



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Ethiopia-Eritrea February 2008

BACKGROUND

The history of Ethiopia and Eritrea is rich and centuries long. Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia annexed Eritrea in 1962 sparking a thirty-year long war led by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). In 1974 Colonel Haile Mariam Mengistu overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie and established a Marxist inspired government. Mengistu continued to wage war against the EPLF, led by Isaias Afwerki and their allies, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), led by Meles Zenawi, until 1991 when the Mengistu Government fell to the rebel forces.

From 1991 through 1993, the two leaders, Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea, cooperated until the Eritrean people voted overwhelmingly for independence in a UN-sponsored referendum. By 1998, relations between the two leaders and their governments had deteriorated seriously over three main issues: the ill-defined and disputed border between Ethiopia and Eritrea; the introduction of Eritrea's own currency in 1997 which complicated economic relations; and a dispute over access to the port of Assaba lost by Ethiopia when Eritrea declared independence.

When Eritrea occupied the symbolically important border town of Badme in May 1998, bad relations turned into a military conflict that killed from 70,000 to 100,000 people, displaced about one million people and caused economic and developmental setbacks that persist to today. After two years of brutal trench warfare, Ethiopia managed to push Eritrean forces back from Badme in May 2000. The two parties entered into negotiations brokered by the UN in which the U.S. played a decisive role. The agreement set up a security zone between the opposing armies secured by a UN peacekeeping force and also established the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Commission (EEBC) charged with the task of defining the border in what would be final and binding way. In 2002 the Commission awarded Badme to Eritrea, a decision that Ethiopia disputed until 2004 when President Zenawi presented a five-point peace plan that accepted the EEBC border in principle.

However, Eritrea rejected the plan and insisted on full implementation of the EEBC decision since Ethiopian troops still have not been withdrawn from Badme. In October 2005 Eritrea started efforts to force the border issue to a resolution by banning UN peacekeeping flights and forcing the UN to abandon half of its peacekeeping posts. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1640 calling on Ethiopia to accept the EEBC ruling and on Eritrea to lift its restrictions on the UN peacekeeping forces or face sanctions. Both Ethiopia and Eritrea remain locked into their political and military positions while tensions along the border remain high. To this day each country has up to 100,000 facing the other along the common border. In addition, they support armed opposition groups in each other's countries.

The political situation in both countries is grim. Both governments suppress human and constitutional rights; they have arrested ordinary citizens and political opponents and are accused of serious violations of human rights. While the border dispute raged in 2005, Ethiopia held elections which the international community considered to be the most free and fair since the end of the civil war in 1991. Although the ruling party won, the main opposition party won a large number of seats (173 up from 12 previously) and claimed massive fraud. When the Zenawi government claimed victory, opposition supporters provoked large demonstrations. In response the government launched a massive crackdown on the opposition. It arrested scores of civilians and charged them with treason, genocide and using violence to change the constitutional order. The Catholic Church in Ethiopia condemned all acts of violence. It called on the opposition to collaborate with the ruling party and insisted that the ruling party allow opposition parties the right of full participation in the political process for the common good. Finally, the Church called on all parties to adopt a constructive attitude in order to solve the conflict

through dialogue and mutual respect. Although some political prisoners have been released or pardoned, political suppression has continued to the present day.

Eritrea has followed a similar path of political oppression, but more severe. President Isaias Afwerki established an autocratic rule excluding elections and suppressing all political and civil society organizations. The government has expelled many international NGOs, exiled political opposition and suppressed all the local religious groups, including Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The constitution approved by referendum in 1997 has never been enforced; no elections have been held and no political opposition has been allowed to organize.

The intense rivalry and conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea extends well beyond their borders into Sudan and Somalia. Both countries are involved in an open proxy war in Somalia. It is widely believed that Eritrea provides military support to the Islamic Courts Union. When the Islamic Courts took control over the capital Mogadishu in 2006, Ethiopia invaded Somalia with backing from the U.S. The Ethiopians scattered the Islamic Courts forces and installed the Transitional Federal Government in Mogadishu. Since then, Eritrea continues to support the Islamic Courts in their insurgency efforts against the Ethiopian army and its ally, the Transitional Government.

Many observers believe that except for the 2000 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea brokered by the U.S., our nation has not exerted a coherent and intensive strategy for peace between the two governments. Observers point to the failure to apply pressure to implement the 2000 Algiers Agreement that ended the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Even though the U.S. and the other Western Donors criticized the government for its 2005 crackdown, the U.S. seems to have favored Ethiopia in the “war on terror” in the Horn of Africa over its responsibility to promote good governance in the country and peace with its neighbor Eritrea. The State Department reports on Ethiopian human rights violations, but these concerns seem eclipsed by events in Somalia.

Eritrea has chosen to cut itself off from many international contacts, especially those with the U.S. and Western governments involved in the Algiers Agreement (called the Algiers Witness Group). Eritrea now receives almost no bilateral assistance and only small amounts of humanitarian assistance through the UN. It forcefully reduced the number of free food aid recipients from 1.3 million people to 70,000, expelling nine international NGOs.

USCCB POSITION

In December 2007 the Committee on International Peace approved a new set of policy recommendations for the Horn of Africa that builds on previous policy positions regarding the Darfur conflict and the North-South conflict in Sudan. These recommendations recognize and address the interconnectedness of the conflicts that rage in Sudan Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

ACTION REQUESTED

USCCB supports a general policy framework toward the Greater Horn of Africa that puts more emphasis on diplomacy, conflict resolution, peacebuilding and development. The U.S. Government should shift from its almost exclusive focus on combating terrorism in the Horn to a broader strategy with three objectives:

1. promotion of diplomacy, peacebuilding and resolution of the conflicts that plague the region;
2. promotion of good governance and curtailment of support to governments that abuse the human rights of their peoples; and
3. collaboration with the European Union countries, China, the UN and its peacekeeping office and the countries of the region, especially the Intergovernmental Authority for Development, in efforts to resolve conflicts.

For more information: visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/ethiopia-eritrea.shtml> or contact Stephen R. Hilbert, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3149 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), Shilbert@usccb.org.