

• **We are all the Losers: Looking at the Effects of the Ethiopia–Eritrea Border Dispute**

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It is difficult if not impossible for most of us to assess the effects, including the loss of human lives, the displacement of a large number of people, and the impact on economies, of the still unsettled Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict – a most unfortunate war that is said to be a result of border dispute. To make such an assessment and be able to present relatively balanced figures on the repercussions of the war, one would certainly require a proper and probably lengthy study, including access to government documents in both countries and the cooperation of officials. In general terms, however, it is clear (as many observers have indicated) that if it is allowed to continue the war will have a devastating effect on the people of the two countries. Additionally, based on the experience of the past two years, one might also argue strongly that this unexpected war has deeply affected both day-to-day interactions and general social relationships between the people of two countries – so badly that deep seated hostility has reached a point that may be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse.

One cannot deny the existence of the tensions and resentments towards each other that have been present since the inception of the very idea of a separate state of Eritrea. During the 1980s - which marked the intensification of the armed struggle between EPLF/TPLF and the former dictatorial regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam - various hostile elements (including the distortion and misrepresentation of events and the history of Ethiopia, and quite disparaging statements directed at both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian historians), were used as tools to gain sympathy and assistance from the international community with the overall goal of achieving an independent state of Eritrea and helping the TPLF to take power in Addis Ababa. In the same period, both EPLF and TPLF worked successfully to gain not only sympathy but also the financial, material and moral support they needed from the West. Later, the early 1990s, with “new leaders” in Ethiopia and Eritrea – at the time, regarded as role models for African leadership – marked a dramatic revival of diplomatic and economic relations with the west.

What is obvious to many of us today is that the desired objectives of both movements (being in power) have been achieved, but without any thought for the future direction of the countries and people they wanted to lead. That is, without developing the sort of vision that is an indispensable part of leadership. Instead, those in power appear to have had a hidden, deep-seated animosity towards each other, which they did not want to disclose to their people. Instead, the two leaders made countless statements in their endless speeches and in addressing many regional and international gatherings, saying they were peacemakers. There would never, never be war between the countries under their leadership; they were not only peacemakers in their own countries but also forces for regional stability, in countries including the war-torn Somalia, the Sudan and even further, to Central and probably even Southern Africa. They said they had taken power because they wanted to free their people from endless conflicts and from the yoke of military dictatorship; to bring an accelerated economic prosperity; and to make people in the region happy and proud of their countries and themselves. Nevertheless, Ethiopians remain unconvinced. Instead, they resisted from the beginning, in an attempt to make their views clear to the international community. There was opposition to the arrangements and agreements between the two regimes in Asmara and Addis Ababa, as well as to the ethnic policies of the Ethiopian government. Since the change of power in Ethiopia that coincided with the independence of Eritrea, Ethiopians, especially the Amhara, have become outcasts, rarely given higher level governmental responsibilities and kept in the dark regarding arrangements between the two countries. In fact, little or no information was given to “outsiders”. Ethiopians who were worried about the new directions being taken in Ethiopia were constantly accused by the regimes in Addis Ababa and Asmara, and also by donor countries and major NGO communities, of either being associated with Mengistu's regime or of regretting the loss of power by the Amhara, who had been in power throughout most of Ethiopia's history.

After fighting as hand and glove with TPLF against Mengistu's regime, Eritreans (living both in Ethiopia/Eritrea and abroad) had at least a brief period in which they could enjoy freedom of movement. Also they, rather than Ethiopians, held the highest governmental and non-governmental positions in Ethiopia. They also had the privilege of advising and helping the TPLF (then called the Ethiopian Transitional Government) to craft strategies and policies in an effort to keep Ethiopians out of Ethiopia's national and international activities and affairs. As can be seen from speeches and papers presented by Eritreans at many conferences devoted exclusively to Ethiopia, as well to the media in Africa, Europe and the United States, Eritrean intellectuals and professionals indeed behaved as the uncontested official representatives of Ethiopia. Eritreans today probably regret the many roles they played on behalf of the government of Ethiopia during the early 1990s. It is becoming clear that their behavior was not based on a rational assessment and a responsible attitude towards the future wellbeing of the people of these two countries.

Apart from protesting about human rights issues, Ethiopian intellectuals and professionals, on the other hand, produced little or no effective efforts to organize an effective, operational and respected voice capable of embracing Ethiopians and their issues. It is unfortunate that no effort was made to create and use such a vital and indispensable force, capable of linking the energy, knowledge, skills and expertise of Ethiopians living at home and throughout the international community. It is probably not wrong to see the past 15 or 20 years as a missed opportunity. The past two decades have been experienced by Ethiopians as a period of humiliation, characterized by a drastic reduction in the status of Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the international community - with increasing dependence on the outside world and external charities. Unfortunately many Ethiopians have spent this painful period mainly haggling with each other over largely irrelevant matters such as the future leadership of social and political groupings or organizations.

One of the frustrating factors that contributed greatly to the inability of opposing Ethiopian groups to form and shape a united force capable of challenging the regimes in Addis Ababa and Asmara has been the open handed support provided by western countries to both Ethiopia and Eritrea, while little or no attention was given to Ethiopians with opposing views. Western governments were eager to assist the two leaderships, because they were convinced they could do business with them. Long-term political stability in Ethiopia and Eritrea was expected. The presence and the active involvement of the United States was more obvious than that of other countries and its financial assistance, especially to Ethiopia, was said to be quite substantial. US-Ethiopia relations, however, were not limited to diplomatic relations and economic assistance. The United States was actively and publicly engaged in strengthening and shaping a combined regional force involving Uganda and the two countries that were now in conflict with each other. This was aimed at weakening and replacing the Islamic government of Sudan with "moderate" individuals or groups willing to work cooperatively with the west and embrace its economic models. It is also believed that, despite internal tensions and human rights violations, the IMF and the World Bank were and probably still are more open to lending large amounts to the Ethiopian government than to other governments in the region. Yet despite the involvement of donor countries and the provision of substantial financial and military support, and the widespread presence of western institutions and NGOs (the latter were largely in Ethiopia), it would be wrong to assume that donor countries were interested in the general well-being of the people, the issues facing rural people and the urban poor of the two countries. In fact it was evident that foreign powers had little or no interest in helping to craft a reliable framework or final agreements regarding Eritrean independence that would have been conducive to a lasting peace. There was also little interest in the many other issues related to future relations and cooperation between the two countries. Since the change of power in May 1991, as far as one can recall, no single western country or department official has shown any concern for human rights violations in either country. No concern was shown when thousands of Ethiopians were forced into exile; when those few Ethiopian public figures who managed to escape Mengistu's seventeen years of terror were forced to languish (some have already lost their lives) in prison because their views differ from those in power. To convince the world, government officials call their victims criminals. They say these people have been jailed because of criminal activities. Government officials display weapons (secretly placed by government representatives in the backyard or house of a political opponent of the regime) to journalists and the media. Meanwhile Ethiopians have continuously attempted to make the international community aware of Ethiopians who have been killed or jailed and kidnapped or are victims of political repression by the governments in Addis Ababa and Asmara. Multiple sorts of evidence, including lists of names of victims of human rights violations, have periodically been presented to various western ministerial departments and

concerned major western institutions and NGOs by national and international human rights organizations. The leaders of donor countries, however, remain reluctant to become involved; they have kept a deaf ear to the daily cries of Ethiopians.

Despite the persistent outcry of Ethiopians regarding massive human rights violations, the present leaders seem to have had the power to convince both diplomats and the rest of the international community, saying it was their predecessors who committed inhuman acts; but they themselves claim to be the backbone of human rights organizations. And despite what must have been longstanding and growing animosity, both leaders were also capable of creating the impression for the outside world that their mutual friendship and cooperation would last for generations. Just three weeks before the official outbreak of war, when foreign journalists asked if he were aware of tensions and anxieties between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, indicated that he saw such rumors and gossip as the talk and dreams of enemies, of those who have nothing better to do than spread rumors. He said they were jealous of Ethiopia-Eritrea, and their strong and immovable friendship built on the basis of brotherhood and respect for each other. But this wasn't true. The two leaders were engaged in making fools of us. The deep-seated animosity that had existed for many years became too much to cover up. It exploded in May 1998, spreading throughout the two countries in a highly accelerated fashion. Many friendly donor countries reacted to this news with surprise and disbelief. For the United States, the outbreak of the war was more than disappointing – it was a slap in the face. But for the INF government in Khartoum, the news was received with relief; it expressed its joy by simply saying “you see, Allah is always with us.”

Inside sources stated that, because the hate and hostile attitudes towards each other were so strong and had built up over many years, the war between the two leaders will not come to a peaceful end. They added that a peaceful resolution of the conflict would definitely affect the existing power structure and in fact the very chance of survival of each leadership. Thus, the two leaders must insist on maintaining the current course, at least their war of words.

Looking at the overall outcome and the painful conditions and experiences that the people of the now two countries have lived through in the last three decades, one tends to conclude that we are all the losers, with little or no prospect of future recovery. The goals that were said to be expected to come from war did not materialize. The obvious results of these years are instead the continuation of the war itself, the loss of more and more human lives, and the production and dissemination of elements that help the leaders to increase the animosity among the people, to help perpetuate their own power. And people listen to the leaders; they are used as instruments.

What has been more surprising, depressing and even shocking in recent times, however, is the instrumentality of intellectuals in the production and distribution of material that has helped to worsen the already existing animosities among the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. The irrational approach of Ethiopian and Eritrean intellectuals and professionals to the complex and longstanding issues that face us, as well as the people at large, strongly indicates our willingness and readiness to be used as followers and tools of those in power who are interested in keeping people in conflict. We also seem to be incapable and/or unwilling to engage with each other and to look for ways to discuss our problems rationally and constructively. The continuation of the war at home and the increasing animosity towards each other have greatly contributed to the breakup of many marriages (even among those living abroad); many people who used to be good friends do not see each other anymore. But is this the best way to influence people? Is this what we want? In the search for possible strategies to peace and future relations between the people of the two countries, the education we received both at home and abroad (some of us with advanced degrees) seems in some cases more a detriment both to us and the people at large than a force that delivers the anticipated positive contribution.

It appears that our emotion has become exceedingly dominant over our rationality. The techniques we use in attempting to explain our views are often harsh, destructive to both current and future relations between people. Our views and attitudes towards each other are so full of hate and cruelty that we may not be able to reverse or repair the damage in the near future. Ninety percent of writings presented in various newspapers, magazines and web sites for reading or, rather intended for a deeper understanding of their grievance with a particular intention of getting sympathy from the international community contain only emotions and

animosities. Texts seem to be written only with the objective of winning the battle and controlling the disputed area; defeat and kill the targeted enemy and then organize a huge party to congratulate those who achieved that. Such emotional articles, full of distortions about day to day events in our home countries and attempting to humiliate leaders and other government officials, are being produced and distributed (in my view) without the slightest thought of any responsibility for short and long-term consequences.

Of course people are being killed and others are suffering as a result of the endless conflict, but again, the loss of so many lives, the painful experiences and events are a clear result of our own creations, deeds and hostile attitudes towards each other. In other words, everything we have to deal with at present is the result of our own desire to achieve certain goals, spurred on by the force of emotion, whatever the cost. The question is again: Have our actions put us where we want to be?

As an illustration, Professor Jordan Gebre-Medhin's characterizes (Ethiopian Review, Feb. 1993: 27) those who disagree with measures undertaken against the Ethiopian people and with the political and territorial arrangements reached between the two regimes as "Ankober chauvinist," constituting a repressive campaign to make their dream of greater Ethiopia a reality. Professor Jordan's article contains many disparaging statements, which does not encourage non-Eritrean readers. Professor Jordan concludes his article by instructing us to read his book for more information.

In the more recent *Eritrean Studies Review* (volume 3, number 2, 1999, published by Red Sea Press, Inc., and devoted to the Ethiopia-Eritrea war, with articles exclusively written by Eritreans), Professor Jordan again appears to make all possible efforts to add fuel to the existing tensions between the government in Addis Ababa and the Oromo people. In his attempt to convince us, Professor Jordan sees the source of the current Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict as the TPLF's ambition for the "revival of Tigrayan hegemony" as seen under Emperor Yohannes IV. Jordan states that "Emperor Yohannes and the TPLF made extensive use of the Oromo peasants as the bulk of their army in their invasion of Merb Melash (Eritrea). The centralized states of Emperor Yohannes were built by slave trade from the populous Oromo region. The slaves were shipped to Europe and North America through the Red Sea." To be able to control Eritrea. He sees exactly the same activity and the same objective as the overall aim of TPLF today: to gain and control access to the Red Sea. Jordan concludes by saying that "already under this Eritrean leadership two regimes in Ethiopia have fallen. If history teaches a lesson it is that the TPLF is marching headlong toward the same abyss into which its predecessors have fallen". Regrettably, in his review of Jordan's article in the same volume, Professor Tekie Fessehazion, Editor of ESR, cites this article as "insightful."

It is not at all clear to me which period of Eritrean leadership and previous leadership in Addis Ababa Jordan refers to. Jordan of course mentions names of authors, including well-known names who write on Ethiopian history. But specific books, years and pages are not provided. Such vague, unverifiable analysis can hardly be expected from individuals such as Jordan. In fact it comes across as a bit of creative writing, with bizarre references intended to blackmail both the past and present leadership of Ethiopia. Such distortion and hostility suggests a total immaturity. One thing is clear: this sort of thing will never bring people closer. We will all remain the losers, without being able to help either ourselves or the people.

Another illustration of the growing animosity between the people of the two countries is the following. Since the war erupted, the official representatives of the two countries have been engaged in highlighting and explaining the causes that led to war to the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities residing in the West, to the best of their ability. Such gatherings are typically organized with the intention of arousing emotions, as well as getting moral support and financial contributions from the communities. The officials of each country do their best to convince community members to be on their side, and to share their attitude that their government has been forced to armed confrontation by an aggressor and invader, to defend the country and the well-being of the people.

I myself have attended some of these meetings, both in Europe and in the United States. Two or three weeks before one of the events in which I was a participant, a videocassette showing the bombardment of Mekele was distributed to the Ethiopian community. It graphically pictures the ravaging effects of the war, such as bodies of children who have been killed and wounded. During the meeting the Ambassador and other officials, who had come a long distance to inform us, asked the conference audience if we had already seen

the film of the bombardment. A good number of people said “yes”, with a tone of sadness. But one young lady, who said she was from Mekele, said loudly, “yes, I saw it ten or more times.” She went on to tell her story very emotionally to the attentively listening government officials and conference audience: “I was married to an Eritrean man and have three children. Immediately after I saw the videocassette, however, it became clear to me how cruel those people can be. I realized my three children will never, never be a part of me. Because they have an Eritrean father. Two weeks ago, I left my children with their father. I am now living alone. And I will never, see them again”. Because her emotion was so high there was silence for some time among conference participants, and probably many sad emotions as well.

There are many more such instances; we have been witnessing them since the outbreak of the Ethiopia–Eritrea war. Meanwhile it seems to me we have been imposing a restriction on ourselves, so that we do not ask questions, such as whether our current enterprise of spreading hate and animosity against each other is the best way to fulfill our goals and dreams. In my view, they are not. As the past four decades have shown, not even a small section of the population of the two countries has experienced a positive effect as a result of the struggle or the animosity. Instead, almost all of us have clearly been the losers. Not only have we lost family members, also we have witnessed the repeated humiliation of our country and people as a result of frequently returning famine and hunger; and growing poverty, partly as consequence of the diversion of money and human resources into the military. Finally, we have seen the weakening and loss of our many common social and cultural elements. In summary, recovery would be easier if we could work together, but it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to restore the many sided cultural forces that have tied us together over centuries, unless we are willing to begin approaching our issues and problems rationally and to take measures to correct the mistakes we have made.

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- **This paper was written in early 2000, and was published in Ethiopian Review Magazine and other Ethiopian newsletters at that time. Although the text is almost a decade old, the issues analyzed are still current and fresh.**