

THE ACTION GROUP FOR ERITREA
(AGE)

ANNUAL REPORT 2006/2007

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Another year has come and gone. The Eritrean Ethiopian border is yet to be demarcated and peace between the two countries remains elusive. The international community continue to abrogate its responsibility and seems to be content in seeing justice and the rule of law being trampled on. Every trick in the book has been used to deny Eritrea and Eritreans their right to live in peace with their borders respected. Against all odds and the immense challenges faced, Eritreans continue to remain steadfast and demand that justice is served. The Action Group for Eritrea (AGE) was set up to do its bit in this struggle and in line with its objectives has been engaged in relentless lobbying campaign to increase awareness and prompt decision-makers within the UK Government to exert the necessary pressures on the Ethiopian Government with the view of bringing peace and stability in the region.

Throughout the year, meetings were held with Members of Parliament from all of the main three parties, Shadow Ministers, Lords, Civil servants, journalists and other influential individuals. AGE facilitated an important meeting between the representatives and leaders of the many Eritrean groups in the UK with departments of the British government. This created a platform for the Eritrean community to express their concerns face to face and hear firsthand the policies of the British government in relation to the border conflict. It has also proved beyond doubt that Eritreans are as steadfast and united as ever when it comes to safeguarding the integrity of the country and their national interest. AGE was also engaged in other lobbying activities such as letter writing and telephone campaigns, participation in public meetings and monitoring and responding to publications in the media.

With limited resource, AGE, with its partners the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and The Eritrean Youth Association in UK (EYAUUK), has contributed in a small way to the betterment of education in Eritrea. AGE sees education as the gateway for development. In this regard, AGE members and supporters worked hard to collect books and raise funds for shipment. Close to 20,000 books were collected, sorted and shipped to Eritrea as part of the Books-for-Eritrea campaign. Preparation is now underway to ship another container holding books and computers in July 2007. This



would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of both AGE members and non-member Eritreans living in the UK.

Financially, thanks to our donors and members, AGE has managed to raise enough funds to cover its expenses this year. However, only a fraction of members have paid their annual membership fee of £10. Lack of sufficient funds has hindered the group from repaying back loans and venturing beyond what has been done. The idea of paying for AGE members and young Eritreans to join the different political parties has been shelved. AGE fully relies on its members and it is important that members pay their due on time.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to all those who supported us in all our activities and wish the incoming Executive Committee every success in carrying out the AGE aims and objectives.

Simon Marcos

Chairman

June 2007



1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Action Group for Eritrea (AGE) is a non-profit civic organisation aiming to promote the social, cultural and economic development of Eritrea. As its prime objective, AGE conducts a concerted campaign for the implementation of the Eritrea Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) ruling by way of full and unconditional border demarcation. This report summarises the activities the group conducted throughout the year to achieve its objectives.

2.0 LOBBYING CAMPAIGN

AGE view the delay in demarcation of the border as an obstacle to greater developments in politics, social, economy and human resources in Eritrea. AGE employed various methods and used every opportunity to lobby support for expediting the full implementation of the Algiers Agreement and demarcation of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. Below are examples of the lobbying activities conducted by AGE this year.

2.1 Face to Face Meeting

Meetings were held with a number of MPs and Lords in the House of Commons and House of Lords at Westminster. The MPs and Lords that AGE met come from the different political parties. Meetings were also held with people who are in a position to influence policies. AGE approached individuals who were thought to be sympathetic to the Eritrean cause. AGE made the effort of meeting those who have backed Ethiopia's position and tried to develop an understanding of their position and through these meetings, it has tried its level best to increase awareness and seek support to the implementation of the EEBC decision. At every opportunity, AGE lobbied support for expediting the demarcation of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. Below are short summaries of some of the meetings held.

In second quarter of 2006, a meeting was held with a senior representative of the Conservative party who showed a great interest on the matter as his party was in the process of formulating their foreign policy. A detailed discussion was held about the conflict and he seemed to have appreciated our concern. He followed up the matter and raised a series of questions in Parliament and demanded to know as to why



Ethiopia is being provided with large financial assistance at a time when its military expenditure is on the increase and it has violated numerous international laws. A meeting was also held with a Lib Dem Party Foreign Affairs representative. As promised, he also discussed the issue with his colleagues and raised questions in Parliament.

In continuation of the effort made to reach out to individuals who are ardent supporters and advocates for Ethiopia's stance, AGE met a shadow minister and a senior member of the Conservative Party. AGE, in addition to the numerous correspondence made with him prior to the meeting, was able to demonstrate, backed with evidences gathered over the last couple of years that the MP's stand on the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia could have been more balanced. The meeting was focused on developing a rapport and clearing the air with respect to long-standing reservations AGE had on the unconditional support that he has been giving the Ethiopian government irrespective of its attempt to thwart the EEBC decision.

AGE requested for him to be fair and balanced. In his defence, the MP tabled selected reports by the UN which alleges that Eritrea is not cooperating with the UN in solving the problem and repeatedly highlighted that his support for the Ethiopian government is solely to help reduce poverty in Ethiopia. In the discussion, it transpired that the MP was misled and did not know much about the details of the peace process and how the EEBC came to its decision. As a result of our meeting with him he raised a question in parliament.

AGE also facilitated a meeting between the representatives of various Eritrean organisations in the UK and the British government involving two departments. AGE received a good response from the Eritrean-British community including faith groups and their participation was commendable. The meeting which was held on 26th March 2007 mainly looked at the government's policy with respect to the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the adverse impact it is having on the people of the region. The delegation included representatives from the Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, Wengiawit Lutheran faiths and organisations such as the Alliance of Eritrean Evangelicals, the Eritrean Youth Association in UK, and the Eritrean Relief Association were also represented. The British government was represented by civil servants from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the



Department for International Development which included senior Officials and the newly appointed deputy Ambassador to Eritrea.

During the meeting, a statement¹ was made by AGE and representatives of the community urged the British government to play a constructive role and to use its influence to urge Ethiopia to accept and implement the decision of the Boundary Commission.

In March 2007, three AGE representatives, accompanied by a religious community leader, met a Lord who has a good knowledge of Eritrea and had participated in the Eritrean Referendum as an observer. In the meeting which was held at the House of Lords, a detailed discussion was held on the border conflict and the overall situation in the Horn of Africa. The Lord reassured the representatives that he will look into the matter and discuss it with senior members of the British government. In response to his request, AGE compiled a dossier detailing the sequence of events in the conflict and the reason behind the current problem and forwarded it to him.

2.2 Letter Writing Campaign

AGE have written numerous letters to ministers in the British government to register our complaints and remind them of their responsibilities. AGE prepared standard letters and guidance to encourage members and other Eritreans to write to their representatives in a simple and quickest way using technology.

AGE has also sent a number of letters to senior officials of the British government and people of influence as and when necessary, mainly during the anniversary of the signing of the Algiers agreement and the announcement of the EEBC's ruling. As a result of the letter writing campaign, many questions were tabled in parliament.

2.3 Media Campaign

AGE has been active in monitoring the media and challenging malicious and inaccurate reports about Eritrea. For example, AGE challenged a number of newspaper articles that depicts Eritrea as an Islamic country where Christians are

¹ Refer to http://www.eritrea.co.uk/meeting_with_fco_and_dfid/statement/



being pressed to convert to Islam. AGE members wrote to Editors of newspapers and had letters published. An apology was also published by the Editor of the Church of England newspaper after an intensive campaign by members.

AGE members Dr Bereket Fessehazion, Huriy Ghirmai and Simon Marcos participated in a radio interview and discussed on current developments in Eritrea with the presenter of NubiArt, Kubara Zamani on Sound Radio. The interview covered wide ranging issues including AGE's activities, Eritreans in the UK, free press, Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict and drought in Eritrea and many more. AGE members also participated in other radio programmes and phone-in sessions.

AGE board members were also busy engaging with editors and organisations who are hell-bent to tarnish the image of Eritrea by spreading unsubstantiated reports. AGE has engaged a number of journalists who has made it a job of unfairly attacking Eritrea. AGE member dined with senior member and editor of a large media outlet to put the Eritrean case across. A member also participated in a discussion about the Horn of Africa in general, and about Somalia in particular, at the Journalist Club Frontline. At the meeting, the member put AGE's view that Ethiopia has been allowed to breach international laws with impunity in Somalia as it has done with regards to the EEBC decision.

2.4 Other Meetings

AGE participated in a number of public meetings throughout the year. AGE members attended a meeting organised by Chatham House on a briefing paper titled 'Ethiopia and Eritrea: Allergic to Persuasion'. The paper was seen as lacking objectivity and balance. Members of AGE challenged the authors in person and in writing². AGE collated all articles written in opposition to the paper and forwarded it to all key players who were present in the meeting.

AGE participated in a consultation on a draft Ethiopia Country Assistance Plan prepared by DFID. The Consultation was held at London School of Economics on the 14th of March 2007 and was organised by a Think Tank called Connections for

² Refer to <http://www.eritrea.co.uk/there-are-no-weaknesses-in-the-agreement-that-would-not-be-cured-by-ethiopia2019s-compliance> and <http://www.eritrea.co.uk/eritrea-allergic-to-injustice>



Development (CfD). AGE made it clear that without peace and security, any amount of financial aid will be wasted. AGE asserted that that direct budgetary aid that is being given is fuelling the conflict in the region and donors should take responsibility for their actions. AGE also encouraged members to write to DFID and air their views on the subject before the 'consultation' process ended.

3.0 BOOK COLLECTION DRIVE

3.1 Books for Eritrea 2006

During the lull in the lobbying activities, AGE has been actively working to help the education sector in Eritrea by collecting and sending books to Eritrea. In collaboration with Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and the Eritrean Youth Association in the UK (EYAUUK), AGE launched a "Books for Eritrea 2006" campaign and collected books and shipped it to Eritrea to be distributed to a number of organisations. AGE members participated actively in the collection and sorting of the books.

We have managed to collect all kinds of books: paperback and hard cover, fiction and non-fiction, elementary to university level text books, reference books, medical books, legal books, books on hobbies, etc. In addition, we have made an effort in collecting large amount of reading books for children in a hope that it will encourage reading.

In total, 405 boxes containing close to 20,000 books and some magazines were sent to Eritrea. This is almost twice as much as what was planned. Of these, 57.3% was given to the Ministry of Education for them to distribute to schools and libraries as they see fit. The new EdagaHamus, Hazhaz and Embagaliano Public Library (EHEC) received 17.4%. Barantu Library got 15% and Mai Nefhi Institute of Science and Technology all received 4%. The remaining books was distributed to other institutions.

The books were donated by Eritrean nationals and British institutions (parliament, universities, professional bodies and others). Through this campaign AGE with its partners has created a good relationship with donors such as the Open University,



the University of Reading and many other libraries and individuals. AGE intends to continue this relationship.

AGE thanked all organisations and individuals who made it possible for us to undertake the challenge. Letters were sent to those who made large book donations. The youth's participation towards the end of the campaign was superb and the fact that we have such committed youth should give hope for future campaigns. Furthermore, we also thank ERA, the British Council, members and friends of AGE for making substantial financial contributions to cover cost of transportation.

AGE's contribution has been appreciated by the recipients. Appreciation and acknowledgement letters were received from the then Minister of Education HE Osman Saleh³ and others.

3.2 Books for Eritrea 2007

AGE has been overwhelmed by offers of book donations which prompted the launch of the Books for Eritrea 2007 campaign early. However, the Books for Eritrea campaign 2007 have been facing a number of challenges. Finding storage has been a major problem. A member had offered a temporary storage space, but because it was not manned, arranging collections and deliveries was very difficult. Another member has now kindly offered a place until the cargo is dispatched to Eritrea during the third week of July 2007.

In order to overcome the challenges a book sub-committee was set up with a mandate to oversee the fundraising, correspondence, storage, collection, sorting/packaging and transporting of books and other educational materials to Eritrea.

AGE has approached a number of organisations and individuals to provide financial assistance for the shipment of books. Pledges have been made and it is hoped sufficient funds will be raised to cover expenses.



The Ministry of Education has set up The Library and Information Association of Eritrea (LIAE) to oversee the distribution of books in Eritrea. This organisation will be responsible for receiving and distributing donated books to libraries in Eritrea. AGE will therefore deal with this organisation to ensure a smooth process and avoid any of the problems experienced in the past.

4.0 OTHER ACTIVITIES

- 4.1 Three AGE members invited a member of the British government to an Eritrean dinner and discussed current issues relevant to Eritrea and the Horn of Africa.
- 4.2 AGE members attended Conservative Party hearing held at Westminster on Human Rights in Eritrea
- 4.3 AGE members attended a presentation at SOAS organised by the Royal Society of Africa on the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia.
- 4.4 AGE member attended an Annual General Meeting of a Lib Dem MP in North West London.
- 4.5 An evening social gathering was held at Adulis Restaurant with AGE members to reflect on the books collection drive.
- 4.6 AGE member run for a seat in a local government in North West London.
- 4.7 Six AGE members have been training to participate in the British 10K London Run on 1st July to raise funds for the Eritrean Relief Association
- 4.8 AGE members attended a social gathering organised by ERA with Olympic medallist Meb Kiflezghi following his participation at the London Marathon.
- 4.9 AGE member visited the EHEC community library in Asmara and Abraha Bahta School for the Blind on behalf of AGE and held discussions with board members and head of The Library and Information Association of Eritrea.

³ For details see http://www.eritrea.co.uk/books-for-eritrea/letters_of_acknowledgement/Letter%20from%20Minister%20Osman%20Saleh.pdf/view



5.0 FINANCIAL STATUS

AGE had £505 transferred from last year with £1000 loan. This year AGE managed to raise close to £2385 in total, including a membership fee of £220 this year. A total of £2365 was spent through out the year for activities including payment towards Books-for-Eritrea drive, hiring van, hall, PO box rental, refreshments and stationeries. AGE now has just over £500 in a bank account. Membership fee has not been paid by all members.

AGE members paid their and the guests expenses for food and drinks when meeting and dining with people on behalf of AGE. All individual expenses for telephone and travelling on the groups business is also covered by members themselves. Daniel Berhane, a member of board, continues to cover the expenses of running the website.

AGE is trying to source further donations for shipment of the books. A fund of approximately £3000 will need to be raised for this purpose.

6.0 CONCLUSION

AGE has worked hard to meet the targets set for the year in the face of lingering challenges. The British government has been supporting the position of the Ethiopian government almost to a fault where the border situation is concerned. Although AGE has managed to successfully lobby some influential people both in parliament and the Civil Service, there is still a long way to go. The challenges therefore will go beyond the term of the present board and on to the next. More work needs to be done in this regard if AGE is to have a telling impact on the way the British government formulates its policy towards Eritrea.

Most promisingly, AGE has been very successful in mobilising the Eritrean community in the UK to rally around a common cause. This has not been just around the issue of border demarcation but also in development projects. A good example has been the Books for Eritrea campaign. The help offered to the board by all sections of the community has been exemplary. The incoming board will therefore



need to build on this and form an even more robust alliance within the wider community.

AGE will also need to work hard in improving its financial resource. As things stand at present, AGE has had to borrow money in order to support its activities and various campaigns. This of course needs to change if AGE activities are to become sustainable. One area where the board will need to work on is membership drive. Here, the help of the wider membership will be crucial.

Finally, AGE will need an injection of new blood in terms of the composition of the board. To date, many of the members have served in the board since the inception of AGE. A new crop of more energetic and may be even younger individuals will serve the cause of AGE positively. With the solid foundation that has been laid so far, the future is promising.

AGE Board Members

Simon Marcos
Tsebaot Yohannes
Habtom Tesfai
Daniel Berhane
Sirak Bahlbi
Huriy Ghirmai
Mahta Tewolde

