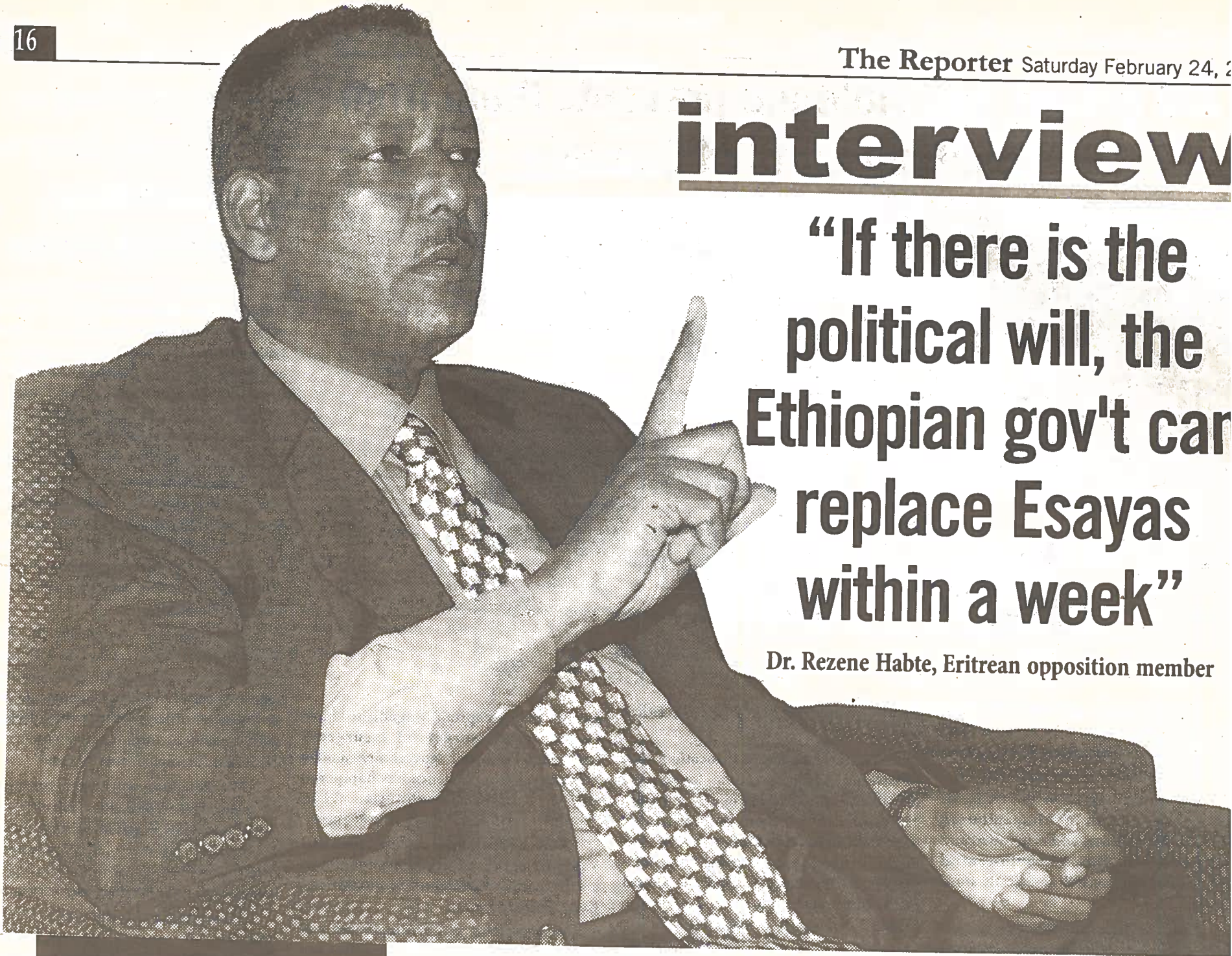


interview

“If there is the political will, the Ethiopian gov't can replace Esayas within a week”

Dr. Rezene Habte, Eritrean opposition member



Dr. Rezene Habte is one of the earliest Eritrean opposition members who dared to raise their voices against the Eritrean President Esayas Afewerki. He joined the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1974 which was waging guerrilla war against Ethiopian forces in order to create a separate Eritrean state. In 1980 when ELF was wiped out by forces of the EPLF led by the current Eritrean president Esayas, he left for Khartoum, Sudan. Then in 1983, he went to the US.

He now works for the US federal government at the General Accountability Office as a supervisor.

Last week, he was in Addis Ababa to attend a conference of Eritrean opposition parties. Our senior reporter Bruck Shewaredged interviewed Dr. Rezene on Eritrean opposition, the government in Eritrea and the living conditions in that country. Excerpts:

... you know the situation in North Korea. Eritrea is Africa's North Korea. The people start to line up in front of bakeries beginning from 4:00 am every day. Sugar and other items are rationed.

Sometimes, when some youngsters flee the country, the government takes away that ration card from the family. This is how harsh the government is.

How disastrous is Eritrean government's policy whether in terms of democracy, relationships with neighbors or the economy?

The government is treating the Eritrean people harshly, even harsher than the Derg (military) regime. From an Eritrean citizen's point of view, the people's struggle for independence which lasted for more than three decades has totally gone off track. Had the Eritrean people known in advance that they would have such a regime, they would have long abandoned their struggle. Had they known that president Esayas would be at the helm of power and exercises his authority ruthlessly, they wouldn't have supported the struggle. I know that this is the sentiment of the people currently.

Let me make one thing very clear. The government has no policy at all. It is a government made up of bandits. Unfortunately, the Eritrean people who have been harshly suppressed by this regime are forgotten by the outside world.

Neighboring countries know perfectly well about the plight of the Eritrean people. But they are not doing anything to help the people of Eritrea.

They are leaving their country behind en

masse. I've been recently to Khartoum, Sudan. There I saw a large number of young Eritrean refugees. It seems they have lost their nationality value...

Sorry to interrupt you. Apart from Sudan, many are fleeing to Ethiopia though most of them stay in the houses of their relatives here. Aren't you worried that the state might collapse if so many people abandon their country, especially the youth?

The Eritrean state has practically collapsed. The problem is that there is no viable opposition force which challenges the regime.

And why is that?

Well, the first reason is the opposition's incompetence. There is a power rivalry amongst opposition forces. They have no wider vision. The way they are organized and conduct their struggle is very much narrow-minded. They are also corrupt.

On top of this, the biggest problem is that so far there is no government that showed commitment to support them and help remove president Esayas' government.

Most worry about stability first rather than democracy. In the absence of a viable opposition which can overtake power in orderly fashion, is it fair to blame other countries for refraining from precipitating the fall of the government in Eritrea?

Yes, they are to blame. Honestly speaking we saw the recent takeover of power by the Somali transitional government. In terms of the existence of opposition, Eritrean opposition forces had a better chance than their Somali counterparts. But they have not secured that crucial support. They so far didn't get US support. Even the Ethiopian government doesn't have an official policy to support opposition forces. The notion that there is no

personality to replace President Esayas in Eritrea is very much mistaken. There are capable people but they lack outside support. I'm sure you have not heard of any country which officially supports the opposition.

Even if the Eritrean opposition leaders are corrupt and are on the wrong track, I think it is difficult for the Ethiopian government to put them back on the right political trajectory if there is the will.

Overall, I know that Esayas is not only an enemy of the Eritrean people but he is also an enemy of the people of Ethiopia. There is a stone left unturned by Esayas to disintegrate Ethiopia. The Ethiopian leaders must disregard Esayas' ability to do serious harm to Ethiopia. But in my opinion, it is wrong to give him several chances.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean people have strong cultural and historical bonds and more than half a million Eritreans live in Ethiopia. Since the conflict started contacts have been severed between the two. What would be the social impact or the consequences of this?

I couldn't even understand how the separation began to take place in the first place. Many Eritreans who, I think, did not pose a threat to the national interest of Ethiopia have been deported. I have come to understand that the Ethiopian government did not think it thoroughly at the time.

Honestly speaking, the Eritrean people should not have been punished for voting for independence. They have supported the independence, not Esayas' aggression against Ethiopia. So I don't support the Ethiopian government's decision to deport them.

Can you give me a picture of what Eritrea looks like in Eritrea now?

As a journalist, you know the situation