

## Washington Watches & Waits

By Dan Connell | January 23, 2004

The latest State Department call for progress in the stalled Ethiopia-Eritrea peace accord—issued this week and coming on the heels of similar expressions of concern by European diplomats last week—is welcome news for those fearing the renewal of war. But it doesn't go nearly far enough.

The absence of even the barest suggestion of consequences to either party for blocking the accord renders the statement toothless. European calls for “dialogue” only muddy the waters further. Without international pressure to implement the accord in full, and soon, the downward spiral will continue, driven not only by the unresolved border issues but by internal political considerations.

Four years ago, Eritrea and Ethiopia agreed to put the border dispute that triggered what became one of the most costly conflicts in African history to binding arbitration. Today, with Ethiopia balking at the results, the two states are on the verge of going back to war, as the U.S. twiddles its political thumbs in the hope that the problem will somehow go away.

It won't.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi uses the crisis and its emotive appeal to Ethiopian nationalists to shore up his narrowly based regime, even as the country confronts widespread famine due both to a persistent drought and to the redirection of scarce resources to the war effort.

For his part, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki uses the continued war-footing to bludgeon his critics, suppress dissent, and postpone indefinitely the democratization of the small but strategic East African state, Africa's newest.

The Bush administration, which seeks both countries' support for the “war on terrorism” and for the pacification of Iraq, appears loathe to step into this quarrel, which grows more and more bitter as it festers, even as it poisons the politics of both states. Yet to remain on the sidelines and allow this tinderbox to

explode once again will spell disaster—for the two war-weary peoples, for regional stability, and for much more.

The Eritreans fought 30 years for the independence of the former Italian colony, which Ethiopia forcibly annexed in the early 1960s. To win their hard-fought victory, Eritrean nationalists joined forces with antigovernment guerrillas in Ethiopia to oust the dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, but the erstwhile allies fell out with one another in the decade that followed as each set out to reconstruct their battered states.

The last war, fought in three rounds over a two-year period that started in May 1998, cost tens of thousands of lives and hundreds of millions of dollars. It also wrecked plans for regional cooperation and development, exacerbated the civil war in neighboring Sudan, and even managed to heighten tensions in Somalia, where rival political forces find support from one or the other feuding state.

Discrete diplomatic efforts failed to defuse the Eritrea-Ethiopia crisis as it was building up in 1997-98. After a series of armed incidents during which several Eritrean officials were murdered near the disputed village of Badme, the Eritrean army rolled into the area with a large mechanized force and took the village. Shortly afterward, Ethiopia, claiming it had been invaded, declared “total war” on Eritrea and mobilized its armed forces for a full-scale assault.

Three rounds of combat, fought with World War 1 tactics and cold war-era weapons, produced mind-boggling casualties and nearly bankrupted both countries. The fighting was accompanied by a mass



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Ethiopian expulsion of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin, creating a severe social crisis on top of that caused by the war itself.

During the last round in May-June 2000, the Ethiopians occupied nearly one-fourth of Eritrea, displacing some 600,000 civilians and inflicting enormous damage to the new state's fragile infrastructure. After the Eritreans retreated to defensible positions and halted the advance, Ethiopia agreed to a cease-fire.

On December 12, 2000, Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Algiers, assisted by mediators from the U.S., the European Union, and the Organization of African Unity. Under its terms, a 25-kilometer-wide Temporary Security Zone was established within Eritrea to be patrolled by UN peacekeeping forces, while an international Boundary Commission, whose members were approved in advance by both sides, delimited the contested border. The UN force has been there ever since.

The Boundary Commission issued its findings in April 2002, giving a little to each side but confirming that Badme was in Eritrea. Both parties initially accepted the outcome, though Ethiopia voiced objections over Badme, which had become the symbolic rationale for the war itself. As a result of this and other reasons (de-mining delays, among them), the actual demarcation never took place.

A renewal of fighting along the Ethiopia-Eritrea front now would be waged with more passion—and with new and better arms—than ever before, damaging both states in devastating ways and almost certainly pushing them into famine. It would also exacerbate tensions in a far wider sphere and create new openings for global terrorists to expand their operations.

In addition to this, a U.S. failure on the diplomatic front will undermine confidence in all such internationally arbitrated settlements. The most serious consequence could be the collapse of peace talks in Sudan, in which the U.S. is heavily invested—and where access to some of the world's largest untapped oil reserves await the end of the fighting.

Such an outcome would prove a political catastrophe for the Bush administration as it seeks to convince a skeptical American public going into election season that this country and the world are safer today than they were before the “war on terror” got underway. The fact that both Eritrea and Ethiopia are charter members of Bush's much-touted “coalition of the willing” in Iraq could then prove more than a little embarrassing.

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Stepped up Western efforts to promote peace reflect these fears but fall far short of what is needed to produce results. Britain's Minister for Africa Chris Mullin met Zenawi in Addis Ababa last week after talks in Eritrea and Djibouti. He was quickly followed by German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder who embarked on an Africa tour aimed in part at promoting conflict resolution, and then by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs

Donald Yamamoto. However, none of this diplomacy appeared to make a difference.

Though the State Department press release issued in Washington this week called on both parties to implement the boundary commission's finding “fully and without delay,” it did not specify a cost for not doing so or a benefit for acting. Nor did it even generate a substantive response from the warring parties.

For their part, both European leaders urged more discussion between Ethiopia and Eritrea to move the process forward. In doing so, they appeared to take Ethiopia's side, for it is only Addis Ababa that wants to reopen the talks and alter the pact. The danger is

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that such a “dialogue” could undo the entire agreement and place the combatants back on square one of the peace process, which is itself becoming an issue.

More than 60 countries have provided troops for this mission since February 2001, but many—particularly those underwriting the mission—are growing weary. “The international community cannot go on paying \$180 million for the UN peacekeepers on the border indefinitely,” Mullin told a news conference in Ethiopia last week.

Time is short for averting a new outbreak of fighting. The Bush administration needs to take decisive steps now—and to pull the Europeans into the effort—or risk seeing the entire region slide into chaos. Meanwhile, continuing a situation of no-war-no-peace has terrible costs—not only in terms of growing instability, but in the setbacks to a promising democratization process that has since become a hostage to the crisis.

Eritrea’s President Isaias Afwerki—a guerrilla commander in the liberation war—has blocked the implementation of a Constitution ratified in 1997, arrested dozens of his critics (including top government and liberation movement leaders), shut down the independent press, banned competing political parties, and repeatedly postponed national elections—all in the name of “national security.”

While this is an old ruse to suppress dissent, it has for the most part worked. Many Eritreans, deeply disturbed over the turn of events in their new country, hesitate to speak out for fear they will give comfort to their foe—or be branded as such.

Meanwhile, both countries are threatened with famine due both to recurrent drought and to the destructive effects of sustaining a war footing of this scope and magnitude. Both countries need large-scale food aid—Eritrea alone is asking \$146 m for this year—but donors are understandably worried about the potential misuse of such aid. At best, emergency aid would take up the slack in these ailing economies and allow more resources to be directed into the war effort.

The Bush administration is in a position to break this logjam and move the process forward. Public statements bemoaning the lack of progress are not useful, however well meant. What is needed is concrete action.

Consequences for sustaining this impasse need to be spelled out—condemnations in international forums, aid withheld, sanctions imposed. And rewards for settling the conflict need to be made clear—reconstruction assistance, demobilization support, trade advantages, new training programs.

Meanwhile, the U.S. should not paper over this problem by remaining in a military and political alliance with both these states. At the least, they should be dropped from the Iraq coalition until they get their own houses in order.

To do otherwise is to make a mockery of claims that U.S. policy in this important region has anything to do with democracy—or peace.

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