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## Peace Fails, War Resumes—Why?

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

February 1999

By Marc Michaelson

On February 6th, Ethiopia and Eritrea resumed fighting over territories along their disputed border. After seven months of stalemate and gradually increasing artillery exchanges, fierce ground battles broke out in the Badime area, and began spreading to other fronts. Following a familiar pattern, both governments are blaming each other for instigating the latest outbreak of war, both are claiming victories in early exchanges, and both are decrying their opponents' attacks on civilians.

In May 1998, the border dispute erupted when a confrontation in Badime sparked Eritrea's use of military force in the Badime, Zalanbessa and Aliteina areas.<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia protested this invasion and subsequent occupation of its territories. Eritrea responded that it had merely re-taken control of Eritrean territories that had been illegally administered by Ethiopia. Two months of battles placed Eritrea firmly in control of the lands they claimed, and left Ethiopia insisting on Eritrean withdrawal as a precondition for negotiations. Both sides have proclaimed their desire for peace, but reserved the right to use force in defending their sovereignty, should peace fail.

Since the war first began, there have been numerous international efforts to make peace. These initiatives began last May with an attempted U.S.-Rwanda facilitation process and ended this February with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan's Special Representative, Algerian Ambassador Mohammed Sahnoun, meeting with officials in Addis Ababa as the war resumed. In between: an Organization of African Unity (OAU) initiative led by Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso and Djibouti; a moratorium on air strikes brokered by U.S. President Bill Clinton; and four shuttle missions by former U.S. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake. Leaders from Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda, Libya, Japan, Egypt and Italy have also conducted peace consultations with the warring parties. Prominent religious leaders from the two nations have met twice in Europe. Members of the press corps from both countries met in Germany. Even a respected Princeton University Linguist, Professor Isaac Ephrem, has attempted to bridge the gap between the two leaders.

All of these peace efforts have failed to resolve this seemingly simple border

<sup>1</sup>The Badime incident of May 6th is itself disputed. Eritrea contends that three high-ranking military officers were murdered in cold blood when they arrived in Badime to discuss recent border-area problems. Ethiopia claims the Eritrean officers attempted to cross the border with their weapons, and a shoot-out ensued when they refused to leave their weapons on the Eritrean side of the border. Regardless of which story is true, the events of May 6th progressively snowballed into a war between the two previously brotherly neighbors.

conflict.<sup>2</sup> How could this happen? How could these two brotherly nations, among the poorest in the world, choose to divert hundreds of millions of dollars into building up their militaries? How could they risk the destruction of their noteworthy development and nation-building achievements? How could they sacrifice thousands of lives over a petty border dispute? How could Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, previously at the forefront of the new “African Renaissance,” lead their peoples back down the path of violence and self-destruction?

In short, how did peace fail and why did war resume?

## FAILURE OF THE PEACE PROCESS

The seeds of failure were sown in the very first peace initiative — the U.S.-Rwanda facilitation process. The team, led by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice and Rwandan Vice President Paul Kagame, fell into a trap. Following Eritrea’s May 1998 military actions, Ethiopia protested loudly and vehemently that it had been invaded, its sovereignty violated. Eritrea demonstrated its typical pattern of silence and self-confidence learned during the nation’s 30-year struggle for independence. The Eritreans insisted that they were on their own territory, and offered little additional information, saying essentially, “the truth will come out eventually.” Eritrea’s initial reluctance to voice its case turned out to be a dire mistake. The U.S.-Rwanda team produced a one-sided peace plan, requiring Eritrea’s withdrawal and a return to the *status quo ante*. The proposal called for a return of Ethiopian administration (including militia, police, etc...) as an interim arrangement, after which time the border would be demarcated by a third party. This peace proposal emboldened Ethiopia and invalidated Eritrea’s claims.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, Ethiopia accepted the U.S.-Rwanda proposal. Eritrea rejected it.

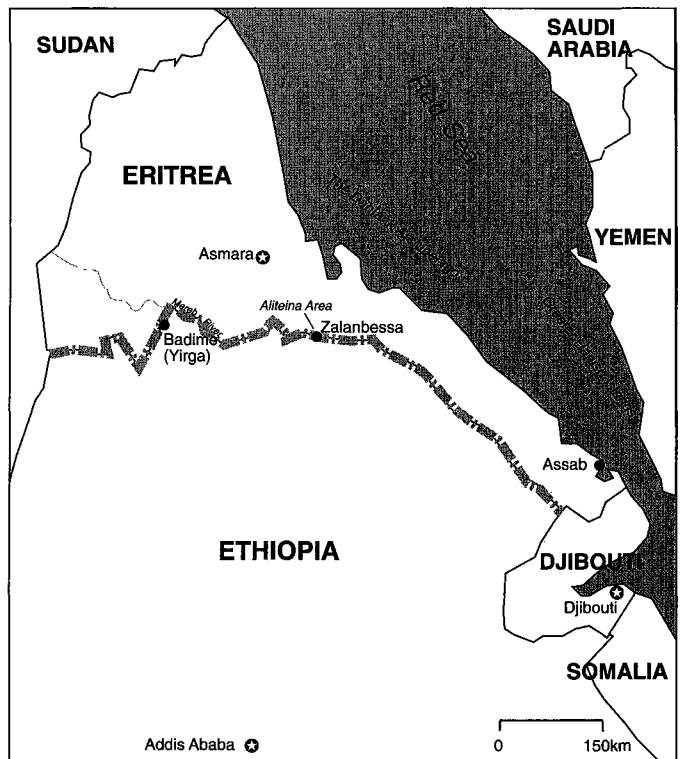
The major flaw in the peace process came not during, but after the U.S.-Rwanda proposal was made public. To strengthen the initiative, the U.S. flexed its political muscle and lobbied the OAU, UN and European Community (EC) to express their support. This had two serious implications. First, the Eritreans were backed into a corner. They were alone and misunderstood. Once again, the world was siding with their opponent, just as it did during the liberation struggle when neither Cold-War patron supported their cause.

The second problem with the U.S.-Rwanda initia-

tive was that it enabled the Ethiopian government to become cemented in its position. By making *status quo ante* a precondition for negotiations or further action, U.S.-Rwanda gave Ethiopia the upper hand. Over the six months that followed, Ethiopia never wavered from its position. Ethiopian authorities refused to negotiate or talk to their adversaries unless Eritrea withdrew unconditionally. As a result, the peace process stalled. Successive initiatives — most prominently by the OAU and Anthony Lake — failed to break the deadlock. In fact, these initiatives merely rehashed and repackaged the U.S.-Rwanda plan. They contained no substantive changes or additions, no new ideas at all. That turned out to be the death knell of the peace process. U.S.-Rwanda precluded new ideas and creative alternatives from making their way to the table, and left both governments in their initial positions. The “peace process” has thus not been a process at all. Rather, it has been stuck, spinning in place, offering up a single proposal that one side, Eritrea, has repeatedly refused and the other, Ethiopia, repeatedly accepted.

\* \* \*

From the Ethiopian perspective, the failure of the various peace initiatives has been due to the international community’s lack of resolve. Had sufficient pressure been exerted, Ethiopia believes that Eritrea would have had



<sup>2</sup> Some observers believe this conflict is not about borders at all, but rather a reflection of deteriorating economic relations, internal political factors and external conspiracies. I believe a number of factors ripened the environment for conflict, but maintain that the current dispute is still fundamentally a border problem. For further analysis of the causes of this conflict, see MM-5: “The Ethiopian Eritrean Border Conflict: Part 2—Explanations” *ICWA Letters*, November 1998.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the actual events that took place during the first several months of the border conflict, and a recap of the peace process, see my earlier piece: “The Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Conflict: Part 1—Events”, *ICWA Letters*, October 1998.

little choice but to accept the proposals. Openly frustrated, one high-ranking Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leader complained of the international community's complacency: "We have been invaded, and yet the world has failed to uphold the principles and norms of international law. They have only used 10 percent of the tools at their disposal to convince the Eritreans to back down. They need to use the other 90 percent." Here he was referring to sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and if all else failed, the use of force to get the Eritreans to accede. His frustration is understandable, but for several reasons his expectations were unrealistic.

The harsh reality is that the United States and Europe don't care enough about Ethiopia and Eritrea to impose sanctions or engage in military action. Repeatedly,



*Decal on a T-shirt for sale at Eritrea's Expo '98*

I've heard local officials and citizens discuss the roles of the U.S. and U.N. as if Clinton and Annan were discussing the Ethio-Eritrean conflict with their advisers every morning over breakfast. The Abyssinian worldview places Ethiopia at the center of the universe, and can scarcely fathom that there are other places considered more strategically important, other crises considered more urgent than their own. The TPLF official quoted above equated the Eritrean "invasion" with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Sad to say, the U.S. response in the Gulf was not about upholding principles; it was about oil. The mere fact that Clinton sent senior diplomat Anthony Lake to the region four times was impressive and showed real concern, more than many might expect.

The TPLF official believed that with enough pressure, Eritrea would relent. This assumption fails to factor in the Eritrean government's stubbornness and resolve. Eritreans are suspicious of outsiders and are undeterred by the fact that, yet again, the international com-

munity has turned its back on them. The more the world tries to force Eritrea to do something, the less likely it will be to do it. When Eritreans believe in a cause, nothing will stop them from pursuing it to the bitter end.

Another flaw in Ethiopia's expectations is that it assumes its position is entirely right and Eritrea's wholly wrong. Justice, Ethiopia claims, is one hundred percent on its side. This claim is partially true, but only partially. While Eritrea did take numerous Ethiopian-administered territories by force, that is not the whole story. Ethiopia says that OAU and UN principles were violated when Eritrea took these lands. However, Ethiopia has also violated the OAU charter. For example, the OAU charter states that colonial borders are inviolable. According to colonial borders, Ethiopia's 1997 map of Tigray swallows large tracts of Eritrean land, and Ethiopia has been wrongfully administering portions of Eritrea since independence in 1993. The case is thus not so clear-cut; both sides have some valid legal and moral claims. References to "principles" can be (and have been) used by both disputants, and have thereby served to block progress on the peace front. It would be better to deal with the facts on the ground, use logic, common sense, and creative problem-solving skills to resolve this thorny issue, rather than sticking to positions and claiming unwavering adherence to international principles.

Ethiopia's rigidity has been counterproductive, but that should not cloud one critical point: Eritrea's forcible occupation of Ethiopian-administered territories must not be condoned. While Eritrea does appear to have legitimate claims to some of these territories, the manner in which it has gained control of them is unacceptable. As Ethiopia has correctly pointed out, such military escapades set a dangerous precedent. If it wish to obtain legal possession of these lands, Eritrea must relent and temporarily withdraw. To *legally* gain territory (that according to colonial treaties and maps should have been Eritrean), it must demonstrate respect for international laws and norms. The border dispute can only be resolved once it is submitted for adjudication and border demarcation by a third party. And this can only take place when Eritrea withdraws. Eritrea will need to swallow a bit of pride, and take one step backward in order to take one or two steps forward.

Eritrean withdrawal is an absolute necessity, and Eritrean authorities have openly stated a willingness to pull back. The major sticking point and Achilles' heel of the peace process surrounds the issue of interim administration. Who will control the disputed territories during the six months it will take the U.N. cartographic unit



(or another acceptable arbitrator) to determine legal ownership? Eritrea wants a third party to administer the border areas. Ethiopia insists on the return of Ethiopian

administration. This is where creativity and compromise are most critical. Until now, none of the mediators seem to have been able to bridge this seemingly minor gap.

## Advice for Future Mediators: A Few Principles for Peace

Over the coming months, international efforts to stop this war and rekindle the peace process are likely to intensify. The OAU, United States and United Nations will almost certainly continue to function as the primary contact points. During the next round of peace initiatives, mediators must bring some innovative ideas to the table, and avoid merely recycling old proposals and dressing them in new clothing. Below are a few ideas for future mediators of the Ethio-Eritrean border dispute to consider.

- **Maintain Steadfast Impartiality** – Be careful not to alienate either side. By all means avoid the perception that you favor one side over the other.

- **Encourage Back-Channel Dialogue** – Provide good offices, and facilitate private dialogue between high-level government officials. Give them a forum to discuss the border problems in a safe, unofficial environment, out of the public eye. Given the opportunity to grapple with the core elements in dispute (minus the official posturing and bunk), they might just solve the problem themselves.

- **Be Creative With Carrots and Don't Bother With Sticks** – Both governments are extremely sensitive about outsiders telling them what to do. Sticks (except the most subtle ones) won't work. Success will hinge on the identification of creative incentives to entice both sides to compromise a little. Find a way to sweeten the pie — enabling both sides to save face and pride — so they can do what is in the best interest of their governments and their peoples.

- **Offer Guarantees to Build Confidence** – Any peace plan must include considerable support and guarantees (most likely from the United Nations or United States). Trust is currently very low. To agree to enter the process, both governments must be convinced that the other side won't back out or ignore an adjudicated settlement. After demarcation, both countries must accept the result and have assurances that the other side won't be allowed to break the deal.

- **Solve the Thorny "Interim Administration" Issue** – The following four steps will be central to any peace agreement. Both sides already agree in principle to points 1, 3 and 4. Figure out who will administer the disputed territories during the adjudication process, and you have fit the final piece into the puzzle. Demilitarization of the area and international peacekeeping monitors will likely be needed as confidence-building measures. Emphasize that this arrangement is temporary — valid only for six months or so until step 3 is complete. The bottom line: both sides must compromise in order to construct a workable interim arrangement.

- 1) **Eritrean Pullback** – Eritrea pulls back from all territories it has taken militarily since May 6th.

- 2) **Interim Administration and Peacekeeping Presence** – ??????????????????

- 3) **Border Claims Adjudicated** – All territorial claims and supporting evidence are submitted to a mutually agreeable third party (e.g. UN Cartographic Unit or International Court of Justice) for adjudication. The border is delineated and then clearly demarcated on the ground. Both sides must agree in advance to accept the decision of the third party.

- 4) **Supervised Return of Administrations and Resettlement** – Supervised return of land to Ethiopian and Eritrean administration as decided by the third party. This will need to include programs for the return of displaced people to their homes (or resettlement elsewhere) and ongoing mechanisms for dispute settlement.

- **Don't Get Bogged Down in History, Conspiracy Schemes and Other Allegations** – Stories abound — some are true, some are lies (e.g. the border conflict dates back hundreds of years; Tigrayans and Eritreans hate each other; both are expansionist; etc., *ad nauseam*). These countries, their peoples and their histories are extraordinarily complex. The background noise can be very distracting. Avoid drowning in the bog of propaganda and innuendo. Keep the disputants focused on the present situation and potential futures.

- **Reinforce Reality: War is Not a Solution** – Both sides are extremely confident in their ability to get (or keep) what they believe is theirs through military means. It is extremely difficult to envision an endgame militarily — eventually the two parties will need to put down their weapons and negotiate a settlement. This war is likely to become protracted and has already proven disastrous and costly for both nations. When the dust ultimately clears, Ethiopia and Eritrea, two of Africa's recent shining stars, will both emerge as losers.

Perhaps most simply, the U.S.-Rwanda and OAU initiatives have failed because any peace proposal must be acceptable to both parties. Peace is a two way street. When one disputant agrees and the other disagrees, new routes must be explored. In any peace process, both disputants will need to compromise. Never to my knowledge has a peace been forged by one side acceding everything and the other sticking to its positions and getting all of its demands. By presenting the same proposal over and over and over, the international community has foolishly spun its wheels.

When discussing this problem with the TPLF official, I offered the following analogy.

If you are in a room, and the door is locked, but you absolutely must get out, what do you?

There are several options. You can try the windows, climb through an air vent, check to see if the ceiling or floor have a hidden escape route....or you can stand at the door, and continuously turn the knob to see if it will open. That is what has happened here. The mediators have kept Ethiopia and Eritrea standing at the door, trying to turn a doorknob that has been, and will in all likelihood remain, jammed. There is another option: war. You can always use force to try to break the door down. Unfortunately, you might break some bones in the process, and still there is no guarantee of success.

Sadly, this last option is the one that both parties have currently chosen to pursue. Ethiopia is trying to use military force to regain territories it lost in 1998. This is a mistake, but seemed in some ways inevitable. Never can a solution to this border dispute be obtained on the battlefield. Only through negotiations and demarcation can the problem be solved. Ethiopia may take some territories and lose others. The momentum may shift back and forth. Thousands of troops and hundreds of civilians will die in this war — a war that will ultimately lead back to some form of a peace process. One can only hope that next time, the international community will bring some new and innovative approaches to the table, and the two parties will be ready to do something they have until now refused: compromise.

## STEADILY INCREASING WAR MOMENTUM

For several reasons, the momentum for war has proven more potent than the momentum for peace. While both parties would like to blame international inaction, responsibility lies first and foremost with the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. History will judge them most harshly. This is not Bill Clinton's war, and it is not Kofi Annan's war. Neither they nor their constituencies will

feel the deep pain and destruction wrought by this senseless violence. It is the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia who will bear the most severe burden.

Since May 1998, a number of disturbing trends have placed these two countries firmly on the road to war. They have relentlessly beaten the war drums, agitated public opinion, and vastly expanded their military capacities. Through their own self-destructive policies, actions and propaganda, the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have fueled the war fire. As a result, they will both likely get burned.

First, and perhaps most damaging, have been the propaganda campaigns. As in many conflicts, various media (newspapers, radio, television) have been manipulated by both governments to demonize the "enemy." Most of the propaganda has focused on the opposing government leadership. The Ethiopian press has compared Eritrean President Isaias to Mussolini and described him as "mentally unstable", "psychotic", "insane." This campaign has been carried out so effectively that even many expatriates have asked me if it is true. In Eritrea, Ethiopian President Meles has been berated as an evil expansionist whose expulsion of Eritrean nationals is "ethnic cleansing" akin to Hitler's extermination of



*Remnants of cluster bombs dropped by Eritrean planes on Ayder Primary School in Mekelle, Ethiopia*

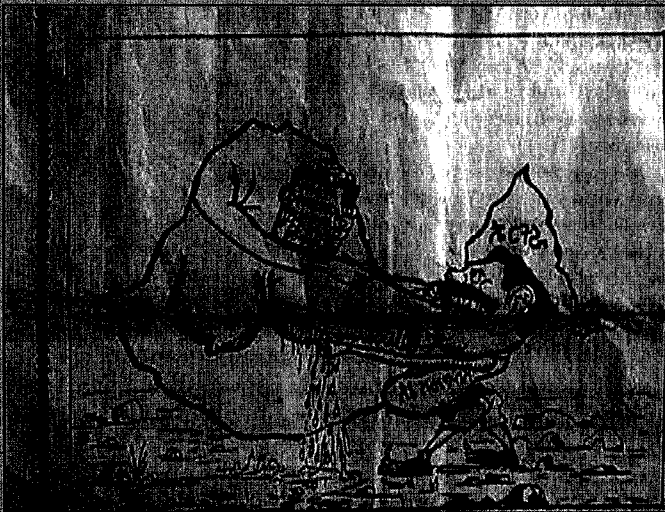
the Jews. This exaggeration and hyperbole is so outrageous it would be comical — if people didn't believe it. But many do, and that's not funny at all.

The two former liberation movements, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) call themselves "Shabiya" and "Woyane" respectively. These names are used with pride to describe the valiant heroes who liberated their people from the oppressive rule of former Ethiopian dictator



# The Ethiopian-Eritrean Propaganda War in Cartoons

Here is a small sampling of cartoons from newspapers and posters in Ethiopia and Eritrea. These pieces of nasty folk art are published only in local-language publications, never in English-language media. The aim of this negative imagery is clearly to demonize the "other" and rally public opinion against the wicked "enemy."



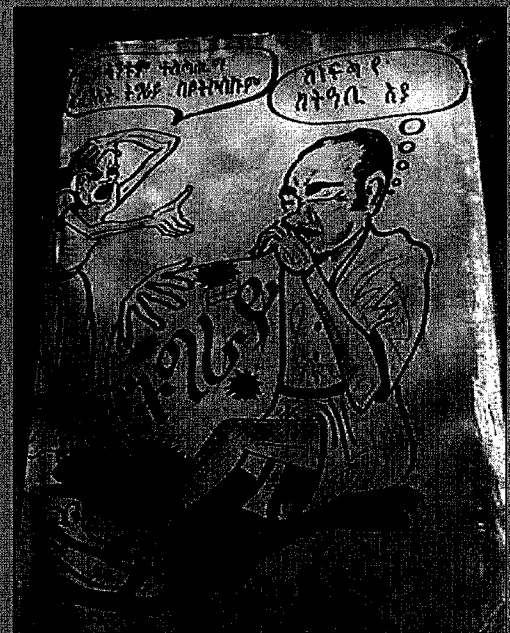
A crazed Isaias cutting the breast of Mother Ethiopia, as sharp spoon-feeding him. His bulging stomach says "I am full." Ethiopia is decapitated and its northern portion has become a hat for Isaias, a reference to Eritrea's secession in 1993.



Isaias as an evil liar, with forked tongue and snakes coming out of his head. On one side he says, "We won't force Badma/Sheraro," and on the other, "We didn't invade Badma/Sheraro." He also claims, "The chance for peace is past," while saying, "We accept the UN decision."



Meles depicted as a blood-sucking parasite. The caption above his head reads "wild animal."



Meles as an expansionist blowing up a balloon representing Tigray. The distressed woman is warning him, "You better be careful, it's going to explode." Meles is thinking, "I'm going to blow it up to make it bigger."

Mengistu Haile Mariam. During the current conflict, the two terms have taken new meaning in the opposing countries. "Shabiya" are derided in the Ethiopian press, and are perceived by Ethiopians as Asmara's arrogant, expansionist and authoritarian ruling clique. In Eritrea, "Woyane" are considered a cruel minority government that is sucking the lifeblood out of the rest of Ethiopia, while trying to push the border in preparation for Tigrayan secession.

The propaganda against "Woyane" by the Eritrean media and contempt for "Shabiya" in the Ethiopian press have greatly affected public opinion. Through repetition of horrific imagery and dehumanizing descriptions, feelings of animosity and distrust have proliferated. For example, after Eritrea bombed the Ayder Primary School in Mekelle, killing 51 civilians, Ethiopia showed graphic pictures of the victims on television almost daily for more than four months. While this air attack was inexcusable and deserved condemnation, the repetitive visuals served no purpose but to foment anger and desire for revenge against "Shabiya."

Eritrea's coverage of the deportation issue and reports of the Eritreans who have died in detention in Ethiopia have been similarly repeated *ad nauseam*. These abuses have been rehearsed over and over to emphasize the ruthless and vengeful nature of Ethiopia's "Woyane" leaders. Such propaganda has steadily increased the pressure for war. In both countries, the authorities have subtly (and sometimes overtly) reinforced the view that the only durable solution to this problem is destruction of the "Woyane" or "Shabiya", and the installation of a more reasonable, rational and humane government in the country next door.

The vitriol, innuendo and brash posturing by both governments have been swallowed hook, line and sinker by the peoples of both nations. Ethiopians and Eritreans, at home and in the Diaspora, have responded to their governments' propaganda campaigns with unquestioning dedication and unwavering enthusiasm. Throughout Africa, people uncritically consume government-controlled media, assuming any information conveyed over the radio or in print must be true. Throughout the past nine months, the propaganda has been so pervasive and repetitive that the expatriate communities living and working in Eritrea and Ethiopia have

also largely bought the official line of their host governments.

This successful propagandizing has limited the scope of discussion among both locals and foreigners. Dissent is all but absent, and even should it exist below the surface, it is rarely expressed openly for fear of reprisals. This is particularly true in Eritrea, where all media are strictly controlled and government-censored. In this regard, Ethiopia is significantly more open, as its free press has regularly criticized the government. However, since the current conflict started, even Ethiopia's normally feisty independent media have hopped on the nationalist bandwagon.

Within Ethiopia and Eritrea, private-citizen peace initiatives — campaigns, advocacy and activism — have been virtually nonexistent. This may be the result of the aforementioned propaganda, general complacency, or fear. There have been no demonstrations, petitions or other citizen-organizing. There have been no popular attempts to exert pressure on either government to be conciliatory or compromise in the interest of peace. Feelings of national pride run high, but the people of both countries are war-weary — only seven years ago they finished fighting a hard, long liberation struggle. They were just becoming accustomed to peacetime living, and were successfully rebuilding their war-tattered communities. Considering this background, the current public silence is peculiar, particularly in the face of what one diplomat calls "the stupidest war in Africa."

While Ethiopians and Eritreans are victims of their government's ill-advised adventures, they have done



*Ethiopian TV crew filming at a military camp in Ara Aro, Tigray*



*Civilian victims: Lemlem Aregawi's house, just south of Zalanbessa, was destroyed during shelling in June 1998*

little to stop the momentum. Democracy and freedom come with responsibilities — people must speak out, express their political interests and influence their governments to do what the people want.<sup>4</sup> While neither of these two nations has a deep historical democratic tradition, the two liberation movements, the EPLF and TPLF, initially sought to empower the people. Now that they hold the strings of power, they, like their predecessors, are demanding unquestioned loyalty.

In Eritrea, the inaptly named "Citizens for Peace in Eritrea" (CPE) is composed of a handful of well-educated, concerned citizens. They got together in July 1998, primarily concerned with the issue of deportations — Eritreans forcefully expelled from Ethiopia. Retired Professor Emeritus Asmarom Legesse and his colleagues have conducted detailed studies to expose the cruel and illegal nature of the deportations. I attended a CPE-sponsored publicity event in Asmara on 11 December 1998, where Professor Asmarom unveiled the second part of his study: "The Uprooted II." One deportee gave a personal account of his experience and other speakers presented papers on women and children deportees and the media.

Professor Asmarom's rigorous research and data

notwithstanding, the event turned out to be little more than another propaganda stunt, aimed at spurring Asmara's expatriates into action against the barbarous regime to the south. It was a rehash of old diatribes. Ironically, hanging from the podium was a computer-printed sign reading simply "peace," a word not mentioned even once during the entire three-hour program. My eyes were continuously drawn to this visual magnet. Peace. The only real hope for an end to all of the abuses exposed that evening were encapsulated in that one word, unwittingly plastered directly beneath each speaker. I wished the "Citizens for Peace in Eritrea" had the political space and courage to promote that sadly ignored goal.

In Ethiopia, to my knowledge there have been no citizens' groups formed to push the peace agenda. Even two meetings between Eritrean and Ethiopian religious leaders, in

Norway and Germany, failed to break the pattern of partisanship and posturing. In other conflicts throughout Africa and around the world, bishops, priests, Imams and rabbis have used their religious offices to boldly transcend partisanship and reach out to the "other." In Ethiopia and Eritrea, nationalist sentiments are so powerful that even these religious leaders have proven unable to rise above the fray.

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Both countries have invested massive amounts of time, manpower and money in military buildups, and in so doing have created additional momentum for war. Both governments have mobilized their populations to "defend" their sovereignty. Ethiopia, whose army was largely demobilized at the end of the civil war in 1991, has recruited young men from all ethnic groups and regions of the country. These new recruits were given rapid training, and now up to 300,000 troops are deployed along the Ethiopian side of the border.

Since independence in 1993, Eritrea has insisted on six months of mandatory military training for Eritrean youth at the Sawa national military training camp. Eritrea had thus already maintained a high degree of military

<sup>4</sup> Public demonstrations are considered an unacceptable mechanism for political expression in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Two recent examples come to mind. At a December 1998 "Citizens for Peace in Eritrea"-sponsored event, one eager participant recommended that they take to the streets of Asmara to draw attention to the plight of Eritrean deportees coming from Ethiopia. The organizers side-stepped the suggestion, uncomfortably saying they would consider the idea. Likewise in February in Addis Ababa, a show of support for the Ethiopian troops fighting in Badime was planned. At 4 o'clock one afternoon, all motorists were to turn on their headlights, and demonstrators were to gather in Meskel Square. At the last moment, the demonstration was canceled, and police told motorists not to turn on their lights.

Both of these proposed public demonstrations were in favor of current government policy. However, public political action is a slippery slope. Today people might protest in favor of the government. Tomorrow, if they are dissatisfied, they might take to the streets in opposition to the government. Hence, the Eritrean and Ethiopian authorities would prefer not to open the Pandora's Box of political activism.



readiness, and quickly mobilized both old liberation fighters and new Sawa graduates to protect their territorial claims in Badime and along the border. Eritrea is estimated to have up to 260,000 troops (about 7.5 percent of the country's total population) mobilized on its border. The opportunity-cost of keeping such massive numbers engaged is considerable, not to mention the expense of keeping them fed, clothed and outfitted.

During the lull in fighting between July 1998 and January 1999, both countries spent massive amounts of money on military equipment. Ethiopia has bought eight Sukhoi SU-27 fighter planes and Mig-24 helicopters from Russia, an unspecified number of tanks from Bulgaria, ammunition from China and communications equipment from France. The last shipment of fighter planes alone is said to have cost \$160 million. Eritrea, for its part, has spent similar amounts of money, most recently on the procurement of six to ten Mig-29 interceptors. Eritrea has also purchased BM-21 rocket launchers from Bulgaria, attack helicopters from Italy and other military supplies from Romania (some of which have been interdicted in Belgium). Qatar and Libya are reported to have bankrolled some of the purchases. And, since neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea has pilots trained to fly such high-tech aircraft or technicians to service them, technical crews from Russia, Ukraine and Latvia have been contracted.<sup>5</sup>

The international nature of the arms trade makes wars such as these truly international affairs. This is not merely two squabbling brothers wrestling alone in a closed room. It is more like a death match at the Coliseum, with cheering crowds haphazardly throwing all manner of weapons to the competitors. In such cases, contradictions abound. Russia, for example, injected massive amounts of arms into the conflict and then, once fighting broke out, feebly urged the disputants to cease-fire.

For two of the poorest countries in the world, the diversion of scarce resources for fancy fighter planes, rockets and bombs goes beyond the unfortunate. It is downright shameful. Both countries remain heavily dependent on external development-assistance (loans, grants and remittances from the Diaspora). And neither country has developed the capacity to feed its own people without consistent infusions of food aid. Ethiopian and



*Sacks of food aid awaiting distribution to displaced people in Adigrat, Ethiopia*

Eritrean squandering of funds on exotic fighter planes is akin to a pauper buying caviar and filet mignon with food stamps — the only difference being that fish eggs and steak probably won't kill you.

These investments in weapons and manpower have created a certain uncontrollable momentum. After repeatedly publicizing the righteousness of your cause and the evil ways of your neighbor, and then spending tremendous amounts of money on weapons and harnessing your population's energy and effort to protect the nation, it becomes nearly impossible to put on the brakes, turn around and compromise. At this point, compromise is perceived as a sign of weakness, and weakness is politically untenable. National pride runs high in both nations, and thus "giving in" or losing face is not a viable option for either government. The stubbornness of both leaders is thus understandable, although not particularly admirable or productive. Their own massive propaganda campaigns have effectively cemented them into their positions, and backed them both into corners.

When fighting resumed in February, the propaganda machines switched into even higher gear. Until now, Ethiopians had carefully poised themselves atop the moral high ground. In their view they had been the victims of aggression, but exercised restraint and a commitment to peaceful resolution. With internal pressure mounting and patience wearing thin, the Ethiopian government decided to pursue the military option. They are now attempting to regain their territory by force. Eritrean

<sup>5</sup> Much of the information contained in this paragraph was drawn from a BBC Analysis article on the internet: "Arms Pour in for Border War," Patrick Gilkes, 16 February 1999. Some of the numbers of planes vary from source to source and should thus be considered rough estimates. Also, this paragraph discussed only *new* purchases. Both countries still have significant numbers of Mig-21 and Mig-23 fighters as well as hundreds of tanks and large amounts of ammunition inherited or left over from the liberation struggle that ended in 1991.

authorities, having been burned by their initial silence, now seem to recognize the power of information. The Eritrean government has given journalists timely access to the frontlines, and is now speaking out more loudly and openly than ever before. These efforts appear to be bearing fruit — most observers seem to agree that Ethiopia has initiated the fighting this time around.

#### WHAT NEXT?: PROSPECTS FOR EVENTUAL PEACE

After this current round of fighting expires, perhaps in a month, a year or more, the atmosphere might be more conducive for compromise and peace-building. However, that is only speculation. Hopes are, the two sides will tire of killing each other, and recognize the futility of con-

tinued hostility. Conversely, should large numbers of civilians be victimized, antagonisms and anger might deepen, making it even more difficult to restore normality to this troubled area.

As the fighting resumed, both countries displayed characteristic bravado and confidence in their ultimate victory. They have spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours to convince themselves of their overpowering strength, and their brothers' (now enemies') pitiful weaknesses. However, as the corpses pile up, villages are burned and recently rebuilt infrastructures are ravaged, this optimism may fade. I, for one, certainly hope so. Only then will the combatants put down their guns, face the daunting challenges of making peace, and begin restoring sanity to their relations with each other. □

#### UPDATE — March 24, 1999

This article was written and submitted in mid-February. Since that time, there have been a number of unexpected developments. On February 23rd, Ethiopia launched "Operation Sunset"<sup>1</sup>, a massive offensive to regain control of Badime. Three days later Ethiopian forces successfully broke through Eritrean defense lines, recaptured Badime town and forced Eritrean troops to retreat to new trench positions. There have been no independent confirmations of casualty reports, but the total number of dead is estimated to total in the tens of thousands. Should these figures prove correct, more lives may have been sacrificed in these four days of vicious battles than during the entire thirty-year liberation struggle.

While the rapid success of the Ethiopian offensive was unexpected, even more startling was the Eritrean acceptance of the OAU peace plan on February 27th. After months of obstinacy, changing circumstances (i.e. defeat in Badime) caused the Eritrean leadership to accede. This Eritrean about-face may have been a strategic maneuver, as one of the core elements of the OAU plan required Eritrean withdrawal from "Badime and its environs." Having already withdrawn (not voluntarily but under heavy attack), it became tactically prudent for Eritrea to accept the OAU proposal.

These events shifted the ball back into Ethiopia's court. Would Ethiopia continue its military operations and try to regain control of the other Eritrean-occupied territories, or halt the offensive and submit the dispute to the OAU (as originally agreed)? On March 14 this question was answered when Ethiopian forces attacked Eritrean positions on the Tsorona front.

Following two days of heavy fighting near Tsorona, the Eritrean government brought journalists to the site of their successful defense. Reporters saw hundreds of corpses lying along a 200-meter stretch, a scene the Ethiopian government asserted was staged as publicity stunt. Since then, fighting has resumed on the Tsorona, Zalanbessa and Badime fronts (near Shambuco, a village I visited in August 1998, to interview deported farmers). During the latest battles there has been a near-total news blackout on both sides.

Eritrea's acceptance of the OAU peace plan has already become an opportunity lost. The international community has failed to secure a cease-fire, and proven unable to reconcile Eritrea's and Ethiopia's varying interpretations of the OAU framework. The OAU's legitimacy in handling this dispute came into further question on March 22nd at the start of the 69th Regular Session of the Ministerial Council. Eritrea's Ambassador to Ethiopia and delegate to the OAU, Mr. Girma Asmerom, was declared *persona non grata* and expelled from Ethiopia on February 10, 1999. Since then, Eritrea has had no formal representation at the OAU. The Ministerial Council's consideration of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict is thus a farce, as one of the concerned parties, Eritrea, is the only African country not represented. Likewise, the

<sup>1</sup> "Operation Sunset" was named after a comment by President Isaias. He proclaimed that the withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Badime was as likely as the sun not rising.

venue of the meeting, OAU headquarters in Addis Ababa, can hardly be considered neutral turf.

Prognostication, as I have recently learned, is a dangerous business. I'm reluctant to predict the direction in which the winds of this conflict will next blow. At the moment, the fighting continues. The danger of short-term battle victories is that they boost confidence, embolden public opinion for war, and thereby encourage the pursuit of a total military victory. The jubilant moments of temporary triumph in Badime and Tsorona have overshadowed the staggering human losses both sides have sustained during the past six weeks of fighting.

In the coming weeks and months, several questions will be answered. Will the bloodshed continue or will revived diplomatic efforts place the two parties firmly on the path toward a negotiated settlement? Will the international community somehow succeed in convincing Ethiopia and Eritrea to accept a cease-fire? Can the details of the OAU peace framework be clarified to the satisfaction of both parties? If fighting continues, will one party be able to obtain a "total victory" on the battlefield or inflict enough damage on the "enemy" to force a surrender? We will have to wait and see. In the meantime, the senseless carnage of Africa's "stupidest war" continues in earnest.

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## INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

**Adam Smith Albion.** 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. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Shelly Renae Browning.** A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

**Chenoa Egawa.** An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

**Paige Evans.** 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. [THE AMERICAS]

**Whitney Mason.** 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. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Marc Michaelson.** 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." [sub-SAHARA]

**Jean Benoît Nadeau.** A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theatre 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." [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Susan Sterner.** A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. [THE AMERICAS]

**Tyrone Turner.** A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. [THE AMERICAS]

**Daniel B. Wright.** A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duiyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andraee, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

## ***NOTES***

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