

The Dergue too went on the propaganda offensive, to accompany its large-scale military campaign professing to have made a serious offer for peace and alleging to have been rebuffed by the EPLF. Confident of quick military victory, the regime, after the Berlin talks did not consider using peace as a maneuver chip. Meanwhile, the Numeiri regime in the Sudan, which had earlier (at Free town, Sierra Leone) and for purpose of its own expressed support of the Eritrean Peoples cause change its stance, offered to mediate and started exerting pressure on the Eritrean revolution to induce it to compromise. Taking in to consideration the effort of the Sudan and other interested parties to organize negotiations, and more importantly, assessing the experiences of Berlin, the EPLF issued its Referendum Proposal on November 23, 1980 in which it set, in unequivocal terms, its views on a peaceful solution of the Eritrean case, moreover, the EPLF continued with unflinching seriousness its intensive political and diplomatic works in search for sincere dialogue.

Furthermore, governments, organizations and individuals continued to take initiatives for a peaceful solution, initiative to which the EPLF gave positive considerations and whole-hearted support. But the Dergue was not interested. It was only after the debacle of the “Red Star Campaign” that the regime signaled through its agents abroad, its willingness to meet with the EPLF. In its approaches, the Dergue insisted that the meetings be conducted in secret and without the presence of a third party. The EPLF agreed and first meeting was held on 23-08-82. Successive meetings followed on 11-11-82, 03-01-83, 18-02-83, 16-31/5/83, 19-07-83; 26-12-83, 02-03-84, 31-85..... In all there were ten exploratory meetings.

At first, the secrecy of the meetings was the main point of contention. The EPLF proposed that the meetings be formally declared, that a third party acceptable to both sides participate, and that each side submit its own proposal or work paper. The Dergue did not present any proposal but limited itself to repeating its desire of keeping the meeting secret. With respect to the issue of a third party, the Dergue, at first, emphatically rejected the idea and when it finally relented, it kept insisting on the third party being from those whose views are identical with its own and were thus sure to side with it. By the time the preliminary talks broke down, agreement had not been reached on the matter. In regard to the presentation of position papers that would serve as a basis for dialogue the EPLF submitted the points of its referendum proposal. In contrast, although the Dergue after considerable delay presented a paper similar in content to its regional autonomy proposal, it subsequently declared that the paper did not reflect its final position. This meant that the Dergue had failed to submit a paper incorporating its views. In this situation, the EPLF insisted that the regime present a definite position even if it is one that is not incorporated in the three options of the Referendum Proposal. The representatives of the regime, however, engaged in a maneuver to buy time, as they found it impossible to present a position paper, and to this end requested and were given a clarification on the EPLF’s interpretation of the points in the Referendum Proposal. In addition, they kept taking contradictory stands in formal and informal meetings and concentrated their efforts on prolonging or pushing the dates of the

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meetings. When all the issues pertinent to the preliminary meetings were exhausted, the EPLF took up the basic question once again and proposed that the proper negotiation should start in the form of formally declared meeting with the participation of a mutually agreeable third party when this too rejected the preliminary meetings reached a dead end and was terminated.