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The Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Conflict: Part 2—Explanations¹

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

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"I find it difficult to give a satisfactory answer to the question why relations with Eritrea have soured and how they reached the present stage. As I have found no answer that can satisfy me, I have no answer to give you which I believe will satisfy you."

—Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi speaking to journalists²

"It is difficult to even guess what could be behind this sudden turn of events. However, when it is all over we will stand in judgment before our own people."

—Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki as quoted in *Eritrea Profile*

By Marc Michaelson

When fighting broke out along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border in May, nearly everyone was shocked. No one expected a war between these close friends and neighbors. The people, and even the presidents, of the two countries expressed disbelief.

The two liberation movements, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), had cooperated closely during "the struggle" to overthrow Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam's socialist Derg government in 1991. Once they exchanged their battle fatigues for civilian clothes, assuming dominant roles within their respective governments, collaboration increased. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi were personally very close, speaking regularly on the phone to discuss issues, coordinate policy and offer each other friendly advice. The two governments worked together to ensure a smooth referendum on independence and transition to self-rule in Eritrea. They negotiated partnership agreements in currency, trade and certain spheres of foreign policy. Together they revitalized the sub-regional Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), based in Djibouti, to promote trade and stability in the sub-region.

All of these efforts were reaping tangible benefits for both countries. Aggressive economic development programs were steadily reversing decades of disastrous feudal and then communist stagnation. War-ravaged infrastructures — roads, electricity, telecommunications — were being rebuilt and modern-

¹ This is the second of a two part series on the Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict. Part 1 described the conflict events and peace initiatives from both Ethiopian and Eritrean perspectives. Part 2 explores the background and causes of the conflict.

² Meles Zenawi as quoted in "The Eye on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa," Vol. VIII, 1998, p.18.

ized. The two countries were pursuing different strategies for economic development and nation-building, but both were persistent, strong-willed and principled in their commitments to rehabilitate their war-battered nations.

How, then, could all of this be lost overnight? How could such dear friends turn into vitriolic enemies nearly instantaneously? How could the "African Renaissance" praised by President Clinton this past spring unravel at the seams so quickly, so naturally?

Understanding the Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict is not easy — the conflict in many ways defies logic. A plethora of conspiracy theories, diabolical intrigues and maniacal schemes have emerged as answers to this simplest of questions: Why? Herein, I will attempt to wade through the rumors, propaganda and hoopla to provide some explanation and insights into this war that no one seems to understand.

HISTORICAL FACTORS

Don't Ask 'Why?', Ask 'Why Not?'

The puzzlement expressed since the outbreak of hostilities in May is, in many regards, entirely unfounded. When put in proper historical perspective, it is not the return to war that is strange or noteworthy, but rather the peculiar absence of war during the past seven years. Instead of asking how war could possibly have broken out between these two peace-loving, development-oriented neighbors, a more *à propos* question may be 'how did they avoid war until now?'.

Ethiopia has known relatively few periods of total peace and harmony throughout the past two thousand

or so years. War, conquest and political violence has been endemic in this part of the world. As Harold Marcus notes in *A History of Ethiopia*, "The five hundred years before the Christian era witnessed warfare that increased in scale..." (p. 5) Later, in the 4th Century, King Ezana of the Axumite empire led his army into Sudan to secure caravan trade routes. In the 6th Century, King Caleb led his troops to Yemen where they fought the Jewish leader Dhu Nwas, whose persecution of the Christian population was disrupting trade relations. In the 8th century, Axum looked southward, and established itself, militarily of course, in the area that is now Welo province. The Agew subjects of that region fought back, and as Marcus observes, from 900-1000 there was "continual warfare and skirmishing against the isolated government fortresses."³ This is merely a brief sampling; the accounts of perpetual warfare continue from the Zagwe dynasty to the Solomonic Dynasty and into the modern era.

Expanding and contracting empires, wars of accession, skirmishes between rival feudal lords, religious conquests — all have been an integral part of societal and political life in what are today Ethiopia and Eritrea. All of this is not meant to portray the Abyssinian people as a slew of gun-toting violent zealots, but rather to show that those who expected a long reign of peace and tranquility to descend upon Ethiopia and Eritrea beginning in 1991 were probably unduly optimistic.

The Barrel of the Gun: Political Power Gained, Political Power Exercised

The current governments in Ethiopia and Eritrea are led by former guerrilla movements. Eritrea's EPLF has been renamed the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) and reorganized into a political party. In Ethiopia, a coalition of rebel groups led by the TPLF formed the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) in 1988. This multi-ethnic coalition, now a collection of civilian political parties, formed a transitional government in 1991, and continues to rule Ethiopia today.

Violent political transition is not new to Ethiopia, nor to Africa as a whole. Guerrilla movements and military *coups d'état* are a common feature on the continent. During the 1990's, Zaire (now Congo), Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, and a host of other countries have hosted violent power changes. In the Horn of Africa, there have been intractable civil wars in Somalia and Sudan, and periodic civil strife in Kenya and Uganda. Ethiopia's recent history is also indicative. Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown by a collection of disgruntled seg-

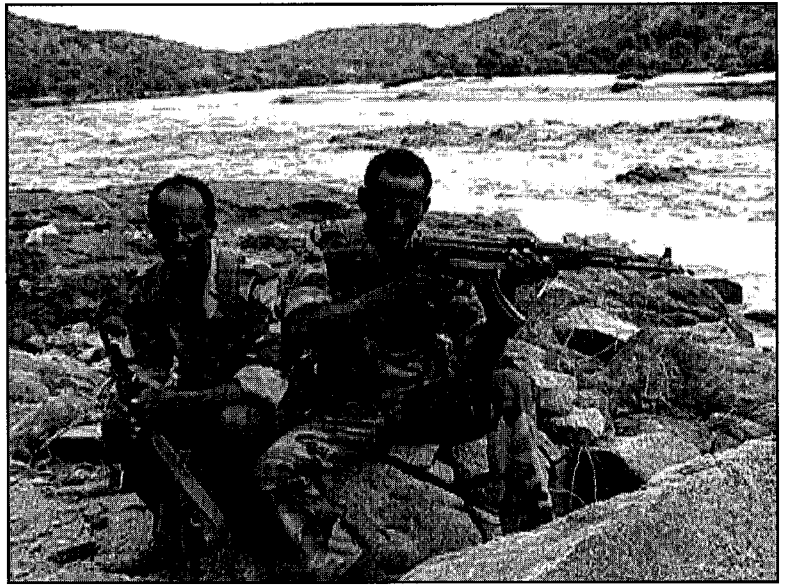


Ethiopian troops deployed near the disputed border with Eritrea

³ Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 11.

ments of the population in 1974, and eventually the Derg, a hard-line, left-wing faction of the military, assumed power. Then, in 1991, the TPLF and EPLF ousted the Derg. A pattern begins to emerge.

This pattern of accession by violent overthrow validates violence as a political tool. When groups, even benevolent, progressive and principled movements like the EPLF and TPLF, attain political power through the barrel of the gun, a precedent is set. Military operations are perceived as legitimate, perhaps even the most effective, means to achieve political ends. In times of stress, pressure, threat or confrontation, these groups will often resort to military force to achieve political objectives and maintain or protect power.



Two members of local Eritrean militia pose in front of the Mereb River

The Ethiopian-Eritrean border war can not be adequately explained by such simple reasoning; however, the history of the EPLF and TPLF provides the context or backdrop in which this conflict has occurred.⁴ The current dispute is not the first time these two governments have used military force. Eritrea has had military confrontations with Yemen over ownership of the Hanish Islands in the Red Sea, with Djibouti over a border dispute, and has assisted the rebels in neighboring Sudan. Ethiopia, for its part, has been somewhat less aggressive, although it has also shown some propensity toward using the military as a political tool. Ethiopia has aided the Sudanese rebels, and has had several military skirmishes with Al-Ittihad, a Somali rebel group.

They Never Liked Us, and They Like Us Even Less Now

Some observers point to historical animosity between the populations of Eritrea and Tigray. Tensions between the two peoples began prior to the Italian conquest of Eritrea in the 19th century. A series of Tigrayan warlords and leaders, from Ras Mikhael Seul in the 1760's to Yohannes IV in the 1870's, incorporated Eritrea into their political dominions. The Eritreans, who at that time did

not yet have a distinctive identity separate from Ethiopia, first became alienated and distrustful of their southern neighbors in Tigray during this period.⁵

The relationship changed significantly when Italy colonized what is now Eritrea.⁶ As Italy built its colonial structures and spurred the local economy with investments in industry and infrastructures, Eritrea began to modernize and its people started to form their own distinctive identity. Many Tigrayans came to Eritrea in search of work, and most were given the most menial jobs — those the Eritreans themselves didn't want. The Tigrayans began to resent the Eritreans, who looked down upon them as third-class citizens.⁷

The self-confidence of Eritreans, particularly as they proclaim their Italian-inspired sophistication and civility, and their prowess on the battlefield, can easily be interpreted as arrogance and condescension. Throughout Tigray, one can sense the deep anger toward Eritreans for their boastfulness — portraying themselves as advanced and civilized. This ill-feeling is quite pervasive and childish — the repetitious whining resembles kids in a schoolyard,

⁴ I believe political organizations (and leaders) that attain power through violent means are more likely, while they are in power, to use violence as a tool to achieve political ends than are political organizations that attained power non-violently (e.g. democratically). Further quantitative research is needed to test this supposition.

⁵ "Background Notes on the Ethio-Eritrean War," anonymous unpublished manuscript distributed by GTZ.

⁶ There was a brief period, 1889-1896, when Italy controlled both Eritrea and Tigray. Hoping to assume control of all of Ethiopia, the Italians planned further pushes south, but were defeated by Emperor Menelik II and his armies in the famous Battle of Adua in 1896. Following that defeat, the Italians withdrew back to the Mereb River, and ultimately agreed on a border demarcation with Ethiopia in a series of treaties in 1900, 1902, 1908. These treaties are currently cited by the Eritreans as evidence of clear colonial-demarcated borders. Had the Italians been successful in holding Tigray, modern-day Ethiopia would likely have included both Eritrea and Tigray, and the tensions between the two populations would have dissipated.

⁷ The Italians treated their Eritrean subjects as inferiors, segregating neighborhoods and many facilities. But if the Eritreans were second class citizens, they treated Tigrayans as third class citizens, in an effort to salvage their own dignity. The first Tigrayans who came to work in Eritrea came from an area called Agame. Eritreans began to refer to all Tigrayans disdainfully as Agame. The term has become loaded with negativity, implying they are a stupid and an inferior class of people.



Asmara's Italian-style skyline, a source of pride for many Eritreans

bickering over whose dad can beat up the others. The Tigrayans are incensed, and would seem better served by just ignoring Eritrean arrogance. Instead, they appear to have developed an inferiority complex, which they of course vigorously deny.

Ironically, it is often extremely difficult to definitively distinguish Ethiopians from Eritreans, particularly in the border areas. Tigrayans and Eritreans are ethnically, linguistically and culturally very similar.⁸ The two peoples have lived close together and intermarried for centuries, making "pure" ethnic composition relatively unusual. The populations have been inextricably mixed. Even Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles and Eritrea's President Isaias each have one Ethiopian parent and one Eritrean parent.

The Tigrayan-Eritrean historical feud is an unlikely direct cause of the current conflict. Still, although the tensions are trite (and due to ethnic integration, in some ways unfounded), they are prominent. The all-encompassing animosity that has rapidly enveloped the people of Tigray is largely related to these feelings. The current conflict is being viewed as an opportunity to "teach them a lesson" or "show them who is boss." As such, there is a personalized element to the conflict; it is not strictly a political

dispute, but additionally a feud between two peoples carrying the baggage of historical rivalry.

TERRITORIAL FACTORS

Shifting, Poorly Defined Borders

The central problem from which this crisis emanates is that of continuously shifting, ambiguous borders. There have been a number of historical opportunities, all foregone, to clearly delineate and demarcate the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Had the border been definitively agreed upon and well-marked on the ground, this conflict would not have happened.⁹

Following the Ethiopian's defeat of the Italians in Adua in 1896, and Italy's successive retreat to the Mereb River, a trio of agreements between Italy, Britain and Ethiopia were concluded in 1900, 1902, and 1908. These agreements clearly described where the border should be placed. The reality on the ground remained less clear, and never entirely reflected these treaties. Ethiopia continued to administer sections of land designated for Italian rule. In other areas, particularly in the inhospitable eastern Denakil Desert region, no demarcation was ever conducted.

In 1951, as British rule¹⁰ was replaced by a loose-confederation arrangement, the border issue was again left unresolved. Then, when Emperor Haile Selassie's government forcibly annexed Eritrea a decade later, the border became irrelevant as Eritrea officially was under Ethiopian control. The boundary between Tigray and Eritrea was a regional boundary, not a national one, and therefore of little consequence.

During the liberation struggle, the border once again became contentious. TPLF and EPLF rebel groups fought over some of the areas that are currently the object of dispute. Specifically, the Badime area was contested. With their primary focus on the quest for independence, the Eritreans (especially the EPLF) chose not to focus attention or resources on competition for territories. These problems could be resolved later, after

⁸ Eritrea is composed of nine different ethnic groups. Here I am referring to the dominant majority Tigrinya group. The only significant difference between the Tigrinya of Eritrea and the Tigrayans of Ethiopia was a result of Eritrea's 50 years of colonization by the Italians and then the British.

⁹ A detailed historiography of the boundary would be useful, but lies beyond the scope of this piece. In this section, I provide a brief sketch of the border issue to illustrate the gaps between agreements, maps and realities on the ground. For those interested in a more in depth look at the history of the border areas, see Jean-Louis Peninou, "The Ethiopian-Eritrean Border Conflict," in *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1998.

¹⁰ Following the defeat and expulsion of Italian forces, the British administered Eritrea from 1941-1951.

defeating the Derg and attaining self-rule. As such, the TPLF assumed and maintained control of Badime, and continued to administer the areas until May 6th.

Even after the TPLF-EPLF joint victory in 1991, the border question was skirted. The internationally accepted border, reflected on both Ethiopian and Eritrean maps, does not reflect the reality on the ground, nor has it ever. Large chunks of land that lie within the confines of what, according to colonial agreements, should have been Eritrea, have always been administered by Ethiopia.

When Eritrea officially gained independence in 1993, the last opportunity to resolve the border issue was missed. At that time, the maps and administrative reality on the ground should have been reconciled, one way or the other. Yet, since the issue was inherently thorny, both the EPLF and TPLF decided to concentrate on the more pressing needs of rehabilitation and reconstruction. Relations between the two countries were cordial, cooperation close.

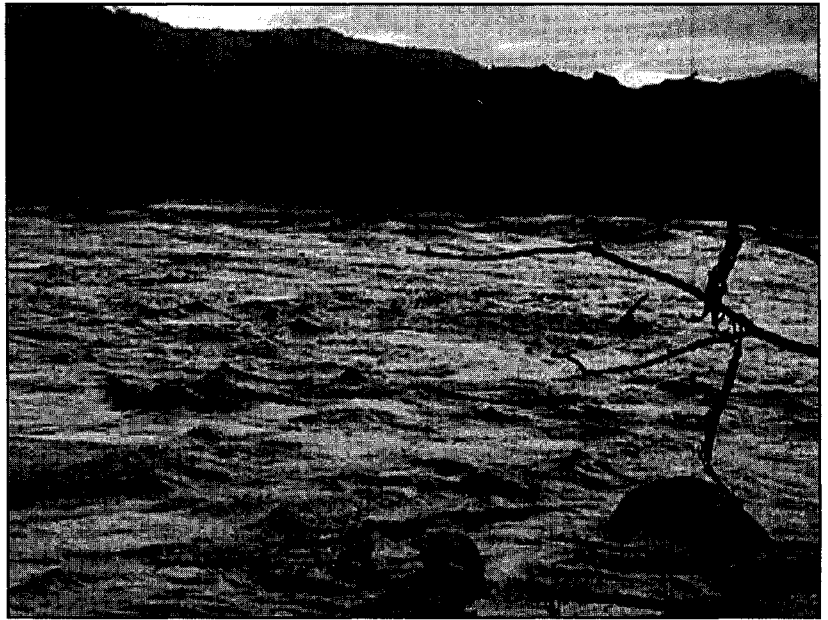
Now, due to the trigger events of May 6th, and increasing tensions between the two nations in the preceding months, the border issue has come to a head.

The Organization for African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations both recognize colonial borders as immutable. However, the fundamental question remains — which colonial border? Is it the border spelled out in colonial treaties between the Italians and Ethiopians at the turn of the century, or is it the functional border, the actual territories the Italians and Ethiopians actually administered? This question lies at the crux of the border dispute.

Eritrean Expansionism: Pushing the Territorial Envelope in all Directions

Ethiopia accuses the Eritrean government of attempting to expand its territorial boundaries in all directions. As a small country, Eritrea needs as much land as possible to be an economically viable entity. To these ends, over the past several years, Eritrea has initiated territorial disputes with nearly every one of its neighbors. According to the Ethiopians, the Eritrean invasion of Ethiopian lands in May was just the latest expression of Eritrean expansionist ambition.

The most noteworthy incident took place in December 1995 when Eritrean forces occupied Greater Hanish, the largest of the group of Hanish Islands in the Red Sea. These small but strategic islands were claimed by both Yemen and Eritrea, but their actual ownership was ques-



The Mereb River, full from heavy rains in August, marks a non-contested section of the Ethiopian Eritrean border.

tionable. A tense military standoff ended in May 1996 with a French-brokered agreement to cease fighting and hand the dispute to an international arbitration panel. Both sides presented their evidence, and after long deliberations, in October 1998 the International Court of Justice in the Hague rendered its decision. The major islands would be placed under Yemeni rule, while a few lesser clusters would be administered by Eritrea. Both sides have accepted the decision, and have rapidly begun to normalize diplomatic and trade relations. However, what is most important from the Ethiopian perspective is that Eritrea used military might to forcibly assume control of the Hanish at the outset. This, they assert, is indicative of Eritrean aggressive attitude, and its government's tendency to fight first and talk later.

Another border confrontation took place with Djibouti in 1996. This conflict never escalated, since French military forces (stationed in Djibouti) flew fighter planes over Eritrea in a show of force meant to send a clear message: you mess with Djibouti, you mess with France. Eritrea backed down. Again, the point from the Ethiopian perspective is that Eritrea shows little respect for international law, or established principles for resolving disputes; rather, it takes these situations into its own hands and resorts to what it knows best — the military.

Following the Ethiopian line of argument, the Eritrean occupation of Badime, Zalanbessa, and Alga-Aliteina represent the latest in a series of aggressive actions by the Eritrean government against its neighbors. The case appears quite solid on the surface. The Eritrean government has shown little restraint in the use of force. Its frequent use of the military is provocative, dangerous, and destabilizing. Likewise, the mandatory six months of military training for Eritrean youth at Sawa

military camp signals the continued promotion and institutionalization of a military culture.

This militaristic culture notwithstanding, the current border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea cannot be properly explained as outright Eritrean aggression. Such an explanation ignores the ongoing skirmishes and incursions at points along the border by both sides over the past several years, including alleged Ethiopian territorial encroachments in the Badime area and the invasion of Bada in July 1997. Eritrea initially exercised considerable restraint in its responses to these events, and repeatedly sought to resolve the simmering disputes through diplomatic channels. The Ethiopian argument also fails to acknowledge the provocative 1997 Tigray map (which swallows sections of Eritrea) and the psychological threat it posed to Eritrea. In Eritrea, the current conflict is perceived as *defensive*, protecting the internationally-recognized borders it believes, with some valid reasoning that Ethiopia is violating. Thus, while Eritrea has been quick to pull the trigger, this is not inherently indicative of expansionist designs.

Tigrayan Expansionism: The Quest for 'Greater Tigray'

Mirroring the Ethiopian accusation of expansionism is a similar but opposite explanation from the Eritrean camp. The Eritreans perceive the gradual but persistent Ethiopian nudging of the border deeper and deeper into Eritrean territory as a reflection of the historical quest to establish a "Greater Tigray." The general argument stems from the TPLF's 1985 manifesto, which explicitly equates the TPLF struggle with the quest for Tigrayan indepen-

dence. Eritrea claims there are indications that Tigray's nationalist ambitions are presently coming to the fore, in preparation for Tigrayan secession from Ethiopia.

The evidence provided is all circumstantial, but does point to some interesting developments in the management of internal territorial boundaries within Ethiopia's system of ethnic federalism. For example, in 1997 internal provincial boundaries were re-drawn, allocating to Tigray State pieces of Welo and Gondar Provinces, while ceding an eastern portion of Tigray to the Afar regional state. These changes were apparently undertaken to place Tigrinya-speaking peoples under the administration of Tigray, and shift the Afar population into Afar regional state. The re-drawing of these boundaries gave Tigray Region a common border with Sudan.

Corollary evidence is the new 1997 map of Tigray, produced by the Tigray Regional Government with German financial assistance. This map, Eritrea claims, swallows large chunks of Eritrean territory, particularly within the now hotly disputed Badime and Alga-Aliteina areas. The map reflects the areas actually administered by Tigray on the ground (prior to May 6th), but in so doing, contradicts the actual legal boundary between Ethiopia and Eritrea. When comparing the new map with the old (and still current) national map of Ethiopia, the border areas look quite different. Among other changes, the straight line marking the western edge of the Yirga triangle has been replaced by a lumpy double hump. The Eritrean alarm at this map seems quite well founded. Eritrea perceives the unilateral shifting of the border on this map as evidence of Tigray's intent to expand its territory at the expense of Eritrea.



Tents provide temporary shelter from shelling behind hills. This area, south of Zalanbessa, has been controlled by Eritrea since July.

Finally, the Eritreans point to the constitutional mechanism allowing regional states, under certain conditions, to secede from Ethiopia and establish themselves as independent states. This dangerous legal provision, the Eritreans contend, was put in to the constitution by Tigrayan nationalists to enable them to separate from Ethiopia when the timing became ripe. Eritrea's condemnation of this provision is quite strange, since Eritrea itself seceded from Ethiopia in 1993.

Despite the evidence cited, the contention that the TPLF is intent on establishing an independent "Greater Tigray" is far-fetched. There may well be hard-line nationalists who still cling to this dream, but the mainstream Tigrayan leadership, the leaders of Ethiopia as a whole, do not harbor such aspirations. Pointing to the 1985

TPLF manifesto is similarly ludicrous. Much has changed in both countries and in both political movements since then. At the time both the EPLF and TPLF were militantly socialist/communist in their economic orientation. Both

have since espoused free market systems and are making slow but deliberate efforts to liberalize their economies. Likewise, now that the TPLF dominates the coalition governing Ethiopia — much to the benefit of

infrastructural investment, rehabilitation and development in the Tigray region — it would be foolish for Tigray to pursue separation.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

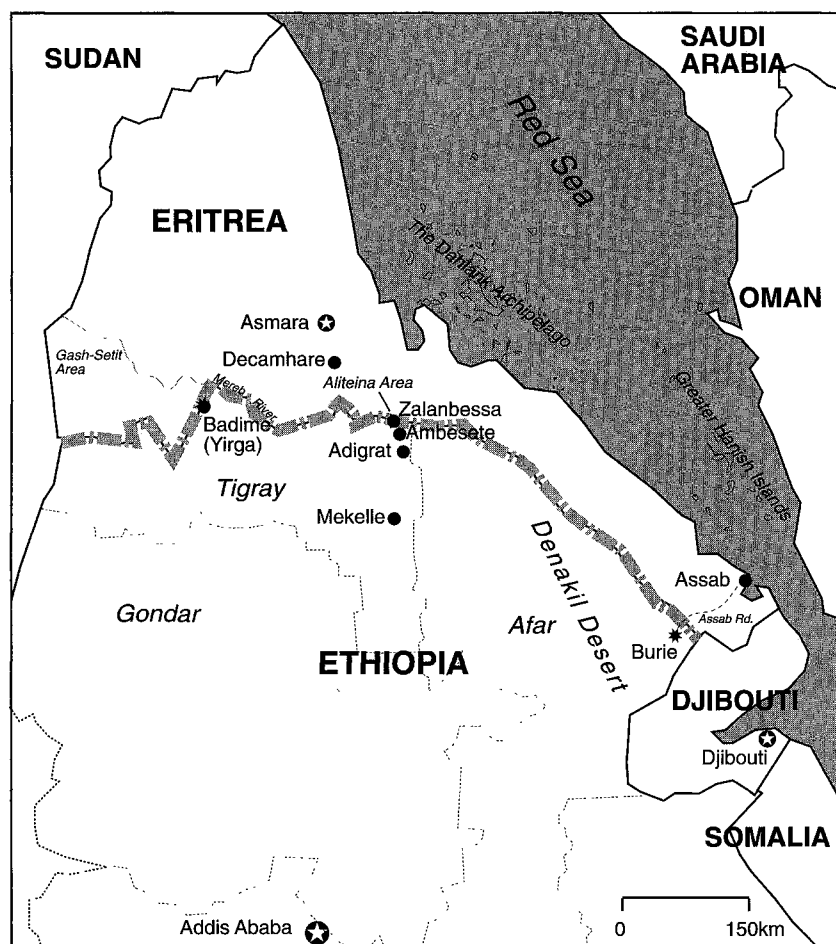
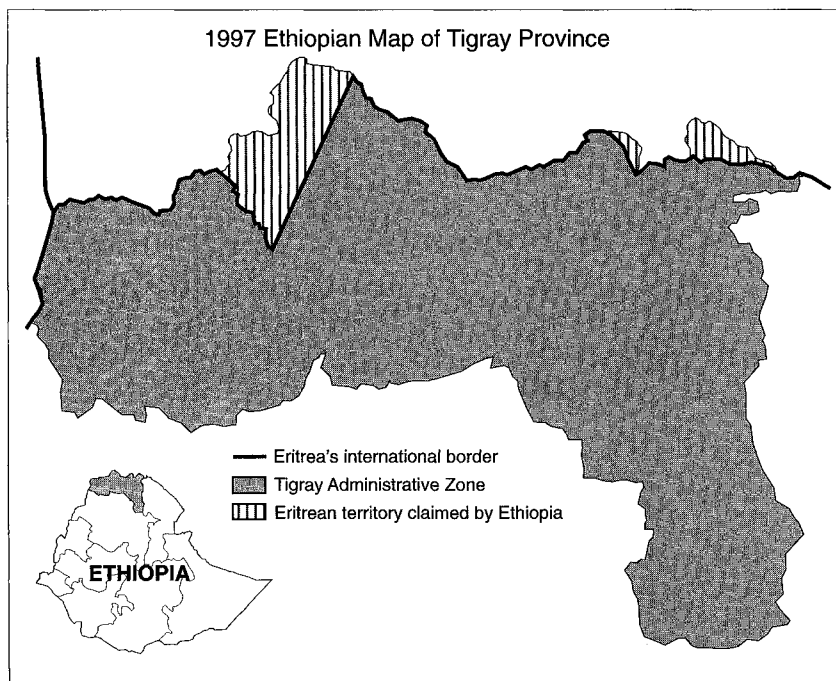
The economies of Ethiopia and Eritrea have been integrally connected since long before Eritrea's independence in 1993. Ethiopia has always used the ports of Assab and Massawa as primary points for the import and export of goods. Eritrea is a net food importer, and has always purchased *teff* (the staple grain used for making traditional *injera*) from Ethiopia. Ethiopia bought its salt from Eritrea; Eritrea bought its coffee from Ethiopia.

After 1993, this trade and economic cooperation continued and prospered. As part of the agreement surrounding Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia was granted free, long-term use of the port of Assab. Eritrea continued to utilize Ethiopia's currency, the *birr*. The two countries negotiated agreements for Ethiopia's continued use of the oil refinery at Assab, and for duty-free trade of basic commodities like coffee, sugar and staple grains.

However, in the months leading up to the outbreak of fighting in May, economic relations soured. The agreements no longer seemed mutually beneficial, and on a number of levels, economic tensions multiplied.

A New Currency and Trade Woes

With the introduction of Eritrea's currency, the *nakfa*, in October 1997, trade relations, particularly in the border areas, began to deteriorate. Despite the two governments' efforts to ensure a smooth transition, trade levels and efficiencies were adversely effected. Eritrea wanted to maintain a one-to-one exchange rate between the *nakfa* and the *birr*, a provision that was understandably unacceptable to Ethiopia. Since Ethiopia had no control over Eritrea's monetary policy, it could not sub-



ject itself to a fixed exchange rate. After the introduction of the *nakfa*, Eritrea wanted the continued benefit of unrestricted trade with Ethiopia. Ethiopia, for its part, insisted that all trade, except small transactions of less than 2000 *birr* / *nakfa* (about \$275) at the border, be paid for in hard currency Letters of Credit. This provision, extremely bureaucratic and cumbersome in practice, slowed and reduced trade considerably. To protect its economy, Ethiopia also restricted some categories of goods (particularly exportable items) from free trade at the border.

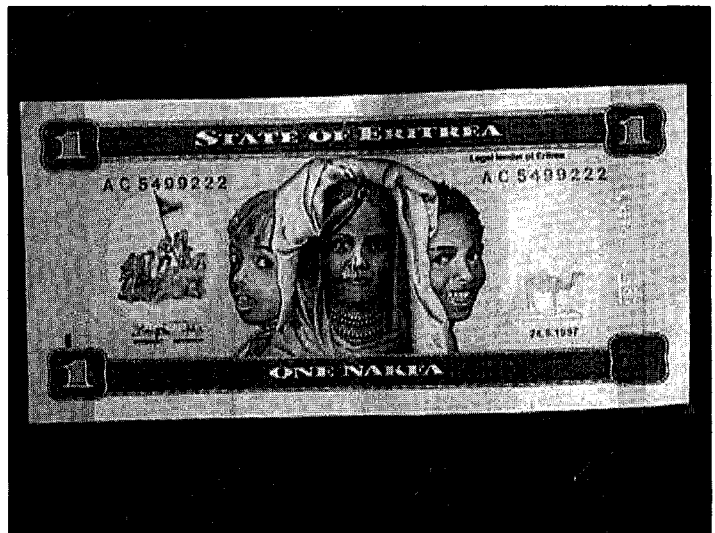
Economic tensions grew and with them political tensions, especially in the fragile border areas. Most border towns were mixed in composition — Eritreans and Ethiopians lived side by side. The border was porous — people moved freely and frequently between the two countries. Both currencies thus became acceptable modes of exchange, a common occurrence in border towns around the world. However, according to some Eritrean residents in Ethiopian border towns, Tigrayan local officials were infuriated by the appearance of the *nakfa*, and sometimes confiscated it, or beat and jailed local citizens for possessing the new currency. These allegations at first sounded somewhat unlikely, but similar stories were repeated by numerous people, from different villages, who had fled after the outbreak of hostilities. Such vignettes, while impressionistic, are indicative of the negative reactions sparked by the new Eritrean currency, especially in the outlying areas.

Coffee Follies

Ethiopia has now accused Eritrean businessmen of violating the concessionary trade agreement by aggressively buying Ethiopian coffee and then exporting it. They claim this has enabled Eritrea to become the 13th largest coffee exporter in Africa, despite the minor fact that Eritrea doesn't even grow coffee.

The trade agreements apparently permitted Eritreans to buy Ethiopian commodities duty-free in local currency (*i.e.* at the same price as Ethiopians), but with the stipulation that it be used solely for local consumption and not re-export. This complaint surfaced after the war began, and is suspect in some regards. First, export-grade coffee is tightly controlled by the Ethiopian government, and is sold only by auction, in hard currency, to registered exporters. Any coffee purchased by Eritreans in local currency would not have been labeled export grade, and any re-export would therefore have been to the benefit of both the Ethiopians who sold it at local market rates, and the Eritreans who were able to re-sell it abroad.

Such trade violations, once proven, can easily be addressed through other channels. They are unrelated to



Eritrea's new currency, the nakfa, has been a source of economic tension

the current dispute and are a distraction from the more relevant and pressing border issues at the heart of this conflict.

Schemes to Unlock the Landlock

In line with its accusations of Tigrayan expansionism and quest for independence, Eritrea asserts that Ethiopia sparked the border war to take the port city of Assab and thereby gain an important outlet to the Red Sea. They cite Ethiopia's June offensive at Burie (on the road to Assab), an area that was never disputed by either country. They also point to a speech made by an Ethiopian deputy foreign minister in Washington DC to former Derg officials in June, in which he allegedly pledged: "we will give you back Assab in a few days."

While many Ethiopians remain bitter that the secession of Eritrea has landlocked the country, the Ethiopian government has reiterated its respect for Eritrean sovereignty and says it has no intention of re-taking Assab. Prior to the war, Assab was being utilized freely by Ethiopia, and the vast majority of employees in the port area, numbering in the tens of thousands, were Ethiopian nationals. The scheme appears both farfetched and unworkable. Should Ethiopia attempt to occupy Assab — an unlikely prospect — Eritrea would certainly launch a counter-offensive, and continue fighting until it regained control of its valuable port.

Some observers have tried to explain the outbreak of this war in economic terms. The Ethiopian government itself has implied that economic imperatives may have sparked the conflict. They claim the Eritrean economy was faltering and that President Isaias, in an effort to distract his increasingly disgruntled subjects, triggered a border war. While it is true that prices of some staples (*e.g.* *teff*) and imported products (*e.g.* fuel) had risen with

the *nakfa*'s introduction, these conditions do not appear sufficient cause for launching a mutually destructive border war. And, while the *nakfa* and deteriorating trade relations may have raised tensions and ripened the climate for conflict, they were certainly not the primary cause of the current border war.

INTERNATIONAL CONSPIRACIES

A host of creative conspiracy theories have surfaced to explain the current conflict. The general inexplicability of this misguided war has fed those with grand schemes who believe someone out there is always out to get them.

Egyptian Protection of the Nile

Among the highest priority infrastructural developments undertaken by the Ethiopian government has been hydroelectric power. To satisfy the electricity demands of other regions, especially Tigray, the government has begun to harness energy from tributaries feeding the Nile River. Already a major hydroelectric station near Bahir Dar (in Gojjam Region) is operational, and in mid-1998 began supplying electricity to major towns and villages throughout Tigray. A number of potential sites for secondary hydroelectric power stations have also been identified and the government is seeking partners to assist in their development.

The Nile is one of the most critical natural resources in the region, and ten countries rely upon it for drinking water, irrigation and power.¹¹ The two main downriver countries, Sudan and Egypt, are most vulnerable, and their fragile, arid landscapes present, perhaps, the greatest need for river resources. All of the countries in the Nile River Basin meet periodically and discuss river-related issues to promote equitable sharing of this valuable resource. Still, the Nile has been an ongoing source of strain, and Egyptian-Ethiopian relations have in recent years cooled considerably as Ethiopia's capacity and desire to aggressively develop Nile resources has dramatically increased.

With this background, the latest conspiracy theory to float around Addis Ababa places Egypt behind the border crisis. Hoping to protect its Nile lifeline, unreliable sources say, Egypt has supported Eritrean aggression, in the hope that a prolonged war will devastate Ethiopia's capacity to develop Nile resources. While the motive is clear, no supporting evidence for this hokey scheme has been offered. Nor has there been any allusion to what benefits will accrue to Eritrea, which would also presumably be severely devastated by the conflict.

This Egyptian conspiracy scheme appears blatantly bogus. However, Ethiopia has been somewhat brazen in proclaiming its right to unilaterally decide on Nile utilization within its territorial boundaries. The Nile itself is a flashpoint resource, and its management will need to be carefully monitored and discussed in coming years. Otherwise, there is a real risk of direct conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt (as well as the other riparian countries).

"They're Trying to Overthrow Our Government"

From both camps there have emerged explanations of the conflict based on the opposing government's desire to overthrow them. Ethiopia points to Eritrea's relations with the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) and ALF (Afar Liberation Front), accusing the Eritreans of supporting these movements to destabilize and topple the Ethiopian government. The Eritrean goal, they assert, is the installation of a puppet regime in Addis Ababa, thereby guaranteeing an exploitative relationship and enabling Eritrea to milk the lifeblood of the Ethiopian economy, and manipulate it politically.

Strangely enough, the Eritreans accuse the Ethiopian government of similar designs. Due to economic tensions, and still lamenting the loss of their own outlet to the Red Sea, Ethiopia wants to oust Isaias' stubborn inner circle and replace them with a friendlier government. Ethiopia is displeased with some of the developments in Eritrea, and therefore wants to place it on a different track.

Neither of these conspiracy theories is particularly convincing. The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments were still quite friendly until the outbreak of violence in May. The recent accusations from both camps, based on the new hostility and distrust, reflect prevailing political winds and propaganda more than concrete efforts at inciting overthrow of the (now) enemy government.

Sudanese Self-Defense

While this scenario hasn't garnered much attention, Sudan would be the most eager local instigator of a damaging, distracting war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ethiopia and Eritrea (along with Uganda) have been the "front-line states" assisted by the U.S. to destabilize and overthrow the government of Sudan. Both countries have aided the south-Sudanese rebels with training and supplies, and most of the rebel groups have set up their headquarters in Asmara, Eritrea's capital. A major war between Ethiopia and Eritrea would render them incapable of intervening in Sudan, thereby fortifying the Sudanese government's military position. How exactly Sudan could trigger such a conflict between its neighbors is a major

¹¹ The Blue Nile, originating in the Ethiopian highlands, and its tributaries, account for 86% of the Nile River water. The White Nile begins in Burundi, flows through the Equatorial Lakes, and provides 14% of the Nile waters. These two rivers converge at Khartoum before continuing to flow northward through Egypt and into the Mediterranean. (Ashok Swain, "Ethiopia, the Sudan and Egypt: The Nile River Dispute," in *The Eye on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa*, Vol. IX, No. 50, June/July 1998, p. 28.)

question mark. However, thus far, the biggest beneficiary of the border dispute has been Sudan.

In a strange twist, there seems to have been a general rapprochement between Sudan and Ethiopia over the past several months. Rumors of private meetings between Ethiopian and Sudanese diplomats have been confirmed. In mid-October, Ethiopian Airlines announced the resumption of flights to Khartoum. War makes strange bedfellows, and while Ethiopia publicly denies the realignment, it will be interesting to see how these shifts ultimately play out and impact sub-regional affairs.

Conclusions

It is exceedingly difficult to isolate one causative factor, one historic event, one opportunity missed, or one conspiratorial force as the linchpin of the current Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict. This war was a mistake. Neither government intended to launch or become embroiled in a resource-sapping full-scale war. The events of May 6th, the details of which remain shrouded in mystery, provided an unwitting trigger. With the Eritrean occupation or re-taking of Badime (depending on your perspective), events began to spiral out of control. Before either side knew what hit them, they were engaged in a series of border battles, wooing the international community for support, and rallying their peoples to protect national pride and territorial integrity.

By the same token, this conflict certainly did not emerge randomly from a vacuum. Increasing tensions over border skirmishes and deteriorating economic relations ripened the atmosphere for war. Trust and cooperation were declining; suspicion was on the rise.

There were opportunities, particularly at the time of Eritrean independence in 1993, when the border dispute could have been resolved once and for all. However, the issue was bound to be thorny, and neither side relished the prospect of dampening the jubilant mood and golden

spirit of cooperation with sultry and depressing topics like untangling a messy borderline. At the same historical juncture, the citizenship of Eritreans should have been clarified. Those of Eritrean descent who had long lived in Ethiopia should have been given a choice — to assume Eritrean citizenship and live within Ethiopia as a foreign national, or to apply for/maintain Ethiopian citizenship. The quirky dual citizenship that emerged, with many holding Ethiopian passports and Eritrean identification cards, led to the disturbing deportation of tens of thousands of Ethiopian nationals of Eritrean descent. Again, it is easy to see why this citizenship issue was tabled during happier times; no one thought it would ever be necessary to choose one or the other. No one ever thought things would ever get so bad so quickly between the two friendly nations.

Fading out the background noise, the current war is ultimately about borders. The Ethiopian government maintains that the core issue is invasion, and they have garnered considerable support from the international community for this point of view. However, contradicting that assertion is Ethiopia's unwillingness to specify precisely where it has been invaded. This all leads back around, in a never-ending circle of points and counterpoints, to the basic question of the border — where was it, and where should it have been? Ultimately that is the root of the issue. Should the parties find a way to clearly resolve and demarcate their common boundary, the prospect of war will rapidly fade. That is the heart of the challenge — defusing the crisis, avoiding a disastrous war, and slowly rebuilding peace.

Some serious and lasting damage has already been done. Even if a political settlement is achieved, and trade and diplomatic relations restored, considerable ill-feeling will continue to linger. *'How can we trust them after what they've done?' 'Look how they treated out citizens during the war — abusing, raping, torturing, expelling.'* These feelings of mistrust, anger, and pain will take longer to heal. The political solution, as difficult and remote as it currently appears, will be the easy part. □

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