

Dialogue and education have kept the "Eritrean miracle" on track, writes SUE

There is a lesson in there for South Africans engaged in transformation.

Keeping hope ali

THREE years since independence, hard work, commitment and integrity are keeping the Eritrean miracle alive, despite growing signs of disquiet and in the face of mounting hardship. "Our people are our asset," said Paulos Tesfagiorgis, an executive committee member of the group charged with drafting a constitution for the new democracy.

Chairperson of the Committee on Governmental Institutions and Human Rights and co-founder of the Regional Centre for Human Rights and Development, Tesfagiorgis visited South Africa recently as a guest of Idasa to observe the transformation process.

In the three years since Eritrea won its independence after a bitter conflict with Ethiopia, most civil servants and state employees have worked unpaid, except for a monthly allowance calculated according to their experience. For Tesfagiorgis, a prominent lawyer with about 20 years of work behind him, this amounts to 180 birr (about US \$30) a month to cover basic living expenses.

"We eat in cafeterias and many sleep in dormitories. That's how we manage on so little. We hope to begin getting salaries from next January.

"The spirit that prevailed during the liberation struggle is still there," says Tesfagiorgis. "People are very honest, straightforward and united in their commitment. We need these qualities to make our transition work, but how do we maintain them?"

Small signs of disquiet are emerging and citizens are starting to ask how long they will have to endure hardships in order to rebuild the country. As money begins to flow into the country from those who fled the fighting and made good in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, patriots who stayed to fight the struggle are starting to ask when they will get some relief from poverty.

"When people look around they see that there are some who are starting to get money and differences are emerging, although it's

nothing like the extremes I've seen between people in Eritrea are that some live in their own houses.

"We also have government ministers who live in their own houses where before they lived in tents alongside their comrades from the struggle. This is coming up more and more, and if we don't do it we could undermine everything we achieved.

For the time being, however, the government is motivated the Eritrean liberation struggle. They are poor, they are willing to share. They can walk through the streets of the townships without fear of attack.

"Women comprised one third of the liberation struggle. They have earned recognition and we must understand and respect that. Also, for the poor people, it's a lot easier to maintain their dignity.

Asked his impressions of the squatter townships, Tesfagiorgis identifies human dignity as the key. "I've seen poverty. I don't come from a place of depressing driving through Cape Town. In the midst of plenty there is such a sense of dignity. So much don't seem to be aware of their own dignity. They don't regard it as their own problem. They don't care about them.

"The conditions in the townships are degrading human dignity. Something is taken away from them. Human dignity, what do you care about your own dignity, what do you care about your own dignity? You destroy your own communities by not caring about them. I've seen here is very frightening. It's a very sad country."

Back home, Tesfagiorgis is responsible for consulting and educating as many people as possible on the proposed constitution.

"It would be easy for four or five good constitutions for our country, but the one that would be respected, implemented and lived by our citizens?

