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## **Ethiopia–Eritrea: Proxy Wars and Prospects of Peace in the Horn of Africa**

*Jon Abbink*

Many inter-state and intra-state conflicts in Africa become more complex by being extended into 'proxy wars'. Secondary or substitution parties are involved in fighting battles in alliance with larger states, but with their own agenda relevant in a local arena. In the era of the Cold War, proxy wars were often orchestrated on a large scale by the then superpowers. This occurred, for example, in Angola and Mozambique and in countries in the Horn of Africa. But after about 1990 they proliferated in Africa in more limited regional settings, in the context of state competition. In some cases it is not clear whether the conflicts are proxy wars with foreign agendas. Many simmer on in the margins of visible dramatic conflicts as in Sudan, West Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In the past decade, new webs of proxy wars and transborder alliances between armed groups and states – or what remains of them – have emerged in West Africa, a region of growing concern to the global powers, mainly because of its oil potential. The nature and extent of proxy wars need to be studied more systematically, because they have a serious impact on long-term stability and regional peace in Africa, and reveal patterns of international and regional African power politics that are often neglected. The recourse to proxy wars is another reflection of the problems of the African state and of its failure to institutionalise democratic structures (Joseph 2003).

In the Horn of Africa, to which this paper will limit itself, the proxy war phenomenon is visible – though in an extremely complex form – owing to the alliances behind the scenes, the involvement of neighbouring countries such as Sudan, Egypt and Kenya, and the frequent changes of allegiance. Indeed, the politics of proxy war resembles a chess game, but one in which the rules constantly seem to change. While this paper does not pretend to uncover these partly invisible dynamics, it will comment on the general outline of regional proxy wars in recent years and on their possible future impact.

All countries in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, the Somali areas, and some would include Sudan) are affected by proxy war phenomena. Exploring them is relevant for the period after the conclusion of a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in December 2000. This agreement ended the intense and large-scale border war between the two countries that had started in May 1998 and which showed a notable (re-)activation of proxy war conflict. Negotiations on

the Ethiopia–Eritrea border demarcation and on the normalisation of relations between the two countries, which started in 2001, have been precarious and slow. In mid-2003, there were still ongoing disagreements about the border lines, despite the judgement given on April 13, 2002 by the Ethiopia–Eritrea Boundary Commission (EEBC) of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that was mandated by the two countries.<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia contested the decision concerning its western front, and the controversy has raged on following a new statement by the EEBC published on March 21, 2003.<sup>2</sup> An equally tenacious issue may prove to be that of claims for war damage compensation, brought by local residents and businesses in the former war zone and by the two governments. The international community has supported the United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), in place since October 2000, and until now the ‘Temporary Security Zone’ along the two provisional borders has remained relatively calm during the presence of this mission. The massive drought and famine that affected both countries in 2002–3 makes them hesitant to escalate the issue, but Ethiopia’s misgivings have increased markedly because the EEBC statement appears to have awarded the contested village of Badme to Eritrea (Abbink 2003).

**Figure 1: Map of the Horn of Africa showing Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia**



In this paper I contend that the threat of regional instability by proxy conflict remains, as the two regimes in power in Ethiopia and Eritrea – led by the two former insurgent movements, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)<sup>3</sup> and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) (until 1994 officially called the Eritrean People's Liberation Front or EPLF)<sup>4</sup> are unlikely to make a real peace with each other. Neither have they solved any of the underlying causes of their problematic political and economic relationship since 1991 (when the former Mengistu regime was defeated): issues concerning trade, communications, transborder movements of labourers and pastoralists, the outstanding bank debts (especially of Eritrea to Ethiopia's banking system), goods and property in Assab port destined for Ethiopia and confiscated by Eritrea, Ethiopian military hardware given 'on loan' to Eritrea well before the war, legal issues relating to ethnic groups in both countries, citizenship, environmental problems, water-sharing, and so on. Ethiopia, and especially the population of the 'front line' regional state of Tigray, experienced the war as an incomprehensible stab in the back by their erstwhile (Eritrean) allies in the struggle against the Mengistu regime. In this context of deep tension and distrust generated by a war that brought serious internal dissent and threatened the power of the reigning elites (Paulos 2001; Plaut 2001), the danger of proxy wars appears to be permanent.

In the context of the Horn of Africa, I define proxy wars as being secondary, often 'low intensity' armed conflicts, pursued in the context of a major geopolitical power struggle or an outright war between states, carried out by subsidiary or co-opted insurgent movements, usually of an ethno-regional nature. These movements can get leverage with the governments on whose support they depend when they are led by aspiring but socially blocked elites from 'minority groups' from neglected or secondary regions, who attempt to make a local bid for power or exert domestic political and military pressure on the central governments, both the foreign one and the one supporting them. The movements, while usually centred around self-appointed leaders with an elite outlook, have varying degrees of popular support, based on local grievances or feelings of neglect. Their record, however, is very mixed. Some groups have authentic grassroots origins and can bolster legitimate claims to represent the concerns of local populations. But most of them have only a tenuous support base and tend to revert to armed struggle without a clear agenda of positive change and also revert to the use of terror and 'ethnic cleansing' (to use that terrible concept). They often prey upon their own people (Mkandawire 2002). One depressing example here is the Lord's Resistance Army in the Sudan-Uganda border area, operating against Uganda (or rather Ugandan civilians) and opportunistically supported by the Sudanese government. Other movements are pure creations of a patron state (the initial founding of Renamo (*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*) in Mozambique is a good example). What seems clear is that although they may bring some short-term military gains, proxy wars, by provoking a militarisation of daily life and rebounding

state repression, are potentially quite destructive of local societies, and thus may become a source of long-term instability and insecurity.

In the Horn of Africa proxy wars, of course, have a long history. In Sudanese-Ethiopian relations before the fall of the Mengistu regime in 1991, there was Ethiopian support for the South Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), while the Sudan government in turn was involved with providing facilities and supply-lines to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF and later EPLF) fighting against the Ethiopian government. In the late 1970s and 1980s, President Siyad Barre of Somalia supported the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia, while Ethiopia later supported the northern Somalis in what is now Somaliland against Siyad.<sup>5</sup> Similar patterns occurred with the Afar people in Djibouti and Ethiopia. In recent years, Sudan supported the Eritrean Islamic Jihad while Eritrea has given facilities to the Sudanese opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

The other concept, suggested by the title of this paper, 'lasting peace', is a cherished term in international diplomacy, but is to my mind a very tenuous, if not fictitious, one in the Horn of Africa. In general, a lasting peace is difficult to achieve anywhere in an unequal globalising world that sees an intensification of antagonisms and conflicts around resources and 'identities'. But certainly in a volatile and vulnerable region like the Horn its chances are slim. Especially here, the problem is that state (re)formation is never finished: it will produce persistent conflicts on the basis of material, political and other competition. The most one can hope for in current conditions of ecological fragility, ethno-regional tensions, state authoritarianism and political unreliability is a manageable state of 'no armed conflict', and the gradual development of a wider regional conflict-resolution structure, to be developed within the international system and linked to better donor-country development efforts.

One crucial instance that brought the phenomenon of proxy wars very clearly into focus was the interference of Ethiopia and Eritrea in Somalia during their recent war (Abbink 1998; Battera 2001; Tekeste and Tronvoll 2000). The various examples of proxy war efforts in the Horn show that the central Ethiopian and Eritrean governments will always try to co-opt or direct (and eventually neutralise) such movements and make them instruments of their foreign policy. While in African terms these two regimes are relatively strong, although not necessarily accepted as fully legitimate by the population, the proxy war strategy is a very risky business because some proxy groups are unpredictable, may go out of control, and may constrain a country's foreign policy options. Nevertheless, proxy war is an important and enduring feature of the political dynamics of the Horn. Foreign donor institutions and diplomats tend to underestimate this dimension of covert politics and political manipulation and for the most part trust or rely too much on central government rhetoric.

### **Heritage of Conflict: The Post-War Situation in the Horn**

As noted above, the situation along the Ethio-Eritrean border since the December 2000 peace agreement is relatively calm: there have been no serious incidents, no battles, no imminent threats of renewed hostilities. This is largely due to the shock of the Eritrean defeat in mid-2000 and the very precarious economic situation in both countries,<sup>6</sup> coupled with persistent food insecurity. The most recent drama was the famine in both countries in late 2002 and early 2003<sup>7</sup> that reduced the overall harvest by some 15 per cent from a 'normal' year<sup>8</sup> and put around 13 million people in need of food aid. Famine and persistent economic problems threaten the relative stability of the area, also along the new border, because vulnerable and starving people not only migrate in large numbers but also give support to alternative politico-military forces whenever they have the chance. For instance, popular rural support for the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the 1980s grew markedly owing to its offers of food relief that the central Ethiopian government could not or would not deliver. In the short run, therefore, such problems of food scarcity and economic distress enhance the support for local movements of protest or rebellion.

The December 2000 agreement has frozen the military situation and led to a release of most prisoners of war, to de-mining operations, and to a return of displaced people on both sides; but the truce and the subsequent negotiations have not contributed to meeting the challenges of 'normalisation' between the two countries, and they have not resolved the alleged cause of the dispute: the border line.

There is also continued tension in both countries at the highest political level, as witness the emergence of serious internal criticism and even divisions within leading opposition parties – TPLF in Ethiopia (Paulos 2002) and PFDJ (Popular Front for Democracy and Justice) in Eritrea.<sup>9</sup> These home opposition groups (apart from the many diaspora opposition groups, all with their own websites) against the current leadership represent a very serious challenge. But they have been sidelined by a combination of arrests, repression and social ostracism of an amazing kind. Seeing both leaders acting in such a repressive manner against their comrades-in-arms revealed for many the undemocratic nature of both regimes and recalled the Leninist model and practice of political party organisation.

In Eritrea tensions now seem to be most serious and may eventually have a wider impact. The president there shows no intention of honouring the constitution, of opening up the political system (for example, by elections, indefinitely postponed), of allowing dissenting voices or even critical debate questioning his own role. Problems within the Eritrean armed forces are also heard, with frequent commander changes and occasional tension between units. In September 2001 an armed clash occurred, apparently between two front units in Barentu, one of which was then quickly transferred to western Eritrea.<sup>10</sup> The demobilisation of (part of) the 250 000 or so Eritrean troops was constantly delayed in 2001–2 because the leadership feared that the impact of the returning troops to Asmara, for

example, might fuel the ground swell for political reform. On the Ethiopian side this sparked fears that Eritrea might start a diversionary armed clash with Ethiopia in the Temporary Security Zone.

In Ethiopia, domestic problems such as tensions in the political system, a failing economy, the constant food insecurity, the 2002–3 famine, the faulty justice system, and the unrest and deep resentment in parts of the Oromiya, Somali and the Southern Peoples regions, are far from being resolved. The position of the prime minister, also chief of the TPLF/EPRDF, has come under fire especially since the great rift within the TPLF party that occurred in the spring of 2002. But in fact it has been strengthened in the past two years with a new network of loyal supporters. A more autocratic approach seems to be in the making, as evident from the 2003 reorganisation of the leading party and its constituent parts.<sup>11</sup> A new power formation seems to have emerged, dependent less on the old TPLF party than on loyalists in the civil service, the army and the bureaucracy, and on the other (re-structured) parties in the EPRDF coalition. A stable institutional political structure that will survive the current regime has not yet been achieved.

Furthermore, the negotiation process between Ethiopia and Eritrea on both the border issue and compensation for war damages (for example, of local communities) is proceeding very slowly. As of Spring 2003, more than two years after the peace accord, there are no clear-cut agreements on the exact borders of the Temporary Security Zone,<sup>12</sup> on free corridors and unrestricted UNMEE movement, on the presence of militias, and on the return of all civilian populations. Many incidents of unauthorised entrance into the Temporary Security Zone have been reported in recent years, and also several exchanges of fire between Eritrean and Ethiopian units in late 2002. For the UNMEE-led Military Coordination Commission, the situation is very time-consuming and taxing. One can imagine that future memoirs of participants such as the UNMEE force commander and the special representative of the UN secretary-general will expose the tricks and stalling tactics of both sides. The first force commander, P. Cammaert, was boycotted by Ethiopia from mid-2002 until the end of his contract in October 2002, owing to an incident with a group of journalists who visited the disputed village of Badme from the Eritrean side without notifying the Ethiopians. The latter saw this location as undisputedly under Ethiopian administration and held Cammaert responsible for the affront.<sup>13</sup>

After criticism from Ethiopia on the April 2002 decision, the border issue was further debated in Border Commission meetings and consultations in late 2002 and early 2003. Whatever the final outcome, however, unanimous acceptance from both sides is unlikely. Neutral experts were expected to resolve the border demarcation problem,<sup>14</sup> but it is doubtful whether political pressures could at all be avoided or unambiguous answers to problems of demarcation found. Bowing to pressure, on the other hand, might lead to unhealthy compromise and to the subverting of any durability of the peace agreement. Apart from Badme village, another contentious issue is the status of the Irob area. The border of this area

around the town of Alitena was never clearly or definitively demarcated, and the treaties or accords of 1896 and 1900 (and the additional 'Notes', sometimes also called 'Treaties', of 1902 and 1908) are rather ambiguous (Larebo 2000). From the available evidence so far,<sup>15</sup> the Irob people tend to identify themselves as Ethiopians. They were in any case always under Ethiopian administration. The scorched-earth war policy and the wholesale repression in Irob-land by Eritrean occupying troops after May 1998 has not won the population over to the Eritrean side. The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) decision of April 2002, however, divided the Irob region between Eritrea and Ethiopia without any recourse to the principle of self-determination or even consultation with the local population (see pp.52–4, p.99 and the facing map of the PCA decision, cited in note 1). This has evoked serious protests (see note 15), and indicates the instability to come.

In view of these enduring problems of border demarcation, foreign policy mistakes and deep political tension resulting from the war, neither the government in Asmara nor in Addis Ababa would mourn a regime change in their opponent. In this context, the 'proxy war' strategy has been an option since May 1998. This paper does not address all the international dimensions of the conflict, such as the involvement of the US, Yemen, Sudan, Libya or Egypt,<sup>16</sup> but outlines something of what it meant for the countries immediately involved.

### **Insurgent Movements and Proxy War**

The proxy war strategy was pursued by both players in the devastating war of 1998–2000 between Ethiopia and Eritrea, not only in the enemy country but also in neighbouring states such as Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti and Sudan.

In this strategy, Ethiopia has worked through two kinds of insurgent movements:

(a) those organisations entirely set up by Ethiopia itself. These have had a very limited impact and will not be discussed here. Among these are the Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front (the former Demahai, or Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea) and the Afar Red Sea Democratic Front (founded in 1998). There may be a few more in the offing;

(b) those already existing and having some basis in pre-existing rebellions in Eritrea and Somalia. Here we have the ELF and its various factions (Central Command, Revolutionary Command, National Command), one Kunama movement and one Afar movement, the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF). In Somalia, Ethiopia has allied itself with, and has used, several groups that opposed the warlords and later the transitional Somali government in Mogadishu, as well as the Islamist al-Ittihad, then linked with the Bin Laden al-Qaeda network<sup>17</sup> and making incursions into southern Ethiopia in 1996–8. But in 2001–2 Ethiopia again backed some of the warlords to form a local front against the Transitional National Government of Somalia in part of Mogadishu, installed with UN support and financial help from several Arab countries after a Somali reconciliation conference in Arta, Djibouti.



The Eritreans have used existing organisations or fronts, with some of which (such as the Oromo Liberation Front and Ogaden National Liberation Front) they already had long-standing contact,<sup>18</sup> and have intensified relations with Somali groups (especially warlord militias) opposing the Rahanwein and the Ethiopia-backed groups in the Baidoa, Beledweyn and Bakool areas along the border. There are also indications that they shipped weapons to Somalia's Transitional National Government in Mogadishu.<sup>19</sup>

As far as the Islamist threat was concerned, the United States, the backer of both new regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea after 1991, tacitly approved of both countries taking measures against these Islamist groups and containing the Islamist government in Sudan. Ethiopia recently admitted that it had actively interfered in Somalia.<sup>20</sup> In Eritrea, Islamic extremists based in Sudan (such as the Eritrean Islamic Jihad) had actively sought to undermine Eritrea's government and destabilise the region, with the support of Sudan's Islamist regime.

The same policy was in place for Somalia, especially since the 1998 terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi (with 228 people dead, 210 of them Kenyans), where Islamists linked to Somalia and Bin Laden's terror network were involved. The Islamist groups in Somalia were combated with some success, but the overall strategy fell apart after May 1998 with the Ethio-Eritrean war.

The most critical period of proxy war was, of course, during the recent Eritreo-Ethiopian war, especially in 1999 when there was a major upsurge of Ethiopian and Eritrean interference in Somalia. Before this date, Ethiopia had already perceived an emerging security threat on its borders from al-Ittihad al-Islami in Somalia and had acted against it. The Eritrean government started to back anti-Ethiopian Somali and Oromo armed groups (OLF, ONLF, perhaps al-Ittihad) in a disintegrating Somalia.<sup>21</sup> It is a matter of historical record that especially after February 1999 Eritrea began to push the OLF to act against Ethiopia and to import large quantities of arms for 'allies' in Somalia,<sup>22</sup> notably some warlord groups, in an effort to open an additional southern front in the war against Ethiopia. This effort failed rather dramatically, because Ethiopia contained the threat. The OLF, which had held a congress in Mogadishu in 1998, did not make much headway either, and allied with the wrong people in a bid to gain more legitimacy (for example with the warlord Hussein M. Farah). Many Ethiopians, and certainly most of the government and independent media, saw its stance against Ethiopia in the war as a historical mistake if not 'treason'.

Ethiopia supported its own small Eritrean insurgent movement (Demahai) but started to back more significant Eritrean opposition movements gathered in the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces – for example, giving them free access to the occupied areas in May and June 2000 after the big offensive in western Eritrea. However, the Ethiopians did not entirely tell them what to do.<sup>23</sup> These opposition groups had to leave again when the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed on June 18, 2000. Before 1998 both governments suppressed the Afar

movement ARDUF, which opposes the division of the Afar people into two states and was against both Ethiopian and Eritrean policy, but in the war the Ethiopians briefly supported the movement. After December 2000, ARDUF was again dropped by Ethiopia. About the Kunama movements in or outside Eritrea, little is known. They do not seem to pose a threat of armed resistance or rebellion. The Ethiopian government allowed Kunama refugees and community leaders to cross its borders.<sup>24</sup> At least 4000 Kunama now live in northern Ethiopia near the war zone.

As to Djibouti, during the war the Ethiopian government accused Eritrea<sup>25</sup> of "seeking to destabilise Djibouti by planting mines and promoting insecurity along the northern borders of Djibouti". The Afar opposition movement *Front pour la Restauration de l'Unité et de la Démocratie* (FRUD) was probably supported and armed by the Eritrean government in 1998 (Gilkes 1999). But apart from attacks on some outposts and road convoys and planting land mines they did not achieve much. Ethiopia has assisted Djibouti in suppressing the FRUD movement since late 1998. However, FRUD probably made a serious error of judgement in entering into an alliance with the Eritreans, because in the end it weakened their position in Djibouti. Ethiopia (being a landlocked country) will not take any risks with Djibouti whose port is a major life-line, and especially since the port of Assab was ceded to Eritrea and boycotted since the start of the war in May 1998.

### **Possible Impact of Proxy Wars**

The above picture makes it clear that during the 1998–2000 war the two parties used all means, including that of covert proxy war, to gain the upper hand. Neighbouring countries (notably Somalia and Kenya, but also Djibouti and Sudan) felt the fall-out of the war, as well as the active interference of the two adversaries in local affairs.

However, since the formal end of the war in June 2000, the activity of these various movements and fronts (see Appendix) appeared to decrease despite the fact that in the post-war situation some organisations continued with their operations. It is not clear whether they still operate with any substantial support from their sponsor country. OLF and ONLF (the outlawed branch) keep an armed presence and carry out small-scale attacks in Ethiopia. OLF moved to Kenya after the debacle in Somalia and is sometimes pursued there by the Ethiopians. At the same time the Kenyan authorities, because of the border areas becoming very unstable, tolerate it less and less. ONLF activity was at its height in 1999–2000, with kidnappings, ambushes, and attacks on EPRDF garrisons. In 2000–2 its activities were reduced, although they are still kidnapping relief workers and hampering the famine relief efforts in the Somali region of Ethiopia.

But incidents with other insurgent groups continue to occur. On March 4, 2001, the pro-Ethiopian-government Walta Information Centre reported an attack by

the Eritrean Popular Democratic Liberation Front on Eritrean army contingents in the localities of Basebuba and Edeberusuma, with many casualties and the destruction of two vehicles. On June 18, 2001, Eritrean state radio<sup>26</sup> announced a military action of the hitherto unknown Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front against Ethiopian government troops (always called 'Weyyane') in Angereb (in the Gondar area). As usual there could be no independent confirmation of these actions, and in 2002–3 little more was heard from these groups.

Opposition fronts also regularly give out statements supporting the cause of one or the other government. For example, on April 12, 2001, the Ethiopian weekly *T'obbiya* reported on a congress of the Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM) which resolved to continue the "struggle against Eritrea to realise the Afar people's national unity and to enable Ethiopia to have its seaport Assab" (which is on ancestral Afar land). The status and origin of the ANLM is unclear. More recently, in March 2003, the new Eritrean opposition, Eritrean National Alliance (see below) formed in 2002, gave out statements in Addis Ababa on the removal of the Isayas regime, and even called for armed struggle.<sup>27</sup>

The importance and impact of the proxy war factor in the Horn has thus declined somewhat since June 2000, when the Ethiopian army brought the war with Eritrea to an end by gaining a de facto victory. Before the final onslaught, the relevance of the respective proxies in Somalia or elsewhere had already been diminished because they were largely neutralised (the Somali al-Ittihad, the OLF). In addition, armed proxy groups of both countries, if not pushed back on the battlefield, were increasingly reined in by their patrons (for example, the Eritrean opposition groups by the Ethiopians), because they were not allowed to interfere with the new process of diplomacy.

Whether the decline of the proxy war factor will contribute to the building of a 'lasting peace' is not at all certain. The experience of the last two years of tenuous negotiation after the Ethiopian–Eritrean war seems to show otherwise. The reining in of the proxy partners in the immediate aftermath of the Algiers 2000 peace agreement appears to have been a temporary measure, to give the diplomatic process a chance. Now that this process has encountered serious hurdles and while the governments in place do not successfully address grievances of wide sections of their populations (notably the dismantling of the democratic process in Eritrea), the proxy conflict factor is resurging.

Proxy wars thus have a conjunctural life, being just one part of a larger strategy of regional hegemony used on and off – and when they stop, peace will not follow. Overall conditions – ecological, political and economic – are too volatile to allow for instant peace or stability. For instance, Ethiopia will continue to be active in protecting the national border, especially with Somalia, as long as there is no credible or stable national government in place in that country. It will continue to support allies there, to prevent Somali and other groups infiltrating on its southern border. It is likely that Somali allies such as the Rahanwein Resistance Army (RRA) will continue to be advised and trained. In June 2001, a group of

RRA people was sent back to Somalia after training in Ethiopia.<sup>28</sup> The Ethiopians also supported the 2001 formation of the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council, a coalition of militias, ex-warlords and factions opposed to the UN-sponsored and very shaky Transitional National Government in Mogadishu. It is also obvious that with the emerging obstacles in the border demarcation process with Eritrea, unrest through proxy parties is reawakening, as evident from Ethiopia's ostentatious support of some Eritrean opposition groups.

On the Eritrean side, there are deep grievances among followers of the banned opposition groups including ELF and the Kunama and Afar organisations. Member groups of an Alliance of Eritrean National Forces (AENF), set up in 1999, were active in the months of Ethiopian occupation of western Eritrea (Kunamaland) in June–July 2000, but they later retreated to Sudan, where a large part of their constituency lives in the Eritrean refugee camps (about 200 000 to 250 000). Judging from news coming out, the Kunama are probably the Eritrean people now in the most difficult situation. Owing to the devastating impact of the war, the ongoing land-grab by Tigrinya-speaking people (the mainstay of support for the government), and the apparent repression by the central government, they remain quite vulnerable. This situation may cause more instability.

In September–October 2002, a large conference of the Eritrean opposition coalition AENF (then renamed Eritrean National Alliance or ENA) was held in Addis Ababa. While this alliance is high on rhetoric but low on actual political, let alone military, strength and has resolved neither the tensions between its 13 constituent groups nor the question of leadership, its prominently publicised gathering in Addis Ababa was a further sign of Ethiopian support for opposition movements against the Eritrean regime in Asmara. The Eritrean government responded with a strong condemnation of what they saw as Ethiopia's policy "of continuing war by proxy".<sup>29</sup>

A negative and often underestimated impact of proxy war through the above-mentioned smaller groups is the disturbing influx and spread of all kinds of weapons. The state sponsors of these movements and factions have continued to arm them to further their perceived interests. Even Egypt, Libya and Yemen have joined in here. These arms not only circulated in the battle zones of the war but found their way well beyond.

### **On What Does the Building of a So-Called Lasting Peace Depend?**

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has repeatedly suggested that a lasting peace in the Horn is "impossible with the present government in Eritrea in place". On the Eritrean side it is no secret that the current president would like to see a different regime in Addis Ababa (Gilkes and Plaut 1999:61–2). Thus, if both sides are unwilling to make peace, it will not happen. Ultimately, however, one may even doubt whether the two leaders would be happy with the alternatives. Deep down there is a similarity of ideology and approach to politics. Eventually,

a new kind of tacit alliance between the (reformed) leading parties or elites in both countries stands a good chance of emerging, although in a much transformed shape.<sup>30</sup> They know that their ideology and programmes have the same source and run a more or less similar course. For instance, there are similarities in (post-Marxist) views on economic policy and on the political process, and agreement – not shared by most of the Ethiopian opposition parties<sup>31</sup> – on the highly debatable point of Eritrea having been a ‘colony’ of Ethiopia. It is also remarkable that at no point in the war did the Ethiopian leaders question the right of Eritrea to possess the port of Assab, although the legal arguments and the border demarcation based on the past international treaties and maps are far from clear, and the war situation called many things into question. Thus one cannot discount the possibility that, with different personal leadership, new forms of co-operation between these two leading parties might indeed be revived.

Apart from such issues, one needs to look beyond the personalised rancour and develop a vision for developing a businesslike working relationship between the two countries. This will take time because the sense of betrayal and breach of trust is still deep and includes the common people. But the issue will eventually have to be taken up. It could start modestly with initiatives such as opening the border at selected checkpoints for local trade and traffic; initiating the processing of compensation claims of the war-affected people;<sup>32</sup> demilitarising the border zones; allowing private trade relations, academic exchange, travel of citizens to visit family and/or friends across the border and establishing periodic intra-regional contacts in a kind of ‘standing conference’. When these measures are implemented, support for proxy war strategies will be de-emphasised. A general process of political reform and democratisation in both countries would also create further conditions for *rapprochement*.

The only immediate way forward is perhaps for the donor community to stimulate further confidence-building measures and practical economic schemes of co-operation in the framework of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development composed of the Horn countries, or the international bodies, and through developing cross-border initiatives within UN structures to rehabilitate and reconstruct war-affected zones and populations along the border. The local people on both sides are related by culture, kinship and economic interests, and must find ways of daily interaction, market contacts and social relations. In the long run this is inevitable, whatever the two political regimes may state at present. An inclusive, future-oriented national policy that de-emphasises divisions along communal lines will be the only prospect that will encourage people to work toward a more peaceful situation.

However, within today’s networks of political mobilisation and transnational rebellions, the movements involved in proxy wars will continue to exist, though in shifting and opportunistic alliances. One might also reconsider the role of the what could be called ‘diaspora proxy wars’ which are being fought out in propaganda and (dis)information messages on the dozens of internet sites (Guazzini

2001 for a remarkable study). Their impact should not be exaggerated, but the role of diaspora communities active in cyberspace has not been very constructive. Contributors hardly talk to each other, but tend to incriminate, accuse and offer extreme views and solutions. This is perhaps due to the well-known phenomenon of 'radicalisation at a distance':<sup>33</sup> well-educated elite groups who no longer have close contact with the home base or everyday life and daily dilemmas in the countries of origin (Ethiopia or Eritrea) can afford the luxury of uncompromising and principled ideological stands. This is also visible in community meetings of ex-Ethiopians and ex-Eritreans abroad, which are often violently disturbed by opponents and have the character of sectarian infighting. A toning-down of diaspora proxy war would probably have a moderating effect on the political radicalisation of movements (most of which also have their own websites) engaged in actual proxy wars.

### **Some Conclusions**

It is easy to make normative and prescriptive statements about the drama of the Horn of Africa and the culture of conflict there, but these will be without value if the specific realities of the region are not taken into account.

In the quest for explanations one has to analyse the long-term historical process as well as the dynamics of present-day political systems unfolding within the constraints created by history and the ecological-economic problems of the area. The implications of proxy wars for *governance* should also be considered. Some years ago (1985), the American sociologist Charles Tilly published an interesting chapter called "War-Making and State-Making as Organised Crime" to explain the antecedents of the emergence of national states in Europe and the shaky border line between the two phenomena of warfare and state formation. What he called "coercive exploitation" and "protection rackets" played a major role in state-making in Europe. Far be it from me to suggest that we have to interpret the Horn of Africa in analogy with Tilly's article. But one has to recognise that state (re)formation and relentless power struggle usually occur in conditions of poverty, population pressure, environmental fragility and resource scarcity, resulting in (elite) competition and exclusivist hegemonism. The inequalities of the global economy may add to the problems. Sometimes, however, political leaders in the region themselves appear to give the impression that their political strategy is somewhat akin to what Tilly called "organised crime". Political power and access to economic privilege for a limited group, buttressed by an inability to develop compromise politics on wider national issues, have to be defended at all costs, whereby the pursuing of policy with shady means and duplicitous schemes is not shunned. In some parts of Africa, states decline into private rackets of criminalised elites, for instance, in Zaire, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, parts of Nigeria, and Somalia.

Proxy war has often been a part of a state's strategy of survival. We may recognise its military and tactical advantages in the short run, and indeed alliances with

semi- or illegal violent groups are quite common, as part of Machiavellian political manoeuvring, in many places. But in the Horn of Africa there is also a wider regional logic of power politics which continually impels leaders to search for proxies, be they ethnic, regional or religious-ideological allies. In a way, one might say that supporting proxy war is a predictable extension of a 'normal' diplomatic strategy of enhancing the national interest, with a variant on the old Clausewitz doctrine on war. Obviously it is always a risky strategy, dependent on internal communal relations and the political strength of the state engaging in it. In today's international political system it is also less and less likely to succeed. Last but not least, if there is continued political stagnation, repression and economic crisis, some of the erstwhile proxy war partners of both Eritrea and Ethiopia may become a real liability to their former patrons.

Strategies to build a more 'lasting peace' include no doubt the gaining of international backing, a structure of inter-state consultations, developing transborder economic co-operation, and building of broad support among one's own national constituency. They will subvert the need to look for armed proxy movements that foment unrest and do the provoking and the fighting. Modes of governance aimed at enhancing human security – in the economic, political and civic sense – seem vital. Institutional reform and democratisation of the polity and cultivation of a more law-based, pluralist system of administration, with the possibility that a regime or a leader may step down after elections or might open up to multiparty participation and compromise politics, would be part of it. These things are perhaps a chimera in many parts of Africa under present conditions. There are no good prospects for Weberian-type states, owing to the problematic linkages between rulers and people, the precarious state of the economies, and the predatory links of the developed world and Africa in a globalising, not well-regulated, economy (Joseph 2003). But policies that create conditions for a political culture of negotiation and compromise and the observing of elementary judicial rules of equity and justice – that often have a basis in traditional political culture – would enhance solutions. Some respect of rulers and donor countries for the historical and cultural continuities of African society would also help. In the popular clamour for reform and democratic change in Africa that occurred after the end of the Cold War, Africans have demanded attention to basic things such as proper management of the economy, and ways out of poverty and insecurity. But they also asked for, and still do want, respect for freedom of the person, the press, due process of law, and more social and political autonomy. Local constitutions in Ethiopia and Eritrea rhetorically proclaim such rights, but the state's practices and capabilities of governance do not sustain them. In the old neo-patrimonial tradition, elite groups have to serve their own regions, ethnic or clan constituencies, and in persistent conditions of scarcity and material insecurity they continually fear that their power position will be affected. This inhibits the institutional system of power-sharing politics from taking root. In the Horn of Africa, we have to be patient indeed.

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### Notes

1. See the full text on: <http://pca-cpa.org/EEBC/EEBC%20-%20Text%20of%20Decision.htm>.
2. See the text on: <http://pca-cpa.org/PDF/Obs.EEBC.pdf>. Ethiopia responded on May 2, 2003 with a detailed 34-page memorandum "Comments to the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission" (to be found at [www.geocities.com/EthOnlinePublication](http://www.geocities.com/EthOnlinePublication)). On July 31, 2003, the highest officials in Tigray State in Ethiopia declared that they would not allow the actual border demarcation (as based on the PCA ruling) on the ground; (see the news report on [www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=35709](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=35709)). Several leading Ethiopians now regret not having put the border matter before the International Court of Justice for judgement instead of to the (lower, and self-mandated) PCA.
3. The core of this party is the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), but its other members are the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF). For an analysis of the TPLF movement, see Young 1999. For the meaning of acronyms in this paper, see the Appendix.
4. For a study of the EPLF, see Pool 2001.
5. For some of the complexities in Somalia, see Adam 1999; Pérouse de Montclos 2001; and Abbink 2003.
6. The cost of the war for Ethiopia was about US\$ 3.7 billion, according to an Ethiopian government adviser (*Daily Monitor*, Addis Ababa, July 17, 2001). This seems a rather high figure. An official estimate of the war costs for Eritrea was not released.
7. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2440093.stm>
8. See IRIN news report of November 25, 2002: "Almost a sixth of harvest lost", <http://sustainable.africa.com/stories/200211250238.html>
9. It started in Eritrea with the October 2000 'Berlin Manifesto' by 13 prominent Eritrean academics and professionals against the president's authoritarian rule. It found support in wider Eritrean society. See also BBC's news report of May 31, 2001, "Dissent surfaces in Eritrea" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1362822.stm>), and "Eritrea defends clampdown", October 10, 2001; (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1591835.stm>).
10. As confirmed to me by a Scandinavian researcher with contacts in high places in both Eritrea and Ethiopia (October 10, 2001, personal communication).
11. The new Ethiopian president (as from October 2001) is much weaker than the previous one. Cabinet ministers have been made more subservient to the prime minister, and the leading party EPRDF was 'purged' of opponents after the March-April 2001 crisis (Paulos 2001). In early 2003 there seemed to be a new central party in the making that would effectively dissolve the TPLF/EPRDF and create a national 'unity party'.
12. The UNMEE website never published a map of the operational area, in contrast to other UN peace-keeping missions. When contacted, the UNMEE spokespersons always claim that there is no map available.
13. As from October 2002 the new UN force commander is General Robert Gordon of the United Kingdom.
14. Which is indeed very difficult, owing to the shaky legal status of the so-called 'pertinent colonial treaties' mentioned in Article 4 of the December 8 Agreement between Ethiopian and Eritrea signed in Algiers. Without bilateral negotiations and a show of mutual goodwill there will not be a precise and acceptable border, even apart from the unsolved problem of Irob-land.
15. Interviews in Addis Ababa with people from Irob and visitors to the area in 2000 and 2002. See also Souba Hais 1998: [www.geocities.com/~dagmawi/NewsJan99/Back](http://www.geocities.com/~dagmawi/NewsJan99/Back)



ground\_Irob.html#TO); Ad-Hoc Committee of Zalambesa-Irob Community, "Zalambesa: A contextual background note of the Gulo-Makeda and Irob area", Arlington, VA, March 3, 2001 (contact: Zalambesa\_irob@yahoo.com). Two other statements are also relevant: a response after the April 13, 2002 border ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration: "Statement by the Zalambesa-Irob Region Committee on the boundary demarcation between Ethiopia and Eritrea announced on April 13, 2002"; ([www.geocities.com/malula86/ethiopian/zalambesa\\_irob\\_april16.html](http://www.geocities.com/malula86/ethiopian/zalambesa_irob_april16.html)) (accessed on April 17, 2002), and: "The Ethio-Eritrea Boundary Commission's decision regarding the Irob land and people", May 15, 2002, ([www.waltainfo.com/conflict/articles/2002/may/article3.htm](http://www.waltainfo.com/conflict/articles/2002/may/article3.htm)) (accessed May 20, 2002). The sovereignty over the Irob was already contested in the 1920s by Ethiopia and colonial Italy (see Zoli 1931). This was not necessarily because of the inhabitants wanting to be with Eritrea, as it was a territory colonised by a foreign power. Already at that time, the whole of Irob country was de facto under Ethiopia (see the map in Zoli 1931, grafico no. 3 between pp. 716 and 717). Zoli (1931:730) argues that on the basis of, for example, dialect difference and mode of life, the Irob were divided into two parts, the northern one of which should be with Eritrea.

16. It is no secret that Eritrea intensified contacts with Libya in late 1998, obtaining funds for arms purchases (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/280273.stm>) and with Egypt, a country whose consistent policy is to keep Ethiopia weak in view of the Blue Nile question. In the war, Egypt supplied military advisers and, possibly, air force personnel to Eritrea.
17. See "Bin Laden tied to Mogadishu massacre"; ([http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=24595](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=24595)). After the November 27, 2002 terrorist attacks in Mombasa, Kenya, on an Israeli hotel and a departing El Al aeroplane, this group was also accused of being involved.
18. For EPLF support of OLF activities in the Gambela area in western Ethiopia, see Young, 1999:327.
19. See the AFP news message of July, 7 2001, "Eritrea 'stirring trouble' in Somalia", where Somali 'warlord' Osman Hassan Ali accused Eritrea of supplying the Transitional National Government with arms.
20. "Ethiopia admits Somali forays", BBC News, February 24, 2003; (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/fr/-/2/hi/africa/2795077.stm>).
21. Eritrea's indirect support for Somali al-Ittihad was asserted in 1999 in the report to the US House of Representatives: "US policy options in the Horn of Africa", by then US assistant secretary for African affairs, Susan Rice (May 26, 1999), (<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/erieth.htm>) Ethiopian government sources have routinely accused Eritrea of involvement with the Somali al-Ittihad: see a Reuters news report: "Ethiopia says doubts Eritrean commitment to peace", August 24, 1999.
22. See the BBC World Service news report of Friday June 18: 1999 "Mystery arms ship arrives in Somalia". Also Gilkes and Plaut 1999:42. See also the detailed 2002 UN experts' report (S/2003/223) on Eritrea's and Ethiopia's proxy involvement in Somalia; ([www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2003/umsc-som-25mar.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2003/umsc-som-25mar.pdf)) especially pp. 24f.
23. See BBC news item of May 23, 2000: "Free rein for Eritrean opposition", (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/760503.stm>)
24. The Kunama, however, have serious cause to bring their situation to the attention of the general public and international organisations. There is a persistent in-migration of Tigrinya-speaking highlanders to Kunama land going on, together with confiscation of the ancestral lands without compensation. Serious tensions have arisen due to the differences in world views, Kunama reproaching the newcomers for usurping the land and treating its resources without any respect. Some observers, both Kunama and foreigners, fear a creeping 'ethnocide' on this people. This may be exaggerated but there is certainly a danger to Kunama culture, land and traditions, and Eritrean state policy does not do much to protect the economic and cultural rights of this people. One (diaspora) Kunama internet website provides quite alarming news on this group ([www.eritrean-kunama.de](http://www.eritrean-kunama.de)) but independent confirmation is difficult to find. See Naty 2003 for an insightful recent study of Kunama problems.

25. "Statement on the Current Situation in the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict", Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 4, 1999.
26. "Voice of the broad masses of Eritrea" in Tigrinya, as monitored by BBC Monitoring, June 18, 2001.
27. See "New rebel force in Eritrea". BBC news, May 2, 2003 (accessed on July 23, 2003 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2995873.stm>). See also note 25.
28. Report of the BBC Monitoring Service, June 21, 2001, taken from the Somali newspaper *Ayaamaha*.
29. See "Opposition alliance establishes leadership, vows to topple Isayas"; (<http://allafrica.com/stories/200210240221.html>) and "Ruling party slams Eritrean opposition meeting in Ethiopia"; (<http://allafrica.com/stories/200209300335.html>). Whether the ENA can rally significant support from outside remains to be seen, despite promises made by Yemen, Sudan and Ethiopia for material resources. The declarations about the armed wings of the various movements within the ENA are still largely rhetoric, and the gun-bearing supporters that they may have in no way pose a threat to the Asmara regime. In addition, the decisive factor in the future development of the ENA into a movement of any substance will probably be the Ethiopian regime, who will also want to keep a strong measure of control over the Alliance.
30. A commentary overstating this case is: "Renewal of the EPLF-TPLF Alliance: What prospects?" July 15, 2000, on the Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict Page website, ([www.geocities.com/eureka/park/5875](http://www.geocities.com/eureka/park/5875)).
31. Nor by former leading TPLF members who came to oppose Prime Minister Meles. For example, Gebru Asrat, the former governor of Tigray Region, has said that "Ethiopia's rights to the ownership of Assab should be respected" (cited in the independent Ethiopian newspaper *T'obbia*, August 15, 2002).
32. An article in the Ethiopian business weekly *Fortune* of March 17-24, 2002 states that about 100 000 compensation claims (!) were already gathered to be filed at the court in The Hague. This figure seems highly exaggerated.
33. Compare the story of the wealthy Sikh exile, comfortably established in Canada and donating funds to the radical armed Khalistan movement in India, in Anderson, B. 1992. "Long-Distance Nationalism", Amsterdam: CASA: 11-12. This example illustrates a now general pattern, and instances can be multiplied since the upsurge of rebel and terrorist movements in the past couple of years.

## Appendix

List of insurgent movements and rebel organisations in Ethiopia and Eritrea (not complete; the country of operation is in brackets). Some of them (\*) were active in proxy wars, but they are best seen as occasional, opportunistic allies of the two governments. I have not listed all the parties involved, especially the Sudanese.

### *Direct Creations and Allies of Ethiopia*

Afar Red Sea Democratic Front (Eritrea-Ethiopia) \*

Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front (formerly: Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea) (Eritrea) \*

### *Occasional Allies of Ethiopia*

Eritrean Popular Democratic Liberation Front (Eritrea) \*

Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (Eritrea-Ethiopia) \*

Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Kunama (Ethiopia-Eritrea)

Eritrean Democratic Resistance Movement (Eritrea)  
Eritrean Liberation Front or Jebha (Eritrea): \*  
ELF-Revolutionary Command or Sagem (Eritrea)  
ELF-National Command (Eritrea)  
ELF-General Command (Eritrea)  
Rahanwein Resistance Army (Somalia) \*  
United Somali Congress-Peace Movement (Somalia, in Beledweyn area) \*  
United Somali Congress (Somalia, led by Hussein H. Bod) \*  
Somali Salvation Democratic Front (Somalia, in Puntland area)  
Somali Popular Movement (Somalia, in Kismayo area) \*

### ***Occasional Allies of Eritrea***

Oromo Liberation Front (Ethiopia) \*  
Ogaden National Liberation Front (Ethiopia) \*  
Al-Ittihad al-Islami (Somalia) \*  
Somali National Alliance (Somalia, led by Hussein M. Farah 'Aydeed')\*  
Somali Salvation Alliance (Somalia, led by Ali Mahdi Mohammed)\*  
Somali Popular Movement (Somalia, led by Omar Jess)\*  
Somali National Front (Somalia, led by Omar H. Mohammed) \*

### ***Allies Unknown or Unclear***

Akkele-Guzay People's Movement (Eritrea, a very small group, seemingly no longer active).  
Democratic Front for the Liberation of Setit and Gash (Eritrea).  
Eritrean Jihad Movement (Eritrea-Sudan, links with the Sudanese government, Middle Eastern and other Jihad groups).

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