

Ethiopia frees Eritrean PoWs

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(ADDIS ABABA) - Ethiopia has released a total of 75 Eritrean prisoners of war who were captured by the Ethiopian army during cross border attacks it carried out in March 2011.

However Ethiopia said that the move does not necessarily imply a restoration of relation between the two rival neighbours whose relation remain at odds following the 1998-2000 border conflict which left an estimated 70,000 dead.

Ethiopian military attacked an army base inside Eritrea, where Addis Ababa said rebels were training; an allegation Asmara rejects.

In mid-January, gunmen alleged to be members of the Eritrea-based Ethiopian Afar separatists group (ARDUF) attacked a group of western tourists in Ethiopia's remote Afar region near the Eritrean border and killed five people from German, Hungary and Austria. ARDUF also denied Eritrea's involvement in the attacks.

The separatist group, who fight a low-level insurgency against "political marginalisation" by Addis Ababa, claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Ethiopian troops carried out cross-border attacks in retaliation for the killing of five tourists in Ethiopia's remote Afar region in March.

The Eritrean prisoners of war were taken to the Eritrean border on Tuesday, with the help of a local refugee agency, Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA), which is an implementing partner of UN refugee agency (UNHCR).

The Ethiopian government offered the war prisoners with three options, voluntary repatriation, to remain in Ethiopia or resettlement in a third country.

Speaking to state television, the prisoners thanked the Ethiopian government for freeing them and for providing them with good treatment while they were held in a camp for prisoners of war.

The military strike which was Ethiopia's first military incursion since the two countries ended the 1998-2000 border war, increased fears of a return to a full scale war.

The Eritrean government accused the US of being behind the attack and appealed on the UN Security Council for intervention and stated that it would not attack Ethiopia

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