Eritrea in the News

Photo Exhibition at the Resource for London
Opening Event: 04 September 2018

Event Summary
Contents

1. Eritrea in the News – Exhibition Opening Event .........................3
2. About the Exhibition........................................................................4
3. Welcome and Opening Speeches ..................................................5
4. Exhibition Opening - Photos .........................................................7
1. Eritrea in the News – Exhibition Opening Event

The photo exhibition ‘Eritrea in the News’ was formally opened on Tuesday 4 September by Lord Alton of Liverpool, Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Eritrea.

The exhibition charts Eritrea’s history from Italian colonial rule in the 1880’s to the dictatorship of the present day, and was organised by Eritrea Focus with the aim of illustrating how the promise of independence from Ethiopia in 1991 evaporated into confrontation, repression, and mass exodus.

The opening event was attended by around 60 people. The exhibition itself opened to the public on 5 September, and will run until 30 September. It is open to all, and entry is free.

Guests arriving at the Resource for London (Credit: Martin Plaut)
2. About the Exhibition

‘Eritrea in the News’ tells the story of Eritrea through a series of fascinating images captured at pivotal points in the country’s history, from Italian colonial rule through to the struggle for independence and the repression of dictatorship that followed.

The exhibition features more than 40 images – a mix of archive material and personal collections, some never publicly exhibited before – of the places and people that have shaped Eritrea throughout the years.

The photos document the defeat of Italian occupation forces by British troops in the Second World War and the ensuing period of British administration, as well as the years of federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, during which members of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) began an armed struggle against Ethiopian rule.

They also show the aftermath of independence in 1991, when disputes over border areas led Eritrea and Ethiopia into a devastating new armed conflict that killed 100,000 people, and illustrate the ensuing repression and prospect of indefinite conscription under President Isaias Afwerki that has led many Eritrean refugees to flee and attempt the perilous Mediterranean crossing, often losing their lives. Above all, they are a reminder of the human stories interwoven in political upheaval and armed conflict which, at a time of ground-breaking new political developments, must not be forgotten.

*Guests discuss the image of EPLF leader Isais Afwerki visiting London in 1989 (Credit: Martin Plaut)*
3. Welcome and Opening Speeches

Welcome from Habte Hagos, Chairman of Eritrea Focus

Habte Hagos welcomed guests to the exhibition opening and introduced Eritrea Focus as an association of NGOs, human rights organisations, exile and refugee groups and individuals working to expose human rights abuses in Eritrea, unite Eritreans from all walks of life, and to bring about positive change in a country that has suffered greatly under dictatorship.

Habte summarised the content of the exhibition, which brings together a series of photographs – some of them never before exhibited – that shed light on Eritrea’s history of subjugation and struggle, where colonial rule was followed by federation with Ethiopia in 1952. He said that although Eritrea had declared its independence from Ethiopia in 1991, “the promise of freedom was never honoured”, and in 27 years no elections have been held, the constitution of 1997 has never been implemented, and there is no independent legislature, judiciary, civil society or media. Indefinite national service, he said, “has been characterized by a UN Commission of Inquiry as effective enslavement”. Commenting on current political developments between Eritrea and Ethiopia, he said that there remained few signs of real change.

Habte then welcomed Lord Alton to deliver the keynote address, praising him as a good friend of Eritrea Focus and a dedicated campaigner for human rights and an advocate for international religious freedoms.

Keynote address from Lord Alton of Liverpool, Vice-Chair of the APPG on Eritrea

Lord Alton thanked Habte and praised the work of Eritrea Focus and its members for campaigning tirelessly to draw international attention to the ongoing human rights abuses in Eritrea. He also thanked Martin Plaut for his involvement and efforts in raising awareness through his book *Understanding Eritrea*.

In particular, Lord Alton drew upon his recent experiences at a meeting of the APPG on Religious Freedom, at which he heard first-hand testimony from religious leaders in Eritrea of the persecution,
detention and torture that they have faced, and praised the inter-faith solidarity that they had demonstrated.

Lord Alton told attendees that the exhibition offer an in-depth insight into the grievous abuses of human rights committed by the government of Eritrea, which he said is engaged in violating almost all 30 human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Making reference to the images displayed in the exhibition, Lord Alton remarked that the photograph of coffins on the Italian island of Lampedusa, containing the bodies of Eritreans who drowned when a boat carrying 336 people sank in the Mediterranean in 2013, affected him deeply and was a desperate reminder of the forces that drive Eritreans to flee their country.

Lord Alton introduced the exhibition by noting that while it is called ‘Eritrea in the News’, the small nation in eastern Africa rarely makes the news, and little is known amongst the wider international community about the repression and abuses suffered by its citizens.

He reiterated the history of Eritrea since the years of Italian colonial rule, which were followed by a disinterested British administration that passed the matter of the country’s future to the United Nations. He noted that the ‘federation’ of Eritrea with Ethiopia was more of an incorporation of the former into the latter, and that “history would have been very different” if Emperor Haile Selassie had “accepted Eritrea’s federal status and respected its individuality”.

Lord Alton pointed to another “iconic” photo – that of Eritreans celebrating in the streets on 24 May 1991 – as being akin to images from the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the jubilation and expectation that it embodied. It was, he said, a poignant reminder of the hope that was shattered by the regime of President Isaias Afwerki, and the policy of “no war, no peace” that dominated Eritrean politics and policy for 20 years. “Many of you will know this from painful, personal experience”, he said.

Of recent political developments, Lord Alton expressed his hope that the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia is permanent, and that it “brings peace and reconciliation between these two neighbours” and is accompanied by “the real, democratic, internal transformation that Eritrea’s people so richly deserve”. “An international community looking to a new future with an open, just and free Eritrea,” he said, “must not do so at the expense of forgetting its past.”

In closing, Lord Alton encouraged his audience at the Resource of London to spread the word about the exhibition, contact London media and make representations to their local politicians to bring attention to Eritrea in Parliament and in the public eye.

**Closing remarks from Habte Hagos**

Habte Hagos thanked guests for attending the opening, and thanked Andy Gregg, CEO of Race on the Agenda (ROTA) and a campaigner with Eritrea Focus, for his help with the exhibition and unwavering support for the Eritrean people. He also thanked exhibition curator Chris Hudson for his excellent work.

He informed guests of two upcoming Eritrea Focus events at the Resource for London, on 15 and 22 September, about the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal, and the ‘push factors’ that drive Eritreans to flee their homes.

Habte ended with a personal wish that such exhibitions might one day be held in Asmara and other towns and cities across Eritrea, without intimidation.
4. Photos

Included in this document is a selection of photos from the opening event on 4 September. Further images are available to view and download at [this link](#).

*Lord Alton delivers his keynote speech to the audience (Credit: Martin Plaut)*

*BBC World Service journalist Kim Chakanetsa with Habte Hagos. Kim interviewed Habte about the exhibition and about human rights abuses in Eritrea (Credit: Martin Plaut)*