

# Fragile peace in Ethiopia-Eritrea war

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Representatives from Ethiopia and Eritrea are taking part in further peace talks in Washington this week. A partial peace agreement was signed in Algiers on June 18 and both sides appear to have observed a cease-fire since that date.

The peace plan worked out by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations calls for the deployment of a UN force under the aegis of the OAU. This is to occupy a 25 kilometre (15 mile) wide buffer zone along the Eritrean side of the border until UN cartographers can demarcate the disputed frontier between the countries.

The war fought between the two countries since May 1998 is ostensibly over where the territory of Eritrea, a former province of Ethiopia, begins. It stands as the biggest war on African soil since the beginning of the twentieth century, involving over half a million troops fighting in protracted trench warfare. Whilst both countries are among the poorest in the world, the regimes in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Asmara (Eritrea) have spent millions on high-tech military hardware. At least 100,000 people have died in the fighting and over 750,000 Eritreans were displaced in the last period.

Under the OAU/UN agreement, Addis Ababa has largely won the demands it made after its military successes in May, when it penetrated far into Eritrea. Ethiopian troops will have to withdraw from Eritrean territory two weeks after the deployment of the UN force, but will remain in occupation until then. Disputed land under Ethiopian control before May 1998 will continue to be policed by Ethiopian troops. Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin called the agreement a "political victory for Ethiopia".

The signing of the accord was followed by secret talks to discuss the size and implementation of the UN mission that is to police the 1,000 kilometre (600 mile) border between the two countries. In attendance were

US envoy Anthony Lake, a three-member UN team sent by Secretary General Koffi Annan and representatives from the European Union and the OAU.

Throughout the talks Eritrean and Ethiopian representatives refused to meet face to face and tensions between the two countries remain high, with both governments whipping up nationalist sentiments and accusing the other of war crimes. Some analysts predict a resumption of fighting before a UN force can be implemented.

The *Washington Post* referred to the "deep frustration" felt by the Clinton administration, which had viewed "the two countries as part of a regional strategic bulwark against the influence of neighboring Sudan". It pointed out that Anthony Lake had shuttled back and forth between the two countries for more than a year.

Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki accused the West of "mute indifference" to the conflict and of supporting Ethiopia. Addis Ababa is equally suspicious of Western governments, only accepting the UN force if it was under the aegis of the OAU. An Ethiopian government spokesman stated they would not accept the participation of "certain countries" in the UN operation that are considered biased towards Eritrea economically and militarily. Economic rivalry between the two countries has been exacerbated by Western trade with Eritrea, which lies on the coast, at the expense of landlocked Ethiopia.

Notwithstanding the responsibility the regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea share for the war and the suffering it has brought to the people of the region, the disaster in the Horn of Africa is primarily the responsibility of the Western powers. They were happy to mute criticisms of these regimes—now described by Western commentators as "senseless"—when they were regarded as a bulwark against Sudan. Both regimes emerged out of national movements, which had received Western

military backing when they fought as allies against the pro-Soviet Ethiopian regime of Mengistu Haile-Mariam in the 1980s. Just before the war began, President Clinton praised both Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia and Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea as part of an "African renaissance".

Throughout the 1990s both regimes abandoned the socialist rhetoric they had used as guerrilla fighters and sought Western investment on the basis of implementing free market economics. Despite the poverty of the region and the huge problem of periodic droughts, the support they received has been minimal. Addis Ababa and Asmara responded by building up their armies and blaming each other, diverting attention from the growing economic crisis and debt. As soon as the war began many Western countries, including Britain and Germany, used it as an excuse to cut their aid budgets further.

Drought is once again seriously afflicting the region. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has issued a warning that it threatens the lives of up to 13 million people in the area. UNICEF's chief Carol Bellamy said it posed a "humanitarian crisis on an enormous scale", which could prove as serious as the famine of the 1980s. Eritrea was particularly affected because the war had stopped food crops being planted. Bellamy appealed for urgent financial support.

Only days before the UNICEF appeal, the UN released a report from a high-level task force on the Horn of Africa. The report states that with overseas aid currently so low—official figures put it at just \$15 per person per year—a new approach was needed to end the vicious cycle of famine and drought. Western governments would like nothing more than to abandon any responsibility for the people of the region, who the report says should "move towards greater self-reliance" and take "responsibility" for themselves.



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