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Ethiopia and Eritrea: Border War

History Behind the Headlines, 2001

The Conflict

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea—two of the poorest countries in the world—began in 1998. Eritrea was once part of the Ethiopian empire, but it was colonized by Italy from 1869 to 1941. Following Italy's defeat in World War II, the United Nations determined that Eritrea would become part of Ethiopia, though Eritrea would maintain a great deal of autonomy. In 1961 Ethiopia removed Eritrea's independence, and Eritrea became just another Ethiopian province. In 1991 following a revolution in Ethiopia, Eritrea gained its independence. However, the borders between Ethiopia and Eritrea had never been clearly marked. Following arguments and skirmishes, Eritrea invaded the area of Ethiopia it viewed as its own. Trench warfare—and the deaths of many soldiers and civilians—has continued since then.

Territorial

- Eritrea believes that Ethiopia has moved border markers to infringe on Eritrean territory.

Economic

- Ethiopia believes that Eritrea charges an exorbitant fee to export Ethiopian coffee through the Eritrean port.
- There is conflict regarding use of the U.S. dollar for transactions, instead of local currency.

Over two hundred thousand troops are massed at the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, waiting for the next outbreak of violence in a war that has been fought off and on since 1998. Ethiopia and Eritrea are two of the poorest countries in the world. Yet poverty has not prevented a war that appears to be more about sovereignty and national pride than about the few square miles of land around which fighting has been concentrated. Ostensibly at issue is which country controls approximately two hundred square miles of territory along the border of the two states. The land that is disputed is not of great value; it is scrubland, where farmers have traditionally raised a few hardy crops and grazed their goats. For Eritrea, this scrubland represents their claim to sovereignty and the victory they won in a thirty-year civil war against Ethiopia. To the

Ethiopian government the issue is one of defending against this and any possible future Eritrean incursions into their territory.

Few people outside of those living in the Horn of Africa, an eastern outcropping on the continent of Africa including the countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, and a few academic experts understand why these countries are fighting, but the whole world has remarked upon the particular brutality of this war. The Ethiopian-Eritrean border war has attracted international attention for the tactics used by each side. After taking a few miles of Ethiopian territory, the Eritrean army dug in and began to use trench warfare to defend their territorial acquisitions. In response the Ethiopian army used the time-honored method for combating trench warfare—rushing the trenches in human waves in order to capture the enemy. This method of fighting has led to a large and mounting death toll on both sides. Though the numbers are disputed, it is estimated that seventy thousand soldiers from both sides have died. The rest of the world has been stunned by methods of fighting that have not been used for such an extended period of time since World War I.

In addition to the staggering death toll, this war has also been characterized by the use of land mines against both combatants and civilians. When the Eritrean army retreated from the territory it had captured initially, it left fields and scrubland filled with landmines, making farming impossible and a re-establishment of the Ethiopian administration difficult. Ecologically, the effects of this war will be felt for years, both because of the presence of so many landmines and due to the effect that the fighting has had on the fragile, semi-arid ecosystem, now polluted with shell casings, wrecked military equipment and the refuse of two armies.

Prior to the war, relations between the two countries had been friendly enough that many Eritreans lived in Ethiopia—the larger country with more economic opportunities. When the war began, the Ethiopian government became distrustful of Eritreans living within its borders and began to round them up and forcibly expel them, often without even allowing them to gather up other family members. Approximately fifty-five thousand Eritreans living in Ethiopia have been so expelled. Other Eritreans left voluntarily to avoid being forcibly removed.

While the expulsion of citizens has primarily affected Eritreans, an estimated three hundred fifty thousand Ethiopians have been moved from the Tigray region of Ethiopia, where most of the fighting has occurred. During the first year of the war, the Eritrean army bombed towns in Tigray and terrorized the local population. The Ethiopian air force also bombed civilian areas until an agreement between the two sides was reached to stop the air war. The on-again, off-again nature of the fighting discouraged Ethiopians from returning to their homes. The failure of peace talks, and the development of new fronts in the fighting has also discouraged local residents from returning to the areas under dispute or near the disputed areas.

Historical Background

In 1974 the Ethiopian Revolution ended the longest ruling monarchy in African history. Haile Selassie, the well-known emperor and statesman, was deposed in a revolution caused by inequality and lack of development and democracy within Ethiopia. The Marxist government that took over power was called the Dergue, which is the Amharic word for committee. (Amharic is the language of Ethiopia.) But what was supposed to be a committee quickly turned into a dictatorship under the control of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Shortly after the revolution, Mengistu began to purge the country of dissent in what was called the "Red Terror." Many young people died, others fled the country or joined armed opposition groups in the countryside.

Opposition to the state was already going on in the northern province of Eritrea, where fighting dated back to 1961. In 1961 the Ethiopian state abolished any autonomy held by the Eritrean region. Though it was at one point part of the Ethiopian empire, the Italian colonization of Eritrea from 1869 until 1941 gave it a distinctly different history than the rest of the Ethiopian state, which had never been colonized. When Italy was defeated in World War II, it was forced to give up its colonies. A United Nations commission decided what should be done with the Italian colonies in Africa: Eritrea, Libya and Italian Somaliland. It was determined that Eritrea should be united with Ethiopia, but that it should be allowed to keep its own laws, flag and language. Eritrea, therefore, had some autonomy from 1952 until 1961, when Haile Selassie decided to end what Eritrean autonomy existed. In 1961 Eritrea was stripped of its distinctive government and became simply another province of Ethiopia. It was at that time that fighting began between Eritreans who supported complete independence from Ethiopia and the Ethiopian state.

Armed opposition to the Ethiopian state continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Opposition to the Ethiopian government grew during the Ethiopian famine that occurred in 1985. The government was thought to have responded too slowly and to have favored certain regions with food aid. By the late 1980s, the Ethiopian state was threatened by organized rebel groups throughout the countryside. These groups were organized along ethnic lines with the Oromo supporting the Oromo Liberation Front, the Tigrayans supporting the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritreans supporting the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

These rebel groups began to coordinate their offensive actions in the late 1980s, a strategy that proved very successful. The TPLF began reaching out to other ethnic groups to form an umbrella organization called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPRDF included groups representing most of the major ethnicities in Ethiopia apart from the Eritreans. Eritreans were not included because it was accepted by the EPRDF that Eritrean independence would become inevitable should the Ethiopian government be overthrown.

In 1999 as a result of coordinating efforts among the rebel groups, as well as the weakness of the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Ethiopian state underwent a "second revolution." Mengistu Haile Mariam fled to Zimbabwe where he now lives in exile and the EPRDF took over the capital city of Addis Ababa. The Eritreans established an independent state in the north, which became officially independent after a 1993 United Nations sponsored referendum. The separation was accomplished in a

friendly manner with Ethiopia taking complete responsibility for the foreign debt and the Eritreans being left with substantial resources and control over the port of Assab.

The leaders of the two countries knew each other and had cooperated with one another in the overthrow of the previous state. Both countries realized that the border between them had not been properly demarcated and it was assumed that Eritrea's boundaries would be the boundaries it had prior to its incorporation into the Ethiopian state in 1952. But this proved to be a problem because the borders of Eritrea prior to 1952 were not clearly defined. There were multiple maps of the border area, most of which marked the border as a straight line, in spite of the fact that administration of the areas followed the jagged boundary of a river. Perhaps because the Italians always desired to take over more of Ethiopia, they did not clearly identify the southern border of Eritrea. To resolve the confusion regarding the border, Ethiopia and Eritrea formed a border commission in 1993 to discuss the border problem. The commission met from 1993 through 1997, but conflicts between local peoples in the border areas continued during this period. At issue was the question of who had the right to farm the territory. Eritrean people complained of harassment and fines imposed by Ethiopian officials and the confiscation of animals. Neither side seemed certain which farmers—Ethiopians or Eritreans—should be able to plant crops.

Serious economic problems between the two countries began in 1997. Ethiopia was, at that point, already angry with Eritrea about what Ethiopia viewed to be excessively high port charges to export its coffee crop through Assab. The two countries shared a common currency, the Ethiopian birr, and Ethiopia was upset that Eritrea was using birr to acquire dollars and thereby tightening the money supply in both countries. In 1997, Eritrea came out with its own currency called the nakfa. Ethiopia insisted that interstate transactions be conducted in dollars, which put economic pressure on Eritrea as it then had to pay for imports of food and other Ethiopian resources in dollars. By the end of 1997 tensions between the two countries had risen to an all time high.

What Really Happened at Badme?

The confrontation began when armed Eritrean troops crossed the de facto border at Badme. According to the Ethiopian government, Eritrean troops entered Ethiopia in violation of an existing agreement that prohibited the crossing of the border by armed military personnel. Ethiopian police reminded the Eritrean soldiers of this agreement and asked them to leave their weapons if they wished to enter Ethiopia. The Eritrean troops refused to comply and opened fire on the Ethiopian police, killing two police officers.

The Eritreans claim that Badme is their own territory based on maps from the Italian colonial era. The Eritrean government alleges that after 1991 the Ethiopian government had a systematic policy of attempting to expand their northern province of Tigray through the acquisition of Eritrean territory. They claim that in 1992 Tigray administration officials crossed the true border and put new border markers deep in Eritrean territory. Subsequently Ethiopians from the Tigray region moved into this newly reclaimed area and Eritreans living there began to be harassed. Attempts to peacefully

resolve the conflict were allegedly met with further territorial aggression and harassment by the Ethiopians until the Eritrean troops were called into protect the interests of the local people.

Ethiopia acknowledged that there are problems with the demarcation of the border between the two countries. However, Eritrean movement into the Badme area was seen as aggressive due to the fact that Badme had never been administered by an Eritrean government, not since 1991 and not during the Italian colonial period. The bilateral border commission had been established to resolve the border conflicts, but the Eritrean military takeover of Badme moved the dispute from diplomacy to armed conflict.

The Leaders

Meles Zenawi has been the head of the Ethiopian government since 1991 when the EPRDF overthrew the government of dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam. He became prime minister of the current government of Ethiopia in 1995 after his party won elections under the new Ethiopian constitution. Prime Minister Meles, as he is properly called in Ethiopia where a person's last name is simply their father's first name, was born Legesse Zenawi. He comes from the Tigray region of Ethiopia, from the town of Adwa, a historic and revered site in Ethiopia. Adwa is the place where the Ethiopian army was able to fend off Italian colonization efforts in 1896.

Zenawi went to high school in Addis Ababa and started college where he studied medicine. The Ethiopian Revolution occurred in 1974 and Meles interrupted his studies to fight against the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam. He joined an organization that was later to become the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front or TPLF. The TPLF is currently the dominant party in the coalition of parties that makes up the EPRDF.

Zenawi is known as being both bright and energetic. He earned a masters degree after the 1991 success of the rebels. He collaborated with Issayas Afeworki, now president of Eritrea, in the attempt to overthrow the Dergue government. The two were reported to be friends prior to the beginning of tensions that ultimately led to the border war.

Issayas Afeworki is also of the Tigrayan ethnic group, though he was raised on the Eritrean side of the border. He is well respected for his intelligence and his 'everyman' quality. President Issayas (the Eritreans have the same naming convention as Ethiopians) is known to drive around Asmara (the capital of Eritrea) in an old Toyota and live modestly with his wife and three children.

Issayas Afeworki was active in fighting for Eritrean independence since 1967. He helped to form the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) as a joint effort between Muslims and Christians aimed at the independence of Eritrea. When Eritrea became independent in 1993, the National Assembly elected Issayas head of state. Shortly thereafter, the EPLF dropped its military name and became the People's Front for Democracy and Justice or PFDJ.

The similarity in the backgrounds of these two leaders—they both come from the same region and have both worked their way up in the hierarchies of their groups during an

active conflict—could have led to a positive rapport and the ability to communicate amicably. However, this has not been the case. Since the outbreak of active fighting between Ethiopia and Eritrea, speeches and statements by the two leaders have done more to escalate the conflict than to diffuse it. Indeed, both leaders appear to feel justified in the use of force to protect their border and perceived violations of sovereignty.

Recent History and the Future

Efforts at Resolution

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has developed a three-pronged peace agreement that has been supported by the United Nations, the European Union and the United States. The three prongs of the agreement consist of the Framework Agreement, the Modalities, and the Technical Arrangements. The agreement was developed in consultation with Eritrea and Ethiopia and adopted by the OAU in July of 1999. However, it has not yet led to peace, because Ethiopia has refused to sign the Technical Arrangements.

Both parties to the dispute have agreed that the United Nations will determine the demarcation of the border. However, though the end result is decided, obstacles to a formal agreement remain. Ethiopia objects to the Technical Arrangements document that would lead to the final settlement, because it does not entail a return to the situation before the outbreak of fighting. The primary obstacles to conclusion of the process and an Ethiopian/Eritrea agreement are: the specific identification of all areas that are currently occupied and agreement on the movement of troops out of the areas of conflict; the alteration of the Technical Arrangements so that a U.N. Peacekeeping Force would be replaced by a much smaller OAU observer mission and; the restoration of civilian control in all areas from which troops withdraw. Ethiopia is adamant that it will not agree to the Technical Arrangements until there is a guarantee in place to return control of all territories to what they were before the whole conflict began.

The peace agreement has been on the table now for over a year with little evidence that Ethiopia is ready to sign the Technical Arrangements in their current form. Frequent diplomatic interventions and appeals from the United States and other countries have had no success. Eritrea appears frustrated by Ethiopia's demands and argues that the Technical Arrangements are not open to amendment. Eritrea appears to be afraid that if it accepts the changes to the Technical Arrangements that Ethiopia is demanding, Ethiopia will get the disputed territory back and reestablish control of the area. In this scenario, Eritrea will ultimately be the loser, as the problems that initiated its incursions into Ethiopian territory will not be solved.

Several countries have made efforts to mediate the conflict and achieve agreement on the Technical Arrangements. Libya, Algeria and the United States have all sent high-level diplomatic missions to shuttle between the two leaders in an effort to bridge the gap between the positions of Eritrea and Ethiopia regarding the Technical Arrangements. However, each side has refused to budge from his position and none of

the international diplomatic missions have so far been successful. Mediators are frustrated by the fact that both countries have agreed to the eventual U.N. demarcation of the border, but are unable to take the steps needed to calm the military conflict and enable the demarcation to take place.

While attempts are ongoing behind the scenes to bring the conflict to resolution, both Ethiopia and Eritrea have been engaging in a war of words that mirrors the war on the ground. Ethiopia has repeatedly referred to the "aggression" of Eritrea. The foreign minister of Eritrea has argued, "For our part, we will condemn and challenge any force or power which forces us to withdraw from our own land and sovereignty" (Tseghenay 1/27/99). It does not appear likely that they will reach a settlement soon.

Extension into Other Countries

While Asmara and Addis Ababa (the capital of Ethiopia) have made no further progress toward peace after the initial OAU agreement, the border conflict has expanded into other countries in the Horn of Africa. In an attempt to destabilize Ethiopia by encouraging conflicts within it, Eritrea has supported rebel movements by several different groups opposing the Ethiopian state. The Eritrean government has been funneling money and arms to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which has been fighting the Ethiopian state in southern Ethiopia. It has also been supporting Al-Ithad Al-Islami, an Islamic group that supports the secession of the Ogaden area of Ethiopia. Aiding these groups is a deliberate and somewhat successful attempt to destabilize Ethiopia and engage Ethiopian security forces in places other than Eritrea.

However, Eritrea's funding of rebel groups has resulted in an extension of the Ethiopian/Eritrean conflict to parts of Kenya and Somalia. Ethiopian forces have pursued OLF rebels over the Ethiopian border and into both Kenya and Somalia. In addition, Ethiopian troops have attacked the forces of Somali warlord Husain Aideed inside the Somali border because of his alliance with Eritrea. The Somalis have lodged a complaint with the U.N. Security Council and the Organization of African Unity, protesting Ethiopian involvement in their territory, but because of the conflict with Eritrea and with the rebel groups, Ethiopia is unlikely to stop. Ethiopian relations with Djibouti remain strong because all Ethiopian exports are now passing through the port there.

There is a great deal of international pressure for Ethiopia and Eritrea to solve the border conflict. Any lasting solution must include a way for both the Ethiopian and Eritrean leaderships to save face by claiming victory. Since both sides have agreed that a U.N. team should survey the border area and determine where the border should be, the only obstacle to resolving the dispute is to develop an agreement on the terms of the cease-fire and troop withdrawals. However, after eighteen months of negotiations and third party interventions there is no progress toward agreement on these issues. The chief obstacle to achieving troop withdrawals is a lack of trust on each side. The Ethiopians do not trust the Eritreans to withdraw to the positions they held prior to the outbreak of fighting and the Eritreans do not trust that the Ethiopians will negotiate a new border in good faith once they give up the armed conflict. A solution to this conflict has been in sight virtually since the beginning of fighting. These two countries have

been unable to see past their immediate security interests and distrust of one another to achieve that solution. The Eritreans fought Ethiopia for thirty years to achieve their independence. Both countries are capable of fighting a long war driven by issues of pride and perceived threats to sovereignty in spite of their relative lack of resources.

Chronology

- **May 6, 1998** Conflict begins as several Eritrean soldiers enter Badme.
- **May 12, 1998** Mechanized brigades of Eritrean soldiers conquer the town of Badme.
- **June 5, 1998** Eritrea bombs the town of Mekelle in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, hitting a school as well as other targets.
- **June 9, 1998** War breaks out on a second front around the town of Zala Ambesa, the main road between Ethiopia and Eritrea.
- **June 11, 1998** Fighting occurs on a third front, close to Assab. Eritrea bombs Adigrat in the Tigray region.
- **July 1998** Eritrean students studying at the University of Addis Ababa are arrested and sent to a detention camp in Bilate. Other Eritreans living in Ethiopia are forced to return to Eritrea.
- **August 1998** Ethiopia shoots down a jet en route to South Africa when it enters the no-fly zone along the northern border area. Two European civilians are killed.
- **November 1998** Ethiopia accepts the OAU Framework Agreement.
- **February 6, 1999** Ethiopia launches an offensive in which it reclaims Badme and takes Eritrean territory inland from the Badme front.
- **February 10, 1999** U.N. Security Council passes Resolution 1227, which establishes an arms embargo on Ethiopia and Eritrea.
- **February 27, 1999** Eritrea accepts the OAU Framework Agreement.
- **2000** Ethiopia invades Eritrea.

Biography:

Haile Sellassie (1892-1975)

Haile Sellassie was born near Harer, Ethiopia on July 23, 1892. His name at birth was Tafari Makonnen. Ras ("prince") Tafari displayed keen intellectual abilities early in his studies, and by the age of fourteen was appointed provincial governor. Upon his coronation as emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, he took the name Haile Sellassie, which means "might of the trinity." He was also granted the title "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and King of the Kings of Ethiopia."

Haile Sellassie led his country while in exile for a time during World War II. In 1941 he returned to power in Ethiopia. Early in his rule, he was considered a progressive reformer, who outlawed slavery and introduced educational, economic, and social reforms. He helped found the Organization of African Unity in 1963. However, as famine, economic depression, and the Eritrean crises worsened conditions in Ethiopia, he lost support. Sellassie was deposed by military mutiny in 1974, and lived under house arrest until his death on August 26, 1975.

In addition to having served as Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930-74, he is worshipped as a divine being by followers of the Afro-Caribbean Rastafarian religion.

Trench Warfare

Ethiopia and Eritrea are involved in trench warfare—soldiers wait in trenches for the opposition to try to push them back. During World War I, European soldiers fought foot-by-foot over much of their continent. One of the most powerful descriptions of trench warfare is in Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

The front is a cage from which we must await fearfully whatever may happen. We lie under the network of arching shells and live in a suspense of uncertainty. Over us, Chance hovers. If a shot comes, we can duck, that is all; we neither know nor can determine where it will fall.

At regular intervals we ram the iron stakes. Two men hold a roll and the others spool off the barbed wire. It is that awful stuff with close-set, long spikes. I am not used to unrolling it and tear my hand.

We must look out for our bread. The rats have become much more numerous lately because the trenches are no longer in good condition...it is a sure sign of a coming bombardment. The rats here are particularly repulsive. They are so fat—the kind we all call corpse-rats. They have shocking, evil, naked faces, and it is nauseating to see their long, nude tails.

The bombardment does not diminish. It is falling in the rear too. As far as one can see spout fountains of mud and iron.... Our trench is almost gone. At many places it is only eighteen inches high, it is broken by holes, and craters, and mountains of earth. A shell lands square in front of our post. At once it is dark. We are buried and must dig ourselves out.

The days are hot and the dead lie unburied. We cannot fetch them all in, if we did we should not know what to do with them. The shells will bury them. Many have

their bellies swollen up like balloons. They hiss, belch, and make movements. The gasses in them make noises.

One morning two butterflies play in front of our trench. They are brimstone butterflies, with red spots on their yellow wings. What can they be looking for here? There is not a plant nor a flower for miles. They settle on the teeth of a skull....

Attack, counter-attack, charge, repulse—these are words, but what things they signify! We have lost a great many men, mostly recruits.... Although we need reinforcements, the recruits give us almost more trouble than they are worth. They are helpless in this grim fighting area, they fall like flies. Modern trench-warfare demands knowledge and experience; a man must have a feeling for the contours of the ground, an ear for the sound and character of the shells, must be able to decide beforehand where they will drop, how they will burst and how to shelter from them. The young recruits know none of these things. They get killed simply because they hardly can tell shrapnel from high explosive.... They flock together like sheep instead of scattering, and even the wounded are shot down like hares by the airmen.

Military Spending

Fighting a war is expensive. Both Ethiopia and Eritrea have used precious resources and valuable foreign currency to improve their military capabilities since the fighting began in 1998. Prior to 1999, both countries used airplanes, artillery and tanks that were supplied to them, primarily by the Soviet Union, during the Cold War. Once the conflict began, Ethiopia purchased fifty-five new tanks from Ukraine as well as Sukhoi-27 fighter planes. The Eritreans have purchased new Mig-29 jets and surface-to-air missiles.

Between their new purchases and the daily expenses of war, such as ammunition, salaries for soldiers, and food and medical equipment, both sides have significantly increased their military spending. In May, 2000 the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution imposing an arms embargo on both Ethiopia and Eritrea. The arms embargo occurred both as a result of renewed fighting and because of estimates that both sides in the conflict were spending a million dollars a day on military purchases.

Both countries have raised funds for the war through an increase in taxation, enforced "contributions" by citizens, and donations to the cause from Ethiopians and Eritreans living abroad. In addition, Eritrea has received contributions toward its military budget from the governments of Qatar and Libya. Eritrea does not make the figures pertaining to its military spending public. Estimates are that both countries were spending around \$100 million dollars per year on defense prior to the outbreak of the war in 1998. Recent data from the Institute of Strategic Studies in London suggests that the 1999 spending by both countries had skyrocketed with Ethiopia increasing its budget to \$480 million and Eritrea to \$306 million.

The U.S. State Department estimates that Eritrea spent 7.8 percent of its Gross National Product (GDP) on military expenses in 1997, and Ethiopia spent 1.9 percent on military expenses in 1997. These percentages can be tripled or quadrupled to account for military spending since the outbreak of the war in 1998. This makes Eritrea, a poor country, one of the largest spenders for ME/GDP (military expenses per GDP) in the world.

Further Readings

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