

Fighters struggle to rebuild battered Eritrea

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ASMARA -- On Asmara's streets draped with flags to mark the 16th anniversary of its liberation from Ethiopia, former fighters remember the cost of their bloody 30-year independence war. Despite a continued tense border standoff with arch-foe Ethiopia, the focus Thursday is clearly on national reconstruction, not war.

Battle-scarred ex-fighter Berhane Mesfun, now a radio mechanic, said that he remains committed to his young nation.

"The struggle is now to rebuild Eritrea," he said. During the war he was shot in the forehead, wounded by a bazooka rocket, and blasted by a landmine. "I don't want to be a parasite on my people or country, but to carry on working as I can," Berhane added.

"You have to give everything you have for what you believe in."

For Eritrea, one of the poorest countries in the world, the liberation of the capital May 24, 1991 - before independence itself in May 1993 - marked only the first stage of the heavy sacrifice that its people would pay.

Reconstruction efforts and economic growth have since been stifled by a stalemate with Ethiopia following their 1998-2000 border war, but many remain positive despite their struggles.

"All Eritreans, men and women alike, inside and outside the country, should use independence day as a springboard, so that Eritrea becomes like developed countries," said Belainesh Seyoum, an ex-fighter and head of international relations for the National Union of Eritrean Women.

"We need to be very strong and to work hard for the benefit of the young generation, who are going to be handed over the strength, commitment and efforts of the past," she said.

Colorful liberation celebrations, held under the slogan of "today's investment, tomorrow's prosperity," underline the importance of national unity, self-reliance, and the continued commitment of the young, who are forcibly drafted into mass military and labor programs.

Meanwhile, the state continues a wartime level of control, with gangs of military police prowling streets, and arresting hundreds without documents permitting them to move to certain areas.

Alongside, state-run media works overtime to combat disillusionment and evoke the spirit of the liberation war, promising repeatedly that Eritrea is growing "nearer and nearer to the bright future that awaits."

"The people of Eritrea, without looking for external help or kneeling down before temporary difficulties or pressures, have registered an exemplary development leap as a result of 16 years of unrelenting toil," claimed a recent editorial in the government Eritrea Profile newspaper.

Old fighters are modest in talking about their years of endurance and single-minded determination, defeating a far larger Ethiopian army backed first by the United States, then the Soviet Union.

But they remain convinced of the ultimate success of Eritrea.

"We never expected to see independence of Eritrea ourselves, but we were sure that independence was inevitable," said Tekeste Fekadu, a senior battlefield surgeon in the war who then treated mass casualties in the two-year border conflict.

"Independence is everything to me, whatever problems may emerge now and then," he added.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has warned of the potential for a new outbreak in hostilities with Ethiopia, pointing to a worsening situation with heavy troop deployments in the officially de-militarized border buffer zone.

Meanwhile, the high cost of freedom hangs heavy round the necks of the young.

"We paid a lot to bring about independence, in terms of martyrs and disabilities, as well as economic, social, and cultural disruption," veteran Tekeste said. "Every Eritrean has the responsibility and duty to maintain its sovereignty and guard its territorial integrity."