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Commentary

Challenges of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Eritrea-Ethiopia relations has, within a span of barely six weeks between 5 June and 16 July 2018, witnessed an abrupt and drastic change from a protracted state of bitter hostility into a state of overzealous peace and friendship. This is the outcome of a series of sudden and dramatic events:

- Ethiopia's declaration of unconditional acceptance and implementation of the demarcation of the boundary on 5 June 2018;
- Eritrea's positive response on 20 June 2018;
- A high-level Eritrean delegation's visit to Ethiopia on 26-28 June 2018;
- Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's visit to Eritrea on 8-9 July 2018;
- The signing of a [*Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship*](#) between Eritrea and Ethiopia on 9 July 2018; and
- President Isaias Afwerki' visit to Ethiopia on 14-16 July 2018.

The rapidly unfolding chain of events illustrates a case of *decades where nothing happened, and weeks when decades happened*. The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia represents the jewel in the crown of these significant developments. It puts an end to the state of war between the two countries and commits them to forge close political, social, cultural and security cooperation; resume transport, communication and trade links and diplomatic ties; implement the decision on the boundary; and endeavour to ensure regional peace, development and cooperation.

This landmark Joint Declaration concludes two decades of a particularly destructive, ugly and bitter chapter in the history of relations between the two neighbouring countries:

- the politics of senseless war and hostility;
- the tragedy of mass deportations and population displacements;
- the confiscation of Eritrean capital and property in Ethiopia;
- the malevolence of a 'lose-lose' relationship; and
- the huge lost opportunity for economic development, social progress and human welfare of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples.

The end of the state of war, the resolution of the boundary conflict, the normalisation of bilateral relations, and the promise of close political, social, cultural and security cooperation augur well for a durable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as for the prospects of peace, security, stability and regional cooperation in the Horn of Africa. The new relationship paves the way for steps to [*lift the sanctions against Eritrea*](#) and allow Eritrea to resume membership and play its role in the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

Eri-Platform warmly welcomes the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, in principle. This is because the Eritrean people have a profound yearning for a long-denied stable peace. Nevertheless, we find the vindictive mindset manifested in Asmera prior to its signing and the theatrics, devoid of normal protocol, indicative of betrayal of national sovereignty and full of insult to the State and people of Eritrea, that followed it in

Addis Ababa and Hawassa of grave concern and extremely unsettling for all patriotic Eritreans. National duty thus obliges us to issue the following cautionary note with regards to the practical implementation and implications of the five points of the Joint Declaration:

1. Viable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia should also translate into durable peace and real human security within both Eritrea and Ethiopia. The ongoing bloody ethnic strife and instigation of hate speech in certain regions of Ethiopia must be made to stop. The general state of insecurity perpetrated by brutal repression, arbitrary arrests, indefinite detention and endless active national service in Eritrea must come to an end. There is a paramount need to exercise wise statesmanship that aims to rectify the wrongs and heal the wounds of the past. The pursuit of viable peace requires forward-looking leadership to lay a new foundation for a peaceful future. The process of securing durable peace and the enjoyment of the fruits thereof should be inclusive and engage, at a minimum, the main political actors and stakeholders in both countries. An attempt to exclude or marginalise any significant political actor(s) would be unwise. It could even prove counter-productive, unravelling the progress made and potentially provoking new intrastate warfare with the consequences thereof reverberating across the whole Horn of Africa region.

2. The forging of mutually beneficial intimate political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation that serves and advances the vital interests of the two peoples would require a level playing field in these spheres of activity in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. While there exist considerable similarities in the general condition of the two countries, there also exist significant disparities in technical and professional capacity as well as differences in the state of play in certain specific sectors that would cause substantially disproportionate benefits accruing to the two countries and peoples from close bilateral cooperation in the various specified areas. Eritrea's is a closed polity, economy and society reeling under the monopoly of a defunct ruling Front and the command of an impulsive authoritarian ruler. This means Eritrea's commitment to the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship is precariously and solely reliant on the whim and interest of president Isaias Afwerki, in contrast to Ethiopia's commitment endorsed by the ruling EPRDF Executive Committee and national parliament.

Furthermore, most of the leaders and cadres in the *who is who* catalogue of capable veterans of Eritrea's war of national independence as well as Eritrea's intellectual and business elites are either in jail or in exile. Post-independence, the regime's trivialisation of education has denied generations of Eritrean youth the opportunity to actualise their potential and prepare for effective public service or gainful private employment. These factors have caused the country to suffer from an acute shortage of competent personnel in all areas of endeavour and at all levels of government and business.

Beyond the crucial absence of the rule of law and good governance, Eritrea lacks even a nominal parliament and functional institutions in both the public and private domains. Its economy is in shambles with no transparency and accountability of public finances or knowledge of the whereabouts of the revenues from, for instance, the highly lucrative mining sector. Constant harassment, arbitrary detentions, withdrawal of licenses and closure of businesses have forced most of its professional and entrepreneurial class out of the country. This stark reality places the State of Eritrea, the Eritrean people, the Eritrean government and Eritrean entrepreneurs at a huge disadvantage vis-à-vis their relatively better positioned Ethiopian counterparts. There is thus an urgent need to lift the prevailing state of economic suffocation, political paralysis and societal disruption to enable the State of Eritrea, the Eritrean

people and Eritrean enterprise to reap comparable benefits from close political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation with Ethiopia.

3. The normalisation of bilateral relations; the restoration of diplomatic ties; and the resumption of transport, trade and communications links signify an important development and new opportunities. However, the Eritrean people continue to suffer from food rationing, chronic water shortages, constant electric power stoppages and inadequate transport facilities. Reaping mutual benefit from the resumption of transport, trade and communications links with Ethiopia would thus require opening the services, commerce and industry to the private sector and overhauling Eritrea's ruined physical infrastructure to improve transport and communications facilities and ensure adequate supplies of energy and water. In short, the Eritrean people must be the direct beneficiaries!

4. The implementation of the decision on the boundary would serve as the bedrock of all relations, including close political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation, between two sovereign states of Eritrea and Ethiopia. The concept of a boundary is an essential feature of the contemporary international system of relations among nations. A clearly demarcated boundary would thus define the national identity or the nationality and citizenship of Eritreans and Ethiopians in the adjoining borderlands and delimit the areas of respective sovereign authority or domestic jurisdiction of each state. Otherwise, the claim that boundary has no significance can only be either ignorant or conspiratorial.

All boundaries among African states were arbitrarily defined by colonial treaties. As such, the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia was [delimited by the colonial treaties of 1900, 1902 and 1908](#), making use of geographic markers and geometric coordinates. The people in the borderlands on both sides have known, recognised and respected the precise location of the common border. Indeed, the colonial treaty border had remained the *de jure* and *de facto* international boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia for nearly an entire century. Ethiopia had neither contested nor altered the colonial treaty border. It was only in 1997 that it was unilaterally redrawn to incorporate large swathes of Eritrean territory in the western, central and eastern sectors into an expanded Tigray Regional State.

There exists a principle of customary international law that serves to preserve the boundaries of colonies emerging as States. Initially applied to establish the boundaries of decolonized territories in Latin America, *uti possidetis juris* has evolved into a norm, notably in Africa. The principle affirms the intangibility of borders existing at the time of accession to independence. It is duly enshrined in the OAU Charter (1963), the OAU Cairo Resolution (1964) and the AU Constitutive Act (2000). Both the OAU and the AU have consistently upheld the sanctity of colonial borders inherited on attainment of independence.

In giving due consideration to the boundary decision, a viable resolution of the boundary issue should thus be predicated on the preservation of the historical colonial treaty border in accordance with the principle of *uti possidetis juris* and in consultation with the borderland populations. Such a resolution would restore the pre-1997 *status quo ante* and keep the ancestral lands, nationality and citizenship of Eritreans and Ethiopians in the borderlands as well as the areas of respective domestic jurisdiction of each state unchanged, entailing minimal or no population displacement.

5. Upon securing peace and restoring normal relations, Eritrea and Ethiopia can focus their attention, effort and resources on addressing their domestic challenges of democratic

governance and inclusive development. Successful democratic transition and inclusive development in both countries would be the key to the future of their bilateral and regional relations. A new 'win-win' bilateral relationship can serve as a powerful impetus for regional peace, development and cooperation in the Horn of Africa.

If the process of regional political cooperation and economic integration spearheaded by a transformed Eritrea and Ethiopia is laid on a viable foundation and proceeds well, the present hard borders serving as barriers would turn into soft borders serving as bridges that connect. This, however, should be a gradual process predicated on reciprocal respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and entailing incremental steps agreed to with the active participation and express consent of the respective national populations.

Against this backdrop, the recent rapid transition from a state of war and rabid hostility to a declaration of peace and friendship is commendable. At the same time, the mix of a deafening frenzied call for *love and addition*, the hasty assertion of *one people*, and the repeatedly declared *granting of* (Eritrea's) *leadership and agency* to the prime minister of a newly befriended long hostile neighbour is, to put it mildly, bizarre and unsettling, especially given the history of Eritrea's struggle for self-determination. Unless we do our homework, move fast and seize our destiny into our own hands, it would be an easy step to move from the *fiction of one people to the myth of one country*, whose dire consequences we Eritreans (and Ethiopians alike) have paid for dearly in blood and sweat during three decades (1961-1991) of liberation war, an additional two years (1998-2000) of border war, and decades of ruthless repression and lost opportunity for development continuing to date. We can ill afford the luxury of denial or complacency. Let us wake up, before it becomes too late, to contain the tempest, defeat treason and prevent the history of the last 66 years from repeating itself!