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## On The Student Movement In Asmara And History Of ELF

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Transcript read and corrected by Abdalla Hassan Ali summer 1991

*What is your personal background and how you became involved in politics and more particular in the student movement?*

I was born 1948 in Adi Keyh. I started my education in Adi Keyh, continued it in Massawa and then went to Asmara. I came to Asmara at the end of 1962. In September 1963 I enrolled in 8th grade at Leul Mekonnen secondary school. As far as my involvement in political activities is concerned foremost there was the family influence as my family used to be interested in politics. I used to hear some of their discussions and also as student and worker strikes had been going on since 1958 I used to hear about the activities and even the imprisonment of some relatives or of some other people we had an acquaintance with. And also we knew of the political activities of the students who were before us. There were also the moves of Harakat. So all this finally got me involved into politics.

For example in Leul Mekonnen there were monitors and prefects and Weldeyesus Amar was the head of the prefects. He had the power of appointing assistant prefects. So he used to appoint those students who had some political inclinations and I was appointed as one of the prefects<sup>1</sup>. And there was another thing. Debates were carried out and in these debates issues such as democracy and independence were indirectly discussed even though the points of discussion were decided by the school administration. So such things made one to get involved into politics and it means we also saw the activities of the students prior to us.

*How did the student movement in Asmara develop after the strike of 1965 and what was your role in these activities?*

I participated in the student strike of 1965. After the strike Weldedawit and Seyum joined the armed struggle and Weldeyesus left to Addis. And in the secondary schools we took after them and began to carry on with our activities. In the same year Weldedawit and Seyum secretly returned to Asmara and organized us because they knew us previously. Also they gave us directives to begin a students organization and to make contact with some workers. Then they were arrested before they could return back and we continued the task.

Because in Leul Mekonnen we had a favourable ground immediately we formed a student organization in form of cells. Then we extended to Haile Selasie I and we started some cells. After that we passed on to such towns as Decamhare and Massawa. Also in the Western Lowlands there were some activities for students' organization and by 1967 almost all the towns had student organizations. And through other channels the organizing activities went as far as Addis Abeba. So by this year the student movement was almost intensive and we had relations to each other. The higher body of Asmara of this student movement was called Central Committee and there were local committees in the schools. This directive had come from the Revolutionary Command and we had also some shadow leadership members in case any arrest or something happens, they should take over.

As to the question of organization at that time, although we carried out our mission according to the directives of the organization, we can not say that there was a detailed and continuous

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<sup>1</sup> Monitors looked after the behavior of the students inside the class, prefects were responsible for the orderly behaviour of the students outside the classrooms within the school area (Tesfay Weldemikiel).

system of organization and sometimes you can't even know whether one is a member of a local or even of the central committee. It was because of the absence of direct and continuous contact with the field. So, as I remember, for a short time, I was leading the student movement and for another short time Gerezgiher Tewelde was leading it and it kept on functioning. So the general concentration of the students was to do some political activities of the armed struggle. There was a contact to the field but sometimes it gets delayed, it was not developed in a way that it was functioning smoothly.

One thing should be explained. When I said the organization was not developed I mean that the organized student leadership did not have all the power to give guidance and that. And the student body had its own contacts with the field. And, on the other hand, the ELF had 4 zones, so when a student goes to Keren, Aqerdat, Massawa or the Highlands he sometimes gets into contact with the army operating in that area. And because there was a national sentiment he can join the armed force without even the information and consent of the student leadership. Another way was the way organized by us. It was the main way, I could say. For example, we had relations or contacts with the 3rd zone around Adi Keyh, the 4th around Massawa and the 1st around Aqerdat. Also we had connections with the workers' cells. When students wanted to join the army we send them to the field by accompanying them with some couriers.

And some of them went through different means. For example, we give them the general place where they can meet the fighters and they go by themselves. When someone wants to join we also could order him to go by bus to Aqerdat or to Adi Keyh and that when he gets down from the bus a person of such and such identification will pick him up and take him to the field. This was done in precaution of the security measures of the Ethiopian army.

There were many students who had different contacts and activities besides our movement. The Addis students though they contacted us they also wrote their own pamphlets which we then used to distribute all over Eritrea. In those conditions where the work was going on secretly you could not organize things as you wish and as usual. Practically the one who has contacts with the front gets more done as those who had it only indirectly.

*What was the role of the girl students in the movement and did at that time any girls already join the armed struggle?*

There were not as many girl students as boy students but with us in the movement there were girls also participating. But as far as the question of joining the armed struggle is concerned, it was delayed for the girls, at least in the area we were functioning. And the reason is clear in that our society does not give much independence to the women to act as they wish. The first women who joined to the field were from the area of zone no.3 in about 1967. There were even some women who participated in a military operation in Keren and then joined to the field. They were mostly operating in the medical field. There were also some women from the rural areas. But then the overall number was small, maybe it was in the tens and even the Ethiopian army was especially running after those units which had women in them.

*What was the organization of the ELF among the workers and did the student organization of ELF have any relationship to the workers' organization?*

In the ELF organization priority was given to the workers. The ELM had begun workers' organization in about 1959 and after the formation of the ELF it began to organize workers since 1961. Their organization was always there. Concerning the leadership of the workers, it was sometimes formed of 7, sometimes of more than 7 members. But the worker' organization used to take in some of the trusted students. That means that they had close relations with some students. The workers' organization was strictly clandestine. But the students'

organization, because the students were relatively free to enlarge their number, it was decided that they continue their organization with the membership of students only. Mehamed Umer Yahya, Ahmed "Egirigir", Musa Mehamed Nur were some of the workers' leaders. Mehamed Umer Yahya used to contact us, he was in Asmara at that time. There were also others who later joined the revolution and were martyred and others were killed by the Ethiopians such as Sheikh Mehamed Saleh Hamed and Mengistu Bairu. Those who joined and were martyred were Siraj Ahmed, Tukue Yehdego. It is also that the workers, because they have responsibilities for their families, were joining to the armed struggle less in number. Those who went out and joined to the field were mainly those who knew they were in danger. And on the other hand, the underground work in town was interesting.

*Why and when did you leave Asmara and what were your first activities in the field?*

I left Asmara on April 14, 1967. We were operating together with Gerezgiher Tewelde and when he was arrested the Ethiopian authorities began to search for some clues. So after 10 days I left Asmaras. I went to Barka and met some military units led by Abu Tiyara. He had been to the 3rd zone and when he returned from that zone I found him in Upper Barke in Duluk around Mensura. He told me to go to Kassala and to meet the Revolutionary Command. And I went to Kassala. Here I stayed for 2-3 months and then I went to the military training section in the field under the leadership of Umer Damer. After I took the training I joined the training unit there and stayed with it for about one year. I stayed in the training center unit. We were around Rora Maria, in Erola, up to Sahel. This training unit was established only in name but it was not functioning in an ordinary way with its training activities because the other zones did not send new recruits as they should to it. So what was going on was that if any newcomer joined he was accepted by a unit and got his military training inside that military unit. And even gun shooting was not practiced inside the training unit. In practice all zones had their own training systems. There were no new recruits for the training center. If one came they let him join a fasila and let him be trained there. I went to Kassala then in 1968 before the meeting of Aredeib.

*When you came to Kassala it was the time when the Harakat Eslah and the movement of the fighters were agitating there. What were the issues and how did you participate in those activities?*

At that time in Kassala the general atmosphere was intensifying in calling for the unity of the zones, also there was slogan about there should be one leadership and its center must be the field, that the congress should be held and also there were slogans calling for the programmatic declaration of ELF. In Kassala there were many houses which belonged to the different zones, these centers accepted the fighters who came either for rest or for treatment but all the fighters used to gather and to exchange ideas. And also there were people entering Kassala from different zones and the organized people in Sudan also had the same sentiments and views of this general atmosphere. So being in Kassala at this time I participated in the activities calling for the unity of ELA and the establishment of one leadership whose center would be in the field. There was no difference between the general sentiment of those fighters and people here in Kassala and the Harakat Eslah. And finally the task was done jointly. From Harakat Eslah there were Abdelqader Ramadan, Abdalla Suleiman, Kidane Kiflu and others. So even this expresses the general sentiment of the situation. There was no difference, we can not see them as different groups. We were doing meetings together. Although we can't say that this gives a form of two bodies, from those who were known as army committee were such persons as Abubaker Mehamed Jime, one martyr called Abdalla Talodi, Abdalla Mehamed, Taha Ibrahim, Mehamed Nur and also Idris "Sharif".

*How did it come about that Aberra Mekonnen and you were given the assignment to accompany Jack Kramer to the field even though you were active in the movement of the fighters? Was Aberra also of this movement?*

Aberra Mekonnen was with us also in these activities. When he came to the field he directly came to Kassala before even taking a military training and he participated directly in this situation. At that time, even though the Harakat Eslah and the movement of the fighters were present, this does not mean that the relations between the fighters participating in them and the Revolutionary Command did not exist. For example, Said Saber has been working in the information Department, Welday was a member of the Revolutionary Command and Kidane Kiflu and myself were under the Kiada Sewriya.

When this American journalist came it was seen that the Americans still do not have a clear assessment of the situation. So it was organized that if this American goes to the field and writes of what he sees it would be for the benefit of the revolution. So I and Aberra Mekonnen were ordered to go with Jack Kramer to the field. We were not long with him, we accompanied him from Kassala to Barka, we visited some place in Barka and then, because he had to meet some units in the 2nd zone and then enter to Keren, he was given some fighters who accompanied him and they directed him to zone no. 2 and with Aberra Mekonnen I returned to Kassala with his documents and films.

*When you came to Kassala in 1968 what was then the relationship between the ELF and the Sudanese government? Was there a tendency of the government to impose restrictions on the activities of the ELF in Sudan?*

At that time, of course, I was new in Sudan and how the government of Sudan functioned and what its relation to the revolution was, I did not know. But what I had come in contact with was that the Sudanese authorities were arresting some fighters who were released after paying some fees. The members of the Kiada Sewriya were mainly operating underground and the activities of the Ethiopians also intensified. They have been throwing some bombs in the Western Gash area of Kassala against the Sudanese petrol distribution area to threaten them, This was the general information I had, but I really did not know what was going on.

*What did you do after you returned to Kassala with the materials of Kramer?*

After the formation of the Tripartite Unity I went to that area and with me were many other fighters who were sent to the field in many directions and with the same ideas we had we joined the units in the different zones. I went to Akele Guzay and joined the unit called seriya<sup>2</sup> 8. Seriya 8 at that time had about 150 fighters. In the Tripartite Unity there were at least eight seriya but also independent gantas for guerilla activities. I did not participate in the Adobha Congress. I continued in this seriya in Akele Guzay. Its commander was Umer Suba. I stayed with this unit till the Tekhlit of Tahra. After that some units were sent to the vicinity of Asmara. After the merger of the army new units were formed and it was also decided to send guerilla units around every town. Saleh ad-Din Abdalla and myself were given the duty to organize inside Asmara, Mahmud Hazebe was sent to Aqerdat, a certain Mehamed Yazin to Massawa, Suleiman Musa Haj to Keren, Mehamed Taher to Mendefera.

The guerilla units were given the tasks of organization around Asmara and inside the town. When I returned responsible for organizing the city I found everything had come to a new situation, that the Ethiopians intensified their campaign to arrest the ELF members. So we

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<sup>2</sup> At that time a seriya was composed of 3 fasila and it was the biggest unit; the seriya level of military organization was introduced in 1966, when the zones were established the forces were still organized into fasila only (Tesfay Weldemikie/Abdalla Hassan).

began to organize the city according to the acquaintances we had. We also tried to recruit new elements. At that time to operate in Asmara was very difficult. Besides this task of organizing the guerilla units had other tasks which can be identified as military operations and political agitation around Asmara.

Our main camps we were depending on, were in the area of Mensa up to Ad Shumer (Filfil, Agenat). When we tried to go up to the Highlands we couldn't even stay for half an hour, just after some time the Ethiopians used to arrive. So, the center being these lowland areas gradually we were managing to expand our activities, to create cells in the villages, to get information and to return back. We had cells inside the villages, we got information from them and sometimes we came into contact with some persons who came from Asmara and organized them. But we were always returning hastily. For example, we first met in She'eb, Selemona, some teachers and we mandated them to carry our mission. Concerning the acceptance of the people, of course, because there is an intensive enemy pressure in that area, there were difficulties, but those who came into contact with us from Asmara were mainly composed of Christians and we fighters, our units, were both composed of Christians and Muslims. So, especially in our task, when we come to work, the general national sentiment was dominating. And when we were inside Asmara, Muslims and Christians were working together.

I did this work up to October 1970. Then I was captured on October 13, 1970 inside Asmara, but Saleh ad-Din Abdalla carried on with our work after I was arrested. I was about 6 months in prison, then in April 1971 Mehamed Amir "Kabli", who was captured at Massawa, and myself, we escaped from the prison by digging our way out. After I fled from the prison, I was mainly on treatment in Kassala and Khartoum and then I participated in the 1st National Congress.

*Concerning this Congress, how many of its delegates were from the fighters and how many participated there due to their leadership position or as representatives of the offices and branches abroad?*

At that time there were not many administrative organs except the participation of the General Command and the ex-members of the Revolutionary Command and of the High Council but there was no great administration within the units. A few members of the foreign offices had come and also some national elements like Ibrahim Sultan were accepted as delegates but about half of the delegates were of the fighters. From the people there were about 20 representatives from Denkel, from different areas and also from Sudan. At that time the congress took not less than a month and the delegates from the people were given a chance for some consultation and lobbies were being carried on. So they might know who is who. Besides this, because the revolution was almost in every part of Eritrea, they can have some information about the important members of the ELF. Through this they can elect who is to lead them.

*What can you say about the role of Hajoti concerning the Seriya Addis?*

Hajoti was not even accepted by the fighters as a revolutionary. He was the head of the security office, he had connections with all the sections of this department, even we when we were in Asmara have direct contact with him. I can not say that this episode of the Seriya Addis took place without his knowledge, He was the nearest to the authority to know.

*Which unit or section elected you as delegate as you had been to Sudan for some time?*

After I was out of the prison, I had not a concrete task, so I was ordered to stay in the Sudan. When I participated in the congress I did not come representing a certain organ, but a special decision was taken in order to have me participate in the congress.

*What did you do after the Congress?*

After the congress I stayed for some time and then I was appointed to work in the information department but I did not have a concrete task there and after some time again I was appointed responsible as a command leader of the guerilla units in the highlands. The task was almost the same as my former task, my area being Asmara and its surroundings. I was not entering Asmara at this time but I was interested in the task carried on inside Asmara. The main work there was done by Umer Mehamed and Mesfin Bahlebi. Of course after the 1st National Congress the situation in Asmara and surroundings was positively changed. We were succeeding in our mission. There were many military operations being carried out inside Asmara and its surroundings. Up to the 2nd National Congress I continued in this task.

*Operating around Asmara at that time, what were your contacts or informations concerning the group around Isayas?*

I have some idea concerning when Isayas split. Even from the unit we had a big group which went and joined to him. At Addi Gebres we always crossed the street Keren-Asmara and entered the villages and distributed information and immediately returned back. There comrades of us were having contacts with Isayas and they organized themselves and they left us sleeping. They had taken over the guard-duty. I myself was not thinking that we who move together would act like this. They left us there and directly they went. We went after them in the direction they had gone but we could not get them. Our aim was to find out why they left. They left a letter saying our cause is connected with the General Command, so nobody should follow us. It was a very severe thing for us. We were happy about our successes and also believing that these differences could be solved by unity. Among them were Berhane, Teclu "Abu Tamania", Tekhle "Wodi Arba'ate", Tsegay, Amanuel, they were 7-8 who left. Mehari Uqbazgie, he went at some other time.

*What was the problem in Denkel at that time?*

The problem in Denkel was because of the deeds done by the PLF. At that time they did many bad things to the people so they took a very bad picture of the revolution and many took a stand against the revolution. And that time also many were having guns from the enemy, they were militia. Starting from Thio till Asseb, all the people were armed. So it is needed to show to the people that this revolution is their revolution, that the enemy is one. They could not differentiate then that the PLF is different from the ELF. They saw it as one. It was like the same problem with those who had weapons from the enemy in the highlands. The Danakil were even special as they think that the revolution is not theirs. In the congress the many causes were discussed. It was decided not to use force against them. First we have to do intensive political programme among them and the operations done might then be done only against those who were traitors. When the ELF went there after the congress with their programme then it was accepted and many fighters from that region played a good role.

*What did you do after the 2nd Congress?*

After the 2nd congress I was wounded and in 1976 I went to Syria for military training with the Military Institute of Syria and the Al-Fatah. I was a military commander after my return in unit 8 till 1978. Then I went to Sahel as Vicecommander of Brigade 64 and then I became commander of this brigade till the fight with EPLF ended

*How was the military office organized after the 1st Congress?*

In the Military Office then there was a kind of staff but I don't know what their responsibilities exactly were. Within its section called Guerilla Units Department were Said Saleh, Ahmed Ibrahim, Idris Hangelay. They supervised the activities of the guerilla units and their formation.

## **Addendum Abdalla Hassan Ali on 16-02-1991**

### **Development of the Military Structures of ELF**

From 1961 up to beginning of 1963 the units were called group (teshila) and had 6 members . Before Awate's martyrdom there were 12 men in two groups of 6. From the beginning of 1963 to 1965 till the zones were established there were the platoons (fasila/ganta) in growing numbers. Their strength was up to 80 but it was no fixed number. Since 1967 till 1976 the largest units was the Company (haile/seriya). From 1976 onward organization in batallions (bataloni/kata'ib). In 1978 brigades were created in a process of some months which started in April 1978. In summer 1979, in July, came the reorganization into fronts.

### **Dates**

The meeting of Anseba was at Erola in 9/1968.

The Adobha Conference started 28.08.1968 and had 160 delegates.

Awate was 260.2. - 30.03.1971 with 300 participants

23.12.1969 decision to suspend the Supreme Council and to call it to the field.

Uncertainty when the Tekhlit of Tahra was, probably in early summer 1970, and when the conference to which the Ubeliyun were supposed to come but did not come.