



## RSADO FOREIGN MISSION

*Advocating for the Rights and Dignity of the Red Sea Afar in the Horn of Africa*

### **Historic Meeting of International Foreign Affairs Experts Leads to Landmark Agreement to Re-Write Eritrean Constitution**

*“The constitution ... is alive in the minds of Eritreans everywhere”*

Ottawa, ON Oct, 26, 2012 – A two-day summit of scholars, diplomats, academics and international foreign affairs experts has resulted in a landmark agreement to re-evaluate and re-write the disputed 15-year-old constitutional framework for the East African state of Eritrea.

The October 19-20 event, which brought some of the finest thinkers in African affairs, international relations and constitutional law to Canada’s capital city, an interdisciplinary academic seminar conducted in the Ivy League tradition witnessed a historic meeting-of-the-minds between University of Ottawa Law Professor Joseph Magnet and Professor Bereket Habte Selassie, the William E. Leuchtenburg Professor of African and Afro-American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

During his time in Ottawa, Professors Selassie and Magnet – a respected Canadian constitutional expert – agreed in principle to jointly re-write Eritrea’s constitutional framework to include recognition of the country’s diverse nine plus ethnic communities.

This multi-ethnic reshaping of his document is landmark moment, and one that will hopefully pave the way for freedom of speech and democratic rule in a country that has been dubbed “The North Korea of Africa.”

“The constitution, though unimplemented, is alive in the minds of Eritreans everywhere” said Dr. Selassie during a seminar in Ottawa.

Professor Selassie has been called “The Father of the Eritrean Constitution,” and was the primary architect of the East African country’s constitution, which he drafted in the years following its independence from Ethiopia in 1991. In 1997 he fled the country after its unelected president, Isais Afwerki, refused to implement the constitution.

In the 15 years since then, Professor Selassie has been a vocal advocate for democratic reform in the Horn of Africa country, which has been the subject of UN sanctions for human rights violations and alleged support of terrorist activities.



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The two-day event was organized by the Red Sea Afar Democratic Association (RSADO) Foreign Mission in Ottawa and chaired by Prof. Magnet, who serves as legal counsel to the Afar people in Africa.

The goal of the event was to address the continuing human rights issues for the Red Sea Afar (and other ethnic minorities) in Eritrea, under the more than 20-year rule of Isais Afwerki and his government. The RSADO's Foreign Mission, is committed to advocating for the indigenous rights and freedoms of the Red Sea Afar people, who have lived along the Red Sea coast in Eritrea for nearly 2,000 years.



### **Warm welcoming hospitality by Afar Community for an Eritrean Hero**

Prof. Selasie was welcomed warmly in Ottawa by the city's Afar community, and was the guest of honour at an evening event that included presentations, traditional Afar food, a cultural celebration and a Q&A session with the Professor and Eritrean war hero.

During the event Ahmed Youssef Mohamed, an Afar-Canadian and head of the RSADO Foreign Mission, highlighted the pain and suffering of the Red Sea Afar in Eritrea in the two decades since Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia. Mr. Mohammed's presentation detailed the history of Afar self- rule and self-governance in their homeland of Dankalia inside Eritrea, and outlined some of the morbid human right violations that have been committed against Red Sea Afar people at the hands of the Eritrean regime.

These included:

- mass murder,
- rape of indigenous afar women by the army,
- kidnapping and disappearance of Afar leaders,
- destruction and prevention of Afar to carry on their traditional way of life and economy ,
- forcible resettling of non-Afar in Dankalia, and
- Interference with the Afar language and cultural identity.



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Mr. Mohammed said that as a result of this “systemic ethnic cleansing” the Red Sea Afar are fleeing from their homeland in Eritrea by the thousands, resulting in what he calls “a humanitarian crisis” for neighboring countries.

Professor Bereket showed solidarity and great sympathy for the suffering of the Red Sea Afar people under current Eritrean regime of Isayas Afewerki . He called for a truth and reconciliation style of dialogue going forward: *“The question of reconciliation – we need to confront the past and that will bring lots of painful revelations, and to come to terms with our own mistakes. We won’t succeed in creating a better future without including recognition of the basic dignity of the Afar people. We will not be able to go to the next step. Where you end up in terms of compromise depends on that recognition”.*

Professor Selassie also explained the reason for the absence of minority rights from his 1997 Constitution: *“In our conversation with Professor Magnet, I mentioned 2 important facts – the timing of the writing of the constitution was in the context of the 30-year war and most people of that generation regarded themselves as socialists. The socialist ethos was a crucial point for the creation of values that were understood to be the main principles. That mindset did not consider the possibility of the minorities not agreeing...we had a mentality of “we are all in it together”. We did not go to sufficient lengths to consider the possibility that our framework might not work for the minorities and that made hubris possible”.*

Professor Selassie spurred applause from the audience on several occasions, and did not disappoint the audience when he recalled remarks made by US president John F. Kennedy as he visited West Berlin in 1963: **"Ich bin ein Berliner"** (which means **"I am a Berliner"**).

Selassie rephrased these words, and said **"Ich bin ein Afar"** (“I’m an Afar”), leading to enthusiastic cheers from the more than 100 Afar in the audience.

Selassie and Magnet reiterated their pledge to re-open the Eritrean constitution for a new age, as Magnet predicted that the Afwerki regime was “on its last legs” and would fall within three years.