

SAS NOTES/DIARY

TUESDAY, JUNE 11, 1991

Meetings with ATO MELES ZENAWI, President of EPRDF and President of the Provisional (Interim) Government of Ethiopia

The major event of the day was my meeting with Ato Meles Zenawi, the chairman of the EPRDF and the President of the Interim Government of Ethiopia. It was only yesterday noon that I had requested for this meeting. And then I was told by the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs that the new leadership was equally anxious to meet with me.

The meeting took place at the Old Menelik Palace. Incidentally this is the one place in Addis Ababa where the remnants of the Ethiopian Army put some resistance against the EPRDF forces when the latter entered in Addis Ababa and easily took control of the Capital.

The meeting with Ato Meles lasted 1 hour 15 minutes. From 15.00 to 16.15 hours. The President was with the Acting Foreign Minister, Ato Seyoum Mesfin and Ato Berhane Gabre, Member of the Supreme Council of the EPRDF. I had met Ato Berhane for several times in Abuja when he was with the leader of the Ethiopian (EPRDF) delegation to the Summit, Ato Dawit Yohannes.

I was accompanied by Ambassador Dede, ASG, EDECO who was the officer in charge here in Addis Ababa when the EPRDF Forces entered Addis Ababa and my Director of Cabinet, Mr. Said Djinnit.

As this was my first formal encounter with the top leadership of the new administration, I decided (a) to treat the meeting as a formal occasion involving the OAU General Secretariat and the new administration and then the presence of Ambassador Dede and Mr. Djinnit (b) to speak candidly so as to lay down sound perimeters towards understanding and cooperation between the new authorities and the OAU.

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The meeting went on extremely well. We discussed the larger issues of the country's path towards normalcy. National reconciliation in the context of democratisation as well as the issue of unity. Also discussed in this context were issues of security and stability. At the same time, I raised the no less important issues relating to the functioning of the OAU Headquarters in Addis Ababa. Under this basket of issues, I raised such matters as the status of international staff, their families and dependents; the need to remove issues which create harassment and irritation to the staff and above all the creation of an environment permitting the OAU to function smoothly and effectively in the context of a true respect of international conventions including the Headquarters Agreement between the OAU and the Ethiopian Government.

The President of the Provisional Government received me very warmly. Our discussions were conducted in a very sombre and relaxed atmosphere. I came out of the meeting impressed by the leadership's determination to forge ahead towards restoration of normalcy, security and stability; impressed by their recognition that the process of genuine national reconciliation to take place, they need to ensure the broadest possible involvement of the different groups in the affairs of the national and also convinced that they intend to work with the OAU and in that context would do everything possible to cooperate with the Organization. Below is the resume of my meeting with Ato Zenawi as recorded by my Director of Cabinet:

" H.E. The Secretary General was accompanied by Amb. Dede, ASG, EDECO and Said Djnnit, Chief of Cabinet.

President Meles Zenawi was accompanied by Mr. Seyoum Mousse (Mesfin), Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs and Berhane Gebre Christos, member of the Supreme Council of EPRDF. The meeting started at 15.00 hours. It took place in the Menelik Palace.

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President Meles:

It is a pleasure to meet such a distinguished African and representative of OAU. I was always looking forward to meeting you.

Secretary General

We are also privileged to meet you.

I expressed yesterday to the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, my wish to meet you. I would like to listen to you. We had good discussions with your representative in Abuja, sometimes in calm situation sometimes in situations which were not calm.

Let me begin by saying that we were following the situation closely. I sent Amb. Haggag to follow the peace talks and to meet you in London though we were not invited to the Ethiopian talks. I did so because I felt we were concerned. Ethiopia is not simply an African country. It hosts the Headquarters of our Organization. We are at home in Addis Ababa. What happens in Addis Ababa concerns us.

It was very wise of you to send a delegation to Abuja. It helped a lot.

Our concern is that peace, security and stability prevail in the country. The OAU Council of Ministers addressed itself to the situation in Ethiopia. Reference was also made to the situation in Ethiopia during the Summit. We are interested in the restoration of peace and stability in Ethiopia and in the establishment of a process of national reconciliation. We would like an Ethiopia which can play its rightful role in our Organization. A strong Ethiopia

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is important for Africa especailly at a time when we are trying to get Africans to get their acts together. Whatever efforts will be deployed to put an end to the conflict and bring peace in Ethiopia are welcomed developments. We will support all efforts deployed in that direction.

I followed the efforts you are making to maintain peace and security in Addis Ababa. A part from the tragedy of the explosion on 4th June 1991, the situation is almost normal. All the reports I got when I was in Abuja underscored the fact that your forces were very disciplined. I commend you for this. But naturally in situations of this nature, there is always concern. While in Abuja, I had gone through enormous pressures. There was very legitimate concern regarding the safety and security of OAU staff families and dependents who were in Addis Ababa. This concern was shared by Member States of our Organization.

We are friends of Ethiopia and not friends of any particular Government. We value the presence of OAU in Ethiopia. We would like therefore that they are conditions to allow the Organization to function normally.

Since the OAU Headquarters was established in Addis Ababa, different views have been expressed. According to one point of view, Addis Ababa is the provisional Headquarters of OAU. According to the other view, it is the permanent Headquarters. This issue normally surfaces at the slightest opportunity when there are problems. When I was in Abuja, I was asked by the media if OAU is going to move its Headquarters from Addis Ababa. I made it clear that we have no intention to evacuate the Headquarters. But it is important to stress that an enabling environment must be created. For it is a fact that there has been a lot of frustrations endured by OAU Staff and other international staff in Addis Ababa. This issue should be addressed.

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We want to be helpful. We want to see the restoration of peace and stability and the return to normalcy in Ethiopia. We have been encouraged by your talks with Ambassador Haggag and my discussion with your delegation in Abuja. We are encouraged by the position of an all inclusive approach. One should not make the mistakes of the past. The country should make use of its full capacity. I can assure you that you can count on the full support of the General Secretariat and on my own support.

Regarding unity : in Africa there is a legitimate concern for unity and territorial integrity. There are many reasons for that concern especially now that the trend in the world is for countries to come together. The possibility of Ethiopia's disintegration is a concern in Africa and for all of us. Indeed, we cannot force unity. However, everything should be done to bring the Ethiopian people together.

From the more restricted point of view as Secretary General of the Organization, my concern is to ensure that a permitting environment which can allow the Organization to function is created in Addis Ababa. For as long as that environment is there, we have no problem. OAU is a unique Organization. It is totally African. By its very nature the OAU has always and will always show greater understanding and demonstrate greater sensitivity to developments in Ethiopia. But the legitimate concerns of the staff must be fully taken into account.

My point is - We hope that as you have started, you will pursue your efforts aiming at creating a climate of security and stability for all residents of Addis Ababa. As long as the conditions are created for our staff and as long as the status of our institution (Headquarters Agreement) are respected, we shall work in Addis Ababa.

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In fact we expect that the Ethiopian Government will go beyond the limits of the Conventions and international regulations in dealing with the OAU.

There has been some irritations. In the OAU, we have international staff. Everybody is expected to work in accordance with international rules. While in Abuja, I got a message that the Authorities at the Airport did not allow Ethiopian nationals to leave the country. I have the same responsibility to staff whether they are Ethiopians or not.

Incidentally, I never raised the issue of the treatment of the OAU staff families and dependants of Ethiopian nationality during the Summit. I did however, raise the issue of the clearance for the Nigerian plane to leave Addis Ababa. There is also the question of Ambassador Yilma's family. The plane did not leave on the 9th as planned. Yesterday, I spoke myself with the Vice Minister. Despite all the assurances, the plane left without Ambassador's Yilma's family as the authorities at the airport created obstacles for them. It is my understanding that the Government was not responsible for this - (President Meles nodded). There was a problem of coordination. It is a problem in many countries. But in a situation of crisis, any small incident like this can have far reaching repercussions.

I said to the Vice-Minister that I am trying to be helpful. But it is important for the host country to respect international regulations and conventions. I have no doubt that at your level there is no problem. The issue is the one of implementation of decisions taken and directives given at your level and other high level. It is a problem even in countries when there is no crisis.

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My request to you Mr. President is that in sensitive areas like the airport, try to place officials who can communicate with members of the international community in a manner that can avoid unnecessary problems.

I thought I should talk to you frankly.

I hope I can count on your understanding.

President Meles

We all heard of the personality of Salim Ahmed Salim. We have great respect for you because of your stature to say that we have not been disappointed.

We were extremely concerned that the seat of Ethiopia in Abuja will not be vacant. With your cooperation and the cooperation of the Nigerian government, we have succeeded not to have the Ethiopian seat vacant. It would have been a shame for this country. We want to keep OAU here for as long as OAU functions. For some reasons, Ethiopia was independent before some brotherly African countries. We participated in the struggle for Africa's liberation. We did not want to reverse this by some mistakes. I can assure you that we will do everything so that OAU can function under the most comfortable conditions we can provide. It is incumbent to any Ethiopian government to go beyond the normal regulations because OAU is not a normal organization. It is OAU. We cannot limit ourselves to the normal convention when we deal with our own.

The problem we have is - we are new comers, we have some problems with the previous regime. We do not have the cooperation as much as expected. (The President made reference to the officials of the Airport). We don't have experience. Our people are not experienced. This is the cause of some irritations.

At the same time, we expect your understanding.

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I assure you, the security of OAU Headquarters was one of our priorities.

Some people were expecting that the situation in Addis Ababa will be like Monrovia or Mogadishu. We tried to avoid that situation. We have avoided the worst aspects of this.

We are very concerned about the security situation. There was a general distribution of arms in the city by the previous regime. This was not helpful. We are trying to collect the huge amount of arms.

We expect that the situation will continue to improve.

We are committed to national reconciliation. As you know, the previous regime was not respecting the human rights. Some officials of the previous regime committed crimes.

We have detained some officials of the previous regime. We are trying not to be brutal. We provide them with proper accomodation.

There have been some shortcomings. But we have been dealing with them in an appropriate manner so far.

They will be tried by the Courts. International Observers will be allowed to attend the proceedings. We consider them as prisoners. They are accused of crimes. They will be tried by regular courts not by ERPDF Tribunals.

Regarding the issue of unity, we share the concern of our African brothers. It is a fact that the trend now is towards integration. There is more need for integration in Africa. This the deep conviction of EPRDF.

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At the same time, there is a process of disintegration in Europe. This process of disintegration is due perhaps to the fact that the unity was not solid. We believe that for African Unity to be solid, we need peace. We cannot force people to unite. All ethnics and all languages should be respected. People should be free to run their affairs. Our idea is to create this ground for unity.

In some areas, they have been too far. The situation in Eritrea is out of hand in a certain sense because of the attitude of the previous regime. We should avoid repetition. It is not just the position of EPLF. It is the deep conviction of the Eritrean people.

We have agreed that the Eritrean issue will be solved through an internationally supervised referendum. We will respect the outcome of that referendum.

We hope that we will have some form of political association. We hope that a process of integration will take place. It will be in the interest of Eritrean people and others. We believe that the EPLF leadership will understand that. We believe that the economic and cultural links between Eritrea and Ethiopia will not be disrupted.

If we succeed in our democratic process, it will open prospects for the development of our country and its contribution to Africa.

Regarding the democratic process a conference will be held soon. It will be an important step in that direction. With the assistance of all friends and brothers, we will succeed in the process of reconstruction of our country. We are taking the lead in the organization of the conference.

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Our view is that OAU should host the conference. This is at least the view of EPRDF. The OAU Summit has selected a group of Heads of States and Government to participate in the process. I am very glad that you offered your assistance. We expect your help and assistance not only in your capacity as Secretary General of OAU but also as eminent personality. You may have ideas and advice. We are ready to get your ideas.

Secretary General

Regarding the conference. I want to assure that whatever input you think we can give, we will be ready to provide it (the Secretary General mentioned a role of observers).

On the decision of the Summit, the role of the Committee created by the Summit will not be confined to the talks. The Committee chaired by the Current Chairman and composed of the Heads of State and Government of the neighbouring countries (Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya) was created in order to follow the situation in Ethiopia and to help Ethiopian parties to find peaceful solution to their problems. I speak definitely on behalf of the Current Chairman when I express the disposition of the Committee to assist Ethiopians in resolving their problems.

I started by saying there was a lot of prediction about Addis Ababa. After the experience of Liberia and Somalia, there was a lot of concern. That is why there was a rush to leave the country.

According to the assessment of the situation in the diplomatic circles and from the reports I have from my OAU colleagues who have been here, your forces are very disciplined.