

Diaspora Involvement Crucial for Nation Building

The Ethiopian government has been doing its level best to engage the Ethiopian Diaspora in the overall development process in the country. Besides, establishing pertinent bodies managing Diaspora-related issues, the government has been providing support as well as various incentives to encourage them to actively take part in investment, trade and service sectors.

Fisseha Tesfu, Ethiopian Expatriates Affairs General Director with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs says the Diaspora with an aggregate capital of 2 billion birr have engaged in various ventures. Fisseha spoke to the MoFA Newsletter. An excerpt of the interview follows.

Newsletter:- What was the General Directorate doing to mobilize the Ethiopian Diaspora seeking their engagement in the socio-economic development of the country?

Ato Fisseha:- To start with, the basic responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is discussed in detail in the Foreign policy and Security Strategy document which clearly indicates that the Ethiopian Diaspora could contribute to the country's development. In this connection, based on the Business Process Reengineering (BPR) study results, the Ethiopian Expatriates' Affairs General Directorate has organized itself into three Divisions so as to engage the Diaspora in the socio-economic and political activities of Ethiopia. And these Divisions are the Service Giving, Policy Analysis, Information and Database, and the Promotion Divisions. In addition, a ministerial committee was established last June in cooperation with other concerned ministries to address issues related to the Diaspora. This Committee has adopted its directives on how to manage its activities. A technical committee has also been set up under the ministerial committee to deal with Diaspora services in relation to the duties and responsibilities of each institution. This technical committee meets every month and each institution presents its report on its performance, problems encountered and possible solutions. If necessary, the unresolved issue could be taken to the Prime Minister's Office. There is an office at the ministerial level which follows and coordinates these activities.

Newsletter:- What have been done in the regional states to entice the Diaspora?

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Ato Fisseha:- Yes, seeking to address drawbacks in regional states, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has held meetings with officials of each regional state including Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa city councils. And we have agreed that each region should have to open an office within

its administrative structure to deal with Diaspora activities. The structure within the regions has gone down to the Woreda level and that is what they are working on right now. Whoever comes to that particular area, he/she would be entitled to get information plus services at the Woreda administrative office level.



Ato Fisseha Tesfu

We are also going to constitute a committee of those Ethiopian Diaspora who have already invested here within the country. They know their problems and they can give us a lot of ideas on how to approach the Diaspora. They can also help us to sell products in foreign markets, introduce tourism opportunities, and select investors.

Despite all these efforts exerted over the past few years, the result registered so far was not that much satisfactory. Therefore, we have to work in a more coordinated and focused manner so that we could be able to achieve our objectives.

Newsletter:- How would you describe the involvement of Ethiopian Diaspora in the nation building endeavours?

Ato Fisseha:- The Recent report of the Investment Agency shows that in the last 6 months, Diaspora Ethiopians have invested about 2 billion birr in various sectors. They are involved in construction, tourism and service giving, industrial, agricultural, real estate and other sectors. In general, up to now there is an encouraging involvement from the Diaspora though the level of their involvement has not reached the desired level. So, we have to work hard to maximize investment by the Ethiopian Diaspora.

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Newsletter:- What are the incentives to the Diaspora?

Ato Fisseha:- There are some incentives. Suppose if there are any Ethiopians who have lived abroad for 5 years or more, they can bring their property that they were using free of tax. Actually, it has been found that some members of the Diaspora were found squandering these incentives. In relation to the tax free car, the assumption was that the car an individual was using abroad could be an old car. If it comes here, more foreign currency is needed to buy spare parts and the vehicle could also incur other costs. Therefore, taking this into account, bringing in a new car free of tax was allowed. But this was very much misused by certain individuals. Some people went to the extent of having a false marriage license to transfer duty free cars to another person. The Government lost 1.4 billion birr in the last 3 to 4 years in unpaid tax, according to the data given by the Ministry of Revenue. That is why the duty free car was prohibited since last July. However, the Diaspora is allowed to bring other items to the country free of tax.

In addition, special ID cards were also given for non-citizens. Those who have taken other nationality can get a special ID card because of their Ethiopian lineage. They pay only 500 dollars for 5 years to get the ID card and can come to their country without visa. They can also invest here like any other Ethiopian. That means though they have a foreign nationality, they are treated as an Ethiopian and can be engaged in any development activity.

The other incentive is they are allotted a plot of land to build a house. Here, members of the Ethiopian Diaspora have to organize themselves in housing associations. In the past few years, the Addis Ababa City Administration has already provided a plot of land for 68 housing associations through our embassies. Different regions have also clear directives on how to provide land for housing projects by the Diaspora and at the same time involved in the development of that locality.

In addition to these incentives, a study is underway on how to improve services rendered to the Ethiopian Diaspora in a more efficient way in collaboration with other concerned bodies.

Newsletter:- Do you have a message to the Ethiopian Diaspora?

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At Fisseha:- My message is that there are a lot of opportunities in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Diaspora's involvement in the development of their country, their contribution to the democratization and development process is a matter of necessity. There could be some few vocal destructive elements abroad. But the majority of the Diaspora are not against the development of their country. I can tell you no Ethiopian thinks that he or she will remain abroad for good. Therefore, I would like them to actively engage in various activities here and benefit themselves and their country at large.