

**Brig. Gen. Hailu Gonfa and Col. Gemechu Ayana Interview with EriTV
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Question

Welcome.

Brigadier General Hailu Gonfa. Could you tell us who you are?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

I am Brigadier General Hailu Gonfa. I have worked in the Ethiopian defense forces in different capacities of leadership. Prior to my coming here, I was head of the Curriculum Department in the Defense establishment.

Question

How about earlier?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

I was in positions of leadership at army division level, head of logistics at the army corps level, and in various other capacities in the military.

Question

Col. Gemechu?

Col. Gemechu

I am Colonel Gemechu Ayana, from the defense forces of Ethiopia. Prior to coming here, I was commander of a mechanized division. I have been commander of the 8th, 4th, and 5th mechanized divisions at different times.

Question

What made you leave a country that you love and join the struggle?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

The system of government in Ethiopia. I had an important position. I am beneficiary of the privileges that come with rank and position. However, the situation in Ethiopia is such that the people suffer from the repressive action of the government. Students are killed and arrested, businesspeople lose their property and have their business activity disrupted, and the people are not ruled by a government of their choice. The people have called upon the military to join the struggle against the government. It is in response to this call that we have come to join the struggle.

In the past, we have tried all peaceful means to have the people's demands addressed. However, the situation was deteriorating further. Illegal arrests, killings, and plundering of property continued at increased level. Eventually, the situation reached a stage that to be associated with the government constitutes becoming accessory to what it was doing to the people. The situation creates mental stress and possibility of being held accountable in history. I have decided to support the people's struggle in my profession as a soldier, and to pay the ultimate sacrifice for the cause. That is why I came here.

Question

How about you Col. Gemechu?

Col. Gemechu

The Weyanie (the ruling Tigrayan group in Ethiopia) has caused the Ethiopian people untold suffering for the last fifteen years it has been in power. No one has any freedom, be it at individual, family, or group level. We thought that the situation may improve with time. We attributed the problem to lack of administrative experience by fighters who just came from the field. In reality, the situation got worse with time. Killings were heading towards genocide. Destruction and plunder of property became rampant. In general the suffering of the people went from bad to worse. The culmination point was reached in the 1997 election. In this election the government in power did not win.

As soldiers our allegiance is to a government elected by the people. One can say that the current government has seized power by force. Leaders elected by the people are incarcerated. As a rule we should be led by a government elected by the people.

Currently in Ethiopia there is no government elected by the people. From now on, to expect to bring change peacefully by working with an impostor government that has seized power by force, stole the people's vote, sent to prison popularly elected leaders, is tantamount to giving unqualified support to the government and its action. I can't support this government morally and physically. All suggestion and advice we gave was in vain. The demand of the day is to join the forces that are fighting against the government, overthrow this government through a struggle, and establish a popularly elected government. I believe in this approach and that is why I have made my decision to come here.

Question

What is the impact of the government's seizure of power by force of arms on the soldiers?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

The soldiers are members of society. They have parents and siblings. Some of their family members have been imprisoned, lost their jobs, or lost their property under the threat of the gun. As members of society the soldiers are familiar with the plight of the people. Many young people joined the military to serve the people. However, the reality on the ground does not match with the expectation. In such cases serving the interest of the people is paramount. Hence, the soldiers are not prepared to accept and execute orders issued by this government. Their main complaints are:

We should not have to kill people and we should not be the ones to herd them to jail

People should be ruled by a government of their choice;

The people's questions should be answered;

Col. Gemechu

The military is part of society. The same repression perpetrated on the society at large also befalls the soldiers. The government murders members of the armed forces the same way it murders members of the population at large. The government conducts illegal mass arrests in the population. Members of the armed forces are also subjected to mass arrest without any justification. The soldiers have no freedom. They cannot ask questions and they do not get any answers. The Ethiopian people and members of the military suffer the same predicament.

Question

The troops suffer the pain and tribulations of the people. What was the feeling of the troops at the massacres perpetrated by the Agazi soldiers?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

Agazi is a unit of criminals and murderers. It is true that some Agazi members are decent individuals who have not committed any crime. However, they are not trusted and consequently are not given appointment to position of authority. Agazi soldiers do not follow the rule. They only follow instructions from their leaders to kill people. The unit has been structured and conditioned to follow such instructions.

Agazi soldiers are viewed as the devil incarnate by the other troops. The troops know that the Agazi are responsible for all the atrocities committed on the people. Agazi are responsible for death and imprisonment of their relatives, and rape of their girls. Agazi, as the servant of the few in power, is a dirty spot on the military's image and a source of dishonor and will be held accountable in history for its acts.

Some, in the lower ranks who are not party to the criminal acts, oppose what is going on. However, the top leaders know that their acts constitute major crime and unless they keep on doing what they are doing, they are doomed. So they continue to mislead their soldiers and continue with the mass killing. Nevertheless, there is strong opposition within the Agazi corps. The Weyanie, continue to use the Agazi against the people to commit murder and other criminal atrocities.

Col. Gemechu

It appears that the Agazi corps falls under the command of military intelligence. The truth is that the unit is under direct command and control of the Weyanie intelligence service. The targets for killing are identified by Weyanie intelligence. Individuals suspected as members of Oromo Liberation Front or sympathizers of the Coalition (“Kinjit” opposition group) are targeted for killing. Individual killers are assigned to execute the order.

During the uprising following the election (2005), all soldiers in a unit will be ordered to open fire. However, there are individuals who are assigned to kill selected individuals. The Ethiopian people know who the murderers are. They know that just because all Agazi members wear the red beret does not mean that all of them are murderers. The murderers are members of the Weyanie intelligence service. They are members of the Tigrayan people’s Liberation Front (T. P. L. F.). Not all Agazi members are murderers. They may be there and they may open fire. Members of the Weyanie intelligence are inserted into the Agazi units and assigned their specific targets. This is targeted killing. The killers may be officers, party members (T. P. L. F.), and members of the Weyanie intelligence.

Question

How is ethnic discrimination manifested in the day-to-day administration, such as staffing, promotion, training, leave?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

The Weyanie follow the tactic of sowing discord among the people and soldiers by pitting one against the other. This was their main weapon for staying in power for the last fifteen years. This practice is widely applied in the military. The leaders do not have any vision. They do not have a clue about future development and growth of the country. They have blocked minds. Unquestioning obedience to orders from the few at the top is the main criterion for selection and promotion to high level leadership position in the military.

People with leadership skills and concern for the well being of the people are bypassed and put under the control of the less competent superiors. This is done to deliberately frustrate them and torture them psychologically. They are subjected to stringent control and surveillance.

The union of the opposition parties is a major victory for the troops. The rank and file do not have an agenda (interest) of promoting division and disunity. They have no interest in imprisoning people. They are not corrupt. Many joined the military to serve the country. Their unity is flourishing. They stand together. This gives the Weyanie a big headache. Because the Weyanie trick of survival is sowing discord among people by spreading innuendos and lies to get them at each other’s throats. However, this anachronistic approach is not producing any results.

The country belongs to all nationalities. The Weyanie insistence in using this obsolete approach creates suspicion as to their motive. The country belongs to all. But in the Weyanie rule some are not to be trusted. Even within the people of Tigray, only people from a certain awraja (zone) are trusted to head and have a role in the “security sector”. The entire leadership they put in place is myopic and obsolete in the 21st Century.

Nevertheless the Weyanie continue to follow the same pattern. Their reasoning is that the system has worked for them so far, and there is no reason why it should not continue to do so. They do not trust people who are patriotic, can lead, and would pay attention to the people's heartbeat. Their very essence does not allow them to do so. The moment they do so, they will be history.

Question

As senior officers, when you make suggestion for improvement, what response do you get?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

Weyanie are not receptive to ideas that do not support their position or are outside their line of thinking. They have closed minds. They have no vision of the future. Normally, leadership starts with managing a family. Many of these people cannot even manage their families. If some people come out with ideas that are not to the liking of the leadership, they are labeled and ostracized. They are labeled as belonging to the Oromo Liberation Front, or as chauvinist "Neftegna" (armed settler or conquistador, for Amhara). They are also accused of eroded commitment to the political party and the party line.

In these circumstances, there are some innocents who believe that the presence of the oligarchy is sine-qua-non for the unity of the country. They use scare tactics by asserting that the country will fall into chaos and anarchy without this group's leadership.

The Ethiopian people's position is different. The people are saying that the regime has plundered the country and it cannot be trusted to maintain unity of the country. They tell the leaders that they do not represent the country and its people. The people are demanding the government hand over power. The people want to have a transparent government that follows the will of the people. The demand by the troops is similar to that of the people.

Any suggestions for improvement are viewed by the government with suspicion. The proponent of an idea will be viewed as enemy of the government. The leaders cannot live among the people, because they have enriched themselves through corrupt means. They have plundered people's wealth. They are thieves. They are murderers. They send people to prison and kill at a scale never seen before in Ethiopian history. They are not governed by law. What they do is contrary to what is in the books. In the end, once they have taken maximum advantage from the country, they do not care whether the country falls into chaos and the people kill each other. As a matter of fact, they appropriate a budget for promoting conflict among the people of the country. As a matter of fact, they want the country to be mired in social, ethnic and other conflicts. In the process, they hope to maintain power and continue to plunder.

Consequently, they are not receptive to any suggestions. Their vision does not go beyond their doorstep. This is their true nature.

Question

What was the reaction and feeling of the soldiers when Gen. Kemal Gelchu joined the Oromo Liberation Front? What is the attitude of the soldiers now?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

As I explained earlier the soldiers had enough of the people's suffering, their own condition of living, and their own suffering in the hands of the government. Kemal's joining the people's struggle gave the soldiers a big morale boost.

Everybody in the military that is not party to criminal acts of the Weyanie was very happy that the popular struggle was started by senior officers. The troops were expecting the senior officers to lead. As reaction to the popular sentiment, the Weyanie tried to spin a few their dirty acts. In addition, they imprison soldiers. However, imprisonment will not deter the soldiers because they are prepared to die for their cause. The soldiers are not ready to execute orders of mass arrest and mass killing of people, and school closings.

There may be individual criminals as usual. These are individuals that the soldiers can easily identify. It is not even necessary to ask the question whether these people have committed the usual crime of murder and theft. They are open murderers and thieves. The government tries to mislead the soldiers by conducting meetings. They imprison and kill. However, there is nothing that can slow the progress towards the ultimate demise of the regime. As for the individuals, the military is ready and waiting for orders to throw them off its back.

Question

Were there any meetings after the coming of Gen. Kemal Gelchu? Were any evaluation/criticism self criticism sessions conducted? Were any officers dismissed? What is the situation with the troops?

Col. Gemechu

For the soldiers that came from the various nationalities this is good news. Few evaluation sessions and meetings were conducted by the Weyanie. Ever since Gen. Kemal joined the O.L.F. the Weyanie openly declared that Oromo soldiers are not to be trusted. Senior officers are under strict surveillance and control. They cannot move freely, meet with their families, or take leave. By doing so, the government thought that the troops would be scared and coerced to ask for pardon. They have started imprisoning people. However, the reaction from the troops is more organizing and consolidation. There is no sign of backtracking. The Weyanie cannot reverse the situation.

Question

What is the essence of the call to the troops?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

The call is from the people. It is based on the frustration of the people. We arrived at this situation after failing to see improvement through peaceful means. From now on, to continue with the government means to be accessory to their criminal acts. The Oromo Liberation Front now is a member of the Coalition of opposition parties. This is a joyous event. We as Oromo and as Ethiopians, and as normal human beings, cannot rest in peace knowing all the injustice committed on the Oromo people. Our people have been exploited, displaced, made to develop a sense of emptiness (hopelessness), and was not entitled to the harvest it produced. We heeded the call from the people and joined the struggle.

The struggle is carried out inside and outside the country, as armed struggle and without arms. Everybody knows the nature of the Weyanie. Even the old fashioned trick (divide and rule) will not work. Supporting the struggle is the issue of the day. It is nobler to advance freedom of the mind despite the hardship than living in material prosperity in a state of mental slavery. That is the way to start an order for the coming generations. That is why we came to the struggle.

Question

The call was for all the soldiers. The reason why this was done was explained earlier. Can you give us additional ideas?

Col. Gemechu

Part of the reason was to encourage the troops to tighten their belt, never to slacken their effort; in short to prepare mentally for the struggle and to continue on the path we have already embarked on. The oppressors of the people are losers. This is a historical truth. We are close to the light while the Weyanie are getting close to darkness. During the short remaining period, the troops should not be dissuaded by the preposterous propaganda of the Weyanie. They should never allow their commitment to wane. Our main effort was focused on the soldiers and not the population at large. We have been working together, struggled together, we are organized together, and we have been conducting discussions together. To emphasize again, the Weyanie may resort to their old tactics. In this regard, imbecilic minded people such as Minassie Wode-Giorgis and Gen. Bacha Debele, are individuals who feel insecure unless they are burdened with responsibility by the government. These are like a horse that goes to the master in the house to be loaded. This never happens in real life. The horses I know go to the house to get some feed and not to be loaded. The master has to go out to bring the horses to load them.

Nevertheless, the troops have to be careful from machinations by such individuals. The troops have to maintain their steadfastness. They have to maintain course. We admire the troops for sticking together, talking to each other while maintaining the secrecy of their activities. Weyanie may kill individuals from now on. But it can never reverse the course of events.

Brig. Gen. Hailu

I like to stress that the people are not on the government's side. The people are far ahead of us. They are paying heavy price while still unarmed. The Weyanie are clinging to power through the military; albeit, a few people within the military. Hence, it is appropriate to view the Weyanie and their supporters separately. After the formation of the united front between the various opposition parties, T.P.L.F. members who did not participate in the criminal activities of the government, at all levels of the hierarchy, support the struggle. They get incensed at the cruelties committed on the people. The troops should be reminded not to get divided on the basis of ethnicity, personal association and other forms of categorization. To cite an example, after the decision taken by General Kemal and his associates, the government was expecting the non-Oromo soldiers to rise against the Oromo. To the disappointment of the government, the troops did not do as expected. They stood together. All soldiers, including those from Tigray,

applauded Kemal's decision. They blamed the government for all the hatred by the people. They assert that the heavy sacrifice paid during the struggle that brought the present government to power was not for this end result. A few individuals are responsible for misdirecting the movement.

This is a major failure for the Weyanie. They wanted to do criticism/self criticism. However, no option was favorable to them. There would not be any options in the future. The only possibility is for the antigovernment camp, the struggle, to get strong. The only people left with the government are informers and participants in the criminal acts of the government. They will be held accountable for their deeds and may face the consequences. These are individuals who have been isolated from the rest of the troops and used by the government as instruments in its effort to confuse the troops. They are the only people that have earned the trust of the government. Otherwise, the troops are united, ready to address the people's issues. At this rate, the day for the establishment of a government by the people is not far. On the other hand, this is the sound of death knell for the Weyanie.

Question

When Brig. Gen. Kemal Gelchu came, the government was quick to state that his action was that of a disgruntled person. When you came here, the government's response was that they don't know anything about you. How do you explain this?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

I think the Weyanie have run out of words. They probably came out with this idea to agitate the soldiers. The truth is that the soldiers took the government's explanation as a joke. It is ridiculous for the government to say that "We knew what step he (Gen. Kemal) was going to take", and that he finally took that step.

The Weyanie have said that Gen. Kemal left because he did not get promoted or appointed to higher position. Getting promotion or appointment under the Weyanie is very simple. All one has to do is be anti-people and kill people. If I want to be a president, all I have to do is kill more people, I have to lie, plunder, and be corrupt. I have to be an instrument for the Weyanie. The action taken by Gen. Kemal and us is not related to quest for power. The issue is not pertaining to individuals. It is a matter of articulating and addressing the people's questions. It involves matters of national interest and questions of identity. The government's explanation was to simply confuse the people. However, the people know this and the fact that Gen. Kemal's decision was not for power.

I have enough power and rank. I have material comfort in my life. However, my mind has become a slave. Having all material comfort in the world while the mind is enslaved makes one think of facing the day of judgment, in this world or the next. The government supporters suffer from this syndrome.

Recently, the president of Oromia zone was on a visit to the U.S.A. In meetings with Ethiopians living abroad, he offered parcels of land ranging from 200 to 500 square meters in area for building houses in Ethiopia. The implication is once people accept this deal they will not participate in the struggle. This was his mission as assigned to him by his Weyanie bosses.

However, the demand the people in general and Oromos have to this individual is that he is incompetent and should relinquish his position to capable people. They accuse him of having the Oromo people massacred. He is an embarrassment and a porcine of a politician to carry such a message to people living in Europe and America. This is proof of the type of people that are used by the Weynie to exercise their authority over the Oromo.

This leader has sold his self respect for the benefits he gets. He has killed the inspiration and vision of the Oromo. A budget of Birr 500 million has been appropriated for purposes of dividing and destroying the Oromo people. The government incites fights between Guji (an Oromo group in southern Ethiopia) against the Borana (neighboring Oromo group), create conflict with the Somalis, promising elevated status in the administrative hierarchy for one area and relegating others to lower levels, are some of the usual practices applied in Oromia.

This is the type of leader Oromia has. These are also the people that are ruling Ethiopia. They follow antiquated methods of divide and rule. Their weakness also emanates from here.

They are quite justified to say that they don't know us. They must be busy with their agenda of murder and plunder.

Question

Ethiopia's relation with its neighbors is deteriorating by the day: be it with Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, or Kenya. How do you explain this situation?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

Weyanie can survive only in an environment of conflict. Conflict is its life, its essence. Its history reveals constantly creating clash between groups and individuals, and changing the people's agenda.

The suffering from the previous war is fresh; the blood spilt has barely dried, the bones strewn all over the battlefields are not even graced with proper burial; the mother who lost a son has not been properly told; children and parents are reduced to life of mendicancy on the street due to lack of support. The people want to know, after the war for Badme, why their children were killed. They accuse the government for getting into an illegal war that is not supported by law and causing the death of countless people. The government officials' children or relatives did not die in the war. They are sent to school abroad where they live there in comfort.

The demand of the people could ensnare the government. That is why they had to change agenda and get involved in another war. The government is involved in Somalia without any justification in history or law. In Ethiopia, if there is a working law it is the requirement that the government has to get the permission of the Parliament to declare war or to cross the borders into another country. However, the government leaders forget the laws they have enacted. They don't even seem to know the reason why the people have to pay the salary of the members of parliament. The people also have to be involved before such a decision is made.

In reality, even if the matter was to go to parliament it will pass without objection. The whole process is a charade. Only people of law respect rule of law.

The whole purpose behind moving into Somalia was to divert the people's attention. Ethiopia should maintain peaceful relations with its neighbors. The government should not send troops to Somalia. Anyway, the young people who will die are not the children or relatives of people in power. It is children of the poor masses that will die. Similarly, resource to be expended will be other people's resource, and not theirs.

True to their nature of living in conflict, they create conflict with the Sudan, Kenya and others. They create conflict not only with neighboring countries but within their own country among their own people. The government in Ethiopia is a government that appropriates a budget to foment division and conflict.

They fabricate incidents and stories in a manner that would arouse people against each other. Sometimes they broadcast such stories on the mass media. In one incident, they had to eventually to apologize to the Amhara. In another situation, they made T-shirts, with offensive wordings to the Oromo on them, had some Amhara speaking individuals wear them in the universities. They are now distributing these T-shirts in the schools. The goal is, by creating conflict amongst different nationalities, to divert the agenda, and stay in power. This is antiquated trick. The people are asked to close their eyes and be ready to be fooled.

It is sad that government budget is allocated to finance such activity. This is the work of a government, as I mentioned earlier, that has no vision. The government is not worried that the country might disintegrate and people die, as long as it does not affect them or their families.

The Ethiopian people have to get united to defeat the propaganda and machinations of these leaders. The important thing is that people know the intentions and methods of the government. That is part of the reason why the government is bent on fomenting conflict within the country and with neighboring countries. This government cannot survive without ongoing conflict.

Col. Gemechu

Woyanie's policy in its relations with neighboring countries is "*après moi le deluge*". If we take the Ethio-Eritrea border conflict, their concern is not that Ethiopia is going to lose territory. This has never been their agenda. They rejected the decision of the demarcation commission not because they believe that Ethiopia was denied justice. Their purpose is to pass the conflict to coming generations. If Badme is taken away, their concern is not that Ethiopia was going to lose territory. Rather, their intention to leave a bone of contention behind is frustrated. The aim is to leave a perpetual state of conflict between the two countries. Otherwise, the border issue between Ethiopia and Eritrea has been concluded peacefully in the court. The reason why the case has not been concluded is because if that happens, Eritrea and Ethiopia will be living in peace. This is a thorn in the flesh of the Weyanie. They do not want Eritrea and Ethiopia to live in peace, when they are not there any longer.

On the Somalia case, Christians and Moslems in Ethiopia have been living in peace and with mutual respect. The government urged the people to rise, claiming that a Sharia war has been declared against Ethiopia. This is none of their business. The aim is twofold: to create permanent hostility between Somalia and Ethiopia, and within Ethiopia between Christians and Moslems. They know they have reached the end of the line. They want to leave Ethiopia in a state of lawlessness that Somalia had to endure for the last 15 years.

In relations with the Sudan, at one time they support one group against the government. At other moments they support the government against other groups. This is not because Sudan has done anything against Ethiopia. The purpose is to leave a burden to the next generation. They don't want to let the country in peace when they are gone. The Ethiopian people have to realize that the Weyanie are sowing the seeds of destruction of the country. The people should wake up in time and abort all Weyanie intrigues.

Question

Do you have messages to the Ethiopian people?

Brig. Gen. Hailu

My main message to the Ethiopian people and the various nationalities and groups is that the present government has created an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion amongst us. It is working hard to prevent us from getting united. This is how it has managed to stay in power so far, and that is the only way it can stay in power in the future. If the Ethiopian people follow their tradition of mutual respect and peace, these bandits will not stay in power.

You, the Ethiopian people, have embarked on a struggle. You have been struggling for 15 years. The government has been intimidating, imprisoning, and killing people and plundering their resources without any pretext. Their effort was to make you kneel down. You did not kneel down so far. Instead, you have launched the struggle. Thanks to the martyrs yours struggle has reached its present stage. People in the military and Ethiopians in the Diaspora are on your side. We joined the struggle responding to your call. Keep your struggle coordinated. Follow instructions of your lead organizations and raise your arm against the oppressive regime that is the cause of all the misery in Ethiopia.

In the meantime, abort the effort of the regime to create conflict between the nationalities and social groups. When you unite and show concern and respect for each other, your enemies will not stand on your way. They are reduced to individuals. To this end, beware not to fall victim to Weyanie cheap propaganda. As you are aware of, they plant landmines, and they produce provocative material in the name of one nationality.

Sometimes, they even write books. Don't let them dictate your action.

My message to the Ethiopian people, and especially the Oromo people is that you have struggled and sacrificed a lot. We have joined you to render our services in our profession, including paying the ultimate price. You also have to be prepared to join the struggle with material resources, physically, and in any way you may deem appropriate. Join the Oromo Liberation Front and participate in the once and for all struggle to chase out the criminal elements in power.

The other nationalities get organized under umbrella organizations. Lift up your arm against the criminal gang that is defiling your name and group. Be prepared to follow and execute orders from your organization. This is the message I like to pass.

Col. Gemechu

The Ethiopian people are involved in the struggle. They are tenacious and strong people. Weyanie are between the rock and a hard place. I want to add a few words, not because I believe the Ethiopian people do not know these things, but to express my feeling. Beware of the Weyanie evil schemes designed to prolong their stay in power. The scheme is

sowing division and discord. If the Ethiopian people exercise caution and counter the Weyanie scheme by fostering unity among the people, then the light of change is close by. After all, the rulers are a group that seized power by force. Legitimate leaders are in prison. The struggle has to continue unabated, as it was before the leaders were incarcerated. It should not change. That is my message.