



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE www.usip.org

SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

John Prendergast was part of the facilitation team behind the two-and-a-half-year U.S. effort to broker an end to the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This report is the final installment of a five-part series on African conflicts, the previous four of which were also published by the Institute as Special Reports during Prendergast's tenure as an Institute executive fellow.

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.

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John Prendergast

U.S. Leadership in Resolving African Conflict

The Case of Ethiopia-Eritrea

Briefly...

- The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea was one of a series of conflicts erupting at the end of the past decade that contributed greatly to undermining earlier optimism for the prospects of a hoped-for "African Renaissance."
- The conflict was extremely destructive, killing over one hundred thousand people in World War I-style trench warfare carried out with modern weaponry.
- From the outset of the conflict, President Clinton decided that the United States would play a major role in attempting to broker a settlement.
- The president's special envoy, Anthony Lake, backed by a team from the National Security Council, State Department, and Defense Department, worked closely with Organization for African Unity and European Union envoys in resolving the conflict.
- The close partnership between the United States, European Union, and Organization for African Unity could be a model for U.S.-Africa teamwork in future mediating efforts. The parties had little recourse but to stay with this process, as no competing initiative would be counteracted by a united international community.
- Early and continuous engagement between the mediators and the UN secretary general ensured that nothing in the peace agreement would pose too great a challenge to the follow-on peace implementation mission.
- The Ethiopia-Eritrea case demonstrates that high-level, sustained, continuous U.S. engagement in peacemaking in Africa can have a major positive impact. The case also demonstrates the importance of multilateral, coordinated leverage in the form of significant carrots and sticks.

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The African Context

One of the principal obstacles to Africa's economic and political emergence at the end of the 20th century was the explosion of a chain of conflicts extending from Somalia in the north-east to Angola in the southwest. Not least of these was the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, two countries that many had seen as key players in the hoped-for "African Renaissance."

The war between these two nations was relatively brief but intense. It snuffed out as many as one hundred thousand lives, displaced one third of Eritrea's population, froze foreign aid and investment, sparked a bilateral arms race and defense spending spree, and drove the two countries' real growth rates to zero. Coming so close on the heels of President Clinton's historic 1998 trip through Africa, the war helped dash the hopes of what had been a growing sense of Afro-optimism in the United States. Ironically, two governments that wanted to lead Africa in new directions ended up living up to old stereotypes.

Intense U.S. diplomatic involvement was a key factor in ending the conflict. This case therefore has wide ramifications in the debate over how deeply the United States should immerse itself in conflict resolution efforts throughout Africa, if not more broadly. Twice the United States has made a commitment to lead a peace process in Africa and sustained that commitment over an extended period of time (led by Chester Crocker in Namibia and Anthony Lake in this case), and twice the United States has succeeded. Though not widely recognized as strategically important investments, there is no doubt that these efforts have major repercussions in terms of lives and resources saved.

From Low Boil to Explosion

Why did the conflict erupt between Ethiopia and Eritrea? What drove two erstwhile friends to wage what was at the time the largest conventional war on earth?

It is important to distinguish between proximate and root causes of this conflagration. The proximate cause was certainly a dispute over their common border. The parties alternately alleged encroachment along the undemarcated border, and the moving of border markings, as evidence of disputes going back years regarding administration of border towns. These border issues simmered on low heat until early May 1998, when frustrations boiled over. A series of military actions culminated in an unprecedented use of force by the Eritrean army, which moved with heavy armor into areas previously administered by Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Parliament met and demanded Eritrea's withdrawal. Eritrea insisted it was only taking back areas that belonged to it, according to its interpretation of colonial treaties. This led directly to a breakdown in relations between the two countries, and hence the war.

But of course the causes of the war run much deeper.

Problems in Bilateral Relations

- Unresolved disputes and tensions left over from the war against the former dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam continued to fester and were never adequately addressed.
- Differing visions of governance led each to dismiss the approach of the other.
- The two countries failed to effectively institutionalize bilateral relationships that were borne of collaboration between two guerrilla armies but then shifted to relations between two distinct and very different states.
- There was a consequent dependence on relations between personalities in the leadership of both governments.
- When the crisis erupted, there remained no institutional channel for communication and both leaders felt compelled to defend their stance.

Divergent Economic Interests

At the time of Eritrea's independence, there were immediate structural and policy differences concerning economic relations between the two states. Ethiopia inherited a huge debt, an enormous population unlinked by roads and commerce, and major internal political divergence. Eritrea, on the other hand, inherited no debt, a somewhat cohesive and united population, and less daunting infrastructure deficits. Over time, policy differences emerged over trade, currency, port usage, customs, and labor migration.

Poverty and Unrealized Expectations

- In the key regions of fighting in northern Tigray and southern Eritrea, people live on the knife's edge of survival, and productive land is scarce and irreplaceable; therefore, land is an issue over which peasants are perhaps the most willing to fight and die.
- The leadership in both countries had key constituencies in these contested areas, and given the genesis of the governments in popular movements, they had to respond to these populations' needs and demands, which arose from a context of:
 - demographic pressure: northern Tigray is one of most densely populated areas on the Africa continent and thus there was pressure to expand geographically;
 - economic deterioration: despite some development, post-Mengistu expectations were higher than even rapid economic growth could match; and
 - food insecurity: this increased because population growth out-stripped productivity increases.

Unavoidable War?

Could war between the two countries have been prevented? At the risk of defying most of our best models on conflict prevention, I think not, although the groundwork could have been laid years earlier for institutional relationships and initiatives that may have reduced the likelihood of violence.

If you surveyed African and Africanist experts—even Ethiopia/Eritrea/Horn experts—throughout the world at the beginning of 1998, no one was predicting conflict between these two states. There were many more logical candidates for potential conflict across the continent.

Furthermore, although the U.S. government and the World Bank were deeply engaged with these two governments at the time, neither government gave any indication of any problem on the border that might lead to serious trouble, despite the fact that they had a joint commission of very senior people discussing the issues. Neither government ever contacted any human rights group about the alleged abuses being committed against their citizens by the other government. In short, it was a flatliner. There was no pulse detected by outsiders as to the potential for armed confrontation.

Operating with that limited information, we can see that the war was the result of problems that both parties kept to themselves and thought they could resolve quietly between themselves. And although some form of confrontation may have been inevitable, both parties were very surprised that they could neither contain nor turn it around.

In retrospect, two initiatives on the part of the international community could have reduced the possibility of conflict. First, there could have been pressure immediately after Eritrea's independence to formally demarcate the border. Second, there could have been more effort expended to ensure the institutionalization of the bilateral relationship, rather than relying on the relationship between the two leaders.

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Rapid Diplomatic Response

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When the conflict visibly erupted in May 1998, the leaders of both countries asked Susan Rice, U.S. assistant secretary of state, and, separately, Paul Kagame, then vice president of Rwanda, to come to the region to try to defuse tensions. Rice and her American team worked closely with Kagame to craft a formula designed to address the proximate cause of the conflict, the border. Over two years later, that formula would form the basis of an agreement, but at this early juncture only Ethiopia accepted the proposal, while Eritrea wavered and did not accept at that time. Further fighting then hardened attitudes and made agreement more elusive.

Soon thereafter, Rice attended the Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit and helped forge a consensus among key African states in support of the basic elements of the formula as the appropriate path to peace.

Later that summer, Rice and Joe Wilson, senior director of the National Security Council (NSC), sent David Dunn, director of the State Department's East Africa office, Ambassador Robert Houdek, and me out to try to put an end to one of the nastiest elements of the conflict, the air war, which had led to the deaths of a number of civilians and threatened to widen the war beyond the border. With critical support from Pentagon officials, we brokered an air strike moratorium; also actively involved was President Clinton, who was in frequent contact with the leaders by phone, backing up and sealing our diplomatic efforts on the ground. Without an air strike moratorium, the war might have spun out of control, with much more civilian damage and death, a change in strategic targets to include capitals, and an intensification of other means of fighting the war.

Special Envoy Diplomacy

Late in 1998 President Clinton and Secretary Albright named as their special envoy former national security adviser Tony Lake, who immediately launched a series of shuttle visits over the following six months. Lake led a State-NSC-Department of Defense (DOD) team that worked closely with the OAU to help produce the OAU "Framework Agreement" and "Modalities of Implementation," two documents aimed at producing a set of principles as a basis for resolving the conflict. These documents drew heavily upon the original U.S.-Rwandan proposal. Ethiopia accepted the two documents but Eritrea had serious reservations, so consultations continued, and the United States and OAU continued to press Eritrea for its acceptance.

Another round of fighting in February 1999 only hardened attitudes further. The situation was anything but "ripe for resolution." Nevertheless, shuttling missions by Lake as well as continuous engagement by Susan Rice and Gayle Smith, NSC senior director for Africa, forestalled further offensive action for over a year.

In August 1999, Algeria as chair of the OAU hosted a drafting session that included teams from the United States and United Nations, with the objective of producing a set of detailed steps that would provide a roadmap for the two parties to implement the two OAU documents. Negotiations between the United States, OAU, and United Nations were as intense as the follow-on consultations with the parties. These deliberations finally produced the detailed peace implementation plan, in no small measure due to the expertise on security issues provided by the Pentagon, spearheaded by Lt. Col. Mike Bailey.

This time, the situation reversed. Eritrea accepted while Ethiopia expressed concerns. Subsequently, the U.S. team, working closely with Algerian special representative Ahmed Ouyahia and European Union (EU) special envoy Rino Serri, endeavored to gain Ethiopia's agreement. This involved extended visits, shuttling between Asmara and Addis, and proximity talks in Algiers.

This stage of the process lasted nine months, from September 1999 to May 2000. While forestalling further active conflict, the U.S. team worked to address Ethiopian

concerns. In April the OAU, U.S., and EU teams met in Algiers with the two partners, but the Eritrean team presented what amounted to conditions for further negotiations, and the process was stymied.

Further inadvertent damage was done when a UN Security Council mission to the Congo veered off to the Horn and presented an ultimatum to the Ethiopians, who already had a jittery finger on their trigger. The war resumed a day later. This first and only example of a breakdown in coordinated international action in the Ethiopia-Eritrea process was doubly disappointing in that the U.S. team was on the precipice of presenting a new proposal to the two parties that might have moved the process towards conclusion.

Throughout the process, the mediation focused on the proximate issue of the border, as the parties were unwilling to discuss other issues. But it was the deeper underlying issues referenced earlier that complicated the talks, introduced contradictions at the most perplexing moments, and informed the stances of both parties.

Military and Diplomatic Breakthroughs

Ultimately, Ethiopia launched a massive offensive in May 2000, which overwhelmed Eritrean positions at a number of points along the front. Fighting was intense and the mediators immediately convened in Algiers with the two foreign ministers and went into round-the-clock negotiations, led by Ouyahia and Lake. Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika made a trip to the two capitals that helped lay the groundwork for those talks. EU envoy Serri also contributed.

Early on in these talks, the mediators and the parties collectively decided to split off the longer-term issues of determining the border and paying compensation for war damages from the immediate need to cease the fighting. Intensive negotiations finally produced a document acceptable to both parties in mid-June 2000, and the guns immediately went silent.

In the aftermath of securing the ceasefire, our immediate focus was to get the peacekeeping mission deployment process initiated quickly and competently. A challenging environment pertained at that time, given the problematic missions in the Congo and Sierra Leone. We immediately invited Col. Robert Phillips, chief of planning for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, to Algiers to “game out” the peacekeeping mission with the mediators and the parties. The UN contribution in this regard was stellar.

We also immediately began work on the framework architecture for the larger agreement involving determination of the border, compensation for war damages, and investigation of the origins of the conflict.

These talks followed similar formula—intensive sessions in Algiers during the fall of 2000, shuttling led by Tony Lake between Asmara and Addis, and intensive work from Washington by Susan Rice and Gayle Smith (and their superiors when necessary). The United States took a more prominent role, backed by the new Algerian envoy, Abdelkadir Messahel, and EU envoy Serri.

Although the drama of an active shooting war no longer provided the backdrop to diplomatic efforts, there still remained serious repercussions at stake. If no agreement was forthcoming on demarcating the border, this surely would have impacted on decisions by countries to contribute forces for the peacekeeping mission, thus pushing back the date for eventual redeployment of Ethiopian forces off Eritrean soil, an issue that certainly could have sparked new tensions.

In this set of negotiations, legal issues replaced security issues as central areas of focus. Rather than Pentagon expertise, which had proved so decisive to the earlier effort, we now turned to State’s Legal Office for critical and continuous involvement in the negotiations. Kathleen Wilson and Ron Betthauer became indispensable to U.S. and OAU efforts to mediate the final agreement. This involved countless hours with the legal teams of both parties, which also assumed prominent roles in the push to the finish line.

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The peace agreement finally signed by President Isaias and Prime Minister Meles on December 12, 2000 does not deal with all of the economic and political issues that divide these two countries. Nevertheless, it does address exhaustively: (1) the proximate cause of the fighting—by establishing a commission to delimit and demarcate the border; (2) the reasons for the fighting—by creating an independent commission to investigate all of the causes; and (3) the immediate effects of the fighting, by establishing a commission to address compensation issues.

Since the signing of the agreement, the United States has made it a priority to support the agreement's implementation and the consolidation of the peace. This includes exploring or moving forward on the following: demining, demobilization, peacekeeping training, humanitarian aid, support for resettling the displaced, support to the International Committee of the Red Cross on detainee repatriation, reconstruction aid, the return of the Peace Corps, trade and investment, port issues, International Monetary Fund/World Bank credits, and debt relief. In addition, the United States made its first troop contribution to an African peacekeeping mission since Somalia, a small yet symbolically important action.

International support for the implementation of the agreement and the consolidation of peace is critical. This has certainly been made clear by other promising but ultimately failed agreements, where attention shifted too rapidly away after peace agreements were signed. This support involves resources but also diplomatic engagement to ensure the parties live up to their commitments.

[The need for continued support] has certainly been made clear by other promising but ultimately failed agreements, where attention shifted too rapidly away after peace agreements were signed.

The joint initiative is perhaps a model for U.S.-Africa cooperation in conflict resolution.

Lessons Learned

1. *Gravitas.* The naming of Tony Lake as special envoy, and his subsequent full-fledged commitment, was a central factor. Lake's status as a former national security adviser plus his personal interest in African issues meant that he was deeply respected in Africa and among allies.
2. *Highest level engagement.* When needed, President Clinton, National Security Adviser Samuel Berger, and Secretary Albright weighed in, as did Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering. They allowed the team great latitude and provided unswerving support, particularly through phone calls and letters to the leaders of the two countries.
3. *Close partnership between the United States and the OAU.* The joint initiative is perhaps a model for U.S.-Africa cooperation in conflict resolution. The U.S. team closely consulted with the OAU, and undertook coordinated diplomacy first with Kagame and then with the Algerian envoys, and consistently with OAU secretary general Salim Ahmed Salim and his undersecretary, Said Djinnit. No facilitator acted without the knowledge and agreement of the other, and we constantly reinforced each other's moves. This partnership ensured both wider donor solidarity and wider African solidarity around one path to peace. There was only one door that Ethiopia and Eritrea could go through to get an agreement.
4. *Intensive, sustained engagement.* Susan Rice and Gayle Smith led and coordinated a monumental effort of constant engagement. Our team was in touch with both parties every day, often for hours. The U.S. team was a model for State-NSC-DOD cooperation. The case also makes clear the need for sustaining engagement until the end, which requires a full commitment before launching the effort and the understanding that success rarely comes easily or quickly.
5. *Close coordination with allies and the United Nations.* Early on, the team established a close working partnership with the European Union through its envoy, Serri, with whom we worked closely throughout the negotiations. The team also worked directly with UN secretary general Kofi Annan and his undersecretary, Kieren Prendergast,

throughout the entire process. This was done both to take advantage of their diplomatic support and to ensure that the United Nations—as the main would-be implementor of any agreement—was fully on board with our proposals.

6. *Leverage*. The mediators tried to make maximum use of leverage in the following ways:
 - a. Aid freeze—a combined multilateral and bilateral freeze on most key non-humanitarian programs for both governments by most donors until the peace agreement was signed.
 - b. Diplomatic isolation—both governments, like most, wanted full integration in the global community, and wanted to participate in global decisions and issues; but Ethiopia and Eritrea were pigeonholed by the UN Security Council and most key governments as countries in conflict, which greatly limited their ability to participate normally in global affairs for the entire time of the conflict.
 - c. Pressure from international financial institutions—there was no major lending during the conflict period, and no substantial debt rescheduling.
 - d. UN Security Council arms embargo (imposed in May 2000)—probably should have come earlier, but still important in sending a signal against business as usual.
 - e. African leaders—the OAU made use at key junctures of other African leaders to weigh in with both parties.
 - f. Congressional engagement—the moral outrage expressed by critical members was key in underscoring the extent to which the two governments were isolated.
 - g. U.S. private citizen engagement—the efforts of members of the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers demonstrated the importance of peace in the Horn for key constituencies in America, particularly those with histories in one or both countries and those interested in investing in the region.

Postscript

The author traveled to Ethiopia and Eritrea in July 2001 and found that the implementation stage of the peace process was inching slowly but unmistakably forward. Significant implementation challenges still remain, including ongoing disputes regarding the Temporary Security Zone separating the forces of the two parties, and fears about the results of the deliberations of the Boundary Commission favoring one or the other party.

Other bilateral relations issues need to be addressed. The economic issues outlined earlier, and particularly Ethiopia's access to the Eritrean port of Assab, could benefit from external facilitation when the time is right. The United States and others should remain in a position to help with these issues at a suitable juncture.

The war also sparked major turmoil within both ruling parties. President Isaias and Prime Minister Meles face significant challenges from some members of these parties. Both governments are moving to counter these challenges through a mix of arrests, sackings, court cases, and marathon party meetings. Neither situation has been fully resolved.

Because the two governments have made strategic decisions in favor of peace, the prospects are positive, barring any unforeseen change in leadership. The discipline of the two armies enhances the likelihood of successful implementation. As long as both parties see poverty and underdevelopment as greater enemies than each other, the embattled residents of the Horn of Africa will have one less war with which to contend.

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