

Fighting erupts over Eritrean armed incursion into Djibouti

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18 June 2008

Fighting broke out between Eritrean and Djiboutian forces on June 10-11 over Eritrea's incursion into the Ras Doumeira area in Djibouti, according to several media reports. Djibouti, which hosts major French and US military bases, reported that clashes had killed at least nine Djiboutian soldiers and wounded 108 others, while Eritrean officials did not give Eritrean casualty figures.

Djibouti is a strategically located country on East Africa's Indian Ocean coast near the Bab el-Mandeb straits.

An armed standoff had lasted for several weeks, after reports emerged from Djibouti of an Eritrean incursion about 20 kilometers into its territory on May 6. On May 8 Djibouti's ambassador to the United Nations, Roble Olhaye, told the BBC: "We wanted to urge the Security Council to take all necessary measures to prevent any kind of conflagration because the prospect of a real war is there."

Eritrea denied that a border incursion was taking place. Its UN Ambassador, Grirma Asmerom, told the BBC: "There is no such problem with Djibouti; we have never had a problem with Djibouti."

The Eritrea-Djibouti border has been a long-standing source of disagreement between the two countries, however. It was fixed by vague language in a 1901 treaty between France (then the colonial power in Djibouti) and Italy (the colonial power in Eritrea).

On May 19 Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki described talk of an Eritrean intervention as a "wild invention." *Africa Confidential* then reported on May 23 that Djibouti's President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh had requested arbitration by Qatar, a Persian Gulf state allied to Eritrea, and Egypt.

For some time the situation remained in limbo, with Eritrea denying that an incursion was taking place and

Djibouti seeking negotiations. According to Djiboutian officials, fighting broke out when Djibouti's troops turned down a request by the Eritrean force to return an Eritrean deserter.

France quickly issued a statement supporting Djibouti. On June 11 US State Department spokesman Gonzalo Gallegos said: "The United States condemns Eritrea's military aggression against Djibouti...These hostilities represent an additional threat to peace and security in the already volatile Horn of Africa. We call on both sides to cease all military hostilities immediately and to reduce tensions by withdrawing troops from the border area." On June 12 French Defense Minister Hervé Morin expressed "France's very great preoccupation" over the situation and assured Djibouti of France's "full and complete support."

France has 2,900 soldiers in Djibouti, as well as 10 Mirage-2000 fighter planes and 10 attack helicopters, and the US has 1,100 soldiers there. According to *Le Monde*, "France granted logistical and medical support to the Djiboutian forces, as well as military intelligence assistance" during the fighting. On June 13 the French government announced that it would send reinforcements to Djibouti and set up a military base near the combat zone.

The French Navy is also sending ships to Djibouti, and two vessels, a helicopter carrier and a frigate, are already in Djibouti's territorial waters. Defense spokesman Christophe Prazuck said, "For the moment, their mission is to provide logistical, medical, and intelligence support—there is no participation in combat."

Djibouti's Foreign Ministry issued a statement declaring, "The messages we are sending the Eritrean government are strong enough to make Eritrea

understand that if new aggression happens, the consequences will be severe.”

For its part, the Eritrean government has refused to comment on the dispute. However, on June 17 it posted a lengthy statement on its Ministry of Information web site by Mebrahtu Asfaha, titled “United States, Eritrea, and the Horn of Africa: The Political Rhetoric of Democracy and the Era of Hegemony—Lessons to be Learned.”

The statement makes clear that the Eritrean government is bitterly opposed to US policy, and particularly US support for Eritrea’s arch-rival Ethiopia, from which Eritrea seceded in 1993 after a 30-year civil war. The US has used Ethiopian troops since 2006 to carry out a proxy war in Somalia in favor of the US-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), against the Eritrean-backed Union of Islamic Courts (UIC).

Quoting at length from US government statements and think-tank analyses, Asfaha denounced US plans for extending its base in Djibouti and “the current, non-existing border issues between Eritrea and Djibouti, concocted by the US administration to serve its strategic interest in the region, and the conflicts in Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti are part of this grand evil design to control the Red Sea Basin.”

The fighting between Eritrea and Djibouti broke out on the heels of a June 9 peace agreement negotiated in Djibouti between the TFG and the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS), which is headquartered in the Eritrean capital of Asmara and includes senior members of the UIC.

The peace deal seems to be largely a dead letter. UIC spiritual leader Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, as well as the Al-Shabaab militia, reportedly rejected the agreement. Kulmiye Saeed, a political analyst based in Mogadishu, told Chinese wire service Xinhua: “The outcome of the talks was crafted with beautiful words but is unrealistic, given the fact that two armed groups oppose it [...] We cannot expect any real change on the ground.”

The fate of the negotiations, as well as the current Eritrea-Djibouti tensions, underscore the reckless and destabilizing character of the US intervention. Far from bringing peace to Somalia, the Ethiopian government’s brutal, US-backed invasion of Somalia has exacerbated pre-existing political tensions and increased the threat

of wider regional war.

Disputes continue between Ethiopia and Eritrea over their common border—which sparked one war between 1998-2000 that killed 70,000—and over Eritrea’s continuing support for separatist forces in the Ogaden (the region of Ethiopia near Somalia), which Ethiopia attacked in 2007. Ethiopia has a great interest in Djibouti, as Djibouti is its only available outlet to the sea; Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, has a direct rail link to the country.

The vital strategic position of the region increases the risk of war and of a rapid armed intervention by the imperialist powers. Eritrea’s positions in Djibouti place it directly across from the narrowest part of the Bab el-Mandeb straits, through which most westward-bound Persian Gulf oil tankers pass on their way to the Red and Mediterranean Seas.



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