

Ethiopia-Eritrea Disengagement Proceeds Slowly, Civilians Watch & Wait

By Dan Connell

Asmara, Eritrea

Two months after Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a pact to end their two-year border war, an agreement to move ahead with its implementation has finally been ironed out. Ethiopian forces occupying positions inside Eritrea began to pull back last week, and the 4,200 UN troops brought here to monitor the truce are now deploying to the contested frontier. A spokesperson for the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea today said that the withdrawals are taking place on schedule and are expected to be complete by February 24. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of war-displaced civilians remain in camps behind the lines, waiting to see if the truce will hold.

Throughout the time that the two sides contested the fine print of the peace agreement, hammered out last year with the help of mediators from the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the UN, and the U.S., and signed in Algiers on December 12, Ethiopia refused to withdraw from territory it occupied inside Eritrea. As a result, those who fled their homes during the fighting were unable to return, and the UN peacekeepers were prevented from moving into the area between the two armies. Most displaced civilians are likely to wait months longer before taking the chance of going back to the disputed areas. However, if they are not back to their homes by May, they are likely to miss the entire crop cycle for this year, since the annual summer rains start in June. This would compound the human crisis here and leave the war-displaced civilians reliant on donated relief until late in 2002.

Under the terms of the truce reached last summer, Eritrea agreed to pull back its forces 15

miles from the border—roughly the range of each side's heavy artillery—in order to create a buffer zone. Eritrean forces had already withdrawn in several key areas, either to take more defensible positions or to make a good will gesture (in response to OAU requests). However, Ethiopian forces moved into several of these areas last summer and have been trying to occupy others until recently. They have also allowed Eritrean proxies formerly based inside Ethiopia to operate in the buffer zone. These groups are thought to be responsible for planting anti-tank mines inside western Eritrea, where two civilians were killed last month in a roadside explosion.

Some commentators have derided both sides for bickering over what appear to be minor issues, much as they once characterized the war itself as one fought on “worthless land” over little more than pride. However, what is at stake now are the future boundaries of the two countries. Behind the conflict is a contest over power and influence within the region—and over Ethiopian ambitions to gain its own access to the Red Sea. Meanwhile, the longer this impasse continues, the more Eritrea's economy is hurt and the more its people suffer. Many observers in the Eritrean capital of Asmara think that the slow implementation of the truce is an effort by Ethiopia to keep up the economic and social pressure on Eritrea, which is barely one-twentieth the size of Ethiopia.

For two months after signing an implementation agreement in Algiers, Ethiopian and Eritrean negotiators argued over issues ranging from where to locate an air corridor for UN flights (Ethiopia objected to the original plan, saying it passed over sensitive military installations) to the precise positions each country's



troops occupied at the outset of the conflict. The latter issue, which goes to the heart of the border dispute, was the one that stymied the UN deployment until recently.

The Algiers agreement calls for demarcating the border on the basis of colonial treaties and applicable international law. The Italians established the colony of Eritrea in 1890, but they were defeated by Ethiopian forces when they tried to push southward. Treaties signed then set out the boundaries between the two states. Eritrea bases its claims on these agreements. Ethiopia insists that changes in the administration of the frontier since then—of which there were many during the 40 years that Ethiopia occupied the strategic Red Sea territory—should be taken into account. Under these circumstances, both sides saw their pre-war troop positions as a likely factor in the outcome of future legal wrangling.

Without Eritrea, Ethiopia is landlocked. After the former colony's independence, Ethiopia traded through the two major Eritrean ports. However, since fighting broke out in 1998, the country has conducted its external commerce by road and rail via neighboring Djibouti and Sudan.

The Ethiopian government's claims in the border dispute reflected its efforts to inch closer to the Eritrean port of Assab, where hundreds of thousands of troops from both countries remain dug into positions less than 50 miles from the sea. As if to underline Assab's importance, several thousand Ethiopians staged demonstrations on January 28 in the capital, Addis Ababa, calling the government too soft on Eritrea. One protest leader, Ethiopian Democratic Party chair Admassu Gebeyehu, termed the peace agreements "a sellout of the vital interests of Ethiopia, including its outlet to the sea."

As many as a half million men and women were engaged in pitched battles that ranged across much of the frontier during the third round of the fighting last May and June. After fierce confrontations in which tens of thousands reportedly perished, Ethiopian forces broke through Eritrean defenses and drove deep into that country's fertile western lowlands. Eritrean forces retreated to positions at the edge of the central highland plateau, where Asmara and most other large towns are situated, and the war ground to a stalemate. During the fighting, an estimated one million Eritreans, nearly a third of the

country's population, were displaced. More than 220,000, most of them subsistence farmers, remain in relief camps today, cut off from their homes and their croplands and dependent on international assistance for their survival. The displaced are still waiting for the war as they have lived it to end.

The lack of effective international mediation further delayed the return of the Eritreans displaced since December. Peace efforts by the international community—particularly the U.S.—lost momentum after the signing of the Algiers accords. The new Bush administration was slow to fill key Africa desks in the State Department and the National Security Council, leaving a vacuum in U.S. Africa policy at a crucial moment in the disengagement process along the Eritrean-Ethiopian border.

*(Dan Connell
<dconnell@aol.com> is the author of Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution [Red Sea Press, 1997] and Rethinking Revolution: New Strategies for Democracy & Social Justice [Red Sea Press, April 2001].)*

The Republican Rule

<http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/republicanrule/index.html>

Essays Include:

Robert Cutler *A First Glance at Bush's Policy Toward Russia*
 Karen Hansen-Kuhn *Bush's Trade Policy: The NAFTA Express*
 Chris Hellman *What Can We Expect from the Penatagon?*
 Neil Hicks *The Bush Administration and Human Rights*
 Chris Toensing *Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors*
 Tomas Valasek *George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe*
 Carol Welch *Republican Rule and the IFIs*
 Ian Williams *The United Nations: Beating Around the Bush*

And Many Others!

Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage
 Paul O'Neill
 Richard N. Perle
 Colin Powell
 Condoleezza Rice
 Donald Rumsfeld
 George Schultz
 Paul Wolfowitz
 Ann Veneman
 Robert B. Zoellick