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East Africa: Rising Tensions Amid New Opportunities for Engagement

By Jason Mosley, 19 July 2012

The latest report from the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea has stirred tensions between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia.

Eritrea has seized on a selective reading of the report to call for the lifting of UN imposed sanctions, a call already rebuffed by the Monitoring Group's Coordinator. The diplomatic fallout is likely to continue as Ethiopia and its allies push for continued (or tightened) sanctions on Eritrea.

It is a sensitive time in the Horn of Africa. Tensions are rising along the region's main political and security fault-line between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ethiopia's government has taken an increasingly bellicose tone towards its former province, perhaps signaling an increased willingness to push more actively for regime change in Eritrea. This would have major but uncertain security consequences across the region.

In January, Ethiopia accused Eritrea of being behind an attack by ethnic Afar gunmen on a tourist convoy travelling in Ethiopia's north-western region. The attackers were most likely criminally motivated. However, given that the Afar people range across the Ethiopia-Eritrea-Djibouti border area, the attack significantly worsened Ethiopia-Eritrea relations. In March, Ethiopia staged raids across the Eritrean border - the most significant military activity along the border since 2000. Ethiopia said it was targeting Eritrean-sponsored training camps for Afar militants. Ethiopia's government may have hoped to trigger a reaction from their Eritrean counterparts, but there was no retaliation.

Long History

Successive governments in Addis Ababa have been challenged with ensuring Ethiopian security in the context of a volatile regional security landscape. The last two decades have seen civil wars in Somalia and Sudan, as well as the 1998-2000 border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Since 2002, lingering animosity between Ethiopia and Eritrea has contributed to regional tensions, as both governments have sought to undermine the other's interests, such as by sponsoring proxy militia in each other's territory, and in Somalia.

Ethiopia has successfully exploited its important geo-strategic position to ensure that Eritrea remains isolated, within the region and internationally. Ethiopia's failure to abide by the terms of the binding arbitration over the two countries' border delineation and demarcation led to the current impasse. Eritrea's poor diplomatic engagement has not helped its position, although it could benefit, in principle, from holding the legal high ground in the decade-long stalemate with Ethiopia. In practice however, the African Union (AU) and the Horn of Africa's regional grouping, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have fairly consistently followed Ethiopia's lead in applying pressure on Eritrea, widely portrayed as a regional spoiler.

Ethiopia's Strains

The government in Addis Ababa faces domestic resentment as a result of the border war, which triggered a split in Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF is the core of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The

purge which followed the TPLF split has seen power increasingly concentrated in the hands of Meles and his senior advisors, and more broadly, political space has tightened since 2005. In the 2010 elections, opposition parties had their appeals rejected after results saw their representation reduced to just 1 of 547 parliamentary seats. Restrictions on the media and non-governmental organizations have also increased. The government has utilized its dominance of the media, especially radio, to weave a narrative for public consumption of a nation under attack, with the EPRDF defending Ethiopian interests in the region.

Eritrea's Isolation

Eritrea's autocratic government was targeted by UN sanctions in late 2009, in response to providing assistance to Al-Shabaab in Somalia. However in 2010 and 2011, the government made a concerted effort to improve its international engagement. It reopened its mission to the AU headquarters in 2011 but came under pressure as a result of allegations, mainly from Ethiopia, that there was an Eritrean plot to bomb the AU's January summit. So far, sanctions have been weaker than Ethiopia had hoped for. Moreover, they have not extended to Eritrea's mining sector, revenue from which has eased the impact of its isolation.

An Opportunity?

Although tensions are arguably at their highest level in a decade, developments in Ethiopia and Eritrea and current shifts in regional security may still signal an opportunity for renewed engagement. Security dynamics in southern-central Somalia have shifted in the last year, and Ethiopia and Eritrea are no longer the only external actors. Al-Shabaab has suffered important military losses, which may leave enough space for international diplomatic engagement on the Ethiopia-Eritrea issue. International players should take the opportunity to pressure the two countries to resolve outstanding border issues and to unblock their diplomatic and security stalemate.

Eritrea's fiscal position is improving as its mining sector starts to generate revenue. This makes the country slightly less vulnerable to an Ethiopia-led isolation. Eritrea's government could be receptive to a well-timed reengagement with the international community, if this were seen to be accompanied by pressure on Ethiopia to abide by the 2002 arbitration decision. More quiet forms of diplomacy are needed, however, as both sides have already staked their public positions quite strongly.

Finally, rumours are circulating about Meles's health after he missed a recent AU Summit. These echo similar reports alleging the death of Isaias Afewerki, the President of Eritrea, earlier in the year, which turned out to be false. Whether he has a serious illness remains to be seen, but it could well be that the leadership structures in Addis Ababa are in for a shift - creating risks, but also potential opportunities for engagement.