War resumes between Ethiopia and Eritrea

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20 February 1999

After an eight-month unofficial cease-fire, the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa has returned with a vengeance. Shooting began in the beginning of February in the Badme triangle, a desolate area of borderland that is claimed by both sides. It rapidly escalated to other parts of the border further east, including a disputed zone 70 kilometres from the major Eritrean port of Assab.

Ethiopia has brought in fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships. Whilst both sides are pouring out a barrage of media propaganda, it is clear that there are hundreds of casualties. Since the first round of the conflict in May and June last year, there have been repeated attempts by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the United States and the United Nations to broker a peace deal. This week the European Union are also attempting to intervene, backing an OAU peace plan that demands the Eritreans withdraw from the disputed border regions they occupy. Both sides are continuing to ignore the pleas for peace and have used the last eight months to build up their armaments.

Although they are among the poorest countries in the world, Ethiopia and Eritrea have scraped together hundreds of millions of dollars to buy aircraft and military equipment. Ethiopia bought eight Sukhoi 27 fighters and Eritrea a similar number of MiG-29 interceptors. Neither side has pilots or technicians for the planes and so they are hiring them from Russia and Eastern Europe. Both have purchased helicopters and helicopter gunships, and are as well building up ammunition and refurbishing existing aircraft and tanks.

What is remarkable about the war is that the two countries were until recently allies, formed out of movements fighting against the Soviet-backed military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which collapsed in 1991. The Eritreans had fought for 30 years, the longest war in Africa, and gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front had built an alliance with the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front, which together with other oppositional groups brought down the Mengistu regime in 1991 and formed the present Ethiopian government.

The leaders of both movements--Issaias Afwerki, now president in Eritrea, and Meles Zenawi, now prime minister in Ethiopia--once declared themselves to be socialists. By the 1990s they had embraced the free market and sought to attract foreign investment. Both were praised by the United States and hailed during President Clinton's visit earlier this year as the new type of African leaders who are prepared to do business with multinationals. Along with Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Ethiopia were cited as part of an "African renaissance"--countries that would further the imperialist interests of the US and Western powers in the continent. They received particular backing from Washington in its attempt to destabilise the neighbouring regime in Sudan.

The war exposes the hollow rhetoric of US and EU diplomacy. Until this month there was no attempt to place an arms embargo on the countries or to prevent them raising funds for war from their citizens throughout the world. None of the Western governments have any intention of halting the lucrative arms trade. Their concerns are sources of cheap raw materials, potential for investment in the region, and the strategic position of the Horn of Africa.

The war also serves to reveal the dead-end into which nationalism has dragged Africa. Until recently, peoples of both counties passed freely across the border. Now tens of thousands of Ethiopians who previously worked in Assab and the ports of Eritrea--Ethiopia has no sea access--have been sent home, and similar numbers of Eritreans expelled from Ethiopia.

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The disputed border has no rational economic or geographic basis. It was imposed by Italy under colonial occupation, when Mussolini used Eritrea as a base from which to take over the whole of Ethiopia.

The build-up to the present conflict was in 1997 when Eritrea, although its population is one-fifteenth that of Ethiopia's, unilaterally introduced its own currency. Eritrea's bid for more economic independence increased tensions over the port of Assab, traditionally the port for the whole of Ethiopia, and this escalated into disputes over the 1,000 kilometre-long border between the countries.

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