# Historical and social issues behind the Eritrean-Ethiopian border war

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The month-old border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea continued with the eruption of heavy fighting around the border town of Zalambessa on June 9. This conflict in the Horn of Africa pits two of the continent's poorest nations against one another. Both are ruled by leaders of movements that proclaimed themselves fighters for national liberation, and, at times, even socialism. What the fighting has demonstrated, and not for the first time, is the inability of movements based on nationalism to provide a way forward for the oppressed African masses.

Hundreds of soldiers have died on both sides and towns and villages have suffered aerial bombardment. In one of the bloodiest episodes, an Eritrean fighter plane dropped a cluster bomb into a schoolyard in the border town of Mekele, killing a dozen children. As parents and other villagers ran to the site, the plane returned, dropping another bomb and killing scores more. Ethiopia also claims that Eritrean troops have driven thousands of peasants out of the region, expropriating their land.

Eritrea's main airport in Asmara, meanwhile, has been strafed and bombed by Ethiopian MiG jets. Eritrea's foreign ministry blames Ethiopian forces for launching the attacks and claims the fighting is taking place on its territory.

The ostensible cause of the war is a dispute over 160 square miles of mountainous territory claimed by both countries. Embodied in this conflict, however, is the entire historical legacy of colonialism and the inability of the African bourgeoisie to overcome its continuing grip over the continent.

The Eritrean regime of President Issaias Afwerki bases its claim to the disputed territory on an agreement signed between Italian colonialism and the Ethiopian monarchy in the period preceding Italy's overrunning of the entire country. Before Mussolini established his "Italian Ethiopian Empire," beginning in 1936, Eritrea had served as Italy's base of operations in northeast Africa, ruled as a colony and occupied by Italian troops. The borders that existed between it and Ethiopia were determined by continuous acts of aggression on Italy's part and the desperate attempts of the Ethiopian regime to resist the encroachments of Italian colonialism.

That a movement which proclaimed itself the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) should stake its claim to sovereignty on the authority of treaties extorted by Italy at the beginning of the century is an expression of the bankruptcy not merely of this regime, but of bourgeois nationalism throughout the continent.

All of the movements that took power during the period of decolonization after World War II shared one thing in common. They held the borders inherited from European colonialism as sacrosanct. In reality, these frontiers divided the continent into an irrational patchwork of territories that corresponded not to any economic geographical or linguistic logic, but rather to the carve-up of Africa by rival European powers. To challenge them, however, was to call into question the right to rule of the aspiring national bourgeoisie, which had grown up under colonialism. This contradiction was the basic reason for the ultimate failure of all movements that advocated Pan Africanism.

The Organization of African Unity, which has always insisted on the immutability of these borders, has remained impotent in the face of the escalating conflict in the Horn of Africa. While the OAU is headquartered in Addis Ababa and its annual summit went into session in Burkina Faso in the midst of the crisis, the organization's deliberations have been largely eclipsed by Washington's attempts to broker a settlement between two regimes which it had proclaimed leaders in a US-sponsored "African renaissance."

The Eritrean regime is the product of a 30-year insurgency, Africa's longest war, which ended in both the region's breakaway from Ethiopia and the collapse of the

Soviet-backed military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. The insurgency was initiated in the early 1960s when the regime of Emperor Haile Sellassie abrogated limited autonomy granted to the region after it was joined to Ethiopia following World War II. In particular, local elites objected to the imposition of Amharic, the language of the south, as the official language. The effect was to limit the access of the Eritrean middle class, Tigrinya and Arabic-speaking, to government jobs and higher education.

Initially the insurgency was led by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), a group which based itself on a pan-Islamic ideology and found backing from the Arab states. The EPLF, however, gained clear ascendancy in the early 1980s. While it initially proclaimed its adherence to "scientific socialism," by the end of that decade it had won the tacit support of the Reagan administration, which broke from the 45-year-old US policy of supporting Ethiopian sovereignty in the territory.

The EPLF's military victories in the north went hand in hand with the advances of the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front, which had begun as a movement which also sought regional autonomy or independence, but in the end cobbled together an Ethiopian-wide alliance against the dictatorship. By May 1991 it marched into power, installing its leader, Meles Zenawi, who continues to rule to this day.

Neither country has yet recovered from the effects of the 30 years of warfare and the ravages inflicted first by the Haile Sellaissie regime and then the Mengistu dictatorship. Ethiopia, with 58 million inhabitants, has an annual per capita income of $100. It remains a dirt-poor agricultural country which is almost totally dependent upon coffee exports and which bears the burden of a $10 billion foreign debt incurred by the country's former dictators.

Eritrea, which formally achieved independence in a UN-sponsored referendum in May 1993, has a population of 3.5 million. Despite the flurry of economic deals signed with foreign capitalists in the first years of independence, it has not been able to raise per capita annual income above $200.

The roots of the present conflict lie not merely in colonialism's historical legacy, but also in imperialism's ongoing machinations in the region. The Horn of Africa has long been viewed by the US as a strategic area of the globe because of its proximity to the sea lanes linking the oilfields of the Persian Gulf with the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

First Washington sought to assert its hegemony over the region by backing Haile Sellaisse and, following his ouster, the US adopted the Somali dictatorship of Siad Barre. In 1992, under the pretense of famine relief, it deployed tens of thousands of US combat troops in Somalia.

Since the debacle suffered by the US forces in Somalia, Washington has attempted to forge close ties with the former guerrilla leaders holding power in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Both have long since shed their socialist pretensions, embracing free market policies and foreign investment. In Eritrea in particular, foreign capitalism has fostered the conception that the small country's coastal facilities, its potential oil wealth and its relatively small population can serve as ideal engines for economic growth tied to multinational capital.

Eritrea's economic trajectory has led to growing tensions with neighboring Ethiopia. Last year the regime in Asmara unilaterally decided to create its own currency, the nakfa, and stopped using the Ethiopian currency, the birr. Addis Ababa responded by demanding that all trade between the two countries be conducted in dollars. The economic warfare deepened with the Eritrean regime demanding that Ethiopia pay higher rates for the use of its port facilities, upon which the latter country depends for much of its trade.

The eruption of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war comes on the heels of the genocidal conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes region where rival elites have fought ethnic-based wars across national borders. It raises the threat of far wider conflicts in the volatile Horn of Africa. There are still no recognized borders between Ethiopia and Somalia, which previously exploited the Eritrean conflict to militarily assert its claim to the Ogaden. Yemen, meanwhile, has claimed sovereignty over the Dahlak Islands, off Eritrea in the Red Sea, where the prospect of substantial oil reserves has already raised regional tensions.