



Eritrea

Naizghi Kiflu, the dictatorship's eminence grise

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The man who ordered the September 2001 roundups in Eritrea lives quietly in London where he receives treatment for his ailing kidneys on Britain's National Health Service. Eritrea's information minister at a time when its government was emerging as Africa's most ruthless dictatorship, Naizghi Kiflu has not however escaped the attention of Eritrean exiles seeking justice. With the help of Redress, a British NGO that helps torture victims seek reparation, Eritrean exile and human rights activist Elizabeth Chyrum asked the British government to investigate and prosecute a man who inspires terror in most of his compatriots yet lives comfortably and legally in his middle-class house on Gloucester Road, in the north London borough of Haringey.

From police case to moral outrage

The British police began taking a serious interest in Naizghi in 2005. Three Eritreans who were direct witnesses of the role he played in the government's repressive apparatus were questioned at the behest of the Crown Prosecution Service's anti-terrorist section in 2006 and 2007. Investigators visited several European countries to take statements from exiled Eritreans who were direct victims or witnesses of Naizghi's activities in his long career as minister and presidential adviser. If the case had been sufficiently solid, he could have been prosecuted under article 134 of the 1988 Criminal Justice Act, which punishes torture regardless of the perpetrator's nationality and where it was committed. If convicted, he could have been sentenced to life imprisonment.

Although very detailed, the statements of the three main witnesses were apparently not enough to take the president's special adviser to court. "The police told me they thought the case was not strong enough to go to trial,



but they never agreed to write this down in black and white," Chyrum said. The investigators in charge of the case declined to answer Reporters Without Borders' questions, referring us to the police press office.

"Since we cannot make a court case out of Naizghi, we can at least turn it into a moral case, Chyrum said, "so that this man will from now on live surrounded by people who know he is a criminal." To satisfy her desire for justice for one of Eritrea's most feared officials, Chyrum decided to post a long report on several reputable Eritrean exile websites on 1 May detailing the various stages of her fight against the man who, over the years, has become her chief concern.

Naizghi continues to be a shadowy figure in what is one of the world's most brutal and paranoid governments. He is still a special advisor to President Issaias Afeworki and appears with him in public. He takes part in meetings in London organised by Eritrea's ruling party (the only party permitted). And Eritrea's official press refers to him as someone still holding office as a government minister. But this respectable-looking and reserved resident of a quiet London street and regular outpatient at a local state hospital was at the centre of one of the darkest episodes in Africa's recent history.

Grey eminence behind the dictator

Journalist Semret Seyoum, the cofounder of Eritrea's most popular weekly Setit, was in his

office on the morning of Tuesday, 18 September 2001, when the phone rang. The big political roundups had begun a few hours earlier. At the behest of President Issaias and his information minister, Naizghi, the government had just given orders for all the leading members of the ruling party's reformist wing to be neutralised and for the country's lively newspapers and magazines, with issues on sale everywhere on the streets of Asmara, to be closed down. From his exile in Sweden, Semret recalls the morning that changed the course of this young African country's history so dramatically: "I picked up the phone at once. It was a man's voice that I did not recognise. He said, 'Prepare yourselves for the long march to exile, friends,' and then he hung up. I was stunned."

All of Asmara's newspapers received the order to stop publishing. The following weekend, police raids on the homes of journalists began. At least 16 of them are still missing within the country's prison system. Four of them, including one of Semret's partners, playwright Fessehaye "Joshua" Yohannes, have died in detention, according to Eritreans who have fled the country. Their bodies were never handed over to their families. They were probably buried behind the administration building at Eiraeiro, a top-security prison camp in a mountainous desert region in northeastern Eritrea, a source told Reporters Without Borders in early 2008.

Two men are regarded as the masterminds of this extremely brutal political purge. One is Issaias, a guerrilla fighter who emerged at the head of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) during the independence war, became the country's first president and is now its all-powerful chief. The other is Naizghi, the president's special adviser and currently minister of local government after holding various other posts in the political and security apparatus.

Never a Mr. Nice Guy

A guerrilla fighter who joined the EPLF in 1971, Naizghi was sent to Algeria to be its representative there until the end of the 1980s. "He was the one to whom Issaias Afeworki assigned the task of protecting the movement at any cost, at home and abroad," Chyrum said. In the early years of the 30-year war that Eritrean guerrillas waged against the Ethiopian occupier, he was in charge of EPLF security. He became second in charge of Halewa Sewra, the guardians of the revolution brigade, an EPLF body set up to protect the movement from internal threats. Deputy interior minister after independence, he was given the job of carrying out a purge in the wake of Eritrea's international recognition in May 1993.

Emptied of their EPLF detainees, the prisons were now filled with all those who were suspected, rightly or wrongly, of supporting

Eritrea: history of a liberation war

A small Red Sea country annexed in 1890 by Italy and occupied in 1941 by British forces combatting Mussolini's army, Eritrea remained under British control until 1952 when the UN controversially decided that it should be an autonomous part of a federation with neighbouring Ethiopia. Annexation by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1961 fuelled calls for independence. Ethiopian repression triggered a national liberation war led by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), a movement based on the country's Muslim community and supported by Nasser's Egypt and by Sudan. Divisions within the ELF resulted in the creation of a Marxist breakaway group in 1970. Called the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), one of its founders was Issaias Afeworki, the current president.

Fighting between these two factions caused more than 3,000 deaths as the war against Ethiopia continued. A military junta led by Mengistu, the "Red Negus," seized power in Addis Ababa in 1974 and declared total war on the Eritrean rebels at the end of the 1970s. The ELF was decimated but the EPLF emerged as a regular, disciplined people's army with solid roots in Eritrean society and gradually gained control of the entire country. A provisional government led by Issaias was formed in July 1990. Its victory was sealed by a referendum in April 1993 in which 99 per cent of Eritreans voted for independence. This was proclaimed on 24 May 1993 to widespread jubilation.

Ethiopia or lacking enthusiasm as guerrilla fighters. "I had been held for three years in Adi Quala camp in the south of the country when Naizghi Kiflu arrived one day and ordered that all the detainees be assembled," Reporters Without Borders was told by a former prisoner now in exile. Speaking on condition of anonymity, for fear of reprisals, he said: "He then announced to everyone that we were going to be told our sentences." None of them had been tried, but Naizghi said the government could do as it wished, including "killing or burying detainees."

"He separated the prisoners into three groups," the source continued. "He then read out the names of the detainees in the first group and told them they had been sentenced to death, but could thank President Issaias Afeworki for commuting their sentences to life imprisonment." The same ritual was followed with the second group, who were told that thanks to the president's clemency, they had been sentenced to 15 years in prison "beginning from today," although most of them had already been held for several years.

The detainees in the third group, who including this source, were given sentences of eight, nine or ten years in prison. "Naizghi told us all that these decisions could not be challenged. He was standing about a metre and a half from me. I can still see him clearly in my mind, just as I can still see the people who died during detention. Some of them such as Girmay, an 18-year-old youth, died of malnutrition. Others died for lack of medical care."

During the second war with Ethiopia (1998-2000), Naizghi was ambassador to Russia, a major provider of arms to Eritrea. He was appointed information minister in August 2001, a few weeks before the "Black Tuesday" that eliminated Eritrea's free press, artistic life, moderate opposition and civil society. "His appointment was a sign that something terrible was going to happen," said the publisher of one of the banned newspapers, who also asked not to be named. "We all felt that, with killers like Naizghi, it was the end of press freedom in Eritrea."

The first warning shots were not long in coming. Shortly after his appointment as information minister, Naizghi summoned the

editors of all the newspapers to his office and ordered them to submit their tax declarations and accounts to him or else they would be closed. Their accountants had only a few days to get everything ready. In the end, this legal subterfuge was not used to get rid of them. A decision by the president and his special adviser, followed by police raids, sufficed.

Naizghi was not unknown in Asmara at this time but he was not prominent public figure. "I had never seen him, but many people including party members had warned me about him," a former newspaper publisher recalled. "Independence war veterans had told me Issaias had used him as his enforcer since the 1970s and had sent him to Europe and America to intimidate or eliminate opponents." There are many obscure episodes in Naizghi's career as a guerrilla fighter that make his former comrades shudder.

Internecine strife within the guerrilla factions was common during the independence war, both in Eritrea and abroad. Most Eritreans in exile nowadays identify Naizghi as the perpetrator or instigator of many of the mysterious deaths that have occurred in the course of the Eritrean national resistance movement. One such case is that of Mengistab Isaac, a student leader who supposedly took his own life in strange circumstances in New York in 1979, at a time when his movement was becoming more and more open in its criticism of the "undemocratic culture" of the guerrilla leadership. "It is of course unverifiable, but I don't know a single one of my compatriots who does not think Naizghi Kiflu was responsible for these murders."

The view is shared by other former comrades in the EPLF, renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) at the head of a one-party state after independence. "The party turned to Naizghi Kiflu whenever there was destructive work to be done," said a former senior PFDJ official who is now a political refugee in Europe. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he added: "He was the man for the dirty jobs. But when a man orders the imprisonment of his own comrades, who fought beside him for more than half of his life, that says a lot about his indifference to humanity, his brutality and ruthlessness."

“The first time I saw him was in July 2001, when I was having a drink with friends in a hotel in the centre of Asmara,” said the former newspaper publisher, who calls him a butcher. “He came over to us and said: ‘If you don’t stop your nonsense, I’m going to cut out your tongues and cut off your hands.’” One of the people in the group that day was Medhanie Haile, a young man then aged 33 who was the deputy editor and co-founder of the weekly Keste Debena. He was arrested one morning two months later, during the fateful September. Former prison guards who defected to Ethiopia say he died in February 2006 in cell number 8 in Eiraeiro, where detainees are kept in appalling conditions.

Specialist in arbitrary arrest

President Issaias’ special adviser did not let up after ridding Eritrea of its opposition and press. The next step in his political career was to crack down on churches and religious

groups on the grounds that they allegedly encouraged insurrection and supported networks of deserters. In May 2002, the PFDJ banned 36 churches and religious groups that were not recognised by the state, closing centres of worship and imprisoning priests, pastors and members. According to Amnesty International, dozens of members of these banned churches were arrested in 2002 for holding religious ceremonies in their homes or religious weddings or referring publicly to their religious beliefs. They were taken to police stations, top security prisons or military camps and were often tortured or threatened and made to sign statements renouncing their beliefs in exchange for their release. Amnesty International currently puts the number of cases of arbitrary detention under this policy at about 2,000.

The most famous case is that of gospel singer Helen Berhane, a member of the Rema evangelical church, who was freed in November 2006 after being held for 17 months in a metal cargo container in the Mai Srwa prison camp north of the capital. This young woman has described how she was beaten every day and often tortured, as a result of which she still has to use crutches. After her release, she fled to Sudan, where she lived clandestinely until Denmark granted her political asylum. It was in Sudan that Reporters Without Borders met her at the end of 2007.

Naizghi was the man within the government in charge of crushing the churches. He still held the position of minister of information and culture when, on 15 May 2002, he summoned the pastors and leaders of the main religious groups still active in Eritrean and told them they had “no right to operate in Eritrea” because they were not “registered.” He did not however explain what procedures should be followed in order to register. A participant in the meeting told Reporters Without Borders that Naizghi went on to warn them that they should “take care with what they said” because their conversations were being recorded. The threats began to be realised soon afterwards and three pastors – Kiflu Gebremeskel and Haile Naizghi of the Mulu Wengel

1993-2008: Border war and totalitarian change of course

Renamed the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the ruling party quickly turned its back on its Marxist origins after independence as it set about trying to rebuild the country. But its policies were often received badly, especially by members of the Muslim community and by former guerrillas who had found poverty and destitution awaiting them in civilian life. The government became more and more authoritarian, the constitution was not followed and elections were postponed.

A war broke out with Ethiopia over a border dispute in 1998 that left 100,000 dead. Hostilities were brought to an end by an agreement in 2000. But opposition to the war, which had been regarded as absurd, fuelled discontent about the regime’s increasing radicalization and a growing number of Eritreans called for more freedom. The president and his closest associates responded on 18 September 2001 by setting the police on the ruling party’s reformist wing. Former comrades-in-arms, ministers, advisers and influential generals were thrown in prison. The handful of Asmara-based independent newspapers were “suspended” and their editors were jailed. Any criticism of the regime was henceforth branded as an “attack on national security.”

Pentecostal church and Tefasion Hagos of the Rema evangelical church – have been missing within the Eritrean prison system since their arrests in May 2004.

Keeping the information ministry as his fief, Naizghi continued to impose his law on journalists who had avoided the 2001 purges. “Naizghi is an aggressive person who inspires fear, one who gives orders for no apparent reason,” said a former information ministry employee who has fled to Europe. A public media journalist experienced this at first hand after writing a book about the independence fighters. He decided he had better tell the ministry’s “boss” what he had done. Naizghi became enraged with his insolent employee and ordered him to go to the cafeteria and not move from there. The terrified journalist complied and waited for many long minutes before two members of the security services came and arrested him. He spent more than two months in a detention centre without being tried and without being able to talk with anyone outside.

Health problems ended up frustrating Naizghi’s ministerial career. He has been undergoing dialysis for many years and in early 2005 he joined his wife and children in London, where they had already resided for several years. He arrived on an ordinary passport and an Indefinite Leave to Remain visa of the kind that the United Kingdom issues to political refugees. It allows him to enter and leave Britain at will, and therefore to continue his political career, without bureaucratic inconvenience.

But did the Eritrean president’s special adviser read the letter that is supposed to accompany such a permit? It says: “You should fully understand, however, that if during your stay in the United Kingdom you take part in activities involving, for example, the support or encouragement of violence, or conspiracy to cause violence, whether in the United Kingdom or abroad, so as to endanger national security or public order, the Secretary of State may deport you.” Asked by Reporters Without Borders about Naizghi’s exact status in the United Kingdom, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said this was confidential because of

the requirement to protect personal information.

Naizghi has continued to make return trips to Eritrea for political meetings or rallies or to accompany President Issaias on visits, while blending into the quiet life of the London suburb where he now lives. Chyrum has learned that he receives treatment free of charge at a London hospital under the National Health Service.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Eritrean diaspora is split between those who still support the regime because they see it as the country’s liberator and those who have been the victims of its abuses. Almost as large as the population still living in Eritrea, the diaspora is one of the regime’s main pillars, providing it with key political and economic support. All Eritreans living abroad are required to transfer 2 per cent of their income to the Eritrean embassy in the country where they reside. If they refuse, they are banned from returning to Eritrea, owning anything there, or sending parcels to relatives.

The many festivals, concerts, seminars and conferences organised abroad by Eritrea’s government and ruling party enable them to count their supporters and identify their opponents. Thanks to the apathy of the democratic governments that grant asylum to Eritreans, the terror reigning inside Eritrea is effectively extended to the Eritrean diaspora. This is why most of the sources interviewed by Reporters Without Borders insisted on not being identified for security reasons although they are now out of the country.

The British authorities should ask themselves what this baron of one of the world’s most brutal dictatorships is doing leading a comfortable life in London. There are lessons to be learned from this, and explanations need to be given to the British public and to the Eritreans who were the victims of the despotic regime imposed by Issaias and his close associates, of whom Naizghi is one of the most important.

The issue of prisoners who have disappeared within Eritrea’s prison system cannot be ignored by governments that are linked to Asmara

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by treaties and bilateral accords in which a requirement to respect human rights is spelled out in black and white. Both symbolic and practical measures are needed to apply effective pressure on the Eritrean government, so that Africa's youngest country can breathe again after years of oppression.

Reporters Without Borders therefore recommends:

- That the next European Council meeting of heads of state and government should agree to ban Eritrean government members and

senior military officers from entering European Union territory until Eritrea releases its political prisoners, including journalists who are illegally held;

- That governments in democratic countries with a sizable Eritrean community (such as the United States, Germany, Britain and Sweden) should summon the Eritrean ambassador in order to express their revulsion at the inhuman treatment of political prisoners in Eritrea and call for their release, and to express their concern about the climate of intimidation fostered in the Eritrean diaspora.