

Profile Q & A: United Nations Day with UNRC, Nahla Valji



□ Interview conducted by: Sabrina Solomon

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United Nations Day 2024 was commemorated in Eritrea on Thursday, October 24th, at Hotel Asmara Palace. The celebration featured speeches by Foreign Minister Osman Saleh and UN Resident Coordinator Nahla Valji and a video message from UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Government officials, diplomats, and UN agency heads attended the event. Ms. Valji shared her perspective on the UN's role and the significance of celebrating UN Day with Eritrea.

- **Can you describe the current scope of UN operations in Eritrea?**

Absolutely. First, I want to say that it's been almost a year since I came to Eritrea, and it has been incredible. This country is beautiful and has been amazingly welcoming. It has been a great 10 months here. In terms of the scope of the UN's work here, firstly, the role of the United Nations in Eritrea, and in any country, is to accompany the country in line with their priorities to achieve sustainable development. And so, in this country, you'll see that we have a cooperation framework that outlines our partnership with the Government, and it reflects the Government's priorities for achieving development and leaving no one behind. And so, the scope of our foundation reflects those priorities and includes everything from social protection, health, education, food security, and, of course, a major priority here, water access. These are all the areas that the Government

has prioritized, and as the UN, we come together across a number of agencies; both in and out of the country. And so, the entire UN system is here to support Eritrea as it achieves its goals.

- **In your view, what opportunities exist to enhance the UN's impact in the country?**

I think that we can accelerate our impact in our partnership by, as I said, looking across the United Nations and seeing the expertise, the capacities, and the partnership that we can bring to Eritrea. In the past 6 months, we have had two senior leaders visit Eritrea, our climate crisis coordinator, since climate is both a priority in this country and an area where Eritrea is a model for other countries – and I would say it is important for us as the UN to accompany this country in telling a more balanced and holistic story about what is happening here.

We also had the Executive Secretary, the Head of the UN Economic Commission for Africa come here. What we are trying to do through these visits is firstly to give visibility to the fantastic work that's happening in the country and secondly to make sure that the entire system is thinking about what we can bring to line up behind the priorities here.

As an example, one of the things we did recently was that we sat as the UN team here in country, all of the Heads of Agencies, with the Minister of Agriculture. And it was a fantastic opportunity to hear from the Minister and his senior leadership about the vision for this country and food security; how far this country has already come in just the past 3 decades, and what is the vision for the future. And then how we can holistically bring together the work that needs to happen on infrastructure, energy, water, and agriculture behind this partnership to support that vision for food security going forward.

- **How is the UN working towards the Sustainable Development Goals in Eritrea?**

We are working in a way that comes together at the community level to achieve the SDGs as a whole. As one example, when the UN's Climate Crisis Coordinator was here, the Minister of Land, Water, and Environment took us to visit with some

communities, where we had the opportunity to see reforestation, solar-powered irrigation, crop rotation and clean cook stoves in houses. It was really heartening to hear from the Government and communities 'UNICEF supported us on the water piece, UNDP have been supporting us here on reforestation, FAO on seeds etc'. How we work is behind the Government's priorities and the community's initiative to bring together the pieces behind that in a comprehensive way that moves forward on the sustainable development goals.

- **How do you envision the UN's role in Eritrea evolving over the next five years, and what are the critical priorities for ensuring the UN's continued effectiveness in supporting the country's development?**

So, as mentioned, I think that we need to take stock across the United Nations. We have incredible expertise from industrialization to food and agriculture to specific expertise on financial systems; there's so much in the system that we can bring here, and that will be one of the areas we're looking to strengthen. In terms of key priority areas, as mentioned, climate is a priority for Eritrea. There's so much happening here regarding resilience, adaptation and response, and access to climate finance. As the Secretary General of the United Nations continues to say, these countries are paying the most significant price but are not the ones who have caused the problem. And we need to ensure that there's global solidarity and global investment behind the efforts of these countries on climate resilience and adaptation. So that's certainly one area of priority.

Another area, as mentioned, is to help to tell the story of this country. And it has been a priority for us to bring more senior leaders here because everyone who comes to this country says that what they see is not what they expected, that 'this is not the story of Eritrea that we were told'. And when they visit the communities and see the integrated response and see the model that we have in this country for so many things, like the high levels of vaccine rates, the reforestation at the community level, the solarpowered irrigation, the dams that are extraordinary to see across this country, these are not stories that are told outside of the country. I think as the UN, we are your United Nations. We are made up of every country in the world, and we want to ensure that Eritrea's voice and influence are being reflected at the global level as well.

- **What does UN Day mean to you personally and for the work of the UN in Eritrea?**

I think UN Day is incredibly significant. This is an institution I have believed in and worked towards, even before I formally joined the UN, my entire life. I have worked on issues of international development, peace, and security. There's an old saying that if the United Nations didn't exist today, we would have to invent it. And I think that's never been truer than it is at this moment. We face global challenges, such as the existential threat of a climate emergency. We have growing numbers of conflict, inequality, and lack of trust in essential institutions, which require a global response. Individual countries or individual communities can do none of these. And so, really, the UN is everybody's institution. Again, for me personally, if it didn't exist, we would have to invent it. There are, of course, challenges. The UN comprises 193 Member States. Cooperation, collaboration, and dialogue need to happen, but it is our space. And I think today is a significant day. We have national days, but today is everybody's day. Now more than ever, I believe that in Eritrea, bringing the Sustainable Development Goals to fruition, which constitute our global growth map for achieving sustainable development in every country around the world, is so important.



- **What has been your most significant experience since arriving in Eritrea? How have you adapted to Eritrea's cultural and social landscape during your time here?**

I would say that my most significant experience was visiting the communities and hearing from Eritreans about their community development goals and what they

are taking forward. That has been an incredible opportunity. Accompanying government officials to New York to present their Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals, seeing the country showcase what has been achieved, hearing where they want to take things in the future, and being there with the Government as a partner was a significant experience. And, of course, meeting with President Isaias when the Head of the Economic Commission for Africa was here and hearing his vision for this country, for the institutions globally and regionally, was an extraordinary experience. In terms of the social and cultural aspects of Eritrea, I would say, on the one hand, I don't think it has been a substantial acclimatizing challenge. This country is so warm and welcoming and has been wonderful to experience. My family is originally from this continent, from East Africa, and I have spent more than a decade working in South Africa. Of course, there are so many cultures and experiences across this continent. Still, I find one thing that feels very familiar: the real sense of community and solidarity and caring for each other. I think the value of global solidarity, taking care of each other, is needed more now than ever. And it certainly is very alive here in Eritrea. The last thing I would say about the social and cultural aspect here is that it's been incredible to experience a country with pride in its diversity and unity.

- **What message would you like to convey to the people of Eritrea on this significant day?**

Thank you again for inviting me to be here and have this conversation with you. My core message would be that the UN is your body. This is a global body made up of every country in the world. It is meant to represent the world. And it only works if it can represent everybody's voices. The UN will be 8 decades old next year. It was born at a time when the world was coming out of a massive global conflict. In September last month, we launched the Summit of the Future in New York, presided by the Secretary-General. Reforms are being contemplated to make the UNSC more representative, to reform our international financial institutions, to provide further attention and focus on climate, as we said, and to ensure global peace and security that every person in every country cherishes. So those reforms need to happen, but everybody needs to reform them. This needs to be the UN that everybody feels is their global body. And so, I would just say to

Eritreans, Happy UN Day. Hold us accountable because we are your body and do that by participating and make your voice heard.

- **Thank you.**