

THE BRIEF

MARCH 2026



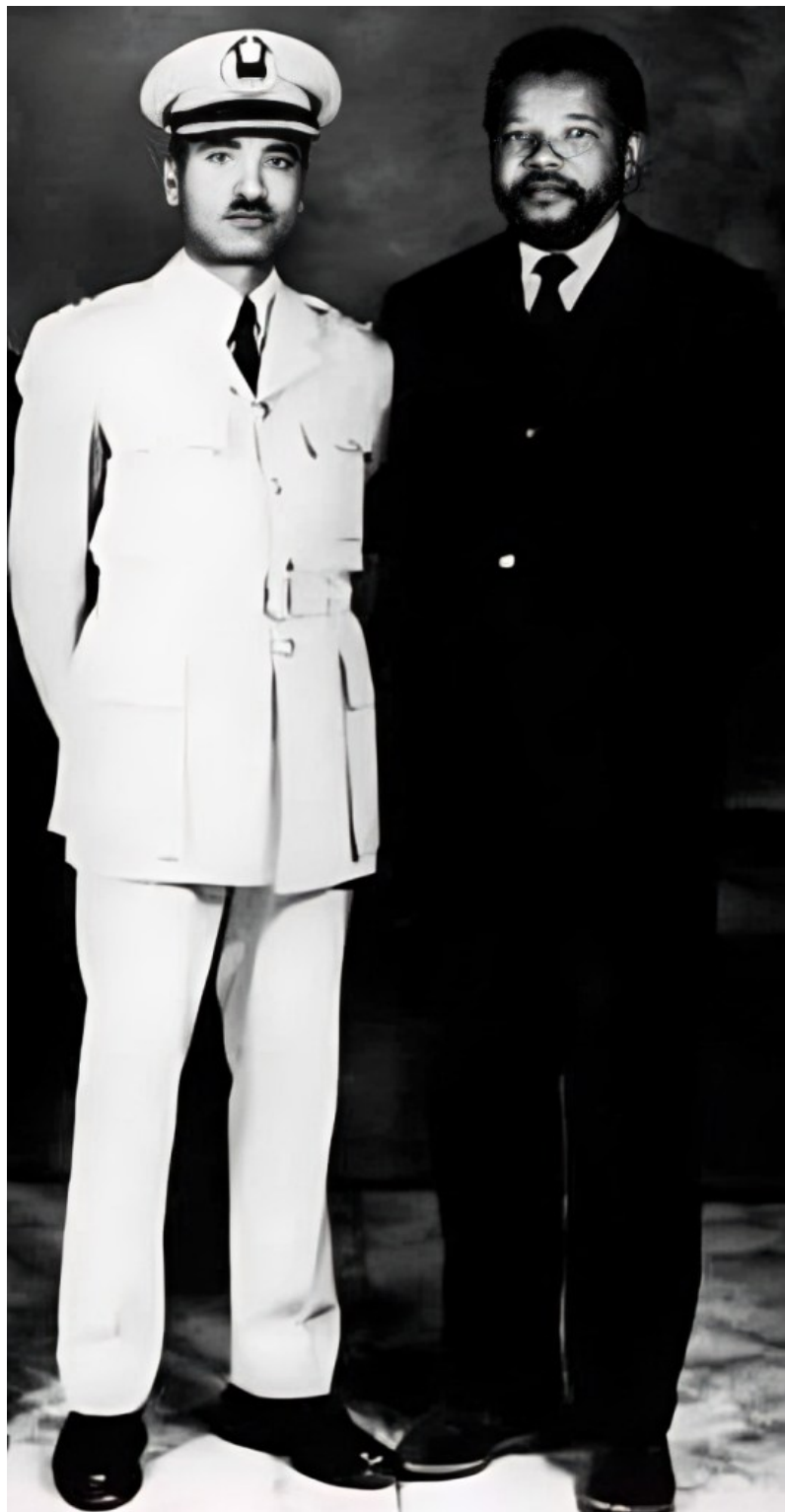
INSIDE THE 2026
AFRICAN UNION
SUMMIT



A MONTHLY
MAGAZINE

ETHIOPIAN EMBASSY
LONDON

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PHOTO: 39th African Union Summit on sustainable water and sanitation, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Water, Unity and Leadership

INSIDE THE 2026 AFRICAN UNION SUMMIT

Addis Ababa once again took the spotlight on the continental and global stage by hosting the 39th African Union Summit, themed Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063. For five days, the city welcomed Heads of State, Government officials, and international dignitaries, including United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy, who participated in the parallel Italy–Africa Summit.

Dr. Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, opened the summit by highlighting the dual role of African leadership and unity in shaping the

continent’s future. He urged leaders to shift from reacting to global events to actively shaping the world agenda, emphasizing that sovereignty includes owning Africa’s narrative and technological future. Ethiopia’s investments in innovation, including the continent’s first Artificial Intelligence Institute and plans for an AI university, exemplify this commitment. “Every river we manage, every city we design, and



every digital platform we deploy must generate resilient opportunity and dignity. By 2063, Africa will be defined by what we secure, what we sustain, and what we share,” Prime Minister Abiy declared.

Water and sanitation took center stage at the Summit, marking a historic first for the AU’s annual gathering. The agenda underscored water as a collective good essential for development, peace, and prosperity. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, framed the discussions around Africa’s urgent need for sustainable water management. He emphasized that the theme reflects the strategic importance of water and sanitation for human security and social stability, calling on Member States to accelerate infrastructure investments and transboundary cooperation.

Secretary-General António Guterres reinforced this message, noting the critical intersection of water security, peace, and development. He praised Africa’s growing influence in global affairs and emphasized the need for multilateral cooperation and equitable access to financing. “Africa’s role in shaping international decisions is more important than ever,” he remarked, highlighting the continent’s potential to lead on sustainable development and industrialization.

Hosting the summit provided Ethiopia and Addis Ababa an opportunity to demonstrate logistical and diplomatic excellence. Delegates marvelled at the transformation of the city, particularly

the City Corridor Development Initiative, which streamlined traffic and urban access, and the Riverside Renewal Project, which converted degraded waterways into vibrant, walkable public spaces with clean waters and communal areas. The newly built Addis International Convention Center and modern hotels ensured attendees experienced top-tier services. Coordination among security institutions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ensured the summit proceeded successfully, reinforcing Ethiopia’s reputation as a capable host for large-scale international conferences.

The Summit concluded with the election of Évariste Ndayishimiye, President of the Republic of Burundi, as Chairperson of the African Union, and a renewed emphasis on unity, financial self-reliance, and measurable progress toward Agenda 2063. Leaders pledged to prioritize continental cooperation on water and sanitation while addressing peace, security, and climate resilience.

The 39th AU Summit demonstrated that Africa could chart its course with cohesion and determination, while Ethiopia, besides playing leadership role in shaping Africa’s destiny, showcased its ability to host landmark events with precision, security, and world-class infrastructure. Addis Ababa stood not just as a venue but as a symbol of Africa’s collective vision, where water, unity, and leadership converge to define the continent’s path forward. ■



By 2063, Africa will be defined by what we secure, what we sustain, and what we share,” Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed

A CUP OF COFFEE, A FOREST, AND THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL TRADE PERFORMANCE

*Ethiopia champions sustainable
coffee and inclusive supply chains*



BY H.E. AMBASSADOR BIRUK MEKONNEN

Early in the Ethiopian highlands, dawn paints the coffee fields in gold. Farmers tend their Arabica trees with care handed down through generations, balancing productivity with the forests that surround them. Every cup of coffee enjoyed abroad carries their labour, knowledge, and commitment to the land. It is a vivid reminder that global trade is not abstract. It is about livelihoods, culture, and ecosystems, and the choices we make in one corner of the world ripple across the planet.

In London this February, I had the privilege of participating in a roundtable on UK Forest Risk Commodity Supply Chains hosted by ODI Global and Transform Trade. Around the table were government officials, retailers, researchers, civil society, and producer representatives. The discussion was not simply about regulations. It was about shaping frameworks that preserve forests while enabling millions of farmers to participate in global markets. The stakes are high. Poorly

designed compliance systems risk undermining livelihoods, while well-crafted, inclusive solutions can strengthen both trade and sustainability.

Ethiopia is the birthplace of Arabica coffee. The sector supports over 15 million people, most of them smallholder farmers, and is one of the country's main sources of foreign exchange. Yet, coffee production in Ethiopia has a minimal impact on deforestation. Our farmers have long managed their land in harmony with forests. Through initiatives such as the Climate-Resilient Green Economy strategy and the Green Legacy Initiative, which has planted billions of trees, we show that economic growth and environmental protection can reinforce each other. These efforts are tangible every day in communities that depend on their forests and farms for survival.

Traceability is a central pillar of modern commodity regulations, but it presents practical challenges. Smallholder farmers often lack the technical capacity to meet complex reporting



requirements. Even simple data collection and record-keeping can be difficult in remote areas, especially when rainfall patterns shift and coffee-growing altitudes change due to climate variability. Our Digital 2030 strategy is hoped to transform monitoring and reporting, offering farmers tools to document their practices and connect to markets, while ensuring our data sovereignty. But technology alone is not enough. Technical assistance, training, and targeted investment are essential to ensure that smallholders are not left behind. Implementation must be collaborative, demand-driven, and adapted to local realities.

Well-designed regulatory frameworks can be a force for inclusive development. Harmonized standards and predictable systems allow producers and buyers to plan, invest, and comply with confidence. Knowledge sharing, financial support, and capacity building create opportunities for smallholders and small and medium-sized enterprises to participate fully in zero-deforestation supply chains. Without such measures, sustainability risks being reduced to an abstract goal, while the farmers who embody it face exclusion.

Ethiopia is committed to co-designing solutions with international partners. Collaboration, transparency, and sustained engagement are essential to create supply chains that are environmentally responsible and economically inclusive. The cup of coffee enjoyed in London should support, not displace, the farmer in the Ethiopian highlands. This vision embodies the principle that climate ambition and development ambition should advance together, not in opposition.

The opportunity before us is profound. By aligning trade, technology, and environmental stewardship, we can create global commodity markets that sustain forests, empower producers, and preserve the integrity of trade for generations to come. Ethiopia is ready to share its experience, provide practical guidance on traceability, and work hand in hand with stakeholders to ensure that sustainability is inclusive, resilient, and enduring. This is the future of global trade, and the time to act is now. ■

This article was authored by His Excellency Biruk Mekonnen, Ambassador of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia to the United Kingdom of Great Britain.



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A Nation Builds Its Own Safety Net

In July 2025, Ethiopia enacted a law that could quietly reshape how nations finance resilience in an era of climate volatility and shifting priorities in geopolitics. Proclamation No. 1386/2025 established a nationwide disaster risk management system and, more significantly, created a permanent Disaster Risk Response Fund financed largely from domestic sources.

At a time when global humanitarian financing is tightening and major donor countries are recalibrating foreign aid priorities, Ethiopia has chosen to construct its own financial buffer against crisis.

The legislation, entered into force on July 28, 2025, does more than reorganize emergency response. It restructures how the country prepares for risk. It creates an autonomous Disaster Risk Management Commission accountable to the Prime Minister, formalizes early warning systems, institutionalizes strategic food and non-food reserves, and introduces a national disaster threshold mechanism that determines when local, regional, or federal intervention is triggered.

But the centerpiece of the reform is the Fund itself.

Rather than relying primarily on ad hoc appeals or external assistance in the aftermath of disaster strikes, the law embeds small, distributed contributions across the domestic economy. A one percent contribution is collected from bank loans and insurance premiums. Five percent of digital banking fees and telecom airtime purchases is directed to the Fund. Fuel carries a one birr per liter contribution. Domestic airline tickets include a fixed surcharge. Passports, visas, business licenses, and document authentications contribute modest amounts. Tobacco and alcohol sales carry a five percent levy. Even government budgets allocate a quarter percent annually.

No single stream is overwhelming. Collectively, they form a permanent national reserve. The design reduces fiscal concentration risk by distributing contributions across con-

A woman wearing a dark headscarf and a patterned shawl is harvesting a large pile of bright orange and yellow flowers in a field. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows tall green plants under a clear blue sky.

A Smallholder Farmer in Ethiopia

sumption, financial activity, and public services, ensuring continuity even if one sector slows.

For ordinary citizens, the fund creates an opportunity to contribute in the nation's endeavour of disaster risk management without imposing unnecessary burden and through marginal contributions in the form of service costs. For the state, they create something more significant — a predictable financing architecture for disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

This model reflects a broader philosophy of shared responsibility and ownership. The law explicitly frames disaster risk management not as episodic emergency relief, but as an integrated system spanning prevention, mitigation, response, rehabilitation, and resilience building. It links humanitarian action with long-term development and peace-building strategies.

In doing so, Ethiopia is aligning its domestic institutions with global best practices in risk governance, while funding them in a distinctly national way.

The decision carries geopolitical weight. Traditional humanitarian donors face fiscal pressures and shifting strategic priorities. Climate-related disasters are increasing in frequency and severity worldwide. Aid budgets are being redirected or constrained. Development partners such as the United Kingdom, for example, have signalled a policy evolution toward partnerships and investment frameworks in Africa rather than open-ended aid flows. Other donor governments are reassessing overseas commitments amid domestic economic challenges.

Against this backdrop, Ethiopia's move sends a clear message. Disaster resilience is not solely a matter of external support. It is an element of sovereign state capacity.

The approach echoes an earlier national mobilization effort — the financing of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which relied heavily on domestic bond purchases and citizen contributions. In both cases, the underlying principle is similar: broad-based internal participation in projects framed as national priorities.

The Disaster Risk Response Fund differs in purpose but not in philosophy. It institutionalizes collective contribution as a mechanism of resilience. It embeds preparedness into economic activity rather than treating disasters as exceptional interruptions.

The reform also addresses a structural weakness common in many developing countries — the volatility of humanitarian financing. When droughts, floods, epidemics, or conflict-related displacement occur, response often depends on external pledging cycles. Delays can compound human and economic losses. A standing fund reduces that lag. In practical terms, this means that when drought conditions intensify or flash floods displace communities, the government can release pre-positioned funds and supplies immediately, rather than waiting for pledging conferences or emergency appropriations.

Ethiopia is among the first countries in the region to legislate such a diversified, cross-sector disaster financing model at this scale. By spreading the fiscal base widely, the law reduces pressure on any single sector while ensuring continuity of funding.

The broader significance lies in the signal it sends internationally. Ethiopia is positioning itself not simply as a recipient of assistance during crisis, but as a state constructing its own institutional buffers in anticipation of risk. It reflects a recalibration of the development relationship, one that emphasizes institutional partnership, shared risk management, and domestic

fiscal responsibility.

For international investors and partners, the message is also one of governance reform. The establishment of a structured Commission, defined accountability lines, disaster thresholds, early warning systems, and regulated humanitarian coordination reflects an effort to standardize and professionalize disaster management.

Resilience is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of economic stability. Infrastructure, agriculture, urban growth, and social protection systems all depend on the capacity to absorb shocks. A domestically financed disaster fund strengthens that foundation.

In a world of climate volatility and shifting geopolitical alignments, Ethiopia has chosen to build a permanent safety net financed largely by its own economy. As the Grand Renaissance Dam has demonstrated the effectiveness of domestic resource mobilization in building large-scale infrastructure, the Disaster Risk Response Fund could serve as a reference for how emerging economies can institutionalize resilience, not as emergency reaction, but as a permanent state capacity. ■



ADWA

Africa's Defiant Victory and Its Enduring Legacy. How unity, strategy, and courage turned the tide of history—and why it still matters today.

In the crisp, wind-swept hills of northern Ethiopia, late February 1896, tens of thousands of warriors stood shoulder to shoulder, defending their homeland against a foreign army that believed victory was inevitable. The Italian expedition, armed with modern rifles and bolstered by colonial troops, expected little resistance from what they assumed was a “backward” African state. They were wrong. At Adwa, a carefully united, coordinated and strategically prepared Ethiopian force delivered a stunning defeat, shattering assumptions about Africa's place in the world. This was more than a military victory—it was a declaration that African unity, foresight, and courage could overturn the dictates of empire and reshape the course of history.

A VICTORY ETCHED IN ETHIOPIAN IDENTITY

For Ethiopians, Adwa is far more than a historical footnote. It is a defining moment of national pride, a cornerstone of identity, and a symbol of a people who refused to surrender their independence. It is celebrated annually with ceremonies, educational initiatives, and civic commemorations. Modern Ethiopia has established a memorial museum in Addis Ababa, the Adwa Museum, to honour those who fought, ensuring that generations understand both the bravery of the past and the stakes of sovereignty.





Pictorial Representation of the Battle of Adwa in Traditional Ethiopian Artistic Style

Visiting foreign dignitaries lay wreaths at the site, reinforcing Ethiopia's historical leadership in asserting African agency on the global stage.

ANATOMY OF A TRIUMPH

Ethiopia's success was no accident. It was forged through meticulous planning, disciplined leadership, and broad-based mobilization. Unity across ethnic, regional, and religious lines was paramount: the leaders rallied warriors, peasants, and local chieftaincies alike to defend their homeland. Strategic diplomacy amplified Ethiopia's advantages, allowing emissaries to secure modern weaponry from European allies. Logistics—feeding and arming tens of thousands of soldiers and their animals—were coordinated with precision. Even internal religious divisions were managed thoughtfully, ensuring that no schism undermined national cohesion. In short, the victory was a product of preparation, foresight, and an understanding that independence required collective action.

CONFRONTING THE FORCES OF EMPIRE

Ethiopia faced not only Italian military might but also the broader geopolitical realities of the Scramble for Africa. European powers divided the continent with little regard for indigenous states, bolstered by racialized ideologies that assumed African subservience. The Italians relied on colonial askaris and sophisticated weaponry, presenting a formidable challenge. Against this backdrop, Ethiopia's triumph was extraordinary: it was a victory over modern military power, racial prejudice, and the global assumptions of European dominance.

LESSONS FOR A MODERN CONTINENT

The legacy of Adwa resonates far beyond the battlefield. It demonstrates the transformative power of unity, preparation,

and strategic foresight—qualities equally vital for contemporary African development. Today, these principles manifest in Ethiopia's infrastructure and energy projects, most notably the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, as well as broader continental initiatives in governance, trade, and regional cooperation. Adwa teaches that Africans are not passive spectators of history but active shapers of their destiny, and that collective action and self-belief remain indispensable for addressing modern challenges.

COMMEMORATING AFRICAN AGENCY

Each year, Ethiopians and Africans commemorate Adwa not just as a historical event but as an enduring symbol of African agency. The celebrations foster education, civic pride, and a sense of continuity, connecting generations to a legacy of courage, unity, and the unwavering defence of sovereignty—values that continue to guide contemporary achievements in development, self-determination, and regional cooperation. Adwa is a reminder that triumph requires more than courage; it requires foresight, unity, and the conviction to act together for a common purpose.

ADWA TODAY: A LIVING LEGACY

As Ethiopia celebrates the 130th anniversary of Adwa this week, it is a reminder that victory is not confined to the past. Modern "Adwas"—projects in energy, education, and infrastructure, and above all, efforts to build a strong and resilient nation—demonstrate how the spirit of unity and strategic vision continues to shape the country. For Africans everywhere, Adwa offers a blueprint: cherish history, mobilize communities, and pursue sovereignty in all its forms. It is a call to action, a celebration of achievement, and a reminder that Africa's destiny is determined by Africans themselves. ■



Nelson Mandela Undergoing Military Sand Table Training in Ethiopia, 1962.

YOUNG NELSON MANDELA IN ETHIOPIA

Addis Ababa has long held a central place in the story of Africa's liberation movements. In 1962, a young Nelson Mandela travelled to Ethiopia, seeking not only support for the fledgling armed wing of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe, but also a deeper understanding of the continent he sought to serve. His journey, undertaken under the name David Motsamayi and facilitated by an Ethiopian passport, would place him at the heart of early Pan-African organizing and leave an enduring mark on Ethiopia itself.

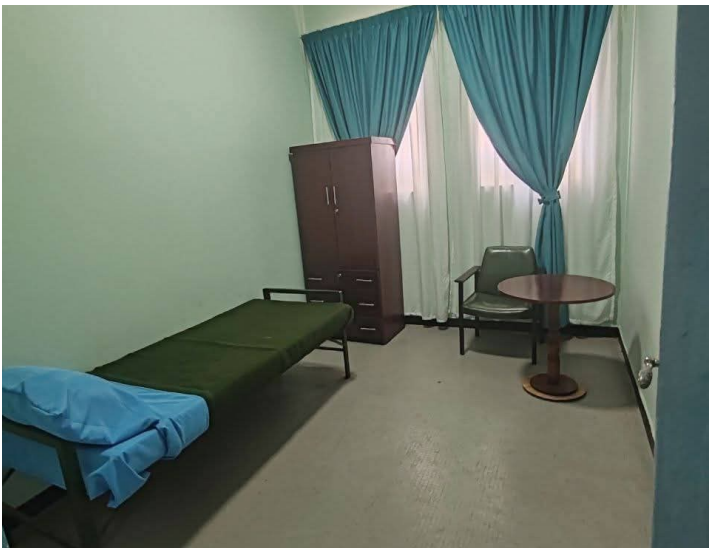
Mandela's first stop was the Pan-African Freedom Movement for East, Central and Southern Africa conference in Bishoftu (formerly Debre

Zeit), Ethiopia. The gathering, a precursor to what would later become the Organisation of African Unity and today the African Union, brought together freedom fighters and political leaders from across the continent. Mandela recalled the moment in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* writing, "Ethiopia has always held a special place in my own imagination and the prospect of visiting attracted me more strongly than a trip to France, England, and America combined. I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African."

At Bishoftu, Mandela observed the solemnity and dignity with which Emperor Haile Selassie carried out the formalities of his office, wit-



Nelson Mandela Museum Inauguration



The Bedroom of Nelson Mandela



*Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo
Addis Ababa Ethiopia 1962*

nessing black soldiers commanded by black generals, applauded by black leaders. “It was the first time I had witnessed a head of state who was himself African,” he reflected. Beyond the ceremony, the conference offered Mandela the opportunity to address continental leaders directly, to articulate the challenges in South Africa, and to build support for the struggle against apartheid.

Following the conference, Mandela later returned briefly to Ethiopia for military instruction at the Kolfe Federal Police Training Center (formerly the Ethiopian Riot Battalion) under General Tadesse Birru, Colonel Fekadu Wakene, and Major Wondemu Befekadu, who had experience fighting during the second Italian invasion. While the training was rigorous, it was framed by the ethos of equality and respect.

The young activist left Ethiopia for further travels across Africa and eventually returned to South Africa, where he was arrested in 1962. Yet the time he spent in Ethiopia, and the hospitality extended by its leaders, would remain central to his understanding of Pan-African solidarity. Ethiopia’s support was not limited to Mandela alone. The country had long been a symbol of African resistance to colonialism, having preserved its independence despite multiple invasion attempts, and it continued to shape continental cooperation through the OAU and its successor, the African Union.

More than fifty years later, the site of Mandela’s training has been transformed into the Nelson Mandela Memorial Museum. Speaking at the inauguration, Federal Police Commissioner General Demelash Gebremichael remarked, “Ethiopia, by supporting Mandela, showed its commitment for the liberation of Africa from apartheid and from colonialism in general.” The museum recounts not only Mandela’s presence in Addis Ababa, but also the dedication of Ethiopian personnel such as Major Guta Dinka, whose vigilance ensured Mandela’s safety from threats emanating from apartheid agents. ►



Nelson Mandela (far right) at the Pan-African Freedom Movement for East, Central and Southern Africa conference in Ethiopia with colleagues and Emperor Haile Selassie I (center).

The museum also serves as a reminder of Ethiopia's broader commitment to peace on the continent. From its historical role in anti-colonial movements to its ongoing participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions, the country has sought to translate the ethos of solidarity Mandela experienced into concrete action for African stability and cooperation. General Demelash emphasized that the museum is intended to pass the story to younger generations and strengthen "fraternity and cooperation among Africans," reinforcing Ethiopia's historic contribution to continental independence.

Echoing this sentiment, South Africa's Ambassador to Ethiopia, Nonceba Losi, remarked, "In Ethiopia, Mandela felt like a free man for the first time, experiencing a freedom shaped by the spirit of a sovereign nation. The museum commemorates this experience and stands as a testament not only to Mandela, but to the en-

during friendship and shared struggle between our nations, reminding future generations that solidarity can change the course of history."

Nelson Mandela returned to Ethiopia decades later in 1990 to address the OAU in Addis Ababa, reflecting on the continuity of Africa's efforts to overcome division and oppression. The museum, and the story it preserves, situates Ethiopia as more than a backdrop to Mandela's journey. It depicts a nation whose role in the liberation of Africa and in fostering continental unity remains tangible and instructive, bridging the aspirations of past generations with the ongoing work of African solidarity.

In remembering Mandela's time in Ethiopia, the museum celebrates a shared history, highlighting how collaboration, foresight, and a commitment to justice can leave a legacy that continues to inform the path of the continent today. ■

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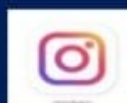
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