

On June 20 Eritrean nationals commemorated this year's Martyrs Day. Nationals from all over the country and abroad came together in one spirit to pay homage to the sacrifice made by these gallant fighters. For those veteran fighters it was an occasion to remember their fallen comrades. While for others, it was an event to honor the selfless act of their beloved brothers and sisters and tell the story of those compatriots to young generation.

Eritrean martyrs are not only remembered in this specific Day dedicated in their honor, but they are living monuments in the heart of every Eritrean. For every Eritrean Nakfa has a special meaning. Nakfa means endurance, perseverance and belief. Nakfa was a place where Eritrean liberation fighters put their strong belief and conviction that one day Eritrea will be an independent country where its people will walk proud as independent and free people in their own land. Nakfa was the foundation of the true State of Eritrea that we have today. When we celebrate our Martyrs Day in Nakfa we remember not only our martyrs but also Nakfa as the foundation of all the successes the EPLF attained until the last day, 24th of May, 1991.

In 1977 Nakfa fell in the hands of the Eritrean People's Liberation front and remained under it until the end, Eritrean Independence. The trenches from huge rocks split by hoes and hammers and other small equipment defending Nakfa were built by the fighters amidst the aerial bombings and shelling. From the holding stations for the reserve groups, to underground care centers, command posts, to the never ending curves of trenches, everything is breathtakingly inspiring.

The stone structures, dug deep underground, served not just as the protective shelters for the fighters, but became places where friendship were cemented, commitment and courage displayed, pain and hurt shared, and where the fate for Eritrea and her people was laid. From here the Eritrean freedom fighters have gone through trying times, endured and fought and clambered up a steep slope to prove themselves strong. The endurance they have displayed coupled with perseverance in the face of conspiracy has helped Eritreans outlast subjugation, dependence, indecency and other ignoble human qualities.

From Nakfa, right from 1977, a unique sense of nationalism, and nationhood was born, and the gallant fighters knew that nothing was to deter them to continue their struggle with determination to the end until the occupation forces are routed out from Eritrea. They knew within their hearts that whatever the circumstance their commitment, courage, tolerance, and readiness to face whatever challenge was what matters for them.

The attempts of the Ethiopian regime to recapture Nakfa miserably failed and the enemy forces became so weak that after Nakfa the major towns and cities of Eritrea, except Asmara, Massawa and Barentu, fell in the hands of the EPLF fighters. Asmara was encircled and was looking for its final day until the major powers came to the rescue of the Derge regime.

The Derge regime, which took power in Ethiopia as the result of power vacuum in that country after the fall of Haileselesie regime immediately claimed it was a communist regime and sided with the Soviet Union. The Soviets in return began to supply the Derge regime with whatever military hardware, fighter jets they felt enough to crash the EPLF forces. They also trained hundred of thousands of soldiers. And in 1978, the Derge regime, convinced it had the necessary military equipment and ready and trained personnel, launched its military operation through different fronts with different military task forces such as 501, 502, 503, and 505 military task forces. However, it was not easy to crash the Eritrean forces as simple as that. With all the military equipment, ground, air and naval forces coupled with interferences of foreign powers, the liberation forces were not found to give up easily. Hence, the Derge regime in its bid to destroy the EPLF had to launch seven separate offensives until it was totally impotent and easy to rout it out from the country.

The first military offensive was launched on the 13th of June, 1978, from four fronts. The first front was launched by 503 task force from Girhu Sernay with the assignment to go all the way through Tsorena, and Dekemhare. The second front through Ksad Ika, Adi Quala, and Mendefera, convinced in its way will wipe out the EPLF forces. The third front was by 502 task force assigned to march all the way through Shambuko and Gash to Barentu. The 501 task force was assigned to capture Tesenei through Omhajer. At fifth front the 505 task force came with assignment to clear the EPLF forces stationed in Semhar plains. The sixth front was through Dogali strait to the north.

All the Derge military operations from the five fronts were not able to hit their target due to the strong resistance they encountered from the liberation forces. The Derge regime had not the slightest clue that it would launch seven military operations. It was so convinced, with the huge supply of arms it received from the Soviets and others; it will crash the armed struggle for independence within days of the first offensive. However, the reality on the ground was very different; it was faced with determined and steadfast forces and was forced to give up its offensive until it reinforces its much weakened military supplies and personnel. The first military offensive was foiled within days.

The second military offensive was launched some months later after the failed 1st offensive from three fronts, north, east, and west. From the north through Adi Yakob; from the east through Dogali and from the west through Ingerne to Afabet. The wise decision of the EPLF leadership to strategically withdraw during this operation was one of the heavy blows to the Derge's appetite, which believed ones again that it will crash the movement once and for all. With its second military offensive the Derge regime remained empty handed and did not realize what the EPLF had in mind in conducting strategic withdrawal.

The third military offensive which was in January 1979 was to control Afabet and the north east Sahel and finally recapture Nakfa, which they have never been able to do so for years. It was during this operation that the Denden trenches and the Sahel front that we proudly talk about today were created. The fourth military offensive was aimed at penetrating the strong hold of Nakfa trenches. During this operation the Derge regime was so desperate that it was launching around 15 operations per day, and with no result except heavy human and material loses. In the fifth military offensive the Derge regime was so exhausted that it was forced to bring soldiers

from other palaces of Ethiopia to try to do something. But the fifth offensive was also crashed like those other offensives.

The Derge regime realized that with the emptied energy it had it could do nothing to regain the balance of power to fight the gallant liberation fighter had to take 2 years for preparation for another military operation. February 1982 was the launching of the much anticipated 6th (Derge's Red Star) military operation. This offensive was the biggest of all offenses ever launched by the Ethiopian regimes. For two years on, after the fall of the fifth military offensive, the Derge regime took two solid years to train new recruits and procure military hardware before going to another try. Before actually engaging itself in combat the Derge regime had to use different propaganda means including distributing pamphlets, disseminating messages through its mass media and terrorizing the population through different means.

The slogans that were being disseminated then were aimed at terrorizing the population in a bid they will disassociate themselves from their sons and daughters. It was also to incur terror and suspicion among the combatants of the EPLF forces. The Derge regime, misled by the power it thought it had, was confident to annihilate the Eritrean liberation forces from the face of the earth.

The Derge regime was armed to the teeth and had the backing of some major powers to the extent of having Soviet military advisors in the frontline. With the propaganda that the regime was disseminating many believed that it was the end of the Eritrean revolution and the history of the movement of Eritrean people for independence will remain confined only to the books of history. And some were seen to shift sides with the Derge regime convinced by the propaganda the regime was disseminating.

The 6th military operation was launched from all sides of Sahel front. The fighting was so fierce that it took months to foil it and ultimately exhaust and kill the fire power and morale of the enemy soldiers. Before the official launch of the 6th offensive the EPLF leadership was well aware of the plan of the Derge regime and was conducting sporadic attacks from behind the enemy position and in the frontline. With those sporadic attacks the EPLF forces were able to minimize and break the moral and capacity of the enemy forces.

The attempt of the Derge regime to break through the lines of the liberation fighters were found once and again an impossible task. The trenches of the freedom fighters were found un-penetrable with all cost; not even with the massive interference of supper powers on the side of the Derge regime. The Derge's mission impossible led to the defeat of its forces and its army into despair. After the devastating defeat of the Derge at the hands of EPLF fighters was forced it give up its attempts to try to engage itself in a fight and confined into defensive positions in and around Afabet and in other areas far from the stronghold of the EPLF around Nakfa. Some people compare the 6th offensive of the Derge regime to penetrate the Sahel EPLF trenches as the battle between David and Goliath. The fierceness of the fighting could be explained with the nick-names of the trenches given them by the EPLF combatants. Every trench was given a name depicting the ferocity of the struggle in and around them. Rigole, Volleyball, Fernello,

Globe, Letter P, Testa, Nakura, Sembel, were some of the nick-names given to the chains of trenches around Nakfa.

Rigole is an Italian word meaning penalty kick like that in a football game, and the nick-name was given to indicate how close the trenches of the enemy were to that of the EPLF combatants. In some places the trenches were some meters apart. Could any one imagine staying for months some meters away from enemy trenches with all the grenades and hand bombs falling on you? That was the reality, and the combatants had to face it for they were committed not to give up. Volleyball as everyone knows is a kind of a game where two competing teams are separated with a net in between and play the game. In the game of Volleyball from the six players there is one as play maker and one smasher. The ball coming from the smasher is very hard to deal with. And the nick-name for this particular trench was given to indicate the hard part of it. In this trench when the enemy throws a hand grenade on the EPLF fighters it was common for the fighters to catch the grenade, before it reaches the ground and explodes, and throw it back to the enemy. What a Volleyball game! Fernello is also another Italian word meaning a kind of a zinc corrugated stove where our mothers use to boil coffee or sausage. The process is done by putting charcoal on the Fernello and the charcoal is lit with fire and the charcoal becomes very red and very hot.

According to those who have been in the trenches fighting the enemy recite that the trench Fernello was turned into a hell with the heavy artillery and aerial bombardment of the Derge regime and it needed beyond imagination to comprehend. The combatants had to face all the hell on earth with the bombardment and their unflinching determination and will of power did not allow the enemy to succeed even an inch.

Testa is a kind of bull fight where people use their physical heads to hit each other on the head. It is a kind of collusion of two people's heads. With this kind of fight there is physical contact between the two sides. This trench was later renamed to Globe. It was designed in a way that from the trench, unlike the other trenches, one could control the enemy movement from every angle. And the name Globe was given to it to indicate its round formation as that of the earth.

The long trenches circling the enormous and proud Denden are among the first trenches the EPLF fighter built to hold the advance of the Derge forces during the fourth offensive. All other trenches in the area have their peculiar names upon which they tell their own story of the struggle. The trenches are now renovated and maintained into their original forms and are made ready for visitors to visit them and understand how the combatants were defending themselves and crashing the enemy forces. The trenches are solid and un-penetrable.

Nakfa today is a small and growing city. The school of Social Sciences, Wina Technical School, the modern hotel and the new buildings under construction have made the town of Nakfa a promising one for its inhabitants. Above all the climate condition of Nakfa is very moderate and suitable for people to live in.

Nakfa as it is the symbol of endurance and steadfastness it will remain so for posterity.

