CHALLENGES TO SECURITY SECTOR REFORM IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

THE SECURITY SITUATION IN ERITREA: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION AND ITS CHALLENGES FOR SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

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Introduction

For almost five decades the states of the Horn of Africa have been in the throes of a continuous internal, regional and international crisis. One of the main causes of political instability, the protracted Eritrean revolution and the response of two successive Ethiopian governments, was rounded off with the independence of Eritrea. The Eritrean armed struggle (that broke out with the dissolution of the Eritrean/Ethiopian federation set up by the UN in 1952) lasted from 1961 to 1991. The full extent of the human and material waste of this fratricidal war defies statistics.

The first Ethiopian revolution, conducted against Emperor Haile Selassie, was another source of internal instability. The ideas that propelled the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 were class based; in this enterprise, the Ethiopian student movement (in the early 'sixties) played a pivotal role in formulating the political and ideological language. The first Ethiopian revolution was directed against the ancient monarchical system and the feudal structure that supported it. Its ambition was also to accommodate the demands of the different ethnic groups of Ethiopia by creating a socialist commonwealth. This revolution was hijacked by a military/communist junta known as the Derg (Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army).

The second Ethiopian revolution was conducted by the Tigray People's Liberation Army (TPLF) against the Derg and was propelled by the vision of equality for the ethnic groups of Ethiopia. The Derg responded by proclaiming that the conflict was a struggle between the Amharas and the Tigrinya speakers, with the former fighting for unity and the latter for separation. At an ideological level the struggle was represented as a struggle between the narrow nationalism of the Tigrinya speakers and the socialism of the Ethiopian state. The Derg's war against its opposition in the two revolutions, perceived as a final confrontation between the Amharas and Tigrayans, was characterised by an all-out war involving the whole country.

In addition to the above internal factors that caused instability, there were intermittent wars between Ethiopia and Somalia during the Emperor's rule as well as the Derg's dictatorship. The Ethiopia–Somalia wars were caused by claims and counterclaims on the Ogaden territory. The scope and scale of these conflicts were devastating and decimated the scarce human and natural sources. It is no exaggeration to state that the states that compose the Horn of Africa have not known peace since the outset of the period of decolonisation.

Security sector reform (SSR) envisions constitutional, democratic and public control of the security services as such, and given the historic involvement of the security services in instability in the Horn, SSR is certain to go a good distance towards improving the dismal human conditions existing in the Horn of Africa.

In this paper it is argued that that the totalitarian dictatorship that prevails in Eritrea does not permit an entry point for the implementation of SSR. It is also argued that best method of laying the groundwork for SSR in Eritrea is to advance democratic change internally, accompanied by international pressure for democratic elections.

The paper provides a framework for SSR in Eritrea, describes the security issues in Eritrea as they stand as well as the security issues in the region, identifies lessons learned and relates them to the challenges for SSR, and finally examines the so-called Eritrean opposition from the perspective of SSR.

The historical context

An American journalist, Peter Ritner, wrote a book bearing the ear-scorching title *The death of Africa.* The dramatic title was matched by an equally harsh salvo right at the beginning of the book:

> What the world with insufficient apprehension is now witnessing in Africa is the birth of a monstrosity whose whole future is mortgaged to its deformities. The putrefaction is close at hand. Africa society has lost its coherence and its ability to defend itself from itself or from the impinging forces of the outside world (Ritner 1960:258).

The message of the book was dismissed by foe and sympathiser alike; nonetheless, in the end Ritner's prediction has proven to be true. He summarised his views thus:

> To sum up, there will be more and more people in Africa growing
> hungrier and hungrier as they grow increasingly less satisfied with
> their lot. They look around them, observing a progressively more
> senseless disarticulation of society, with abandoned industries and
> worked-out mines, cheek by jowl and with mud-acre patches of wind
> and water erosion square mile after square mile (Ritner 1960:258).

Ritner's forthright language was addressed to the emerging African elites – a
reminder of the pitfalls of nation-building, as much as it was addressed to
the American voter, businessman and government, to direct their attention
towards Africa. He rejected 'foreign aid' as a lame remedy and advocated
instead the cure of massive capital transference into Africa as a form of a
long-term American investment that should be envisaged as a profitable
enterprise for all concerned. He advocated an institute of African affairs,
which would form an organisational centre for the proposed involvement,
with a budget of US$6–8 billion.

Amongst others, this capital was to be funnelled into research for reclaiming
soils, stimulating the growth of protein-forming micro-organisms, improving
the nutritional content of food crops, reforestation and watershed repair
programmes, agricultural research foundations, stock-breeding experiments,
fellowship programmes, a college for training educators and health officers,
and much more (Ritner 1960, chapter 13).

A discussion of the merits or demerits – or, for that matter, the intentions or
possible consequences of Ritner's cure – is not the issue here: the point is, more
than 40 years ago the contours of the things to come were already visible.

What went wrong? Why is Africa afflicted by mass starvation and systemic
collapse of its political, economic and social institutions? To a certain extent,
the answer to this question may be found in the role of the internal and
external security institutions of the post-colonial, nation-building African
state. In this approach, nation-building shall be treated as a case in point for
the security sector.

Nation-building

In Africa the post-colonial world started out with ex-colonial territories
and the ex-gubernatorial states as building blocks of the nations-to-be. The
exclusive political/military control over a given territory or the monopoly
of political legitimacy and the legitimate use of violence was one of the

three main pillars of the nation-building project. The second pillar was the defence of a given post-colonial territory against possible claims from the external world. The third pillar, the dimension of development and welfare, became hostage of the first two pillars. The preservation of the territory and sovereignty of the post-colonial state required a sizeable part of the nation-building budget – at the expense of the development dimension. This situation explains, to a considerable extent, why nations that are victims of internal and external instability enter into a vicious cycle of starvation and epidemic diseases from which there seems to be no escape (Giddens 1985).

The second major problem faced by post-colonial Africa was the question of what to do with the gubernatorial state. The multicultural setting of nation-building assumed that a 'nation' could be fashioned out of the multiplicity of tribes or ethnic groups. These constellations of ethnic groups or tribes tended to fight for monopoly of political legitimacy and became instrumental in state violence. After the short lifespan of hastily drafted constitutions, military intervention became the vehicle for attaining, and maintaining, state power and political legitimacy. Very often political legitimacy entailed unfurling the obligatory socialist nation-building programme that promised a shortcut to modernisation and development. In the absence of consensus to regulate the relations of ethnic groups with the state and society, the armed forces were ensnared into a vicious cycle of coups and countercoups (Decalo 1976).

In pre-colonial society there was a kind of laissez-faire relationship between various ethnic groups – in so far as they came into contact with each other. During the colonial period, the relationship of these ethnic constellations to each other changed in proportion to the relation of the state to each of them. As a result, new ethnic positions emerged during the colonial period: some ethnic groups emerged with advantageous positions measured in terms of access to educational, market and civil service opportunities. This phenomenon gave rise to a new form of political struggle in which ethnic groups competed to capture the state structure. In the early stages a single ethnic party was the vehicle for capturing state power; later on, however, the coup became the main instrument of political change in Africa (Enclose 1980).

The strategy of the people's war and the militarisation of Eritrean society

In 1961, Eritrean nationalists resorted to armed struggle in order to achieve national independence. The strategy of a people's war as applied in Eritrea (a small country with scant resources and without external support) led to an extreme form of self-reliance that, in its turn, led to the militarisation

of Eritrean society. The burden of the armed struggle was borne by the peasantry in the countryside. Despite their extreme poverty the peasants provided food to the guerrilla fighters, without respite, for 30 years. The peasantry was organised into cells to provide information and was organised into militias for control of the unarmed peasants and to serve as an auxiliary arm of the main guerrilla forces.

The twofold aims of the original guerrilla army, namely to function as a propaganda vehicle among the people and to recruit fighters from the peasantry, were intended to challenge the security system of the Ethiopian state. Their small-scale military actions challenged the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state in such a way that a substantial amount of the national development and welfare funds were deflected to the needs of modernising its internal and external security sectors. With regard to Eritrea, the process of the militarisation of society was completed when the guerrilla forces were transformed into standing army forces.

In the context of the militarisation of Eritrean society, the *yekealo* (the guerrilla fighter) and the *warsay* (the soldier of the Eritrean–Ethiopian war) are, today, presented as bearers of the highest national values in President Issayas's Eritrea. *(Yekealo* is a Tigrinya word for 'he who is capable of performing the impossible'.) There is no doubt that the courage and the resilience of the Eritrean liberation armies were admirable; be that as it may, the purpose of raising the image of the guerrilla fighter to that of a national hero was to use the high esteem in which these fighters are held to buttress a sense of military nationalism.

Warsay is a Tigrinya word for 'the inheritor'. This name was selected in order to present the Eritrean–Ethiopian war as a continuation of the struggle for national independence. This conceptual trick was successfully used to mobilise successive waves of Eritrean youth for Issayas's war. The ruler's sizeable army is an unpaid army with a shoestring budget; it has never been demobilised and it has access to an endless supply of youths who reach the age of 18. Members of this army have been inculcated with hatred: hatred of the opposition forces! Hatred of the Ethiopian people! Gigantic efforts shall be needed to restore the spirit of reconciliation with co-nationals and neighbours.

Personality cult

Intoxicated by the achievement of national independence, the Eritrean people issued a blank cheque to President Issayas to do with Eritrea as he

wished. Having secured the unquestioning adulation of the masses, Issayas set about, unhindered, building a one-man, one-party state.

In this paper the elements of President Issayas's militarised nationalism has already been identified. First and foremost, civilian values were deliberately erased. The central values surrounding the institutions of family were attacked at their roots. The vision of the nation-building programme of the new regime was to erase the diverse tribal, religious and cultural identities of the country, and fashion them in the ruler's image. The Eritrean–Ethiopian war facilitated the implementation of this project. The programme of total mobilisation for the war effort provided the ruler with a further opportunity to militarise all sectors of the Eritrean society; sadly, even candidates to the university prepare for their entrance examinations at military camps. The enhancement of the cult of personality was taken a further step when Issayas launched a campaign to garner for himself the achievements of the Eritrean revolution. This militaristic ideological form, combined with the cult of personality that accompanied it, paved the way for one of the most violent dictatorships in the history of the region.

The guerrilla state

From guerrilla army to guerrilla state

The Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) became the manpower resource of the newly created state. The transitional parliament was drawn from the ranks of the EPLA, because the transitional government was formed from the high ranks of the same source. The middle echelons took over the internal and external security institutions, whereas the political cadres occupied the civil service. In short, the Eritrean state was taken over by the EPLA.

In 1994, at the third congress of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), President Issayas succeeded in removing the old guard from his government and replacing them by groups who were absolutely dependent on him. To make matters clear, he substituted the EPLF with an organisation of his making, called the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). He legitimised the new power structure by putting up a brand new parliament (composed of his military and civilian supporters) and forming a provisional government composed of second rank yes-men. As a final step towards legitimising his new power base, he set up a constitution-drafting committee that drew its inspiration from the constitution of the People's Republic of

China (the country where he acquired his basic military training). The draft Eritrean constitution is still gathering dust. It can be safely asserted that from 1997 onwards Eritrea was transformed into a guerrilla state, run by a guerrilla army. From that time the Eritrean people has referred to Issayas as the 'dictator'.

President Issayas evolved a nation-building strategy known as the New Eritrea. The pre-independence society was depicted as corrupt and the pre-independence civil servants were, likewise, branded as decadents. The next step was to replace the administrators by fighters, who were oblivious to the Mandarin art of administration. The fighters were attached to the administrators for an intensive in-service learning process; once this do-it-yourself programme was completed, the administrators were dismissed without compensation.

The defacement of inherited culture was central to the strategy of building the New Eritrea. In Maoist 'cultural revolution' style, Issayas singled out language for focused attack. The official languages of Eritrea (Tigrinya and Arabic) were demoted in the name of equality for all the languages of Eritrea.

Religion was treated as an obstacle to the creation of the New Eritrea. President Issayas put religious affairs under the control of the Ministry of Interior; gradually, he built up a vicious campaign against religious leaders and institutions, both Christian and Muslim. The inhumanity of this offensive has reached such a level of intensity that it has, finally, attracted world attention (Department of State 2006).

The campaign against national groups and regions represented another important aspect of the policy of creating a culturally uniform New Eritrea. The New Eritrea strategy was a copy of the Maoist cultural revolution – the main ingredients of which were the idealisation of the liberation army, the promotion of aggressive military nationalism, and the worship of the personality of the dictator.

The education policy of the New Eritrea was based on the anti-intellectual model of Mao's cultural revolution, too. Modern Eritrean history and the facts of the struggle for independence were deliberately distorted in order to provide some kind of legitimacy to the rule of Issayas.

The New Eritrea economic policy was also based on the Maoist notions of collective ownership and 'self-reliance'. Land was declared government

property, giving the dictatorship a free hand to sell land for housing and commercial and industrial projects; in this policy of open dictatorial plunder the losers are the village communities, while the winners are the dollar-flashing Eritreans in the diaspora. The decision to introduce an Eritrean currency without bilateral consultations with Ethiopia was also a grievous mistake committed by the strategists of the New Eritrea.

Identifying the dictator's strategy

President Issayas implemented a strategy of the people's war against his own people – a strategy that is outright incongruous in an already independent country. His aim was to turn Eritrea into his private fiefdom and transform it into a military base in an era of national liberation wars. In order to achieve this aim Issayas replaced the military, vertical command structure of the Ministry of Defence with a horizontal command structure of military governorships of the provinces.

This strategy, in addition to camouflaging the fact that the Eritrean state had collapsed, was intended to impose a total dictatorship and initiate an undeclared state of war against its immediate neighbours. From the point of view of the neighbouring countries, Issayas intends to maintain a permanent state of tension, thus impeding their development aims and programmes.

In the economic sphere the president introduced a party command economic policy organised around party/military farms, party banks and party commercial establishments. The free labour market was replaced by military indentured labour. It is no exaggeration to state that in Eritrea the laws of an organised national economy have been replaced by a party command economy. The population at large is in a state of semi-starvation and the youth flee from their country in large numbers, never to return to the hell that Eritrea has become.

The transformation of the military command structure of the Eritrean army into the institutions of a people's war made it possible for Issayas to maintain a vast army on a war footing, at low cost. Out of the 15 years of nominal independent statehood, eight have been wasted on wars of aggression against Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan.

From an ideological point of view, the New Eritrean nationalism has become the justification for internal tyranny and external aggression. From the human rights point of view, the people have become hostages of the system; half

of the Eritrean government has been thrown into jail for advocating political pluralism; there is no democratically elected parliament; and the independent newspapers have been closed while their editors have either escaped or been imprisoned. The human rights issue in Eritrea is often compared to that of Pol Pot's Cambodia (The world's most repressive societies 2006).

These excesses testify that Eritrea is a failed state. The sooner the international community is aware of this situation, the greater the possibility of denying the Eritrean dictatorship international legitimacy.

The regional security complex

The internationalisation and the regionalisation of conflict need to be examined as important aspects that should be addressed as part of SSR. At the level of conflict between states, the consequences are that the genie, once out of the bottle, has no wish to return to the constraints of its previous status quo. The wars of the Eritrean dictator against Yemen, Sudan and Ethiopia brought these countries closer to each other. Recently, he came out in favour of the Islamic fundamentalist movement in Somalia, and in so doing interfered in the internal affairs of both Somalia and Ethiopia.

The war in Yemen

The Eritrean–Yemeni war came without warning; everybody assumed that the question of territorial integrity between these two states had been settled amicably. The Eritrean people came to know about the conflict only after war had already broken out. President Issayas could have preserved Eritrean/Yemeni lives, scarce resources, and regional amity with his Arab neighbours. But as experience has shown, his first response to any crisis situation is hard and violent. A peaceful and bilateral resolution to the Eritrean–Yemeni conflict was possible.

The conflict with Sudan

The emergence of the Eritrean Jihadist movement gave Issayas the excuse to accuse Sudan of promoting international Islamic fundamentalism. He severed diplomatic relations with the Sudanese government and gave the Sudanese forces the freedom to operate from Eritrea politically and militarily. Until recently, Eritrea was in a state of war with Sudan.

The war with Ethiopia

As with Yemen and Sudan, the Eritrean people assumed that Ethiopian–Eritrean relations were amicable. Political observers of the region were perplexed by the fact that two forces that had fought side by side, appeared to have enviable state relations, and were perceived to belong to the same ethnic pool, were not able to resolve their differences amicably. The Badume conflict and its spread along the entire Eritrean–Ethiopian border were the last straw in the economic, political and diplomatic provocations on the part of President Issayas. The US/Rwanda proposal (whose aim was to bring the Eritrean and Ethiopian sides to the negotiation table) was rejected by Issayas in his televised 'the sun shall never set in Badume' speech, months before the outbreak of war.

The Ethiopian parliament responded by announcing a war of self-defence and thus laid the national and international legal basis for an all-out war. The Eritrean dictator's failure to grasp the seriousness of Ethiopia's announcement of war and the preparedness of its armed forces led him to a disastrous conflict against a sisterly nation and a brotherly people. The visible and accountable losses sustained by the two countries in human lives and material resources are staggering; worse still are the incalculable losses of the future, in ecological, developmental and political terms. Until the border has been demarcated, the two countries may still be regarded as being in a state of war.

The guerrilla state and terrorism

The guerrilla state is by definition a failed one; sadly, transforming the country into a military base – with military, financial and propaganda support systems – also lays it open to the forces of terrorism. The madness of President Issayas's intervention in the affairs of Somalia has not only enraged the governments of the region, but also invites international terrorist/anti-terrorist confrontation.

Challenges to security sector reform

In 2001, prominent members of the ruling party and government wrote a letter of dissent to Issayas. These dissidents, later known as G-15, emerged on the political scene about a year after the democratic demands that forced the president to declare an election for 2001. Their objective was to pave

the way for a constitutional and democratic transition. The dissidents listed a number of failings and infractions in their letter (a copy of which is in the author's possession):

• Preparations for constitutional government had been deliberately delayed

• The law governing political parties and elections had not been declared

• The mandate entrusted to the committee to draft the laws governing political parties and elections had been usurped by the dictator

• The president had created a special court that reported directly to him

• People were being jailed without the knowledge and agreement of the judiciary

• In the absence of institutions for national security, innocent people were becoming victims of unexpected threats to their security

The G-15 dissenters were thrown into jail, as were the journalists that took up the torch of democracy; tragically, a number of the dissidents have died in prison. What went wrong? Why were they picked up so easily? These questions have plagued the democratic movement for years; be that as it may, the task of the day is to agitate for their release (The obscure and tragic end of the G-15 2006).

The reality of the Eritrean situation

The reality of the Eritrean experience is dismal:

• The horizontally organised, semi-guerrilla army is under the control of a dictator

• The horizontal structure of the army does not permit a hierarchical chain of command – let alone civil–military relations based on civilian guidance of the security sector

• Security matters are hidden from the public

• There are no civilian authorities that exercise actual political control

- Civil society organisations exist only in the diaspora

- If there is peace at the local and regional levels, it is because the totalitarian dictatorship has muffled the voice of the people

- Constitutional and international laws, and respect for human rights, exist only in theory

The Eritrean opposition

The background

It should be emphasised that the totalitarian dictatorship that prevails in Eritrea does not provide any entry point for SSR. The only possible entry point for the implementation of SSR may be through some sectors of the Eritrean opposition forces that are dedicated to the removal of the dictatorial system. The propagation of the principles of SSR, today, is certain to prepare the ground for entry points in the post-dictatorship period. It is for this purpose that this paper is examining the Eritrean opposition.

After independence, the non-EPLF organisations were ridiculed as failures by the Eritrean public and the leaders of the region, with the result that neighbouring countries denied these organisations permission to operate from their territories. The disoriented and apathetic non-EPLF organisations were reduced to operating clandestinely from Sudan. The emergence of the Eritrean Jihad, capable of standing its ground in military confrontations with Issayas's troops, lifted the spirits of the non-EPLF organisations and increased their support among some Eritrean Muslims. Sudanese support and access to massive funds from Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf countries enabled the Eritrean Jihad to promote an Islamic revolution that mobilised Eritrean refugees in Sudan.

Another impetus to the growth of an organised opposition was the outbreak of the Eritrean–Ethiopian war. The non-EPLF organisations were able to establish an umbrella organisation called the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA). Ethiopian support gave the alliance a new lease on life that made it possible for them to intensify their military activities against the regime of President Issayas. However, Ethiopia was disappointed with the performance of the alliance.

There were two important developments in the growth of the opposition movement. The first was the creation of the Eritrean Co-operative Party at the Stockholm conference for democracy in Eritrea (funded by the Palme

International Centre), which was held in December 2000. The second was a democratic movement, the Eritrean Alliance Involvement Movement (EAIM), in the US. These two movements played a great role in the fight for democracy, and the equally important fight to stop the war. In 2005, these organisations joined five other organisations to establish the Eritrean Congress Party in Khartoum.

The fifth conference of the Eritrean National Alliance

There were qualitative differences between the fifth conference of the ENA and the previous four conferences. The first difference was that the fifth conference was held when the war came to an end and the warring nations decided to submit the conflict to negotiations and international arbitration. This removed the stigma of 'collaboration with the enemy' that had plagued the alliance previously. The second difference was that the Co-operative Party and the EAIM joined forces with the alliance. The third difference was that Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen had decided to establish a forum of cooperation and friendship at the same time that the fifth conference was convoked in Addis Ababa. These countries resolved to support the reorganised alliance and the resultant recognition of the ENA was to elevate its status.

Unfortunately, one of the organisations withdrew from the alliance over the issue of who should fill the posts. The ENA, together with a breakaway organisation from the PFDJ, conducted a combined campaign that in the end cooled the enthusiasm of the Sana'a Forum for the ENA.

The Eritrean Democratic Alliance

In 2005 the secretary-general of the ENA, under the auspices of the Sudanese government, brought together the four main Eritrean opposition organisations. They agreed to hold a conference in Khartoum, where a new alliance named the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) was established. Although the EDA was in many respects a continuation of the ENA, there was a central shift in its aims. The objective of removing the totalitarian regime by all means available was replaced by one of negotiation with Issayas on the basis of the comprehensive peace agreement regarding South Sudan. The ENA demand for a national congress that included the civil societies, the diaspora communities, and the refugee camps in the neighbouring countries was also cancelled. This shift of strategy was promoted by the two anti-ENA organisations mentioned above.

The failure of the alliance

The fifth conference and the support from the Sana'a Forum was not to the liking of Issayas and he reacted by hiring professional propagandists to conduct an intensive anti-ENA campaign, in combination with the two aforementioned anti-alliance organisations. The result was that the alliance failed and that the Eritrean opposition is now divided into those who wish to reconcile with Issayas and those who want to implement a constitutional and democratic Eritrea at peace with itself and its neighbours. Clearly, the EDA is not a suitable vehicle for the propagation of the principles of SSR.

Promoting security sector reform in Eritrea

It should be clear from the above that any meaningful SSR in Eritrea will only be possible once the current dictatorial political system has come to an end. Political change may be achieved by the selective support of opposition parties who promote conditions for change inside the country, and by the mobilisation of regional and international pressure for the implementation of democratic elections in Eritrea and organisation of a caretaker government in exile. Such a government is most likely to be successful if it is established around political personalities who have the support of the Eritrean people and enjoys the confidence of the region.

Conclusion

The essence of the concept of SSR aims at the democratisation of the security establishment in the developing world. The normative language of this complex programme reflects the need to subordinate the military and other security establishments to the imperatives of constitutional and democratic governance.

In Eritrea, the current dictatorial system uses the concept of 'nation-building' as an instrument to legitimise its actions. The stated aim of Issayas is to strengthen the material base of Eritrea by rapid industrialisation and modernisation; his immediate goal, however, is to maintain exclusive political/military control over the Eritrean people and territory.

In reality, Eritrea is a guerrilla state that exercises totalitarian tyranny at home and aggression abroad. The humanitarian issue is fast assuming the character of genocide. In the name of securing the future, Issayas has dissipated the

present; in the name of national unity, he launched civil wars; and in the name of territorial correctives, he warred against his neighbours.

The unbearably expensive security and military apparatus of Eritrea has isolated it from the other states in the Horn of Africa. There is no entry point for SSRs in Eritrea under the current dispensation. It is hoped that Africa takes up the cause of the Eritrean condition for democratic correction.

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