

## Preliminary Analysis of Eritrean-Ethiopian War

Alasdair Guest

How unreal it seems to onlookers that former comrades in arms, who rid their countries of the brutal military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, should now be engaged in a bitter and bloody war over the precise position of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. A month of fighting has disrupted the lives of farmers and pastoralists, who should have been preparing for planting and shifting their herds before the annual rains. Tens of thousands are once more refugees facing hard times that they thought were behind them. Hundreds of civilians, including many children, have been killed or wounded, and casualties among the troops involved are, as usual, either unspoken or distorted. To the world at large the Eritrea - Ethiopia war came as a sad surprise, but conditions for its outbreak have been building almost since the victories over the Dergue in May 1991.

To a visitor, it is hard to see any difference once the border is crossed: the same soils, rocks, vegetation and people, and the same hardships of a peasant life where rains are uncertain, farming methods very primitive and the land has been devastated by years of neglect and abuse. The only outward sign is that in Tigray most people live in isolated farmsteads, whereas in Eritrea they cluster in villages surrounded by fields. That is a legacy of two different forms of land tenure. Centuries of feudalism in the Ethiopian empire forced families to eke a living from small holdings, from which as much as a half of produce went to their local lord or *ras*. Eritrea historically was not ruled from the Amhara heartland, and land was held communally and shifted from family to family through local agreement, hence the focal point of villages.

Like most borders in Africa, that between Ethiopia and Eritrea is a relic of colonialism, following major rivers, arbitrary straight lines and salients around major population centres. Italian invasion of Eritrea in 1890 was halted in its tracks by defeat at the hands of the feudal army of Emperor Menelik at the battle of Adwa in 1896. A series of treaties in the early 20th century, dominated by Italy and Britain, with its presence in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, drew the border that appears on maps commissioned by Haile Selassie and made by the US Defense Mapping Agency in the 1960s and 70s. Before these treaties and Italian colonization, no such entity as Eritrea existed. The area was a constantly changing mosaic of local domains and partial control by the Ottoman Empire and British dominated Egypt. Following the removal of Italian colonialism from Eritrea in 1941 by joint British and Ethiopian forces, an eleven-year British mandate gave way in 1952 to semi-autonomy in loose federation with Ethio-

pia. Manipulation of the Eritrean assembly by Haile Selassie ended with the complete annexation of the territory as a province within his empire in 1962.

Eritrea's existence today stems from the eventual unity of most peoples of the area against the exploitation and barbarism, first of Amhara feudalism and then the Bonapartist Dergue regime that emerged from the revolutionary overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974. The Dergue established its hegemony after the physical liquidation of all opposing left-wing parties and trades unions in the misnamed "Red Terror" of 1976-7. Although it was supported by the former Soviet Union, and instituted wide-reaching reform of land tenure and feudal taxation in Ethiopia, the Dergue was in no sense a left-wing or socialist force. It was a militaristic and corrupt bureaucracy, forced into reform by the popular uprising of the dominant peasant population. A long and bitter internal struggle between several Eritrea liberation movements, with different ethnic and political orientations was resolved in the form of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front. The EPLF, although dominated by a leadership drawn mainly from christian Tigringna-speaking people from the highlands, formed a non-sectarian front that unified opposition forces.

The other central participant in the eventual victory over the Derge was the regionalist Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front, founded by ultra-left survivors from the "Red Terror". Partly under the tutelege and material support of the EPLF, itself deadlocked in the later stages of the war against the Dergue, the TPLF formed a loose alliance with other ethnic and regionalist groups in Ethiopia in the form of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front. It was the rapid advance on Addis Ababa by the EPRDF, partly armed, tactically advised and supplied by the EPLF, that resolved the 30 year struggle in mid 1991. The Dergue was already in disarray and directionless following a series of major defeats in Eritrea by the EPLF, and the collapse of its Stalinist backers in the former Soviet Union. Although formal separation of Eritrea awaited the overwhelming support of Eritrean voters in a referendum in 1993, it was a de facto reality after the flight of Mengistu from Addis Ababa.

Many of the leaders of the EPLF and TPLF, notably their Secretaries, Issaias Afeworki and Meles Zenawi, are Tigrigna and were politically and militarily trained in China during the 1970s. In the TPLF this training took a peculiar direction, many voicing allegiance to the ultra-bureaucratic regime of Enver Hoxha in Albania, even after his death and the collapse of Albania's tragi-comic

Stalinism. Perhaps its attraction was a relentless inward-looking orientation, which indeed characterises the leadership of the EPLF (now Peoples' Front for Democracy and Justice - PFDJ). Unlike Hoxha, the EPLF/PFDJ and TPLF, have not voiced any socialist conviction whatsoever, at least since the early 1980s. The EPLF programme, adopted at a congress in 1987, was little different from those of many other national liberation movements. It promised the widest democracy, social equality (including gender equality) and freedom of association, speech and political organization. Economic measure included the conversion of agrobusiness to state farms and equitable distribution of land to peasants, programmes of appropriate agricultural modernization, special attention to the problems of nomadic pastoralists (its main means of transporting supplies during the early stages of the war), nationalization of larger industries with worker participation in management, state regulation of banking and rents, a national programme of low-cost housing, the encouragement of capital inflow from expatriate Eritrean businessmen and so on.

To attempt to build anything approaching socialism in a small country, devastated by war, with a population dependent on food aid and with no developed material resources of any kind would be doomed to failure in isolation. To its credit, the EPLF sustained its forces during the liberation struggle by a fierce self-sufficiency, funded mainly by expatriate Eritreans. However, it failed to build any kind of links internationally with its natural allies in the labour movement. This aloofness made it impossible to work through an understanding of the nature of its adversaries, particularly Stalinism, to discuss the great dangers of nationalism, however resourceful and courageous, nor to grasp the pressures of imperialism that a future state of Eritrea would face. The EPLF showed a clear accommodation to imperialism during the Gulf War in 1991, just before its final victory over the Dergue, by support for US-led atrocities against the Iraqi people. It rationalized that position by simply equating Saddam with Mengistu, even saying it would welcome similar support. In the seven years since 1991, Meles and Issaias, along with Musaveni of Uganda have been lauded by successive US administrations as a "new type" of African leader. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Countermeasures and Information Security, William Clarke, the US Ambassador Designate to Eritrea, emphasized Eritrea's central place in US strategic planning for control of the Red Sea in his statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 16 June. The capital Asmara was in Haile Selassie's time the site of a major US satellite tracking and communications monitoring base, which shows signs of recently being re-equipped.

Liberated Eritrea faced great problems, devastation and theft of its communications and industrial base, no potential for export earnings and years of agricultural neglect after hundreds of thousands of peasants had fled repeated terror bombing. The new regime in Addis Ababa, a loose alliance of regionalist forces dominated by the TPLF, while

welcomed by the majority of Ethiopians faced growing unrest. One of the largest countries in Africa, Ethiopia's 60 million people are among the most diverse culturally, linguistically and ethnically. Previously it was dominated by feudalists and militarists drawn from the Amharinya-speaking minority of the central highlands, Tigrigna. Many smaller groups in the south-west and especially the Oromo demanded a greater measure of autonomy. The Oromo, previously existing in semi-slavery, constitute around 50% of the population and its most disadvantaged section. However, their wide distribution means that they do not constitute a majority in any one region of Ethiopia. The EPRDF's eventual response to growing regional dissent was an attempt to federalize the country on dominantly ethnic lines. This placed the Oromo in a minority in every semi-autonomous region, so fuelling their grievances. Of the new regions only Tigray has to some extent begun reconstruction, with accusations from other regions of being favoured with capital input by the dominantly Tigrayan leadership of the EPRDF. Moreover, Tigray's boundaries were re-drawn to include its western neighbour Begembder. In other words many other Ethiopians believe they are witnessing Tigrayan expansionism to swallow material resources, both agricultural and mineral, on a large scale. Many also saw collusion between the PFDJ and the former TPLF to create an axis of economic expansion in the north.

The border war superficially seems to stem from the Tigray administration's commissioning a high-quality map of the region from a major German firm of cartographers. This redrew the border with Eritrea, extending it to include in its central part several thousand square kilometres beyond that decided by imperialism and appearing on all previous maps. This annexed on paper some of the most potentially fertile land in a high rainfall area and also the site where seemingly rich goldfields had been discovered by local people and the Eritrean Department of Mines in a zone known previously to extend into Tigray. While the new survey was being conducted, Ethiopian authorities placed an embargo on sales to Eritrea of maps and aerial photographs of the whole country, which are held in Addis Ababa. Ostensibly to improve communications to the Tigrayan part of the new agricultural area in the Badme Plain, the Tigray government built a new road linking Axum to the main border area. The border dispute had been simmering since 1993, but negotiations to resolve it had made no headway by the end of 1997. The PFDJ maintained that although the border had its origins with imperialism, long usage had established it in international law. The EPRDF's position was that it had been established under duress and had been unchallenged until the separation of Eritrea. In early 1998 Ethiopian forces began harassing local farmers and administrators on the Eritrean side, to the extent that locals attempted to build a wall along the previous border.

In March 1998 Ethiopian troops occupied a small farming area below sea-level in the torrid Danakil depression 300 kilometres away at the eastern end of the disputed

boundary. Eritrea's counter was to move 9000 troops and 13 tanks into Badme, which eventually occupied the disputed area in early May after small skirmishes. By early June Ethiopian troops had moved in force to Badme, the Zela Ambessa area on the main Addis-Asmara highway and to the southern border near the port of Assab on the Red Sea. Major fighting broke out on all three fronts, with heavy losses on both sides, although unbiased reporting from the actual battle zones is lacking. War in earnest began with a pre-emptive strike by Ethiopian MIGs on Asmara military airport on 5 June, followed immediately by counterstrikes on the military airfield at Mekele, the capital of Tigray region. Conducted by inexperienced pilots flying small jet trainers, this Eritrean attack also bombed civilian areas in Mekele, resulting in 51 dead and 132 wounded, many of whom were school children. Later bombing of Asmara and the forward base of Ethiopian forces at Adigrat resulted in further civilian casualties. Italian diplomatic efforts fostered a moratorium on air strikes on 14 June, and at the time of writing ground hostilities have lessened with Eritrean forces still occupying the disputed areas. The EPRDF is threatening all-out war, claiming the Eritrean positions amount to invasion of its territory, albeit based on arbitrary new maps.

Both sides have expelled large numbers of resident civilians from their respective capitals, and have detained several hundred suspected of espionage. Upwards of 300,000 refugees have fled the battle areas, placing severe strains on already overstretched supplies of food aid. Despite a flurry of racist and near-fascist hysteria on the Internet from individuals in expatriate communities of both nationalities, there have been no reports of civilian hostility to nationals of either side remaining in urban areas. The electronic ravings that have overwhelmed an Eritrean forum on the world-wide web (<http://www.asmarino.com/asmarino/>) are embarrassing to follow. They reflect a resurgence of nationalism in Eritrea and resentment in Ethiopia at the loss of access to the Red Sea among isolated and powerless, yet highly privileged, petty-bourgeois elements who played no role except as donors during the liberation struggle.

Beneath the hostilities, the war of words and a barrage of rationalization and dissimulation from both sides lie fun-

damental issues. Both regimes in Asmara and Addis have proved powerless to satisfy the clear needs of ordinary people. The PFDJ continues to preside over a one-party state without a constitution, with no free press, independent political parties or trades unions, and continually puts back the date of pluralistic elections, despite the US State Department's willing and open assistance! By nationalizing all the land it has removed the one incentive for farmers, previously owning land communally, to modernise their agriculture and improve soils and irrigation for future generations. It has drawn in transnational capital - mainly from the Pacific Rim and Arabia - with the most generous fiscal conditions in any African country. It has further encouraged investment by free hand outs of prime agricultural land for the construction of industrial estates to manufacture luxury goods - a source of considerable resentment among recently dispossessed farmers. Those industries placed under state control after liberation are scheduled for privatization a la Thatcher. While there has been a building boom, financed in part by royalist Iranian and Korean funds, this is at the top end of the market to encourage the return of Eritrean expatriates and their capital. Building of basic housing is at a far slower pace, centring on establishing small private brickworks so that locals may build their own housing. While low-paid government employees have set up credit unions to overcome the awful housing shortage, poorer people have little chance of decent dwellings. The 1987 EPLF programme has been largely abandoned.

The PFDJ failure to improve the conditions of the large number of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists by a crash programme of well drilling in the arid lands that they inhabit, and failure to improve communications in those areas so that they might more easily have access to food aid and markets, has created the conditions for splits on religious grounds. Long known for the peaceful co-existence of many ethnic and religious groups, Eritrea now has a terrorist problem in those areas most neglected. Most of the pastoralists are Muslim, and there are regular incursions by fundamentalists of Islamic Jihad, sponsored by the fundamentalist regime in the Sudan. The PFDJ, dominated by highland Christian Tigrigna speakers, has made vain attempts to corral desert peoples into fixed settlements to take up farming, with little sensitivity to their



ancient culture and clear preference for freedom of movement. More generally, the basic provision of safe water for domestic and livestock consumption is far from resolved, even villages close by Asmara having to depend on trucked-in supplies. A recent study to make a national inventory of potential water supply for irrigation, funded to the tune of 4.4 million *ecus* by the EU and managed by a transnational consortium of commercial consultants, appears to be in complete disarray. On this depends the sustainable expansion of agricultural production to make the country self-sufficient in staple grains.

Around 70% of Eritreans are to some degree dependent on imported food aid, many selling part of their rations as a means of generating cash. This forces down the market price of staples and depresses the incentive for surplus production by ordinary farmers. The only noticeable growth sector in agriculture is self-financed, small-scale pumped irrigation to produce vegetables and fruits. The vegetable market in Asmara has almost doubled since 1993. Prices are depressed and there is much waste. While this favours urban Eritreans, it further drives down the lot of peasant farmers. Although unemployment has fallen from the level of almost 70% in 1993, much work is casual, low-paid and not full-time. Since 1995 all Eritreans between 16 and 40 face conscription for 6 months military training in the arid wasteland on the Sudanese border, followed by a year's unpaid hard labour on major projects such as land clearance, reforestation and reconstruction of the Massawa to Asmara railway up the precipitate Red Sea escarpment. To its credit, the PFDJ has widened access to education in rural areas and established basic medical services across the country.

The EPRDF government in Ethiopia is faring no better, and there is justifiable resentment over failed promises in many rural areas, particularly those where life is hardest, such as the arid wastes of Afar bordering Eritrea's SE salient along the Red Sea. There banditry is on the increase and local leaders are pressing for separation from Ethiopia. By far the greatest suspicion is over the clear expansionary aims of the Tigray region, popularly regarded as being directly fostered by the Tigrayan leadership of the government. To some extent the scale of investment in Tigray is hidden from the rest of Ethiopia because of its remoteness and by supplies of materials and heavy equipment being imported through the Eritrean port of Massawa and along Eritrean roads, but more of that shortly.

It is difficult to see the present war as anything other than the material expression of jingoism by both EPRDF and PFDJ regimes, no matter which side provoked the action. Both are finding their original programmes impossible to carry out and face growing popular resentment. In Eritrea this is dominated by the high level of urban unemployment, especially among young people, the reluctance of expatriates to return and contribute their skills to reconstruction, and among the 50% of the population who have Islamic beliefs, principally those in rural areas. Ethiopia is on the verge of Balkanization, which in many respects

Eritrea's declaration of independence began. Neither that nor a fully centralized state can satisfy the aspirations of its majority Oromo population. Jingoism is a universal response by regimes whose limited scope for action has run its course, but the devastation of peoples' lives so soon after 30 years of war must mean that it is no avenue for escape. Much more powerful forces than either EPRDF or PFDJ are at play in the area and globally, which show that each country is far from independent.

Eritrea claims 5% annual economic growth in the last 5 years. Economic activity is dominated by two sectors, both have which have collapsed in the last 6 months. The first is cross-border trade with Ethiopia. On the one hand is supplying manufactured goods to one of the world's poorest countries, but nevertheless one with a population of around 60 million. On the other is importing both the traditional staple grain of the highland area, teff, and produce for re-export including coffee, one of Ethiopia's largest sources of foreign exchange. From 1991 to 1997 Eritrea used Ethiopian currency, the birr. Like many African currencies, the birr was grossly over-valued by a fixed exchange rate against the US dollar. However, in Eritrea the government openly and directly sold birr at a rate significantly below the rate in Ethiopia and that in commercial banks in Eritrea. It also permitted a thriving parallel exchange market operated by hordes of old men clustered around Asmara's central post office. Consequently Eritrea gained a significant trade advantage over Ethiopia, thereby encouraging smuggling of Ethiopian cash crops, particularly coffee, and enabled the government to buy gold mined by local people for birr and sell it at its dollar price internationally. A complex web of "illicit" cross-border trade sprang up. Foreign exchange from sales of these goods fed into what had become a form of economic parasitism. The PFDJ rationalized these activities as the only means whereby it could get war reparations from Ethiopia, in the absence of substantial support from international sources, while also demanding that Eritrea's reconstruction must be based on its human resources and self-sufficiency. In 1997 Eritrea introduced its long delayed national currency, the nakfa. Within Eritrea it was exchanged at par with the birr, but was fixed at a lower rate against the dollar, thereby maintaining the trade advantage. Claiming that the introduction of the nakfa made the country truly independent, the PFDJ was in fact "having its cake and eating it", or so it appeared.

The second major source of Eritrea's income were Ethiopian imports and exports through the Red Sea ports of Assab, and particularly Massawa, which commanded port dues. It was through Massawa that both food aid and imports for reconstruction flowed to Tigray. Assab has no significant Eritrean hinterland, being at the arid southern tip of its 700 kilometre long coastline and unconnected by serviceable roads to the rest of the country. Indeed, any goods landed at Assab that were destined for Eritrea had to be moved by road via Addis Ababa. Before Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia Assab was the main port for central Ethiopia and its major centres of population. Djibouti,

connected by rail to Addis, charges port dues in hard currency. The loss of Assab was a major blow to the Ethiopian economy in 1991, and in a seeming gesture of neighbourliness Eritrea continued to charge port dues in birr, thereby making its ports more attractive than facilities at Djibouti, despite their rail link to Addis. Until 1997, some 70% of all Ethiopia's foreign trade went through Massawa and Eritrea. Through its control of favoured Red Sea ports and the better terms of trade, income from port dues fed into the economic "engineering" of the birr in Asmara. Eritrea thereby effectively held the Ethiopian economy hostage.

In 1997 the EPRDF government in Addis, faced by the competing nakfa and Eritrea's engineered economic parasitism declared that bilateral trade should henceforth be in dollars. It also issued a new birr [printed incidently in Britain] in an attempt to render Eritrea's birr reserves and therefore the nakfa valueless. They also demanded repayment of Eritrea's 1 billion birr debt, incurred with the EPRDF's willing encouragement in the early period of reconstruction, in hard currency. This effectively annulled Eritrea's debt, rebounding on the EPRDF measures. Ethiopia began to shift its trade to Djibouti, thereby depleting its hard-currency reserves. The new birr fell sharply to dollar-rate parity with the nakfa, destroying the advantage in illicit cross-border trade for merchants. Eritrea's response was to shift imports to cheaper sources, including Egypt. However its economically parasitic dependence was effectively at an end having lost the ability to manipulate terms of trade, with both economies under severe strain. Eritrea's hard currency reserves were shifted into "high-yield" foreign investments, including Djibouti, to profit further from increased Ethiopian usage of that port, thereby seeking to fund activities from interest. A large chunk of Eritrea's economy is therefore at the whim of volatile international money markets, at a time when the US is attempting to prop up the yen among other far-eastern currencies, and the dollars exchange value is falling. One outcome of this economic fantasy game is that the dilapidated oil refinery at Assab, on which both countries depended for fuel, has been closed through lack of investment! This throws into question the viability of possible oil supplies indicated by exploration in the southern Red Sea off Eritrea's coast, a new refinery being needed if they are to benefit Eritrea's economy instead of being shipped at a currently depressed price to the spot market in Rotterdam. Eritrea's short-lived, but successful skirmish in 1994 with Yemen over the Hanish islands ensured that these potential reserves were in Eritrean and not International waters.

Internally, the bulk of capital inflow to Eritrea's reconstruction programme stems either from the recession-wracked Pacific Rim or from Gulf States. Its inflow can only have been guaranteed by the assurance of high rates of profit and therefore exploitation of Eritrea's large pool of unemployed workers. The relentless nature of the global crisis of capital in general means that continuity of this inflow cannot be guaranteed. The PFDJ claims its

goal is establishing a mini-"tiger" economy in NE Africa, but as currencies in the Pacific rim collapse, establishing the high-tech infrastructure and a willing, highly skilled workforce to compete for dwindling markets seems a far-off, if not impossible dream. Many Eritreans living abroad combine these skills, but seem reluctant to return while conditions of life are poor, except as tourists. There are no immensely wealthy expatriates to form an independent source of capital. The US gives Eritrea a high profile, not because of the esteem in which its extraordinary people are held internationally, but because of its strategic position. The region's severe economic difficulties, exacerbated by the border war with no foreseeable way out of the disruption that it has caused, may constitute additional pressure for World Bank intervention. That being the case any residual notion of independence will soon be revealed as a sham. Because of its globally important position, that seems inevitable, and Eritrea in particular becoming a client state of US imperialism, a sort of mini-Israel, is on the cards if not already established.