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democratic governance in Southern
Africa and beyond.**

ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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Introduction

This paper looks at the formation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in the Horn of Africa with particular attention to the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Firstly, conflict in the Horn of Africa at large is mapped out. Ethnic and political groups within Ethiopia and Eritrea are looked at respectively so as to analyse the outbreak of war in the two countries. The extent of external role players' involvement in this conflict is examined. Finally the essay also attempts to assess the social and economic consequences of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Definitions

Ethnicity

According to Jenkins (1997:9) ethnicity or the word ethnic comes from the ancient Greek word "ethos" which is a situation in which a collectivity of humans lived and acted together. Another scholar, Eriksen (1995:251) defines ethnicity as an aspect of relationship between people or groups whose members believe that it is culturally distinctive. He indicates that ethnicity is situational in that people can behave differently according to situations. It is possible to make a distinction between ethnic groups that have culture and cultural groups. Ethnicity may not be adequately defined by cultural groups because they are not identical to ethnic groups. Cultural groups can only be used to reinforce ethnic identity.

Ethnic Group

"Ethnic group is a group of people whose members believe that they are of a common descent but not unilateral" (Jenkins 1997:13). It is not enough for a group to have certain common features because it is the interaction of various ethnic groups which according to Eriksen (1995:251) creates ethnicity. He says that ethnic groups are not isolated. Ethnic groups can only know of their existence by being in contact with others. The point about interaction can be illustrated with an example of someone who comes across a person lying dead in the street after a shooting incident. The reaction of the onlooker becomes one of shock and sorrow. There would be a different reaction if it were a dog lying dead in the street. The reason for the onlooker's reaction is that he identifies with the dead person as another human being. He sees his image in the body of that dead person and imagines that the same thing could happen to him. The reality of his dependence on others' existence and being in contact with them strikes his mind. Similarly, as much as ethnic groups are different, they need others so that they could have their own identity.

Ethnic Boundary

Boonzaier and Sharp (1993:80) state that ethnic boundary is an area within which people observe, learn and internalise the rituals and habits of speech, dispositions and dress of their bodies and modes of thought to the extent that they become entirely automatic. They further note that these boundaries are created during social interaction.

State

Boonzaier and Sharp (1993:80) define a state as a territory enclosed by borders with parliament, courts of law, law and

order enforcement institutions such as the police and the army. It also has the bureaucracy that administers day to day affairs of the people within such territory.

Ethnic Conflict

Following the definitions of ethnicity and ethnic groups given above, ethnic conflict may be defined as a conflict between two or more ethnic groups over resources, identity, borders or against oppression. Burton (1990:137-138) observes that multi-ethnic conflicts are usually violent and destructive to the societies they directly affect and often expand to become international affair. Parties in conflict get external military and financial support for strategic or ideological reasons and these results in costly and protracted conflict.

CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Background

It is important that a general picture of the conflict in the Horn of Africa is portrayed before a specific conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is examined. This region referred to as the Horn of Africa consists of Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea. John (1986:85) gives a physical description of the region as the region where the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the African continent meet. He also adds that it is the major link between the Middle East and Africa, situated close to oil supplying points. Hansen (1987:87) says that the Horn is potentially the second most explosive sub-region following Southern Africa in the whole continent. He says that war in this region has brought with it social dislocation and human suffering. According to him, out of about

five million refugees in Africa, more than one million refugees are found in the Horn and almost all of them as a consequence of drought and continued warfare.

History

Hansen (1987:88-89) attributes the origin of war in the Horn of Africa to three major reasons. Firstly, it is the ruling classes' attempts to create national states within the international boundaries that were established by the European colonialists. Another reason is the little economic surplus and weak economic base in this region. Lastly is the nationalist ideologies of the regimes and preservation of territorial integrity. He states that towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a scramble for the Horn of Africa. The British, the French and the Italians were the main competitors.

The British controlled the Somali hinterland and called it the British Somaliland. The French also had their own area around Djibouti and they called it the French Somaliland. The Italians on the other hand controlled the area along the Red Sea Coast extending to the Tagrayan highlands. This area was called the Italian Somaliland. Hansen further states that in 1896 the Italians were engaged in war with Ethiopia and were defeated by Ethiopia. The Italian ambition to expand its territory from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean could therefore not be realised. The Ethiopian victory was followed by demarcation of major international boundaries in the Horn. As a result, the Somali population was split between the French, the British and the Italian Somaliland. The Ethiopian Empire which consisted of the Amharic-Tigre

core now included the Somali Obo, the Oromo and the Afars.

Ethnic Groups in Eritrea

According to Tronvoll (1999:1042) there were four ethnic groups that inhabited the colony of Eritrea. In the central highlands region, also called the Mereb Melash, lived the Tigrinya speaking people, comprising mainly orthodox Christians. This region was largely kinship. Within the same region lived a group of Saho-speaking agro-pastoralist Muslims and the Tigrinya-speaking Muslims. In the lowland areas were the Barka and Cash-Setit regions inhabited by Tigre-speaking and Beni- Amer clans. These were mainly nomadic pastoral groups. The Kunama and Nara hunters and gatherers, although smaller in numbers, were also in this region. The third region was the coastal and internal areas north of Massawa that was dominated by Arabs and Muslims. The fourth region was the Afar land that covered the coastal and internal areas from the Gulf of Zula down to Djibouti. This area is within the present Eritrea's borders. The Afar clans in this region were independent and were never under an external control until the arrival of the colonialists.

Political Groups in Eritrea

It appears that in Eritrea there were no active political parties before its independence. After its incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire, its people began an armed struggle. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) spearheaded the struggle although internal conflicts led to its split. The splinter group, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) overpowered the ELF and pushed it out of the country.

Ethnic Groups in Ethiopia

According to Hansen (1987:92) the ethnic groups that lived within Ethiopian Empire were the Tigrayans, the Oromo, the Somalis and the Afars. Among these groups the Oromo constituted the largest ethnic group with 40% of the whole population and as it will be shown later, this had an effect in the ethnic conflict in this country.

Political Groups in Ethiopia

A number of groups contested in the political arena in Ethiopia. According to Ledarach (1997:162-163) the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic front (EPRDF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogadeni National Liberation Front (ONLF) were prominent. These groups were liberation movements such as the EPLF in Eritrea but also very active politically.

The boundary demarcations in the Horn by the colonialists concretised ethnic identity in the region. Each of the societies mentioned above had to be stronger than ever before to fight infiltration by foreign powers. They had to protect their culture and interests against the colonialists who seemed to have no regard for their autonomy and dignity. The historical background of these ethnic groups shows that they have always lived as separate enclaves under their own rule. It was therefore difficult for these societies to comprehend foreign rule. Their suspicion and uncertainty about the future forced them to fight for their survival as a group.

In the definition of ethnic group it is said that members of such a group must believe that they are of a common descent. It has been further stated that

ethnic groups are not isolated and must therefore interact with others in order for ethnicity to exist. This means that although it can not be denied that there were groups that inhabited the Horn of Africa for centuries, the formation of ethnicity only happened upon the arrival of the colonialists. This is the period where (as it has been said above) these groups consolidated their efforts to survive. They competed with each other for preservation of their values and for survival because none of the individual groups would want either to perish while its neighbors survived or to lose its land, culture and values while its neighbours maintained theirs.

ORIGINS AND THE OUTBREAK OF WAR BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA

Background

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea dates back to the pre-colonial era. Historically, in the Horn as well as in other regions of the African continent there have been wars between different ethnic groups. In Southern Africa for instance, the Mfeqane wars devastated the region as the Zulu *Impis* (Zulu warriors) attacked the smaller and weaker ethnic groups. The nomadic societies, the agro-pastoralist societies and the hunters and gatherers in the Horn also had their own disputes amongst each other. Their way of living as in the case of the Somali nomads and the Beni amer clans, made boundary disputes inevitable as they kept moving from one place to another. The Afars, as it has already been said earlier, had never been under external rule and this implies that they were not going to accept the colonial rule easily. Tronvoll (1999:1042) asserts that between 1869 and 1896 the Italians drew Eritrean

borders by violence. The use of force suggests that there was resistance to the colonial rule and the consequences of these forced demarcations will be discussed later.

It was during the same time that the Italians were exerting their influence in the Horn that the Ethiopian Empire was also seeking to expand its territory in the region. Emperor Menelik was busy conquering the region beyond the traditional Amhara-Tigre area. Hansen (1987:89) says that the Emperor wanted to establish what he called the "ancient frontiers of the Ethiopian Empire" which extended up Khartoum and as far as lake Nyanza. The state that Menelik forged in the late 19th century has also influenced the debates amongst the ethnic groups in present day Ethiopia.

Post Colonial Era

Tranvoll (1999:1043) states that in the 1930's Italy fought with Britain as it attempted to expand the Eritrean borders to include the Ethiopian Empire. After defeating Italy the British then took over the control of Eritrea. In the 1960's two important events happened in the Horn. The first was the unification of the British and the Italian Somalia that gave birth to the Republic of Somalia. The second development was the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia by the United Nations (UN) in 1962. These two events are significant because they are among factors that influenced the development of ethnic conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia and between Ethiopia and Eritrea as well as in the region at large.

The incorporation of Eritrea triggered Eritrea's arms struggle against the Ethiopian regime. Hansen (1987:1043) states that in 1978 the Republic of

Somalia also battled with Ethiopia for control of the Ogaden. The Ogaden is the land to the east of the Ethiopian highlands and deep into Somalia. It is poor land, partly desert, that has been occupied by the Somali nomads for over a century. Hansen also believes that among the sources of war in the Horn is the economic surplus and weak economic base. This is however refuted by the Eritrean leader Isaias Afwerki. According to Tranvoll (1999:1049) Afwerki does not believe that the crisis is caused by economic problems. He says that as both countries involved in the conflict have a weak economic base and it therefore, would not make sense for either of them to fight the other with the aim of reviving the economy. Afwerki looks at the conflict from a cultural point of view. He sees pride, integrity, respect, trust and confidence as central to the conflict. Lack or absence of these factors is a real problem to the inhabitants in the Horn, not the money and resources. The factors outlined by Afwerki do not only apply to country versus country conflict but also to intra-conflict where ethnic groups, particularly the marginalised ones, fight those in government. The conflict between the ethnic groups is not always over access to resources but is also about pride, trust, respect and integrity.

It is important to underscore the role of the nomadic societies in the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia and between Ethiopia and Somalia. Their tendency to move from one place to another, adds to the already burning fire caused by the boundaries that split the ethnic groups between the two countries. The two governments' claims to the ethnic boundaries also become claims to national boundaries. There is no way that any ethnic group on either side could be incorporated by one of the

countries without that country's borders expanding to include the land inhabited by the ethnic group. The Afar ethnic group in Ethiopia or in Eritrea for instance would not accept an offer to relocate to a new territory and leave their ancestral land behind. The same thing would apply to the Somali nomads in Ethiopia and Somalia. There is also a possibility that even the land allocated to them would be claimed by some other ethnic groups.

Internal Complexities in Eritrea

The ELF was exiled by the EPLF, with the implication that as an enemy of the EPLF, the ELF had become a threat to stability in Eritrea. Eritrea's independence entailed a number of complexities that, in turn rendered its involvement in endless conflicts with almost all of its neighbours. Tronvoll (1999:1037) reveals that Eritrea has had engaged in armed conflict on all its borders with her neighbours - the Sudan, Yemen, Djibouti and Ethiopia. All these countries have accused Eritrea of armed attacks and aggressive foreign policy.

UNESCO (1987:229) states that some countries in the Third World begin border conflicts deliberately to deflect attention from their domestic problems. This view is also true with countries in the Horn. The colonial boundaries referred to earlier have combined ethnic groups that were never combined before and, have as well, separated some that never lived away from each other.

UNESCO further states that some postcolonial regimes have adopted the colonial policy of 'divide and rule'. This policy empowered some ethnic groups at the expense of others. The empowered groups monopolise education, job opportunities and political power.

After liberation from Ethiopia, the Eritrean government adopted a nationalistic ideology. As Tronvoll (1999:1043-1044) puts it, they declared in the National Charter for Eritrea that was adopted by the Third Congress of EPLF/PFDJ that national unity is the paramount guideline to which all policies were to be aligned. The ruling party made it clear that all Eritreans are born equal and that no ethnic group is superior to another. This ideology does not however consider whether or not the ethnic groups have pride, trust and confidence. Eriksen (1995:262) observes that nationalist ideology assumes that members of a society share a culture and so individual differences are not important in nation building.

The nationalist government's ambitions were completely contrary to views of the Afar people. Tronvoll (1999:1050) indicates that prior to independence, the Afars formed the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF) which called for armed struggle to oppose the Eritrean government. ARDUF wanted separate land and recognition for the Afar society. In South Africa's recent past there was a similar demand by the Afrikaner society to have their own country (Volkstad).

The Eritrean government had a reason to worry because the Afars in Ethiopia enjoyed relative autonomy under the ethnic federal system. ARDUF joined forces with Ethiopia to protect the Afars from the Eritrean government. The Eritrean-Ethiopian border that runs through Afar territory is a source of violent border conflict between the two countries. Tronvoll further points out that after independence the regime's legitimacy was (and is still) questioned by the Kunama and Afar ethnic groups. These groups had reservations with the

new Eritrean identity because they regarded the liberators as the oppressors. The new authority meant that these ethnic groups had to part with their long enjoyed autonomy and provides the reason for the alliance between the Afars and Ethiopia to fight Asmara.

Internal Complexities in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia there was also mounting internal political pressure against the government. Hansen (1987:92) states that the EPRP and the EPRDF were competing against the government for power. There were also other ethnic groups such as the Tigrayans, the Somalis, the Afars and the Oromo. The Oromo with their army wing, the OLF, fought for Oromo liberation and the ONLF fought for the independence of Ogaden.

The ethnic groups in Ethiopia considered themselves marginalised by the government. The government then had to use force to quell internal challenges. Given this scenario, it is most likely that in order to withstand both internal and external threats, the government would have to acquire more arms although UNESCO (1987:226) says that stock piling arms is in itself a cause for concern to its neighbours. This was indeed the case in Botswana for instance, as they purchased tanks and military helicopters in the 1990's during their dispute with Namibia over the Caprivi strip. This caused an uproar in Namibia exacerbated the fear that Botswana was planning to attack it and the relationship between the two Southern African countries deteriorated.

During the colonial era, ethnic groups in the Horn did not cease in their struggle for freedom against the colonial powers. In Eritrea, ethnic groups such as the Afars continue the armed struggle but this time against the government for

recognition of the Afar traditional political institutions. The Afars in Ethiopia on the other hand have their own regional state. As it has been stated earlier, some of the ethnic groups lived together before the advent of colonialism and therefore have a sense of belonging together. This will always prevail and encourage groups such as the Afars to unite and revolt against the government.

Tronvoll (1999:1050-51) maintains that the EPLF leadership belongs to the Tagrawi ethnic group and the President of Ethiopia is also from the same ethnic group but on the other side in Tigray. Should it not be for the colonial boundaries, it is likely that the two leaders and their core members would be in one ethnic group. The hostility arises because EPLF wants to create an Eritrean national identity and that they do not want to compromise by mixing with their cousins in Ethiopia.

Burton (1990:138) states that members of ethnic minority experience discrimination in a way similar to those members of less advantaged income groups. In both the Eritrean and Ethiopian regimes there are ethnic groups that regard themselves as marginalised. The Eritrean government for instance, with its army that consists of all ethnic groups, may be fighting for Eritrean national identity and yet have elements within the army that support the struggle of their own ethnic group. The ethnic group that comprises the regime is without question the more advantaged and this becomes a potential cause of conflict.

EXTERNAL PARTIES IN THE CONFLICT

Hansen (1987:88) states that countries in the Horn of Africa have received massive military and financial support from the United States of America

(USA) and the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and this has helped sustain conflict in this region. He argues that the USA and the USSR each rendered their support so as to win in their competition for natural resources in this region. They deliberately incited political conflict so that they could sustain the dependency of the region on them for technical support and arms supply.

He further indicates that in the case of Eritrea, the ELF received support from the Arab states such as Syria, Iraq and Libya. ELF resided in Sudan after its exile from Eritrea. Although EPLF and Sudan are now rivals, during the liberation war, EPLF had its military bases in Sudan. The boundaries that split the Beni Amers between Sudan and Eritrea caused the rivalry between Eritrea and Sudan. The Beni Amers in Sudan are Islam and given the Islamist tendencies to expand beyond Sudanese borders, the EPLF government had to relinquish its good relations with Sudan in order to suppress any Islamic influence the Beni Amers in Sudan may have had on those in Eritrea.

According to Lederach (1997:162), political parties in Ethiopia derived huge support from the radical Islamist groups in Sudan and the Middle East. It is worth noting that Sudan was involved as an external force in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Ethiopian government on the other hand got support from Saudi Arabia and Yemen particularly, during its battle with the Republic of Somalia.

Kenya also supported Ethiopia and the aliens between Kenya and Ethiopia is important for the purpose of this essay because Kenya had inherited part of the Somaliland from Britain. So the presence of the Somali ethnic people in

Kenya brings to the Kenya-Somali conflict an element of ethnicity.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICT

During its occupation of Eritrea, Ethiopia had access to the sea. Cervenka (1973:17) subscribes to the theory that the African trade is export oriented and access to sea means an automatic access to world markets. One can therefore suggest that with Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia became landlocked and has no direct access to the sea. The geographical position of Eritrea therefore, coupled with what Cervenka maintains above concerning international trade, gives it an economic advantage over Ethiopia as far as sea trade is concerned. The historical and on-going rivalry between the two may pose a threat to Eritrea's security if it were to serve as a state of transit to Ethiopia. If Ethiopia wins and some of the 'strategic' boundaries are altered, it will have achieved political satisfaction but no peace because its arch rival will seek ways of changing the situation.

It has been said earlier that the war in the Horn is accompanied by human suffering. Lederach (1997:6) also alludes to the same far reaching effects of the war in this region. He says that regimes in the Horn give weapon procurement first priority over other needs of the communities. He adds that between 1980 and 1983, military expenditure in ten African countries exceeded their combined health expenditures.

In the Horn in particular, there are many weapons yet the social structure is fragile. This situation has the potential of creating humanitarian disasters as happened in Somalia during the mid

1990's. Similar developments to those alluded to by Lederach are also experienced in Angola where, despite being one of the richest countries in mineral resources in Southern Africa and on the African continent, the civil war that has raged for over two decades has crippled its economy. The income is spent on military expenses.

"The effects of warfare and external involvement have been felt directly by the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa and its surroundings" (Hansen 1987:96). Every war has victims and armed conflict in the Horn can not be separated from refugee problems. According to UNHCR (1995:13), the Horn of Africa is one of the largest refugee producing regions of the world and approximately 1.6 million refugees from the region were assisted by the UNHCR. In 1992, some refugees were repatriated from Somalia to Ethiopia at the time when Ethiopia was in a state of acute societal disorder. The post-colonial nationalist system had failed and considerable uncertainty, social strife and lawlessness prevailed compounded by a severe and repeated drought.

John (1986:87) suggests that the majority of refugees were from Ethiopia where the regime had adopted the "scorched earth" policy against its mostly rural people to stop them from supporting the rebels. The regime burned harvests, bombed wells and killed cattle. The people were then forced to fled the country or relocate to camps. In situations such as the one portrayed by John above, the economic well being and sustainability of the people were undoubtedly destroyed. The refugee camps were not conducive for the people to start their lives over again. Instead, crippled by hunger and disease, death becomes inevitable.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the formation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is both a result of imposed colonial boundaries and nationalist ideology versus the indigenous inhabitants of the two countries. In each country there is more conflict between the government and the ethnic group than between the government and another government. The leaders in these countries fail to address the fundamental needs of the ethnic groups. In Eritrea for instance, the EPLF does not attend to issues such as the recognition of the traditions of the Afar society that seem to be of the utmost importance to this ethnic group. The question of distribution of resources, critical for stability of any country, is put aside by the nationalist government. The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia has a spill-over effect on the entire region given the widespread settlement of the ethnic groups.

The bonds that exist between members of the same ethnic groups transcend national unity advocated by the national government in both Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Afars in the Eritrean army still sympathise with the ARDUF rebels for they are brothers. This could also be a factor contributing to the protracted conflict between the two countries as there is an Afar ethnic group in Ethiopia that could also act as an external party to conflict in Eritrea. Ethnic issues are at the centre of the conflict between the two countries and so are the boundaries and sovereignty. The system of government adopted by the regimes in not only alien to the indigenous people of the region but are seemingly oppressive. The foundation for successful end to the conflict remains however, the responsibility of the regimes in this region.

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