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CREATING BORDERS: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF THE ETHIO-ERITREAN WAR ON THE LOCAL POPULATION

by Jon Abbink (*)

Introduction

On 12 December 2000, the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea met in Algiers, smiled, shook hands and signed a peace accord after more than two years of extremely bloody battles and quite insulting propaganda warfare. This deal was unexpected, and prepared completely away from the public view of the Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples. In view of the huge rift created between the two countries and of the feeling of enmity that both leaders expressed vis-à-vis each other during the two-and-a-half years of fighting, and recalling the intensity of the war, after one year the question can be asked what the chances are for normalization or peace between these two "brother countries" (1)

It is true that the December deal paved the way for negotiations and perhaps for a delineation of the border, and also that it initiated a phase of 'reconstruction'. Indeed, in the present conjuncture of events it is incumbent on every-one to again look for hopeful signs for peace, reconciliation and overall development. But one cannot help feeling that the instant praise songs given in December 2000 by former US president Clinton, UN secretary-General Kofi Annan, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and others on this provisional accord sounded a bit

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(1) See K. TRONVOLL & TEKESTE NEGASH, *Brothers at war making sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war*, Oxford, James Currey and Athens (Ohio), Ohio University Press, pp 179

hollow and facile after two years of preventable war.⁽²⁾ The immediate trust they again put in the two parties is somewhat misplaced. One may still remember the uncritical appraisals of the so-called 'new leaders' of both countries in the years before the war started on May 1998, assessments based on sand and not on serious knowledge of the local situation.⁽³⁾

The Horn of Africa seems to be characterized by unbuilt, permanent instability. What is the basic reason for this instability? No doubt the common fond is enduring poverty, ecological crisis and competition for scarce resources of all kinds in a volatile political environment marked by authoritarian traditions that do not handle ethno-regional diversity very well. As important is that both regimes and their leading elites are still undemocratic and perhaps also sectarian: acting on behalf not of the nation but for their own, limited, constituency. Judging from the news reaching us daily, they do not have a system of meaningful political communication with the population, and do not know — or worse, perhaps do not really care — how to handle the local people's interests or how to deal with 'minorities' in a proper manner. As is the case in developed, post-industrial societies, the challenge of multi-ethnicity or 'multi-culturalism' is unresolved in the Horn, although on another level. The difference is that in Northeast Africa violence and intimidation are more consciously and openly used as ingredients in the political process. This societal and political instability will only be lessened if the two governments in power review their system of governance and significantly reform to become more nationally inclusive.

To assess the context of the current political dynamics in the Horn, the focus here is on some of the social developments 'on the ground', and on the psycho-social impact of the war on local people and local society. While 'the border' has not been the main issue causing the war, it will become a focus of negotiation and of concern in the period to come. The thesis of this article is that the impending creation of an iron-clad, physical border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in an area of trans-

(2) The then Italian Foreign Minister Rino Serri even said in December 2000 that the peace accord was "...an important contribution to the stability of the region" — a very optimistic view. Amazing also was the eagerness of the World Bank and other donor institutions for renewed financial aid with few conditions attached. On 6 December 2000 already, a press release was made announcing a US\$ 400 million aid package to Ethiopia for post-war recovery.

(3) See M. OTTAWAY, *Africa's new leaders: democracy or state reconstruction?* Washington, DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999, pp. 138.

border contacts and shared local identities, will yield a new element of instability. Such a border may further divide or redefine local (ethnic/regional) groups, and provide material reasons to argue about, and exploit difference, created or not, in the economic, political and cultural spheres. Ironically, the coming creation and solidification of this border — which is inevitable at the present historical juncture of two separate states — is reminiscent of the classic Western colonialist scheme in Africa of dividing contiguous areas of ethnic groups or peoples without regard to their interests and local patterns of life. Predictable arguments will keep on arising over this, and while the situation on both sides will be kept in check with military repression, a problem is being created that will come back sooner or later.

A secondary thesis is that the impact of the United Nations Mission for Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE; in place since December 2000) on the process of peace-building remains very limited. UNMEE is dealing with immediate security matters, with patrolling the front-line area, with the liaising between the two armies and administrations, and with negotiating the emerging differences relating to the military situation and the temporary security zone. They do not — are indeed prohibited to do so under their mandate — mediate between the people or between state authorities and local inhabitants in the area, and neither provide medical aid, assist resettlement and rehabilitation, etc.

A complicating factor of the entire conflict is that it has become psychologically deeply rooted in the minds of the common people. This element cannot be underestimated, and is evident from all statements of victims, ex-prisoners of war, and the displaced. The nature of the violence perpetrated in this two-year war has sunk in deep into the public consciousness of the common people, especially, it seems, in Ethiopia after the return of victims⁽⁴⁾, who tell tales of humiliation, suffering and violence. The deep antipathy, and often hatred, now generated is a social fact, which will have serious consequences. Of course not the violence in battle but the often unspeakable abuses against civilians that created the deep resentment, also among people with no interest in politics and no commitment to yet another war: the expulsions of each other's citizens, the arbitrary killings and disappearance of people, the robbing of labour migrants of all of their possessions and savings, the internment

(4) NITA BHALLA, *Ethiopian refugees' atrocity tales*, 7 July 2000 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/africa/newsid_824000/824250.stm), and the PANA news bulletin of 24 December 2000 (*ICRC repatriates over 1,400 Ethiopians from Eritrea*).

of so-called 'enemy people' in camps under dismal conditions, the physical abuse, and the torturing and humiliating of ordinary people.

Of course, a UN peace keeping force does not deal with such sociological matters of people's traumas, experiences of suffering, and resentful attitudes during or after the war situation, and one also wonders how the national governments are going to deal with these. However, they *have* to be dealt with in order to contribute to long-term reconciliation or peace-making.

The forgotten people

With this term I mean the people who live or lived in the war area on both sides of the border, and few of whom were soldiers in the two armies. The larger part of this local population was displaced in the past two years from their ancestral lands. It started in May 1998 when thousands of Ethiopians were chased out or fleeing from the Badme, Zalambessa, Ts'orona and Bure areas. In the course of the fighting, an estimated total of 360,000 people was displaced, most of them on the Eritrean side. Later, in February 1999 and May 2000 with the big Ethiopian offensives, reputedly more than 600,000 people on the Eritrean side were harassed and displaced. A few hundred thousand returned relatively soon, but in December 2000 an estimated 350,000 were still in makeshift camps and other temporary dwellings. On the Ethiopian side, another 300,000 were displaced. Though the numbers declined subsequently, the situation is still not normalized. The people affected received assistance from international organizations (UNHCR, WFP, a.o.), but this was woefully inadequate, and despair among those still displaced is rising. In the past two-and-a-half years, these groups have received little attention from the international community or from their government for future rehabilitation. As the borders of the 'temporary security zone' (TSZ) of 25 kilometres deep along the entire border are still not officially determined as of September 2001, people cannot return there.

Perhaps the lot of these displaced civilians is the real tragedy and one of the long-term challenges of the conflict. Their areas and homes are destroyed, their fields, herds and food stocks lost, but they must some day return and rebuild their societies. They probably also have to be brokers in peace, because they live or lived in the frontier area and of necessity have developed trans-frontier relations. They were pastoralists and traders crossing the line, they visited each other's

markets, they had relatives across the border. The question is whether they can and when they will be encouraged to do so again. These people are from various backgrounds, and remarkably little is known about their societies and recent histories. Neither have they been discussed in the context of the current conflict. Among the main groups are:

a. the *Afar*, a group of about a million people, speaking a Cushitic language, and predominantly nomadic camel pastoralists in (semi)arid areas. An unknown number (perhaps about a 100,000) live in East Eritrea. The Assab area is part of their traditional habitat.

b. the *Irob*, a partly Ethiopian-Orthodox and partly Catholic community of some 25 to 30,000 people, originally Saho-speaking people. Saho is a Cushitic language also spoken by the Saho pastoralists in Eritrea. Most of the Irob live in Ethiopia. Under Eritrean occupation from May 1998 to June 2000, many were chased away or forced to become Eritrean citizens (the village of Waratle is a known case, in July 1998). In July 1999, an Irob refugee camp in Magaoma in Tigray was shelled by the Eritrean army, causing injury and death.

c. *Kunama*, a ca. 100,000-strong indigenous community, partly Muslim, Protestant-Christian and traditional-religious (the majority). About 7,000 to 10,000 of them live in Ethiopia. They speak a Nilo-Saharan language. Kunama are a self-conscious, but open and tolerant people, with cultural traditions rather divergent from Tigrinya-speakers and others. They live of mixed agriculture, pastoralism, and trade and are known for their matrilineal descent system and complex ritual life. They were in the crossfire since May 1998 and suffered heavily. Many of the towns in their area, like Barentu, Haykota, Shambukko and Dukinbia, were seriously damaged by heavy Ethiopian shelling and bombing (also churches) in the February-April 1999 fighting and in the May-June 2000 offensive, during which several thousands fled to Ethiopia.

d. In areas around the central war front (e.g., Zalambessa), the population is mostly formed by the Tigrinya-speaking highlanders, the population group from whose ranks the two regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea are mainly drawn. Like the previous groups, they are on both sides of the border. The fighting displaced up to 250,000 of them.

The war was mainly fought on the territory of these groups. The Afar, Kunama and Irob are more or less distinct minority (ethnic) groups who have lived in the area since ages. Being minorities, they already had a hard time under the two regimes in the pre-war situation: they were politically marginalized and lived under domination. Especially for the Kunama the situation was difficult: much of their lands were gradually

taken for resettlement of other groups, they were 'fined' for allegedly giving support to small rebel groups, their cultural traditions were slighted and devalued, and they were not ruled by their own representatives.

The armed conflict itself started in the Kunama area in May 1998. The Ethiopian village of Badme was named after the *Badumma plain*, where Kunama traditionally herded their livestock and practised some agriculture. Kunama traders, who regularly crossed to trade with their brethren across the line and visit market towns in Tigray, ignored the colonial border that was drawn (but not demarcated) in 1890.

In and after the war, these local populations were affected in a number of ways:

- they were direct war victims, not only as conscripted soldiers, but many because they were kidnapped, abused or killed by the invading army.

- there was large-scale displacement of people and massive loss of life and property in the occupied areas, both within Ethiopia and in May 2000 in Eritrea. Tens of thousands, soldiers as well as civilians from the above groups, also fled to Sudan.

- detention of innocent people, many of whom still unaccounted for. In the case of Eritrea, there are credible reports of severe pressure the past year on the Kunama people (arrests and disappearance of leaders, very tight security that seriously hampers daily life in the villages) who did not show the 'expected amount of enmity' vis-à-vis the Ethiopians when the latter occupied their area.⁽⁵⁾

- purposive destruction of the civilian, administrative and economic infrastructure. This started in Badme, Zalambessa, and the Irob country: churches, schools, houses, government buildings were desecrated, looted and destroyed. The Ethiopian revenge came in May 2000 when in the wake of the *blitz* offensive Barentu, Tessenai, Haykota and other places were razed to the ground, and shops and industries like the big Eritrean textile mill in Ali Gidir blown up.

- there was serious environmental destruction: massive deforestation to make trenches of several hundred kilometres, the burning of fields and forests, the destruction, e.g., in the Irob area, of indigenous irrigation systems, the pollution of the area with oil, waste and armory rubbish.

(5) A website of Kunama expatriates with alarming news on the situation of the Kunama in western Eritrea is: www.ndh.net/home/kunama.

- the area still suffers from extensive mining of the fields, pasture lands and forested areas of the people, so that normal life, farming and herding cannot be done safely in the coming years.

The war practices of both sides have contributed to the creation of deep antipathy and hate towards the other. Traders who see their shops looted and wantonly destroyed, or people who witness their loved ones humiliated, abused, raped or killed, develop a burning resentment that will spoil relations for a long time to come. The enmity has definitely sunk down to the level of the common people and has been 'internalized'. Indeed, emotional enmity and scorn were purposely created by Eritrean and subsequently by Ethiopian war policy on the ground. This is one of the most disturbing results of the conflict and it seemed to be a clear policy, imposed by the two regimes. The rationale was again to 'create difference' and to anchor it psychologically. It is a sad job to analyze the quite repulsive discourse of ethno-national stereotyping and insulting that has gone on during this war.

Local people and the current peace deal

The above problems of these local people as a result of this war have not even begun to be addressed under the current peace deal. The text of the December 12 agreement refers to them in the context of Article 2, on prisoners of war, and in Article 4, on the Claims Commission, that will deal with the claims to compensation for injury, and lost or destroyed property by the governments and nationals, including civilians (to be submitted within one year after the signing of the 12 December 2000 accord). In practical terms, it will be very difficult for individuals of these local groups to file claims, as many of them are still displaced and are illiterate, and as the governments will be in control of this process.

Furthermore, Article 3 of the accord, on the boundary delineation, refers to a potential future problem in that the official border, largely following the former Italian colonial line, will run through the territory of four of the groups mentioned (Afar, Kunama, Irob and Tigrinya-speakers), and who may not feel happy to be divided and even see their livelihood threatened (fields, pasture, water points, market access).

The UNMEE does hardly deal with the local populations, whom they do not know much about. When they are allowed to return, the UNMEE units may give some logistical assistance, but any deep involvement is

beyond their mandate. It is also likely that the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments will try to 'use' the UNMEE to restore their grip on the local population. There has been a report by Kunama (6) that the Jordanian UNMEE contingent in Eritrea was causing serious trouble for the local people.

Even in the event of an acceptable peace deal, there are problems with the political formulae in both countries to deal with legitimate demands from these minority groups. Ethiopia has chosen to emphasize ethnicity for all political, educational and economic purposes, which leads to unnecessary oppositions and to undue 'ethnic competition' for resources (e.g. state funds), while Eritrea follows a kind of 1950s unitary, forced 'national integration'-model that tends to bulldozer ethnic differences and the needs of certain of these groups, favouring one or two majority groups. As the groups on whose land the war was fought were minorities that were already neglected in national policy, there is no reason to expect a real change.

Local people as element of instability? Elements of resentment and revolt

There are reportedly about ten rebel or opposition movements existing in the border area. Many of them date from before the recent war, and some even from before Eritrean independence in 1991 (since about year most are in a national front, the Alliance of Eritrean Democratic Forces). Most, except the last two, have some sort of ethno-regional basis. They are:

* the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF), a group seeking the unification of the Afar area, and inclusion of the Eritrean Afar into an Ethiopia-affiliated Afar Regional State. ARDUF gave out a press statement on 23 June 2000, saying that they objected to the stationing of 'foreign troops' (meaning peacekeeping forces) on their land. They see the area of the port city Assab as their land as well. The *Ugugomo* militia of this organization is, however, not a military factor to reckon with.

* the Red Sea Afar Movement. This is also an Afar organization, but smaller.

* the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Setit and Gash, a

small and militarily not active movement, with some support among the Kunama,

* the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama, also a small group without an armed presence,

* the Akkele-Guzay People's Movement (also known as *Haika*, a small group from the Eritrean Akkele-Guzay region, but with no organized structure. Most of its leaders are outside Eritrea). They have objections to the unquestioned inclusion of Akkele-Guzay into independent Eritrea. (7)

* the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (or *Demabai*, a small opposition movement among Tigrinya-speakers, supported by Ethiopia), and

* the Eritrean Liberation Front (or *Jebha*, the oldest front, set up in 1960 and which has its support largely among north-western Islamic groups in Eritrea and among Eritreans in Sudan). It has three off-shoots, the ELF-RC (or 'Revolutionary Command'), known as *Sagem*, the ELF-GC (General Command) and the ELF-CC (Central Command).

There are also opposition groups (based mainly in Sudan) with a religious agenda, such as the Eritrean Jihad Movement. Its programme is exclusivist, externally inspired, and will not appeal to a large section of the population. As is well-known, some of Ethiopia's armed opposition movements are not in the border area but in the south and west of the country

The above groups emerged from dissatisfaction with political and economic developments in Eritrea and Ethiopia before the war, and of course, the conduct of the war, the horrific human suffering and material destruction have not made them less relevant. Some were already created by a government (e.g., the *Demabai* by the Ethiopian government, probably already by TPLF). However, they appear not to have a significant military role to play. That they exist and are trying to become more active is due to the fact that political representation and communication of local interests within the current two political systems is still not guaranteed.

To pre-empt these movements, it would be necessary to draw them into the political process in both countries in some way or other. This is one of the challenges of the post-war situation, and the regimes may

(7) Leadership of the PFDJ (EPLF) is said to be mainly formed by people from Sera's and Hamasien regions

(6) See www.meskerem.net/kunama.htm

of course opt for repression and violence, as has largely been the case up to now, but that would destabilize the peace and reconstruction efforts and break down a constituency of support that is sorely needed in a border area.

The border as construct

In a situation where people are so similar as in the war area, and where other, political, issues have provoked the conflict, the border can only be perceived as a construct. Although independent Eritrea needs a border, it is in part a political creation to emphasize 'difference'. The war, allegedly to form 'the right border', had the effect — intended or not — to put Eritrea firmly on the map as an independent polity and as a counterweight to Ethiopia, also in the economic sense. Solidified political separation will indeed come out of the current negotiations and the delineation process. But for the local people it will probably be a missed opportunity: they will not be involved in the process and some will not be given a chance to choose where to belong. The construct will thus become a harsh reality and an effective divisive element within the various peoples involved (Irob, Kunama, Afar). This process has for historical reasons already happened with the Tigrinya-speakers of Northern Ethiopia: the Eritrean Tigrinya and the Tigray-Ethiopian Tigrinya, who were in a previous generation one speech community made up of several regional groups.⁽⁸⁾ They now have dissociated themselves so much from their common socio-cultural and linguistic heritage that they even start denying that they were or are very similar. While political realities since the Italian colonial venture have indeed produced this, the ideological effort to consciously buttress the division is still going on, sometimes in bizarre and historically dubious forms. Though the border is a construct, and not even the real issue of the conflict, it will also become an economic and social reality apart from a political one, and perhaps as divisive.

(8) See for instance, ALEMSEGED ABBAY, *Identity jilted or reimagining identity? The divergent paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan nationalist struggles*, Lawrenceville, NJ and Asmara, Red Sea Press, 1998, pp. 250. For an historical analysis see also: MESFIN ARAYA, *Eritrea 1941-52, the failure of the emergence of the nation-state*, New York, City University of New York, Ph.D. dissertation, 1988, pp. 302.

Elements of hope in the post-war condition?

In view of the fragility of legitimate governance in the Horn, it is difficult to foster much hope if the interests of the local societies/groups are bypassed. The current peace agreement make it clear that the political concerns of regime maintenance in both countries — seeing their ultimate mutual dependency despite all that happened — take precedence over everything else, but at the peril of maintaining instability in the border areas and ignoring local needs.

This, incidentally, also applies to the current international peace mission, the UNMEE. They would be wise not to bypass local people, but indicate ways of co-operation beyond the political and military agenda set by the two regimes. That the UNMEE will have trouble in doing so is indicated by the letter of Ethiopia's UN ambassador (of 21 November 2000) as well as the press statement of the Irob community in the USA (14 December 2000), protesting the first UNMEE reference map⁽⁹⁾ of the Temporary Security Zone (prepared by the UN Cartographic Unit) that included the towns of Zalambessa and Alitena within Eritrean territory. In the course of 2001, the Irob of the Zalambessa area came to feel more alienated from the Ethiopian government, which was seen as not representing their rights properly.⁽¹⁰⁾ Several Kunama groups have expressed fear of being unduly divided. They are very critical of the record of both the Eritrean government and the UNMEE, whose contingent did not relate well to the local Kunama.

The border people thus may hold a key to the future. Can they be mediators in daily economic and social contacts, or better, will they be allowed to do so, and to conduct their normal trans-border contacts? They are connected by kinship bonds, way of life and economic interests (trade, movements of livestock). In the long run, it is these people who must be allowed to contribute to a redefinition of the border as a relative thing. It may have been created to produce (political) difference, but only with a major ideological and political effort by the authorities on both sides can the people be really divided by it and internalize its existence as a line defining 'identities'. This would be an unfortunate development. Hence, the border is best construed around the socio-

(9) No. 4150/Rev.I (of September 2000). It was not an official map. As of November 2001, still no map was issued.

(10) See: Ad hoc Committee of Zalambesa-Irob Region, *Meles' Regime Abandons Zalambesa*, a statement issued on 9 September 2001 (zalambesa_irob@yahoo.com).

economic, cultural and developmental needs of the people in the area. This would contribute to defusing tensions.

One year after the agreement the question of assisting and consulting the local populations on whose territories *they* fought, assessing their needs in terms of trans-border contacts, and allowing them to rebuild a viable society, across the border line is still unresolved. Lines of national-political identity will supersede those of social and cultural solidarity, at least in this area, thus affirming the hegemonic claims of the two states, who have declared repeatedly that, with the current political leaderships in place, normalization is unlikely to occur.

JON ABBINK

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article veut traiter de quelques effets sociaux et politiques du conflit érythro-éthiopien dans la zone frontalière depuis décembre 2000. Il s'agit surtout de la population et de la société locale dans le contexte de la situation post-guerre.

L'auteur affirme que la création immanente d'une frontière physique et rigide entre l'Éthiopie et l'Érythrée, apparemment voulu par les deux gouvernements, servira à produire un élément d'instabilité additionnel dans une région marquée, traditionnellement, par des relations trans-frontalières et des identités et des intérêts partagés. Tandis que les questions de frontière n'étaient pas la cause principale de la guerre, cette frontière devient maintenant le bout de négociation et de discord. Une frontière rigide contribuera à antagoniser les groupes ethniques/régionales locales, et fournira des raisons matérielles pour des différends permanents sur les 'différences', artificielles ou non, dans les domaines économique, sociale et culturelle. En plus, il n'y a guère d'indication que les gouvernements en question vont s'occuper de façon satisfaisante des intérêts des peuples de la zone frontalière.

RIASSUNTO

L'articolo analizza gli effetti sociali e politici del conflitto tra Eritrea ed Etiopia verificatisi nella zona di frontiera a partire dal dicembre 2000 con particolare riguardo ai problemi della società locale nel contesto post-bellico.

L'autore afferma che la creazione immanente di un confine fisico e rigido tra i due paesi, apparentemente voluto da ambedue i governi, provocherà un ulteriore elemento di instabilità in una regione segnata, per tradizione, da rapporti di frontiera e da identità e interessi condivisi.

Considerato che i problemi di confine non erano la causa principale della guerra, la frontiera diventa ora il nodo principale del negoziato e della discordia. Un confine rigido contribuirà a rendere antagonisti i gruppi etnici regionali locali provocando scontri permanenti sulle differenze, artificiali e non, che esistono nel campo economico, sociale e culturale. Inoltre non vi è nessuna indicazione che i governi in questione vogliano occuparsi realmente degli interessi delle popolazioni della zona di confine.