

## STATUTORY DECLARATION

I, Ali Abdu Ahmed, of C04/415 Brunswick Road, Brunswick West, in the state of Victoria, ex-Minister for Information in Eritrea, make the following declaration under the *Statutory Declaration Act 1959*;

1. Until very recently I was the Minister of Information, the official Spokesperson of my country, and a special advisor to the President of the State of Eritrea. I joined the Ministry in 2000, and prior to that I was the Ambassador to Germany and also the Vatican, Austria and Belgium in 1999. I was also the Vice-President of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students from 1995 until 1999.
2. My political differences with the Eritrean regime date back to the year 2007 and they are centred around its policy towards Somalia; its endless conscription of Eritrean youth into a form of modern slavery; its creation of a two-tier system of privileged and dispossessed citizens; its arming of civilians including elderly men and women; the illegal extortion of 2% tax on Eritrean Diaspora; and the fact that I was being told by the Eritrean people, particularly those young Eritreans, that I was the “next in line”, the “next President of Eritrea” – this aroused deep suspicion of me in the mind of the President.
3. In late 2006, Eritrea and Somalia entered into open warfare. The Ethiopians were able to quickly penetrate and overthrow the Somali government, many of whom took exile in Eritrea in 2007. We helped many of the Somali government. As part of the Eritrean government’s Foreign Relations Committee, my responsibility included political and diplomatic media work. Our committee’s principle was that Somalia should be left alone without any interference. The only support we should give should be politically and diplomacy.
4. Unfortunately, the Eritrean government – particularly the Head of State - instead decided to extend their military support to Somalia to achieve their aim. This included of course extending their support to Al Shabab (which clearly has affiliations to al-Qaeda). This caused a daily clash between those of us who were attempting to provide political support and those military officers who had been hand-picked by the Eritrean President to provide military support.
5. I argued that this was an extremely dangerous position – after all us Eritreans had gone through, not only was it immoral for us to support an organisation that was pledging fights, but it would antagonise our relationship with the West even further, and it would place a big target-mark on Eritrea. I felt that this would especially place Eritrean Muslims in a dangerous place. Once Eritrea’s name is linked to ‘terrorism’, it

is the Eritrean Muslims who will bear the brunt of the persecution because an Eritrean Christian can always point to the absurdity of being accused of being a Jihadist by simply stating that he is a practicing Christian.

6. The President, who pursued this policy blindly out of spite of the Ethiopian government, dismissed my concerns, and labelled me as a “defeatist” and then expelled me from the Standing Foreign Relations Committee. I now call this a “blessing in disguise”. This was in 2007.
7. Since 2007, I have networked with US-based Eritrean opposition website, *awate.com*. My aim was to expose the brutality of the government, the unhinged personality of the president, and the severe discrimination pursued against minorities and Muslims. The website *awate.com* operated in the US because nothing like that could ever operate within Eritrea. However, it had its foundation in Eritrea, particularly amongst the Jeberti minority race. The website broke a lot of news stories that could only have come from people with inside information about the government, especially about its involvement with Somalia’s Al Shabab, and since it is public knowledge that the news editor is my brother, some within the government would occasionally “joke” that I was the source. Indeed, on some of the stories, I was the source.
8. In 2010, when I wanted to show the world that the Eritrean President was unstable, I arranged an interview of him with Al Jazeera’s English program. He was, as I expected, unhinged and crazy-sounding: he was very drunk. *Awate.com* called the interview “*President Gone Wild*” and featured it prominently on its website. The President directly told me to contact Al Jazeera and remove the interview and the label “*President Gone Wild*” but I told him that not only did the Ministry of Information have no control over Al Jazeera and *awate.com*, but that it was illegal to block or jam the websites.
9. When I refused, I was put into house arrest for 12 days from 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2010 until 6<sup>th</sup> March 2010. I was only released because on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March I had to appear in an important national ceremony, and the President wouldn’t have wanted people to ask questions about my whereabouts.
10. When I wrote stories, I wrote under the pseudonym “From the Belly of the Beast”. Two of my biggest contributions to them deal with exposing the Eritrean government’s targeting of two groups that I belong to: the Jeberti, and the Muslim population of Eritrea.
11. The Jeberti are a persecuted minority. Although there has been no demographic study done in Eritrea in the last 21 years, roughly speaking, the Eritrean demographic is as follows: Tigrinya (Christian), 50% of the population; Tigre (Muslim), 34%; Jeberti (Muslim), 5%; Saho (Muslim), 3%; Afar (Muslim), 3%; Blin (Christian and

Muslim), 2%; Hdareb (Muslim), 1%; Kunama (Christian and Muslim), 1%; and Rashaida (Muslim), 1%.

12. The ethnic group which I belong to – the Jeberti – is not recognised as a nationality despite the fact that the group has existed in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia for over a millennia. It was absorbed into the ‘Tigrinya’ nationality, which is predominantly the base of the Eritrean government. The generally accepted myths is that the “Jeberti” are not even Eritreans; that they are ‘recent transplants’ from Ethiopia; that they are an inferior group who do not live off the land by farming or raising animals but by engaging in trade and other crafts. As ‘recent immigrants’, they are also accused of having dual loyalty (to their religion or to Ethiopia) but never considered to be totally loyal to Eritrea and, therefore, unfit to hold positions of authority. Many of the Eritreans who had named me as the eventual successor to President Isaias Afwerki would, no doubt, change their view once they realised that I am a member of the Jeberti ethnic group.
13. I am the only high-level Jeberti in the Eritrean government. Within the corrupt and hard-core chauvinist in the regime, to those who know I am Jeberti, the fact has not been acceptable to them. The Jeberti are the only ethnic group who are not allowed to call themselves by their name – they are required to refer to themselves as “Islam-practising Tigrinya” – they are the only ones who are not supposed to celebrate ‘ethnic pride’ in the annual cultural expo that is held in Eritrea. In a nation like ours which supposedly celebrates its cultural diversity, I always found this practice as one that caters to the prejudice of the masses, and one that attempts to artificially increase the number of the Tigrinya by absorbing the Jeberti into their ranks.
14. There have been several incidents where I have been warned to “*know your place*”. When my younger brother went to the Immigration Office to apply for a passport, he was asked to prove that he was an Eritrean citizen. When he told them that his brother was a Minister, he and my father were told (in a way that clearly meant to send me a message): “*we often host guests, even at high levels of Government.*” Also, a prominent Jeberti businessman and a close friend of mine, Mohammed Hagos, was brutally killed in a way that left no doubt that his killers were from the Eritrean National Security Office. The general message that was being sent repeatedly to me was that I was simply a “guest” serving as Minister for the purpose of showing artificial diversity and an ethnic balance in the Eritrean government, but that I should not get carried away into believe that I am anybody’s equal.
15. A couple of years ago, Taha Mohammed Nur, a man who was one of my father’s best friends; a man who happens to be one of the founding fathers of the Eritrean Revolution for independence; a man who happens to be a Jeberti; he was arrested together with my father. No reason was given. He died while in jail. I was told by one of the mob that this is the fate of our “disloyal guests”.

16. Recently in 2012 when rumours started circulating that I had abandoned the regime to seek political asylum, Sophia Tesfamariam – the media attaché and a spokesperson for the Eritrean government – wrote on her Facebook page that my defecting was ‘unsurprising’ given that I was a ‘gift of Meles Zenawi (Ethiopian Prime Minister) to Isaias Afwerki (Eritrean President). The implication being that my origins, and my loyalty, are from and to Ethiopia. She further accused me of being a spy for Western countries.
17. Back in 2001, my father, who was then in his 70s, was arrested. He was not accused of having committed any crime, but he was jailed for four and a half years. He was not politically active nor was he a leader in the Islamic community – he was a businessman. So, it was not clear why he was arrested. This is not atypical: in Eritrea, those arrested are never charged with any crime, they do not have a right to self – defence, and they are not sentenced. They are just detained. When he was being released four and a half years later – suffering severely from diabetes and other health complications – he asked: “*Why was I arrested to begin with?*” And he was told: “*So your son gets the message.*”
18. Another big difference I had, which was a source of a simmering conflict, was the government’s policy towards the Eritrean youth. In 1995, the government implemented a National Service police: upon graduation from high school, Eritrean males and females were required to provide an 18-month long national service. Part of this service was supposed to be in military training, and the other part was to be in national campaigns – such as eradicating malaria and illiteracy. Like almost all Eritreans, I supported this policy. However, after 1998, when Eritrea and Ethiopia entered into a two-year long border war, this “national service” which was supposed to be only 18 months, was gradually lengthened. At this time, I thought that this change was due to the war. Even after the war ended, when there was a tense period of “no war and no peace”, I still believed this was only a temporary situation. But, as the years passed on, and none of the conscripted were being released, and there was an endless round up of Eritrean youth which had nothing to do with national defence – it was simply a means of providing free labour, slave labour, to the dozens of companies which were owned by the ruling party – the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Mainly, however, it was to keep the youth from thinking of public appraisal.
19. The girls who were being conscripted had a more humiliating fate: they become the maids, and sometimes the concubines, of the corrupt generals. As the government continued to press on with its endless conscription program, the Eritrean youth began to pour out of the country by the thousands into Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. As I had been a long-time vice-President of youth and students NGOs, this affected not only my emotions, but it also affected my immediate family. In May 2007, my eldest

daughter was forced to escape to an unknown country (I believe she is now in a refugee camp in Sudan, however I have not had contact with her since she fled five years ago). One of my brothers ended up going to Yemen, another was arrested while he was trying to leave.

20. Since my job required frequent travel to the Middle East and to Europe, I would always run into Eritrean youth who had crossed through the Sinai desert to go to Libya, and from there crossing the Mediterranean on dangerous boats. They told me stories of the young Eritreans who had escaped from Eritrea to Uganda to South Africa to South America and from there to the United States.
21. Raising my second daughter alone, it was becoming increasingly clear to me that this conscription or dangerous exile was to be her fate. As I raised the issue with the President, it became increasingly clear to me that this was not going to be a “temporary” situation for Eritrea, but a practice for the foreseeable future. Whenever I raised this issue and my concern – of Eritreans that were disappearing by the tens of thousands in order to escape conscription – in one of the Cabinet of Ministers meetings, the President would say “Let them escape, their dirty skin can get lost!”
22. The Eritrean government has been described as an “organised mob” and, in many ways, it is. But it is not the whole government. The government has technocrats and civil servants who are trying their best to serve their people. As the Minister of Information and the Spokesperson of the State, my job was to make sure that I run a media centre that – like any Third World Ministry of Information – tried to be the public relations arm of the government. But most of my energy was spent trying to reach out to the tens of thousands of Eritreans who were leaving their country, never to return. I saw the grave danger in hundreds of thousands of Eritreans leaving the country, and I fought for increasingly large budgets to arrange for satellite TV contracts to provide cultural and entertainment programs that would allow them to remain connected with their home country. This was one of the reasons for my popularity.
23. On the other hand, within the Eritrean government was a corrupt core of military men and their outlaw facilitators who reported directly to the President. These people benefited from the exile of Eritreans. They were involved in the lucrative business of human smuggling and contraband trade. They thus turned a blind-eye to the destitute living conditions of the people as they boozed, gambled, and created a new class of the super rich. To this group of people, you are either one of them, or an enemy. To them, if you are conspiring with them in perpetrating corruption, you are suspected. If you don’t drink alcohol, gamble, womanise and engage in corrupt activities, you are considered a suspect. Since I was not in the corrupt group, I was eyed with suspicion. In fact, when I raised the corruption issue with the Cabinet of Ministers in 2009, I was silenced even though I had substantial proof.

24. In 2009, the Commercial Attaché in China handed substantial proof of corruption within the Eritrean government to the Eritrean Ambassador in Dubai (Consul General Mr John) and asked him to bring the evidence to me. The evidence was an invoice. The Eritrean government had purchased from China 10 million exercise books, stationary and material for the Ministry of Education. The Attaché had discovered that they had cost 5 million dollars, however the invoice amounted to 10 million dollars. This means that the government had stolen 50c per book, or simply stolen 5 million dollars from their people. I told the President in his office that this was clearly embezzlement and that it should be investigated. He told me he would follow it up but never did. In March 2009, I raised it again at the Cabinet of Ministers. Afterwards, I was called into the office of the President's Chief of Staff who told me to shut my mouth. In the meantime, the Attaché (whose name is Alem Tsehay) had been promoted to the job of Ambassador in India in return for his silence. This was obviously a bribe.
25. There was one more thing that I consider the straw that broke the camel's back. For me, this was the government's recent decision in 2012 to arm everybody including elderly men and women. While some of us were wondering when the young Eritreans would be demobilized – this had been what we were all expecting – in April 2012, the President gave an order that all Eritreans (including the men and women up to the age of 75) should be armed. It must be a decision in preparation for a war. The President was trying to create his own Defence Force that was under his direct control. The Defence Ministry was completely paralysed and separated from the project. The Minister of Defence complained about the creation of the President's Defence Force directly by coming to my office. Only one Brigadier General named Tecele Manjus – who is on the United Nations Security Council Human Trafficking list - assigned to the new defence force – he is extremely corrupt, and is involved in smuggling and trafficking.
26. The President's decision was puzzling to many of us as there was no discussion of the policy before it was implemented. At the Cabinet of Ministers meeting in July 2012, I argued that this is a wrong-headed policy, and that, in any event, I would not enforce it upon my Ministry.
27. Within days, senior government officials who knew I had direct access to the President, began to approach me at my office to discuss the militarization of Eritrea's civilian population. Brigadier General Tekle Lebsh in charge of Eritrea's Special Court; Commander of the Eritrean Air Force Major General Teklay H-S; the Army Commander of Central Region, Major General Flipos W/G; all of these people approached me to discuss bringing about change in Eritrea. As they were military men, they wanted to use my popularity and for me to be their figurehead for their proposed military solution. I am the only person who they believe can look the President in his eyes and tell him "this is wrong". But he wouldn't listen to me. He just lectured me for 6 hours. He told me the history of China, the history of Hezbollah

in Lebanon, the history of Afghanistan; the history of Iraq. He told me that Saddam Hussain had fallen because he depended on his modern defence force. He believed that this doesn't work – you have to fight with your own people, the citizens. These “people's” armies live together and die together. The President was scared by the Middle East uprisings in 2011. He totally controlled what the Ministry of Information was allowed to publish about the uprisings. The President didn't want to create a precedent. He was worried that there would be a similar uprising in Eritrea if the population knew what was happening around the world. When it was finally reported, the President made the media assertion that Egyptian President Mubarak deserved to fall because he didn't adopt Isaias's policy of self-reliance.

28. So the military men began to approach me. The general situation in Eritrea had been getting darker and darker. The General Secretary of the PFDJ (ruling party) approached me and asked me to do something to help the situation. This is the man who is supposed to be the second in charge to the President and he literally cried and asked me what were we going to do. It wasn't just the issue of conscription and the arming of civilians, but Eritrea has no electricity, no drinking water, no food – everything is controlled by the President. His philosophy was clear that “if people are hungry, they dare not think about politics.” It has become more and more totalitarian and the situation has become totally dire. Thousands are fleeing our country. The people approached me because they thought I would be the next President.
29. I suggested to them that we bring about change – and the only way to do it would be “Tahir Square style” (that is to say, the Egyptian way) via a popular uprising. An uprising that would come about from the state media conducting “man-on-the-street” interviews, explaining the quality of their life; the price of groceries; inflation; availability of water; electricity. Later in 2012, about June or July, I started a TV Program called “*Honesty*” which was talking about all these issues. I was trying to rouse the people in Eritrea. This really angered the President.
30. Then the Defence Minister approached me and insisted on seeing me urgently. We agreed to meet in a safe place. We met for about three hours and he informed me that there had been a lot of chatter recently as to why all these military officials – who had previously rarely visited my office – were now frequenting my office. Without giving me any specific information, he told me that the President does all his “dirty work” while travelling outside of the country – and that all the high-profile executions and arrests usually occur when the President is away. This is so he can order such arrests and executions to be done, but then turn around and act “surprised” and “shocked” that it has happened. The Defence Minister told me that the President would be travelling outside the country on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2012, and that I should make plans to get out as well – he believed that it would be my turn to be arrested or executed.

31. Since 2007, as the Eritrean President became more and more autocratic, the punishment endured by the long suffering Eritrean people has become intolerable. The country was being emptied of its productive youth, so much so that we got to the point where old people were being armed and veteran Generals were speaking of change in veiled terms. I had been planning a way to separate myself from the regime since 2007. But I have spent a lifetime putting the interests of others above mine – it is the responsible thing to do. I tried to arrange for the travel of my friends and colleagues who I felt were in danger of losing their lives and liberty. I had a wide network of people to whom I felt responsible and I wished to ensure that they were out of the country before I myself fled.
32. One of the most prominent is a man named Tadesse Teame, a scientist, a genius, who I was sure was going to be killed. The details of the situation are not as important as the overall fact that the Eritrean President believed the details and, believing them, would kill him and eventually me.
33. Teame was an electrical engineer and had discovered upon a scientific way to cure people. He came to me in 2006 or 2007 and proposed his scientific invention which has particular a significant health considerations and benefits. When I asked him why he was telling me – a Minister of Information – about his discovery, he said that it was because he believed that I would be the next President and that he wanted to be sure that his breakthrough discovery would have support at the highest Government level. Sceptically, I questioned his invention, which he proposed would cure ‘uncurable’ diseases. Since I had been vice-chair of the National Eritrean Youths and Student Association, I had been very interested in finding such cures for the people of Eritrea. Of course I was sceptical, but I was interested. And I nurtured him for five years. I promised him to support him as long as we kept it confidential.
34. His discovery had great success. He is a one in a million genius. Later in 2011 our working relationship was brought to the attention of the Eritrean President who told him that he should, henceforth, discontinue all communication with me and report directly to him. He was offered some special assignments within the government and \$400,000. From what I hear, the President needs the invention to help himself. This, if true, is a great national secret. The President then approached me and asked me “*Why did you keep it a secret? I am the Head of State*’. I told him that it must be proven first. In any event, the Eritrean Defece Minister – Sbhat Efrem – told me that he believed the likely outcome for my friend Tadesse would be that he would be killed for his invention. And then I would be killed. I felt a special obligation to get this scientist out of the country, and I did. He now lives safely in Amsterdam.

35. It is only when my own personal safety and life was in danger, and only after I felt I had done everything I could to arrange for the travel of friends and colleagues, that I finally felt comfortable to come forward and do what I have been planning to do for a long time: ask for political asylum in a country that respects the human rights of human beings.
36. In October and November (after being told that the President was going away and that I would be arrested or killed while he was out of the country) I travelled around Europe, Canada, and finally Australia. As a Cabinet Minister with a Diplomatic Passport, I was able to create special assignments and told the Office back home that I was working on these assignments and had to remain out of the country. I couldn't stay in any city or country for more than a month without arousing suspicions, so I travelled – I squeezed medical care into my excuses too. I have cardiac issues.
37. This is how I was able to move from Dubai to Europe – Germany and Sweden – to Canada. While in Canada I was able to see my family for one week. My wife and my son who is disabled fled to Canada four years ago. They were being persecuted because of me and in fear for their lives they left Eritrea. When they arrived in Canada, my wife had to throw away her passports and change her name. She has been so petrified that somebody in Canada would find out her true identity- that she is my wife – and then they will hunt her down. In fact, the Government supporters led by a PFDJ spy named Estifanos has tried to eliminate her. I have proof of this. They have now been hiding for four years under aliases. They have a green card in Canada under these different names. If my country had found out that I'd sent them overseas we would all be in great trouble because it is illegal in Eritrea to send your family abroad.
38. And finally, I arrived in Australia. Meanwhile, I was busy trying to get people in network out of Eritria. I was giving passports away to all the people who needed help. That is how I managed to get them out of the country. My chief engineer – Daniel Kiflom – is now asking for asylum in the UK. My partner and good friend for over 25 years Michael Adonai – a prominent artist and fine art ambassador - (who I shared all my secrets with) I helped him leave the country and he is now seeking asylum in Australia. My network facilitator, Nur Abdu, is currently in Dubai. The scientist Taddesse is currently in Holland. A laboratory technician has fled to Sudan. Colonel Fitsum from Eritrean National Security is now in Sweden. And there are others who I have managed to save in the last 6 weeks. Because, as a leader I should be responsible. And in order for me to save these people, I had to drag my legs by continuing to create assignments for myself overseas.
39. Once in Australia, as I was on assignment (as far as the Eritrean government is concerned) I continued working on getting people out of the country; the people I felt a special obligation to. When I was in Canada, I had heard of the arrest of General Philipos. He was one of the officers visiting my office in Eritria searching for a military solution for the dire situation of Eritrea. Once in Australia, I learned that the

Eritrean Defence Minister, Sebhat Ephrem, had disappeared. Sebhat Ephrem did not show up to the Ministerial Cabinet meeting on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December and I heard that he was either arrested or exiled. I am really worried about him, he is one of the reformists who secretly approached me to get rid of the crazy President before our country becomes another Somalia. He also shared my secret with the young electronic engineer Tadasse Teame. Two other colonels, Colonel Wedi Bri and Colonel Haile Estifanos (with whom I had close contacts) had also disappeared.

40. I asked for a visa to go to Canada and/or New Zealand in order to buy myself some more time. In November I withdrew that application. Meanwhile, the final person that I needed to leave Eritrea was my fifteen year old daughter Ciham. Once I was in Australia, the deals I was negotiating with smugglers who were contracted to get her out of the country were getting worse and worse. I was fearing that she would end up with people who would trade her for Egyptian Bedouin Arabs who are notoriously known for selling human organs and asking a ransom of \$25,000.
41. Security forces intercepted a phone call I was having with my brother about the smugglers. My brother was telling me that in order to save my daughter I would have to pay \$7000 (plus a further \$7000 for the accompanying person). My brother Hassan was arrested and now remains in jail. And then on the 8<sup>th</sup> December my worst fears came true when I learned that my daughter was arrested by the criminal regime in Eritrea while crossing the border to Sudan. My father who was trying to save her was also arrested. This was the day I decided to apply for political asylum. God forbid they will now kill my daughter in revenge. And I am sure my father, my brother, sister, my friends and my relatives who remain in Eritrea will face harsh measures. Until my country – which I worked for 34 years of my 47 – prevails freedom justice peace and prosperity.
42. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of December, my wife's cousin Ambess Mebrahtu was arrested. On the same weekend, my diplomatic passport was revoked. This is normal protocol for those who have defected from the Ministry. That's why I urgently requested my passport from the embassy before it was to fall into the hands of the Eritrean consulate because a circular had been issued to void it. That is when I knew that I would make it official that I will never return to Eritrea. And that's why I have decided to ask for political asylum in Australia.
43. The more I talk about my secrets the more I am worried and shivering about my safety because I know what crazy things the President can do to me. Even in Melbourne I am very recognisable and I fear that government supporters are following me. I am equally worried about every member of my family back in Eritrea especially my fifteen year old daughter and brother and father who are all in jail. I am suffering from insomnia and heart pains. I have had serious suicidal thoughts. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December when I learned of my daughter's fate I wanted to commit suicide because I had lost everything. I am so lonely. I am in great need of my wife and

children and I desperately need the emotional support of my family. I need a family reunion. I am suffering from depression and loneliness and stress. I am under great financial hardship.

44. I was a clean and not corrupted person; a good person. I joined the struggle for independence in Eritrea when I was just 13 years old and have worked my whole life for my people. I was a workaholic, spending all my days working for the people of Eritrea and neglecting my family. I was totally dedicated to my country. I was destined to be the next President. But when they asked me to lead the revolution I said no. I said I don't want to be involved in politics today or tomorrow. To be the President would be a curse for me. Now I want nothing to do with politics, I want nothing more than to live in a small village kissing my wife and children and spending the rest of my life begging for my wife's forgiveness.

I understand that a person who intentionally makes a false statement in a statutory declaration is guilty of an offence under section 11 *Statutory Declaration Act 1959*, and I believe that the statements in this declaration are true in every particular.

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Declared at                      on                      2012.

Before me: