suggestions. This is a long story. In line with their long-term objectives, they (the party in power) were taking steps on the Oromo people. Any of our people who raised the issue of the rights of the Oromo people, be it in the military or the civilian population, were targeted and killed, or imprisoned. On our part, we called for an end to such action because it is wrong to label people who raise questions pertaining to rights of the Oromo as belonging to the Oromo Liberation Front (O. L. F.). After all, we struggled jointly to bring forth equity in political and economic power sharing; not only sharing, but also to bring change in attitude of people. On the contrary, the government was putting down the Oromo people by belittling the economic contribution of the Oromo to the country. This was written in books and used in political discussion. We were opposing such actions.

On the military front, the creation of the unified military in 1995 was done to give a semblance of fairness. In no time, they staffed the organizations with their own people. All these acts were anathema to creating an atmosphere conducive for people to live together. We expressed our concern through all available means. The response was to label anyone who raised these issues as O.L.F. member. People started getting embarrassed at being called O.L.F. by the government, even though the government itself is a terrorist organization.

It took us a long struggle to convince the people (Oromo) that our question is legitimate and cannot be separated from the Oromo people, and that it is not dishonorable to be called an O.L.F. member. Now, the people have reached a stage where they can articulate the Oromo people's questions without fear.

We tried all peaceful means with the government in power, believing that we all were on the same course. The problem is that they had a different agenda. So, the problem is not due to individuals, or due to unintended mistakes. It is the result of action taken to take advantage of opportune moment. That is one of the reasons that precipitated our decision. There were many other things we were doing in addition to what is cited above.

Question

It is known that the Weyanie treated any Oromo that raise questions related to Oromo people's rights as enemy and subjected them to arrest, murder and other forms of atrocities. In such a situation, how did you manage to reach such high rank as brigadier general, while you were still voicing opposition to the government action?

Reply

Our situation should not be seen separate from the Oromo people. The origin of our struggle is the question of the Oromo people. The culmination of the struggle is reached when the people's question is answered. That will mean our question has been addressed. As I tried to explain earlier, our vision was for the Oromo people, a people oppressed like other people in Ethiopia, by the previous governments. Our wish was to struggle against the fascist Derg jointly and have a country where we all can live in equality. This vision was dashed on the way by the organized "mafia" government.

This problem is not an individual's problem or a few people's agenda. It is a question, a demand of the people. We live amongst the people. It is a demand of our fathers, mothers, and siblings. The soldiers are part of the people. As Oromo, they are directly affected by the oppression. However, if they raise the question of Oromo people openly, they are subjected to all forms of punitive action within the government's means. They may be passed over for promotion, subjected to ridicule and humiliation, while those that tow the official line are openly praised and promoted.

We made it a point to explain to the Oromo people that such action is intended to divide and rule and is a strategy for perpetuating their (party in power) hold on power. Any Oromo organization that advocates for Oromo rights, especially the O.L.F., are raising legitimate demands of our people. Consequently, we should not feel embarrassed about what is happening, but rather have the courage and fortitude to join the people's camp. This idea is gaining acceptance by all people. We are learning a great deal from the oppression we are subjected to.

As Oromos, we are subjected to oppression and injustice by the Weyanie as if we were enemies of the country. On the media, poverty is officially portrayed as the number one enemy. However, in practice, the Weyanie consider the Oromo as the main enemy. The policy is to deprive the Oromo people from any benefits. Force and appeasement may be

used when deemed necessary. In this regard, Oromo turncoats inflict incalculable harm on the people.

People in my position have worked hard to raise the level of consciousness of the people. That is how we managed to reach this stage.

Question

As you know, Ethiopia is home to many nationalities. There are Amharas, Southern Peoples, and Oromo. Why are the Oromos singled out for oppression?

Reply

Ethiopia's ruling classes never rested for a moment when it comes to the Oromo. They never trust the Oromo. The reason is, the Oromo are a great people. Their contribution to the national economy is very high. The geographic location of Oromo territory is also very important for the country.

They (the ruling classes) live a parasitical life by preying on the Oromo. They can continue to benefit from Oromo economic resources only to the extent that they wield political power. They are scared of a situation where they live in equality with the Oromo and the demands made by the Oromo are addressed. They are afraid that once the Oromo come to power and assert their rights, they will lose their exploitative position. The view of the ruling groups is that "once the Oromo taste freedom they will never be subjugated again". This view puts the ruling groups on a course to prevent the Oromo from gaining political power and to keep them in low economic condition. That way, the Oromo can be easily ruled and exploited.

The explanation for the assault on the Oromo people by the ruling classes is a result of their dependence on Oromo economic resources.

Question

To move to another subject – There is allegation that the structure and whole set-up of the military is based on ethnicity. How does this affect morale in the military?

Reply

Ethnicity is the basis for organizing not only in the military but the entire government. The structure and staffing of the military follows the government's practice. The cause is ethnic politics, Weyanie politics. Cabinet ministers in the economic sector ministries come from all the ethnic groups. However, real power rests in Neway Gebreab, the Tigrayan (the nationality of the ruling party), who coordinates and controls them. Another Tigrayan, Abay Tsehaye, as head of Federal Affairs, controls all administrative ministries. So does Bereket Simon, who controls public information and organization. The military is controlled in a similar manner. All positions of authority above regiment level are occupied by Tigrayans. There are few Amharas here and there. However, compared to their size in the population, their number is negligible. It is possible to say that the military is fully controlled by Tigrayans. All critical command and staff positions are occupied by Tigrayans. The other nationalities are confined to the lower ranks. The situation is the result of deliberate institutionalized action. Especially now, the government, after it got the message from the election results that it is not preferred by the troops, it has targeted the Oromo and Amhara. Oromo have been purged from all positions of leadership in the military. This is not an exaggeration. Throughout the army there were only two Oromo division commanders: me and another officer. Obviously, when considering the size of Oromo population and number of soldiers in the army, our representation should have been proportionally higher. The root cause of the treatment of Oromos are getting is that they (the ruling party) view the Oromo as enemy and consequently, they have fear of the Oromo getting power. They do not tolerate any higher degree of Oromo representation. The number of Amhara in power has also diminished from the past. Even then, real power rests in Tigrayans at second tier in the organizations. So, ethnicity is rampant. It starts with simple association and social interaction. Tigres speak with Tigres, Amhara with Amhara, and Oromo with Oromo. The situation is so obvious for anyone to see. Nobody is happy. It is not only the set-up that is based on ethnic background, but the essence of the military itself is the creation and embodiment of this policy.

Question

As you mentioned, there is the allegation that all positions above the regiment level are occupied by Tigigna speakers. Most of these do not have the requisite qualification. How does this affect morale of the troops?

Reply

The issue can be viewed from two angles. The government's strategy to stay in power is by appointing to positions of authority people that can serve its purpose. We know who is who in the military from our daily contact with them. There are too many people who are appointed and promoted because they are Tigre. The result of such practice was shown in the disastrous performance of these leaders in the last war against Eritrea. The troops are aware of this situation. Appointments are made on the basis of ethnic background and not on proficiency. The overriding interest is to protect the regime and safeguard each other. The troops know that they cannot depend on their leaders in time of crisis. The officers cannot provide needed leadership. The officers herd the troops as cattle being led to the slaughter house. The troops know that the leadership crisis is due to the placement of empty-headed leaders at the top in the defense forces, starting with Samora (Armed Forces Chief of Staff). The widespread disaster that has befallen the nation is due to the appointment of these leaders using ethnic criteria. They are narrow-minded ethnicists. The military and the country are victims of this practice.

Question

How is it possible that the troops are ready to sacrifice their lives when they themselves are subjected to gross injustice and live miserable life?

Reply

We gauge the readiness of the troops by the people's acceptance of the regime in power. The people have said no to the government in the election. The people want to see the government removed and replaced. In this regard, the troops firmly support the people's stand. This is what the troops that were assigned to the election sites demonstrated. They demonstrated their lack of confidence of the ruling government by voting for the opposition candidates. It is known to the troops that many of these soldiers were killed,

imprisoned, and some units were disbanded completely as retaliation by the government. Further more, the government is frantically engaged in the process of disbanding the military and reorganizing it in its image. For the troops, it is not only a matter of not fighting, but they are not even willing to be part of the government. The troops are finding their own ways of abandoning the military. Some never return from leave, others simply desert, and others take the step of joining opposition forces as we just did. There is nobody in the military, be it individuals or groups, who are willing to serve this government. This is the situation in the military. The morale and willingness is not there.

Question

Regarding the troops – there is an annual evaluation process (open criticism/self criticism). The purpose of the process, according to the government, is to weed out anti-government elements. How popular and acceptable is this process to the troops?

Reply

In principle, assessment of performance is helpful. There is no harm in assessing work. You can identify areas of weakness and learn from it. This is constructive. However, the assessment program of the Weyanie is a campaign to prop up their ethnic-based policy. They conduct the assessment to ensure that their policy goes unopposed and to prevent any developments unfavorable to them.

This is not a national agenda. It is not the people's agenda. It is a weapon that enables them to benefit their people and to hurt others.

Not only is this assessment process unpopular, but it has been stopped by the troops long time ago. The leaders are corrupt, provincial in their outlook, and plunderers. The troops and the people know this. The leaders know that if criticism/self criticism is conducted, they will be the targets. Consequently, the evaluation process was stopped three to four years ago. The reason is that they were scared of the outcome. This is contrary to what they state in the media.

If evaluation is to be conducted now, they will be the losers. They have enriched themselves illegally. This applies to military and civilian leaders. The truth is known to the people and troops. We were conducting evaluations to prevent corruption and

impropriety. What they are doing now is to avoid the evaluation process at any cost and replace it with decision by administrative fiat. There is no evaluation now. What they say is sheer lie. The allegation that people that oppose the regime are doing so to avoid evaluation is a lie. There is no evaluation, and the reason is what I explained above. That was the situation up to the time I came here.

Question

Now, let us move from military affairs to Election 2005. In Election 2005, the Weyanie lost. However, the government imprisoned winners of the election and thousands of people. Many have gone into exile. What was the impact of this situation on the morale of the troops?

Reply

In Election 2005, the Ethiopian people conducted brave struggle and made tremendous sacrifice. The Weyanie expected to gain from the election. Contrary to this expectation, the election results demonstrated the Weyanie's detachment from the people. The Weyanie lost everywhere. They lost in Oromia, Amhara, and Southern People's regions. There was no election in Tigray (the ruling party home region), because it is not possible to claim an election was conducted when there were no contestants. It is also not possible to say there was election in many areas. Where there were real elections with contestants, the Weyanie were soundly and squarely defeated.

Afterwards, the Weyanie resorted to stealing ballot bags (boxes), stealing votes, imprisoning and expelling observers from the opposition parties, stuffing their own ballot bags and switching the opposition's bags. They resorted to plain acts of embezzlement. We know the whole story. As a matter of fact, the cheating and embezzlement was committed by the police and soldiers. In the end, People and organizations that believed in peaceful transition of power were subjected to imprisonment and murder. Students were shot on the streets and imprisoned. Countless atrocities were committed against the people.

While this was going on, the military was closely watching. Knowing the results of the election, the Weyanie sent warning order to the troops. The government warned that the opposition might resort to violence during the election and that the troops have to be ready for such eventuality. The troops questioned the government's motive. They concluded that the Weyanie knew they were going to lose the election and were preparing to keep power by force. The troops opposed the government's move everywhere. They said that once an election is held, the government should hand over power to the winner. They opposed the government's approach and move.

After the government managed to stay in power, the military decided not to serve under this government, a "Mafia" government. Some crossed the border and went to other countries. Others overstayed their leave. This is my understanding how the troops view Election 2005.

Question

What was the reaction when you heard that the "Agazi" soldiers were killing many people?

Reply

When Agazi troops were killing people, there were many troops in Addis Abeba at the time. However, it does not mean that all of them were responsible for what happened. But, the government brought combat troops clad in Federal Police uniform. Soldiers from the Tigray ethnic group were made to shoot people mercilessly. This act generated intense reaction from the rest of the soldiers. There was objection to the government using the military to kill people instead of handing power, after the people expressed their desire in the ballot in an election that was called by the government. However, the soldiers could not express their feeling publicly because the country's constitution has muzzled them. They have no right to participate in street demonstrations. They cannot be elected. It is illegal to go to public places carrying arms. They cannot engage in party politics. Despite these restrictions, the soldiers view the election as directly affecting them.

It will not be possible to bring to justice people who were guilty. The government is the judge, jury, and executioner. The troops feel deep sorrow at what happened. However, they cannot do anything because they are muzzled and hand-tied.

Question

Would you like to pass a message to the people?

Reply

My message to the Ethiopian people is that this government is a “Mafia” government that usurped power taking advantage of the opportune moment. It is a group that channeled the people’s sentiment in the struggle to its own advantage. Nevertheless, it did not address anybody’s demands. Even the people of Tigray are living in poverty. They got nothing, despite the fact that others used their name. Our measuring yard is the people of Tigray because the ruling group came from this region and ethnic group. However, the party in power is working only for the benefit of its group members. It is this group that is sapping the country dry. The people know this reality.

What I am saying is that “knowing” is not enough by itself. The uprising has to continue. This ruling group believes only in force. It will never surrender power to the people peacefully. Clearly, this group seized power through force of arms without being elected by the people. It has dimmed the people’s hope. People can have their rights restored only by getting organized under their lead organizations and through struggle. This has to be done without delay. People should not wait with the hope that things are going to change for the better by themselves. They have to rise and struggle. The government should not be allowed to recover from the state it is in. I say that all people have to be involved in the struggle.

On a special occasion, I have a message for the Oromo people.

We have neither gained nor shall we gain anything from the past or present regimes. For us, the moment to have the Oromo people’s rights respected, to be masters of our country, to struggle with other brothers (people) and be free together is now. While struggling for this objective, the price paid by the banned Mecha-Tulema Organization, students in prison, Oromo business people and peasants that were subjected to collective

punishment, and the Oromo people in general, should be considered as sacrifice made in the struggle. Additional sacrifice should be made on top of it. The struggle has to spread. The Weyanie have reached a stage where they will not be able survive as a government. Our people should understand the situation correctly and with Oromo Liberation Front, the lead organization, continue the struggle. We, who came from the troops, are on your side. We are certain the rest of the members of the military will also join the struggle. It is only a matter of time. We are certain about it. Oromo youth will flock to the struggle in myriads. We have to recognize the unique situation that has emerged, pay whatever sacrifice it may demand, and secure our freedom. The rest of the Ethiopian people also have similar demands and rights. They have to join hands with the Oromo people to overthrow the existing government without delay. This is the message I would like to pass to the Oromo and the rest of the Ethiopian people.

Question

How about a message to the military officers and other ranks?

Reply

As I mentioned earlier, the situation with the government is clear. From now on, ignorance cannot be an excuse for serving the Weyanie government. Proponents of the existing order and its beneficiaries have their interest intertwined with the regime. However, the majority of the troops are subjected to the same injustice as the people at large. This injustice is manifested in promotion in rank, benefits, and security in life. Consequently, the soldiers do not, and cannot, get any preferential treatment over the people. Because the people are ruled by a leadership they do not like. The military has to take action. But people in leadership position should not mislead the troops. Just for their benefit they should not run up and down to confuse the people. Struggle is the only means for success. Tomorrow, when the difficult moment comes to pass; all will be accountable in history for their action. To be free from such a fate, it is important to act now. As I mentioned earlier, there is nobody that does not know about Weyanie atrocities and brutality. I like to urge them to join the popular struggle and to stop the self-delusion of personal growth and benefit.