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## **THE OGADEN REGION: A FRAGILE PATH TO PEACE**

BY KEN OPALO

### **SUMMARY**

- The Ogaden region in the Southeast of Ethiopia has been at the centre of an ongoing dispute between the Ethiopian government and rebels of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Since 1984, the ONLF, an ethnic Somali rebel movement, has waged a war of secession against Ethiopia. In October 2010, the Ethiopian government signed a peace agreement with a faction of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). In return for amnesty for its jailed leaders and a chance to become a political party, the faction, representing 80 percent of ONLF insurgents in the Ogaden region, agreed to cease hostilities against the Ethiopian government.
- The outstanding issues of political reform and the involvement of regional and international players in the conflict have not been addressed in the peace deal. These may undermine the peace agreement and hinder lasting peace in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia.

On October 13<sup>th</sup> 2010, the Ethiopian government signed a peace agreement with a faction of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), an ethnic Somali rebel movement that has, since the 1980s, been fighting a secessionist war against Addis Ababa. According to *Reuters*, the faction represents 80 percent of fighters under the ONLF umbrella.<sup>1</sup> As the deal was signed, a splinter faction of the ONLF denounced the agreement and said it would continue to fight the Ethiopian government. The website of the ONLF splinter faction, which refused to sign the peace deal, boasts of conducting “34 tactical and strategic military operations, killing 267 Ethiopian Army Soldiers and wounding 157” in October and November.

The Ethiopian government is keen on reducing the number of armed groups in the Ogaden region. In July 2010, Ethiopia signed a peace deal with the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF), in exchange for amnesty for its

<sup>1</sup> Malone, Barry. “Ethiopia Signs Peace Deal with Ogaden Rebel Faction” *Reuters*, October 13, 2010

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top leadership. These agreements are crucial to bringing peace to the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia (hereafter the Ogaden), an area that has experienced decades of conflict and crippling underdevelopment.

The Ethiopian government's urgency for peace in the Ogaden stems from the region's potential for oil and gas production. Foreign companies, including PETRONAS of Malaysia, the Canadian-based Africa Oil Corporation, and a subsidiary of Sinopec of China, have been involved in oil exploration in the region. Rebel groups have threatened to attack exploration ventures if their demands for self-determination are not met.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in April 2007, the ONLF attacked an exploration site run by Sinopec's subsidiary, China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation. Sixty-five Ethiopian and nine Chinese workers were killed in the attack, prompting the Ethiopian government to step up counterinsurgency operations in the region.

But despite these recent agreements, the prospects for lasting peace in the Ogaden are fragile.

Firstly, the ONLF faction that rejected the peace deal continues to cause trouble in the region. In October and early November, this splinter faction claims to have launched "34 tactical and strategic military operations" that killed 267 Ethiopian soldiers. Secondly, it will be difficult to sustain peace without any attempt to achieve political reforms that grant the Ogaden true federalism including democratic freedoms, at least at the state level. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the agreement does not address a key variable in the conflict: the involvement of Eritrea and Somali Islamist groups.

Lastly, a holistic peace in the Ogaden will require considerable investment and a strong commitment to engage in development initiatives on the part of the Ethiopian government. In size, the Ogaden is about 200,000 sq. km, with a population of four million people. Before 2007, the entire Ogaden had only 30 km of tarmac road. If left unaddressed, underdevelopment and perceived marginalization will continue to fuel ethnic Somali resentment against the Ethiopian government.

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2 Malone, Barry. "Ethiopia confirms rebel attack, says repelled," *Reuters*, May 19, 2010

## THE GENESIS OF SECESSIONIST SENTIMENT IN THE OGA DEN

The conflict in the Ogaden region has its origins in the Somali Youth League (SYL) movement that began to take shape in the late 1940s. Formed in Mogadishu, the SYL was a mass nationalist organization that called for the “unification of all the Somali-speaking lands into Greater Somalia” (Barnes, 2007). Following independence, Somalia’s constitution acknowledged the need to unite “Somali territories,” including the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, North Eastern Province of Kenya and Djibouti (Article IV of the Somali Independence Constitution).

In the early 1960s, the Somali government started arming secessionist groups in the Ogaden region, including the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) (Markakis, 1987). These efforts were stepped up following the fall of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, culminating in the 1977 Somali invasion of Ethiopia. The invasion orchestrated by then-President of Somalia, Siad Barre, relied heavily on the WSLF, which was formed in 1976 for this specific purpose (Laitin, 1979). Ethnic Somalis welcomed the ensuing eight-month Somali occupation of the Ogaden as “liberation” from Ethiopian colonialism (Tareke, 2000).

Eventually, Ethiopia managed to repel the Somali invasion with Soviet, South Yemeni and Cuban help (Tareke, 2000; Dagne, 2010). Following the humiliating defeat, the WSLF broke apart, only to reemerge in 1984 as the ONLF. The ONLF fought alongside Meles Zenawi’s Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in the campaign to depose Mengistu Haile Mariam. After the fall of the Mengistu regime, Zenawi became prime minister of Ethiopia and the ONLF joined the new government. In 1992, the ONLF won over 80 percent of the seats in the regional parliament in the Ogaden. Two years later in 1994, relations between the ONLF and the Ethiopian government soured. The ONLF started calling for secession. This eventually resulted in a crackdown by the government that left several ONLF leaders dead (Dagne, 2010b). The ONLF has since waged a low-level insurgency against the Ethiopian government with help from Eritrea and Somali Islamist insurgents (Africa Research Bulletin, 2007).

## EXPLOITING CLAN DIVISIONS

It is not a coincidence that the conflict has been termed “the Ogaden conflict,” despite the existence of ethnic Somalis in the region who belong to non-Ogadeni clans. Most of the ONLF forces come from two sub-groups of the Ogaden clan. These two sub-clans, the Hirsi Khalaf and Rer Harun, make up between 40 and 50 percent of the ethnic Somali population of the region (HRW Report, 2008). The ethnic Somali community in the state is deeply divided along clan lines—a fact that successive Ethiopian governments have exploited.

For instance, the Ethiopian government has armed non-Ogadeni clans in the region to fight the ONLF.

Other rebel movements that have operated in the region include the Islamic Union of Western Somalia and the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF) (HRW Report, 2007). The latter settled a peace deal with the government in August 2010.

## THE HUMAN COST OF THE CONFLICT

Casualty figures for the Ogaden war are difficult to access. Project Ploughshares, an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches, estimates that in 2007 alone the death toll in the conflict was approximately 1,000. Human rights violations by the Ethiopian government and ONLF abound. In late 2006, the government of Ethiopia suspended food aid and blockaded commercial traffic to the Ogaden region, resulting in an acute humanitarian crisis (Dagne, 2010b). According to the *New York Times*, Addis Ababa has civilianized the conflict further by arming locals to make up for shortage of troops.<sup>3</sup>

In 2007 Human Rights Watch documented the abuses on both sides, which include extra-judicial executions of civilians, rape, torture, forced relocations, denial of access to means of livelihood, among others (HRW Report, 2007). The government of Ethiopia also expelled the Red Cross and Red Crescent and MSF (Doctors without Borders), further limiting the access of humanitarian groups to the region (Ibid). Testifying before

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3 Jeffrey Gettleman. “In rebel region, Ethiopia turns to civilian patrols,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2007

Congress in 2007, Fowsia Abdulkadir, chair of The Ogaden Human Rights Committee in Canada, likened the situation in the Ogaden to Darfur noting, “the actions of the Zenawi regime placed upon the Ogaden, could be defined as genocide.”<sup>4</sup> The Ethiopian government denies these accusations, saying that it is the ONLF that is perpetrating crimes against innocent civilians.

## REGIONAL DIMENSIONS OF THE CONFLICT

Observers to the conflict have indicated that Eritrea is funding the ONLF, including other rebel groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the South, and the Afar National Democratic Front (ANDF) in the North. It is also understood that departments within the Somali government, both under Barre and after his exit from power, have helped Ethiopian rebel groups (Dagne, 2010a). Analysts believe there are other indirect actors in the Ogaden conflict originating in Egypt, Libya and other members of the Arab League that are sympathetic to Islamist insurgent groups and bent on ending “Christian” Ethiopia’s occupation of “Greater Somalia.” Egypt has been accused of funding insurgent groups in Somalia and Ethiopia as a check on Addis Ababa over concerns about the Nile waters. Libya’s involvement with Islamist groups is mainly motivated by geopolitical posturing to boost its standing in the African Union (Shinn, 2006).

At times, the line between the Ogaden conflict and the civil war in Somalia can be blurry. It is believed that rhetoric—about creating a “Greater Somalia” and support for the ONLF from the Somali Islamist group, The Islamic Courts Union’s (ICU)—played a key role in the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in late 2006 (Africa Research Bulletin, 2006; The Guardian, 2007<sup>5</sup>). According to *Reuters* the ONLF faction that has refused to acknowledge the recently signed peace agreement is led by a former Somali Navy chief, Admiral Mohamed Omar Osman.<sup>6</sup>

The American-led war on terror in the Horn of Africa, also known as *Operation Enduring Freedom*, has further internationalized the conflict. Ethiopian acquiescence to the use of its territory by the US for anti-terror

4 US Congress. Testimony of Fowsa Abdulkadir, Ogaden Human Rights Committee, October 3, 2007

5 “Invisible Victims in the Ogaden,” The Guardian, September 6, 2007

6 Malone, Barry. “Ethiopia signs peace deal with Ogaden rebel faction,” Reuters, October 12, 2010

efforts encourages Islamist support for the ONLF and the OLF.<sup>7</sup> In 2007, ethnic Somali, anti-Ethiopia sympathizers gathered in Eritrea and formed The Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS). One of the main objectives of the ARS is “the liberation of Somalia from Ethiopia” (Dagne, 2010a).

## PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

The potential for oil and gas exploration in the Ogaden is a crucial factor behind Ethiopia’s push for peace in the region. The Ogaden’s gas and oil reserves will open a new revenue plank for the Ethiopian government if prospecting yields substantial deposits that can be exported. In 2005, the Ethiopian ministry of mines and PETRONAS concluded a 22-month study of the Ogaden. The study showed that the Ogaden Basin is potentially rich in oil and gas. Oil has been discovered in more than 20 exploration wells near the centre of the basin. Encouraged by the gas prospects in the region, PETRONAS has negotiated a US\$25 billion gas development project that will last 25 years.<sup>8</sup>

The peace agreement with the ONLF does not resolve the conflict issue in the region. Outstanding concerns on political reform still remain and continue to fuel conflict in the Ogaden. An ONLF faction opposed to the deal is still waging war against the Ethiopian government. The agreement does not address regional and international actors with grievances against Ethiopia. These actors will continue funding insurgents in the Ogaden and in other parts of Ethiopia until an agreement is reached that accounts for all actors and interests involved.

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7 Michael Gordon and Mark Mazzetti. “US Used Base in Ethiopia to Hunt Al Qaeda,” New York Times, February 23, 2007

8 See “Ogaden Basin Overview,” [http://www.sw-oil-gas.com/ogaden\\_basin\\_overview.htm](http://www.sw-oil-gas.com/ogaden_basin_overview.htm)

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