

ICWA LETTERS

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A Final Trip Around the Horn

By Marc Michaelson

[Transcript of a speech delivered at the Members and Trustees meeting of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Monmouth, NJ, June 18, 2000]

In Ethiopia and in Eritrea, Africa's newest country, there's finally peace. Democracy is taking root. Poverty is on the decline, and the agricultural sector is blossoming. Trade is expanding and investment is pouring in as once-leery investors seek a piece of the "African Renaissance."

That's how I had hoped to start this final report. Sorry to say, that's not the report I'll be giving today.

When I arrived in Ethiopia in January 1998, the country was full of hope. That's why I'd applied for an ICWA fellowship — to learn about all the exciting progress in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Unfortunately, things have once again turned sour in the disaster-prone Horn of Africa. A snapshot shows the region riddled with all the familiar tragedies: famine, war, forced displacement, floods, fires, droughts and the plague of AIDS. To complete the biblical cycle of calamity, I've been expecting the locusts to arrive any day.

It's a tasteless joke, but that's what we expatriates have been reduced to — bad humor is a coping mechanism for those of us who are frustrated, standing helplessly by as our host nation self-destructs before our very eyes. Today I'd like to share a few observations and stories from my ICWA travels. Like my fellowship, this will be a whirlwind tour of sorts — jumping from topic to topic and place to place. So, if you haven't already done so, buckle your seat belts. We are going for a ride.

* * *

Let's start at my house in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. A few weeks ago I hosted a party. It was a chance to share some last good times with friends. The beer flowed, Ethiopian delicacies were munched and I, by popular demand, ate my hat. [Actually, it was a cake...in the shape of a hat].

That hat-eating dare dated back to February, 1999, when I confidently proclaimed to a group of colleagues that Eritrea would never accept the Organization of African Unity's (OAU's) peace proposal. I understood the Eritrean psyche — the stubbornness, the strength, the long-term vision, the unwavering commitment to fight on if need be. Well, The next morning, Ethiopia re-captured the



The author

disputed hamlet of Badime and within 48 hours Eritrea accepted the peace deal. My friends started calling to demand I devour my hat.

I tell this story to illustrate the humbling unpredictability of this region and its peoples. The mindset, the logic, the world-view are incredibly different from our own. To my mind it is inconceivable, unconscionable that the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments should choose war when the possibility of peace is so close at hand, and when millions of their people are hungry (thousands are actually starving).

US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, a man well-experienced in mediating stubborn leaders and thorny conflicts, was shocked by this "senseless war." I am too.

To me this border war seems foolish, the leaders hard-hearted and arrogant.

But to Ethiopia and Eritrea it is historical duty to maintain lofty ideals of sovereignty and ideas of national greatness and grandeur. People can starve, the economy can collapse, fires can rage out of control, but never NEVER will our territory be usurped by an invader.

I don't dispute the right of any government to protect national sovereignty.

But this conflict was eminently resolvable by peaceful means. The two governments have callously chosen to wage an extremely expensive war and ignore the wel-

fare of their populations. Both nations rest firmly at the bottom of the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP's) Human Development Index: Eritrea is number 167 and Ethiopia is number 172 (of 174). And yet the two governments have together squandered upwards of a billion dollars on this war. As Ethiopia's Prime Minister recently said, "We don't wait for our stomachs to be full to protect our sovereignty."

Fair enough, but should Ethiopia expect the international community to feed its people?

This war, like many of the globe's complex conflicts, raises troubling questions for humanitarian action. When and where should we act? When should we refrain? How can we help suffering people and not simultaneously embolden poor leadership? I have found no easy answers.

* * *

As brutal as this war has been, it's important not to forget the many connections that bind the two peoples. When I visited the Eritrean trenches, I was told a story about a radio operator who had been monitoring Ethiopian communications. He heard an Ethiopian soldier on the front lines on the radio with a friend. "We're hungry. Send some food up here. All we have to eat is *kolo* [a roasted barley snack]."

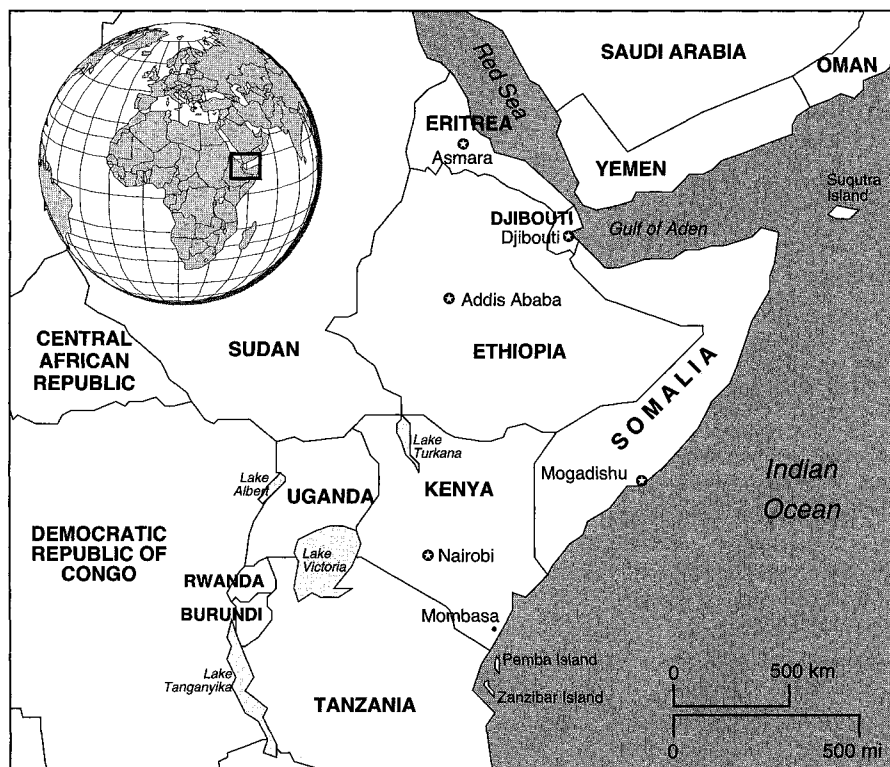
His colleague replied, "Don't worry, in a few days when we win the war, we'll have plenty of *meat* to eat."

At this point the Eritrean soldier breaks his radio silence and interjects, "Buddy, in a few days, you'll be eating dirt!"

The Ethiopian calls back to him, laughing, "My brother, I think we'll both be eating dirt, but Meles and Isaias [our two leaders]....they'll be drinking whiskey!!"

On the front lines, I met a young female Eritrean soldier named Zebib. Zebib, who grew up in Addis Ababa, speaks Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. For this reason, she was put in charge of prisoners of war (POWs).

Zebib told me about one of her experiences from a battle in Geza Gerlassie. "During the battle, I recognized one of the P.O.W.s who surrendered to our platoon. His name was Habtom and he was one of my neighbors



in Addis Ababa. I was shocked to see him there and he was frightened to death. I told him not to worry, we would take good care of them. After the battle ended, we gave them water and milk, and washed their clothes."

Zebib and Habtom's encounter on the front lines shows again how people are tied together, both as neighbors and as enemies.

As we walked along the trenches Major Tewolde, our guide, warned us to keep quiet. The front lines were frighteningly close at this point, about 30 meters. If the Ethiopians heard voices and activity, they might try to lob a grenade into the trench. Despite the tension, Tewolde said, "Sometimes at night, we bring our stereos into the trenches and play music for each other." That's right, during the day they shoot at each other and at night they share their common cultural heritage.

These three anecdotes are simple reminders that these two bitter rivals are actually siblings... albeit siblings engaged in a deadly family squabble.

* * *

I've started with a fairly disturbing snapshot. But set aside the doom-and-gloom of the present moment and take a look at the longer-term trends. Ethiopia *is* progressing — although slowly, unsteadily, in fits and starts, much like the old Russian Lada cars that transport Ethiopians around Addis Ababa. Despite the current problems, I remain guardedly optimistic. This is probably in part due to a flawed gene, but it's also due to a few positive signs of incremental change.

A few examples:

- In mid-May Ethiopia held the second democratic election in its long history. To no one's surprise, the ruling party dominated. Some opposition candidates were harassed and jailed, but there was also real debate, improved access to the media, and relatively transparent voting procedures.
- Ethiopia's press is much freer than it has ever been in the past. Private newspapers are flourishing and criticizing government policy. Journalists are still occasionally thrown in prison, but they continue to speak up and speak out.
- Since the previous Derg government, political violence has diminished, as have oppressive measures like curfews. No longer are dead people turning up on the side of the street, murdered by political cadres for expressing anti-government sentiment.

Have no illusions, much work remains to be done in Ethiopia. The bureaucracy, for instance, remains impenetrable and inefficient. I experienced this inefficiency when I first arrived in Ethiopia. I went to open an internet

account and was told I had to pay with a check. No problem.... I went to the bank to open an account, but the bank wouldn't open an account unless I had a resident permit. So I went to get a resident permit and they asked for a work permit. I tried to get a work permit and they told me ICWA had to have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government. Around and around and around we go. I finally just gave up and asked a friend to write me the darned check.

The bottom line is that the Ethiopian government still loves to micro-manage economic life. Internalizing a culture of democracy and opening the economy will take many decades. But in assessing political and social change on this continent, it's important to be fair and realistic. Ethiopia has been a feudal monarchy for hundreds of years. It won't be able to magically transform into a liberal democracy overnight.

What's important is the direction of the motion. War is hampering the efforts, but Ethiopia continues to limp forward.

* * *

Now let's hop on board Daalo Airlines for a trip to northern Somalia. Daalo is a Somali-owned airline that leases old Soviet Aeroflot planes from Air Tajikistan. This airline doesn't have IATA-approval, much less a frequent-flyer program, so hold on tight.

We arrive in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland.

Much of the world has given up on Somalia. In the 1990's it coined the concept of "failed state" and it continues to be associated with chaos and violence. But in the north, two fledgling nations have sprouted from the rubble of Somalia's civil war — Somaliland and Puntland.

To give you a sense of the changes taking place in northern Somalia, let's take a walk in downtown Hargeisa. The city is temperate and dusty; bullet-pocked buildings are potent reminders of the destructive wars of the late 80s and mid-90s.

Right on the side of the street, money changers hawk huge stacks of currency, unarmed and unprotected. Private banks transfer money more efficiently than Citibank — funds deposited in Toronto, New York or Los Angeles are delivered to Somali relatives in less than 24 hours. Phone companies offer crystal-clear long distance connections to anywhere in the world for \$1 per minute peak, 80 cents on Fridays and evenings. These are the lowest rates in Africa and are competitive with other regions of the world.

Economic growth and development in Somaliland harvest critical lessons of self-reliance. As an "unrecognized" political entity, Somaliland has slipped through

the cracks of the club of nations. It has thus been ignored by the World Bank, USAID and other major funders. Somaliland has been lobbying for international diplomatic recognition since unilaterally declaring independence in 1991. But diplomats riding around in fancy cars and socializing at cocktail receptions will add little value to what the people of Somaliland have accomplished of their own accord. Granted, the government is poorly paid and poorly motivated. Many bureaucrats rarely even bother coming to work. But in spite of this, the government *has* restored and maintained peace. They've created a stable environment in which Somalis can do what they do best — business.

More than 70 percent of the budget is spent on “security.” Somalis don't want government meddling in utilities or levying heavy taxes or passing restrictive legislation. Much like Americans, they want government stripped to the bone, staying out of their way.

Unlike the south of Somalia, Somaliland made peace and established a government without holding fancy peace conferences in the glitzy hotels of distant capitals. There were no warlords hugging and feigning statesmanship only to return to their fiefdoms and fail to make good on their peaceful promises.

Somaliland has undertaken a more indigenous, organic process. Melding together the modern and traditional, the government and clan leaders work hard to keep the peace, and doing so demands continuous attention. That's why the Minister of Civil Aviation is rarely found in the capital, much less at the airport. He's usually out in his hometown of Erigavo mediating clan conflicts.

When I visited Burao, a war-devastated town due east of Hargeisa, I stumbled upon a major peace meeting. A few months earlier, three men from the Habr Ja'llo sub-clan were killed by members of the Habr Yonis sub-clan. In Somali traditional law, the offender [and his clan] must pay 100 camels to the aggrieved family as reparations for the crime. I sat in on a meeting of 20 elders from the two sub-clans as they hashed out arrangements for payment of the blood price.

After the 2 p.m. Muslim prayer, the elders gathered in a meeting hall. They sat for hours, lounging on large mats, drinking sugary milk tea, and chewing *qat* (a narcotic leaf). They listened patiently to each other's lengthy speeches.

They talked and talked until they came to a resolution. That is how local-level peace continues to be maintained in the north of Somalia.

* * *

Now let's fly over to Sudan. The two main political actors are President Omar Hassan al-Bashir and rebel leader John Garang of the SPLA [the Sudanese Peoples'

Liberation Army]. These two human-rights-shredding brutes maintain their grips on power by dividing people and instigating them to fight. Northerners and southerners, Christians & Muslims don't trust each other; they've been pitted against one another in a ravaging civil war that has left about two million people dead and six million more displaced. Taking sides, as the US has done in its support for the SPLA, has done little to make peace. In fact, it has perpetuated and fueled the conflict.

Most Sudanese I spoke to on my short trip are tired, they've had enough of the war, and they've had enough of their government. But they feel helpless, unable to effect political change. Enter the People's Legal Aid Center [a.k.a. PLACE]. Place is a small but revolutionary organization that provides free legal services to displaced people. It was founded by Rifaat Osman, a Sudanese human rights lawyer.

What is remarkable about PLACE is *not* that they are fearlessly representing a 9-year-old girl who was allegedly raped by a policeman, or that they are defending a couple sentenced to death-by-stoning for adultery. These are important legal challenges, but what is remarkable about PLACE is the simple composition of its staff. PLACE's lawyers come from all regions, diverse ethnicities and different religions. It is a microcosm of Sudan and its members are showing the Sudanese people that they *can* work together and live together. This counters the messages of the government and SPLA, the messages of divisiveness, hatred and mistrust. PLACE is chopping down these barriers. It has already come under attack. The government has brought in several PLACE lawyers for aggressive interrogation. Anticipating trouble, they've made arrangements to take care of each other's families should they be detained or even worse.

PLACE has chosen the turtle as its mascot and its members expect their labors to take many years to bear fruit.

* * *

Thus far, I've been dragging you around (from Ethiopia and Eritrea to Somalia and then Sudan. Now I'd like to shift gears and mention a theme that impacts every country in the Horn — forced displacement.

The wars, droughts and politics of the Horn have pushed people around, uprooted them, ripped them from their homes, families and possessions. Some are refugees, others are displaced in their own country. I've spent a considerable amount of time talking with uprooted people. In Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, I couldn't walk down the street or sip a coffee at an outdoor café without meeting a deportee. I interviewed several, including Harnet Kidane, a 13-year-old tomboy, born and raised in Addis Ababa to Eritrean-born parents. We first met on the day of her arrival in Eritrea after a grueling four-day bus ride and a tense crossing of the war zone by foot in the middle of the night. Eritrean troops, on

high alert, shot at them until they heard women and children crying and realized they were civilians. The group was warned not to stray from the road because the entire area was mined.

Harnet's initial anger had subsided by our second meeting a year later, but she couldn't get one incident out of her mind. While she was detained in Addis Ababa, her brother came to say goodbye, but the guard stopped her from seeing him and slapped her. She'll never forget the treatment she received at the hands of the Ethiopian authorities. Thousands of deported youths like Harnet will grow up harboring anger and resentment.

Sudanese refugees living in camps in Western Ethiopia face different problems. Materially, they are relatively well cared for. But many have been refugees for more than ten years. An entire generation of children is growing up in the purgatory-like welfare world of the camps. They don't learn how to farm or survive on the fruits of their own labor. They know only that every month some big trucks will bring sacks of food aid and mom and dad will get their share. Someday, when these children are resettled, they will no doubt have problems functioning in the real world.

* * *

As you can see from this trip we just took, the Horn of Africa remains fraught with problems. I've learned a tremendous amount on this fellowship, just not what I had expected. I'd planned to look at post-conflict *nation-building* but instead found myself investigating post-conflict *conflict-building*. Ah, the irony! I chose this region to study peace and five months after my arrival a brutal border war broke out. And the ultimate irony is that TODAY, as I give this very report, Ethiopia and Eritrea are signing a peace agreement to end that war.

As some of the stories I've shared today show, there are small bubblings of peace and progress. If I had to tease out one big lesson from the past two years, it would be the importance of constructive engagement. *But*, it needs to be a smarter and much more constructive engagement than it is today.

America may be the sole remaining superpower, but the Horn of Africa is a humbling place. Our foreign policy has been a disaster here and we've seen the pitfalls of taking sides in conflicts. In Sudan, our support for the SPLA has done little more than fuel the civil war. And we all know the result of our taking sides [against Mohamed Farah Aideed] in our 1992-93 humanitarian intervention in Somalia's civil war.

As we've seen in Ethiopia and Eritrea, some countries will fight their wars no matter what we do. We've also seen the wastefulness of throwing money at problems. Most aid to Africa has not resulted in development. It has created dependency and debt and discouraged self-

reliance. This doesn't mean we shouldn't act. It just means we need to act smarter. To do so, we need a better informed and more consistent foreign policy. One that is more humble, one that doesn't arrogantly try to control events. But one which encourages peace, democracy and development. If leaders want to run their countries into the ground, sadly, that's their prerogative. We can't stop them. But we can certainly nudge them in the right direction.

If the Ethiopian government sees its own responsibility as fighting the war at the border and sees the international community's responsibility as feeding the starving people in the south, there's something seriously wrong. We need to promote accountability and avoid encouraging lousy governance. As a superpower, we've got ample resources to use as incentives and disincentives, carrots and sticks. We just need to use them more consistently and more intelligently.

* * *

I'd like to make a final comment on the ICWA experience and family and what it's meant to me over these past few years. As much as I've valued this opportunity to learn about the Horn of Africa, I'm equally thankful to ICWA for another gift. Just five months after I was awarded this fellowship, my mother Marilyn was diagnosed with cancer. It was the most devastating and shocking news I'd ever received. My mother was the center of our family. She taught me how to care for other people, and that was what sent me to Africa in the first place in 1990.

As I've learned, an ICWA fellowship is about both professional *and* personal growth. The Institute is *not* just a factory for international professionals. It supports an odyssey to learn about our world *and* ourselves. ICWA didn't force me, like most employers would, to choose between my career and my family. I still remember Peter telling me: "You won this fellowship. It will be there when you are ready for it."

What a gift!

And so I was able to watch as Somali elders resolved a thorny clan conflict.

I got to spend the last Christmas of the Millennium with southern Sudanese refugees. I was able to chase camels with pastoralists, and visit active Eritrean war trenches.

And most importantly, I was able to be with my mom during the final months of her life, to share in her care and give back some of the love she had showered on me for the past thirty years. For *all* of these opportunities, I am deeply grateful to ICWA to Peter, the Trustees and the rest of the Institute family.

Thank you.

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FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

EUROPE/RUSSIA

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A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University.

Gregory Feifer—Russia

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. Greg sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Whitney Mason—Turkey

A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

Jean Benoît Nadeau—France

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

SOUTH ASIA

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sub-SAHARA

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A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research."

THE AMERICAS

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A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the *International Courier* in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990.

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Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

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Tyrone Turner—Brazil

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