

Leenco Lata, ed.

The Search for Peace: The Conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea

Proceedings of Scholarly Conference on
the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict
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About the Participants

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2. Professor Bereket Habte Selassie is William E. Leuchtenburg Professor of African Studies and Professor of Law at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He chaired the commission that drafted Eritrea's constitution, which remains unimplemented.
3. Ato Berhane Woldegabriel used to practice journalism in Sudan and later on in the UK where he now works as a researcher on the Tigrinya language.
4. Mr. Dima N. Sarbo is a Ph. D. Candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN. As a member of the Executive Committee of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) he was appointed as Minister of Information when the OLF participated in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-92).
5. Ato Gebru Asrat is a former member of the Politburo of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and one of the leaders who disagreed with Prime Minister Meles over the handling of peace agreement with Eritrea ultimately being purged from the Front's leadership in 2001.
6. Dr. Getachew Begashaw is a Department Chair and Associate Professor of Economics, Harper College, Palatine, Ill. USA
7. Mr. Leenco Lata is a freelance writer on the politics of the Horn of Africa whose publications include *The Horn of Africa as Common Homeland* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004) and *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads* (Red Sea Press, 1999)

Chapter 1 Introduction

The scholarly conference on the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict was convened with the purpose of achieving the following objectives: (1) putting together an up to date anatomy of the conflict with the hope of contributing to its resolution; (2) contributing to the study of peace and conflict in contemporary Africa with a special focus on the Horn of Africa sub-region; (3) and involving scholars in the search for intra-state and inter-state peace and stability by dispelling the prevailing presumption that the issues of war or peace are the exclusive preserve of state leaders.

Participants were invited to discuss various aspects of the conflict with especial focus on its causes, the mediation process, and why implementation of the settlement agreement remains stalled. Various positioned scholars from both countries were expected to take overlapping yet distinct positions on these issues thereby contributing to the compilation of a comprehensive depiction of the conflict. Although finding willing participants (especially from among scholars residing in the two countries) proved quite challenging, it was possible to convene five Ethiopian (Dr. Bahru Zewde, Dima N. Sarbo, Gabru Asrat, Dr. Getachew Begashaw and Leenco Lata) and two Eritrean (Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie and Berhane Woldegabriel) scholars. Notwithstanding the difficulty of finding willing participants, assembling distinct but overlapping perspectives on the various features of the conflict has been moderately achieved. Furthermore, previously undisclosed factors that led to the conflict and partly account for the stalled peace process have also come to light thereby enriching our knowledge of the conflict. And the participants have suggested various mechanisms that would obviate the tradition that the issues of peace and conflict are the exclusive preserve of state leaders.

Expatriate scholars acquainted with Ethiopian and Eritrean politics were also invited to participate as commentators and made quite a number of insightful interventions. The expatriate scholars who participated are: Jon Pedersen (Chairman); Dr. Siegfried Pausewang; Dr. Patrick Gilkes; and Dr. Lionel Cliffe. The involvement and participation of these expatriate commentators played a critical role in stimulating the Ethiopian and Eritrean scholars to seek for creative ways out of the conflict.

When the Ethiopia-Eritrea war suddenly erupted in May 1998, a flurry of scholarly conferences, involving scholars from both countries, was organized. Those early conferences were routinely regarded as failures because they were marred by a high degree of acrimony. As discussions concerning the conflict became increasingly contentious ultimately ripping apart even the leaderships of the parties ruling both states, holding

further public discourses came to a complete halt. The conference held in Oslo on the 6th and 7th of July 2006 and bringing together the above five Ethiopian and two Eritrean scholars thus was an opportunity to revive the previous attempt of involving scholars in the search for peace between the two states.

In comparison to the acrimonious nature of those earlier conferences, a spirit of civility prevailed during this latest deliberation despite participants subscribing to divergent views. This is an encouraging development perhaps indicating that passions have cooled considerably in comparison to what prevailed in the early days after the outbreak of the conflict. One particularly encouraging outcome of this conference is the suggestion by some of the participants that continued dialogue involving diverse sectors of the two countries' societies should be given serious consideration. Dima N. Sarbo posits that the search for a lasting solution should involve the peoples of the two countries. Gebru Asrat takes a similar stand by making a call for the promotion of a people to people interaction as part of finding a more comprehensive and sustainable peace. Bereket Habte Selassie implicitly implores researchers from the two countries to engage in dispassionate analysis to uncover the 'truths', which is indispensable for finding lasting solution. Bahru Zewde offers the most concrete proposal in this regard by calling for the formation of an Ethio-Eritrean Dialogue and Peace Forum.

The Conflict's Causes

The participants almost unanimously dismissed territorial dispute as the pivotal cause of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict. Border dispute was either completely dismissed as the conflict's cause or was depicted as merely a superficial symptom of far deeper and more complex causes. Getachew Bagashaw's outright dismissal of border dispute as the conflict's cause stems from his repudiation of the legality of Eritrea's separation. His stand should not be surprising because he belongs to the sector of Ethiopia's intellectuals that never really recognized the legitimacy of Eritrea's independence. Gebru Asrat's concurrence with Getachew, on the other hand, is completely astonishing due to one reason. He used to be a member of the Politburo of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), which during the struggle against the previous regime as well as after taking power in the rump-Ethiopian state consistently and publicly advocated Eritrean independence. Gebru is one of the top TPLF leaders who were purged in 2001 for disagreeing with the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, over the handling of the peace agreement with Eritrea. Dima Sarbo subscribes to a position quite close to those of Getachew and Gebru, not because he opposes Eritrean independence *per se* but because he believes the process of separation was not properly handled.

Gebru and Getachew share another position in common: any settlement of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict that does not allow Ethiopia to regain access to the sea would remain untenable. Eritrean scholar Bereket Habte Selassie takes the opposite stand that any settlement that deviates from a two-state solution would be contrary to international law. The other Eritrean participant, Berhane Woldegabriel, takes the surprising position of suggesting that the resolution of the conflict could come through a formula that allows Ethiopia to have access to the sea.

A number of ironies surfaced during the deliberation concerning the importance of border dispute as the cause of the conflict. Although almost all participants downplayed the importance of territorial dispute as the conflict's cause, none could suggest a settlement that would entail either government conceding Badme - the ownership of which is the sticking point of the demarcation process. Ethiopian participants were emphatic that the Ethiopian government cannot concede Badme because doing so would amount to disrespecting the memory of the troops who gave their life to regain the village. The Eritrean side could, of course, argue that Badme should remain Eritrean by citing two rationales: their troops shed blood in order to regain it in 1998; and it was awarded to them by the neutral Boundary Commission. Furthermore, the allegation that neither regime could surrender Badme and survive implies that the leaderships are susceptible to public opinion, which runs contrary to the supposed authoritarian posture of the said leaders. Furthermore, indefinitely postponing settlement by harping on the theme "we lost so many lives" could actually result in the loss of more lives as the direct or indirect consequence of the stalled peace process. Fighting over immediate and distant historical events hence constitutes part and parcel of the problem.

Bahru Zewde, perhaps one of Ethiopia's most renowned historians, in fact sees this kind of conflicting interpretation of historical events as one of the root causes of the conflict. He contextualizes the present conflict within a longer historical perspective. He identifies a deep-seated tradition of autocracy compounded by foreign interventions as the conflict's root cause. He attributes the habit of considering violence as the only appropriate means to resolve any dispute whatsoever, which has been witnessed in the history of the two countries time and again, to the absence of a strong democratic tradition. The absence of democracy and accountability as one of the causes of the conflict figures in almost all the contributions. Bahru discusses at some length how the ordinary people of both countries have often displayed unusual creativity in finding ways to contain the dangerous repercussions of their leaders' violent policies at various historical junctures. Unfortunately, however, civil society has thus far failed to translate this innate pro-peace posture of the societies of both countries into a robust peace movement. By blaming this tragic failure on the absence of a democratic tradition he exposes one of a number of vicious cycles that repeatedly surfaced throughout the discussion. Civil society is weak or non-existent because of the absence of a democratic

space and any democratic opening cannot be widened precisely because prevailing authoritarianism stifles any effort to achieve such an end.

Gebru Asrat attributes the conflict to two interrelated aspirations of the Eritrean leadership. Eritrean leadership's overconfidence in forging a cohesive Eritrean national identity overnight and the equally overambitious desire to precipitously raise Eritrea's economy to the level of that of Singapore, he believes are the pivotal causes of the conflict. He believes Eritrean leaders pursued two conflicting and ultimately self-defeating policies to achieve these dual objectives: fanning conflicts with neighbouring states in order to forge a strong Eritrean national identity; and tapping the resources and markets of neighbouring countries, particularly Ethiopia, on advantageous terms with the aim of achieving miraculous economic development targets. Getachew partly concurs with Gebru that Eritrea's plan to achieve spectacular economic development targets by tapping Ethiopia's resources and markets was the key cause of the conflict. However, he blames Ethiopia's ruling party of harbouring an identical aspiration thereby attributing the conflict to the rivalry between the two ruling parties more than any other factor. My own contribution attributes the conflict to the competition between the two ruling parties to precipitously uplift the economies of their respective societies by tapping the resources and markets of the rest of Ethiopia.

The Eritrean leadership's aspiration of precipitously forging a single national identity as the conflict's key cause figures in the contributions of a number of other participants. My contribution discusses the history of association and disassociation between particularly the Tigrinya-speakers of Eritrea and Tigray and how diverging interpretations of the concept of nation often soured the two ruling parties' relationship. Berhane's contribution goes much further any other in much more concretely discussing how the agenda of precipitously forging a single Eritrean national identity impacted on Eritrea's relations with its neighbours. He rightly observes that none of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups (or eleven depending on whether some groups qualify such designation or not) is unique to the country. Berhane attributes the conflict to the policy of Eritrean leaders to suddenly differentiate Eritrea's ethnic groups from their counterparts in neighbouring countries by involving them in wars against the same states more than anything else. He offers a concrete example of this policy's implication by elaborating on the ongoing deliberate attempt to differentiate the Tigrinya language as it is spoken in Eritrea from the version spoken in Tigray.

Almost total unanimity prevailed also on another cause of the conflict: the governments of both Eritrea and Ethiopia continued to behave like liberation fronts even after coming to power. Dima Sarbo argues that even as liberation fronts they tended to avoid discussing issues openly and formally thus resorting to communications by innuendos, which leaves a lot of room of misinterpreting each other's intentions and expectations. Bahru asserts that the habit of behaving like liberation fronts averted the formal enactment of treaties between the two states after they separated. When

misunderstandings on a number of issues surfaced, a formal agreement was unavailable thereby contributing to the escalation of minor differences into full-scale war. Gebru's contribution actually goes further to demonstrate how deliberations between the two ruling parties were accorded higher importance than the interactions between the two governments. This comes out clearly in his elaboration of the process of negotiating economic relations between the two countries. A joint ministerial commission initially attempted to negotiate the content of an economic relations agreement, ultimately ending in an impasse. A joint commission composed of delegates from the two ruling parties took over the task, which also failed to reach an agreement. The presumption that inter-party relations should be cosier and have heavier weight thus very clearly comes to light.

The Mediation Process

Almost all participants implicitly or explicitly criticized the mediation process as being too hasty and simplistic. Treating territorial dispute as the conflict's pivotal cause is the fundamental shortcoming of the mediation process. Mediators, of course, had no choice but to proceed on this basis because the protagonists signalled that territorial dispute is the conflict's pivotal cause. Bereket made a very apt and insightful observation that analyzing an ongoing conflict is like shooting at a moving target. The same could also be said about negotiating an unfolding dispute. A conflict generates new complications and exposes previously unintended factors as it gathers momentum and involves new actors and interests. Hence, mediation can rarely keep up with the ever-changing context in which the conflict unfolds. The mediation of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict further compounded this already daunting challenge by repeatedly producing rulings that were at loggerheads with each other. The following short summary would help to demonstrate this rather unusual trend.

Friends of the two ruling parties rushed in to settle the conflict within days of its eruption. These early initiatives implicitly concurred with the Ethiopian stand that Eritrea crossed the international boundary and thus advised it to withdraw from the village of Badme to an undefined location. Determining the appropriate extent of Eritrean withdrawal was thereby implicitly made an Ethiopian prerogative. This pro-Ethiopia bias of the earliest mediation initiative remained unchanged with all subsequent mediation exercises merely concentrating on detailing the procedures to achieve Eritrean withdrawal. The Eritrean side's refusal to comply left the door open for Ethiopia to militarily bring about Eritrean withdrawal from Badme in February 1999. Despite militarily taking possession of the village at heavy costs, however, the Ethiopian side left the issue of determining its ultimate ownership subject to the ruling of the Boundary

Commission. The Boundary Commission ultimately awarded the village to Eritrea thereby confirming the initial claim by the Eritrean side that it did not advance beyond the border as stipulated by colonial treaties. Complications continued to mount when this determination of the Boundary Commission was contradicted by the subsequent ruling of the Claims Commission that found Eritrea liable for invading Ethiopia in May 1998. Rarely have decisions concerning a conflict so consistently managed to send contradictory signals to the protagonists. Consequently, these contradictory outcomes of the various and parallel adjudication initiatives constitute part and parcel of the factors that have hampered the achievement of final settlement.

Six years after the outbreak of the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict much has changed within both countries and their ruling parties. Both ruling parties suffered serious internal crises as the result of controversies over the handling of both war and peace. The war's impact on the economic development prospects of both countries appears to be the most significant factor. Although the economies of both countries have suffered considerable setback that Eritrea fared worse appears self-evident. Nowhere does this disparity between economic performance is more observable and relevant than across the border between Eritrea and Tigray. Tigray has registered impressive economic and social development targets regardless of the conflict to such an extent that it could start attracting menial labourers from Eritrea if normalization takes place. The reality that independence did not translate into a higher level of economic development constitutes the Eritrean leadership's worst nightmare thus accounting for the prevailing reluctance to speed up the settlement of the conflict. However, this pivotal factor rarely figures in the various initiatives adopted to date to unlock the deadlock.

The Settlement of the Conflict

Several participants explicitly dismissed the Algiers Peace Agreement as the appropriate framework for arriving at the final and lasting settlement of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict. Getachew emphatically dismissed the relevance of the Agreement consistent with his position that Eritrea's separation was unnecessary as well as being illegitimate. Therefore, his preferred resolution of the conflict is through undoing Eritrea's separation by achieving its reunion with Ethiopia. Although he does not go as far as reclaiming the whole of Eritrea, Gebru also advocates the renegotiation of the peace agreement with the view to affording Ethiopia access to the sea. These two participants hence advocate regaining Eritrea wholly or partially as the only reliable approach to achieve the final and lasting settlement of the conflict between the two entities.

Allowing Ethiopia to regain access to the sea figures also in the settlement formula recommended by one of the Eritrean participants, Berhane. He believes Eritrea has a

seacoast that it cannot exploit in full while it lacks water to develop its agriculture in the western arid areas. His formula hence hinges on Ethiopia allowing Eritrea to tap the water of the Tekeze River in exchange of ceding territory to connect Ethiopia to the Red Sea. On the other hand, the other Eritrean participant, Berekhet, is convinced that tinkering with the Algiers Peace Agreement would spell disaster. He commended the America initiative of simultaneously conducting dialogue and demarcation as a creative approach to get the deadlock unstuck.

All those who attributed the outbreak of the conflict to the absence of democratic culture and institutions in both countries appeared to advocate the promotion of democracy as the necessary prelude to finding final settlement. Involving civil society in continuous dialogue was also suggested as part of this approach. Although this suggestion is in principle attractive, it is hardly an actionable recommendation considering the hurdles confronting the democratization exercise in both countries.

Conclusion

The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia has taken a heavy toll on the populations of both countries. And the stalled peace process has the dangerous implication that another rounding of fighting remains threateningly possible. Hence, everything should be done to move the process of resolution forward. Continued discussion within and among various sectors of the societies of the two states could perhaps produce the magic wand and should hence be supported.

Chapter 2 Eritrea and Ethiopia: In Quest of a Culture of Peace and Dialogue

By Bahru Zewde

The Vicious Cycle

Few conflicts have proved as intractable as that between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Started in 1961, it seemed to have reached a merciful end in 1991, only to flare up once again in 1998 with even greater ferocity. This latest round of conflict was marked not only by greater destruction of life and property but also by unprecedented mass deportations. In the course of the four-decade-long conflict, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives. Resources that could have been used to develop these proverbially poor nations have been squandered on the building of mammoth armies and the acquisition of sophisticated armoury. In the process, the hopes and expectations of a future of peace and mutual respect that were kindled with the political transformations of the early 1990s have evaporated to the accompaniment of the deafening sound of rockets and mortars.

What makes the situation even more distressing is that there is no apparent light at the end of the tunnel. Neither the Algiers Peace Accord of 12 December 2000 nor the boundary ruling that came subsequent to it has put to rest the hostility and venom that had characterized the 1998-2000 war. Relations between the two countries are still marked by mutual recriminations, sabre-rattling and destabilization. Yet another round of conflict between the two parties is thus not entirely outside the realms of possibility.

As the countries bleed to death, literally and metaphorically, the voices of moderation and restraint are only dimly heard. In most instances, even those dim voices come from outside than from inside the countries. Nor are these external voices of restraint always entirely altruistic. Big power interventions are inevitably motivated by strategic rather than humanitarian considerations. The real stakeholders - the Eritreans and Ethiopians - are either aligned behind their respective regimes or betray an attitude of indifference tinged with fatalism. Above all, civil society - so crucial in galvanizing

anti-war movements in the developed world - is woefully inaudible and manifestly unable either to prevent or to resolve the conflict.

This situation of impasse invites two fundamental questions: how did we get here? How do we get out of it? These questions sound easy in formulation. But the answers that are given to them have tended to be contentious. For underlying them are a host of assumptions and biases. The challenge is therefore to build a reasonable degree of consensus on the elements that would constitute an answer to these two fundamental questions. Given the ingrained habits of thought, this admittedly is not an easy undertaking. But there is a desperate need for building such a consensus. For the alternative is an ever spiralling conflict that could only end in even greater destruction.

This paper attempts to analyze the current impasse from a longer historical perspective. For the recent war is a continuation - or the culmination - of the troubled historical relations between the two entities, characterized above all by the thirty-year struggle of the Eritreans for independence. To dwell on the current technical difficulties of the peace process can thus hardly illuminate the fundamental underpinnings of the problem. Moreover, the approach that has been adopted here is societal rather than political, focussing not so much on the whims and caprices of regimes as the social context within which they have operated.

How Did We Get Here?

The weight of history lies heavy on the Horn of Africa. Both the fascination of the region and the many traumas that it has witnessed emanate from its rich and long history. Correspondingly, this has also been a region where history has probably been accorded greater value in contemporary life than it actually merits. As such, it has been a hugely contested terrain. In the course of the Eritrean struggle for independence as well as during the recent war, history has been invoked by both parties to bolster their positions. The Ethiopian side has emphasized the common destiny of both countries while the Eritreans have underscored their uniqueness. The truth, as so often, has lain between the two extreme and often irreconcilable postures.

Rather than delving too much into the historical arguments and counter-arguments, it might be more fruitful to identify the factors that could be said to have contributed to the bloody history of the Horn in the past four decades or more. As is so often the case, one can identify both external and internal contributory factors. The latter are both colonial and post-colonial in character. The advent of Italian colonialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the subsequent creation of the Eritrean colony in 1890 probably constitute the most important developments attributable to an external agency.

Nor did the external agency disappear with the end of Italian colonial rule in 1941. The future of Eritrea was taken to be the responsibility first of the Four Powers (who had come out victorious from the Second World War, viz. Britain, France, USA and USSR) and then, when they failed to agree on a common stand, of the United Nations. The 1950 UN resolution that federated Eritrea with Ethiopia was meant to be a compromise formula that would satisfy (or at any rate least displease) the supporters of Eritrean independence and those of union with Ethiopia as well as the strategic interests of the big powers, particularly Britain and the United States.

But the federal arrangement, intended to satisfy everyone, ended up being a source of displeasure to both contending parties. Eritrean Unionists, who had the upper hand in the newly constituted Eritrean government, eroded that arrangement systematically, excelling in their zeal even the government in Addis Ababa, which itself had found the federal formula unpalatable. Eritreans first fought legally and diplomatically for the honouring of the federal arrangement. When that failed to produce any result, they opted for armed struggle in 1961.

The thirty-year Eritrean struggle for independence also saw external forces arrayed on one side or the other. The Ethiopian imperial regime counted on the support of the United States and other allies like Israel. The Eritrean insurgent forces received moral and material assistance from a number of Arab states and from some of the socialist states, notably China, which trained some of the combatants. After the 1974 Ethiopian revolution and the emergence of a professedly socialist regime in Ethiopia, socialist support, particularly that of the Soviet Union, veered towards Ethiopia. On the other hand, international public opinion in the West stood behind the Eritrean fronts, partly out of disgust with the excesses of the military regime in Ethiopia and partly as a result of the Eritrean fronts' skilful promotion of their cause.

The culmination of the Eritreans' struggle in independence (*de facto* in 1991 and *de jure* in 1993) appeared to open a new chapter in relations between the two peoples. The support that the new EPRDF regime gave to and the readiness with which it recognized that independence was followed by a period of what appeared to outside observers close collaboration between the two regimes. It looked as if the two parties were determined to close once and for all the old chapter of spite and acrimony and write a new one of cooperation. The talk in some circles was not only of federation or confederation but even of possible eventual union. Alas! Barely five years after the formalization of Eritrean independence, the two countries were locked in a new round of war and one that was unprecedented in its ferocity and destructiveness.

What makes this last round of war significant is that the role of external agency was much more limited than was the case in the thirty-year war that had led to Eritrean independence. Indeed, external elements were more active in trying to prevent and then stop the war than in abetting it. One can cite here the efforts of Rwanda, the United States and the OAU (as the AU was then known) to mediate the conflict. In other

words, if the conflicting parties had the will and desire, they could have prevented the deadly war.

At any rate, the above retrospective analysis should not mislead us into believing that external actors had played the decisive role in the history of Ethio-Eritrean relations. With the exception of Italian colonial rule, which did exert a preponderant influence, external actors should be viewed more as catalysts than as creative agents. To adapt a famous Shakespearian phrase: "The fault lies in ourselves, not in our stars". What, then, are these internal factors that explain the impasse in which we find ourselves? An attempt will be made below to delineate some of them.

At the forefront of those factors probably is the absence of a strong democratic tradition. That deficiency played a critical role in generating and abetting conflict at various stages of the region's history. The federal arrangement of the 1950s became the first casualty of that deficiency. While devolution was not exactly alien to the Ethiopian political past, federalism was incompatible with the absolutist state that Emperor Haile Sellassie was forging. Hence an autonomous Eritrea became an anomaly - and a dangerous anomaly at that - in the prevalent political atmosphere of tightly centralized administration. The seeds of conflict were sown largely because of this inability of the *ancien regime* to tolerate the autonomous status that the federal arrangement had bestowed on Eritrea.

This culture of political intolerance and commandism was elevated to the level of dogma in the post-Revolution period. The Derg, which rode to power on a wave of the February 1974 popular upsurge, was inherently incapable of granting democratic space to its citizens, let alone to those it considered inimical to the country's unity and territorial integrity. When the purportedly infallible ideology of Marxism-Leninism was adopted by the Derg, its intolerance came to wear a mantle of ideological legitimacy.

Nor was the lack of democratic tradition unique to the Ethiopian side. The fronts could not be said to have had impeccable credentials, either. The physical elimination by the EPLF of dissenting fighters, notably the famous Menka'a group in 1975, was not only symptomatic of the organization's character but also diminished the possibility of joint struggle between Eritrean and Ethiopian forces fighting for justice and democracy. The accent thereafter on the Eritrean side was clearly on independence at all costs. At the same time, the liquidation of the Menka'a group was a foretaste of the authoritarian order that was to prevail in post-independence Eritrea.

The post-1991 situation saw little improvement in this regard, particularly on the Eritrean side. This is not to under-estimate the limits of the democratization process in Ethiopia, as has become so painfully clear in the wake of the 2005 elections. The two victorious organizations (EPLF and EPRDF) basically steered the course of events - from the vital issue of independence to the nature of relationship between the two sovereign countries, as they had now become. On the surface, the independence of Eritrea was put to a global referendum of all Eritreans and nothing could be more

democratic than that. In actual fact, the referendum was a celebration of victory than the momentous political decision that it has turned out to be. There was hardly any debate on the pros and cons of independence; the possibility of options stopping short of full independence was never seriously entertained.

Moreover, the two ruling parties/organizations went ahead concluding bilateral agreements in a manner that could hardly be called transparent. In effect, they were still conducting their affairs as liberation fronts rather than as representatives of two sovereign states. The outward camaraderie and public professions of friendship concealed a smouldering fire. When that fire flared up in May 1998, almost everybody was genuinely surprised.

Concomitant to the absence of a democratic tradition has been the weak state of civil society. The prevalent authoritarian political tradition - be it in its absolutist, totalitarian or commandist rendition - has smothered the voice of society. Society was expected to dance to the tune of the state, not to hold the latter to account for its misdeeds. This state of affairs explains the fact that, in a region that had witnessed four decades of almost continuous warfare, there has emerged no anti-war movement.

This is not to say that there was no opposition to the war. But whatever opposition there existed was passive rather than active. During the Derg regime, parents took all possible measures to hide their sons from the clutches of the conscripting machine. These included sending children abroad at a tender age. In post-1991 Eritrea, too, one has seen many ingenious attempts to escape the inevitable call to Sawa (the military training camp).

Such passive opposition no doubt helped to reduce the costs and traumas of warfare. And one can only admire the self-restraint and tolerance that Ethiopians and Eritreans have always shown amidst the hate propaganda broadcast by the warring parties. There is no better demonstration of the essential humanity of the average citizen than the solidarity that so many Ethiopians openly expressed to the Eritreans that were being deported in the course of the 1998-2000 war. Their conduct will remain forever as a beacon of hope in a sea of despair and hopelessness. And one can only guess how much more decisive a role civil society could have played in the last four decades of warfare had it been organized and vibrant.

A second inhibiting historical factor has been the strongly militarist ethos that has permeated highland Ethiopian society (which historically included highland Eritrea as well). Few other societies have recorded as much warfare in their history. Contrary to the popular portrayal of these wars as having been fought against foreign invaders, most of them were in the nature of civil wars or armed contests for political power. The wars of the *Zamana Masafent* in northern Ethiopia and the conflict between the Hazzaga and Tsazzaga houses in Hamasien in Eritrea are just two historical examples of such internal warfare.

The Marxist-Leninist legitimisation of violence against oppressive rule, while it gave political rationale and direction to armed struggle, could not but help to sanction warfare. While the guerrilla fronts could be said to have striven hard to “civilize” warfare, as it were, old traditions have a habit of reasserting themselves, especially in times of stress and acrimonious combat. There is a good deal of truth in the argument that armed struggle was an option that those fighting for justice and equity were forced to take when all avenues for peaceful struggle were closed. But, sadly, it has become an equally incontestable truism that democracy has rarely been born from the barrel of a gun, however efficacious that gun might be in ridding society of oppressors.

How Do We Get Out of the Impasse?

In a way, any recommendations or suggestions that one might venture to make to resolve the impasse is bound to follow naturally from the diagnosis above of the nature of the problem. As such, the first important step towards a resolution of the problem is the realization that Eritreans and Ethiopians should not expect outsiders to do the job for them. The brief historical survey above has shown fairly clearly that foreigners have contributed more to aggravate than to alleviate the problem. This is particularly true of the big powers, whose loudly professed and advertised interventions are driven almost invariably by their own strategic considerations rather than concern for the well-being of the peoples concerned.

The shifting attitude of the United States clearly bears out this thesis. It buttressed the imperial regime against both internal and external enemies. It backed the EPLF and the EPRDF against the Derg when it saw that the first two had the potential of dislodging the hated regime in Addis Ababa. In the 1990s, it banked its hopes on the two “new leaders” of Africa as reliable partners in ensuring its hegemony. When the two leaders fell out with one another at the end of the decade, it shifted its support to the Ethiopian regime as the more dependable strategic partner in the fight against “terrorism”.

As for the multi-lateral agencies - be they global or regional - they rarely have the power or the independence of action to make meaningful interventions. Nor do they have the clout to make their initiatives to be taken seriously. The record of the United Nations has not been a particularly edifying one in this regard. Even if the federation that it resolved upon in 1950 could be said to have been the least objectionable option, it did not raise a voice when that arrangement was systematically violated throughout the 1950s. The referendum that was conducted under its auspices in 1993 was nothing other than a sanctification of EPLF’s military victory. Nor did it take any serious steps to avert the 1998-2000 war. As is so often the case, it has been more adept at trying

to manage the post-war situation (read UNMEE with its fat per diems and de luxe four-wheel drives) than in preventing the war.

Which all leads to the conclusion that Ethiopians and Eritreans have no choice but to take their destiny in their own hands. At the end of the day, it is they - themselves or their children - who have been paying and are continuing to pay the price. It is they who shed their blood, lose their lives, are internally displaced or are forced to live in exile. Ethiopians and Eritreans therefore have to be actively and seriously engaged in trying to get out of the vicious cycle of war and destruction. As already indicated above, the self-restraint and civility of the average Ethiopian and Eritrean has prevented the intense and lengthy civil or inter-state war from assuming genocidal dimensions. But what is required and expected of them is to rise above such acts of passive disobedience to more proactive civic action.

Such a change of attitude would be difficult if not impossible to realize without the expansion of democracy and the enhancement of the role of civil society. Thus the struggle for peace becomes inextricably linked with the struggle for democracy and plurality. The record in that regard of the past decade - particularly in the Eritrean case - is not that much encouraging. But there is no alternative if the culture of armed conflict is to be changed once and for all. In this respect, intellectuals are expected to play a pivotal role. The ardour and energy with which they argued the case for independence or unity should be diverted to the struggle for democracy and dialogue. Women, who have directly or indirectly borne the brunt of the conflict and are innately more sensitive to the issues of life and death, should also play a leading role in fostering the new culture of dialogue and peace.

This new culture would or at any rate should also include a repudiation of the cult of militarism that has been a distinctive mark of our societies. If there is one compelling lesson that we have learnt from nearly half a century of war, it is the futility of the military option. Both the imperial regime and the Derg tried to contain by military might the Eritrean struggle for independence; it did not work. Eritreans attained their independence through sustained and ingenious armed struggle; but independence did not bring lasting peace or democracy. On the contrary, it was attended by yet another war of unprecedented ferocity and a version of personal rule that is reminiscent of the very regimes that they had struggled against for so long. The EPRDF regime won the 1998-2000 War; but that has not been attended by peace or security.

What has probably been lacking in the post-1991 period is a collective exercise of soul-searching and stocktaking in the manner of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Instead, what we have had soon after 1991 has been two societies with completely divergent feelings. As the Eritreans celebrated their victory, Ethiopians were licking their wounds. Admittedly, the agenda of independence, which had been the driving force behind the Eritrean struggle, precluded the sort of internal social interaction evident in South Africa. Interaction remained at inter-state levels

and could hardly be said to have been completely honest and transparent. Given the many intricate ways in which the two peoples continued to be linked, some kind of civic dialogue would have helped to avert the catastrophe that engulfed the two countries at the end of the decade.

Current Ethio-Eritrean relations thus find themselves in what for all practical purposes is a stalemate pregnant with explosive potentialities. The whole world seems resigned to yet another round of fighting. At the end of the day, the fate of over seventy million people stands poised yet again to be decided by its political elite, irrespective of the predominantly pacific sentiments of the population.

This situation calls for a concerted action by civic groups and social activists to ensure that the voice of the people is heard. The first modest steps have to be taken towards what would hopefully develop into an anti-war movement. Setting up an Ethio-Eritrean Dialogue and Peace Forum would be one concrete step in that direction. Such a forum could be composed of leaders of religious establishments, women's organizations, youth and civic groups as well as socially committed intellectuals. The accent should be on making a fresh approach than a reiteration of old positions.

The activities of such a forum should be informed by the following major considerations:

- *Dispassionate assessment of the past.* This is a region where the weight of history has lain rather heavily. The obsession with history that has attended the political struggle has few parallels anywhere in the world. History - more than politics or economics - has permeated the ideologies of both integration and separation. As a result, the historical record has often tended to be skewed to support this or that political stance. Ethiopian historiography has tended to be integrationist whereas the Eritrean one has had a separatist thrust. A dispassionate re-reading of that record would indicate that the two peoples have both commonalities and peculiarities, even if the former tend to be more pronounced than the latter. That would not mean, however, that commonality should entail absorption and peculiarity automatically result in separation.
- *Cognisance of the global realities of the present.* More than at any other time in human history, the world is drawing closer together. Not only has the world become a global village, as the standard expression has it, but it has also become impossible for small nations to survive unless they pool their human and material resources. There is no better example to illustrate this point than the phenomenal growth of the European Union. That union has brought together under one roof - so to say - not only historical enemies like France and Germany but also nations that had found themselves on opposing camps during the Cold War.

- *The regional and sub-regional imperatives.* Coming nearer to our own continent, the quest for integration is more than half a century old. In that period, at least at the formal level, the vehicle for the realization of continental unity has seen some progression. The OAU, which was more or less in the nature of a club of heads of state, has grown into the AU, with institutions such as the African Parliament and the Peace and Security Council, which promise broader participation and more serious engagement with continental issues. Sub-regionally, too, it is now decades since an organization for sub-regional co-operation (IGAD) has come into being. Yet, that organization can achieve little while its constituent units are at each other's throat.
- *The futility of the military option.* If there is one thing that the two countries and their peoples should learn from history, it is the fact that recourse to arms has not solved any of the outstanding problems. The Derg's military might did not prevent Eritrean independence. The success of Eritrean arms, while it guaranteed independence, brought neither peace nor democracy. Nor has Ethiopian demonstration of superior armed might in the 1998-2000 war brought about security or development. There is in short no alternative to sober discussion and dialogue in order to achieve the peace and development that the two countries so desperately need.
- *Time for Civil Society to take the initiative.* For far too long, the fate of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples has remained the prerogative of the politicians. The state, which had usurped the role of society, has been dictating the course of events. And yet, it is society that has been paying the price. All the more reason, therefore, for society to make its voice heard. Civil society, which is the organized expression of that entity, should take the lead in this regard. True, at the end of the day, it is the politicians who will make the decisions. But, even if it has no pretence of substituting the political order, civil society is well-placed to serve as its conscience.

Chapter 3 Dreams that turned to nightmares: The Ethio-Eritrean War of 1998-2000 and its Aftermath

By Bereket Habte Selassie

Many people had pinned so much hope on the new governments emerging in Eritrea and Ethiopia after the fall of Mengistu's dictatorship in the Spring of 1991. To the peoples of the two countries it seemed that a new era was dawning after a nightmarish existence of decades. The new leaders, personifying the mystique of liberation fighters, lent credence to people's hopes and expectations of a better future. The mystique carries with it the belief that a freedom fighter does no wrong. A freedom fighter does not lie, does not deceive, does not steal, etc. The hopes and expectations of millions rested on such belief.

Naïve? Perhaps.

But if so, many of us are guilty of it. We imagined a better future for the long-suffering peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia, a future of prosperity anchored on democracy, justice and peaceful cooperation. Our leaders were giddy with the dreams of such a future—or so it seemed. They crafted charters promising liberty and the pursuit of happiness, grounded on concord and not conflict. They signed protocols underpinning these objectives, and making people giddy with the hope of great things to come.

The 1998-2000 war put an end to this dream, teaching us a lesson, once more, on the fallacy of hope—hope that the victims of war would not resort to war; hope also in the orderly progress of societies that had suffered oppression. The doomed alliance between the two governments as much as the devastating impact of the war on the two poor countries, led commentators to describe the war variously as tragic, unnecessary, useless, fratricidal, etc.

Many questions followed, inevitably. Could the cause of the war (*casus belli*) have possibly been ownership of a dusty piece of land called Badme where there was no known precious material like oil or gold? If ownership of Badme was indeed the cause, was it worth going to war for and losing scores of thousands of lives, when the matter could have been resolved peacefully?

The Concept paper of this Conference has given us a useful framework for exchange of views on the cause of the war and in order to help in securing a peaceful future for the region. What more can be said? I am afraid my contribution will consist in posing more questions than providing answers. I think, however, asking questions from as many angles as possible should lead to providing answers, at least eventually.

Consider the following based on random sampling of various opinions:

- Some believe the cause is the clashing ambitions (or colliding egos) of the two leaders.
- Many Eritreans believe that the Tigrayans have a hidden agenda of Greater Tigray, to which they want to absorb Eritrea and obliterate its separate identity.
- Some Ethiopians believe the cause was the Napoleonic complex of Isaias Afwerki, who, it is claimed, was intent upon dominating Ethiopia and, through Ethiopia, the rest of the region.
- Others put the blame on both leaders. One of them gave an astronomical analogy thus: when two objects are in overlapping orbits, the bigger one inevitably pulls the smaller into its path. Sooner or later they collide. In terms of the analogy, Isaias thought he could tame Meles; but he failed because he underestimated the latter's guile and tenacity. Is history repeating itself—Ras Woldmichael (Woldenkiel) of old, underestimating Ras Alula's guile and falling into a trap?

More questions follow. Can the cause of the war be reduced to a single factor such as the clash of ambitions? Surely it is more complex than that. Were newly liberated Eritrea and Ethiopia, its former occupier, on a collision course, from the start, or did the conflict emerge after liberation? If the latter, on what ground? What about the economic factor: the economic factor and its complication by competing political motives? What was presumed to be a done deal in terms of harmonious cooperation between the two regimes, clearly was more elusive. By and large, Ethiopians did not accept the fact of Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia; such separation was anathema especially to the central Ethiopians (the Amhara). It should also be pointed out that Amharas monopolized most of the key positions, including the sensitive posts in finance and banking, at the key sub-ministerial, technocratic level. Eritrean negotiators on the currency harmonization policy discussions complained (in informal talks with this writer) that there was stiff resistance by these technocrats to requests by Eritreans to have a fair share in currency and other financial policy making, when Eritrea still used the Ethiopian currency. The Eritrean negotiators came to the conclusion that their Ethiopian counterparts were determined to subject Eritrean economic autonomy to Ethiopian requirements, thus undermining the political self determination that had been won at so much sacrifice.

This frustrating experience was critical in Eritrea's decision to sever itself from the Birr and issue its own currency, the Nakfa, in November 1997, which happened six months before the "Badme" war broke out. To Ethiopians who were not reconciled to the "loss" of Eritrea, Eritrea's naming of its currency "Nakfa," after the town that was a symbol of Eritrean armed resistance and triumph, only served to aggravate feelings. It was like pouring salt on the wounded political pride of Ethiopians. An often heard remark of Ethiopians addressing Eritreans who lived in Ethiopia was, "You want independence, good riddance; see if you can sustain yourselves." This is not to suggest that serious policy makers at the top necessarily shared such views, but only to indicate the depth of resentment felt with regard to Ethiopia's "loss" of Eritrea. It also confirms the view that one cannot put the blame on a simple cause, like personal ambition or colliding egos, important though these may be as contributing factors.

Eritrea's decision to issue its own currency provoked the Ethiopians to declare a classic protectionist policy. All trade between the two countries, which had been paid for in the Ethiopian currency would henceforth be paid for in hard currency. Eritreans naturally interpreted this as punitive measure taken against them for daring to exercise a crucial function of their sovereignty. There is anecdotal evidence that the issuance of the Nakfa was resented not only as a manifestation of Eritrea's will to develop separately from Ethiopia, but also the very choice of Nakfa grated feelings. There were unfortunate incidents illustrating such resentment, including the refusal by Ethiopian (Tigrayan) custodians of the Holy Church of Saint Mary of Zion of Axum to contributions of Eritrean Christian pilgrims who offered to pay in Nakfa to the Church.

With respect to the failure of the mediation efforts, much can be said by way of attributing faults and pointing out weaknesses. It will be remembered that the first US senior diplomat who led the mediation team, Susan Rice, was treated by Isaias in a manner that can only be described as one not befitting a head of state. I do not have to hold a brief for Susan Rice; she is quite capable of taking care of herself. I suspect that, but for diplomatic considerations and her own non-aggressive personality (which I have observed a few times), the lady might have responded in kind to President Isaias' rough treatment.

Anthony Lake, who is equally gentle (if not more), did not receive a similar treatment at the hand of President Isaias. Lake's superior knowledge and experience was considered by many as the reason why President Clinton appointed him in place of Susan Rice. And in the end, it was under his team leadership that the warring parties signed the Algiers Framework Agreement. I am sure both Rice and Lake have quite a story to tell; and what they have to say may help answer some questions on the problems of mediation in this particular conflict.

Why did it take so long for the mediation efforts to bear fruit? Some believe that Isaias was forced to accept the peace deal after Eritrean forces were dislodged from the Badme area and Ethiopian troops penetrated deep into Eritrean territory thus posing

a serious threat. Many also believe that Isaias' intransigence during much of the mediation efforts was due to his belief that Eritrean forces could defeat the Ethiopians and that such defeat would advance his regional ambition.

A question is also raised regarding the relationship between the two guerilla forces—the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)—during the armed struggle. Was it based on the two leaders, as the Concept Paper suggests? If so, surely the lesson to be derived from this experience is that the peoples of the two countries should endeavour to hinge their governance on democracy and the rule of law under which no war can be declared without prior approval of a people's representative assembly. In this respect, it must be pointed out that Meles, at least, secured the approval of the Ethiopian Parliament before he went to war.

There are those who suggest that President Isaias Afwerki went to war in order to delay or frustrate the implementation of the ratified constitution. This may appear to be farfetched and when challenged the proponents of this view ask why, then, hasn't he implemented it after the end of the war, which has now been over for six years?

The present Conference and the Concept Paper that the conveners have framed is a serious attempt at answering these questions. As indicated above, this war posed a cruel dilemma to scholars and practitioners of the region, and indeed to all persons of good will interested in the affairs of the region. There have been several serious analyses and much journalistic reportage on the war. There have also been numerous partisan controversies on both sides of the belligerents.

What is the contribution of scholars? The first duty of scholars is to collect, classify and analyze the data—in this case, the facts about the war, its origin, its magnitude and impact. In terms of methodology; writing about an on-going conflict (as Tekeste and Tronvol did) is like shooting a moving object. Any narrative account would be incomplete if the writing is being done while the conflict is going on, or immediately after it is over. It would be incomplete and conceivably suffer from a lack of historical perspective.

Apart from the matter of methodology, there is also the issue concerning facts and their evaluation. What we call facts—geographical facts about border, for instance, or who started the war, may be subject to dispute, as they were in this case. The inference that we draw from the data may also be subject to dispute. In a case like the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, if the researchers have been intimately connected with one or the other, or with both of the parties at war, they would be faced with a cruel choice. Their findings and conclusions support one or the other of the parties to the conflict. But that is where the autonomy of the social science research kicks in. The truth must be out; the chips must fall where they may.

A Summing-up

A brief account of the relevant events concerning the conflict may be useful by way of conclusion. The war was supposedly fought over a dispute on the ownership of an area called Badme. The border between the two countries was not completely demarcated at Eritrea's formal independence in 1993. But nowhere in Africa has there been a war fought on such scale and with such huge casualties over a border dispute. And no conflict has so puzzled observers, African and non-African, as this war did. Diplomats from Africa, America and Europe, in various combinations struggled mightily to stop the war and reach an amicable settlement.

Now the difference between diplomats mediating conflict situations and scholars engaged in research is that, whereas the former are interested in reaching a middle ground acceptable to the conflicting parties, the aim of the latter is to discover the truth and report it. True research is supposed to be detached and to respect the "facts" as they are discovered. Of course there is a meeting point between the work of practicing diplomats and scholars in that the former can lean on the latter in search of solutions by invoking "truth" as discovered by scholarly endeavor to put pressure on recalcitrant parties.

A disputed issue like the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Badme as well as in other areas is susceptible to differing interpretations unless the "facts" are by their very nature incontrovertible. The war was supposedly fought over a disputed territory. The border remained un-demarcated presumably because the two sides were thinking about cooperation and integration and considered the border question a side issue. But then after a few years of what seemed an emerging regional cooperation between the two countries, it became clear by the end of 1997 that the governments of the two countries had fallen out and gone their separate ways. And a year later, Ethiopia claimed that Eritrea invaded its territory. Eritrea, on its part, claimed that an Ethiopian military unit, without provocation, fired upon and killed several members of its defense forces who were on a peaceful patrol mission in Badme.

On May 12, Eritrean troops reacted to the killing of their men by displacing the Ethiopians, including a militia force, and occupying the disputed area. The Ethiopians, who had been in de facto occupation of the area, characterized the Eritrean action as aggression, while the Eritreans saw it as legitimate defense and restitution of their occupied territory. After the end of the war with the Algiers accord signed in December 2000, these claims and counter claims became part of the issues in dispute awaiting resolution. Their resolution was submitted for arbitral decision and the arbitral commission handed its decision in April 2002. It is a binding arbitration from which there is no appeal.

Four years have passed and still there has been no demarcation, as the judgment of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission requires. The recent American-led media-

tion efforts aimed at moving the process towards a conclusion have been stalled. The matter awaits resolution. Curiously, the fate of two nations still hangs on the Badme controversy.

It is worth reiterating that the aim of a discussion on the origins of such a war should be not to fix blame on either of the warring sides, but to help end the war, to lay the foundation for a peaceful settlement and to avoid conflict in the future. Let history deal with the issue of blame.

Chapter 4 Eritrea: A War for National Unity

By Berhane Woldegabriel

As many would recall, the last war (May 1998 to April 2000) fought between Eritrea and Ethiopia over a small border village, Badume, was concluded after an agreement on cessation of hostilities was signed on 18 June 2000, under the auspices of African Union, and the United Nations. Despite that however, a proxy war using each others' opposition organisations has been going on so much that six years on, they seem to be continuing their violent conflict in Somalia. Had it not been for the \$186 million current budget of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) before the end of September 2006, the Badume tragedy may relapse.

Eritrea accepted responsibility for starting the 'Badume War' while Ethiopia has not fully implemented the decisions of the Boundary Commission. Hence, the conflict persists. This suggests that the actual causes of the war were other factors, and Badume was only a pretext. Implementation of what amounts to the 'Second Vision' (the 1st was independence) of President Isaias was likely reason for the war. How this objective had been pursued is the main focus of this paper.

The Second Vision?

After independence the Eritrean government decided to radically transform the country to emulate Singapore, a controlled state with a thriving economy. To that end, Eritrean ethnic groups must be united and exhibit a level of loyalty and dedication similar to the one that enabled it to win its independence. National unity and 'self-reliance' were seen as the pillars of the ambitious 'vision' of President Isaias Afewerki's (PIA).

Since there is no ethnic group that is unique to Eritrea, PIA sought to conduct measured wars and sever ethnic ties with neighbouring Djibouti, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen, to promote Eritrean national unity.

The Second Vision asserted that Eritrea was self-reliant and its army so superior to that of its neighbours that none of them would dare to fight against it. These traits, including the political elite's impulse to control, were acquired during the long years of struggle for independence.

Causes of the 'Badume War'

When the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia broke out in May 1998, a number of causes were postulated: the boundary issue, deterioration of economic relations since the launch of the Eritrean currency (the *načfa*), national, and even personal pride. Above all of these reasons was a conviction to unify the nation and to control, prerequisites to the fulfilling of the Second Vision.

The war emanated from the Eritrean government's desire to unify its (nine or 11 Jebertee & *Eleet*) ethnic groups¹. The number one and most important of the six goals of the national programme of the one party PFDJ² government has been 'national harmony'.

Background to Nationhood

The existence of ethnic-based Eritrean political opposition organisations, like the Afar and the Kunama; the Federalist party of mainly exiled young Eritrean Muslim intellectuals, and the Eritrean Islamic Jihad; the issue of national language, particularly Arabic, and the "One people, one heart" slogan, indicate that the process of nation building in Eritrea is almost like the "Democracy" and "Justice" in the PFDJ, the ruling party – hard to implement by military control.

Before the Italians colonised and named it Eritrea at the end of the 19th century, part of it was an extension of the Ethiopian empire, whilst most of the lowland was part of the Beja dynasty that cut the Axumite kingdom from its Red Sea port of Adulis and made it collapse. Many in Eritrea, including especially PIA [Solomon Enquay], believe that the 60 years experience of Italian colonialism and the subsequent decade

¹Two arguments the author put forward at that time (Woldegabriel 2000) have since been proved correct: that Eritrea started the war (Boundary Commission, 2006), and that Eritrea had assumed (wrongly) that Ethiopia would not risk going to war (Jacquin-Berdal, et al. 2005).

²People's Front for Democracy and Justice. PFDJ is the political party of the EPLF, which has been ruling Eritrea formally since 1993.

of British Administration engendered Eritrean nationalism [Alemseged Tesfai's, *Ayn-falale*, 2004] that warranted Eritrea's distinction from Ethiopia [Alemseged Abay's, *Identity Jilted*].

Colonial administrators such as Stephan Longrigg saw Eritrea as one in the same predicament as the countries surrounding it. When the future of Eritrea was debated in the late 1940s, the foreign ministers of Italy and Britain, Sforza and Bevin respectively, proposed to divide Eritrea by uniting the predominantly Moslem lowland area with the Beja ethnic groups of Sudan, and the mainly Christian highland area with Ethiopia.

The main Eritrean parties, namely '*Mahber Andinet*' in the highlands and the '*Al Ra-biTa al Islamiyah*' (named after Ali Jinah's party that created Pakistan) of the lowlands, fought for and against union with Ethiopia respectively. The plan to divide Eritrea was defeated in the United Nations in 1949, because the Umma party in Sudan, which was under the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, rejected the plan in order to prevent its political rival, the pro-Egypt Democratic Union Party (DUP), from gaining the 'Eritrean' vote³. Lowland Eritrea's spiritual loyalty has been to the Mirganiyya in Eastern Sudan, which is the foundation of the DUP.

The 30 years war for Eritrean independence encouraged national unity but had its tolls too. There were more battles between mainly the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) than against the Ethiopia army⁴. In the end, it was the coordinated army of the EPLF and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) which defeated and expelled the ELF out of Eritrea into Sudan in 1981. Despite their socialist aspirations, the ELF and the EPLF were perceived to represent disparate sections of Eritrea and its people.

The most telling anecdote about Eritrea's nationhood happened soon after the 1978 Khartoum agreement to unite the ELF and the EPLF. The late historian Michael Gabir, then Head Teacher of the UNHCR-funded secondary school for Eritrean refugees in Kassala, took the initiative to amalgamate the curriculum of the ELF and the EPLF. "All was well except teaching Eritrean history"⁵. Considering the numerous in-fightings and abrogation of treaties that occurred between the ELF and the EPLF, their respective versions of events differed, as also observed by Daniel Kndie on Eritrean identity (Kendie 2005:22). The first Eritrean constitution took three years and \$5 million to draft. Dr Bereket Habte Selassie, then Head of the Constitution Commission, emphasised that the group was totally independent and involved more than half a million people in its deliberations. The only advice received from PIA, he admitted, was to uphold national unity.

³ In an interview with the Sudanese scholar one time Commissioner of Khartoum Mr. Sedig Moukhayer, by the author Khartoum, 1978 (unpublished)

⁴ Al Amin Mohamed Said, History of the Eritrean revolution in (Arabic & Tigrinya) 199

⁵ From a discussion with the author in 1986, in Kessala, - a Sudanese town near the Eritrean boarder

It seems that PIA realised that poverty, disease and ignorance were not threatening enough to unify Eritrean ethnic groups, as did the troops of the dreaded Dergue regime. Then, Eritreans fought together resolutely and won. The Eritrean government wanted to attain unity and commitment of the people on the road to Singapore - a sort of a search for “El Dorado” - and forge national unity in the process.

A threat to the controller

Eritrea is composed of nine or 11 ethnic groups, depending on whether the *Eleet* and the *Jabertee* are counted. Every ethnic group in Eritrea has its kin outside the boundaries of the country. The struggle for independence was not lead democratically enough to guide these ethnic groups into having a viable national unity and the country's poverty didn't help either. Soon after the common enemy - the Dergue - was removed, ethnic communities and individuals in Eritrea started to invest in ethnic-oriented projects voluntarily. Elementary schooling in local languages bolstered such developments.

The government, which has an urge to control, felt insecure by such activities and wanted ethnic groups to unite in national solidarity. It reneged on its pledge to form political parties and condemned activities it called “sub-national identity” that promoted any specific ethnicity and/or religion.

Measured wars across borders

A highly orchestrated macroeconomic policy was laid out in 1996 and expectations were high as an off-shore oil exploration was also underway in the Red Sea. These contributed to the armed conflict against Yemen for what finally became a struggle for the Hanish Islands. The conflict was decided by international arbitration, which settled in favour of Yemen.

Eritrea also conducted some measured war on the border of Sudan, in which some Eritrean Beja (as part of the army) were deployed against their kin in Sudan. Similarly, the skirmishes with Djibouti drove a wedge between the Afar people on both sides of the border, however temporarily.

The motivation for engaging in war against its neighbours (though energy and resources were needed for development) aimed at carving out a singular Eritrean identity and a mental map, away from the common ethnic and cultural ties in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. The border dispute with Ethiopia was intended to emphasize the division between highland Eritreans, who are culturally akin to those in Tigray.

Aggregate of interests in the sea port (land locked), the oil refinery in Asab, the replacement of the common currency (Ethiopian) *birr* by the *naqfa* in Eritrea, as well as the deep resentment many Ethiopian felt after the defeat and rejection by Eritrea, aggravated what was meant to be a 'measured war'.

Both governments were crippled by the split within their respective political parties the (TPLF and the PFDJ) as a consequence of the war. Habtegiorgis Abraha, an ex-ELF combatant turned human rights activist in London, observed that despite independence, "the EFDJ continued to behave as a liberation front rather than a government", an interesting feature also observed by Bahru Zewde.

Post Badume War

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (PMZ), who is of the same ethnic group as PIA, was regarded as a puppet leader, so much so that PMZ was dubbed the 'Eritrean Ambassador to Ethiopia' by some independent papers in Addis Ababa. Thus the Badume War rehabilitated and confirmed him as the 're claimer' of the Ethiopian pride, previously humiliated by plucky little Eritrea, instead of PMZ - the Tigrayan - who gave unwarranted economic advantages to Eritrea.

On the other hand PIA, who is known for his ability to control circumstances, clearly miscalculated and as such was hoisted by his own petard. Devoid of any viable long-term plan and overwhelmed by circumstances, he seems to be in perpetual crisis and engaging in ad hoc management. The party PFDJ is known as *Hegdef* (its acronym in Tigrinya), but as the party does things on ad hoc bases and changes the rules every now and then, without proper long term study, many people are calling it *Hez-ghedif*, meaning "touch and go".

Despite the Algiers Peace Agreement, there is no peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Nearly 300,000 young men and women have graduated from Sawa National Service, which include six months military training. Former Attorney General of Eritrea, Ambassador Adhanom Ghebremariam, who has become one of the opposition leaders in exile, called the national service "slavery". The first group of them have served the PFDJ government freely for over 11 years. Some of those who left and took refuge in England described life of the seemingly endless service as "intolerably harsh". The Eritrean constitution, although ratified in 1997, remains suspended. The country is under an undeclared emergency rule, being governed by major generals.

A social worker for refugees in Malta told the author (August 14, 2006) that there are about 4 million asylum seekers/illegal immigrants in Libya who wish to come to Europe via Malta. Some of them are Eritrean. Maltese fishermen at times find remains of victims who do not survive the crossing.

Poor Tigrinya

About five million Tigrayot, mainly in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and about three million in the highland traditional provinces of Akele-Guzai, Hamassen and Seraye in Eritrea, speak Tigrinya. It is practically the national language in Eritrea, and the fourth important language in Ethiopia.

The people in Badume and the other boarder areas took the brunt of the war. According to the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE)⁶, a total of 720,000 people were affected by the war. Most of this took place among the Tigrinya-speaking ethnic 'Tigrinya' (Eritrea) and "Tigray ethnic group"⁷ (Ethiopia). These people have the same religion (predominantly Orthodox Christian), way of life (small-scale farming) and language. Who knows, they may have even stayed together had it not been for Italian colonial intervention.

Up until 1991 relations between their joint liberation organizations, the EPLF and the TPLF, were cordial. Tigrinya had started to flourish as their respective departments of National Guidance (euphemism for propaganda) authored numerous songs, leaflets and publications, virtually overwhelmingly in Tigrinya. Together, they also defeated the ELF in 1981 and the Dergue regime in 1991.

Tigrinya is the mother tongue of the two heads of governments, PIA and PMZ, and despite regional accents, they understand each other perfectly and so do the rest of the Tigrinya-speakers anywhere. Tigrinya has never before had such a golden chance to develop, especially before the Badume war. In addition to many other technological advantages, (the *Geez* script or *fidel*, used by Amharic as well) has been computerized.

Even during Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes of Tigray, Tigrinya was not encouraged. Oral history has it that a Tigrayan peasant appeared before the court and according to tradition began by saying "Egzgiher yereyom, AmlaKh yemelktom..." [May God guide you...], an official demanded, "Say it in Amharic! In Amharic!" To which the startled Tigrayan answered, "In Amharic? How could it be an important mater in Amharic?"

Even in ethnically federated Ethiopia's Tigray State and in the perceived to be Tigrinya government in Eritrea, the linguistic and ethnic identity that existed in history is changing. Political feud and hatred triggered by intolerance to each other's accents have created a schism in Tigrinya, as in the Orthodox Church (in to Eritrean and Ethiopian) without any theological justification. Both governments continued to spread mutual hatred on their media and prevented the people from communicating and trading with each other across the boarder. They are accelerating the linguistic split. Thus, the

⁶ See UNMEE, "background" on <www.un.org>. By March 2000, there were 370,000 Eritrean and 350,000 Ethiopian affected (killed or displaced etc.) by the war.

⁷ As the Eritrean Ministry of Information put it on its official website <www.shabait.com> of April 8, 2006 under the title "Four Ethiopian soldiers arrive here".

Eritrean *Tigrawot*, renamed by the EPLF since the 1970 as a 'Tigrinya' ethnic group (after the language) has complicated relations with the Ethiopian *Tigrawot*.

No doubt, the political elite of the PFDJ takes this schism as a step in the right direction in the realization of Eritrean 'National Unity'. A plan that appears to be working, despite the human and material cost, but conversely undermines the crux of the Second Vision and marching away from the road to 'Singapore'.

A Few Illustrations

Ironically, the war between the Tigrinya-speaking governments made Tigrinya language a casualty of the war. Without going into details, if we take the English word 'now' it is translated as *Hejee* in Asmara and is almost the standard term. In Tigray, it is *Hezee* or *Heyee*. This apparently little difference in spelling or transposition of the letters 'z' and 'j' entailed not only phonetic variation but also pronounced linguistic (+ ethnic) split, which will persist unless normalization of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia did not start on time. Moreover, those who live by the river Mereb in Eritrea say *Heyee* like those across the river - in Ethiopia. In other words, those in the Centre can mistakenly take a fellow Eritrean dwelling near the border areas for an enemy. Both governments are in effect encouraging ill treatment of the evicted Tigrinya-speakers. Owing to their pronunciation of some words people are mistreating each other daily. In the mean time Tigrinya language has started to shrink, because to avoid suspicion Eritreans are confined to using the words that are spoken in the central region. While Tigrinya-speaking Ethiopians, especially the educated, have noticeably resorted to Amharic. Either way, the war has disabled Tigrinya.

Vocabularies of the language have decreased on either side, as the 'centres' of the governments in Eritrea and the regional government in Tigray have practically 'given' nationality to certain words to realize the split although those words previously belonged to the whole body of the Tigrinya language. The words *nebsee* and *Arsee* ('A' for the strong 'a' as in *Assa*, the English word, fish) generally mean 'self'. Strictly, the former '*nebsee*' connote spiritual and the later '*Arsee*' is corporal. By having both, Tigrinya would gain. However, post Badume Tigrinya in Eritrea is comfortable with the former and Tigray's (Ethiopian) with the later. Moreover, Mekelle's naga, mQeyaE (mlgatse), tilheet, Aywona, genaH makina (awtista or meraH), QenChee etc, cuts no ice with Asmara, to use South London's slang.

On the other hand, perpetuation of the split is politically expedient to Eritrea's other half, the non-Tigrinya [Tigrawot] ethnic groups particularly the Tigre, as well as to the Amhara and Oromo in Ethiopia. So, all is not necessarily gloom.

Outstanding problems

The main contention between the two governments has been Ethiopia's reluctance to accept the verdict of the Boundary Commission and allow the demarcation to proceed at Badume. In Eritrea, as Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie quite rightly said, the people were "blinded" by regarding "the liberation fighter as semi-saints". Prior to the Badume war, first class citizenship was reserved to the EPLF combatants known as *yeka'alo*. The war involved a new generation of fighters called *warsay* who got combat experience during the Badume war. They became emboldened and broke the myth and have started to question the policies of the *yeka'alo* Government. The challenge now facing a peaceful resolution of the conflict is also the worry of how to create viable employment to effectively demobilise the more than 150,000 *warsay* troops, now providing free service. A key problem of PIA is that, if Ethiopia implemented the Boarder Commission's ruling without any precondition, Eritrean would need resources to create viable employment to effectively demobilise at least 150,000 of the *warsay* troops who have been providing free national service.

Ethiopia has some semi-functional democratic institutions, but strictly speaking, neither government is democratic. PMZ is concerned about the Tigrayan who would rather die than see Badume go to Eritrea. He would like to continue with the status quo of "no wars, no peace". Interestingly, this communication through low intensity proxy war seems to suit PIA as well. Since their destinies are ostensibly linked, it is plausible to assume that they may have been talking to each other clandestinely.

Exchange of Idle Resources

Meaningful regional cooperation based on mutual respect and understanding, along the principles of the Inter Governmental Agency for Development (IGAD), is the way forward to viable peace and prosperity in the Horn of Africa. The indispensability of cordial relations with Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen notwithstanding, the relations with Ethiopia can commence with the exchange of "idle resources" which both countries can afford to 'barter'. For example, unlike Jordan and Israel each of who has less than 16 kilometres of coastline on the Red Sea, Eritrea commands 1,200 kilometres of Red sea coast. Therefore, Eritrea can afford to allow landlocked Ethiopia access to the sea. In return, Ethiopia, which is the natural aqueduct for the region, could allow Eritrea access to the Tekeze River area from which the Gash Barka region could be irrigated by gravity to ensure food security for the peoples of both countries. Harnessing the water resource might also prevent deadly flooding in Ethiopia like that seen in August 2006. As agriculture experts as FAO's Trkeste Ghebray, former Secretary General of

IGAD, stated that building an irrigation dam is more viable if built in the Ethiopian side than the part of the Tekeze River that touches Eritrea.

Conclusion

Unifying a nation's ethnic groups for mutual progress is a noble vision, however, PIA chose to achieve it through 'social engineering' and resulted in creating suspicion and fear. In the Horn of Africa, any popular armed organisation knows that it can shoot its way to power. A deposed government can also go to the bush (not the one in Washington, although that too would help) reorganise its ranks and then make its way to the capital.

Eritrea has already paid more than enough in blood to entertain this regrettable, violent method. Most of Eritrea's current problems emerged from the government's unwillingness to work with the various opposition groups. It is time for the formation of a national government, consisting of the EPLF/PFDJ and all the opposition organisations.

Moreover, if armed organisations against neighbouring governments (like the Beja movement in Sudan and the OLF of Ethiopia) continue to operate from Eritrea in a conflict by proxy and Ethiopia keeps harbouring all or part of the several Eritrean opposition organisations, peace, honest dialogue paired with mutually-beneficial trade and sound food policies will not happen and Eritrea and Ethiopia will have to wait for some more years before they could be at ease with themselves and in peace with their neighbours.

Chapter 5 Ethiopia and Eritrea: Short-Sighted Solutions, Long-Term Problems

By Dima Noggo Sarbo

Introduction

The latest round of conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which began with open military clashes in 1998 and escalated to an all out conventional war, ended (at least temporarily) with the Algiers Peace Agreement of December 2000. Normalization of relations between the two states was to follow on the basis of the mechanisms agreed upon in the agreement. However, five and half years after the peace agreement, hailed as a model for others to follow, the initial hopes and enthusiasm has given way to despair and disillusionment. Serious disagreements on the agreement itself have stalled implementation, and relations between the two states are tense with fear of further deterioration and the outbreak of another round of hostilities. The international community, which backed the agreement and committed significant personnel and resources to maintain a large United Nations Peace-keeping force between the two states, has been unable so far to impose a solution acceptable to both sides. The conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea has thus become one of the most intractable problems facing the international community.

Over the past half a century, Ethiopia and Eritrea have seen severe fluctuations in their relations. They have gone from federation to unity, from war to peace, and from amicable divorce, co-operation and integration, back to war. The Eritrean war of independence has already contributed to the overthrow of the imperial regime in 1974, and its successor in 1991. The war of 1998-2000 had its severest toll to date in terms of the human suffering and vitriolic exchanges in the war of words. Besides claiming tens of thousands of lives, and displacing tens of thousands more, it involved serious violations of human rights, and the deportation of thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin from Ethiopia. Moreover, it exacerbated the internal

political crisis in both states, splitting the two ruling parties. It is also threatening regional peace and stability.

Relations between the two ruling groups were considered as the closest relations any two groups could have. The formal independence of Eritrea in 1993 and its recognition by the international community was accomplished with the full backing of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which took control of the Ethiopian state in 1991, an act itself accomplished with the full military backing of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). After thirty years of war, the recognition of Eritrea's independence by Ethiopia was considered at the time as an amicable divorce. However, in less than five years the two states went to a ferocious war that claimed more lives than the thirty years Eritrean independence struggle. The outbreak of hostilities in May 1998 thus came as a surprise, as until then both critics and supporters of the ruling parties in Ethiopia and Eritrea believed that the leaders of the TPLF (Tigrean People's Liberation Front), and the PFDJ (Popular Front for Democracy and Justice),⁸ shared a strategic vision. However, a closer look at relations between the leaderships of the two fronts reveals that relations were governed more by narrow-minded short-term tactical objectives than long-term strategic partnership.

The failure to implement the rulings of the mutually established commission on the basis of the Algiers Peace Agreement (despite initial hopes) demonstrates that relations between the two states are far more complex than many assumed. Two major factors seem to be responsible for escalating the conflict and hampering resolution. The first and principal factor is internal to both states, and actually, internal to the ruling parties, particularly their very nature as well the manner in which they have managed their relations. The second has to do with the attitude of the international community. Looking at the stalled peace process, the Algiers Agreement and the subsequent decisions based on it appear to be the wrong instruments for solving the conflict between the two states. Now that the situation has reached a deadlock, the conflict is assuming wider dimensions threatening not only the stability of the two states, but also regional peace. It is therefore pertinent to look at the problem differently and find mechanisms that ensure a lasting solution for both states and peoples. Hence, the need for a fresh, overall and comprehensive look at the conflict and its resolution.

⁸The Eritrean People's Liberation Front changed its name to the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) at its Third Congress in Nakfa in 1994.

Understanding the Causes of the Conflict

Decoding the real causes of the conflict has become a subject of much debate and writing, among academics, politicians and diplomats. There are obviously underlying as well as immediate causes for the flare up in conflict in 1998. Now, both sides as well as others agree that the border issue was not the principal cause of the conflict between the two states, and is only a manifestation of other issues. I think the border was only a trigger for accumulated series of problems between the two parties. But since issues have not been raised openly, observers have given various factors as the principal cause of the conflict. Some have suggested that the regimes ruling in Ethiopia and Eritrea are incompatible, the former being democratic and the latter an authoritarian one (Henze, 2000), while others have suggested that it is an inevitable consequence of a conflict between a hegemonic state (Ethiopia) and a diasporic state (Eritrea) (Iyob 2000). Some others have noted differences in economic and fiscal policies, an open economy in the case of Eritrea and more government control in the case of Ethiopia (Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005: 249-258). The latter seem to blame the Ethiopian opposition and “hard liners” within the TPLF for the deterioration in relations between the two regimes (Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005). Differing attitudes of identity is also raised as an underlying cause (Iyob 1999; Abbay 1998). Others also trace the tensions and conflicts that existed between the two fronts going back to the war against the central government in the 1980s (Young, 1996).

A closer look at the two fronts however shows a very close resemblance in terms of identity, nature of governance, economic policies as well as political orientation. Whatever differences are apparent are only due to the fact that the two regimes have to manage two very different states. Ethiopia is a large complex country for a provincial movement with less acceptance outside its provincial base, to manage, while Eritrea is relatively small and less complex, and the ruling party there has established itself as a legitimate armed movement during long years of struggle for independence. Moreover, no two states can be similar, and such differences as indicated are not enough reasons to take states to war. Indeed, one of the reasons why many observers have gone to great lengths to look for differences is the very fact that the ruling parties in Ethiopia and Eritrea are so closely tied and share a great deal of similarity. They share the same ethnic, cultural, religious and ideological background as well a similar experience in fighting together during years of guerrilla war against an “Amhara dominated” Ethiopian government. The societies from which both movements draw their support have also similar political traditions, if not the same. I think the fundamental cause of the conflict can be traced to the narrow-mindedness and short-term objectives, as well as lack of public accountability that guided the policies of the leaderships of the two states. The lack of public accountability, and the absence of public debate, besides not

helping relations between the two states, has blurred understanding of the conflict itself and therefore its resolution.

Factors Guiding Relations: Short Term Objectives

The policy of the EPLF towards the TPLF must have changed over time. Initially they needed the TPLF probably as a buffer military front against the Ethiopian government. As soon as it became clear that the Dergue regime was collapsing, and the TPLF fighting force grew, the EPLF wanted the TPLF to be strong enough to be able to control the Ethiopian government and endorse Eritrean independence, but weak enough to need continued dependence on Eritrean support for its survival. Certain events that took place immediately after the seizure of power in Addis Ababa and Asmara may also help us to understand the dynamics of the relations between the two fronts. The series of massive explosions that destroyed Ethiopia's massive arms and ammunition depots in Addis Ababa and Dirre Dawa immediately following the seizure of the Addis Ababa (an act attributed to the EPLF) must be seen in this context. It must have been intended to deny the incoming regime in Ethiopia from rebuilding Ethiopia's military capacity, a factor that might allow it a good measure of independence. It might have worked in the short term, but what the Eritreans miscalculated was that the TPLF inherited a large country, with more resources at the disposal of the government, a functioning state bureaucracy as well as, in comparison, a state with a bigger stature in the world, particularly in Africa. I believe that the TPLF also read into EPLF attitudes very carefully, understood it correctly and acted accordingly. As the TPLF consolidated its hold on Ethiopia, the balance of forces gradually changed in its favour and the Eritrean leadership failed to adjust its strategy and tactics to the new reality.

On the face of it, the current conflict between the two states is minor. It has to do with border demarcation and adjustments. However, the complicating factor is that when Eritrea became independent (*de facto* in 1991, *de jure* in 1993), its boundaries were not defined. It was simply assumed that it was the boundary established by Italian colonial rule. It was conveniently forgotten that the boundaries of Eritrea have changed several times in the course of the last half a century. Neither the Eritrean side nor the Ethiopian side raised this issue. As a new state, the burden was on the Eritrean side to insist on at least a clear statement from the Ethiopian government on the boundary. However, this was not done and both sides had their own narrow interests at the time, for which each needed the support of the other, though the boundary issue was already a subject of controversy between the Tigrean and Eritrean fronts during the years they fought against the central Ethiopian state. The immediate interest of the Eritrean leadership at the time was a speedy recognition of the independence of Eritrea by the

international community, which required the legal acceptance of a friendly government, acting on behalf of the Ethiopian state. Since this role was assumed by the TPLF at the end of May 1991, the TPLF leadership had a pivotal role to play. Therefore, in order to secure Ethiopia's endorsement, the EPLF did every thing possible to support the TPLF's grip on power. The TPLF (initially a provincial movement for autonomy) leaders were aware that they had a shaky legitimacy to rule Ethiopia, and they could only impose their rule by force and manipulation. For this they needed the military support of the EPLF as well as its political support, particularly the mobilization of the long established Eritrean community in Ethiopia, mainly in the Oromo and southern regions. Hence, both sides were not concerned with long term issues in relations between the two states and peoples. In fact, relations were never handled at the level of governments. Though it was the most crucial political issue facing the new government, there was never an occasion when relations with Eritrea were ever brought before the Council of Ministers (the executive organ of the state).⁹

Lack of Public Accountability and Debate

The emergence of two states from what was one after long years of war is a very serious issue, and should have been treated as such. But, in the case of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and what transpired during the four decades of federation, unity and war, it was never discussed and reviewed publicly and openly (I doubt if it was ever discussed even secretly). As nothing was said about the past, the present was clouded in mystery, and when the marriage of convenience between the TPLF and EPLF leaderships collapsed, so did relations between the two states. Though ironic, members of the Ethiopian government (with the exception of the top TPLF leaders) were more surprised at the turn of events in relations between the two leaderships, as it was never dealt with in governmental councils and was restricted to the top leaders of the EPLF and TPLF. It was only after open hostilities broke out in May 1998 that the Ethiopian Prime Minister took the issue to the Council of Ministers, and then to his parliament.¹⁰

Whether by design or carelessness, the Eritrean question was never even raised as an important political issue, including in the statements during the failed London conference of May 1991, which ended up endorsing the TPLF takeover of Ethiopia

⁹This author served as a minister in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia during 1991-92.

¹⁰Apparently, this angered the Eritrean leader as it became clear from the personal letters he wrote to the Ethiopian prime minister, later made public by the Eritrean side.

and trusted it with the exercise of sovereignty for the whole of Ethiopia.¹¹ The July 1991 Conference in Addis Ababa was also supposed to seal a political settlement to the civil war that was raging in Ethiopia (including the Eritrean conflict) and chart the post-Dergue political landscape. Unfortunately, even that conference closed without conclusively resolving the Eritrean issue. The Agenda of the conference was pre-prepared by the TPLF leadership, in consultation with the EPLF and OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) leaderships. There were only two items on the agenda of the conference. The first item was the charter of the transitional period, while the second was “relations between Ethiopia and the Provisional Government of Eritrea” (the EPLF). Interestingly, though they had an important stake in the outcome of the conference, the Eritrean delegation was seated with the rest of the international community as one of the observers throughout the conference. Once the conference adopted the first agenda item, the second one was tabled, at which stage the Eritrean leader was invited to take part. It was a rather revealing moment. The Eritrean leader started his speech (he seemed to have no prepared speech) from where he was seated with his own interpreter. But, after disagreeing with his interpreter (probably on points of emphasis), he insisted that the Chairman of the conference (the TPLF leader) act as an interpreter. Surprisingly, the TPLF leader did play the role requested of him. After the Eritrean leader was through with his speech (which was not very coherent, but was a sort of a victory speech rubbing into the wounds of a defeated Ethiopian state), the floor was opened for discussion. Though the conference participants were carefully selected and the main Ethiopian opposition to the military regime was excluded, certain participants raised serious issues that the organizers hardly expected. One of the first people to speak was the representative of Addis Ababa University, Professor Asrat Woldeyes, who underlined the fact that both the Chairman of the conference and Eritrean leaders shared the same mother tongue and urged them to maintain Ethiopia’s unity by using the close personal relations between them. Another speaker was a representative from the Guraghe nationality. He noted that he found ironic for Eritrea, which was part of the historic Ethiopian polity and shared so much with the rest of northern Ethiopia to question its Ethiopian identity when even his own people, the Guraghe, and other southern nationalities that were incorporated into the Ethiopian state only a century ago considered themselves part of Ethiopia. Another speaker, *Fitawrari* Mekonen Dori from the Galab people in the south, stressed that Ethiopia is endowed with resources, and can use any port it chooses and trade with the rest of the world by other means as well other than the sea, and cannot be blackmailed by access to Eritrean ports. One of the last speakers was the Sultan of the Afar, *Bitwoded* Ali Mirah, who underlined that while he supported Eritrea’s right to self-determination, he would also demand the same rights for the Afar people of the Red Sea Coast,

¹¹ Press statement, London, May 28, 1991.

the Assab Region in Eritrea (which became one of the autonomous regions under the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia). It was at this stage that the Eritrean leader (apparently having had enough of this) angrily walked out of the conference, after making a brief comment. The Eritrean leadership probably lost a historic opportunity to directly address the Ethiopian peoples and be magnanimous in victory (at least in words). Unfortunate as it became, the issue was never seriously taken up again. To date there is no document that attests to the fact that the conference (which provided the best opportunity for settling this issue) actually tackled and settled the Eritrean question. While the document of the first agenda item was published in the official gazette, the *Negarit Gazette*, as a legal document of the conference, nothing came out of the second agenda item, a fact that clearly indicates the inconclusive nature of the discussions. Thus, the Eritrean question was left (to be dealt with) as a private matter between the Tigrinya-speaking leaderships of the TPLF and EPLF. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia, which was established by the conference, was charged with exercising legal responsibility and sovereignty for the whole of Ethiopia (as its predecessor for a brief period, the Provisional Government of Ethiopia was, following the agreement at the failed London peace conference of May 1991) at least as far as the international community was concerned.

The above narrative is intended to underline the fact that the Ethiopian state never resolved the Eritrean question in a proper and formal manner. That is why lingering doubts remain within Ethiopia, including within the TPLF leadership, who, for many years openly championed the Eritrean cause, sometimes to the embarrassment of the Eritreans. There was no public debate on the issue either. The Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples were never allowed to give their opinions and were not able to weigh the consequences of the new reality. It is true that the issue was settled militarily, but it needed to be tackled politically and help the people to come to terms with the new reality. It is the consequence of such short-sighted policies that has today become one of the most intractable problems facing the peoples in both states as well as the international community. The peoples of both states were not informed when relations between the Tigrean and Eritrean leaderships were good, but when they fell out with each other the peoples were called upon to pay the costs of the gross mismanagement of the interstate relations.

The assumption of many people was that relations between the TPLF and EPLF were the closest that any two movements can have, and that the two shared common strategic objectives. However, firstly relations between the EPLF and the TPLF leaderships were never as impeccable as presented or many (both supporters and critics) believed. Secondly, relations were more likely based on assumptions and understandings than any formal agreements. Ruth Iyob (2000) is one of the few academics to indicate that the two regimes failed to formalize their "understanding" into formal treaties that have the force of international law, a factor that contributed to the outbreak of open

hostilities. Though the underlying causes were never clear to most people, there were serious disputes between the two fronts already in the mid-1980s with a total severing of relations. Relations resumed only at the end of the 1980s as a result of the practical need for cooperation against the Dergue, particularly as the Dergue's forces started collapsing following the attempted coup of 1989 and waning Soviet support. Even after the collapse of the Dergue regime, a row erupted between the two leaderships in the summer of 1991, when the UN returned a letter written by the Eritrean leader to the Secretary General requesting the UN to oversee a referendum for the independence of Eritrea. The Eritrean leader probably got a verbal advice that the UN would consider a similar letter by some one representing a UN member state (in this case, the Ethiopian state). When the Eritrean leader requested Meles (the TPLF leader) to write a similar letter to the UN, the Tigrean leader drag his feet, on the grounds that he needed to consult the TPLF Presidium and get their approval. The EPLF used all the pressure they could mount to get this letter written, including a high level meeting with the OLF leadership in Addis Ababa, in which they came up with an offer to train and arm OLF fighters and supply other material and support (in an apparent attempt to destabilize the transitional government). The OLF leadership was obviously not aware of the behind the scenes developments and was surprised with the sudden change in EPLF attitudes. The OLF participation in the transitional government was marginal and tensions were already high between the OLF and the TPLF. The TPLF leader probably got the message and caved in for Eritrean support was crucial at that stage for his consolidation of power in Ethiopia. But, he took over five months after the July 1991 Conference to write a letter to the UN Secretary General explaining the outcome of the conference, including a decision on Eritrea (which the conference actually never adopted formally) (UN, 1996: 154). The interesting thing about this letter is that, it requests the UN to put in place measures to hold a referendum in Eritrea and make arrangements directly with the EPLF, and with that letter the Ethiopian government washed its hands from any say on the Eritrean issue.

Thus, the most serious deficit in the relationship between the two states is not only the lack of any public involvement, and the absence of any public accountability, but also foresight on the part of the two leaderships. The resort to war, apparently to settle an internal dispute between the Tigrean and Eritrean leaderships was sudden and unexpected. If there were some public accountability, the procedure to go war would have been at least protracted. The resort to fighting emanates also from the absence of any established formal instruments to manage relations between the two regimes and states. Relations between the leaderships of these fronts were more likely based on assumptions and the personal relations of the key leaders. Even after the outbreak of hostilities, the Eritrean leader was apparently still confident that these informal personal relations would work, as he tried to address personal letters to the Ethiopian

prime minister, and was angry at the latter's handling of the situation by tabling the issue before the government and parliament.¹²

The Role of the International Community

The International Community (particularly the US and Western European governments) also handled the post-Dergue (and post Soviet) political situation in the Horn of Africa on the basis of narrowly defined short-term interests. Many in the international community were guided more by narrow-minded short-term interests than overall regional stability and development in their relations with the regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea. They failed to take into account the complex interplay of internal and interstate conflicts in the region. As a result, the remedy they prescribed and the agreement they pushed on the two states has (to date) failed to resolve the conflict. Instead of promoting democracy and popular empowerment, they were more concerned with short-term stability. Their policies were most likely guided by growing concerns about the Islamist regime in Sudan, and anarchy in Somalia. The two regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea were thus supplied with military, political economic and diplomatic support as a bulwark against the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in the region and possible links to terrorism. It is this sort of encouragement they received that strengthened the structures and tendencies that eventually led to not just internal repression but also interstate war. The two regimes had a free hand to carry out internal repression without any criticism from the west, as well as interference and subversion against the neighbouring states. Western diplomats took the seemingly close ties between the two leaderships also at its face value. The two regimes managed to give the impression of close and cordial relations despite growing tensions. When the conflict erupted into open warfare, western diplomats were not only surprised, but treated the conflict as a purely border conflict triggered by overzealous local officials and attempted to solve it on that assumption.

Thus, the international community's failure to understand the real causes of the conflict and treatment of only the symptoms is part of the problem in the impasse in the resolution of the current conflict. It treated the problem between the two states as a border problem spending considerable energy and resources on that superficial aspect of the conflict. It continues to insist on the resolution of the boundary issue above and before any other aspect in relations between the two states, though it has become clear for sometime that the boundary is only a manifestation of other disputes. Initially, the international community was itself surprised at the turn of events between the two

¹² See note 3 above.

states and rushed in with solutions in the middle of the fighting without analyzing and understanding the underlying causes of the conflict. Yet, it should not have come as a surprise to close observers of the manner in which Ethiopian-Eritrean relations have been managed.

Linkages to Internal and Regional Conflicts

Given the complexities of relations between the two states, and the border issue being only a manifestation of much deeper issues, it is unlikely that the conflict will get a solution soon. The Eritreans now hold the international community (particularly the United States and the UN) responsible for failing to force Ethiopia to implement the ruling of the Hague Commission. In this regard, they have been trying to put pressures on the UN, by restricting the movement of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE). They have stepped up support for all sorts of forces to destabilize the Ethiopian government. Their support of the Islamic courts in Somalia and recent rapprochement with the Sudan is part of this strategy to pressure the international community to force the Ethiopians to implement the ruling of the Hague Commission.

When the two regimes were at peace, they not only shunned any contacts with the political opposition of each other, but opposition elements of both regimes became victims in the hands of both. For example, many Oromo nationalists hold the Eritreans partly responsible for the political ejection and military defeat of the OLF in 1992. Likewise, there are many Eritreans who hold the TPLF responsible for the ejection of the ELF from Eritrea in the 1980s, and after 1991, for the hunting down of Eritreans in Ethiopia, particularly those who belonged to other Eritrean fronts or simply did not like the EPLF. Now the OLF has its main base in Eritrea, and the Eritrean regime is even entertaining the right wing Amhara opposition to TPLF rule (forces who have never reconciled with the fact of Eritrea's independence). Likewise, the Eritrean opposition, including the various factions of the ELF, is supported by the TPLF regime. Moreover, both states support opposing sides in the conflict in Somalia. The most serious charge the opposition has made against the ruling TPLF concerns the manner in which the regime handled Eritrea's independence. Interestingly, the war is popular among the Ethiopian opposition and conflict with Eritrea is the single issue that unites the TPLF and the opposition (with the exception of the OLF and ONLF for obvious reasons). Some Eritreans actually blame the Ethiopian opposition and "hardliners" within the TPLF as well as "Ethiopia's ethnic rivalries" for the conflict between the two states and accuse the TPLF of caving in to these forces (Mengisteab and Yohannes, 2005: 240-48). Obviously, these factors cannot be separated from the conflict between the two states. Therefore, any solution to the conflict and normalization of relations between

the two states, who share so much in common, must take into account the internal political dynamics as well as the regional implications.

The conflict has had implications for the internal cohesion of the ruling groups of the PFDJ as well as the TPLF. The war became an excuse for postponing internal political debates and the implementation of a draft constitution, as well as the further stifling of all dissent in Eritrea. In 2001, a major crisis emerged within the PFDJ leadership as several leading members of the liberation struggle were purged and imprisoned, the few independent newspapers were closed down and journalists and student leaders were put behind bars. In Ethiopia, the TPLF leadership suffered its worst crisis since coming to power as several leading members of the leadership (including senior members of the armed forces) came out openly in opposition to the prime minister and allegedly attempted to unseat him. His Eritrea policy was apparently the main reason for their opposition.¹³ The Prime Minister won the day, but the ruling party was seriously damaged.

Conclusion

Treating this conflict simply as a border conflict underestimates the consequences that this conflict is having on the internal stability of both states as well as on the entire region. Coupled with the already heavy loss of life it has entailed, the conflict has also diverted scarce human and material resources (much needed for social and economic development) to the war. Each one of them spends considerable resources on purchasing military hardware that their poor economies can ill afford, and to destabilize the other.

Ethiopia seems to be comfortable with the present “no war, no peace” situation as it is Eritrea that is shouldering a greater share of the burden. The conflict has led to more militarization in Eritrea, as it has mobilized a disproportionate share of its adult population for war, and spends more on defense than any other country in the World, over 20 per cent of its GDP. Eritrea’s economy is also more dependent on external infusion than the Ethiopian economy, as 35 percent of its GDP is remittances from abroad (Mengisteab and Yohannes, 2005: 252).

As we have seen this conflict has wider implications and if left unresolved, it has the potential of destabilizing not only the two countries, but also the entire Horn of Africa region, drawing in forces from afar and near. Left to its own logic, the conflict has the potential of leading to possible failure or even collapse of states. It should never

¹³ The Ethiopian prime minister has been accused of having a softer approach to Eritrea for signing the Algiers peace agreement that did not reflect Ethiopia’s military victory.

have been treated as a simple border issue in the first place. Therefore, its resolution is best sought within its wider context, for lasting peace, and stability. The internal conflicts in both states also need to be addressed. The international community should therefore look at the wider aspects of the conflict, both internal and regional, and help in finding a comprehensive solution to relations between the two states.

The Algiers Agreement has stalled and is no longer the solution that it was thought to be. And it must be clear by now that the agreement and the subsequent decisions based on it were the wrong instruments for solving the conflict between the two states. Therefore, it is pertinent to look at the problem differently and find appropriate mechanisms that ensure a lasting solution for both states and peoples. The peoples of both states, who are the real victims of the conflict should be the beneficiaries of its resolution, have to be involved in defining and managing the relations between them. This definitely calls for a fundamental restructuring of the political space in both states. The international community can best contribute to the resolution of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea by promoting political reform, dialogue, and national reconciliation within and between both states.

Chapter 6 Towards a Sustainable Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea

By Gebru Asrat

Introduction

On the 6th of May this year, eight years had elapsed since conflict flared up between Ethiopia and Eritrea in the vicinity of the village of Badme. Since then, international efforts have been made to mediate between the warring countries. The UN, AU, USA, Rwanda and the EU have attempted to peacefully resolve the issue, but did not succeed in averting the ferocious war that caused the deaths of about 100,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands. There was some hope for peace when the two countries signed a cessation of hostilities agreement in June 2000 and when the war was officially ended with the Algiers Peace Agreement on December 12, 2000.

But despite agreement by the two warring parties to settle the dispute through international mediation, the problem has not been resolved yet. The Ethio-Eritrea Boundary Commission (EEBC), established through the Algiers Peace Agreement, has focused on settlement of the border issue, perceived as the basic cause of the conflict. The EEBC's boundary ruling has not yet been implemented and the atmosphere remains tense. Although there is no open war, proxy wars and malicious propaganda are being waged by the two parties.

Many observers are puzzled by why the two countries are not settling their differences amicably and speedily, but they may have not grasped the most fundamental causes and nature of the conflict. Many perceive the border/boundary issue as a pivotal cause of the conflict, but the real cause has been a more fundamental and complex one. Although the border issue has contributed to the conflict, the state formation process and the nature of the states in conflict, has been the most pivotal cause of the conflict. Any mediation effort that ignores this fact cannot hope to bring about a viable or lasting solution to the problem. Hence, in this short paper, I will try to present my perspectives on the causes of the conflict and try to recommend some solutions.

The State Formation Process in Ethiopia

Prior to the formation of the present Ethiopian state, the Abyssinian state had established itself in the northern part of the country for centuries. The present Ethiopian state, an outgrowth of the Abyssinian state, acquired its current shape and identity after passing through a long and turbulent socio-political process. This process was no different from the one Europe had gone through, in the sense that it was protracted and coercive. As Gebru Tareke (1991:27) notes “In their search for uncontested sovereignty, ‘state builders’ have sought to subordinate, emasculate, or eliminate existing power wielders and rival organizations either through co-option or coercion- usually both- but more frequently by force. So the historical evolution of the state has invariably been a slow, often protracted, and nearly always a violent process.” Mohammed Ayooob (2001) further notes that “the expansion and consolidation of territory, the imposition of political authority and order on this territory, the maintenance of law and order (policing), the extraction of resources from the territory, all of these, which are essential requirements of state building, depend on the state’s success in monopolizing and concentrating the means of coercion and are done with a certain level of coercive activities conducted by the state builders”.

But there are peculiarities in every state building process that distinguish it and shape the form and nature of stability in a particular society. In the Ethiopian case, state formation and consolidation has been achieved in the face of tremendous internal and external resistance. “The Ethiopian state is no mere duplication of other states, but bears close resemblance to the state formation process that took place in Europe. Despite structural similarities, the Ethiopian state can be differentiated from others in the continent by its greater organic linkages to society. In the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, state apparatuses were bequeathed by colonialism and thus lacked indigenous roots” (Gebru Tareke 1991:28). In this sense, the Ethiopian state building process is distinct. In fact, the Ethiopian state not only survived European colonial occupation, but also increased its size by more than 65% in the wake of the ‘Scramble for Africa.’ At the end of the 19th Century, Ethiopian Emperors crafted most of the physical boundaries of the country by fighting with and subjugating neighbourly societies while, at the same time, fighting colonial powers. This process had, and continues to have, a fundamental impact on the peace and security of the Horn region in general, and the country, in particular. Hence, understanding the history of state building in Ethiopia and putting the on-going situation into historical context is extremely helpful.

Emperor Tewodros II, who reigned from 1855 to 1868, started the process of building a modern and centralized state in Ethiopia. However, his attempt failed due to the strong resistance of the feudal principalities and the church who opposed his modernizing ventures. Emperor Yohannes, who succeeded Tewodros, tried to continue the process of state building by allying himself with the Ethiopian Orthodox

Church and coercing Islam. Like his predecessor, however, he faced strong internal and external opposition. Internally, his main opponents were King Menelik of Shoa and Teklehaimanot of Gojjam. But the main challenge Yohannes faced came from external forces aiming to control the country. Yohannes fought many battles against foreign invaders. He fought against the Ottoman Turks and Egyptians. He fought the battle of Dogali against the Italians who tried to encroach on his territory and he died fighting against the Mahdists of the Sudan in Metema.

After the death of Yohannes, Emperor Menelik, who reigned from 1890 to 1912, continued the process of state building through territorial expansion to the south. While expanding his territory to the south, Menelik compromised with the Italian colonial powers on the northern front by signing the treaty of Wuchale that recognized Eritrea as an Italian colony. His acquiescence to the Italians' claim did, however, not contain their expansion and the Italians violated the Wuchale Agreement by invading Ethiopia, this eventually leading to their defeat at the historic battle of Adwa.

Following Emperor Menelik, Emperor Haile Selassie, who reigned from 1930 to 1974, continued the process of modern state building. But his attempt to build a modern state was interrupted by the 1935 Italian invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. After the ousting of the Italian colonizers, Haile Selassie fostered good relations with the British and Americans, but his rule was strongly challenged by domestic forces, including the peasant revolts of Tigray (1943), Gojjam (1968) and Bale (1963-1970).

Haile Selassie's state building attempt was different from Menelik's in that he was favoured by the international order to expand his empire beyond the previous Mereb boundary. Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea after the UN General Assembly ruled for the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia in its December 2, 1950 Resolution 390A(V). The decision was reached in 1952, but Haile Selassie abrogated it and incorporated Eritrea as a province of the Ethiopian Empire. This complicated matters and led Eritreans to rebel and to establish a nationalist separatist movement starting 1961. Although Haile Selassie made certain reforms, including the institution of constitutional rule, these were neither sufficient to modernize the state nor to effect fundamental economic change. His rule depended on the landed aristocracy and the domination of one ethnic group, a structure that didn't leave much room for democratic resolution of social, political and economic problems.

After Haile Selassie's downfall, the military regime that took power could not bring about any fundamental change, except in terms of land reform. The Derg, which claimed to be socialist, greatly centralized the state and ruled through coercion and terror. This pushed several ethnic groups to form liberation fronts and to wage guerilla warfare against it. In addition to Eritrean fronts established under Haile Selassie, other fronts mushroomed under the Derg, including the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Afar Liberation Front (ALF)

and various Somali fronts. The central political mainstay of the Derg was Ethiopian Unity.

In this period, the civil war was mainly rooted in differences in approaches with regard to the organization and nature of the state. The Derg and its 'Eastern Bloc' mentors failed in their endeavours and the Derg was overthrown by liberation fronts that opposed it. The fronts formed their own states, based on ethno-national federalism and decentralization of power to regions. A constitution was endorsed in

Ethiopia that established the new state of the "Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE)". In contrast to Ethiopia, the Eritreans established a highly centralized state structure.

Based on this brief history of the process of state building in Ethiopia, several conclusions can be reached, namely:

1. The state building process in Ethiopia has distinct features. It did not start with the demise of colonialism and was not a gift bequeathed by colonial powers. Although there was some colonial influence, state building was not determined by post-colonial arrangements.
2. The state building process in Ethiopia was no different from that in Europe, in that it was coercive and expansionist, and involved force and subjugation. At the same time, Ethiopian state builders had to almost continuously fight foreign powers and to overcome internal resistance and rebellions, while consolidating and extending their dominance.
3. Continuously disrupted by external invasions, the process of state building in Ethiopia was protracted, socially and economically costly, and resulted in territorial expansion and consolidation, resource concentration and expansion of power. Even at the end of 20th Century, the process of state building, in the sense of formation of one national state, was not truly complete.
4. The fundamental character and nature of the Ethiopian state is one of being highly centralized and autocratic. Attainment and tenure of state power mean everything, and conversely, the stakes in losing state power or not having an acceptable share in it are great. As a result, the struggle for state power by major social groups in Ethiopia has been a perpetual source of internal conflict, and it was under this situation that the Eritrean state was created.

Causes of the Ethio-Eritrea conflict

It is difficult to attribute a single cause to the Ethio-Eritrea conflict. Several factors contributed to the conflict, including: a) the process of state formation in both countries and the nature and structure of the states created; b) divergent approaches to governance in the two countries; c) conflicting economic interests; and d) border dispute. Although all of these factors contributed to the conflict, perhaps the single most important factor for the conflict is the state formation process and the nature of the two states under which most of the identified contributory factors can be subsumed.

The state formation process and the nature of the states in conflict

In the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the Derg, the central preoccupation of the political leaderships in both Ethiopia and Eritrea was state building. The political leaderships of both countries were busy consolidating the power of their respective states to bolster their position vis-à-vis each other and in the international arena. In addition, the dynamics of relations between the two political forces that led the insurgency in Ethiopia and Eritrea changed dramatically after they assumed state power in 1991. Although the relationship between the two fronts was never smooth, the number of inflammatory issues that could lead to conflict increased and the strength of conflict resolution mechanisms diminished after their assumption of power. Under these conditions, the nature of the states and the historical process that created the Ethiopian and Eritrean states became important causes of interstate conflict.

One of the issues that can be raised with regard to the Eritrean state building process in this period, that contributed to the conflict was the construction of an 'Eritrean national identity' firmly rooted on the invincibility of the 'Eritrean fighter' and the great achievements of the EPLF during the armed struggle. The newly created state of Eritrea tried to leap over the arduous and protracted path of state formation by constructing a national identity that negated its past identity. As Alemseged Abay (1998: 225) notes: "Conceived in reaction to genocidal-like state behavior, Eritreanness remains yet to be delivered, making Eritrean and nurturing Eritreanness demands self definition and boundary delimitation, since identity inherently contrasts and needs relevant other."

Complementing Alemseged's statement, President Isayas, in one of his many such interviews stated "We have lived with Europeans; we have seen much of the civilized world. There are many things we have learned from them. The Ethiopians, on the contrary, have just come out of the forest. They are not civilized. They feel inferior because they have come out of the bush" (Solomon Inquai 1998: 15). It is clear from this statement that, for the Eritrean President, regarded as the hero and father of the

Eritrean State, colonial bondage has become a source of national identity and pride, in spite of the confusion between colonial bondage and civilization.

After 30 years of bitter armed struggle and secession from Ethiopia, the Eritrean political elite, unlike its counterpart in Ethiopia, felt Eritreans were homogenous, united and strong. Conveniently disregarding other political forces that defeated the Derg, the Eritrean leadership simplistically and chauvinistically claimed total credit for the overthrow of the Derg. It claimed that tiny Eritrea had defeated greater Ethiopia that enjoyed massive support from the US and the former Soviet Union. It even went to the extent that the leadership of the EPLF had outwitted the super powers. The Eritrean political leadership used this glorified self-image to build its new national identity and state. It cultivated the attitude that "Eritreans could overcome insurmountable obstacles." Although one cannot deny the role wars play in the construction of a national identity or dismiss the huge sacrifices paid by the Eritrean people, this glorified national identity constructed by the Eritrean leadership played an important and pivotal role in instigating the conflict.

Economic issues

Economic issues have played such a crucial role in Ethio-Eritrean relations that many Ethiopians believe they were at the heart of the conflict. The economic issues that led to confrontation between the two countries first surfaced in the wake of Eritrean Independence, at a national conference convened to discuss the future economic development of Eritrea. Right after liberation and the establishment of the Eritrean state in 1993, the Eritreans declared their development vision as aspiring to be like Singapore and overcoming all of their problems by the year 2015. By then, Eritrea was to be at the level of Germany in the area of road transport, at the level of Sweden in the area telecommunications, and at a par with the rest of Europe in other areas (Solomon Inquai 1998: 15). The actualization of this economic vision assumed a large and untapped Ethiopian market, and cheap migrant labour from the Ethiopian hinterland for Eritrean industrialization.

Right after the conference, a joint ministerial commission was formed through 'the Asmara Pact', to harmonize economic policies and activities between the two countries. At scheduled periodic meetings of the commission, the most important issues discussed related to trade, investment and nationality. But very little progress was made in these talks, and after three years, the arrangement failed. The two countries then agreed to establish a joint review committee, which produced a report that did not conceal the fact that the two countries had widely differing views and positions in terms of economic cooperation. After this, the ministerial commission was disbanded and a joint party commission was established in its place.

Like its predecessor, this commission could not proceed with the tasks it was assigned and instead raised several problems with regard to ongoing economic relations between the two countries, which led to its disbandment. Eritrean President Isayas Afeworki, in an interview he gave immediately after the war started, in April-May 1998, explained that “Ethiopian trade policy was designed to protect the market for Ethiopian manufactured products by creating barriers to Eritrean manufactured products” (Tekeste and Tronvoll 2000: 44) and added this situation was completely unacceptable.

Divergent approaches to governance

As mentioned earlier, in the process of state building, the Eritrean political elite used military invincibility as an instrument for dictating its terms. Professor Endreas (1998: 11) explains the situation as follows. “Eritrea, in contrast to Ethiopia, is united by triumphant nationalism consolidated by unitary rule under a government by an uncontrolled powerful party. The leadership is free of constitutional, parliamentary or cabinet rule. Moreover with an army never demobilized and whose members are continuously enriched through uninterrupted conscription, the leadership is endowed with a strong military arm. A leadership free of political and legal checks is therefore in a position to deploy its military power as it pleases.”

The political leaders of Eritrea aspired to play a much greater role in East Africa and internationally. Not only did they want to humiliate and undermine the Ethiopian state, which they thought weak and divided, but they also wanted to permanently change the power relations in the region by establishing themselves as world leaders. The creation of a new state, the beginning of the state building process, coupled with the construction of a new national identity, in the aftermath of a victorious liberation struggle, had created what Endreas (1998) calls “triumphant nationalism”. The Eritrean political leadership flexed its military muscle on relatively weaker neighbours (Djibouti, Yemen and the Sudan), but ultimately turned to the main force in the region, Ethiopia.

The boundary dispute

The boundary of colonial Eritrea and Imperial Ethiopia was not indisputably settled when the UN decided the Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the subsequent formal rejection by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1947, made the border treaties of 1900, 1902 and 1908 between Emperor Menelik and the Italian government null and void (Abbink 2003). The abrogation of the federal arrangement by Ethiopian rulers made the border issue irrelevant in any case as Eritrea did not exist as an independent entity for the next four decades (1952-1991).

The boundary issue was raised during the armed struggle, but the two parties had postponed its settlement indefinitely. The issue was not raised again until 1997, one

year before the Ethio-Eritrea war. Even then, it was not a major issue and was only raised when agreement could not be reached on other, particularly economic, issues. This is not to say that the border issue had no role in instigating disputes. Once progress failed on other issues of national interest, the border issue gained prominence. The Eritrean government pushed it so far as to question the genuineness of Ethiopia's recognition of Eritrean independence in the absence of a resolution of the border issue. Finally, the issue became an excuse for the Eritrean aggression of Ethiopia and the senseless war.

The mediation process

When conflict was sparked between Ethiopia and Eritrea in May 1998, international mediators tried to resolve the conflict peacefully. However, all efforts by the US, Rwanda, the AU and the UN failed because of the intransigence of the two parties involved in general and that of Isayas in particular. The Ethiopian government saw the issue as one of violation of Ethiopian sovereignty by Eritrea that required reversal by any means. For the Ethiopians, to be invaded by Eritrea, after having recognized its independence and allowed themselves to become land locked (something the majority of Ethiopians resent) was completely off limits. The Eritreans, on the other hand, felt they could have their own way militarily and viewed the situation as an opportunity to once and for all settle their account with their former "colonizer".

The peace agreement signed on June 18, 2000 in Algiers was brokered by international and regional organizations after the warring parties had exhausted themselves. The EEBC's border ruling was in favour of Eritrea, which was unjustly rewarded with the town of Badme where the conflict originated. Ethiopians were bitter with the decision of the commission and felt betrayed by their government because their country, the victim of aggression by Eritrea, had been denied the fruits of its military victory through the weakness of its own government. In any case, the peace agreement had not brought peace or led to the normalization of relations between the two countries.

At present, it is clear that the peace process has been stalled and that the wind of war is blowing in border areas. Allowing another war to erupt between Ethiopia and Eritrea would mean inviting a major disaster that would be detrimental to both countries. Although there seems to be no way out, the situation that would arise if war broke out again would be even more catastrophic, and result in destabilizing the region. It is therefore critical to seek comprehensive short- and long-term solutions to break the deadlock and avert further catastrophe. The following recommendations should be helpful for both countries to come out of the quagmire they are in and bring about peace and hope in their countries, as well as the region as a whole.

- A) Forthcoming mediations and negotiations should not concentrate on a single issue. So far mediators have reduced the conflict issue to a boundary/border issue and dealt with it in isolation. Any attempt to implement the decision of the EEBC would further complicate the situation and might spark fresh conflicts. Therefore avoiding the implementation of the decision of the EEBC would be advisable.
- B) To avert another catastrophe, the short-term solution would be to at least maintain the “No war, No peace” status quo till a comprehensive peace deal is accomplished. This could be done provided international pressure is put on both parties and peace-loving citizens on both sides support the efforts of the international community. Intensive proxy wars being waged by the two parties have to be halted since there is a threat that the current proliferation of conflicts, beyond the parties concerned (e.g. Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya) could destabilize the region. Proxy wars could escalate into full-scale wars and as such stopping them should become a major priority for mediators.
- C) Promote people to people relations and interactions between the citizens of the two countries, by putting in place mechanisms that would enable them raise and discuss issues of common interest.
- D) The basic cause of the conflict has to do with the process of state building and the nature of the states in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Conflict arises because one party tries to undermine the national interests of the other. National interest issues revolve around the economy, territory, security or other regional concerns. Vital national interests have to be enumerated and discussed not only by the political elite, but also by the citizens of the two countries. For Ethiopia, access to the sea, demobilization of armed forces and transparent economic relations are critical issues of national interest. Eritrea should also enumerate its vital national interests for discussion and mediation.
- E) A long-term comprehensive solution must also be sought that would involve replacing the government dictatorships in both countries by the rule of the people. All this will entail the transformation of the incumbent regimes in both countries through a protracted process. Although this seems difficult, it is attainable. The prevalence of democracy is the only guarantee to peace and security in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and in the Horn of Africa.

Chapter 7 The Impasse of the Ethio-Eritrea Conflict: The Way Out

By Getachew Begashaw

The Ethio-Eritrea conflict is much more complex and multifaceted than what many individuals, governments, and international institutions might have originally envisioned. The United Nations and many governments around the world with stakes in Ethiopia thought that a simple stroke of a ruling, handed down by the Ethiopian-Eritrean Boundary Commission (EEBC) would solve the Ethio-Eritrea border conflict once and for all. That did not, however, prove effective, and it is time that other methods and options are sought.

There are two different aspects of the impasse that need to be evaluated -- one pertaining to the conflict, and the other to the failure to implement the ruling of the EEBC.

The main causes of the conflict between the two regimes in Asmara and Addis Ababa could be characterized as strategic rivalries of the two regimes for controlling the political future and economic resources of Ethiopia. In the context of growing bilateral tensions between the two regimes, the long-simmering ideological and political disputes had to find their expressions in what could be sold as legitimate national causes. Eritrea, although the smaller of the two countries, had always been the dominant partner politically, because of the historical relationship between the EPLF and the TPLF in the days of the liberation war [Lortan, 2000; Plaut & Gilkes, 1999]. Isayas Afeworki, the leader of the EPLF, might have had expectations for unlimited access and entitlement to all the resources of Ethiopia that was then controlled by what he considered a proxy government in Addis Ababa. However, in a matter of few years the seething discord between the two groups escalated, and the Eritrean and Tigrian nationalism collided.

The arguments that present territorial claim and specific economic factors as the root causes of the conflict are advanced by Fessehazion (1998), Tesfai (2000), and Cornwell (1998). The territorial claim and, in particular the immediate economic cause, which got its expressions in issues surrounding Eritrea's introduction of its own currency (*nakfa*), the excessive port fees charged by Eritrea, and the divergent trading

policies of the two regimes may be helpful in understanding the pretexts used by both regimes to unleash the ruinous war that caused incalculable loss to both societies in terms of human, economic, and natural resources.

Much to the chagrin of the Eritrean leader, the war ended with his regime taking the beating and suffering heavy humiliation at the hands of the EPRDF. As a result, "... it is difficult to see how relations between the two countries can be mended as long as both governments remain in power in their respective capitals" [Lortan, 2000].

Following the conclusion of the war, the Algiers's Agreement that provided the framework for the EEBC was signed despite the protest of millions of Ethiopians in Ethiopia and the Diaspora. It still remains a puzzle why the EPRDF regime, after totally annihilating the Eritrean army, had to go to Algiers instead of dictating its own terms and conditions for the border demarcation as a victor. At any rate, the EEBC reached a verdict in a process that is extremely questionable. Surprisingly, the verdict was based only on invalid documents that were given to the Commission by the protagonists. The documents are invalid because they are based on colonial treaties that were never ratified by the then Ethiopian government, and were also nullified by Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. The EEBC ruling blatantly favored Eritrea, which was awarded the contested town of Badme, thereby legitimizing its territorial claim. The EPRDF regime, on the contrary, had nothing to show to the Ethiopian people why it had to go to the court in the first place, and found the EEBC ruling to be politically costly for its own political survival, if not for anything else. The EPRDF regime had, therefore, to present all sorts of reasons to question the legitimacy of the ruling and to at least delay its implementation.

With regard to the major causes for the impasse in implementing the ruling of the EEB, we will base our analysis on three important, but often ignored documents. The first is a letter of protest sent to Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, on April 12, 2002, by the Ethiopian Scholars and Professionals. The second is a January 25, 2005 letter of the Ethiopian National Congress (ENC) sent to the Commissioner of the EEBC. The third is a Policy Statement of the Center for Democracy and Social Justice in Ethiopia (CDSJE) issue on May 20, 2006 on the recent formation of the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy. While the first two documents have well articulated compelling reasons why any deal signed between the two regimes regarding the border issue will not be binding for Ethiopia, the third makes suggestions why all Ethiopian political forces should be cautious about the hidden motives of the regime in Asmara.

In presenting their cases to the United Nations and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), both the ENC and the Ethiopian Scholars and Professionals recognized the procedural barriers in place against them. They understood that they had no voice or standing as individuals and/or groups at either of these two institutions. However, pressing on the fact that this was more a reflection on the inadequacies of the United

Nations and the ICJ systems than a question of the legitimacy of their causes, they registered that the voice of the over sixty five million people in Ethiopia was not being heard by these two institutions, since the Ethiopian people do not have a democratic government that represents their interest and security. They affirmed that the regime in Addis Ababa was a violent and anti-democratic dictatorship, and pointed out that numerous complaints to that effect were posted to the United Nations Human Rights Commission ever since the EPRDF ascended to power.

Moreover, according to the Ethiopian Scholars and Professionals, the leaders of both regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea were in collusion against the national interests of Ethiopia, and that the war was simply an outcome of their greed in controlling the political future and economic resources of Ethiopia. Thus, they concluded, the conflict had nothing to do with the people in Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia.

Considering many public manifestations, including the orderly demonstrations of thousands of Ethiopians in front of the United Nations Headquarters, and many meetings and resolutions of Ethiopians from all walks of life, political affiliations, and religious background on issues surrounding the implication, appropriateness, and legality of the Algiers Agreement, the EEBC, and the role of the UN, the ENC and the Ethiopian Scholars and Professionals have made the following summary declarations [Letter, April 12, 2002].

1. We fully support the expressed will of the people of Ethiopia as represented by resolutions, demonstrations, and letters on the illegality of the secession of Eritrea and the border demarcation.
2. We declare the Algiers Agreement of 12 December 2000 to be null and void. The Algiers Agreement was signed by a "leadership" that is blatantly pro-Eritrea and has constantly worked against the interest of Ethiopia. The Algiers Agreement is a result of collusion full of deceit and fraud...
3. We find all references in the Algiers Agreement to "colonial treaties" particularly the 1902 annex and the 1908 convention offensive and illegal in light of the fact that Italy had attacked Ethiopia in 1935-41 and occupied Ethiopian territories breaching or abrogating the sanctity of international agreements and that of the League of Nations. Moreover, in 1947 when Italy signed the Peace Treaty rescinding all claims and interest it had in Eritrea (the renouncement specifically refers to Eritrea), all rights of Sovereignty ought to have been conferred back on to Ethiopia by the operation of the terms of the treaty of 1884 /1896 and customary international law.
4. The United Nations should never lend its name or its organization in a scheme that ultimately will violate the human (civil, political, and economic) rights of the Ethiopian people, and the human (civil, political, economic, cultural, and social)

rights of the people of Afar, Bure, Irob, Kunama (Adiabo), Zaleambesa, and the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. The Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission arbitration process underway at the present time at The Hague for the demarcation of borders between Ethiopia and Eritrea is such a deceitful and fraudulent scheme.

5. We warn the United Nations and the World Community that the unjust and illegal process forced on Ethiopia is a dangerous precedent to all peace loving nations of the World. This may be a political game to some members of the Security Council of the United Nations, but it may end up becoming the reason for prolonged hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea expanding into a major civil war in the Horn countries.

While Ethiopian nationalists in general look at the whole affair as encapsulated in the above five resolution points, the ENC, in its letter of January, 2005 explained the factors that led to the conflict and the ensuing impasse in a more coherent manner. The most important factors cited in the letter go into the very heart of how the official separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia was facilitated and the arrangements of cooperation between the two regimes were set. The ENC believes that the way Eritrea's political independence was handled in 1993 by the regime in Addis Ababa, the leaders of Eritrea, and the international community had created the conditions for the conflict. There was a rush to organize an independence referendum without considered discourse on competing and possible alternatives and options; there was no consultation with the stakeholder citizens in Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia; there was no consideration of Ethiopia's natural rights of access to the sea; there was no deliberation of issue of borders, and the rights of people along them; and there was no negotiation whatsoever over the exact geographic shape of Eritrea and the division of assets or liabilities. More importantly, ENC stated, "...the deliberations made by the UN, the big powers and all interested parties following the defeat of Italy in WWII, and the recognition given even by the adversaries, to federate and eventually integrate Eritrea with Ethiopia, have been ignored."

Ethiopian nationalists, as expressed by ENC, believe that Eritreans and the rest of Ethiopians share the same history, culture, language, religion and an interdependent economy. The artificial border created by colonial Italy was neither recognized nor respected by the inhabitants on both sides of the border. They lived together functioning as an integrated community. Except for the realization of a democratic governance and implementation of the rule of law in the entire State of Ethiopia that includes Eritrea, there was no case for the separation of Eritrea. Indeed, there are no legitimate reasons for the war between the two regimes, and the Ethio-Eritrea border demarcation, as handed down by the Commission, is a contradiction in terms. Thus, in the politically charged environment of today's Ethiopia, it is not politically feasible for any government, be it the current or future, to implement the ruling of the EEBC.

Therefore, until such time as all these deficiencies are corrected and a realistic solution that considers the economic and security interests of Eritreans and the rest of Ethiopians are tabled, there will not be any durable or sustainable solution to the conflict and the impasse that followed. As elucidated below this type of a solution is not to be found in the implementation of the ruling of the EEBC, but in some sort of union between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

First and foremost, Ethiopia, one of the most populous countries in Africa cannot remain landlocked. This is not only an economic issue, but also of history, legitimate right, and national security. Much has been written and discussed on this issue, and, in particular, the works of Abbai and Khishen (2000). Mebrahtu (2001); and Haile Mariam (2001) are excellent references on the topic.

Secondly, the record of Eritrea's economic viability and growth as an independent country is very dismal, to say the least. Eritrea's economic dependence on the more resource-endowed Ethiopia, as a market for its product or a source of supply for its needed resources, is unquestionable. A favorable economic relationship between independent Eritrea and landlocked Ethiopia is not a possibility. As pointed by the CDSJE, "...although the EPLF leaders succeeded in one of their goals, i.e., the dismemberment of Ethiopia, they did not achieve their other goal of subjugating Ethiopia economically. In the first few years following the downfall of the brutal dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, the country's resources were plundered by both parties". With reference to Eritrea, this was documented in a recent monograph by Kindie [2005:120] in the following words:

"... in the early 1990s, the EPLF set up a clandestine parallel government in Ethiopia, and became heavily involved in contrabands, money laundering, extortion, tax collection, kidnapping and other illegal activities. At one time, Eritrea even became a leading coffee exporting state when there are not very many coffee trees in the country."

In its caution for Ethiopian opposition political forces, CDSJE warns that to this date, Eritrea has not given up its dream of gaining by other means what it had lost through defeat in that ill-fated aggression. The current policy that is promoted by the Eritrean leaders is the creation of opposition groups that would operate under the direct control of Asmara and would provide a much more manageable condition to subjugate Ethiopia than was possible with the now autonomous TPLF. As a corollary to that policy, if a post-TPLF Ethiopia is uncontrollable through one puppet group or another, the creation of fragmented ethnic homelands would serve as a fallback plan to ensure ease of control and exploitation. This would be bad for the entire region. The peace loving, hardworking, and enterprising people in Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia deserve better than what the two brutal and dictatorial regimes in both capitals are planning

for them. Their destinies are very much intertwined. They need a union that will avail unbounded economic opportunity and pursuit of happiness.

In summary, the impasse of Ethio-Eritrea conflict is multifaceted, and the root causes fully undiagnosed by the EEBC. The ruling to award the contested border to the offensive party in the conflict, without regard to the objective conditions on the ground and the sentiments of the Ethiopian people, is not likely to be effective or credible. The Ethio-Eritrea war was simply an outcome of the greed of the leaders of the EPLF and TPLF in controlling the political future and economic resources of Ethiopia, and had nothing to do with the people in Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia. Both regimes enjoy the existing stalemate in order to externalize their failures. The stalemate is draining all the economic resources of both societies, which could have been better used in alleviating the poor living conditions of the people in both countries. Even worse, both regimes are now preparing to conduct proxy wars in Somalia and Southern Ethiopia and the region is poised to be an area of a living hell. It is becoming clearer that no durable or sustainable solution to the conflict and the impasse that followed could be found without democratizing both societies and tabling a realistic agenda that considers the economic and security interests and the historical realities of Eritreans and the rest of Ethiopians.

Chapter 8 The Causes, Mediation and Settlement of the Ethio-Eritrea Conflict

By Leenco Lata

Introduction

This paper argues that the causes of the Ethiop-Eritrea conflict are complex and include factors that involve history, culture, identity, economic expectations, and ideology. The mediation process, however, by and large reduced the causes of the conflict to the manageable one of border dispute and its ancillary spin-offs. Furthermore, while the mediators were seeking a common ground for settlement, the protagonists were more determined in finding adjudication or settlement through the use of force. Ethiopia ultimately prevailed on the battlefield and appeared poised to dictate its terms for the resolution of the conflict. However, at this stage another complication emerged as Ethiopia handed over the adjudication of the border dispute to the Boundary Commission perhaps expecting that its determination would at least coincide with its favoured outcome. When the determination proved to the contrary, Ethiopia reneged on the “final and binding” status of the border ruling ultimately asking for modification.

The Causes of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict

A cursory search of the literature reveals the following five causes of the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict: (1) the contrast between democracy in Ethiopia and authoritarianism in Eritrea; (2) the contrasting nature of the two states; (3) divergent economic policies and the role of the border; (4) contrasting attitudes towards identity; and (5) the history of tension during the struggle.

The discussion about the causes of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, however, has to be prefaced with a look at one feature that defines relations between the protagonists. One remarkable feature of TPLF/EPLF opinions and impressions of each other has

to be grasped to start appreciating the complexity of the factors that led to war. How Ethiopia's current rulers perceive and portray the rulers of Eritrea happens to be the exact mirror image of the perception and portrayals of Ethiopia's rulers by the Eritrean leadership and vice versa. Let me mention a few demonstrative cases.

The Eritreans consider the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian regime immensely vulnerable because of the "ethnic" federal policy it has instituted in Ethiopia. To Ethiopia's rulers, on the other hand, the Eritrean regime's refusal to emulate this policy is undemocratic and thus renders it highly vulnerable. The contradictory espousal of democratic pluralism by Ethiopia's rulers while in reality practicing a very centralized administration is seen as a major source of weakness by the Eritreans. The rulers of Ethiopia, on the other hand, believe that the Eritrean regime's more candid rejection of pluralism and more straightforward advocacy of guided democracy is a weakness that could be exploited both locally and internationally. The paucity of its natural resources is presumed to render Eritrea permanently dependent on Ethiopia, in the views of Ethiopia's rulers. The Eritreans, of course, believe the converse due to Ethiopia becoming landlocked after Eritrea's independence. Perhaps the most important factor that led to the war is the divergent impression regarding who owes whom more. TPLF leaders have no doubts that the Eritreans owe them their independence. And the Eritreans are in no doubt that the TPLF owes them its victory over the Derg and continued domination of Ethiopia. This should be kept in mind as we try to summarize the alleged causes of the conflict.

Democracy in Ethiopia Versus Authoritarianism in Eritrea

Paul Henze is perhaps the most forthright in arguing that the prevalence of democratic pluralism in Ethiopia and its absence in Eritrea is an important cause of the conflict. According to him, a commitment "to developing an increasingly open society" exists in Ethiopia where the emergence of "a plethora of political parties and a lively private press" is being tolerated. On the other hand, what exists in Eritrea is "an authoritarian one-party state." (Henze 2000:3) Very few observers would wholeheartedly concur with Henze's views. Other scholars actually depict an underlying similarity between the political systems in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. According to Patrick Gilkes, "the view of democracy still appears to be based more on a Marxist theory of representation, with the vanguard party representing the will of the people as interpreted through the party", in both systems. (Gilkes 1999:60) Others are much more forthright in emphasizing the similarities of the political situation in the two countries. "Varying in the form demanded by the differing conditions in the two countries but not in substance, the political system in both countries is undemocratic, secretive and hos-

tile to open public debate,” in Trivelli’s opinion. (Trivelli 22) Elias Habte Selassie also draws a similar conclusion as follows. “The leadership of both countries are a battle hardened lot in which military expedience dictates the order of things, and the concept of democracy is a rather new word in their vocabulary and its practice has yet to see the light of day.” (Selassie 2001:3) Hence, democracy versus authoritarianism cannot play a significant role in fomenting conflict between the two neighbouring states. On the other hand, the conflict’s causes could fester out of public view to suddenly result in violent exchanges exactly because of the absence of openness and democratic accountability in both states.

Contrasting Nature of the two States

The Eritrean academic, Ruth Iyob, attributes the outbreak of the conflict to the contrasting natures of the Ethiopian and Eritrean states. In her view, Eritrea’s status as a diasporic state and that of Ethiopia as a regional hegemony sits at the heart of the conflict. Diasporic states emerge after extended periods of confrontation with (a) privileged groups exercising hegemony within a multi-cultural state, or (b) a hegemonic and/or conquest state pursuing a policy of assimilation or elimination of resistant populations. (Iyob 1999:16) Ruth Iyob’s invocation of the diasporic image of a defensive Eritrean state threatened by a menacing regional hegemony, Ethiopia, has value despite suffering from considerable shortcomings.

Its shortcomings emanate from the fact that endangered survival, wounded dignity, experiencing victimization and a psychology of living under siege is not exclusive to the Eritreans. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. For centuries, Amharic and Tigrinya speakers (including those of the Eritrean highlands), i.e. Abyssinians, have had an image of their society as a Christian enclave surrounded by a sea of Moslems and pagans. Discussing more recent developments, Alemseged Abbay, is convinced that harping on the Derg regime’s genocidal acts as exemplified by massacres at Hauzien (in Tigray) and She’eb (in Eritrea) was critical in easing mobilization for liberation in both Eritrea and Tigray. (Abbay 1998:222/224) Currently, there are communities both in Eritrea and Ethiopia who could enumerate their own Hauziens and She’eb and who harbour a strong feeling that their sense of dignity is daily being assaulted by those exercising power. Hence, the feeling of victimhood and humiliation is threatening to become a pervasive phenomenon throughout the Horn of Africa region, contrary to Ruth Iyob’s attempt to restrict them to Eritrea. Zero-sum contests to amass not only wealth but also respect and glory are unfortunately spreading throughout the region and sit at the heart of all the various forms of conflicts going on in the Horn of Africa.

Ruth Iyob's invocation of diasporic versus hegemonic state, however, is valuable for one important reason. The practical implication of being a diasporic or hegemonic state is indistinguishable. Imposing their will on weaker entities is presumed to be in the nature of hegemonic states. Similarly, hegemonic states cannot afford to practice democracy internally as this would run counter to their external undemocratic projection of force. The same features happen to apply also to a diasporic state. Democracy as a form of expression of differences is not a salient feature of diasporic states whose primary objectives are survival and the redress of historical wrongs, concludes Iyob. (Iyob 1999:17) People who are imbued with this feeling tend to believe that they have the mandate to change the rules of the game and also to pursue the policy of eliminating their opponents. Hence, in practical terms, the diasporic state is just as aggressive and undemocratic as a hegemonic one. This is the value of Ruth Iyob's analysis.

Divergent Economic Expectations and the Border Dispute

The border dispute as the cause of the Ethio-Eritrean war deserves more attention because that is how its resolution has been approached. Many in fact prefer to reduce the cause of the war to this single issue. For example, for Paul Henze, the Eritrea-Ethiopia war happened simply because Eritrea invaded Ethiopia. (Henze 2000:1) On the contrary, "the conflict has really little to do with territory" states Patrick Gilkes.¹⁴ US diplomats concur by asserting, "The dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea involves a longer background than a simple border dispute."¹⁵ Despite repeatedly agreeing with these opinions, the protagonists have found presenting border dispute as the ultimate cause of the conflict because it appears convenient in their litigation at international forums. Empirical data, in fact, do support those who dismiss territorial dispute as the ultimate and sole cause of the war. By analyzing incidents over a forty-year period (1950 - 1990), Birger Heldt concludes, "that a territorial dispute is a virtually necessary - but not sufficient - condition for interstate war." (Heldt 1999:451) And in the views of another authority territorial disputes is not so much a source of war as an excuse. (Kocs 1995:159-75)

Hence, dealing with the excuse while leaving the underlying causes un-addressed does not augur well for sustainable peace between and within Eritrea and Ethiopia. The initial exchange of gunfire that triggered the war has to be seen in conjunction with two other matters in order to make some sense. These are (1) the concerned

¹⁴Posted at BBC website on 12 May 2000.

¹⁵Addis Tribune website of the Week of 02-10-98.

regimes' divergent expectations regarding Eritrea's future and (2) how this impacted on their economic relations.

Two assumptions may have influenced the way Eritrean leaders conceptualized their new state's future. (1) They fought harder and longer than any other movement. And their victory resulted not only in the attainment of their "independence and sovereignty, intact and unconditionally" (EPLF 1994:8) but also in the installation of a new regime in the Ethiopian capital. (2) They have always considered the attainment of independence as the highest form of self-determination. Their expectation regarding what should follow their hard fought struggle's culmination in the achievement of independence impacts on all aspects of their internal policy and external relations. It is possible that they expected a relatively higher level and faster pace of economic and social advancement to naturally follow the attainment of the highest form of self-determination, i.e. independence. In addition, convinced that "the natural history of the people of Eritrea was interrupted by colonialism," (EPLF 1994) they anticipated completing the process of national integration by performing "miracles in peaceful nation-building" (EPLF 1994:11) perhaps to attain a national unity stronger than at any previous time. Similarly, asserting that "Unless peace, justice and prosperity prevail in Eritrea, the independence we won with heavy sacrifices will be meaningless," (EPLF 1994:1) they defined "building an independent and modern Eritrea" (EPLF 1994:2) that should "find itself among the developed countries" (EPLF 1994:10) as their new mission. All of this is laudable and would not have mattered if it were not countered by another expectation by those ruling Ethiopia.

My own discussions with Prime Minister Meles sometime in 1992, lead me to partly concur with Alemseged Tesfai's assertion that Ethiopian rulers' preference was "to see, not an independent Eritrea, but one linked to Ethiopia in a federal arrangement." (Tsfai 1999:2) The Ethiopian Prime Minister offhandedly informed me of his expectation that Eritrea will imminently rejoin Ethiopia although the form of such a linkage was not put as explicitly. The divergence of the two groups' expectation regarding Eritrea's future relation with Ethiopia generated equally divergent views concerning the political, military and economic policies they pursued once in power. Discussing the economic aspect of this situation is much more informative.

One of a series of agreements concluded by the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1993 had to do with economic relations. In the views of Alemseged Tesfai, this agreement was mutually advantageous to both parties if it did not in fact favour Ethiopia. Discussing Ethiopian allegations of Eritrean abuse of the common currency, he states, "How a country that uses someone else's currency can be deemed an exploiter is yet to be convincingly explained." (Tsfai 1999:10) Eritrean practice of manipulating the exchange rate to amass hard currency is, however, attested to by many including Trivelli who writes the Eritrean government "openly violated the spirit of the currency

union by pursuing its own policy in regard to exchange rates of hard currency within Eritrea.”(Trivelli:16) Tesfai does admit that conditions were much more congenial for Eritrean investments in Ethiopia than the other way around although he blames it on the divergence of the two countries’ citizenship laws.(Tesfai 1999:6) Observers mention other economic arrangements that favoured Eritrea. Trivelli mentions Ethiopia’s decision to turn over to Eritrea 30% of the Assab refinery’s output thus serving as a source of hard currency savings as one of the arrangements that favoured Eritrea more than Ethiopia. What is most important is how the two sides perceived the Ethiopian government’s motivation in entering into economic arrangements that many would testify favoured Eritrea.

I find Trivelli’s explanation of the Ethiopian side’s motivation in following terms quite plausible. “The TPLF leadership . . . hoped that the benefits of the economic privileges given to Eritrea and Eritreans would ultimately induce or even force the Eritrean leadership to re-enter into some form of political union with Ethiopia.”(Trivelli:17) Other policies that TPLF leaders were pursuing during this time show an attempt to send one clear signal to the Eritreans. They were attempting to portray Eritrean/Tigrean relations as being more intimate than the one existing with their “fellow Ethiopians.” Arming Eritreans residing in Ethiopia while simultaneously disarming Ethiopian nationals can be cited as perhaps the most prominent of these signals.¹⁶ Even Eritrean sources assert that support by Eritreans residing in Ethiopia played a critical role in enabling the TPLF to prevail over its internal challengers.(Tesfai 1999:5) It is hard to figure out what the Eritrean leaders thought of TPLF motivation in pursuing economic and security policies that favoured Eritrea and Eritreans. We can only surmise that they might have considered it as a reward for their role in putting the TPLF in power in Ethiopia.

We thus can see two starkly contrasting visions placing the two sides on a collision course. The TPLF and Meles Zenawi seem to have adopted the plan of enticing Eritrea back into some form of linkage with Ethiopia, which would have derogated from Eritrea’s bona fide independence. The Eritrean leaders’ most cherished aspiration, on the other hand, happened to be consolidating Eritrean independence and national unity and turning Eritrea into a modern and prosperous nation. Nothing bears witness to the existence of two parallel visions than how the economic role of Tigray and Eritrea was seen by the respective leaders.

Alemseged Tesfai states, “The Ethiopian strategy (i.e. economic), as officially expounded, was based on the development of its agricultural potential and the building up of a chiefly agriculture-related industry.”(Tesfai 1999:8) On the other hand, “Eritrea had adopted an outward looking, export and free market-oriented strategy.” Those who observed the way the economic roles of the two entities (Ethiopia and Eritrea) were

¹⁶Monitoring of TPLF radio made available by the Government of Eritrea.

being conceptualized in Asmara were led to conclude the following. “[T]he EPLF’s economic policy aimed for Eritrea to serve as the industrial centre to an Ethiopian hinterland that would provide raw materials and serve as a market for its finished goods.” (Young 2000:21) The issue becomes more complicated because TPLF leaders aspired creating an identical relationship between Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia. They started working to turn Tigray into “an export-oriented enclave”, in total departure from the agriculture-related tasks they assigned to other regions of Ethiopia. Hence, it is the economic roles assumed by Eritrea and Tigray in relation to the rest of Ethiopia that became the underlying cause of the tension. Either Eritrea and Tigray merge and develop their industrialized economies with the rest of Ethiopia serving as a common hinterland or the resulting competition would have made indefinite tension between them inevitable. The views of the peoples who were targeted to provide cheap raw materials, labour and market, of course, did not seem to matter.

The sudden upsurge of Tigray region’s economy by itself alone would have had significant repercussions for Eritrea and other parts of Ethiopia outside Tigray. And Tigray’s economic and social change is nothing but spectacular. An international airport, a university, the mushrooming of schools and clinics, the erection of a number of industrial establishments became a reality in Tigray almost overnight. The social implication of the steep rise in construction and other economic activities is dramatic. Tigray, traditionally an exporter of unskilled labour particularly to Eritrea, entered a new phase when it could start becoming an importer. This can be deduced from Young’s report that daily wages of unskilled construction workers in Mekelle rose to eight Birr by mid-1990s, “double that received in Bahr Dar, capital of neighbouring and *wealthier* Amhara (italics added).” (Young 1996:84). People in the rest of Ethiopia, of course, could not go beyond harbouring envy about this dramatic change accompanied by grumbling for they lack the wherewithal to do something about it. What is more directly relevant for the topic under discussion is how it could impact on Eritrean thinking. Tigray practically demonstrated that remaining within Ethiopia by manipulating “self-determination” as a policy of domination could be a means for effecting social and economic development higher than the one expected to follow independence in Eritrea. The wisdom of insisting on independence as the only reliable precursor to a relatively higher level of prosperity was thus practically demonstrated to be at least questionable.

Contrasting Attitudes towards Identity

Looking at the similarities and dissimilarities of Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans (Kebesa) and Ethiopian Tigrinya-speakers becomes germane because of the way the conflict is

often understood. Although the war is officially between Eritrea and Ethiopia, “The people who are fighting each other should not be viewed as all of Ethiopia against all of Eritrea”, according to Chester Crocker. “It’s really Tigrayans and Eritreans going at each other,” he concluded.¹⁷ Surprisingly, prominent Tigreans and Eritreans concur with this view. Gebru Assrat, at the time he was member of the TPLF) is certain that “only Tigray and not the whole of Ethiopia” is being targeted by the Eritreans.¹⁸ And the Eritrean, Alemseged Tesfai, asserts that the war is due to Tigrean ambition to occupy the whole or parts of Eritrea “not for Ethiopia as a whole . . . but . . . to enhance the interests of Tigray.” (Tesfai 1999:2) Hence, the war in essence is between the Tigreans who dominate Ethiopia and the rulers of Eritrea and emanates from their conflicting interests and aspirations. Patrick Gilkes’ assertion that the leaders of both Eritrea and Tigray “come from the same Tigrean ethnic group”¹⁹ would thus make it tempting to situate their dispute in the intra-ethnic category of conflicts.

Trivelli’s analysis of the evolution of relations between the Kebesa and Tigray peoples depicts a different picture. He identifies three distinct stages of identity change by reviewing these two communities’ history of association and disassociation: (a) Until the 18th century, these two communities “maintained a strong feeling of being Ethiopian (Habesha) and, within this Habesha culture, of forming a distinct group different from the Amhara.” (Trivelli:3) (b) Developments between that time and the late stage of Italian colonialism in Eritrea, however, created a sentiment in which “the ‘Eritrean’ or Eritrean identity of the modern strata of Kebesa society manifested itself not as an identity distinct from the Habesha or Ethiopian identity, but rather as a distinct sub-category within the wider Habesha identity which was opposed to the other Habesha sub-category ‘Tigray.’” (Trivelli:9) Trivelli’s inference that the Tigrinya speakers had evolved into two distinct groups by the late phase of Italian rule hence makes classifying conflict between them as inter-ethnic quite tempting.

Trivelli’s thesis regarding the differentiation of the Kebesa and Tigray identities is questionable for a number of reasons. The 1950s Eritrean aspiration of uniting with Tigray to create a greater independent Eritrea, in particular, contravenes his conclusion. The third stage of identity differentiation that, he believes, soon eclipsed this one would tend to imbue the conflict with an inter-“national” character. (c) He believes another change of identity came about during the slow rise of Kebesa nationalism in the form of Eritrean nationalism starting in the 1960s. The self-identification that once distinguished Eritrean Habesha from Tigray (Amhara) Habesha was gradually replaced by one that opposed Eritrean identity to an Ethiopian one (Trivellie:9). Ti-

¹⁷ Quoted by Patrick Gilkes, *BBC website* 8 June 1999

¹⁸ From a mimeographed monitoring of TPLF radio broadcasts made available by the Eritrean Government.

¹⁹ Patrick Gilkes, *BBC website* 12 May 2000

grean academic, Alemseged Abbay, rejects that this identity transformation has in fact been effected. He argues that the ordinary folk of the Kebesa still continue to identify more with Tigreans than with the other peoples of Eritrea just as ordinary Tigreans feel closer to the Kebesa people than to their fellow Ethiopian Amharas, Muslims or the Nilotic Kunamas. It is the post-victory Eritrean political actors' ambition to create Eritreans and nurture Eritrean-ness that is driving "self-definition and boundary delimitation" and which in particular is necessitating "marking the boundary with Tigray", he argues (Abbay 1998:224/225). He enumerates policy decisions taken by Eritrean leaders to promote this disassociation with Tigray.²⁰ One of the measures that he mentions, playing up the history of "conflict of any nature with the Tigrayans" (Abbay 1998:204), is what is relevant to the issue at hand. If one accepts Abbay's views, the Eritrean political actors' efforts to install an identity boundary were just starting when the war concerning the geographical border broke out. Hence, identity differentiation was not a factor that caused the war but it could very well become its end-result. Ruth Iyob echoes this stand when she states that the conflict highlighted "unresolved key issues of territorial demarcations (boundaries) and political demarcations (identity or citizenship)." (Iyob 1999:8) Patrick Gilkes indirectly concurs with these two scholars by describing the Red Sea and Horn region as a zone where the processes of fusion and fission are ongoing. (Gilkes 1999:57) Hence, scholars from diverse backgrounds agree that the process of identity change was still inconclusive when the conflict erupted. Whether one of war's end-results should be making territorial and identity boundaries coterminous is a matter that raises fundamental practical and ethical questions.

History of Tension during the Struggle

Differing attitudes concerning identity was actually one cause of tension between the TPLF and the EPLF during the struggle. One needs to appreciate how the two movements were driven to harbour contrasting beliefs about nationhood and self-determination. Eritrean nationalist thinking was inevitably influenced by the notion prevailing throughout the world concerning self-determination in the early 1960s. Self-determination then was universally understood to have "only the function of bringing independence to people under alien colonial rule." (Emerson 1964:29) In addition, "the peoples so entitled (i.e. to independence) are defined in terms of the existing colonial territories, each of which contains *a nation* (*italics added*)."(Emerson

²⁰ He mentions: (1) The Orthodox Church's 1,600 year-old unity was ruptured. (2) The traditional Gregorian calendar was replaced with the Julian version although ordinary Kebesa Eritreans still relate only to the former. (Abbay 1998: 227)

1964:28) Entertaining any other notions of “nation” or “self-determination” was further stigmatized particularly in Africa after the disastrous Biafran attempt to secede from Nigeria. All Eritrean factions thus found it necessary to distinguish their invocation of self-determination from other cases in the rest of Ethiopia.

Italian colonial rule was endlessly harped upon as the legitimating factor for Eritrea’s entitlement to independent nationhood. “Secessionism” was thereby made to apply strictly to other cases of self-determination’s invocation in Ethiopia. In the event, Eritrean attempt to absolve themselves from the accusation of secession by arguing, “Eritrea is no Biafra” since its “borders were fixed and its national identity defined by colonial history, like the rest of colonial Africa” (Selassie 1998:66), persuaded very few, if any. Only when Eritrean military victory became imminent did the powers resort to the rationale of Italian colonial history to go along with the hitherto unprecedented break up of an African state.

While Eritrean militants were busy invoking the then orthodox version of nationhood and self-determination, a different trend started emerging in the rest of Ethiopia. Finding a striking similarity between feudal Ethiopia and Czarist Russia, Bolshevik-wannabe Ethiopian student radicals started adopting Lenin’s policy on self-determination and Stalin’s definition of nation. They ended up embracing two central themes in Lenin’s approach to self-determination. First, struggles for self-determination are deemed legitimate only in so far as they are conducted under the leadership of a proletarian vanguard party. Second, the vanguard party should champion the right to self-determination in a manner that would avert state disintegration. In addition, Stalin’s definition of the *nation* as “a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (Stalin 1947:8) was embraced. As a result, entities commonly called tribes in Africa or ethnic groups elsewhere were designated as *nations* or *nationalities* in the Ethiopian leftist parlance.

Movements that started appearing on the Ethiopian political scene from this period on, including the TPLF, started invoking this definition of the term *nation* and Lenin’s approach to the principle of self-determination. This was also the time when a large number of Eritrean Kebesa educated youth were joining the Eritrean liberation movement. This period contrasted with the previous decade during which the movement drew its recruits primarily from the predominantly Moslem lowlands. Coupled with the introduction of Marxism-Leninism by the student radicals, this demographic change had important implications. Younger and more radical elements took control of the original liberation front, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), by deposing its traditionalist leadership. The change of leadership alone, however, proved insufficient to reassure a Kebesa-centred faction (led by Isaias Afewerki) that harboured serious grievances regarding the treatment of recruits from its region. These Christian recruits were alienated by the earlier ELF leadership’s articulation of Eritrea’s cause as an Islamic

struggle against Christian Ethiopia. Under the mood prevailing then, they were often looked upon as potential agents of the Ethiopian regime. The resulting schism eventually culminated in the emergence of several factions called Popular Liberation Forces (PLF) in 1970, which merged in September 1973 that paved the way for the birth of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). Although the two splinter groups, the ELF and EPLF, (and their various Ethiopian allies) both professed Marxism-Leninism, fostering sustainable alliance between them proved unattainable.

To outsiders, the EPLF and TPLF appeared indistinguishable during the 1970s and most of the 1980s for they had more in common than with any other group. As so aptly put by Elias Habte Selassie, "Such are the many parallel developments in the history and organizational culture of the two fronts that there were occasional confusion of identity among expatriates as to which is which." (Selassie 2001:4) Elsewhere, I enumerate the factors that they commonly share (Lata 1999:85-132). John Young (1996), however, enumerates the differences that tended to overshadow these similarities.²¹ His conclusion that "the political differences between the TPLF and the EPLF during the years of struggle will be reflected in their present and future relations, and as a result they may be far more problematic than is generally imagined" turned out to be uncannily prophetic (Young 1996:120). Here we will restrict ourselves only to those aspects that seem to have paved the way for the present conflict.

Richard Trivelli relates the story of oscillating mutually opportunistic and purely tactical alliances that the TPLF entered into with one or the other of the Eritrean fronts (ELF and EPLF) starting in mid-1970s. The TPLF came into existence in 1975 supported by and in alliance with the EPLF. When relations between it and EPLF soured a year later, the TPLF shifted its alliance to the rival Eritrean front, the ELF. It was back in alliance with the EPLF in 1979 and in conflict with the ELF. These two allies eventually joined forces to drive the ELF out of Eritrea in 1981. TPLF relations with the EPLF started souring once again in 1983 culminating in open rupture by 1985. Cooperation was resumed only in 1988 at a time when defeating the Derg regime started looking more promising than at any previous time. It was to take advantage of the regime's deteriorating situation that the two fronts decided to put their differences aside and to resume joint military activities. Alemseged Tesfai describes how TPLF relations with Eritrea and Eritreans "started with love, turned to hate and, by independence time, reverted back to love again" (Tsfai 1999:5) only for hatred to become consummate after May 1998. (Tsfai 1999:9) Of course, it is highly possible that the Tigreans too depict Eritrean feelings towards them in a similar way. Trivelli tries to offer a plausible explanation for this volatility of relations between the two

²¹ Young 1996. He lists them as: (a) EPLF persistence in viewing the TPLF as a junior partner, (b) divergence of military strategy, (c) the existence of more internal democracy in the TPLF, (d) EPLF refusal to join the TPLF in denouncing the Soviets as social-imperialists, etc.

movements. He infers that the leaderships of the two Fronts failed to openly discuss their differences and to find their democratic resolutions. Hence, underlying political and psychological differences were merely papered over during periods of friendship. He blames the undemocratic way the Fronts were structured and led by people who “harboured the strong conviction that destiny had chosen them to achieve the liberation of their nations” (Trivelli:21) for this state of affairs.

The main political problems that often led to and inevitably surfaced during periods of discord and suspicion had to do with (1) divergent definition of the term *nation*, (2) differing premises regarding levels of entitlement to self-determination, and (3) the relevance of colonial experience in determining these two issues. EPLF leaders argued that the history of Italian colonial rule automatically qualifies Eritrea as a single nation entitled to independence, as mentioned earlier. Hence, Eritrea’s case was described as a “colonial question” to be settled only by the achievement of independence. All other cases, however, were designated as “national questions” to be resolved in a manner that preserves the unity of the rest of Ethiopia.

The TPLF’s adherence to Stalin’s definition of the term *nation* was what led to the earliest incident of discord with the EPLF. The TPLF’s initial manifesto of 1976 advocated the independence of a Greater Tigray nation, which, consistent with Stalin’s definition, embraced the Tigrinya speaking peoples of Tigray and highland Eritrea. Its implication for Eritrea’s integrity was obviously disturbing to the EPLF leading to a cooling of relations. Alliance between the two fronts was restored in 1979 when the TPLF re-designated the Tigrayan question as a “national question.” Friendship and cooperation lasted until 1983 when relations were soured once again. At this stage, the TPLF introduced another controversy when it began blurring “the distinction between the colonial and the national question” (Trivelli:11) by arguing that referenda are the only legitimate resolution for both cases of self-determination. The only time a compromise of sorts led to the resumption of cooperation between the two Fronts occurred after the defeat of the Derg regime in 1991. The TPLF then openly endorsed Eritrea’s independence while EPLF leaders declared the postponement of their *de jure* independence until after referendum two years later. However, private musings by TPLF leaders and some of their one-sided policies towards Eritrea indicate their expectation that this independence would be either temporary or would at least be subordinated to the two groups’ long range joint economic and security interests, as has already been discussed.

TPLF exploitation of territorial dispute as a pretext for attacking its other erstwhile Eritrean ally, the ELF, appears informative and relevant in view of what happened later on. The ELF was administering Badme and its environs when it first entered into an alliance with the TPLF, according to many knowledgeable people. The fledgling TPLF in fact welcomed the extension of ELF operations into large parts of western Tigray, roughly during 1975 - 1977, because it was eager to gain combat experience

by participating in joint actions.(Young 1996:106). But when relations turned sour, primarily due to some other disputes (enumerated by Young 1996), the TPLF not only staked claim on Badme and its environs but also took unilateral measures to uproot ELF structures and to expel Eritrean peasants. The resulting rancour was endlessly and stridently aired and steadily intensified as a rationale for TPLF siding with the EPLF in the final showdown that resulted in ELF's expulsion from Eritrea. The efficacy and simplicity of harping on the emotive issue of the border dispute to rationalize going to war to settle some other agenda had thus been added to TPLF's increasing repertoire of political machinations. It is also clear that the TPLF continued to administer the said area thereafter until May 1998. Despite the seesawing of relations during this entire period, surprisingly the EPLF never publicly demanded the repossession of a territory that colonial treaties place within Eritrea. So the initial exchange of gunfire that triggered the May 1998 incident did not take place at Badme *per se* but deeper inside Eritrea proper, as we will elaborate later on.

The Mediation Process

Mediating the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict was kicked off within days of its eruption into the public arena. However, one thing became self-evident within days of hostilities breaking out between Eritrea and Ethiopia if anyone was willing to heed the signals of both sides. Nothing short of the use of massive force was bound to change the positions assumed by the protagonists. The outbreak of hostilities was instigated by an exchange of gunfire on May 6, 1998 somewhere in the vicinity of a locality called Badme. The treaty of 1902 defined the border in this general area. The relevant article of the treaty reads as follows:

Commencing from the junction of the Khor Um Hagar with the Setit, the new frontier follows this river to its junction with the Maïeteb, following the latter's course so as to leave Mount Ala Tacura to Eritrea, and joins the Mareb at its junction with the Mai Ambessa.

Italian and Ethiopian delegates shall delimit the line from the junction of the Setit and Maïeteb to the junction of the Mareb and Mai Ambessa, so that the Canama (Kunama) tribe belong to Eritrea. (Ghebre-Ab 1993:15)

Although the proposed demarcation was never carried out, the line connecting the Setit/Maïeteb and Mareb/Mai Ambessa junctions started appearing as a straight line on all subsequent maps. (Negash and Tronvoll believe that the straight line is due to Italian manipulation.) What is the location of Badme in relation to this line? And where exactly did the incident of May 6, 1998 take place also in relation to this imaginary line? According to sketches provided by the Eritreans, Badme is located slightly to the

northwest of this line. That it had been under Tigrean administration since the early 1980s was never contested by the Eritreans and evidently was not the issue that led to the 6th of May incident. According to the Eritreans, the initial exchange of gunfire occurred at a location that was newly designated as part of Tigray region. However, the Eritrean push of the 12th of May 1998 evidently did not stop at just reversing the alleged new designation of the border but went as far as Badme.

Alluding that they merely advanced as far as the border delineated by the relevant colonial treaties, the Eritreans subsequently stuck obstinately to the stand that they have not crossed Ethiopia's internationally recognized borders. The Eritrean Foreign Ministry statement of May 15, 1998, which asserted, "Eritrea has not violated the internationally recognized borders between the two countries to encroach on Ethiopian territory," became their main line of argument. And this was countered by the Ethiopian side's similarly stubborn demand that the Eritreans vacate Ethiopia's sovereign territory by withdrawing to the positions they held prior to 6th of May 1998. The Ethiopian Parliament and Council of Ministers met on 13 May 1998 and passed a resolution demanding an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Eritrean invading forces and warned that Ethiopia reserved the right to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The two parties were thus determined to base the legitimacy of their respective positions on irreconcilable premises. Borders defined by colonial treaties became the ultimate points of departure for the Eritreans while the Ethiopians appeared convinced that "long-term administration of the border areas constituted ownership." (Iyob 1999:26)

Observers now realize that maps released by the Tigray administration^{22•} after 1993 evidently to perpetuate this ownership started showing the border "bulging beyond the straight line of the colonial boundary." And most of the fighting in 1998 and 1999 took place "between the colonial border recognized by Eritrea, and boundary as marked on the new Tigrean maps."²³ Since the disputants were basing their respective claims on virtually parallel principles, proposing a settlement by finding a common ground between them proved impossible. The dispute was thus framed in such a way that settlement could be found only if one party chooses or is forced to back down. The mediation process was hence manoeuvred in such a way that any one trying to arbitrate had to tacitly or directly pass judgment.

Mediation efforts were kicked off within days of the conflict breaking out and continued to expand in scope and participation side by side with rising hostility and

^{22•} One very important absurdity has to be grasped to understand the issue of the border. The border dispute was dealt with as a strictly internal affair of the Tigrinya speakers of Ethiopia and Eritrea until the outbreak of hostilities in May 1998. The Tigray regional administration appeared to exercise the prerogative of determining the border without the involvement of non-Tigrean officials of the Federal Government.

²³ "Border: a geographer's nightmare," *BBC* 12 May 2000

plummeting hopes for peaceful settlement. The first to undertake mediation was a group called the Facilitators made up of Vice President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Ms Susan Rice of the US Department of State and Ms Gayle Smith of the US National Security Council. The Facilitators shuttled between Asmara and Addis Ababa from 17 to 29 May 1998 and submitted their recommendations. The salient points of their proposal were that:

- The parties commit themselves to seeking the final disposition of their common border, determined on the basis of established colonial treaties and international law applicable to such treaties;
- An observer mission, organized by the Government of Rwanda and supported by the United States, be deployed to Badme as soon as possible; and that
- Within 24 hours of the arrival of the Observer Team, Eritrean forces begin to re-deploy to positions held before May 6, 1998, and that, immediately following, the civilian administration in place before May 6, 1998, return, etc.

The Ethiopians scored their first diplomatic victory when they succeeded in persuading the Facilitators to embrace the idea of Eritrean withdrawal "to positions held before May 6, 1998." But what exactly was the geographical location of this position? And who would determine what constitutes an acceptable extent of Eritrean withdrawal? Determining what constitutes satisfactory Eritrean withdrawal was implicitly made an Ethiopian prerogative once the Facilitators eschewed dealing with these details. Eritrea's preference was for the Ethiopians to publicly declare the extent of their territorial claims by citing geographical coordinates, which could then be verified by making comparisons with the relevant articles of applicable colonial treaties. Not surprisingly, Ethiopia, on 4 June 1998, announced its acceptance of the Facilitators' proposals. The Eritreans considered such a proposal a non-starter for two reasons. First, it would be contrary to their insistence that no internationally recognized boundary was breached and would thus amount to surrendering one's territory. Second, acceptance of the principle of withdrawal would serve as a confirmation of Ethiopia's accusation of Eritrean aggression.

The Ethiopian authorities' prerogative to determine the areas they administered until 6 May 1998 and to restore their administration figured in all later proposals. The next body that took up the mediation effort was the 34th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU, held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, from 8 to 10 June 1998. The proposal adopted at this Summit also embraced the idea of Eritrean withdrawal from Badme and its environs to position they held prior to 6 May 1998. Coming at a time when deferring to regional organizations influenced its approach to African conflicts, the United Nations also found it politic to endorse the OAU proposals. The US Government that participated in the initial

formulation of the proposals not only continued backing them but also reinforced all subsequent OAU efforts to operationalize them. The EU too gave all out support to the OAU-led mediation effort. Rarely have influence and efforts been orchestrated in such a manner in the search for the resolution of an African conflict.

Having their condition implanted in the initial proposal of the Facilitators, which was embraced by all succeeding recommendations, the Ethiopians continued to broadcast it not merely as being fair but as a clear designation of Eritrea as the aggressor. Prime Minister Meles, for example in his speech to the OAU Assembly at Ouagadougou, interpreted the Facilitators' proposal as determining that "aggression does not and cannot pay" and that "what was done by force must be undone." The Eritreans too wanted a clear declaration of Ethiopia as the guilty party for detaining thousands of Eritreans and expelling others. Hence, President Isaias Afewerki, in his speech to the same assembly, asked that the proposal's paragraph dealing with humanitarian issues be reworded so as to "reflect that it is only one party, Ethiopia, that is culpable." And he warned the audience to beware of Ethiopia's intention "to browbeat the OAU into imposing its dictates on Eritrea."²⁴ Eritrea's problematic relationship with the Continental body could only experience further deterioration once these appeals to evenly apportion wrongdoing were not heeded.

While the international mediators were searching for a resolution acceptable to both sides, the protagonists were determined to settle the conflict in accordance with their distant and proximate political cultures. And this political culture drives both sides to search for the desired outcome only through scoring victory on the battlefield. This disjuncture between the expectations of the mediators and of the protagonists generated a bizarre behaviour in which the parties exchanged positions as being the most defiant of international pressure. The Eritrea leadership was the first to defy external pressure by refusing to withdraw to positions held until May 6, 1998. The Eritrean leadership's rationale was that withdrawing "from territories it legitimately brought back under its control,"²⁵ was simply unthinkable.

Eritrea's already troubled relations with the OAU only got worse after its government publicly rejected the proposal known as the OAU Framework Agreement. It was only subsequent to losing Badme to the Ethiopians in February 1999 that it declared its acceptance. Thereafter it was Ethiopia's turn to seek one pretext after another to avoid concluding a peace agreement. Meanwhile both sides went on an arms procurement spree to prepare for a more decisive showdown. The following three documents were eventually formulated in response to endless demands for clarification by both sides: (1) the Framework Agreement, (2) Modalities for Implementing the Framework Agreement and (3) Technical Arrangements. The first had been in existence since the

²⁴ Copies of both speeches were made available by Eritrean government officials.

²⁵ Government of Eritrea, Statement of the Foreign Ministry, 23 May 1998

OAU Summit held a month after the outbreak of hostilities in mid-1998. The second document was put together at the following Summit held in Algiers in July 1999. And an OAU technical committee drew up the Technical Arrangements a month after Eritrea's acceptance mostly in response to Ethiopia's new posture of nit picking.

One of the new sticking points was Ethiopia's insistence on OAU observers instead of the newly proposed UN Peacekeeping force. They argued, "Bringing in the UN changed the 'ownership' of the peace process." (Plaut 2000) The OAU admitted that it is "constrained in its logistics and financial means" to undertake such a task.²⁶ This impasse and others like it were engineered as Ethiopia made preparations to militarily settle the dispute. In the last round of fighting, in May 2000, Ethiopia breached Eritrean defence lines to in turn advance far beyond the territory under contention. Its advances were halted only due to rising international pressure as well as additional Eritrean concessions in the reformulation of the Technical Arrangements. Ethiopia had thus achieved its aim of determining the extent of Eritrea's withdrawal and could credibly describe it as a reversal of aggression. Ethiopia and Eritrea ultimately signed a comprehensive peace agreement, known as the Algiers Agreement, on 12 December 2000.

The Implementation of the Peace Agreement

Three bodies were created to implement the peace agreement that Ethiopia and Eritrea ultimately signed in Algiers on 12 December 2000: (a) One body, to be created by the OAU in consultation with the two parties and the UN, was tasked with investigating the origins of the conflict (i.e. the incidents of July and August 1997 and 6 May 1998); (b) A Boundary Commission, constituted of two nominees of each side and a neutral president elected by the four (failing which the UN Secretary General would appoint one), was created to settle the border dispute based on each side's claims and the relevant treaties; (c) And a similarly constituted Claims Commission was formed to arbitrate the loss, damage or injury by one Government against the other. Implementing the mandate of the Boundary Commission necessitated the formation of a UN Peacekeeping Force. Security Council resolution 1320 (2000) authorized the creation of the 4500-strong UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) to be responsible for separating the armies of the two states by a 25-kilometer wide temporary security zone (TSZ). The creation of the TSZ was expected to pave the way for the settlement of the border dispute through boundary demarcation in accordance with the determinations of the Boundary Commission.

²⁶ "Ethiopia-Eritrea: Fighting flares up as peace envoys visit" IRIN 24 March 1999

Resolving the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict appeared to have entered the final phase when the EEBC handed down its rulings on boundary delimitation on 13th April 2002. The difficulty of summarizing the Commission's determination in a work of this length appears evident. Regardless a few indicative remarks can be made.

One of pivotal issues in the border dispute concerned the nature and actual location of the line running from the confluence of the Setit and Maiteb rivers to the junction of the rivers Mareb and Mai Ambessa. The parties' claims showed the greatest divergence in this sector of the border. According to the Ethiopians, the location of the Setit/Maiteb junction lies only 20 kilometres east of the Khor Um Hagar town close to the Sudan border. The resulting border would follow a straight line running in a north-easterly direction to the Mareb/Mai Ambessa junction. The Eritreans, however, chose Setit's confluence with another river called Maiten as the start of a straight, which roughly runs in a northerly direction to the Mareb/Mai Ambessa junction. A distance of some 80 kilometres lays between the location the Ethiopian side named Maiteb and the position the Eritrean side designated as Maiten. In the event, the EEBC rejected both starting points and picked the Tomsa/Setit junction as the starting point of the straight line to the Mareb/Mai Ambessa junction. However, this line is much closer to the Eritrean claim line than to the Ethiopian one. On the other hand, Eritrea appeared to be the party that got less than it claimed in the central portion of the border. In the less controversial eastern portion running through the Afar desert, the EEBC rejected the approach of both sides and adopted its own 60-kilometer-from-coast determination, which effectively ran half way between each claim. The EEBC made adjustments to the border delimitation to grant Zalambessa to Ethiopia and to also let Tserona and Fort Cadorna fall inside Eritrea.

What followed the announcement of the EEBC ruling seems to confirm the difficulties inherent in the parties' expectations we mentioned above. Ethiopia's Council of Minister's hastened to issue a statement on the very day the ruling was handed down expressing full acceptance. It catalogued all the locations that were reconfirmed as Ethiopian territory by the ruling, including Badme - the flash point of the May 1998 fighting. It described the EEBC decision as a defeat that Eritrea suffered in the legal and peaceful struggle on top of its previous humiliating defeat in the battlefield. The Eritrean statement of a week later stuck to its terse tradition and was perhaps prompted to ridicule Ethiopia's declaration of acceptance by calling it superfluous as the parties had agreed that the Commission's ruling should be final and binding. (IRIN 23 April 2002). The extent to which the Ethiopians could go to gloat was demonstrated by their statement, which stated "Ethiopia's victory both in the military field and before the international court of justice left the regime in Asmara in utter shock, embarrassment and confusion." (IRIN 25 April 2002) Meanwhile, doubts were mounting as to who exactly was awarded Badme village, prompting one of the officials of Tigray to ask for clarifications (IRIN 22 April 2002). Contrary to the statement of Ethiopian

Council of Ministers of 13th April, it could actually end up in Eritrea according to the interpretation of the EEBC ruling by one expert (IRIN 17 April 2002). Ethiopia went on to ask for clarification, etc. Meanwhile, it started seeking ways of complicating the imminent process of demarcation. Some 210 people were moved into the contested area as part of a hastily put together project dubbed “voluntary resettlement.” (IRIN 11 June 2002) By the 17th of July the EEBC was asking Ethiopia to dismantle the settlement at a place called Dembe Mengul as it lies “0.4 km west of the delimitation line” established by the 13th of April ruling. (IRIN 22 July 2002) Ethiopia was again criticized by it on 11 November for failing to remove the settlers, which constituted non-compliance with its obligations. (IRIN 11 Nov 2002) Ethiopia ultimately publicly quarrelled with the EEBC and rejected its boundary determination, which is the cause of the impasse that prevails to date.

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The Search for Peace: The Conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea

The conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is one of the most entrenched conflicts in the world today. Focusing on the demarcation of the border between the two countries, and in particular on the small area of Badme, the conflict has wide ranging implications for the stability and survival of the two regimes, as well as for peace in the Horn of Africa more generally.

Writing from their unique perspectives as academics and practitioners from the region, the authors offer their insights and views on the conflict, showing both the complexities and possible roads ahead.



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