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BEYOND THE BORDER WAR: THE ETHIO-ERITREAN CONFLICT AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION EFFORTS

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When Eritrean and Ethiopian troops first clashed along their countries' common border in 1998, most observers accepted that the Ethio-Eritrean dispute was primarily a question of competing claims on territory. The subsequent escalation and apparent intractability of the conflict – illustrated most blatantly by the failure of a series of international mediation efforts – now suggests that factors beyond territoriality may be fueling this costly war. To this end, the article begins with a description of the current dispute and provides a summary of recent and ongoing attempts at conflict resolution by the international community. It then takes a closer look at the element of territoriality to assess how salient a feature it has been in precipitating and perpetuating the conflict. This leads into an examination of a number of economic, political, and social factors in both societies that impact upon the conflict. From this analysis, the article evaluates ongoing mediation efforts and concludes that alternate third-party strategies for settling the conflict should be adopted. These alternate strategies, the argument follows, would target the underlying roots of the Ethio-Eritrean war.

INTRODUCTION

The inhabitants of the former Italian colony of Eritrea, which had been federated with Ethiopia since 1952, gained their independence in 1993.

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Since 1971, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had fought against the Soviet-backed regime of Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam. In 1975, the EPLF joined forces with an emerging national movement in the neighbouring Ethiopian province of Tigray: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Together, they fought a decades-long war of insurgency against the Mengistu government. Meles Zenawi, leading the TPLF, and Issaias Afwerki, leading the EPLF, marched victoriously together into Addis Ababa in May 1991. Meles assumed the interim position as Ethiopia's Prime Minister and, through subsequent elections, held on to the post. Shortly after their victory, the EPLF and the TPLF cemented an agreement under which Eritrea held a referendum on independence. Two years later, Issaias became the first president of an independent Eritrea. Many heralded the Horn's "Velvet Divorce" as signaling a new era of leadership in Africa. US President Bill Clinton pointed to the amicable split as indication of an approaching "African renaissance" (*The Economist* 1998a; Fisher 1999a). The London-based Saudi daily, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, referring to the friendship between the Horn's two newest heads of state, suggested that the pair should share the Nobel Peace Prize (*Asharq Al-Awsat* 1993).

It was therefore bewildering to most when, in 1998, reports surfaced of armed skirmishes occurring along the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Gradually, over the course of a year, rhetoric escalated, the skirmishes evolved into battles, and the battles turned into full-blown military offensives. To date, the Ethio-Eritrean war has resulted in over 60,000 battle-deaths. It has been characterized by mass expulsions — forced "repatriations" — of large segments of each country's population. And it has been fueled by an intense arms race that has drained the economies of two of the world's most impoverished nations. Why would these apparently amicable neighbours suddenly spiral into war? The question becomes even more perplexing when we consider the failure, over the better part of two years, of international efforts aimed at bringing the parties to a resolution over what would seem to be a relatively uncomplicated matter: the demarcation of a border that passes through a desert plateau which has no economic or resource value, is of no cultural or nationalist significance for either side, and is lacking in any discernible strategic importance. Why would these two nations — so recently heralded as bastions of cooperation and peaceful coexistence — balk when presented with sensible solutions for peace?

It is important to recognize at the outset that the Ethio-Eritrean war presents a particularly difficult set of circumstances for the researcher.

First, this is a conflict that is fluid and ongoing. It erupted suddenly, scarcely two years ago, and in that time the war has seen long periods of inactivity followed by short, devastating confrontations that result in appallingly high casualty figures. While similar factors have not precluded in-depth analyses into other conflicts, the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has produced little information for the outside observer. There has been scant media attention focused on the war, and there has been no extensive academic research conducted into the possible sources of the conflict — probably because most academics are “waiting for the dust to settle” in order to sift through the remains of the war to find some explanation for why these countries embarked upon such a costly undertaking. Some, undoubtedly, will assess the international dimensions of any settlement that may have been reached *ex post*.

That the current conflict has raged on in relative obscurity should, perhaps, be of no surprise when we consider that the latest and most lethal round of fighting coincided with the advent of NATO airstrikes against Serb targets in Kosovo. Yet, in the span of just sixty hours, a single battle on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border had claimed more lives than the combined losses, both military and civilian, of all sides over the course of the entire Kosovo campaign. This disparity between a devastating war and the coverage afforded it by the press leads to one obvious assertion: there is a need to examine the elements of the Ethio-Eritrean war more closely. But it also means that any such examination will necessarily be preliminary in nature and will be restricted to relying on limited sources of information in reaching its conclusions. The present analysis therefore draws on the information available from news services, synthesizes it with studies of Eritrea and Ethiopia that pre-date the outbreak of war (no substantial study has been produced since), and attempts to decipher the most likely sources of the conflict. Despite the wide margin of error that must be afforded for any study such as this, it remains a worthwhile undertaking. This article sheds new light on the Ethio-Eritrean conflict by asking a question few others have: Why have international efforts to bring about a settlement failed so miserably thus far?

SYNOPSIS OF THE ETHIO-ERITREAN CONFLICT

For roughly three years following Eritrea's secession from Meles' Ethiopia, there appears to have been no serious bilateral discord. Issaias and Meles — these guerrilla allies turned heads of state — had consistently managed the new international relationship on a highly personal, cordial basis. But relations between the two governments began to unravel in 1997. The first

military incident occurred in July of that year when Ethiopian troops took over a small village in southwestern Eritrea and dismantled the civilian administration there. A month later, Ethiopian forces took similar action in the village of Badme in the Yirga Triangle, along Eritrea's southwestern border. Eritrea says that on 6 May 1998, a group of its officers went, unarmed, to tell the Ethiopians that they were on Eritrean territory; six of its officers were then shot dead. Ethiopia claims that there were casualties on both sides. A week later, Eritrea sent troops and armour into and beyond Badme – into territory administered by Ethiopia. After several weeks of fighting, a number of areas previously administered by Ethiopia fell under Eritrean control.

A joint U.S.-Rwandan peace-making team shuttled no less than eighteen times between Asmara and Addis Ababa in an effort to quell the fighting. The team, led by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Susan Rice, and Rwandan Vice-President Paul Kagame, came up with a four-point plan. It stipulated that both sides should withdraw their troops from the border, which would then be observed by international monitors. In addition, civilian authority would be restored to the disputed areas, and an investigation would be held into the events of May 6th.

On 4 June, Meles announced that he had accepted the plan. But, at the same time, he said that his defence forces had been instructed “to take all steps needed to foil the Eritrean invasion,” and that the Eritreans must withdraw from areas they had occupied. Eritrea also agreed to the plan but said it would withdraw its troops only if the border area was demilitarized (*The Economist* 1999a). The next day, Eritrean aircraft were reported to have bombed the airport at Mekele, the capital of the Tigrayan province. Eritrea, however, denies that it was the first to attack. In the early afternoon, four Ethiopian MiGs bombed the airport in Asmara. Mekele was bombed again in the evening, but this time the bombs fell on residential areas, hitting a primary school, leaving forty-seven civilians dead. Both sides then agreed to a US-brokered airstrike moratorium, and – as the rainy season set in on the Horn — fighting was reduced to a occasional exchanges of artillery and small arms fire.

The two belligerents used the intervening months to acquire new military stockpiles and to recruit, train and deploy tens of thousands of new soldiers. These countries – the two poorest in the world on a per capita basis (bar Mozambique) – engaged in a nine month-long arms race in which Ethiopia turned to Israel to modernize its MiG-21 fighter-bombers, along with the purchasing of T-55 tanks from Bulgaria and SU-27 fighters from Russia. Eritrea, for its part, reportedly purchased \$50 million

worth of rockets and missiles from Romania, and doubled the size of its tiny airforce when it bought four MiG-29s from Ukraine.

In the midst of this military buildup, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) issued a “Framework Proposal” for the resolution of the dispute. The proposal called for the redeployment of troops in the Badme region to the positions they held prior to May 6th; offered OAU military observers to preside over the redeployment, along with the reinstatement of civilian administration and “the maintenance of law and order during the interim period” (Walta Information Center 1999, 156). The plan also required the subsequent demilitarization of all contested areas along the border, and called for the border to be demarcated by a joint Eritrean-Ethiopian-UN cartography team. Echoing the US-Rwanda proposal, the OAU deal provided for an investigation into the events of May 6th. The Framework Proposal also called on Asmara and Addis Ababa to “address the negative socio-economic impact of the crisis on the civilian population” (Walta Information Center 1999, 159). The Ethiopian government accepted the proposal almost immediately, but Asmara balked over the provision that Ethiopia would be allowed to restore its civil administration in the contested area. The OAU plan laid dormant for nine months while a phony war of rhetoric and public posturing ensued, complete with government-sponsored mass expulsions of Ethiopians from Eritrea and Eritreans from Ethiopia.

In February, the shooting war resumed. On the 6th, at Badme, Ethiopian forces advanced against dug-in Eritrean fighters with the goal of winning back the territory lost nine months earlier. Considering the high-tech purchases made by the belligerents in the intervening months, many expected that the resumption of fighting would signal the beginning of Africa’s first high-tech war. It did not. Although Ethiopian forces were backed up by fighter bombers and helicopter gunships, the battle for Badme was characterized by mass processions of infantry, meant to overwhelm the enemy by sheer numbers. As one journalist described it, the second phase of the Ethio-Eritrean war “turned out to be something of a first-world-war throwback, with human waves walking into banks of machine-gun, tank, and artillery fire. The Ethiopians, in particular, noted one military observer, were “prepared to accept casualty figures that are usually regarded as unacceptable in modern warfare” (*The Economist* 1999b).

With scores of dead littering the battlefield (reports estimate as many as 40,000 were killed), the Ethiopians managed to coax the Eritreans out from their trenches and engage them in what must have been fierce hand-

to-hand fighting. The Eritrean line buckled, and Ethiopia's "Operation Sunset" succeeded in retaking Badme. In Asmara, Issaias acknowledged within hours that his forces had been defeated and announced that Eritrea was ready to sign the OAU peace proposals. But Meles, who had accepted the deal nine months earlier, now refused to sign. Instead, Ethiopian forces opened fire on a second front a few weeks later, further east, on the plain of Tsorona. Employing the same archaic battle tactics, the Ethiopians sent waves of tanks and infantry towards the Eritrean line, suffering a casualty count of 10,000 in the span of just sixty hours. This time, the Eritreans repulsed the attack, leaving the conflict to simmer on in an uneasy stalemate through the summer months. Eritrea's losses remain largely unknown, but one impartial report reckons that this country, with a population of 3.5 million (20 times fewer than Ethiopia) and with no more than 180,000 soldiers at the front, may have lost as many as 20,000 along the border (Donnelly 1999; Last 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Lee 1999; Lycett 1999; *The Economist* 1999a, 1999c, 1999e; Vick 1999).

In collecting the information required to diagnose the roots of this conflict, evidence from the battlefield is worthy of consideration. It demands answers to the following questions: Why would Ethiopia, in executing military operations aimed at securing an ill-defined border, adopt battle tactics usually reserved for wars of national survival? Why would Eritrea continue to fight in the face of such obviously superior numbers over what amounts to a barren outcropping of rocks on a largely uninhabited desert plain?

One answer might be that the border serves only as a pretext for war and that the true sources of the conflict are related to more complicated factors within and between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This possibility becomes more plausible when we consider the particulars of the US and OAU peace proposals. We will return to a discussion of these diplomatic efforts shortly, but the brief description provided thus far suggests that, in theory, all that divides Ethiopia and Eritrea from a settlement is the matter of ceasefire and withdrawal. That there has been no mutual acceptance of two separate peace deals that provide for these measures suggests that the causes of the war lie deeper. This may have been implicit in a comment made by Meles earlier this year. He stated that the border incident of 6 May 1998 was "Sarajevo, 1914. It was an accident waiting to happen" (*The Economist* 1999c). To test this hypothesis, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the border issue itself. From this analysis, we can ascertain the degree to which territory really matters in the Ethio-Eritrean war.

A BORDER WAR?

When fighting broke out near Badme in May 1998, the Italians were among many in the international community who were surprised to learn that a border dispute was at the root of the conflict. Officials at the Italian Embassy in Asmara promptly volunteered to “dig out every map drawn” during Italy’s occupation of Eritrea to resolve the dispute on the spot. But according to the Italians, neither of the two parties expressed much interest (Santoro 1998). This sudden display of intransigence led many observers to suspect that the war was being fought for other reasons.

Most objective observers of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict affirm that the border between the two nations has never been clearly demarcated. The international border commonly shown on maps is only a rough approximation of vague territorial decrees set down by colonial-era treaties. Of a dozen or so of these treaties – all signed near the turn of the century — three are important for our purposes. The key signatories were Italy, which colonized Eritrea, and independent Ethiopia — which had continually fought off the Italians’ southward march. A 1908 treaty between the Ethiopians and Italians established the long eastern border as a line running parallel to the Red Sea. A 1900 treaty, also between Italy and Ethiopia, established the eastern part of the Ethiopia-Eritrea boundary along the Mareb River and two of its tributaries. To the west, a straight line was drawn between the town of Toman, in present-day Sudan, northward to Todluc. And a treaty signed in 1902 – the essence of the problem – moved that straight line to the east. But the reference points were far from precise. On the south, those points became the junction between the Setit and Maieteb Rivers and, on the north, between the Mereb and Mai Ambessa Rivers. On some later maps, the 1902 line is moved even further east; but in either case, Badme (the focal point of present-day hostilities) remains within Ethiopian territory (Fisher, 1999b).

However, since the outbreak of the conflict, Eritrea has said that it derives its territorial claims from subsequent treaties which seem to negate the original Italian-Ethiopian treaties. Some of these documents equate boundaries with the locations of peoples. For instance, one treaty provides that the Kunama tribe, a group of highland cattle drivers, be located in Eritrea. Even if we return to the three colonial treaties which laid down the original boundaries based on topographical features such as rivers, the terrain around Badme conspires to complicate the issue by seemingly substantiating Eritrean claims. As one American official describes, the Badme region is “desert right on the edge of the Ethiopian plateau, and when the rains come, they suddenly rush off the side of the mountains with

tremendous force. When you have water moving with such force, the rivers move over ninety-seven years. And so the lines move.” Thus, when Eritrean forces moved into the Badme region in May 1998, they did so under the assumption that history would back their territorial claims. But while the territorial dimensions of this conflict may be complex, it is important to recognize that these competing claims really rose to the surface only *after* the current conflict was underway. These were not festering issues that exploded into all-out war. When Eritrea gained its independence in 1993, formal demarcation of the border was not seen as an immediate priority. In both countries, massive economic and social programs needed to be developed to address the effects of decades of struggle against the Mengistu regime. In Ethiopia, a new federal structure was being built. The international community, encouraged by the strong relationship between Issaias and Meles, assumed that any questions arising over the demarcation issue would be dealt with on a highly personal, ad hoc basis. Indeed, during the first four years of Eritrean independence, the two leaders managed the arrangement as such – resolving problems arising from territorial ambiguity through regular meetings and telephone calls (*The Economist* 1999d).

In November, 1997 a Joint Commission on border issues had been established between the two countries. The commission met in Asmara and agreed that a technical subcommittee would be assembled, consisting of both Ethiopian and Eritrean representatives who would report to the Joint Commission after studying the problem of boundary ambiguity. Officials agreed that, until the status of the border could be permanently established by the Joint Commission, the status quo on the ground should be maintained. Moreover, they decided that the two sides should work to reduce any tensions that might arise in the border areas. (Walta Information Center 1999). It seemed as if a viable, cooperative framework for border issues was well on its way to being established, making the emergence of hostilities on the basis of territory all the more suspicious. In any event, to classify the Ethio-Eritrean conflict as a simple border war is to severely understate the character and intensity of the conflict; it is neither strictly a border war, nor are the territorial dimensions of the conflict at all simple, as made evident by the above analysis. The popular assumption that the war is exclusively fought along an ill-defined boundary is easily discredited when we witness Ethiopian air attacks against targets in Asmara; Eritrean air strikes against Tigrayan towns deep inside Ethiopian territory; the full-scale state of economic war between the two nations; each government’s efforts to support the opposition groups of its

adversary; and clear evidence of the involvement by external actors in supporting one side against the other. The conflict is better described as a total war, since a massive proportion of the countries' military, economic, political, and human resources are channeled into the conflict. What often tempts journalists, scholars, and practitioners to classify the conflict as anything less than a total war is its sporadic nature. The two sides are locked in a conflict requiring such substantial commitments of arms, soldiers, and financing that numerous lulls in the fighting are necessary in order for the belligerents to re-arm and to draw from a pool of new volunteers and conscripts. These lulls typically coincide with the rainy season, when the crude trench warfare that typifies this conflict is difficult to conduct.

More than being a total war, it is also evident that the conflict began rather inadvertently. This assertion stems from an overview of each country's military disposition just prior to the May 6th incident. It is clear that, before this time, neither country was preparing for war. Ethiopia had cut defence spending from \$1.31 billion in 1991 to \$124m in 1996 and had drawn up defence plans for all possible contingencies; war with Eritrea was not one of them (*The Economist*, 1999c). Once war broke out, both governments — quite unprepared for large-scale military action — were forced to rapidly recruit and re-arm. Ethiopia doubled the size of its army to 200,000. Eritrea called up everyone not in an essential occupation. This situation, combined with the fact that the border issue had never been a serious source of tension or dispute in the past, suggests that the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaderships had seized upon a rather minor incident at Badme as a rationale for waging war. The following two sections examine the reasons why each leader may have decided to pursue this path. This is an important step towards gaining an understanding of why subsequent mediation attempts to end the dispute have met with no success.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

The most significant result of Eritrean independence, in economic and geopolitical terms, was that it left Ethiopia landlocked — cut off from access to the Red Sea, on which Ethiopia depended for maintaining its international trading relationships. Since Eritrean independence, Addis Ababa had regulated this situation through the payment of nominal fees to Asmara to ensure Ethiopian access to the Eritrean port of Assab. The port has been crucial for Ethiopia as a station for imports and as a conduit through which high volumes of coffee exports could flow. Along with the port access arrangement, Eritrea and Ethiopia signed protocols commit-

ting each government to a free trade zone. There was talk that Ethiopia would eventually be given duty-free access to Eritrean ports. There were even preliminary bilateral discussions about linking the Ethiopian and Eritrean economies under the rubric of a Horn of Africa common market (Wrong 1998). Eritrea, given its small population and status as a coastal state, had originally aimed its economic strategies towards overcoming its poor resource base by transforming itself into the region's Singapore. As such, Asmara tried to attract investment to make high volumes of processed goods for export. When this strategy proved slow to develop, it seems that Asmara tried to extract higher fees from Ethiopia for the right of access to the Red Sea (*Global Intelligence Update* 1999).

Then, in November 1997, Eritrea introduced its own currency, the *nakfa*. It expected, at launch, a one-to-one exchange rate with the Ethiopian *birr*, but the Ethiopians refused to accept it as legal tender and insisted that all monetary exchanges be made in US dollars. Trade between the countries was severely disrupted as a result. Amidst this disruption, Ethiopia accused the Eritrean oil refinery at Assab of suddenly overcharging for its products, and claimed that Eritrean traders were smuggling coffee across the border and re-exporting it. In response, Ethiopia raised the price of grain, upon which Eritrea is dependent as a food source. In May, Addis Ababa cut all trade through Assab and began re-routing it through Djibouti (The Economist 1999c; Connell 1999a).

Increasingly, Ethiopians came to accuse Eritreans of taking unfair advantage of the Red Sea access which Addis Ababa had granted them when they were permitted to secede. Eritreans began to suspect that Ethiopia was trying to put their fledgling economy in a stranglehold, to make it subservient to Ethiopian economic interests — and this after Eritrea had been gracious enough to grant Ethiopia access to its ports. As one news article characterized the situation, each side seemed to think that their country's generosity was being exploited by the other (*The Economist* 1999c; *The Economist* 1999a).

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

The Alliance and Its Legacy

The argument could be made that the current schism between Addis Ababa and Asmara is rooted in deep-seated tensions that developed between the EPLF and the TPLF during their long struggle aimed at deposing the Mengistu regime. To assess this argument, it is important to understand what many often fail to appreciate: that the EPLF-TPLF alliance was primarily a tactical one. Terrence Lyons describes the relation-

ship as “complex, interrelated, but uncoordinated” in terms of setting goals for a future beyond military victory (Lyons 1995, 248). The alliance was cemented by a positive relationship between Meles and Issaias, but — even beyond the fact that they represented two distinct ethno-nationalist movements — there were some significant ideological incongruities between the two groups. Dan Connell explains the various disputes that arose between the “pro-Albania Marxist-Leninist” TPLF and the less ideological EPLF. These disputes were typified by the Tigrayans’ labeling of their Eritrean partners as “*petit bourgeois* nationalists,” and castigating them for not sharing the TPLF view of the Soviet Union as a “social-imperialist” state. However, Connell concludes that, in light of their ultimately successful partnership during the Ethiopian civil war, the political departures between the two groups should be seen as “more a case of variations in line than clashes in ideology” (Connell 1999a).

For our purposes, it is probably sufficient to understand that there is historical precedent for discord between Tigrayans and Eritreans and that we should not presume that their wartime alliance or the reputed friendship between the two groups would endure in the aftermath of their common struggle. This has often been an oversight by those observers of the current conflict who are bewildered that such supposed “bonds of solidarity” between Eritrea and the Tigrayan-led government in Addis Ababa could have broken down so easily.

Ethiopia: Complex Federation

In 1993, most analysts and common observers of the Horn looked to Eritrean independence as a triumphant manifestation of ethnic nationalism in the region. The carving out of a new state from an old empire made for attractive headlines, and a crowd of historians rushed to publish books about the independence struggle, tracing its emergence from colonial times to its culmination in statehood centuries later. But in the midst of this process, many overlooked the ascendance of another nationalist movement on the Horn: the Tigrayans had triumphed as well. In 1991, Meles’ seizure of power in Addis Ababa was at least as significant as the secession of Eritrea, since it marked a changeover of political control between ethnic groups within Ethiopia.

Long downtrodden as Ethiopia’s underclass, the Tigrayans attempted to establish Tigray as an autonomous region in a newly decentralized Ethiopia in the early 1990s, by pursuing a development strategy they termed “ethnic federalism.” Having established their movement in the 1970s with a call for an independent Tigrayan republic, they appeared to

be “hedging their bets in the postwar period, retaining their option to secede if a reconfigured Ethiopia was not to their liking” (Connell 1999a). Although Tigrayans represent a mere ten percent of the Ethiopian population, Meles filled his government with ex-TPLF militiamen. Today, approximately two-thirds of the ruling coalition is Tigrayan.

The preponderance of Tigrayan rule from Addis Ababa is an anathema for many Ethiopians. Most Amharas, traditionally the dominant group in Ethiopian politics and the group that presided over the exponential growth of the Ethiopian Empire over the past century, did not see the TPLF as liberators when they overthrew the Mengistu regime. Indeed, an *Economist* article recounts that “when the Tigrayan TPLF guerrillas, dressed in shorts and with their hair long and wild, walked into Addis Ababa eight years ago, the locals feared them as an invading army” (*The Economist* 1999c). Many Ethiopians were therefore incensed when Eritrea was allowed to exit Meles’ newly-designed federation — not least of whom were the Oromo people of the south, and the Afars of the northeastern tip of the Horn (where the borders of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti intersect). Both of these groups spawn strong secessionist movements and were frustrated when they were not extended the same right to secede as the Eritreans. Faced with the difficulties of minority rule in an ethnically diverse federation, Meles had to find a way of ruling with public consent what he had won by force. Accordingly, he created a new federal design that devolved some central powers to the regions and drew up a new constitution that, in theory, allows any region to secede. In practice, however, Meles has given no indication that he will allow any other region to follow the Eritrean lead (*The Economist* 1999c).

Upon assuming power, the new Tigrayan-dominated government promptly began channeling disproportionate amounts of resources northward to the Tigray province. Connell explains that the favoritism afforded to Meles’ home province was substantial enough for the regional administrators there to set up an independent Tigrayan security force (Connell 1999a). Overall, the province experienced a surge in economic growth, fueling jealousy from other Ethiopians — both at a societal level and from non-Tigrayan elements within Meles’ coalition. In 1997, as the economic dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia developed, Meles increasingly came under fire in the Ethiopian press for his cordial relationship with Issaias; many suggested that Ethiopia would not be so easily taken advantage of, if it were not for Meles’ unwillingness to stand up to his former ally (*The Economist* 1998a). While it is impossible to say precisely what political events might have unfolded in Addis Ababa when the Badme incident

occurred on 6 May 1998, it is quite plausible to think that Meles was facing some serious challenges. He may have even sensed the beginnings of a popular movement against him.

Thus, when the first skirmishes broke out along the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, Eritrea faced “two intersecting nationalisms” — Tigrayan and (greater) Ethiopian. The result was a three-way confrontation. As Connell writes: “Not only did the Eritreans face a confluence of powerful antagonists, the Tigrayans, who might have sought compromise, were put in a squeeze” as other Ethiopians challenged the Tigrayan leadership in Addis Ababa to demonstrate its commitment to a strong, unified Ethiopian state by actively defending the state’s interests against a former ally (Connell 1999a).

Eritrea: “Never Kneel Down”

Almost from its inception as an independent state, Eritrean relations with its neighbours have been extremely contentious. On the day of official independence, 1 January 1994, Issaias accused Sudan of supporting an abortive invasion of his country one month earlier. He charged that “Islamic militants” had infiltrated from Sudan and declared war on the new government. Issaias alleged that a battle ensued between Eritrean forces and the militants, in which all the Muslim invaders were killed, along with one Eritrean commander. These reports were never substantiated independently. In a statement made over state radio, Issaias implicated several countries besides Sudan in fueling the “invasion”: Afghanistan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Pakistan.

Asmara lodged a complaint about the alleged incident to the OAU and, when the organization was slow to respond, he forwarded it to the UN Security Council. Sudan denied the charges, claiming that “the armed elements in question” were based in Eritrea (*Indian Ocean Newsletter* 1994). Incessant accusations directed at Khartoum created high levels of tension between Sudan and Eritrea. At one point, according to one author, armed conflict between the two nations seemed imminent (Medhanie 1994).

In 1995, Eritrean troops clashed with Yemeni forces over ownership of the Red Sea Island of Greater Hanish, leading to a series of Eritrean claims of sovereignty over numerous Yemeni islands and rocky shoals in the Gulf of Aden. Three years later, a London-based arbitration panel handed most of the islands, including Greater Hanish, back to Yemen (*Arabia On-Line* 1998). Relations with neighbouring Djibouti have also soured recently, in part based on Ethiopia’s decision to re-route its trade through the port of the city-state (*The Economist* 1999c).

The short history of independent Eritrean foreign policy reveals a country willing to engage — almost impulsively — in aggressive behaviour to defend against what it perceives as challenges to its sovereignty. This character likely stems from an ingrained “insurgency mentality” in Eritrean society and within the former guerrilla movement that now serves as the country’s government (Pool 1998). David Hirst, a reporter with *The Guardian*, concurs with this assessment when he writes:

. . . the Eritreans resort to force more quickly than they should, and . . . they also draw dubious frontiers in their own favour.

This is the less attractive, pugnacious, us-versus-them aspect of self-reliance, the prickly nationalism of a small young state determined to hold its own against much larger neighbours (Hirst 1998a).

The EPLF’s rallying cry has become the national slogan: “Never Kneel Down.” Eritrean sovereignty, because its realization was so hard-fought and so recently won, may make those who would challenge it especially prone to a disproportionate, forceful Eritrean response. Few steps appear to have been taken towards building confidence among Eritreans that a re-constituted Ethiopia would not one day attempt to reverse Meles’ commitment to allowing Eritrea to secede. As a result, in May 1998, a dangerous mix of political, economic, and social conditions resonated between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The shooting incident at Badme provided the spark for a wider war.

The confluence of three important factors — a deteriorating economic relationship, political dynamics within the Ethiopian federation, and a highly mistrustful, conflict-oriented Eritrea — were channeled into a single incident on May 6th. The Ethiopian and Eritrean leaderships seized upon the opportunity presented to them. Meles probably had hoped that a quick but powerful show of force would simultaneously persuade Issaias to take Ethiopian dissatisfaction with the economic situation seriously, while demonstrating to his own governing coalition partners (and to those who would seek his overthrow) that, regardless of his friendship with Issaias, he would not let Eritrea place a stranglehold on the Ethiopian economy. Issaias, pandering to Eritreans’ fears that Ethiopia still harboured expansionist designs on Eritrea, and unable to ignore the devastating effects of Ethiopian economic pressure tactics, responded in kind with his own show of force. The resulting insecurity spiral and subsequent confrontations have since created a degree of rhetoric, hostility, and newly

created grievances at the societal level that is self-perpetuating, and from which neither leader can afford to retreat.

ASSESSING MEDIATION EFFORTS

In searching for a rationale for third-party intervention in this conflict, we need only look at the far-reaching regional implications of the conflict itself. Eritrea and Ethiopia, once united in their stand against Islamic militancy emanating from Sudan, have become so consumed with the war against one another that the balance of power on the Horn has tilted in favour of the government in Khartoum. As the war has worsened, Ethiopia has actually turned to its Islamic neighbour for support. Addis Ababa now hopes to build an alliance with Eritrean dissidents that would include Islamic groups exiled in Sudan who oppose Issaias' government. Eritrea, for its part, has established strong links to the Sudanese opposition National Democratic Alliance. Egypt, likely motivated by its strategic interests in the Red Sea, has come out in clear support of Eritrea (*Monitor* 1999). Since the outbreak of hostilities with Ethiopia, President Issaias has made several trips to Libya for consultations with Mohamar Qadhafi, and has joined Qadhafi's Community of Saharan and Sahelian States (COMESSA) (*Reporter* 1999). There are reports that Eritrea has delivered large quantities of weapons and munitions to self-proclaimed Somali "President" Hussein Aideed, some of which are then funneled to a violent faction of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to assist them in their campaign to secede from Ethiopia. The OLF has increased its activities in the South of Ethiopia and across the border, inside Kenya, prompting Meles to approach Nairobi on brokering an agreement on mutual security. Ethiopia has tried to counter Eritrean arms flows into Somalia with its own network of arms deliveries to various Somali clans, contributing to a resurgence of violence in many parts of Somalia. The destabilizing effects of the war have been worrisome for Western officials especially, and likely provided the US State Department with its primary motivation to intervene. Rwanda, for its part, was alarmed by the outbreak of hostilities between the Horn nations because the Ethiopia and Eritrea had been heavily engaged in diplomatic efforts to stabilize the Great Lakes region and now Kigali feared that their "fratricidal" war would negatively affect the situation in and around Rwanda. One official summarized international concerns aptly, when he stated recently: "The Horn of Africa is a very strategic region, on the Red Sea and close to the Persian Gulf. If the war continues, it will mean not only a huge loss of life, but also a complete destabilization of the region. We can bear Sudan and Somalia [at war], but

we can't live with Ethiopia and Eritrea fighting on top of that."

We should note that this is not a particularly unique set of motivating factors for international mediators. As Peter Carnevale and Sharon Arad point out: "Mediators have interests and incentives that motivate their involvement in conflict. . . . When mediators have interests, they have something at stake in the conflict. These stakes may stem from the broader political and economic context and relationships with either side" (Carnevale and Arad 1996, 39-40). But, by focusing our attention on US-Rwandan involvement in the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, we see a case in which the mediators' interests in settling the conflict were so great that they infringed upon the all-important image of mediator neutrality. This effectively led to the failure of the peace plan.

The U.S.-Rwanda Effort

The United States enjoyed good relations with both Eritrea and Ethiopia and therefore felt it was well positioned to intervene as an impartial mediator. While the Americans were motivated by regional security concerns, as mentioned, the humanitarian consequences of the conflict also clearly weighed into their decision to intervene diplomatically. The inclusion of Rwandan officials on the mediation team was as much a reflection of Rwandan interests in the conflict as an opportunity for the Americans to co-opt an African partner as a means of adding a further element of legitimacy to their involvement.

As we have already seen, the substance of the US-Rwanda plan was entirely focused on the border issue. There does not appear to have been any attempt to address any other underlying sources of the conflict. At this stage in the conflict, the Americans might have been excused from pursuing a "holistic" approach (that is, seeking resolution rather than simply settlement) because it would have provided both Issaias and Meles with the opportunity to pull their forces back from a situation of escalating violence—a situation which they had probably intended to be temporary displays of national resolve. In other words, the Americans and the Rwandans had stepped into a ripe moment. Both Meles and Issaias were probably looking for an opportunity to de-escalate their level of engagement. The substance of the US-Rwandan plan could have produced a ceasefire, upon which solutions geared towards the economic and political sources of the conflict could have been built afterwards.

However, the actions of the US mediators demonstrated their lack of appreciation for these non-territorial sources of conflict. Apparently, the Americans were taken by surprise with the notion that Meles' hold on

power might have been in jeopardy. When they inferred as much during a round of negotiations in Addis Ababa, the American team felt it was time to transform their methodical, shuttle diplomacy into more forceful action. Connell (1999b) describes what happened next.

Rice apparently panicked at the idea that time was running out and decided that Eritrea needed to be strong-armed into the pact The US-led team rushed to get the proposal public, asking one member to contact Eritrea while Rice convened a press conference with Meles in Addis Ababa to announce a 'breakthrough.' Unfortunately, no one managed to contact the Eritreans. Meanwhile, Rice flew off to an OAU meeting in Ougadougou to get them on board, telling delegates that Ethiopia was for it and that Eritrea would soon agree. When Eritrean officials learned this through the media, they were furious — and quickly rejected the plan. . . . From that point on . . . the US simply lost credibility.

Thus, the conduct of the US-led process resulted in the failure of American proposals. While there is some debate within the literature over the value and ethics of mediator pressure placed upon one or both disputants (Boskey 1994; Matz 1994), the American pressure tactic in this instance was clearly a mistake. Rice should have taken into account Issaias' personality and political situation before entertaining this option. Had she done this with any proficiency or minimal background knowledge, she should have been able to predict his unfavorable reaction.

The US was then effectively eliminated as a viable mediator to continue the process. Before returning to Washington, the Americans managed to salvage their efforts only marginally, when they brokered the moratorium on airstrikes. Rwanda quickly moved to disassociate itself from the obviously failing diplomatic process (Connell 1999a).

The OAU Effort

With the failure of the US-Rwanda plan, the OAU began a new round of negotiations in an attempt to forge a settlement between Asmara and Addis Ababa. From the outset, it was clear that the OAU did not have the capacity to act as an effective mediator. First, the OAU was not an ideal facilitator because of its questionable relationship with one of the disputants — namely, Eritrea. The OAU, dominated by African states highly concerned with questions of sovereignty and perpetually wary of substate national movements within their own borders, was slow — some would say resistant — to recognize Eritrean independence in 1993 (Jonah 1994). Second, the recommendations that the OAU laid down in its "Framework

Proposal” amounted simply to more detailed enumerations of the US-Rwandan plan. The only qualitatively new elements were the provision for a UN cartography team to work with Ethiopia and Eritrea on demarcating the border, and a vaguely worded pronouncement about the ill-effects of the war on civilian populations. Issaias could not be reasonably expected to accept a deal that was, in essence, the same as the one he had rejected only a few months earlier. As a result, the Ethiopians seized on the opportunity to accept the deal outright, leaving Asmara to receive the brunt of international criticism for appearing to reject peace.

By the time the OAU tabled its proposal in December 1998, the ripe moment for successful mediation had long since passed. Both sides began re-arming in earnest and their intransigent positions became more deeply embedded in their respective national psyches. Moreover, the onset of torrential rains had effectively ended the fighting for the interim and had therefore removed a sense of urgency from the peace process. When fighting resumed in February, hopes for the emergence of another ripe moment were dashed when Ethiopian military successes gave Addis Ababa the upper hand on the battlefield. When Ethiopian forces broke the Eritrean line at Badme, any prospect for the development of a “hurting stalemate,” conducive to each side’s willingness to negotiate, was lost. Predictably, it was now Eritrea that was willing to accept the OAU peace deal; Ethiopia now refused to sign, citing difficulties with some of the plan’s “technical points.”

The Eritrea-Ethiopia case, moreover, exposed the incompetence of the OAU in designing conflict resolution strategies. OAU involvement in the Ethio-Eritrean conflict has been characterized by ineptitude on a number of fronts. For example, the OAU mediators (“either through incompetence or through an attempt at creative ambiguity,” quipped one correspondent) gave the two governments different interpretations of its own plan (*The Economist* 1999c). Meles was told that the term “withdrawal” meant Eritrean redeployment from all areas it has occupied since May 1998. When Issaias questioned OAU officials on this point, he was told that “withdrawal” referred only to the area around Badme. Exacerbating the crisis is an apparent unwillingness on the part of the UN and any number of potential European peace facilitators to infringe upon the OAU effort. Many view the Ethio-Eritrean conflict as a test case for the OAU in conflict resolution and, hoping to see evidence that Africa may soon be able to settle its own disputes, they have been reluctant to step in (Stearns 1999). Recently, the US re-entered the process when Clinton sent former National Security Advisor Anthony Lake to conduct talks with the

Ethiopian and Eritrean leaderships (Rice 1999). This may be an indication that Washington has recognized the OAU's failure. It remains to be seen whether others will try to circumvent the OAU role.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict and the mediation efforts surrounding the war, we can come to the following conclusions:

- The current focus on the territorial dimension of the conflict is a necessary but insufficient approach to finding a resolution to this war. The border issue, the question of its causal role notwithstanding, has become the central focus of the war for Ethiopian and Eritrean societies and their respective leaders. Clearly, the conflict cannot be settled without some demarcation of a common border by an independent adjudicator. But, if we consider the border to be merely a pretext for the wider conflict, there is a pressing need to address the economic disputes and the socio-political factors that have pushed Ethiopia and Eritrea into war. In 1998, the attainment of a ceasefire agreement along the lines of the US-Rwandan proposal may have given sufficient respite from the conflict for mediators to then address the war's underlying causes. However, as the war has progressed, it may now be impossible to achieve an agreement on the border issue without first securing settlements on the other issues of dispute.

- Pursuant to this, a second set of diplomatic initiatives must be taken to address Ethiopian political uncertainty, Eritrean insecurity, and Ethio-Eritrean economic discord. The role of mediator for these tasks could come from a number of sources. It is unclear whether the Eritreans have genuinely accepted the US back into the process in the person of special envoy Anthony Lake, but if Lake is able to exercise American leverage more tactfully than his predecessor, Washington could successfully fill the mediator position. Alternatively, the European Union, perhaps through the African, Caribbean and Pacific States-EU Joint Assembly, could take the leading role; or an African state with significant brokerage power (possibly South Africa, Zimbabwe, or Tanzania) could orchestrate this more resolution-oriented set of mediation efforts. It is important to note that none of these proposed initiatives would necessarily negate the OAU-led process. Rather, they would compliment the OAU's concurrent efforts to settle the territorial aspects of the conflict.

- Examples of such provisions could be: Ethiopian guarantees of stable prices for grain exports to Eritrea in exchange for an Eritrean guarantee on oil transfers to Ethiopia; the rectification of the Eritrea-Ethiopia port-

sharing agreement; the winning of explicit guarantees of Eritrean sovereignty from Addis Ababa; the establishment of an international peace-keeping force to monitor Eritrean and Ethiopian troop movements; and the inclusion of Oromo and Afar representatives into the peace process with the aim of making the resulting peace deal a true "Ethiopian" agreement and not simply a Tigrayan-Eritrean pact.

The Ethio-Eritrean conflict demands a more concerted, competent set of mediation efforts than those put forward to date. The strategic, economic, and human costs of this war are enormous — more grave than they often appear at first glance. Likewise, the sources of this conflict go far beyond a dispute over uncertain boundaries on a barren plateau. Mediation efforts have failed primarily because they have lacked the foresight and the fortitude to push beyond the war's territorial dimension. The international community is now faced with the need to re-ignite and re-focus their efforts to work alongside the now necessary, albeit largely inept OAU initiatives, as a means of moving towards a settlement of and a resolution to this neglected war that rages on in the Horn of Africa.

Notes

- 1 This MiG-29 purchase gives Eritrea the capability to strike at the Ethiopian capital. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Strategic Survey 1998/99*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999): 243.
- 2 For the full text of the OAU's report see the section "Report on the Efforts Made by OAU High Level Delegation On Dispute Between Ethiopia and Eritrea" in *Walta Information Center, One Year of Ethio-Eritrean Conflict*, (Addis Ababa: Walta Information Center): 155-160.
- 3 According to undisclosed diplomatic sources, quoted in "Carnage on the Plain," *The Economist*, 17 April 1999.
- 4 Unnamed source, quoted in Ian Fisher, "Wherever That Town Is, Someone Will Die for It."
- 5 For instance, see quotes of various undisclosed diplomatic sources in John Donnelly, "A Deadly Family Feud: Conflict Between Eritrea and Ethiopia Reveals a Continent's Tensions," *The Boston Globe* 8 August 1999.
- 6 Coffee exports accrued Ethiopia \$450 million in 1998. "Africa's Forgotten War," *The Economist*, 8 May 1999.
- 7 For analyses of Eritrea's economic development since independence, see Paul Heinze, "The Primacy of Economics for the Future of the Horn of Africa," Charles Gurdon, ed., *The Horn of Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994): 20-22; Paul Knox, "Eritrea Stands Alone," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 10 December 1997; David Hirst, "Why Eritreans are on the Right Track," *Daily*

- Star* (Beirut), 10 May 1998; and Dan Bellamy, "End of the Honeymoon," *New African* May 1997: 23.
- 8 For another report that alludes to long-standing discord between Tigrayans and Eritreans, see Alex Last, "Back To War," *Focus on Africa* (BBC World Service Magazine) [www.bbc.co.uk].
- 9 The Ogaden National Liberation Front, based in western Somalia, also pledges to overthrow the Meles government.
- 10 For a discussion of the ethnic dimension of Ethiopian federalism, see Christopher Clapham, "Ethnicity and the National Question in Ethiopia," Peter Woodward and Murray Forsyth, eds., *Conflict and Peace in the Horn of Africa: Federalism and Its Alternatives* (Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth, 1994): 27-40.
- 11 One report claims that, following a negotiation session between the US team and an Ethiopian delegation, the Americans walked away with a distinct impression that "there was a power struggle taking place within the TPLF."
- 12 Dan Connell, "Shootout in the Horn of Africa: A View from Eritrea," *Middle East Report* (Spring 1999) [www.merip.org].
- 13 A German newspaper editorial attributed this trait to Ethiopia as well: "This obstinacy and stubbornness are probably based on the experience of both leadership cliques as well as broad parts of society. The powers-that-be in Ethiopia and Eritrea waged wars for decades and won in the end. And what are the conclusions which the people and the rulers draw from such horrible wars? In Addis Ababa and Asmara, the answer is: War is possible any time and fighting is a means to achieve political end. The ability to make compromises and to achieve consensus are not very apparent in the Horn of Africa."
- 14 "War as a Means to an End," *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Frankfurt) 9 February 1999.
- 15 Andrea Useem and David Gough write that since independence and "those heady days of nascent nationhood, Eritrea's virulent nationalism has brought it into conflict with Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen and now Ethiopia. In a continent notorious for governments interfering in their neighbours' affairs, Eritrea seems to have taken the lead."
- 16 Andrea Useem and David Gough, "No End in Sight for "Stupidest War," *Africa Today* April 1999.
- 17 In May, a coalition of ten Eritrean opposition groups, headed by a prominent Islamic leader, convened in Khartoum to plan a common strategy to overthrow Issaias. Andrew Lycett, "The Crazy War," *New African* May 1999.
- 18 More impartial (i.e. non-Ethiopian) sources recounting regional involvement in the war include: Andrew Lycett, "The Crazy War," *New African* May 1999; and Susan E. Rice, "The Ethiopian-Eritrean War: US Policy Options," testimony to the Africa Subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, 26 May 1999.

- 19 Marcello Ricoveri, Italian Ambassador to Ethiopia, quoted in Andrea Useem and David Gough, "No End in Sight for 'Stupidest War'," *Africa Today* 25 April 1999:26.
- 20 Rice reported to the US House Subcommittee on Africa that "[t]he security costs of the conflict are matched, if not exceeded, by the grave humanitarian consequences of the war."
- 21 Susan E. Rice, "The Ethiopian-Eritrean War: US Policy Options," testimony to the Africa Subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, 26 May 1999.
- 22 For a case study analysis of the "hurting stalemate" as a feature of international disputes, see Marieke Kleibor and Paul T'Hart, "Time to Talk? Multiple Perspectives on Timing in International Mediation," Unpublished article, 1996.
- 23 See Ethiopian government statements throughout the publication: Walta Information Center. *One Year of Ethio-Eritrean Conflict* (Addis Ababa: Walta Information Center, 1999).

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