

# Ethiopian-Eritrean war draws in neighbouring states

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For the last two weeks, Ethiopian and Eritrean troops have been engaged in some of the bloodiest fighting of the year-long border war between the two neighbouring countries. Eritrea claims to have killed, wounded or captured 18,000 Ethiopians, while Ethiopia has spoken of 8,000 Eritreans being "put out of action" as they fight for control of high ground in the Horn of Africa.

Africa's forgotten war has become the largest "conventional" war in the world. It has involved more than half a million troops, hundreds of tanks and artillery pieces, and modern fighter aircraft. The entire 1,000-kilometre border has become a potential battlefield. At one point last March, 50,000 Ethiopians made a suicidal attempt to break the Eritrean lines by running across mined no-man's land through constant artillery, tank mortar and machine gun fire.

Eyewitness accounts of battles have spoken of scenes of thousands of dead Ethiopian soldiers strewn around, evoking the carnage of World War I. In most modern wars, for every soldier killed three are wounded. In this war, where even a modicum of medical facilities is lacking, the ratio is more like one to one. Tens of thousands of soldiers have died on three fronts along the border.

The fighting has erupted in fits and starts. There have been several fruitless international attempts to broker a deal. Both sides accepted an Organisation of African Unity (OAU) peace plan, but each has interpreted the details of the proposed withdrawal differently. Ethiopia says Eritrea must withdraw from all disputed territory. Eritrea says the withdrawal only applies to the Badme region.

With no diplomatic solution in sight, the expectations are that there will be further large-scale battles before the rainy season starts in July.

The two neighbours first went to war last year. Yet for many years since the late 1970s, the presidents of the two

countries were close personal friends and had fought side by side in a guerrilla war against Mengistu Haile-Mariam, then president of Ethiopia, which had incorporated the province of Eritrea into Ethiopia in 1962. They had agreed that Eritrea would become independent.

In 1993, two years after Mengistu's Moscow-backed regime was overthrown, Eritrea duly became independent after a war lasting nearly 30 years, but without a properly drawn up settlement. The ownership of many things, including long sections of the borders, was never agreed.

The two countries became client states of the US, with America one of only a handful of states to establish an embassy in Eritrea. The capital Massawa occupies a strategic position immediately opposite Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea, commanding the route to and from the Suez Canal. Ethiopia thus became the biggest sub-Saharan recipient of US aid. But the economic paths of Ethiopia and Eritrea soon began to diverge. Ethiopia, a large landlocked country of 58 million people, reduced essentially to an agricultural economy, sought a protected market for its coffee and cotton. Eritrea, a country of 3.5 million people with off-shore oil reserves, sought to become the region's Singapore, attracting inward investment to make processed goods for export.

In desperate need of revenues and fearing that it would become a pool of cheap labour for Eritrean industry and face competition from its goods, Ethiopia imposed tariffs.

The establishment of the state of Eritrea in its turn gave rise to the need for state revenues that could only be extracted from trade across national borders. Consequently, Eritrea, dependent for its livelihood on its income from its two ports on the Red Sea, Massawa and Assab, introduced its own currency, the *nakfa*, and demanded a one-to-one conversion with the Ethiopian *birr*. This would have placed landlocked Ethiopia at an enormous disadvantage, since all Ethiopian goods have to go through Eritrea to reach international markets.

Ethiopia demanded that trade between the two should be carried out in hard currency. This wrecked trading relations between the two countries. Eritrea expelled Ethiopian officials from its ports and Ethiopia retaliated by expelling several thousand Eritreans from its northwest province and diverting trade from Eritrea to Djibouti.

Within four years of an amicable independence, the economic disputes between the two countries became a full-scale war. Border disputes broke out in Badme, a remote but fertile area said to contain gold and industrial minerals, sparking off this tragic and futile war. It has brought economic ruin to two of the poorest countries in the world, as they spent millions rearming.

Whereas only a few years ago, the US dollar bought two Ethiopian *birr*, it now buys eight. This has had a devastating impact on the standard of living, with a widening gap between the rich and poor and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

Real GDP per capita is US\$960 for Eritrea and US\$427 for Ethiopia. Average annual income in Ethiopia declined from \$165 in 1990 to \$153 in 1993, while daily calorific consumption is 1,600. Less than 25 percent of the population have access to clean drinking water, 19 percent to sanitation, 46 percent to health services and only 35 percent of adults are literate.

The war threatens the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state as Eritrea has provided support for Ethiopia's own separatist movements: the Oromo Liberation Front based in northern Kenya, the Ogaden National Liberation Front and the Islamist al-Itihad, based in Somalia.

The war has now spilled over into neighbouring Somalia, a country that has largely disintegrated in the wake of the political machinations of the various imperialist powers during the colonial and Cold War eras. The IMF interventions in the 1980s wrecked Somalia's pastoral economy and led to the civil wars and famine that have bedevilled the country ever since.

There is no effective national government—it has been stateless since the civil war of the 1990s and the US invasion in 1992-93. The self-styled Somaliland Republic in the north declared independence in 1991. The rest of the country is controlled by a patchwork of 11 rival clan-based factions and their associated militias.

In their search for allies, Ethiopia and Eritrea have stepped up their support for opposing factions in Somalia. Eritrea has sent arms to Hussein Aideed, nominally the president of Somalia and son of the previous president, who also enjoys the support of the Ethiopian separatists.

The Ethiopian government is providing anti-Aideed factions with tanks, heavy weapons and other military equipment.

Ethiopia has occupied the south central town of Baidoa in Somalia, while its Somali ally, the Rhanwein Resistance Army, has gone in pursuit of the seriously diminished militia of Aideed and his Ethiopian rebel ally, the Oromo Liberation Front. The purpose of this invasion is to create a buffer zone and block Eritrean efforts to open a second front in the border war between the two states.

The war flames are fanning even further afield. Unrest has been reported on the Kenyan-Ethiopian border in the last week, when two Oromo Liberation Front "rivals" were killed and 13 others captured during an operation in northern Kenya by security forces that seized arms and ammunition.

Ethiopia has established a link with Sudan, to whom it was formerly opposed, hoping to build an alliance with Eritrean dissidents including Islamist groups. Eritrea likewise has made up with Sudan and forged links with Libya. Thus the US's latest protégés, hailed as the new renaissance men of Africa, have both formed alliances with America's chief bogeymen.

Meanwhile, the plight of the broad mass of the population intensifies. Ethiopia has appealed for some 400,000 tonnes of emergency food aid for the next six months to feed nearly 5 million people hit by the failure of the short rains. Thus far, the international community has promised less than one quarter of the requested aid.

In Somalia, the security situation is so bad that the UN's World Food Program was forced to divert two ships bringing food aid to the country before they could discharge their cargo.



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