

Chief Engineer Fekeremaryam Cherinet, Alumnus of Maritime Academy,
Bahir Dar University

“From Highlands to High Seas: The African Maritime Journey”

Good morning distinguished guests, ministers, industry leaders, and the future of African maritime!

My name is Fekeremaryam Cherinet, and I stand before you as a Chief Engineer - a seafarer, a mentor, and above all, an Ethiopian. I come from a land known for its ancient history, its high plateaus, and its rivers that give life to Africa, Ethiopia, the Water Tower of Africa.

But let me ask you a question? When you think of the global ocean, do you immediately think of Ethiopia? For decades, the world looked at my country and saw land - mountains, lakes, rivers - but not the sea. They saw the source of the Blue Nile, but not the spirit of a sailor. And yet, here I stand, an Ethiopian Chief Engineer a title I wear with immense pride, not just for myself, but for my country, and for my continent.

My story begins in 2012, as part of the first batch of Marine Engineer Cadets ever trained in Ethiopia, at the Ethiopian Maritime Training Institute (EMTI) at Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, a city surrounded by water, but far from the sea. When I first stood at the gates of EMTI as a young graduate in Mechanical Engineering, I had never seen an ocean. The sea was something from textbooks; ships were pictures on screens. And the idea of being responsible for the heartbeat of one of those ships - the engine room - seemed like a dream almost too large to imagine. But dreams, like ships, are not built to remain on shore. From day one, our academy, EMTI taught us something profound: Excellence is not a goal to achieve. It is a standard to uphold. Let's see how.

Life in the academy was tough, beautifully tough. Our days began before sunrise at 5:30, and ended long after sunset at 22:00. From Monday to

Saturday, every hour had a purpose. It was a paramilitary system, built on discipline and precision. We marched. We studied. We trained. We learned not just how to fix an engine, but how to think like an officer. Our instructors were seasoned Chief Engineers, men who had spent decades at sea. They taught us not only the science of machinery but also the art of responsibility. Please give a round of applause to one of the best Chief Engineer in our Academy, CE Das, who is among us here today. He is an example for all of us what a hardworking seafarer and Chief Engineer looks like. Our classrooms were powered by STCW-compliant curricula, the same international standards that train seafarers in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. We studied thermodynamics, marine systems, automation, and electronics. We worked with a live engine room and auxiliary machinery that mirrored real ship systems. And we practiced on state-of-the-art simulation software, where we could replicate emergencies, troubleshoot failures, and command virtual ships across digital oceans. After months of intense work, I graduated, among Ethiopia's first engine officer cadets. But as every sailor knows, graduation is not the destination, it is only the departure.

My first contract took me far from home, to the real ocean - to the roar of the engines, to the smell of oil and salt, to a world where 30 nationalities lived and worked on one floating island of steel. I still remember the first day I walked into that engine room. The looks of curiosity. And yes, sometimes skepticism. "An Ethiopian engineer?" I could see the question in their eyes, even if no one said it aloud. But that's where training meets reality. Our EMTI education had prepared us not only for exams, but for the moment when eyes are watching to see if you belong. And so, I worked. Hard. Tirelessly. When systems failed, I was there. When the main engine faltered, I troubleshooted. When the fuel injectors jammed, I found solutions. Not once. Not twice. But until the problem was gone. And slowly, respect replaced curiosity. That first voyage was our academy's true final

exam. And I am proud to say: we passed. We didn't just survive the sea; we earned our place upon it.

This path has not been an easy one. Our workplace, the engine room, is hot, noisy, and unforgiving. Temperatures reach 45°C. The air vibrates with the hum of machinery. The slightest mistake can mean disaster. There is no margin for error. When something breaks, you are the last line of defense. As Chief Engineer today, I must know every pump, every valve, every sensor, and every vibration that doesn't sound right. The engine room does not forgive ignorance. Then there's the loneliness. Weeks, sometimes months, without seeing land. Different languages. Different cultures. Meals eaten in silence. And the ache of missing home - family, friends, the taste of Ethiopian food, the comfort of familiar sounds. Even before reaching the ship, the challenges start. Visa issues. Endless documentation. Processes that sometimes feel designed to test your patience and your resolve. And yet, we persevere. Because we know that behind every wave lies a lesson, and behind every challenge lies growth.

As I rose through the ranks, I returned to Bahir Dar University's EMTI for advanced training, because no Chief Engineer is ever "finished learning." I trained in engine room management, human resource leadership, maritime regulations, marine insurance, and surveys. I studied new developments in engine design, in green fuels, in energy efficiency. I saw how the industry is evolving - towards decarbonization, automation, and digital monitoring - and I knew Africa must evolve with it. These lessons did more than prepare me for a higher rank. They made me a better leader, one who could mentor others and ensure that every cadet who follows me can go even further.

As a Chief Engineer, I do more than manage machinery. I manage people - diverse, multinational crews. I mentor young cadets from the Philippines, India, Ukraine, and yes, from Ethiopia. And every time I meet an Ethiopian cadet joining their first vessel, I see myself. Nervous. Hopeful. Determined. And I tell them: "You belong here. You were trained for this. You carry the

standard of excellence that no one can take from you.” Because when an Ethiopian, or any African, steps onto a ship, they carry more than a passport. They carry a story of possibility.

Let me tell you something I’ve learned on ships about us: African seafarers have a unique edge. We are problem-solvers by nature. We are resilient. We don’t panic when things get hard; we adapt. We know how to make things work when resources are limited, and that creativity is gold at sea. Give an African seafarer a chance, and we won’t just fill a position. We’ll transform it. We’ll lead, innovate, and create loyalty. Because when opportunity meets hunger to prove oneself, something remarkable happens.

So, allow me to speak directly to some of you here.

To the global shipping companies and ship managers: Look at us. Invest in us. Do not see Africa as an “alternative crewing source.” See us as the next frontier. Our academies are producing world-class officers, certified, competent, and disciplined. The cadet you recruit today from Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, or Kenya could very well be your Chief Engineer, Chief Officer, or Master in a decade. Partner with our academies. Create cadet berths. Invest in training. And you will build a workforce that is skilled, loyal, and future-proof.

To the policymakers and diplomats: We need your support to smooth the waters ahead. Recognition of our certifications must be universal and unquestioned. Visa processes must understand that seafaring is not tourism - it is a profession that moves the world. And we need shore leave policies that treat seafarers as humans, not just as part of cargo. When you build systems that support seafarers, you build a bridge between Africa and global trade. You empower thousands of young Africans like me to earn in dignity, to send remittances home, to build economies, and to carry Africa’s name with pride across every ocean.

And to the young people of Africa: Listen carefully. If I can master the complex systems of a modern ship, from a landlocked country, what limits can possibly be placed on your future? None. Your journey may begin in a classroom, or on the shores of Lake Tana, or in a workshop far from the coast. But your destiny can stretch as far as the Pacific. This is not just a job. It is a career of dignity, skill, and global respect. You will see the world. You will work with cutting-edge technology. You will join a family that spans every ocean. So, dare to dream of the sea. Dare to lead from the engine room, from the bridge, from the helm. Because the world's fleet is waiting for you.

As you can see, my journey, from the Ethiopian highlands to the high seas, is not a fantasy. It is proof. Proof that the African maritime dream is not a forecast. It is happening now. Proof that true leadership has no nationality. At sea, no one asks what flag your birth country flies. They ask whether you can keep the ship safe, efficient, and moving. At sea, competence commands respect, not geography. And that is the message Africa must carry forward.

So today, we stand at a historic crossroad. Africa has the youngest workforce in the world. The global fleet faces a massive shortage of officers and engineers. And our continent, rich in talent, discipline, and ambition, is ready to sail into that gap. We have built the academies. We have trained the officers. We have proven the quality. The question is no longer if Africa can supply the world's seafarers. The question is: When will the world realize we already are?

Thank you for your time.

አመሰግናለሁ!