



The War Between Ethiopia and Eritrea

By Patrick Gilkes and Martin Plaut

Even by the shocking standards of recent African conflicts, the May 1998-June 2000 war in the Horn of Africa is truly appalling. As many as 100,000 people have been killed in the intermittent, but savage fighting; up to one million people have been driven into exile or internal displacement; hundreds of millions of dollars have been diverted from development into arms procurement.

Yet less than a decade ago the two movements that now govern in Addis Ababa and Asmara were the firmest of friends. Despite occasional fallings-out, they had cooperated closely during the thirty-year war against a despotic Ethiopian military regime. During the 1970s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) provided

training and assistance to its counterpart from Tigray, in northern Ethiopia. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in turn, provided the EPLF with fighters at critical moments in the conflict. And it was crack Eritrean troops that assisted in the final assault on Addis Ababa in 1991. Indeed, so close were relations between the two governments that emerged that there was even talk of a new federation between them. So how did it all go so terribly wrong?

The recent conflict has been widely regarded to be concerning slices of disputed land along the thousand-kilometer-long border created, but never properly demarcated, over a century ago by the Ethiopian

Empire and Italy. The war's origins can also be traced back to the differences between the Eritrean and Ethiopian leadership that emerged in the 1980s. Although both drew support from the same ethnic group, from similar peasant societies, and from Marxist ideology, they differed in their objectives. The EPLF was determined that Eritrea would be liberated from Ethiopian rule as a single, united state, despite its being composed of nine linguistic groups and two major religions—Islam and Christianity. The TPLF, in contrast, fought for the rights of the Tigrayan people, and its first manifesto called for an independent Tigrayan state. It was with some reluctance that the TPLF was persuaded to fight for the overthrow of the Ethiopian regime.

When both movements took power in 1991, they pursued divergent agendas on the national question. The Eritreans, who legitimized their independence with a 1993 referendum, retained the EPLF's unitary perspective, attempting to balance ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences. The Tigrayans, intent on bolstering Tigrayan nationalism, developed a federal structure for the Ethiopian State founded on ethnicity. Provincial boundaries were redrawn to reflect ethnic divisions.

Soon the two movements' aims collided. The EPLF began a policy of rapid economic growth, and the enterprises they established came into direct competition with developments across the border. In 1997, Eritrea issued its own currency, and this disrupted trade with Ethiopia. Internationally, Eritrea asserted its national identity so forcefully that it soon had diplomatic incidents and military confrontations with neighboring Sudan, Djibouti, and Yemen. To the Tigrayans, now in power in Ethiopia, as to Eritrea's other neighbors, Asmara appeared arrogant, assertive, and uncooperative.

The Eritreans came to regard the TPLF in much the same light. Tigrayan hard-liners first expanded the borders of their home province to incorporate areas that were traditionally inhabited by other ethnic groups within Ethiopia, particularly the Amhara. Then, in 1997, they published a map of Ethiopia that incorporated large sections of Eritrea within Tigray.

A border commission between the two countries, established in November 1997, met only once and had made no progress before the conflict erupted. Tragically, when fighting began in May 1998 with the killing of several Eritreans, an Eritrean delegation was in Addis Ababa for the commission's second meeting. When news reached Asmara, the Eritrean authorities reacted by sending heavily armed reinforcements to the flash point. Despite phone calls between the two leaders, the crisis could not be resolved. As the fighting escalated, Eritrea took over three areas of previously Ethiopian-administered territory.

In February 1999, Ethiopia seized back the border area of Badme, setting off five months of fierce fighting. In May 2000, following the breakdown of talks, Ethiopia launched a series of attacks to recover the rest of the areas seized in 1998. In June 2000, under pressure from the U.S. and the international community, both sides reluctantly accepted Organization of African Unity (OAU) peace proposals. These provide for a 25-kilometer-wide security zone to facilitate Eritrean withdrawal from the previous border, the insertion of a UN force, and the demarcation of the border.

Key Points

- During the 30-year war against the Ethiopian military dictatorship, the EPLF and TPLF guerrilla movements worked closely together and achieved victory in 1991 as the firmest of friends.
- Despite claims to the contrary, Ethiopia and Eritrea have been fighting not over a border but over rival hegemonic claims in the Horn of Africa and over "national pride" and "territorial integrity."
- Its neighbors see Eritrea as having deliberately chosen an aggressive foreign policy as a central element in its nation building strategy; Eritrea fears the threat of Ethiopian regional dominance.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

With commendable speed, the United States and Rwanda led international efforts to broker a cease-fire and end the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict. In the second half of May 1998, a joint U.S./Rwandan mission, led by Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Susan Rice, shuttled between Addis Ababa and Asmara. Rwanda added a visibly African element to the effort; Paul Kagame, then Rwanda's vice-president, was a friend of both parties.

In June 1998, when President Clinton telephoned Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the U.S. did achieve a moratorium in the tit-for-tat air war. Initially, results appeared promising, with the crafting of a four-point peace plan calling for: 1) Eritrean "redeployment" (a euphemism for withdrawal) from Badme, 2) reestablishment of the previous administration, 3) deployment of an observer mission, and 4) subsequent demarcation of the border by the UN, on the basis of colonial treaties and international law. These proposals subsequently formed the basis for the OAU's November 1998 Peace Framework and for the additional modalities and technical arrangements for the implementation of the framework.

The agreement, however, cannot be seen as a U.S. policy success. Eritrean leaders regarded Susan Rice's efforts in May 1998 as an effort to "bounce" them into acceptance without discussion or consideration of their reservations about the proposals. Offended by the abrupt manner and, reportedly, the inexperience of the U.S. delegation, the Eritreans were also concerned about its neutrality, given that one member of the delegation, Gayle Smith, was a longstanding associate of the TPLF.

Subsequent personal efforts by President Clinton to encourage both leaders to the negotiating table were ignored, and during the uneasy calm, both states rapidly built up their arms supplies. Ethiopia and Eritrea continued to fight until they were ready to stop: Ethiopia, because it had recovered the territories seized by Eritrea in 1998; Eritrea, because of military reverses and threats to its survival.

In addition, the U.S. almost completely failed to understand the concerns of either Eritrea or Ethiopia and made little attempt to try. Rather, U.S. policy in the Horn of Africa, since Eritrean independence in 1993, has been built around two specific points. One is the desirability of keeping the Eritrean coastline out of Arab hands in order to satisfy Israeli concerns over Arab

control of the Red Sea. Recently, the U.S. has been annoyed by Eritrean efforts to acquire Libyan support and by its (failed) efforts to join the Arab League. Whether or not Libya has "come in from the cold," the U.S. remains reluctant to accept any role for it in north-east Africa.

The second element of U.S. policy has been the effort to isolate, contain, and if possible overthrow the National Islamic Front (NIF) government in Khartoum. Indeed, as soon as Washington had defined Sudan as a terrorist state, U.S. regional policy concentrated on orchestrating an anti-Sudan coalition of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda, all three of which had their own reasons for the containment of Sudan. This policy collapsed when Eritrea and Ethiopia went to war, and each began bidding for Sudanese support. However, State Department policymakers remain firmly convinced of the primary need to contain Sudan. All U.S. efforts at facilitating mediation between Ethiopia and Eritrea have to be seen in this light.

No real effort has been made to produce new policy guidelines, even after the 1999 political changes in Sudan, which limited the influence of the more radical Islamic fundamentalists within the regime. U.S. activities plausibly suggest drift, misconception, and a failure of policy. Israeli interests in the Red Sea and concerns over Sudanese "terrorism" may be policy issues in themselves, but they do not provide any realistic basis for understanding the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, or the regional concerns of Ethiopia and Eritrea, or even the wider issues, including security, political, and humanitarian concerns.

Washington has also failed to understand the delicate relationship between Ethiopia's controversial experiment in ethnic federalism and Eritrea's need for both national assertion and national sovereignty with clearly defined and indisputable borders. U.S. policies have taken no notice of the divergence of Eritrean and Ethiopian approaches to democracy, government, and state building, or to the inevitable competition for hegemonic control within the former Ethiopian polity.

Key Problems

- For two years, U.S. policy has been confined to ending the conflict without addressing the combatants' underlying concerns.
- The U.S. has failed to understand the internal context and causes of the war.
- Washington has continued to be distracted by untested assumptions about Libya and Sudan.

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Toward a New Foreign Policy

There are clear lessons for Washington to learn in the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. These lessons reinforce failures of U.S. policy and understanding in Central Africa, the Great Lakes, Somalia, and elsewhere.

There is a need for more accurate information. It is necessary to understand the reality of the crises on the ground, rather than interpret them through the lens of

U.S. interests and perspectives. Political correctness is no substitute for thought. Nor, to quote Mark Twain, should motion be confused with accomplishment. U.S. policy-makers need continuity and African expertise. Interagency rivalries, internal State Department feuding, and a lack of sustained, high-level interest in Africa have prevented the provision for long-term analysis. There has been little effort to commit resources, whether for analysis or action, for longer than a few weeks.

Simplistic and faulty labels should be avoided. A mutually distorted perspective has caused both Ethiopia and Eritrea to see the other as a favored son of

Key Recommendations

- U.S. policy in the Horn of Africa must be based on accurate information and expertise and must provide for a long-term perspective, decoupling relations with Ethiopia and Eritrea from wider considerations regarding Sudan or U.S. partners in the Middle East.
 - A high-profile international arms embargo should be the first step in any future efforts at resolution of this conflict.
 - Consideration should be given to a "peace package" approach incorporating development aid, debt relief, good governance, and conflict mediation.
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U.S. policy. It allowed Ethiopian commentators to ask why the U.S. supported a "dictator" like Isaias Afwerki. It led Eritreans to wonder—despite their own expulsion of 150,000 Ethiopians in 1991/92—why the U.S. backed "proto-Nazis" in Addis Ababa espousing a policy of "genocidal deportation."

At the time of President Clinton's Africa trip in March 1998, Washington was simplistically classifying the leaders of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Congo as part of an "African renaissance" and as (according to *Foreign Affairs*) "more responsive, accountable, and egalitarian than any of their predecessors." This was a particularly faulty judgement, given the poor human rights records of both President Isaias in Eritrea and Premier Meles in Ethiopia and given their attitudes toward democracy.

International arms embargoes should be maintained and tightened. The U.S. quietly initiated a unilateral arms embargo after hostilities broke out in May 1998. It also backed the UN call for restraint on arms supplies in January 1999, and it supported the UN's arms embargo (May 17, 2000). However, none of these initiatives, carried the necessary weight to control the flow of arms. Rather, the U.S. embargo annoyed Ethiopia, which claimed Washington was penalizing the victim (Ethiopia) equally with the aggressor (Eritrea), and the subsequent UN measures infuriated Eritrea, which saw itself as the victim of the initial Ethiopian aggression.

Particularly damaging has been the U.S. reluctance to speak out publicly against Russian arms sales. Russia sold high-performance fighters to both sides, MiG 29s to Eritrea and Sukhoi 27s to Ethiopia, in December

1998. Since mid-1998, the combatants have each spent an average of \$300 million a year on armaments. It would appear that Washington has been unwilling to jeopardize relations with Moscow (or to sully the image of an African "renaissance") over a "minor" matter of war in the Horn of Africa.

The U.S. should employ economic aid sanctions against both countries. Although sanctions were considered, neither the World Bank nor the IMF seriously restricted funding. In late 1999, the World Bank did impose a moratorium on new programs, and the European Union also suspended loans for new development projects. The U.S. has not used its influence to push for a total cutoff of Bank or IMF funds, and Washington has continued bilateral aid to both countries. Further, Washington has not attempted to discourage either side from raising funds from their respective communities in the United States. Eritrea has been receiving at least \$300 million a year for its war effort from its diaspora. Ethiopia, while attempting to do likewise, has never managed more than a fraction of this.

Humanitarian famine relief should continue. Arms purchases—from Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Italy, China, France, and the open market—have been occurring amidst major food shortages in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. These have largely been caused by drought, but both governments have clearly been distracted by the war, and there has been an inevitable diversion of agricultural resources, including commandeering farmers—hampering both cultivation and harvesting. Both countries are now seriously affected; Ethiopia is seeking aid for nearly a seventh of its 60 million people and Eritrea for almost a third of its 4 million. Donors, despite their concern over the fighting, have continued to provide unconditional humanitarian help to both countries. No one wants to contribute, or be seen to contribute, to famine deaths by refusing to provide food aid. Nor should they.

The U.S. and other donors should promote a multi-tiered peace package to build democracy and create long-term stability. The UN's belatedly imposed arms embargo (May 2000) should be maintained. However, the U.S., in coordination with other donors, should now consider the possibility of encouraging a peace package, which should include long-term development aid and debt relief. It must also involve: pressure for progress in good governance, including real democracy (not the paternalistic and patronizing acceptance of the single-party state, however disguised); the establishment of a free press; and a genuine improvement in human rights, irrespective of political affiliations. These are considerations that should be at the center of U.S. policy on the broadest level.

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