JOURNEY IN THE DARK
Oromo’s untold story in Eritrea

The aim of this bulletin is not in any way to black mail any organization, but only to share my own ordeal and also send a message to my fellow Oromo youths.

It is better to identify myself to all readers than to deeply tell my past background. Few years ago, I was a student at Jima University. While in university, I actively participated and contributed my share of expectation to the cause of Oromo students’ movement protesting against the plunder and brutality of the Habesha regime. Starting from high school education, recruited to an Oromo liberation front (OLF) underground cell, I spent my school time as an activist fulfilling my responsibility of a generation. When I was at university I didn’t completely went to study, but also shared my time for the cause of the Oromo peoples’ struggle. I just couldn’t isolate myself from any movement that stands for justice and equality of the Oromo people.

I was grown up in a family brutalized by their political attitude. Since I was young my father spent most of his life in prison framed as an OLF member. Mercilessly and cruelly tortured by the tyrant government regime, my father became disabled and mentally unstable to look after his children. It was our mother, who fends for our survival while looking after our father in prison and bearing the responsibility of the whole family on her shoulder. Having this kind of deep human inflicted scar in my mind, I developed the wish and the ambition to join the OLF, the organization I yearn to be a member one day since my childhood. This is what I believe in, live for and die for, for OLF is a stamp on my body and a stream running in my blood. Limiting words to tell about myself let me take you with me on a journey to the ordeal I was through as a young Oromo student activist.

As I said, while at university I was spotted by the regimes spies and marked as dangerous daily followed wherever I move. Later the twist turned to a fiasco. Oromo student activists were unjustly arrested and detained by the authoritarian government of Tigray. I was lucky enough to evade an arrest. However, life was not going to be the same again. Failing to visit my family, I spent some few weeks in Addis Ababa hiding from the piranhas totally disconnected from friends. I also lost connection with the OLF and that made me unstable. Life started boring in Addis. I have to make decision soon or later. The soon the better I thought. I made my decision and cut a line to fully join OLF. It wasn’t like an adventure but a life risking start, but I set on a journey to find OLF and wholly submit myself to the cause of the struggle.
LONG WAY FROM ADDIS ABABA TO ERITREA

I don’t have any clue since when was OLF residing in Eritrea but the Tigrayan regimes media puts it as it was since the end of 1990s. Nevertheless, it is a known secret that OLF is based in Eritrea. As a person evading arrest, I passed so many challenges on my way to Eritrea. But before making the final attempt to cross to Eritrea, I spent some few months in Humera, on the side of Ethiopia as a daily laborer; not to earn a living but taking my time to know how it should be done and reach successfully the other side of the border. Fortunately I found a government military escapee person from south Showa who is also working as a daily laborer for coverage but tacitly he was engaged in human trafficking across the border. Knowing him very well I let the cat out of the bag by telling him the secret I was holding. At first he was skeptical of my decision, but at last he let it go and guide me to my final destiny. It was Thursday night. My reference was the information I got from the escapee. Though difficult and risky I Friday morning I was on the side of the other border on Eritrean soil on the hands’ of Eritrean soldiers. Uncertain about tomorrow, but I was certain that I am not in the brutal hands of the Ethiopian regime.

THE NIGHT MARE ORDEAL SOON I WAS IN ERITREA

No sooner I surrender to the Eritrean defense forces, I told them what I was looking for. I want to join the OLF, I cried. They told me I should rest a moment and I will be granted my wish. Even though my yearnings of many years is now about to burst as though I didn’t spend many passing times for this opportunity, I couldn’t hold my excitement of this time for another few moment. But here things are different. It was not as smooth as I wished it should be. Two weeks had gone, and I was under scrutiny. What went wrong? Was I suspected as an agent? I don’t know. Two weeks later a logistic car came and I was on board to Afabet, a small town where soldiers surrendered to Eritrea, escaping from Ethiopia are kept. Interrogated again my wish was one and only one. Joining the OLF! Forget the OLF! I was told, you better stop thinking about OLF and I suggest you join the Tigray people’s democratic movement (TPDM), groaned Eritrean military personnel. I felt a cold blood flows in my body. It all felt like a night mare. I stood my ground. I repeatedly told the man that I will only participate in Oromo political cause and join only the OLF. I knew my request failed on a deaf ear only when I was taken to a place called Harena, where I saw myself in a big military barrack. Only Tigrinya is spoken here. It is a TPDM military camp. Before they left I asked the Eritrean defense force members who brought me to the camp, why should I be brought here against my will? Yet I want to join the OLF. They told me from now on it is the TPDM I should deal with and my case doesn’t concern the government of Eritrea. What a malevolent
act! Is the OLF not in Eritrea? Is the government of Eritrea not sheltering OLF in a safe haven as it was claimed? Or OLF and TPDM are one organization I didn’t know yet?

LIFE WITH TPDM

Two days after in their camp, a TPDM leader came and asked me few questions. I answered his questions honestly and told him my intention. He told me I should stop fooling myself and better think about my future. The mood between us was as uncomfortable as I expected. He came back again two days later. His face was uninviting and my decision was irreversible. What have you decided? He roared. I knew things are going to be bitter, but I told him I will never be his front’s member as long as I am conscious. No deal was struck between us. Removing my shoes I was straightly taken to a prison. Home sweet home; I laughed burningly. Escaping a prison to a prison I murmured. I wasn’t alone at least. There were some 16 Oromo youths handed over to the TPDM by the Eritrean government. Most of them spent more than six months and they are in a bad shape. One of them from western Oromia region, Dembi Dollo, was inhumanely beaten and lost one eye completely. It doesn’t need one to look for evidence to know these youths were tortured, for a foul smell coming from their maimed wound tells it all.

Three month has gone. Torture, interrogations, malicious damages and mental degradation was the fate one is destined to achieve in this prison. We were told leave alone thinking joining OLF dreaming about the name by itself is a crime. What is this all about? My daily stay with the Oromo prisoners has an answer. TPDM is trying to make an organization like people’s democratic organizations incepted by the former Tigray people’s liberation front (TPLF.) a daughter learns from her mother is the case here. The 16 I was detained with strongly opposed TPDM’s dream of turning them in to a tool. But TPDM’s attempt was not in vain. They created an Oromo wing organization like the TPLF did by creating the Oromo people’s democratic organization (OPDO). Their members were those Oromo youths who were coordinated by force, failing to stand the brute’s daily torture. As days were passing I reached on one undeniable fact. TPDM has succeeded in creating a PDO and I couldn’t help about it. So my only way out is to accept their offer and see what fortune has for me in its store. Staying in prison in a dessert far away from home in country like Eritrea is not a wise decision we concluded with my fellow prisoners. We knew what we decided and it was the right decision. We told the TPDM person, our ‘hero’ who daily come to us for beating the ‘hell’ out of us. I observed the excitement on his face. Our gate is open to you gentlemen; he victoriously told us. They let us free at last! We were taken to a farm land to work as daily servants on TPDM owned
vast land. TPDM is not creating an Oromo organization wing only, but also other nations and nationalities are on the making. There was a weekend nations and nationalities entertainment day, by Amharic language. Everybody is supposed to speak Amharic and has to avoid speaking his native language. In this kind of situation one day when at work an Oromo former prisoner working with us hit on a head a Tigre soldier guarding us and escaped successfully. The guard died on spot. It was a miracle the escapee survived the desert challenges and reached Sudan, I learned later. But his escape made life terrible for those of us who remained behind. We were threatened to be retaliation targets. Another incident had happened again. A young Oromo former Ethiopian soldier from western oromia region, Ilu Aba Bor zone escaped. His was not a success to tale. He was captured and shot dead by firing squad. Here what I want my readers to know is that TPDM has a big number of soldiers in Eritrean desert from the age of 8 to 80 shackled together by force against their will. Students, farmers, teachers, husband and wife, all were abducted by force and serving TPDM by the mouth of gun. When an opportunity presents itself everybody tries his/her luck to escape, whatever cost it takes to pay. After we start training 22 trainees out of 108 escaped within a period of one month. Their cruelty is not only for us who were not Tigrayans, but their own members from Tigray also share the same challenge. While on expedition their fighters desert in mass and their casualities are very high. Now they even stopped fighting because number of casualties and deserters.

Through passing time I proofed my loyalty to TPDM and set myself free from their surveillance. All this time I was preparing for my escape and it has to be first and last successful one I thought. One day I collapsed in front of the TPDM leader. I spent some few minutes as though I am unconscious, and when wake up I told the leader who was standing with confused face that I was ill from diarrhea and lost too much fluid. I was treated fairly and that night frequented toilet more than ten times. For there is no a latrine we used the bushes and that night I was sure no one was following me when I was going out and went deep to the bush. The second night was my luckiest night ever. I escaped with ease and saw myself the next morning at the hands of the Sudanese defense force. Without any harsh treatment I was taken to shagarab refugee camp in Sudan. Not all days are bad. After three weeks at the refugee camp I made every contact I could and finally made my way to Khartoum, to try to find OLF contact. I have never dreamed to lead a refugee life and I left my education, my beloved family and my country biasing for the Oromo people’s struggle. Therefore, there is no reason for me to remain at refugee camp and seek an asylum and then repatriated to third country as many refuges do.
ARRIVING IN KHARTOUM AND FINDING OLF CONTACT

It took me only few days. I accessed all my old contacts and it was worth trying. Finally I succeeded in contacting a friend graduate of Jima University who guide me to another friend released from Ma’ikelaw (known for its torching Oromo activists) prison. This freed prisoner is my former class mate at Jima University. It all doesn’t feel real. Yet it was all real. Through this friend I was contacted by an OLF member residing in Khartoum. Though it is not the code of conduct to identify this person his approach, treatment, understanding and caring is a personality I couldn’t pass without mentioning. With him I got a sanction, and I also told him all I was dreaming, my ordeals, and the malicious damage the government of Eritrea is inflicting on our youths in a remote Eritrean dessert. He wasn’t surprised at all when I told him about Eritrean governments act and TPDMS’s attempt of creating PDOs supported by Shabiya. You draw in water unknowing its enmity was all he has to say. When I asked what he means by his word he told me he even couldn’t understand what he said. I knew he was raged in anger and I withdraw my question. But he collected his thoughts and started telling me a long story that touched me deep to my bones. I was a member of Oromo liberation army (OLA), he said; I have been to Asmara so many times before I said enough. I was listening attentively and he continued. Many people think Eritrea is a safe haven for the OLF leaders living there. But the truth is, it is a living hell for them. Leave OLF he hissed, Eritrea is not a country to live in even for its own people. Leaders from Eritrean government hated our movement and they are assigned in splitting us daily, making our struggle crawls on its knees. I was sad and at the same time felt retaliation surging in my body. Kamal Galchu (leader of OLF faction splinted from OLF in 2008) was hand made by this kind of leaders he said. Our leaders are doing all they could to save this struggle from collapse and I am also in this struggle at this old age he told me tears rolling in his face. I was feeling something. Something cannot be put in to words. Hell to Shabiya I shouted! What is the difference between them, they are all working against us for the dominance of habeshan hegemony. TPLF and EPLF are both sides of one coin.

There is nothing for me in Sudan I thought though. From Khartoum I set to Nairobi via South Sudan and Uganda. The journey was hazardous and I don’t see it useful to mention, but I managed to reach Nairobi after three months. I could have said a lot about what I saw and experienced in Eritrea, but I reserved it for history and also feared for the safety of Oromo children still trapped in that malicious country. For me life will never be the same. Now I have the right contact with OLF and I will be looking forward. As I said I will never be a refugee in my life, Nairobi is also not going to be my final destiny. I have my
own destiny and it is my hand, I know where I have to go and it is the right direction to take.

Conclusion
Before ending my story I will say to the government of Shabiya, take off your hands from Oromo struggle, stop harassing our children, stop handing over Oromo youths to TPDM and if you don’t want OLF existence in your country; tell the leaders to leave.
For Oromo leaders who are struggling and keeping the flame burning in this kind of testing situation, my appreciation is sincere and I want to say may God reward you the fruit of your sweat.
I will reiterate once again. Shabiya please take off your hands from our struggle. History will judge us!
For Oromo youths wishing to join OLF, the road to Eritrea is not the road to liberty, don’t make the mistake I made. OLA is in Ormia and look for it just around you.
This is my story and I know there are so many untold histories. But one day someone will live tell these untold stories. Pray for all those who are still languishing in Eritrean dessert.

Thank you for your precious time.

Oromia shall be free!!
God bless Oromia!!

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