



After having enjoyed for many years one of the fastest GDP growth rates among world economies, Israel continued the economic recovery it began in 2003, after a two-year distinct slowdown in almost all economic activities. This trend continued in 2007, according to all economic parameters. In the years 2006-2007, Israel's gross domestic product (GDP) continued its rapid growth, reaching 5.1 percent in 2006, in spite of the Second Lebanon War, which caused a temporary loss of 0.7% of the GNP. The speedy recovery and the continuation of the rapid growth were again led by the business sector, which expanded by 6.4 percent, resulting in a USD 20,138 per capita GDP in 2006.

Now Israel is eyeing Africa and especially Ethiopia to do business with in various fields. Israel's Deputy Ambassador to Ethiopia Leo Vinovezky talked to *Capital's* Groum Abate about his country's involvement in various fields of cooperation. Excerpts

ONE MORE GOOD REASON

Capital: Can you tell me what kind of Israeli companies are operating in Ethiopia now and are you optimistic they will be fruitful?

Leo Vinovezky: We have small, medium and big companies. We have a very good contact with the Ministry of Industry (MoI) and Ministry of Trade (MoT). Yacob Yala, State Minister of Industry, has visited Israel in December and other ministers will visit Israel as well. Yes we are optimistic. I think nowadays, we have a very good reason to be optimistic about the

rising commercial relationship between Ethiopia and Israel. More and more people are willing to come to Ethiopia, not only for tourism but also for investment. President of the Ethiopian Chamber of Commerce and Sectoral Association, is also very close to our embassy as she is always trying to push and promote business between the two countries.

Capital: Are there specific companies that are trying to come to Ethiopia?

Vinovezky. According to my experience here, which is 10 months since I came from Brazil, the fields

are very diverse. We're talking about building, hotel construction, food factories, and agriculture, of course. We are talking about flowers, we are talking about even cooking oil, and so on. So, we are talking about so many things that can contribute to the development of agriculture in general and farmers in particular, but also to give employment to people. We have terrific and qualified people here in Ethiopia. This is something promising and we hope that we could find the commitment from the other side as well. We are getting all the signals from the Ethiopian part

to promote commerce between the two countries and that is part of our task here in Ethiopia.

Capital: What is your country's stand on the Grand Renaissance Dam controversy? You have been pointed out as one of the supporters and Egypt is blaming your country.

Vinovezky. Someone always needs to point at someone. But this project is a very important project for the region-including both Ethiopia and Egypt.

Ethiopia is a true friend. We



shouldn't forget that we have a strategic peace agreement as well. This is something that should be finalized between the parties in the Nile basin. Of course what we wish is a good negotiation because they have decided it is very important to keep the region calm. We have a great deal of cooperation with Egypt in many fields. We have a true friendship with Ethiopia and as well a great deal of cooperation. We also share values with Ethiopia as well. So Israel is in the Middle East but not in the middle of this issue.

Capital: Besides promoting investment in the two countries, what have you done in terms of developmental projects?

Vinovezky. We are contributing more than USD 1 million in Ethiopia to develop the agriculture through capacity building in the agriculture sector, by bringing our own experts, by sending more than 40 or 50 Ethiopians every year to Israel for training there. Don't forget that we are a small country. This contribution is multiplying itself since we are doing special capacity building and bringing people to Israel to train. Now I am happy to announce to you the launching of a program in the coming two months. We are sending 30 students of Agriculture to Israel to get training in Israel for eight or nine months. We started it as a pilot project in Rwanda with 100 students of Agriculture. Now it is a pilot project in Ethiopia by sending 30 students of agriculture from all over the country at the first stage. When they come back to Ethiopia, they would come being different after witnessing firsthand what is going on in their field of agriculture. So, it is a kind of silent revolution. We are picking the best 30 agriculture students of Ethiopia, take them for a tremendous training in Israel for eight months dealing with new technologies, dealing with new planning and then come back to Ethiopia. They can be agents of changes here in Ethiopia when it comes to agriculture.

Capital: But you haven't helped transform Ethiopian farmers or the agriculture sector, and yet you are one of the best countries in agriculture. Besides this pilot project for training agriculture students in Israel, what other plans do you have to boost the agriculture sector here?

Vinovezky. After this experience in Israel, our expectation is that we would establish not only agricultural laboratories but also centers of excellence. After they witness new technologies including computer session of irrigation, fertigation [fertilization and irrigation], and new developments in laboratories, which is something huge. I am not talking about one lecture. I am talking about eight or nine months of full training in Israel. Now in September we are launching together with the German cooperation and the Ministry of Agriculture a project in the Afar



region. According to the experience we had in Arava, Southern Israel, on an area with more or less similar characteristics of Afar, has shown us that if it is done in Israel, we can also do it here in Ethiopia.

Capital: What about the Ethiopian Jews? You have announced that this is the last time that you are going to move out the Ethiopian Jews.

Vinovezky. Neither the embassy nor I are doing this. But what I can tell you is that the Ethiopian Jewish Community visited Gondar a couple of days ago. The Ethiopians in Israel are doing well. When I talk to Ethiopian officials here, we know that this is a terrific bridge between the two countries. Even when you talk to some officials and ministers, they talk about the beauty of the Jewish community. By the way we have Miss Israel, she is an Ethiopian. The fact that the Ethiopian Jewish Community exists in Israel has become a bridge between the two countries more than anything else. You see here and there Ethiopians coming to Israel, Ethio-Israeli's coming to Ethiopia to promote culture, business, and create good understanding between the two countries. This is something that we need to value. This has its own value as well. I am not dealing with the immigration, but what I want to tell you is that the immigration has demonstrated that we can upgrade the relationship between the two countries. We had an excellent reason in the past. But we have now one more good reason to do that.

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understand the culture and mentality of both people. It is more than that. It concerns the language to understand the history. We also have an Ethiopian born Israeli ambassador. We have Ethiopian born Miss Israel. We have Ethiopian born singers in Israel. We have Ethiopian born filmmakers, writers, businessmen, member of the parliaments, and so on. We need to see that as an excellent opportunity to upgrade the relations between the two countries. And I think we found a common language to do so.

Capital: Do Israeli companies have an interest in the telecom investment? Are they doing anything?

Vinovezky. I hope an Israeli company would come here and cooperate with the ethio telecom with one of our dreams. But this is a personal hope- a personal dream. Because, in Israel you could do almost everything through the telephone, through the internet. However officials of Ethio telecom met with seven or eight Israeli companies in South Africa this year to see how we can apply the cooperation between the two countries. So, as I said, there is not even a day by which we didn't try to introduce Israeli company to the Ethiopians.

Capital: What about the power utility company that was trying to take a management contract with the state power monopoly Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation (EEPCo)?

Vinovezky. I cannot comment on this issue now.

Capital: I have heard that you are planning to build a military base around Dire Dawa.

Vinovezky. To be honest, I don't know about it. I am not dealing with

this part. I am dealing with political, economical and development issues. I cannot contribute that much to this subject.

Capital: How many Israeli companies are operating in Ethiopia?

Vinovezky. I think more than 60 or 80, if I am not mistaken. Some of them have representatives living here. Some of them are coming on and off. You can see that we need to do much better on this issue and to keep promoting it.

Capital: What do you say about the current negotiation between your country and Palestine that is going on?

Vinovezky. Actually the negotiation resumed some weeks back. This is not something new for us. We were willing to sit down with the Palestinians around the table of negotiation since the very beginning. We have positive attitude and we are optimistic. But we would not like to be disappointed one more time. In Israel if you ask anyone on the street about the conflict with the Palestinian, never mind they belong to the left, the center or the right, they will tell you that enough is enough. It's time to overcome the obstacles and get better understandings between the two people. And I am pretty sure that if you ask any Palestinian in the street what they really want to accomplish is the same. They would like to send their children to school, to have a good job, and I feel that hopefully the two leaderships are very pretty minded to that. But again, the problem has always been with the extremist, with the radical people. So we hope that this time we can really assume to refresh negotiations, create an understanding. We have gone through too much wars and terror attacks so far. But now enough is enough. It is about time we turn the page.

Capital: So you are optimistic about it?

Vinovezky: In Israeli, we say that a pessimist is an optimist with experience. But yes, by nature I am an optimist and if you look at the history of all the Jewish people, if you are not an optimist, there's no other way. There must be another way to accomplish peaceful solution. But if you are not an optimist, you cannot lead the people. If you are a leader, you should be an optimist.

Capital: The Palestinians are pushing for the two state solutions?

Vinovezky. Yes. So do the majority of the people of Israel as well.

Capital: So, why can't that happen?

Vinovezky. In principle, in Israel we set a very positive way of the two states solution of course by direct peaceful negotiation like the one which resumed few weeks ago.



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