

## The Ethiopian – Eritrean Border Conflict

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### Introduction

A lot has already been written in the news media concerning the current Eritrean-Ethiopian war. Nevertheless, one should not lose sight of the fact that this conflict is, from the beginning, a war about borders. It maybe that, as the situation appears to deteriorate between the two countries, the border problems will be put to one side for a while and more fundamental objectives will, unfortunately, be found to justify a full scale war. However, one day or another, and the sooner the better, border demarcation will have to take place along the parties' c.1,000km-long common border. It seems likely that some kind of international arbitration or mediation will be necessary in order to prepare the way for demarcation work. This is what is wisely suggested by UN Security Council Resolution 1177, adopted on the 26 June.

The reason why the two countries will need a third party to assist them is obvious: over the past seven years, the two sides were very close friends, yet remained unable to settle even one of the numerous small border disputes they inherited from their tumultuous past. A joint committee between Eritrea and Ethiopia has secretly been working on these issues over the past two years but it is unclear whether this committee even succeeded in establishing a complete list of the “*disputed areas.*”

On paper, the Eritrean case is by far the clearer of the two. In two official statements (of 14 and 20 May respectively) the Eritrean government explained that it only claims the “*colonial boundary*”, meaning the line drawn between the Ethiopian imperial regime and Italian colony of Eritrea. This line was established through several international agreements at the beginning of this century, following the defeat of Italian troops at Adua in 1896. Three treaties are relevant to the present dispute – those of 1900, 1902 and 1908.

The primary document in this case is the tripartite treaty (between the UK, Italy and Ethiopia) of 15 May 1902 which superseded a previous agreement

of July 1900 between Italy and Ethiopia. This accord delineates the central and western parts of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. This is where border incidents occurred on the 6, 9 and 12 May 1998. From west to east, starting from the trijunction with the Sudanese border at Khor Um Hagger, the Ethiopian-Eritrean border follows the Tekezze river up to the junction with the Maieteb river, then by a straight line to join the Mereb river at Mai Ambessa. Then the border follows the Mareb, through most of the central highlands. When the Mareb is joined on its right side by the Belessa river, the border follows the Belessa. Thereafter, the border is, eastwards, fixed by the Muna river. All these rivers are well marked, in a mountainous landscape.

Up to now, there have been no official indications that the Ethiopian government would be contesting this well established line. On the contrary, the map given by the Ethiopian minister of foreign affairs to the meeting of foreign ambassadors in Addis Ababa, the 19 May duplicated it. The maps delivered by the two countries to the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), although in large scale definition, are also identical. Furthermore, when the conflict erupted, neither the prime minister office nor the ministry of foreign affairs in Addis Ababa, was able to provide a detailed map of the “*disputed areas.*”

However, Ethiopia is not a centralised state. Since the adoption of a new Constitution in 1995, Ethiopia has been made up of a total of nine federated states. The most autonomous of these states is Tigray, once a border state with Eritrea, whose leaders are also, since the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in 1991, the masters of the country as a whole. All the Tigrean leaders come from the nationalist Tigrean movement, whose most recent upsurge is the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), created in 1975. For over a decade, they favoured the independence of the Tigray province, before becoming powerful enough to lead the fight for central power over all Ethiopia.

As far as the border disputes are concerned, the Tigreans are not using official Ethiopian maps but ones of their own. A map issued in Mekele, capital city of Tigray state, in 1997 by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority, incorporates into Ethiopia territory defined as Eritrean by the colonial-era boundary. Others similar maps have been published recently in Tigray, some with the help of international technical bodies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The Tigrean authorities soberly explain that these maps have been established for “*administrative or fiscal purposes.*” The Ethiopian authorities in Addis Ababa have failed to comment on the Tigreans maps, but the official medias and statements by official experts and local members of parliament in Addis Ababa have concentrated on the “*long time Ethiopianess*” of the areas concerned. There is little doubt that the Ethiopian government endorses *de facto* the Tigrean claims. Moreover, some kind of Ethiopian administration had been established in recent years in most of these areas.

However, it is only from these Tigreans maps that we can know which are the “*disputed areas*” between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, they coincide with the places where the fighting occurred in the last few weeks.

### The Badme Area

The largest disputed zone, the “*Badme area*”, is located west of the straight line between Tekezze and Mareb. When the border line was drawn, in 1902, all this area was almost empty. Badme was the name of a plain area and the straight line passed more or less through the middle of this area. This plain is located just down from the Abyssinian plateau, in lowlands, and it is geographically part of a vast semi-arid and hot plain between the mountains and the Atbara river, known in Eritrea as “*Gash-Setit*”. When it rains, it’s fertile land. There is also some gold gathering by local farmers but not enough for real mining.

Badme is a Kunama word. This land, with only a few villages, had long been a “*Kunama land.*” The Kunama people come from a very old African stock. They are farmers, mostly animists, speak their own language and, for centuries, they used to be raided by Christians highlanders or nomadic Moslem tribes. In the last few decades, particularly following the Second World War, the area has also been populated by farmers coming from Tigray or the Eritrean highlands (Serae).



When the British left Eritrea in 1952, Eritrea was federated to Ethiopia by the United Nations and the importance of the international border in this area faded. Ras Mengesha Seyum, ruler of Tigray, established some settlements in the area without much consideration of the 1902 line and connected their loose administration with that of Ethiopia’s Shire district.

Since that time, there have been sporadic disputes between Eritrean and Tigrean local authorities over the area. In 1966, for example, after the annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie dismissed a protest by the local administrator in Barentu (Eritrea) about interferences by the Shire administrator in the now disputed area, by simply saying “*it’s all Ethiopia.*”

During Eritrea’s independence war, in 1976 and then in 1981, there were some armed clashes between Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and TPLF guerrillas (Tigrean front) over this area. However, the two fronts were mainly allied against Mengistu’s regime and, after the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) prevailed in Eritrea, the matter was cooled down and left unsettled.

After 1991, the Tigreans (Ethiopians) kept the upper hand but nothing was really demarcated on the ground. Several incidents between the local Eritrean population and the Ethiopian authorities in the area have been reported, notably after 1995. Despite several meetings of an *ad hoc* committee between the

local authorities of both sides, the situation worsened. During these meeting the Tigreans claimed that the permanent boundary should be the *de facto* line convened in 1987 between the TPLF and ELF, which included six small Eritrean villages in Ethiopia. This demand led to a deadlock and to the end of local negotiations. The armed confrontation occurred when an attempt was made, beginning in May 1998, by the Ethiopians to push the boundary markers forward and to unilaterally demarcate a precise border line.

This intricate situation developed partly from the fact that the straight line between Tekezze and Mareb, which was latter adopted as the “*colonial border*”, was not stipulated as such in the 1902 treaty. Rather, the treaty gave two indications for future delimitation:

*The line from the junction of the Setit (Tekezze) and Maieteb to the junction of the Mareb and Mai Ambessa shall be delimited by Italian and Ethiopian delegates, so that the Cunama (Kunama) tribe belong to Eritrea; and,*

*...from the Maieteb, ( the border) follows the latter’s course so as to leave Mount Ala Tacura to Eritrea.*

However, the delimitation – if done in accordance with the two indications – would have probably given even more land to Eritrea, was never done and both countries accepted the straight line as the working border.

One of the questions arising from the recent conflict is: where exactly is the village of Badme? There is no indication of such a settlement on current maps. It is reportedly a small village of a few hundred people. The Eritreans claim it is close to the 1902 line, but on the Eritrean side, and assure that when they captured the place in May, they did not cross the border line. In contrast, the Ethiopians claim that Badme is deep inside Ethiopian territory. In the first days of the conflict, they even identified Badme with a place named Yrga, far on the east of the straight line, founded after WWII by Ras Seyum Mengesha, the father of Mengesha Seyum. Of course, establishing the position Badme with precise geographic coordinates would be very easy from a purely technical point of view. But strangely enough neither of the two governments has published the coordinates.

## Disputed Areas in the Central Zone

There are several smaller contested areas, located in the central-eastern part of the border, where the Mareb is no longer the limit between the two countries. The alignment of the border in these areas is rather sinuous but, as the area is densely populated, it is well remembered by villagers.

Two disputed places are north of the Belesa river: Tsorona (a big village) and Belissa. Another one, Alitena is clearly north of the Muna river. Between these two groups of contested pockets, Zalambessa is traditionally the main border post, on the Asmara-Addis Ababa road. In recent years all these areas have been administrated by the Ethiopians. The *de facto* border post since 1991 has been just at the northern exit of Zalambessa.

There is room for legal controversy in the area where the boundary quits the river Belesa in order to reach the Mai Muna banks. This is because it is unclear which streams are called Muna due to the variety of different local names given to these streams at the turn of the century. An attempt to jointly demarcate this section of the boundary in 1904 failed and no new attempt was subsequently made.

The social background of these places differs. Tsorena, Belissa and Zalambessa are populated by villagers who are Coptic Christian Tigrean-speaking people, like the overwhelming majority of highlanders both in Tigray and Eritrea.

The population of Alitena is quite different. It is Saho and the area is known as Irob. The Saho Irob are, like other Saho, semi-nomadic people, organised in tribes and their language is closely related to the Afar language. Most of the Sahos are Moslems but among the Irobs, since the middle of the last century, there are a lot of Catholics. Their grazing lands, which had long been raided and disputed between the traditional lords of Akele Guzai (a district in Eritrea) and Agame (a district in Ethiopia), were divided by the establishment of colonial Eritrea.

People from Asimba, on the Ethiopian side of the colonial border, are closely related to those of Irob on the Eritrean side and, during the brief period of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia (1935-1941), the Italians established some Saho Irobs up to Adigrat in order to further Catholic teaching in this part of Tigray. It is a remote area and the people used to trade in both Eritrea (Senafe) and Ethiopia (Adigrat). Alitena, not far from the dividing river, was administered by the Italians, but some uncertainty

remains about the status of this peculiar place, resistant as it has been to all external authority, even before the arrival of Italians at the end of the last century. The map communicated in 1948, by the British authorities to the Special Inquiry Commission of the Four Powers, shows the Irob area in Ethiopia. But a United Nations team, sent two years later, reproduced Italian maps with Alitena clearly in Eritrea.

During the confused years which followed the fall of Haile Selassie's imperial regime, Irob was, like Badme area in the west, a refuge for all kinds of guerrilla groups fighting against the new Addis Ababa power. And people from Irob could be found in almost every rival's guerrilla groups of that time (Ras Mengesha's Tigrean Liberation Front (TLF), TPLF, EPRP, ELF, EPLF etc). In 1978, for example, Alitena was controlled, for several months by the EPRP, whose social background is to be found far to the south in the central Ethiopian regions. Subsequently, the TPLF displaced those EPRP forces and established itself in Alitena. Tigrean nationalists consider that Irob must be part of Agame and have always contested the "*Muna river line*" conceded by the Shoan Menelik II. Early in June 1998, one month after the beginning of the border war, the Eritrean army retook the place.

### The Eastern Part of the Frontier

More problematic is the situation in the eastern part of the Eritreo-Ethiopian border, where it comes to the Afar areas, along the Red Sea coast. The colonial border was not been precisely defined in those areas, even though an Italo-Ethiopian Convention of 16 May 1908 specifically deals with them. The Convention indicates that the border, going south-east, will "*proceed parallel to and at a distance of 60kms from the coast, until it joins the frontier of the French possessions of Somalia*" (the present Republic of Djibouti). The two governments promised in this document to "*undertake to fix the above mentioned frontier-line on the spot by common accord and as soon as possible.*" However, this never happened. When the United Nations opened the files, forty years later, they found nothing.

For several hundred kilometres the border traverses arid and rugged desert terrain, among the hottest in the world, where warring Afar tribes have led a nomadic existence for centuries, trading salt. They have always been reluctant to acknowledge any

demarcation which would divide what they consider to be their ancestral land.

In contrast to the highlands, where the colonial border follows old limits between villages' properties or feudal estates, the border in Dankalia cuts through the traditional Afar clans and sultanate areas and has no meaning for the locals. For the Italians as for the Ethiopians, there was no urgent need to demarcate a border on the ground that, for most of its length, neither of them really controlled. The situation has not changed significantly up to the present day. The only region where the new Eritrea encountered some difficulties after 1991 is the Afar area and the central Ethiopian government cannot pretend to be in full control of its part of Afar land. The border-line is described as "*approximate*" on official maps and, if demarcation work does start, a lot of "*disputed areas*" will certainly appear.

Recently, the Eritrean Minister of Trade, Ali Said Abdallah, was quoted as pointing out a potentially very disruptive contest in the southern part of the border, at Bure, near Assab (Aseb). He asserted that, on the main road linking Assab to Ethiopia, Ethiopia claims the border point lies 54km from Assab, while the Eritreans claim the distance is 71km.

### The Bada Incident

At the northern extremity of this Afar-zone border, where it joins the border between Akkele Guzai (Eritrea) and Tigrai (Ethiopia), the Bada area has been, for the last year, a hotly disputed place between Eritreans and Ethiopians. The dispute prompted the reactivation of the secret joint (Ethio-Eritrean) committee on border problems last August. The matter is documented since the Eritrean government recently released letters between the two governments on the subject it. The story tells a lot about the complex local political situation.

Here, the traditional border is a little river, known as the Endeli, which crosses a small piece of farming land watered by winter rains. Locally, it is a strategic area since it overlooks the salt coastal plain, and is the gateway from the highlands to Afar coastal harbours such as Mersa Fatma and Thio. Only Afars live there. In July 1997, the Ethiopian army entered the Eritrean part of Bada area in order to fight an Ethiopian Afar guerrilla group, the ARDUF which – at that time – opposed both governments. The two Ethiopian battalions were successful enough in the fighting and even secured

some political agreement between the ARDUF guerrillas and Ethiopia. But, once there, the Ethiopian army refused to leave the place and established an Ethiopian administration, despite angry warnings from Eritrea. There have been recent reports that the Ethiopians withdrew from Bada on 10 June, due to their difficult military situation after the severe border battles in Zalambessa and others places. Still, Bada remains a “*contested area*”, as far as the Tigreans are concerned.

The Eritrean president asserts to every foreign mediator he meets that the Eritrean-Ethiopian border is one the most clearly defined of all African boundaries. Clearly – and this is rarely the case in Africa – he may call upon international treaties for the entire boundary. But it is quite obvious that the non-demarcation on the ground and the post-colonial history have created many uncertainties and contradictory claims. To try to settle them looks like a tough challenge for the OAU. But it must succeed. If it does, it could well inaugurate a new chapter in the history of fixing the African boundaries.

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