The children's place is the home and second home is the school. It is the prophecy in some sacred books "child is the incarnation of God" and such child should not be put to work at such age. It is the age of learning and not earning. This paper is concerning child labour in Eritrea which highlights a few causes of child labour and an attempt is made to highlight certain issues with their remedies which would be a beginning or first step to stir up issues involved regarding such evil.

In Eritrea generally those persons who are under the age of 18 years are divided into two categories. Under the first category fall those who are under the age of 14 and under the second category fall those who are between the ages of 14 to 18 years. The first category is generally what we call children and according to Proclamation No. 8/91 (an amended Labour Code under Eritrean Labour Proclamation No. 118/2001 has been enacted on 15-11-2001 repealing Labour Proclamation No. 8/1991), the employment of these children is prohibited. The second category is called the "young persons" who according to the proclamation can be engaged in light works that are not dangerous to their health.

There are many causes of child labour â€“ problems like poverty (root cause of child labour), a big family, drop out of school, social attitude, structure of labour market, divorce etc. In divorce, the children deprived of parental love and affection which affects them morally, leave their home and quit school and try to earn themselves. Such child can be abused as well as harassed by the employer either in the formal sector or the informal sector. When we speak of culture, we see especially in rural areas, a boy of six or seven years is herding cattle and in case of a girl, she is a maid for her family or she may be employed in houses for doing domestic work. In the capital of Eritrea, in most places it is observed that the boys are engaged in boot/shoe polishing and girl children are working in bars and hotels. Is it the age of earning, when they are supposed to be in the process of learning. Death of the parents where there is no one to take care of them and they will be forced to work for their livelihood. In case of deportees who were sent out from Ethiopia to Eritrea, they are also forced or opt to work irrespective of their age. The fathers who became martyrs because of earlier or recent war and their children to undergo child labour. In a family where suitable age group children are undergoing conscription (draft) and when there is a big family, for bread and butter also children are employed to earn money.

As it is obviously known, most of the Eritrean families are living off food aid. There are 80% of the Eritrean people engaged in agricultural activities as their means of livelihood. In spite of this, they could not meet the food requirements of their nation. Annually hundreds of thousand of metric tons is either donated or imported, which clearly shows the food shortage. These families, especially parents, instead of engaging themselves in whatever kind of job, let their children work in an unpleasant work atmosphere and as a result shoulder the responsibility of family maintenance and care. Moreover, recent war with the neighbouring country made the situation in such a way that the families are disturbed and in some families their breadwinner being no more, such situation also made them work for their livelihood.

Another aspect is, the family is not financially in need but only is in pursuit of more money to live luxuriously or lavishly, in such case the child is ordered by his family members to be engaged in certain kind of work. As a result the child's education inclination would decline. The vested interest of the child also as he/she gets her/his share in their income, can be utilized, lavishly for their own sake. One more aspect under this category is that, families do send their children to certain technical undertakings such as mechanical work or skilled works thinking that they will achieve certain technical knowledge, and the owner of the undertaking will take advantage of this apprenticeship (some changes may be brought under the new labour code) opportunity and will abuse the child. High adult unemployment can impede production thereby creating the worst forms of child labour. The prone areas where a child can be exploited are as domestic workers, self-employed younger persons and in family undertakings. In many sectors of the labour market, children are more and more in demand than adults for the fact that the former can be paid less wages than the latter even for the same kind of work. The reasons can be inter alia, that child workers can hardly form labour unions and that their work is outlawed in labour legislation. In domestic work, the masters prefer young girls rather than adult women so that they could sexually exploit them. In observation it is almost found that none among the child labourers bought even decent clothing let alone a decent living. Above all, men generally are greedy and employers are no exception. They only want their profit, no matter how it comes, they do not care about the child's welfare, well-being, education etc. Parents send their children to engage in hard labour, because families are very poor, they cannot stand any vulnerability they face. This vulnerability could be personal like death of the breadwinner, loss or death of a relative, social, like war, divorce, desertion, natural vulnerability like plague, HIV/AIDS, locust, hoocaust, drought/famine. Since all this should be the responsibility of parents at large and the State in a lesser degree, Eritrea as an emerging nation relies heavily on its manpower especially young men and children. That is why we should give emphasis on the welfare and well-being of the child, since it is really connected to the development of the nation. Education and health (hence the State has undertaken a middle-level hospital at Vilaggio, South-West Asmara, which is under construction at the cost of Nfa. 10 million. The hospital will give service to 50,000 inhabitants of the south and north-western parts of Asmara. It is in addition to the Heilibeth Hospital run by the State) should be given priority rather than occupation in rudimentary jobs. The children are in a position to stand on their feet and become productive citizens. Hence love, tenderness and
responsibility has to be shown towards them as the cruelty and injustice they encounter at tender age has adverse effects in later times.

The other forms of causes as to the incidence of child labour are wide-scale economic poverty and underdevelopment in the developing countries. Structural inequality to land, capital, technology, education, heath services, absence of social security mechanisms have increased the supply and demand for child labour. In certain parts of Eritrea, collecting water has increased the pressure on women and girls to obtain free water from more distant and often dirtier sources thereby creating an exploitative form of child labour. The water treatment plant at Adi Nifas is a good attempt the State has undertaken in the capital city of Eritrea. This will help to cope with the fast expanding size of Asmara and its water requirements. The city will be ensured of constant water supply for at least 10 years. But what about the situation in the lowland areas?

There should be an absolute restriction on sexual exploitation of children for personal gratification or for financial gain, night work, work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions, work concerned with trafficking and production of illicit drugs and other dangerous activities hazardous for child health. The alternatives to combating child labour include the effective legislation and its enforcement, poverty alleviation, social mobilization and awareness-raising, education and training. The Constitution of Eritrea under Article 22(3) says: Parents have the right and duty to bring up their children with due care and affection; and, in turn, children have the right and the duty to respect their parents and to sustain them in their old age. Transitional Civil Code of Eritrea: Parents who are the natural guardians or persons who are in charge of children have the duty to educate and to supervise them as per Article 2052(1)(2)(3). On 15-10-1999, Eritrea ratified the seven conventions and one among them is Convention No. 138 Minimum Age (1973) and undertook in accordance with Article 19, paragraph 5/d of the ILO Constitution faithfully to perform and carry out all the stipulations therein contained. However as to Convention No. 138, the minimum age in accordance with Articles 2(1) and (4) is taken to be 14 years. Furthermore the scope of this convention is applicable only to mining, quarrying, manufacturing, electricity, gas and water, sanitary services, transport, storage and communication sectors. Construction, plantation and other agricultural activities are excluded. In its best attempt the State has repealed the old Labour Code and in its place the new Labour Proclamation has emerged. It is a good sign of progress that the Government has amended the Labour Code produced in congruence with the seven core ILO conventions such as the right for organized and collective bargaining, abolition of forced labour, equal remuneration and others.

Through the ministries concerned, the State is launching its programme, to improve the existing farming practices and soil and water conservation activities; the involvement of child labour in village-level development works is closely taken into consideration. In such areas, adults performing the work eventually are paid for it. Either it is food for work or cash for work programme. The State is campaigning against child labour using traditional media and modern media to reach children, parents, employers and the community at large including teachers, spiritual leaders etc. Some more efforts ought to be taken by the State.

As the author said earlier, the second home is the school. The State has to pay greater attention to the educational system and hence many expatriates are employed for that endeavour. The State has even taken up the matter in a place like Senafe area where the school building, hospital and other structures are razed to the ground by Ethiopian soldiers. At present the schools and hospitals are functioning under temporary shelter.

Based on the above observations and discussion, one favouring the existence (permission) of child labour in certain sectors and the other opposing such permission seems unsolvable issues. Child labour is not only the issue in Eritrea; there are countries with more barbarous practices, even amputating the limbs for their own gain. The upkeep of children rests primarily upon parents, the society and last but not the least, on the State. Children of tender age should be given all the possible opportunities to be the next generation to lead this country into a prosperous economy. The national survey that is going to be undertaken by the ministry concerned should be done with earnest and at the earliest. The exclusion provision put while ratifying the minimum age convention to the mandatory provisions of the convention to some sectors such as construction, plantation and other agricultural activities is to be reconsidered. A mechanism should be provided to protect children who work in the informal sector where exploitative form of child labour is practised. The State should give due attention (of course, it conducted the First National Workshop on the Right of the Child, Asmara, Eritrea, 7-12-1994 and 8-12-1994 by the Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare) to the issues of child labour which is not yet in an advanced stage when we compare with other underdeveloping countries. The State has to take the awareness to the masses and show the evil effects of child labour and build efficient school system, mobilize the society to cultivate sensitivity towards the plight of child workers, exert strenuous efforts to alleviate the poverty of people by launching job opportunity schemes. Let the author remind once again that it is not only the responsibility of the State (by legislation and enforcement) but also of the parents/persons in charge, individuals and society. These children may become the backbone of the country. Today's children will be tomorrow's national pride. Hence, let their blossoming future not be nipped in the bud.