

Fighting intensifies in the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict

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For the last two weeks a new round of heavy fighting has been under way between the famine-stricken African states of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ethiopia is pressing ahead with an offensive deep into Eritrean-held territory and its troops have taken the strategically important town of Barentu, which lies on the main road running west from the Eritrean capital, Asmara. Ethiopian forces claim to have captured the town for strategic reasons and insist they intend to withdraw later.

There are, however, indications that Ethiopia intends to press ahead and occupy their smaller neighbour, or at least seize the port at Assab and thus regain access to the Red Sea.

Fighting between the countries started in 1998, ostensibly over a disputed area on the border between them. The war continued in the border region until the present breakthrough by Ethiopia, with trench warfare on a massive scale. It is estimated that the number of troops involved totals over half a million. There are no accurate figures of casualties, but reports suggest that over 50,000 soldiers and civilians have died, a greater number than in the Boer War of 1899-1902—the last war in Africa on such a scale.

According to the Eritrean government the fighting has uprooted 550,000 people. Sudanese reports said that 4,000 Eritrean refugees had recently flooded into the eastern Kassala region of Sudan, in addition to 67,000 refugees already there. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan reported that 350,000 people in Eritrea needed "immediate humanitarian assistance." These figures are in addition to the number of people affected by famine in the south of Ethiopia. Annan stated that eight million people in Ethiopia were in need of assistance.

A major factor behind Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's military drive into Eritrea is the desire to divert attention from mounting opposition to his government. For their part, Western countries have cited the war as an excuse to cut back on desperately needed food aid.

The present war began as an economic struggle between the two countries, when Eritrea attempted to use its coastal facilities to attract trade and investment denied its poorer,

landlocked neighbour. Eritrea became an independent state in 1993, after Issaias Afwerki, the present president of Eritrea, and Meles Zenawi fought a protracted civil war against the Soviet-backed Ethiopian military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The United States has given both regimes military aid to support rebel movements in Sudan, but the West has done nothing to develop the economies of these countries, which are among the world's poorest. Ethiopia has huge debts to the IMF.

The United Nations imposed a 12-month arms embargo on Ethiopia and Eritrea, with Russia tabling a competing motion urging more diplomacy involving the Organisation for African Unity. When the UN Security Council finally adopted the embargo by a unanimous vote, Russia and France insisted that it should be reviewed in a year's time.

The embargo will have little impact in the short term, because both sides have stockpiled weapons for at least two years, including high-tech arms. Both sides are said to have spent about \$1million a day since the conflict began in May 1998. It is believed that much of the military equipment stockpiled was purchased from Russian and other Eastern European arms manufacturers.

The war is repeatedly described as "senseless". However this tragic conflict, and the nationalism which has been stoked up in these two countries, is entirely explicable when seen within the context of a century of imperialist intrigue and Stalinist betrayals. The Ethiopian and Eritrean people face the same dilemma that confronts Africa as a whole in the aftermath of the Cold War: either working people and peasants unite in their own economic and social interests against imperialism, sweeping aside irrational borders which were created by colonialism a century ago, or the assorted nationalist cliques, ex-Maoists-turned-free-marketeers and tribalist warlords who have emerged in the last decade will drag them into the wars now consuming a large part of the continent. Increasingly, as witnessed in Sierra Leone, Western governments will become involved on one side or the other, using humanitarian rhetoric to regain direct control over Africa's resources.

The Italians carved the coastal principality of Eritrea out of Ethiopia in the 1880s and 90s, after they failed to take Ethiopia in the scramble for Africa. Neighbouring Somalia was divided up between the British, French and Italians, and Djibouti grabbed by the French. This left only Ethiopia as a semi-feudal independent state, as the rival European powers struggled for control over the strategically important Red Sea coast, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. The importance of the region for the Western powers continues to this day, given the huge amount of oil still being shipped out of the Middle East.

The divisions and the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia have their origins in this bloody colonial conquest, rather than in language or cultural differences. In the 1930s the Italian fascists under Mussolini waged a brutal war against Ethiopia, using poison gas and aerial bombardment. They unified Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Italian part of Somalia into Italian East Africa. During World War II, Britain took military possession of the region, and its future became the subject of a dispute between the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union.

US policy in Africa and the Third World in general was to end direct colonial rule and encourage the local elites to set up nominally independent nation states, thereby weakening the grip of their European rivals and containing the wave of working class and anti-imperialist struggles that emerged after the war. Britain and France eventually gave way and by the early 1960s most African countries were granted independence.

A treacherous role was played by the Moscow and, later, Peking Stalinists in this process. At every stage Soviet and Chinese Stalinist regimes subordinated the interests of the workers and rural masses of Africa to their manoeuvres with the Western powers. Even where there were large Communist parties, as in Egypt and Sudan, they were directed to prop up the local bourgeois nationalist regimes.

In Ethiopia the interests of the US were eventually upheld against the British, who were prepared to allow Eritrea to become a UN trust administered by the Italians, as in neighbouring Somalia. The US wanted to build up a naval base on the coast, and accordingly Eritrea was merged with Ethiopia in 1952. With US military aid the empire of Ethiopian dictator Haile Selassie was propped up until 1974.

As the Cold War developed, Soviet interest in establishing military bases in Africa grew. Moscow began supplying the Somali regime with arms from 1963, which gained them naval access at Berbera to the Gulf of Aden. The next year war broke out between Ethiopia and Somalia over the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, whose population is predominantly Somali. Siad Barre, who seized power in a military coup in Somalia in 1969, was backed by the Soviet

Union. With Moscow's imprimatur, Barre claimed that his regime—one of the poorest in the world—was socialist.

In 1976 the Soviet Stalinists switched to backing the Ethiopian regime—which by then was also calling itself socialist—and began using this larger country as a naval base instead. With a huge amount of Soviet military equipment shipped into Ethiopia, including aircraft and training programmes, together with 17,000 Cuban troops, the Horn of Africa became the centre of the Cold War build-up on the continent. Somali forces were driven out of the Ogaden and Siad Barre gained support from the US, which gave military backing to his regime in the 1980s and took over the port at Berbera.

From 1976 onwards the Ethiopian military regime, known as the Derg, led by Mengistu Haile-Mariam, ruled by brutally suppressing the population. It was involved in a series of civil wars against separatist movements of Eritreans and Tigrayans, as well as the Oromos and Somalis. Soviet backing was never extended beyond military aid, and the country became even poorer than under Haile Selassie, plagued by drought and the famine of 1984 and 1985, in which hundreds of thousands perished.

With the collapse of the USSR, the nationalist movements—the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)—were able to defeat the Ethiopian regime of Mengistu. The TPLF, based in the northern part of Ethiopia next to Eritrea, eventually brought together other movements opposing Mengistu and established the present Ethiopian government under Meles Zenawi.

The popular revolutionary uprising which overthrew Haile Selassie in 1974 united working people, intellectuals and peasants against the regime and its US backers and was politically amorphous. Nationalism only came to dominate the political opposition after the military regime, which had immediately begun jailing and executing all opponents, was courted by the Moscow Stalinists and received their military backing. Even then both the EPLF and the TPLF employed socialist phraseology borrowed from Maoism to embellish their nationalist agenda. Since taking power both movements have abandoned their verbal allegiance to socialism, supporting free market economics and vying for support from Western governments.



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