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The Ethiopia-Eritrea dispute

The failure of Ethiopia and Eritrea to settle their differences is a serious setback to regional stability and the African renaissance. Nationalist calls on both sides make a lasting peace settlement unlikely. A return to heavy fighting will not produce a clear victor and will only exacerbate the poverty and underlying ethnic divisions in both states. Turning to Libya for support may be Eritrea's only hope of claiming its place within the regional alliance structure.

Analysis

The continuing stand-off between Ethiopia and Eritrea, following their short war in May-June this year, along with renewed fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), marks a heavy blow to the hopes of a new African alliance that was widely touted only a year or so ago. The breakdown of relations between these two key new African states is especially problematic for the United States (US), as it attempts to mobilise an alliance against the Islamic regime in Sudan in the wake of the East African embassy bombings. It is also something of an embarrassment to South African Vice-President and heir apparent **Thabo Mbeki**, who has signed up to much of the new African agenda with his idea of an African renaissance.

On the ground the situation has stabilised and no major fighting has been reported for nearly two months. Despite their much smaller size, the Eritrean military has always been the stronger of the two sides. They have retained control of the Badime frontier area — which they seized early in the fighting — and have rebuffed Ethiopian attacks elsewhere. The Ethiopians refuse to

negotiate while Eritrea occupies Ethiopian territory. Current mediation efforts are exploring the possibility of introducing a peacekeeping force under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which would save face on both sides by occupying the area and permitting talks to proceed. Despite their desperate poverty, both countries have been seeking to update their arsenals — the Eritreans largely from Eastern European sources (a Bulgarian aircraft crashed while landing at Asmara airport), the Ethiopians from the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The propaganda war between Eritrea and Ethiopia continues unabated. While propaganda for international consumption can be switched on and off at will, attempts by both governments to consolidate their domestic support are less easily manipulated. In Eritrea, this is a relatively simple matter of reviving the nationalist appeals of the long independence war against Ethiopia that ended in 1991. The country's sufferings during that war were so great, and relief at eventual peace so intense, that a return to war can only be

greeted with a very heavy heart and may lead to some withdrawal of support for **Isayas Afewerki's** government which has now engaged in armed conflict with every one of the country's neighbours even though it is under no immediate threat.

The position in Ethiopia is much more complex, since the government of **Meles Zenawi** came to power in close association with the Eritreans, and Meles himself had been regarded by some Ethiopians as little more than an Eritrean puppet. When the fighting broke out, his position, even within his own government, appears to have been under threat. He has now recovered, but only at the cost of promoting a strident Ethiopian nationalism which is all too reminiscent of the closing years of the **Mengistu Haile-Mariam** regime, which Meles himself overthrew in 1991.

The conflict has also revealed that even the leverage of the United States is limited. An early peace plan, promoted by what one Rwandan official described, perhaps only half jokingly, as "the two regional superpowers — Rwanda and the United States", was rebuffed. **Isayas Afewerki** appears to have been especially affronted at being asked to negotiate with **Susan Rice**, the thirty-four year-old, black American Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Despite Eritrean claims of gender equality during the liberation war, sexist attitudes run deep. Although the Americans claim to remain neutral between the two countries, the Eritrean government clearly believes that they have come down on the Ethiopian side. Nothing else could account for **Isayas'** recent visit, with a heavyweight delegation, to Libya. For the US, leaning toward Ethiopia

makes a lot of sense, not least since Eritrea (always difficult to deal with) has turned itself into a regional pariah. Ethiopia also makes a better base from which to destabilise Sudan. The new African alliance has collapsed.

Likely Scenarios

Neither country has the military, economic or diplomatic resources required to maintain a major war. Though the Ethiopians would dearly love to take over the Eritrean Red Sea port of Assab, which serves only as a conduit to Ethiopia and is virtually cut off from the rest of Eritrea, it is unlikely that they could manage this. Even if no lasting settlement is reached, only relatively minor skirmishes are likely.

"An Ethiopian conquest of Eritrea is inconceivable"

Foreign-led settlement

By far the most likely short-term scenario is that some kind of settlement will be patched up, if only with bad grace, and with considerable leverage by foreign states (especially the US and its African allies) on either side.

Heavy fighting continues

Further heavy fighting is not impossible. The leaders on both sides are not only stubborn, but have got where they are today by fighting for years against apparently impossible odds. Such fighting, however, could hardly lead to a clear-cut victory on either side, and would almost certainly end in stalemate. An Ethiopian conquest of Eritrea is inconceivable. The previous Ethiopian regime failed to hold it, despite a much stronger central government and unlimited Soviet support. Scarcely more conceivable is that the Eritreans could reach Addis Ababa, leaving supply lines through the present Ethiopian government's area of core support in Tigray vulnerable.

Collapse of domestic support

A third scenario, that the regime on either side might fall as a result of domestic pressures intensified by war, is improbable in the short-term. For the moment, at least, each leader's domestic power base is strengthened by the confrontation. Meles, appreciably the weaker of the two in domestic terms, has weathered the initial crisis, while Isayas retains an autocratic grip on Eritrean domestic politics.

In the longer term, both countries can only suffer from the stupidity of governments on both sides that has allowed the conflict to reach its current state of crisis. Even if an immediate settlement is negotiated without further violence, however, the close alliance between the two former partners can never be restored. Though both states remain deeply suspicious of the Islamic government in Sudan, it will be difficult for them to retain a common front of support for the Sudanese opposition. Support for rival movements is not unlikely, with the Ethiopians allying themselves with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and the Eritreans with the northern opposition. Lending assistance to rival sides in the Congo civil war is also to be expected, though neither country can spare troops or weapons for a war far from home.

The attractiveness of either state to foreign investors is already low and can only decline

further, with Eritrea — by far the smaller and more vulnerable of the two — likely to suffer most. As Ethiopian goods are now re-routed through Djibouti and the northern Somali ports, Ethiopia has lost the transit trade which formed a major source of income. It has also been left with a domestic currency, the Nakfa, which is virtually valueless. Some transit trade will doubtless be restored, but overall economic prospects are grim.

“Both Ethiopia and Eritrea have deep underlying fissures which are certain to be strained by political crisis and economic failure”

While the immediate result of conflict is to reinforce national unity in each state, both Ethiopia and Eritrea have deep underlying fissures which are certain to be strained by political crisis and economic failure. Ethiopia is already struggling to contain its divisions within a federal system which ostensibly allows self-government to each ethnic group, but is actually subject to increasingly repressive central control.

Eritrea, despite its continuing military strength, remains a very poor and potentially divided country (its population being roughly half Christian and half Moslem), within a highly unstable region. Caught between an Islamic Sudan on the one hand, and Ethiopia on the other, it can only turn to such uncertain friends as Libya. Nothing less than the overthrow of the present government in Khartoum would be likely to provide relief. Ultimately, the lesson of the war is that an independent Eritrea has failed to find itself a niche, acceptable both to itself and to its neighbours, within the regional alliance structure. Continued regional instability is the only likely consequence.