

By THORAYA PANDY

Eritrea: beacon of hope for all

ON MY return from an Idasa-hosted visit to Eritrea, Kenya and Ethiopia most people I spoke to had never heard of Eritrea.

When I explained where it was, many asked, 'did you take food along?' and, 'I hope you wore a bullet-proof vest'.

Such was the level of knowledge about a country that is so peaceful and has achieved so much that it would put many to shame. Eritrea is a beacon of hope, not only for Africa, but the entire world.

I first heard about the struggles of the Eritrean people in 1991 when I met relief workers from the region. Their stories came alive the moment I set foot in Asmara.

There was nothing striking about its buildings, it did not have the conventional historic appearance that could tell me I was in Eritrea, but what was startling was how almost spotless and beggar-free the place was. It was impossible not to feel tranquil and peaceful throughout our stay there.

Unlike Kenya and Ethiopia, and the sometimes nightmarish encounters we had with beggars, we could move about freely at any time during the day and night without a single worry. As a woman I found it particularly congenial being able to walk out on my own, even in the early hours of the morning.

Crimes like rape and sexual violence, in fact crime in general, is something Eritreans don't worry about because it simply does not happen. Everyone is too busy trying to rebuild their country after the devastation of 30 years of war against Ethiopian rule.

When the victorious Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) marched into Asmara after defeating the Mengistu Haile Mirriam regime in May 1991, they found very little money in the banks. The entire socio-economic infrastructure had been destroyed and over a million refugees had to be repatriated.

Amidst endless difficulties – and within just two years – the EPLF (which serves as the provisional government) has established a civil service framework, laid the basis for a foreign service, staffed hospitals with doctors and nurses, opened primary and secondary schools all over the country, provided a police force and a legal system with functioning magistrate's courts. They have even opened the university – which was virtually destroyed by the Ethiopian government – and have staffed it with qualified academics who are teaching up to 500 students.

Perhaps the greatest achievement and wonder is that government officials are not being paid, except for basics such as food

and lodgings. Neither the president nor ministers, neither the judges nor teachers are receiving salaries.

Women, in particular, have played a central role in rebuilding their country. Hundreds of women have come forward to work voluntarily in all departments of the provisional government.

Many were fighters in the EPLF and had formed one-third of the combat forces of liberation army. Together with their menfolk, they occupied the forward-most trenches of the armed resistance.

These women are clear and steadfast that their contribution and sacrifices were not in vain. Women's issues are high on the agenda of the provisional government and many women hold key government positions.

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The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) is playing a central role in formulating government policy. At present its membership stands at 200 000 and it is still reaching out to women in remote areas. Among its activities are workshops to train and provide skills to women on health, leadership, financial management and literacy.

According to NUEW president, Askalu Menkorios, the union and the government are looking at the feasibility of providing credit facilities to women, particularly rural women.

Menkorios explained that at its last congress, the union decided to break away from the EPLF. It was felt that that even though NUEW members supported the government, it was important for the women's organisation to be independent and to provide a voice to all women in Eritrea.

Menkorios' own story is an engrossing one. She was born and brought up in Asmara, studied in the USA and later worked as an air hostess. In 1975 she joined the EPLF where she served as a 'barefoot' doctor, offering basic medical care to the wounded.

Menkorios speaks proudly of the active

participation of women in the armed struggle. Asked why so many women joined the armed forces, she said: 'Everyone was affected by the atrocities committed by the enemy. They burnt our villages, tortured us – especially women and children. We lived in fear all the time.'

'Women were not going to sit about while their menfolk did the fighting.'

Women ex-fighters in Asmara are conspicuous by their cropped hair and army-like attire. Though many were injured in the war, they appear to feel no hatred or resentment. They speak only of rebuilding their country and maintaining the peace for which they sacrificed so much.

The people I met in Asmara were but a small part of the Eritrean nation, but they seemed to embody the lessons of what discipline and self-reliance can achieve. It still surprises me that this country, without any foreign support or aid (except being granted sanctuary by Sudan), and with a population of just 3.4 million was able to defeat the biggest army in Africa.

In April this year they will go to the polls to vote, no doubt, for continuing peace and progress.

During our visit to Kenya it was interesting to meet the well-known Kenyan environmentalist and human rights activist Professor Wangari Mathaai. She speaks with determination about involving the public in conservation efforts.

Mathaai gained international recognition when she and the Green Belt Movement, which she heads, succeeded in overturning a decision by the Moi government to convert a public park into a parking area.

'We were able to galvanise a lot of support abroad and more especially, locally. Kenyans realised that environmental issues affected them. They came out clearly in support of the Green Belt Movement to save the park,' she said.

She initiated a national tree-planting campaign to avoid deforestation over a decade ago. Since then, more than seven million trees have been planted, involving millions of Kenyans, particularly women.

Mathaai's active campaigning around environmental issues have resulted in several clashes with the Moi government.

She has been detained, arrested, beaten up and continuously harassed, but nonetheless says she will continue to challenge and fight government policies whenever necessary.

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