

Public Seminar
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Eritrea-Ethiopia: A Precarious Peace

Thank you, Chair,

Good evening, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fellow compatriots, brothers and sisters from our region of the Horn and other parts of Africa,
Let me begin by thanking Tempo Afric for organising this public seminar.

I am pleased to share with you my perspective on the precarious peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. I will start with the historical context and present a general overview of (1) the boundary question in Africa; (2) the Ethiopia-Eritrea boundary conflict and (3) the way forward to durable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This will be followed by in open discussion.

The Historical Context

Eritrea and Ethiopia have an old, pervasive and problematic relationship burdened by a difficult narrative of conquest, war and conflict, often impacted by the intricacies of shared ethnic and cultural affinity straddling the common border. At the core of this problematic relationship lies a longstanding antagonism between legitimate Eritrean aspirations for self-determination, on the one hand, and expansionist Ethiopian ambitions for territorial aggrandisement, on the other. The two peoples are closely bound by cultural affinity and economic and strategic interests. The multiple pillars of this relationship bear the potential to serve as levers of durable political cooperation, drivers of economic integration, and anchors of regional peace and security.

Let me feature two factors, one historical and the other contemporary, to help shed light on the intricacies and potentials of the Ethio-Eritrean relationship. These are (1) divergent narrations of history and (2) a flawed relationship.

(1) Divergent Narrations of History

Narratives have the power to shape a people's mindset and change the course of history. A cursory review of the literature reveals that Eritrean and Ethiopian narratives render contentious, *polemical* and often *polarised* accounts of the precolonial relationship between

Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian narrative uses pre-colonial history to claim *3,000 years of independence* and historical control over Eritrea and the Red Sea coast, while the Eritrean narrative uses the same pre-colonial history to challenge this *claim* and prove the long-standing *independence* of the region of modern Eritrea. Neither narrative holds water.

The ancient Kingdom of Aksum that flourished in today's Eritrea and north Ethiopia declined at the close of the 1st Millennium. Having retreated from the coast and fragmented under rival fiefdoms in their highland bastions, the Abyssinians were cut off from the Red Sea for nearly a thousand years. The rival fiefdoms expanded or contracted on account of their relative balance of forces. Abyssinia was at no time prior to the European colonial scramble for Africa during the last quarter of the 19th century in control of the entire territory of modern Eritrea or contemporary Ethiopia. Nor was Eritrea an integral part of Ethiopia, as the two countries did not exist as such during the pre-colonial history of the region.

During the advent of the European scramble for Africa, resurgent Abyssinia was both a victim of colonial aggression and a perpetrator of territorial expansion. Having thwarted Italian invasion in 1896, it expanded through wars of conquest in collusion and rivalry with the European colonial powers to occupy and subjugate adjacent territories and assume its present formation. Menelik adroitly exploited European rivalry and ambitions in the region to secure diplomatic recognition, procure modern arms and acquire territories. He invaded and annexed Oromia, Harar, Wellega, Wellamo, Jimma, Kaffa, and Gomma. The European scramble for Africa coincided with the emergence, territorial expansion, and political consolidation of the Abyssinian Empire.

In brief, modern Eritrea constituted the core of the Aksumite Kingdom. The collapse of Aksum, however, irrevocably severed the territory of Eritrea *per se* from any enduring association with the political entities that periodically sprang up, thrived or declined to its south, including Tigray with which the Central Plateau shares close ethnic, linguistic, and cultural affinity. In the main and for the most part, Eritrea remained a fragmented region, often partly autonomous and partly dominated. Legend aside, the Eritrean Red Sea coast had existed independent of Abyssinia or Ethiopia from the fall of Aksum to the late 20th century, as a region of contention or a battleground of rival foreign forces.

On balance, therefore, the historical record contests the Ethiopian claim of control and the Eritrean assertion of independence as untenable. For no state prior to the 1890s resembled the entities called Ethiopia and Eritrea today. The colonial narrative may deny, but cannot negate,

the existence of an autonomous Eritrean history, an indigenous Eritrean culture and a common psychological makeup of Eritrea as a shared homeland of the Eritrean people. In brief, the region's pre-colonial history cannot undo the reality of a well-developed and distinctive Eritrean national identity, detract from the legitimacy of the case for Eritrean independence, or undermine the authenticity of modern Eritrean statehood. After all, the modern states of Africa, including Eritrea and Ethiopia, are products of the European colonial project.

(2) A Flawed Relationship

The liberation of Eritrea and the overthrow of the Derg in May 1991 installed the EPLF and the EPRDF in power in Asmara and Addis Ababa, respectively. The ascent of the wartime allies to state power heralded the apparent resolution of the historical antagonism and the advent of a new era of durable peace between a free Eritrea and a democratic Ethiopia. The independence of Eritrea dissolved the forced union between Eritrea and Ethiopia and created two sovereign states. The peaceful accommodation of this reality required Asmara and Addis Ababa to agree on a set of political, economic, and trade arrangements to enable a stable transition to a cordial relationship. Furthermore, they needed to institutionalise and broaden their bilateral relations at the levels of State, government, Front, civil society, and people. Such measures would have reinforced the apparent reserve of political will to overcome the residual inertia of a contentious historical narrative and expedient alliance and helped sustain friendly relations, close cooperation, and durable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Eritrea and Ethiopia maintained cordial relations during the seven years of peace between the liberation of Eritrea in May 1991 and the outbreak of hostilities in May 1998. They established joint commissions and signed several agreements, including a mutual defence pact, to promote closer cooperation in the political, security, economic, trade, and social spheres. They started initiatives to coordinate foreign policy and diplomatic action on major regional issues, such as the crisis in Somalia, the threat of militant political Islam in Sudan, and the revitalisation of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

The new relationship held great promise and generated high hopes that Ethiopia and Eritrea, having finally secured the peace, could serve as a nucleus for political cooperation and economic integration among the states of the HoA. Belying the outward manifestations of a close cooperative relationship, however, was an undercurrent of latent discord over several crucial issues. These issues included different visions of state construction, divergent policies

of national development, disagreement over trade finance, and trouble in the borderlands. These issues of discord were not a problem *per se*. Rather, the problem lay in the nature of the relationship between the two states and the absence of institutional means to address them.

Eritrea-Ethiopia relations were managed at the top, confined to the leaders of the EPLF and the TPLF. Affairs of state were personalised while the mandated state or government institutions were marginalised. The arrangement worked well when personal relations between the two leaders were good. When their personal relations turned sour, however, things went wrong. When the push came to shove, brinkmanship came to the fore and took over. The absence of wise leadership and prudent statesmanship led to the outbreak of war. Once joined, both sides used territorial sovereignty as the trigger and the *casus belli* for the border war.

1. The Boundary Question in Africa

The boundary question in Africa has been at the forefront of the continent's post-independence concerns. The concept of a fixed, stable and internationally recognised boundary in modern Africa is a European construct implanted on African soil as a result of the territorial partition and colonial conquest of the continent. European colonial powers partitioned, carved up and forged the modern nation states of Africa. The new state frontiers were drawn in a haphazard manner without regard to the interests and customary relations of the affected populations and, often, artificially split same communities into two or three different colonial systems.

Upon its creation in 1963, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) adopted the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, the sanctity of state borders existing at the time of accession to independence. The 1964 Cairo Resolution aimed to preserve the colonial legacy of the Westphalian state system and its fragmentation of the continent. On succeeding the OAU, the African Union (AU) upheld the sanctity of colonial borders.

On the other hand, Pan-Africanists have argued for the redrawing of Africa's colonial borders in favour of the political union of Africa. In the words of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2005: 162):

There is no rational basis other than convenience for regarding colonial boundaries as sacrosanct and by implication the residents of either side of the colonial border as foreigners. These borders were historically constituted, markers of European memory on Africa, to meet colonial needs, and there is no reason why they cannot be historically reconstituted to meet African needs and reconnect with African memory.

Pan-Africanism continues to advocate for (1) the economic integration and political union of Africa; (2) greater solidarity among Africans to overcome the debilitating effects of foreign domination and culture of dependency on external assistance; and (3) self-reliance to achieve real self-determination, sustainable development and prosperity of Africans.

Although *uti possidetis juris* has gained universal legitimacy as an international and continental norm sanctifying the preservation of colonial borders inherited at independence, territorial claims between states, often protracted and militarised, have challenged the stability of the post-independence territorial *status quo* in Africa and undermined the prospects for postcolonial solidarity among independent states (Hensel, Allison & Khanani, 2004).

Moreover, the adoption of *uti possidetis juris* and declarations of adherence to the principle have generated neither universal respect for the delimitation of the borders existing at the time of accession to independence nor the physical demarcation of interstate boundaries in Africa. The lack of reciprocal recognition of the exact limits of the common border or the absence of visible boundary markers on the ground has allowed recurrent territorial disputes and boundary conflicts in a continent where roughly two-thirds of the land boundaries remain physically undemarcated, even in cases where there exist no territorial disputes (AUBP Survey, 2011).

Modern Africa's interstate borders remain significant factors affecting the continent's peace, security and sustainable development. The Eritrea-Ethiopia boundary conflict is a case in point.

2. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Conflict

Eritrea and Ethiopia, like most African states, owe their constructions, geopolitical formations and respective international boundaries to imperial division, conquest and partition of territory. The international boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia was clearly delineated by three treaties signed between Italy and Ethiopia in 1900, 1902 and 1908. The three colonial treaties define three sectors of the entire 1,000 Km-long Eritrea-Ethiopia boundary, tracing it along river beds and geometric coordinates. Thus, the Eritrea-Ethiopia colonial treaty border is one of the most clearly defined boundaries anywhere in Africa.

Thus delimited, the international border separating Eritrea and Ethiopia held untouched for an entire century. The historical colonial treaty border had remained remarkably stable, from Eritrea's birth as a colony in 1890 until Ethiopia's unilateral redrawing of the boundary in 1997, whence it became a subject of precipitous inter-front dispute. Otherwise, Eritrea had retained the integrity of its territory and the configuration of its boundary as defined by the

colonial treaties. The boundary enjoyed formal international status, both *de jure* and *de facto*, during the periods of Eritrea's Italian colonial rule (1890-1941), British military occupation (1941-1952) and federation with Ethiopia (1952-1962). Even when it became *de facto* an internal border during the period between Ethiopian annexation in 1962 and Eritrean liberation in 1991, it retained its *de jure* international status.

The stable international status of the colonial treaty border was sanctioned by the 1950 UN Federal Resolution and Eritrea's declaration of sovereign independence. The *de facto* dissolution of the Ethiopian Empire State in 1991 resulted in the separation of Eritrea and Ethiopia and Eritrea's accession to *de jure* independence in 1993, with its colonial borders intact. The independence of Eritrea confirmed the OAU and AU principle, policy and practice of the intangibility or sanctity of colonial borders inherited at independence.

Ethiopia's redrawing of the boundary happened four years after the independence of Eritrea. The Tigray Regional State produced, with the assistance of the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ, now GIZ), a map of Tigray Administrative Zone¹ which unilaterally redrew the historical colonial treaty border. The map, replicated in the new map of Ethiopia issued by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority and embossed in the new Ethiopian currency, altered Eritrea's international boundary with Ethiopia for the first time in a century (Splinter, 1998, 245-272). It served as a blueprint to encroach on hitherto uncontested swathes of Eritrean territory, dismantle Eritrean administrative structures, expel Eritrean citizens and establish Tigrayan authority over the newly incorporated swathes of Eritrean territory.

This led to the displacement of people in the affected frontier regions and the destabilisation of the borderlands. Inability to defuse the resultant tension and resolve the issue through bilateral consultations or negotiation eventually prompted the outbreak of hostilities between Eritrea and Ethiopia and led to all-out war. As international mediation efforts by friendly third parties (US, US-Rwanda, Djibouti, OAU) were unable to stem the escalation of hostilities, the two neighbours fought an unnecessary, avoidable and destructive war (1998-2000).

The Algiers Agreement ended the war and committed the two states to settle their boundary dispute through *final and binding arbitration* in accordance with the colonial treaties and applicable international law. A neutral body, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), delimited and set out to physically demarcate the boundary. Following five years of

¹ Weyn (ወይን), 1997, official organ of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Ethiopian obstruction (12 April 2002 - 30 November 2007), the Boundary Commission declared the virtual demarcation of the boundary. Ethiopia's refusal to accept and implement the Boundary Commission's delimitation and demarcation decisions resulted in the state of *no peace, no war* that came to an end with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's declaration of Ethiopia's unconditional acceptance and readiness to implement the EEBC decisions a year ago.

3. The Way Forward

This time last year, we witnessed three sudden developments in the Horn of Africa: (1) the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia (2) the lifting of the UN sanctions on Eritrea; and (3) the signing of the tripartite agreement between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia.

There were high hopes and great expectations that the era of bitter hostility and frozen conflict ([link](#)) between Eritrea and Ethiopia would come to an end and the process of healing the wounds of an unnecessary, avoidable and destructive war would begin. That reconciliation between the two countries would help promote peace, security and stability in the Horn of Africa. And that stable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia would create a conducive climate for a new relationship of political and economic cooperation in the region.

We are well aware that the tentacles of the conflict system in the highly strategic but extremely volatile region of the HoA extend to the adjacent Red Sea Basin and the Nile River Basin. The HoA is home to fragile states and dysfunctional regimes. It is a region known for its turbulence, democratic deficit and malgovernance.

The HoA and the Red Sea Basin host the active military or naval presence and geopolitical rivalry of several world powers. The former US preoccupation with the so-called *war on terror* has given way to an increasing Sino-American competition for bases, ports and access to resources, markets and investment opportunities. There prevails a precarious alignment of forces and a constantly shifting mix of regional and international alliances.

In Eritrea, a brutal regime has brought about economic ruin, political paralysis and societal disintegration, turning the country into an earthly inferno. Ethiopia is facing the pains and pangs of transition. Conflict prevails within and between regional states, fanning inter-ethnic strife and internal displacement. Structural instability looms large, with no clear strategy or national consensus on the way forward.

Beyond Eritrea and Ethiopia, the standoff between Eritrea and Djibouti remains unresolved. Somalia has yet to exercise central authority over its entire national territory. Civil war and

internecine killings have badly scarred South Sudan. The popular resistance movement in Sudan is facing serious challenges.

It is against the backdrop of this geopolitical context that we must take stock of the evolution of events on the ground in the HoA over the past year. The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia has apparently turned into a mirage. Neither the demarcation of the boundary nor the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from occupied Eritrean territory has taken place. The four border crossings reopened between the two countries with a lot of fanfare have been abruptly closed. The Ethio-Eritrean Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship and the Tripartite Agreement between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia remain mere ink on paper.

So, a year on, it seems that we are still on square one. No definitive steps have been taken to address the underlying sources of the conflict or resolve the issue of the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The *status quo* demonstrates the unabated volatility of the region as well as the precarious nature of the peace and overall relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Durable peace demands that Ethiopia and Eritrea normalise and institutionalise their interstate relations. Once transparent state to state relations are set, all outstanding issues between the two countries can be resolved peacefully through bilateral consultation, negotiation, mediation, arbitration or adjudication. First and foremost, the boundary issue. In the context of cordial relations, it is possible to envisage a feasible solution. Given the sanctity of colonial borders, the restitution of the historical colonial treaty border, informed by consultations with panels of elders in the borderland populations, would avail a durable solution. As a source of livelihood and identity, land in Eritrea is ancestral. It belongs to the village, irrespective of whether it is privately or communally owned, and each village knows the limits of its land.

To sum up, it is increasingly clear that authoritarian rule in Eritrea is untenable, instability in Ethiopia is dire and peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia is precarious. Durable peace and viable cooperation require a transformed Eritrea and a stabilised Ethiopia, with both states committed to democratic governance and inclusive development. I dare envision the evolution of a new relationship built on common strategic interests and shared values of a future of peace, progress and prosperity for Eritrea, Ethiopia and the region at large.

Thank you for your kind attention.