

# The International Community's Intervention on Ethiopia and Eritrea's Conflict

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## Abstract

Border issues are political problems in Africa. The border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea was one of the contentious wars faced by the international community. To manage this conflict, the same community established border commission to draw up the boundaries and demarcate the borderline. Ethiopia was however insolent and in effect discarded this demarcation. It also continued to dwell in the territory of Eritrea. This research urges the international community to make border issues in Africa a priority. In fact, one of the reasons why Kenya and Ethiopia are reluctant to participate in the efforts to form tangible Somali government has its origin in border issue. Historically Ethiopia will not forget the damage inflicted upon them by Somali freedom fighters including Imam Ahmad, Sayed Muhammad Abdulle Hassan, and the Somali military. In 1531, Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1507-1543) launched a campaign against Ethiopia and defeated several Ethiopian emperors, inflicting much dent on the kingdom. This conflict brought three-quarters of Ethiopia under Muslim Somali Sultanate of Adal in the intense Ethiopian Adal War from 1529-43. Similarly, Sayed Muhammad Abdulle Hassan, ONLF, UWSLF and the former Somali National Military have meted out damages on Ethiopia. Similarly Somalia was on the offensive in 1964 to reclaim the Kenyan Northeastern region. The point at hand is that, the history of most conflicts in the region revolves on border related issues. In the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea the military move by the international community had significantly ended a long held conflict and struggle through peaceful engagement and drafted binding arbitration.

**Keywords:** conflict, East Africa, border issues, Ethiopia, Eritrea, UN, international community

## 1. Introduction

Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia are the known Horn of African nations in the east of the continent. However, the greater Horn of Africa includes Kenya, Sudan and Uganda. The map below elucidates this contention.



Figure 1. Horn of Africa

Source: F.A.O. United Nations

This region is politically and economically potential in the future of international geopolitical and financial developments. Nonetheless, it remains prone to catastrophic calamities of humanitarian, political conflicts, and drought in nature. The war between Ethiopian and Eritrean on border issues was only one of the many calamities facing this region. This conflict increased political repression in both nations; it has also raised the likelihood of heightened instability in the region, a situation which could have led to a perpetuated humanitarian catastrophe. The key objective of this research is to assess the nature of the conflict and the role of international community in resolving the conflict. The political history of the two nations is important as the border issue is very much interlinked with geopolitical history of the two nations.

## **2. TPLF and EPLF's Political Stage**

Both Eritrean and Ethiopian regimes emerged from armed insurgent movements, the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Movement) and TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Movement) respectively. However, on the face of it, the two organizations had many issues in common; as they both opposed the Amhara rule in Ethiopia; although researchers have agreed that the two pursued different agenda in their national identity. The TPLF was originally based on ethnic grounds more so on the grievances of Tigrayans against the Amhara ethnic group. The two are historically political enemies as the political power in Ethiopia was rested from the Tigrayans by the Amharas.

Originally the TPLF started as an urban-based Tigrayan association of the Tigrayan elites, namely; Tigrayan National Organization (TNO). Earlier in 1950s and '60s there had been Tigrayan peasant revolt in 1942–43, through the formation of a movement with a wide-ranging political outlook by Haile Mariam Reda, who led what is to be known later, the Sihule movement. The TPLF itself was however formed in February 1975 as a small guerrilla band in the Tigrayan region of Ethiopia to overthrow the governments in Ethiopia which they eventually did in 1991. The aim was to secure the self-determination for the Tigray people within the Ethiopian political entity. Throughout the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie the Tigray people were politically the target of the Emperor, who was later overthrown in 1974. Tigrayans hoped that the new government would address their plight but this expectation was soon dashed as Mengistu took full power towards the end of that year (Negash & Kjetil, 2001).

Mengistu Haile Mariam proved to be the vilest enemy of Tigrayan people. The Dreg attitude toward the Tigrayan aspiration created a political climate reluctant to negotiate with Mengistu. They instead asserted their rights through the 'barrel of the gun' and succeeded in mobilizing the people of Tigray to such extraordinary effect that, in 1991, the TPLF took over the state power in Ethiopia. During the armed struggle which lasted for 16 years, the TPLF mobilized Tigrayans behind the front and created disciplined army that overpowered one of the strongest military governments in Africa. The power of TPLF was mainly generated from the fact that mobilization of the people in the region was relatively easy, they advocated the concept of Tigrayan nationalism, a common history of oppression and a common religion to unite the people of the region.

In fact, the history of Ethiopian political culture helped the TPLF to unite the people against the Amhara rule. The later had usurped the traditional power base of Ethiopia from Tigray to Amhara and transferred the capital of the nation from Axum to Addis Ababa. It is important to note that, in its first political programme the TPLF aim was for independence of Tigray from Ethiopia. However, at a later stage, internal debate was raised to discuss the question on whether the movement contented with Tigray region or would a hostile government in Addis Ababa require it to fight for the control of all Ethiopia? This discussion had in fact divided the organization and alienated some members but the leaders who had the ambition to rule the whole of Ethiopia made their case and wasted no time to create the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRD) in 1989, so that other ethnic groups could join the TPLF. The EPRD is the major component in the coalition which currently rules Ethiopia.

The EPLF on the other hand has started in Asmara by secondary school boys in the 1960s, as an illegal, underground organization set up to promote Eritrean culture. In fact, Ethiopian government knew about the organization but decided to tolerate or ignore it. At the initial stage it was seen as a mere irritant than a political menace. However, the organization began militant activities, attracting both internal and international attentions. These activities later generated Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1965; and after damaging internal conflict EPLF was formed. As a matter of fact, the EPLF consolidated as a unified coherent political and military force.

Meanwhile, the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was launched in 1971 by Isaias and his comrades and later, in the 1980s, renamed the Eritrean Socialist Party. The point here is, the EPRP ran the EPLF throughout its existence up to the point where the front seized power in Eritrea in 1991. On the military strength, the EPLF's armed forces grew exponentially to nearly 100,000 men and women. In 1994 the EPLF's

non-military departments were reorganized in preparation for their absorption into the new state. Nonetheless, Eritrean nationalism remains complex and more difficult to forge, precisely because, it reflected diverse population. As a matter of fact, Eritrea's 3.5 million people are divided between two major religions and speak nine different languages. The EPLF had to fight a vigorous campaign within its own community to win their support (Beshah & Aregay 1964).

Having said the aforementioned, both EPLF and TPLF had their ups and downs as far as their political, economic and regional cooperation is concerned. On the side of the EPLF, the struggle generated a powerful sense of collective identity based on blood and with clear goals; namely an independent Eritrea. In fact, it was the Italian rule which had fashioned Eritrea. Nonetheless, both the Tigrayans and Eritreans share a long history of ruling Ethiopia although to the surprise of many Eritreans tend to look down upon their cousins across the Mereb River. In mid-1980s an exchange of insults has led to larger consequences. On the whole, the TPLF relationship with the EPLF was always tactical in nature and suspicious based. This is because the Isaias Afeworki and late Meles Zenawi had never adopted democratic traditions in their respective organizations. Though, in the eyes of many, the two leaders initially co-operated militarily in ousting the Derg government of Mengistu Haile mariam. Even in this simple goal, the two, in many occasions, contradicted policy wise and undermined each other militarily.

One of the grave holdups between the two organizations came to public notice during the 1984-1985 catastrophes, when hundreds of thousands were starving in the northern provinces of Ethiopia including Tigray, Wollo and Northern Shoa. In this incident, the EPLF denied the TPLF access to food aid through Sudan. This heartrending experience caused pandemonium within the TPLF fighters, abhorred the EPLF and demanded the leadership to take an immediate retaliation. Nonetheless, Meles Zenawi, as one of the few logicians Africa had, requested a joint meeting to be held in order to normalize the relations for the sake of the cooperation against the Derg (The Economist, 2007)

Instead of retaliation he renewed friendship with the EPLF and offered them support in Nakfa war in which without the TPLF the EPLF would be annihilated by the Derg regime. In fact as early as in the late 1970s TPLF maintained the support of the EPLF. In March 2, 1978 the official party program of the TPLF declared that: 1. Eritrea is under the colonial rule of Ethiopia. Thus, the Eritrean question is colonial. 2. The TPLF fully supports the struggle of the Eritrean people against the colonial rule of Ethiopia. 3. The TPLF condemns the repression of the Eritrean people by the fascist government of Ethiopia. 4. We endeavor to work together for cementing the revolutions in Tigray and Eritrea. Therefore, TPLF's relation with EPLF was mostly cordial with frequent common military operations against the then Ethiopian regime; although at times things were not as smooth as both sides expected.

### **3. The Epicenter of the Conflict: Border Contention**

Historically, the border issue between the two nations has been notorious and contentious. Colonial lines, ethnicity and territorial disputes are all factors interplay in the border question. Cohabitation and conflict between the two countries based on border lines is not new as both Ethiopia and Eritrea are configuration of ethnic entities of the same origin. In 1889, Emperor Menelik, an Amhara monarch shifted the center of power from Tigray based to move power to further south; in the process Menelik incorporated and assimilated Eritrea. However, what gave Eritrea its distinctiveness is that during the colonial rule in Ethiopia, Eritrea was ceded to the Italians, this has given the Eritreans a sense of self which later help to further butter their nationalist sentiments in their endeavor to obtain nationhood (Abbink, 1998).

Eritrea, however remained under the Ethiopian rule both during the Emperor Haile Selassie and during the military rule of Mengistu, but the struggle to overthrow these regimes continuous and Mengistu regime fell in 1991. The TPLF marched to Addis Ababa while the EPLF captured Asmara. At this juncture, the TPLF adopted ethnic based federalism in Ethiopia and without prober plan accepted the independence of Eritrea as proclaimed by the EPLF without working out a program to ensure border dispute, overlapping population and other related issues.

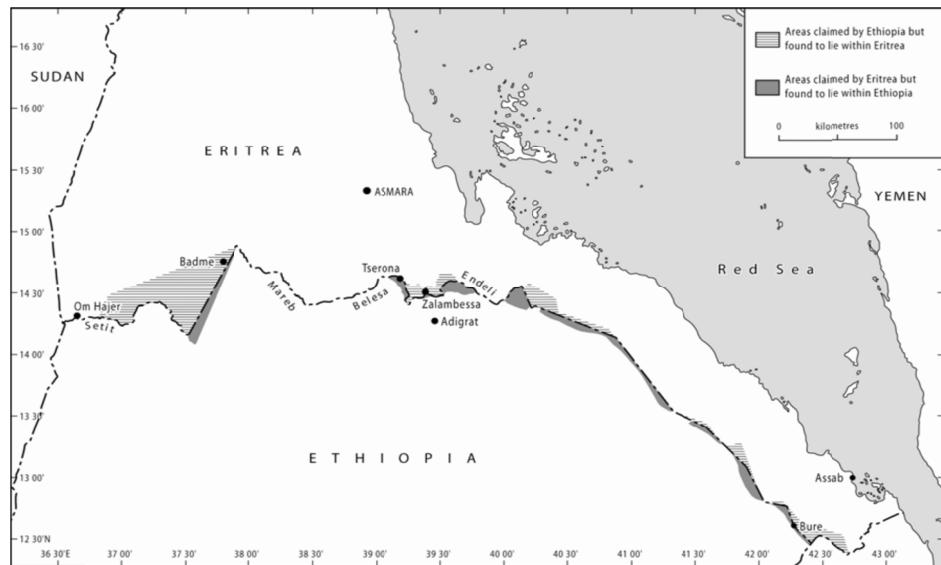


Figure 2. Ethiopia and Eritrea Border line

Source: UN

In mid 1997 Eritrea became suspicious and alleged that Ethiopian battalions invaded Dada and Badme. By this time both Ethiopia and Eritrea have dramatically redrew administrative divisions on the undefined border. In fact, this attitude which is part of the African political war oriented attitude has raised concern both in the level of the international community and on the regional level. This behavior of expansionism and encroachment has led to the most wars in East Africa. To make things worse the Tigray political apparatus redraw a map of the area incorporating parts of Eritrea into Tigray territory an action which infuriated the Eritreans. This had historical implications, as the Eritreans smell the return of colonist dream of a Greater Tigray. As the tension was getting high the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) formed Eritrea-Ethiopia Joint Commission to propose measures of solution and address the detail of the concerns of both parties. However, due to the inherent historical animosity these efforts have failed to avert the devastating two-year war between 1998-2000, which obviously, caused the loss of millions of lives and ruin the infrastructure of both nations. It is remarkable to observe that the borders of these two countries were always indistinct and fuzzy (Abbink, 2003). As mentioned, treaties between the Italian and British colonials and Ethiopian emperors made territorial arrangements but made things worse during the Italian occupation of Eritrea in 1890 and of Ethiopia in 1935. In fact, after the Italian occupation of Eritrea in 1890, the frontier was loosely based on the Mereb-Belesa-Muna Rivers. This is mentioned, in explicit terms, the treaties of 1900 and 1902 (The Washington Post, 1998).

In 1935, the border has changed again incorporating the whole of Eritrea in the north of Ethiopia. The intention was good at least in the mind of the colonials as they wanted to bring Tigrayans together. Nonetheless, after the defeat of Italy in World War II, the British took over both territories in 1941 and redrew the frontiers. In 1952 the Allied powers handed Eritrea over to Ethiopia in a system of federation which allowed autonomy. Soon after, the Ethiopia government dissolved the federation and forced Eritrea into a unified system of government within Ethiopia, this however, encouraged revolts in both Eritrea and Ogaden region as well as other regions such as Bale.

In an African approach these political discontents were brutally suppressed but it has only strengthened resistance and resulted in the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). As mentioned in other sections of this paper, other non-Amhara ethnic groups including Oromos, Tigrayans and Ogadens joined the fray making Ethiopia ungovernable over three decades. The aforementioned historical outline is an imperative background for the border tension which developed between 1995 and until the beginning of the war in 1998.

It could be said that, the release of a map in October 1997 by Ethiopia redefining border lines and the skirmish between Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers over disputed border, including Badme led to a full-blown two-year conflict which could be easily avoided. Badme, the epicenter of the conflict, was administratively and economically part of Ethiopia prior to the war; using the Ethiopian currency and its populace fully involved in Ethiopian politics. Eritreans nonetheless, disputed on the ground that, the colonial treaties located the town

within the borders of Eritrea. It is hilarious that late Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi, and President Isaias Afewerki, cooperated closely to overthrow the brutal Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime in 1991 and have full experience of the consequences of war and its devastating impact. At the same time went to this meaningless war and led poor fellow citizens to more suffering. The UN-monitored referendum in which Eritreans voted overwhelmingly for independence was accepted by Ethiopia; but when the war broke out both regimes presented unconditional goals and repudiated concession on territoriality, legitimacy and identity. Note that, both leaders had bottomless personal animosity and that was the main *raison d'être* of the war; the same reason made compromise and de-escalation intricate (Guazzini, 2002).

The occupation of Eritrean armed forces in the disputed Badme, in May 1998, was provocative on the part of President Isaias. In response, Meles regarded this as an illegal territorial annexation. An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 people were killed, one million were displaced for no good reason to war. Both late Meles and Isaias are war criminals. To further devastate the area, in May 2000 Meles launched a major offensive and forced Eritrea to pull its troops back to pre-May 1998 positions. In December 2000, the militaristic war mongers, Meles and Isaias, were forced to sign an agreement brokered by the international community in Algiers.

#### **4. International Intervention on Eritrea-Ethiopia Confrontation**

In the last decade the interest of the international community in the Horn of Africa has increased due to the humanitarian emergencies, border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the failed state in Somalia, the political crisis following the 2005 elections in Ethiopia, and the presence of al-Qaeda linked groups in the Horn. What the international community does not have however, is continued responsive action-plan and articulate diplomatic strategies which is able to diagnose the problem and provide suitable dynamic solutions.

Therefore, it could be argued that the international community has failed to prevent the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia as it paid too little attention to the conflict in its earlier stage. Later when the United Nation Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was deployed along the border, the cease-fire held, and the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) held its hearings and made its demarcation decision in 2002. At this juncture, the international community failed to impulse Ethiopia to accept demarcation. It took Asmara to impose contemptible restrictions on UNMEE for the international community to take action on the issue. Meanwhile, the international community should strengthen the activities of UNMEE (Security Council, 2008).

After two years of border dispute and catastrophic conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the AU, in June 2000, managed to bring the two nations to the discussion table to sign a ceasefire agreement in Algeria. The function of UNMEE is to maintain liaison with both nations and to uphold the ceasefire. However, Ethiopia dragged its leg on the legally binding agreement in Algiers. Ethiopia was of the opinion that it could avoid implementing the agreement an attitude that heightened Eritrea's frustrations. At this juncture, the international community including the African Union, the European Union, the UN, Algeria, and the United States met in New York in February 2006 to find ways of implementing the peace accord. The accord was adopted by the EEBC in its ruling on border demarcation. In fact, the EEBC in its ruling awarded Badme the main area in the disputed vicinities to Eritrea although for years the impression on the part of the Ethiopians was that Badme is within the border of Ethiopia (Zane, 2003).

The EEBC also exposed Ethiopia publicly in its ruling and directly accused the government of Ethiopia of deception and manipulation of both international communities and its own people. The ruling was made by the EEBC on April 13th 2002 for immediate implementation. The EEBC later met in London with representatives from these two authoritarian war-mongering regimes. But both failed to ratify the details of the demarcation agreement. Eritrea had no problem with the accord initially, but it imposed restrictions on the UNMEE and both sides accused each other, a typical African political behaviour, therefore the stalemate continues. Later, the UN Security Council called again on both sides and extended the UNMEE mandate to January 31<sup>st</sup> 2007.

In general the UN-sponsored initiatives have been intense across the borders in the large effort to introduce democratic solutions to the crisis. However, this effort was exposed to numerous challenges and series of threats which was detrimental to the ongoing work of arbitration. Despite its daunting task, the international community continues to support peace process, and proposed working solutions to the crisis, fighting against autocratic regimes, and reconciling the dispute.

In 2008, the UN Security Council resolutely issued a mandate that urge both the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments to end the conflict and called on the two sides to cooperate fully with the world body in the process of liquidating the cooperation. The Security Council had also at the same time, terminated the mandate of the eight-year-old peacekeeping force monitoring the border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea. It also requested UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to explore further with the two Horn of Africa countries the possibility of a

United Nations presence in the area, and demanded that Ethiopia and Eritrea comply fully with their obligations under the Algiers Agreements, “to show maximum restraint and refrain from any threat or use of force against each other, and to avoid provocative military activities” (Security Council 2008). The Council emphasized the fundamental Ethiopia’s and Eritrea’s obligations under the Algiers accords, by which both countries agreed that the delimitation and demarcation determinations of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission would be final and binding, and that their respective forces would respect the integrity of the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) (United Nations Statistic Divisions, 2011).

Similarly, the border demarcation agreement was developed to effect long-term and lasting peace for the two countries. The agreement was fundamental to end the hostilities and geared wholesome and sustainable framework for peace in the region. The peace agreement process had been significantly and meaningfully initiated to spearhead border demarcation process acceptable by both parties. However, the meaningful result and satisfaction in the context of technical and political terms still remains uncertain. The future undertaking of the international community is to reconcile the claim of the two countries over the border demarcation.

The international community also looked at issues related to human rights. It established human rights office in May 2001 to address the concerns. The human rights office is an essential part of the UNMEE’s mission to monitor the human rights situation and reporting on the development of crisis and providing technical cooperation.

### **5. Concluding Remarks**

The Eritrean and Ethiopian conflict raises definite concern on the future of East Africa and the role of the international community to settle disputes in Africa. The international community must work to further facilitate peace negotiations and supervise peacekeeping process in the region. The failure of one intervention or mission should not hinder the effort to frame alternative approach and persuasion in settling unresolved disputes and hostilities between nations in Africa. As a matter of fact, this conflict has exacerbated governance, health, and humanitarian problems, and set back international efforts to fight against extreme groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia.

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