

United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea in Hindsight

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Introduction

Demands of modern geo-politics have revealed serious flaws in implementation of the UN mandates, examples of which can be seen in the way the situation was handled in Somalia, Balkans and Rwanda. A recent entry into the list of debacles could be the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which was established in the year 2000 its mandate expired on 30 Jul 08.¹ Events that shaped UNMEE's termination provide a number of lessons in the conduct of peacekeeping operations.

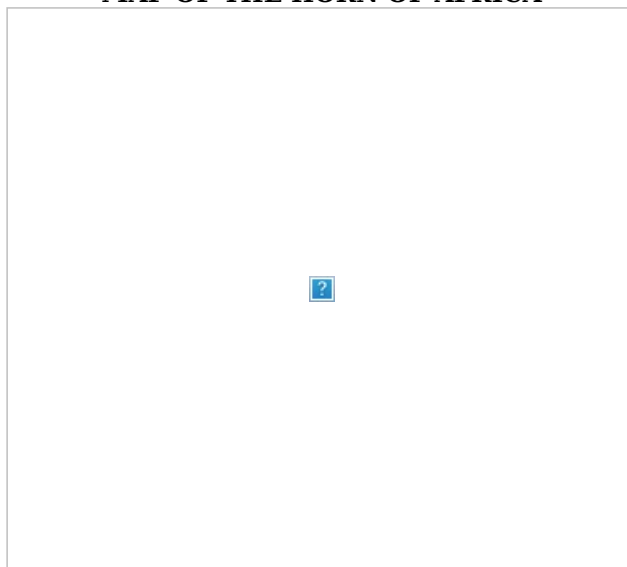
Regional Review: Horn of Africa

Before looking at scenario between the two warring nations of Ethiopia and Eritrea, it would be important to know the relevance of the region called the Horn of Africa. (Refer to Map). The region is marred by messed up boundaries. To its least enviable credit, the region boasts of presence of at least five UN missions. It dominates major Sea Lanes of Communication passing through the narrow corridor of the Red Sea. A ransom amount of \$100 million² has been paid for 60 piracies off the coast of Somalia in 2008. Other countries of the region are Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Uganda.

Briefly, the situation in the region is as under:-

- (a) Border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea had cost nearly 1,00,000 lives from 1998 to 2000. The issue remains unresolved till date amidst fears that any local conflict may flare up again into a full scale conventional war.
- (b) Eritrea had a showdown with Djibouti over the border region of Ras Dumeira despite the presence of the French and the USA forces located there. The UN's fact finding mission released its report on 12 Sep 2008³ and blamed Eritrea for violations.

MAP OF THE HORN OF AFRICA



- (c) Within Ethiopia, the Human Rights situation in the regions of Oromo and Ogaden provide a window of opportunity for its neighbours to exploit.
- (d) Presence of fundamentalist Islamists in Somalia provides a battleground for the USA to fight its war on terror by proxy through the surrogate troops of Ethiopia.
- (e) South Sudan remains volatile over the oil rich border township of Abyei, a bone of contention between the North and the South.
- (f) Deployment of United Nation's Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) is jeopardised over a number of factors. The recent indictment of President Omar Hassan al-Beshir on the issue of alleged genocide by the International Court of Justice might result in closure of the Mission. General Martin Luther King Abwai, the Force Commander of UNAMID has stated that for UNAMID to succeed, we should first have peace in the region, and it would be wrong to have great expectations for an early resolution of the problem⁴.
- (g) Kenya witnessed a spate of violence after recent domestic elections.

Historical Perspective

Background of the Conflict. Mr Meles Zanawi and Mr Issais Ifwerki, the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively, were born in the ethnic region of Tigray less than 90 miles apart and both had studied in Addis Ababa University. Formation of Eritrea in 1991 was the result of a long drawn guerrilla war that both the leaders had fought as partners against the Derg Regime of Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu. Within five years of Eritrea's formation, the leaders drifted apart over issues such as, valuation of currency; un-demarcated borders and use of

Assab port of Eritrea that had traditionally served the trade interests of Ethiopia. In addition, Afwerki who viewed himself as mentor of Zanawi suddenly realised that the latter had become more important when he took over the reigns of the bigger country⁵. Fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia started due to a border dispute over a small, non-descript village of Badme having a meagre population of 1500. Deployment of UNMEE in the year 2000 was considered by many as a ray of fresh hope but the initial euphoria died soon after.

Peace Process

- (a) The Organisation of African Unity (now renamed as the African Union) and the USA, took active interest in trying to bring the warring nations to the negotiating table.
- (b) On 18 June 2000, the former belligerents signed a UN sponsored Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities (ACH), paving way for deployment of a 4,200 strong UNMEE contingent. On 20 December 2000, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed the Algiers Peace Agreement, which provided following important clauses:-
 - (i) An independent and impartial body, Ethiopia-Eritrea Claims Commission (EECC) to determine the origins of the conflict⁶.
 - (ii) Establishment of Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission (EEBC)⁷, a neutral body with a mandate to delimit and demarcate the border, based on relevant colonial treaties and applicable international law.
 - (iii) Establishment of a Temporary Security Zone (TSZ)⁸, an area all along the length of the border, i.e. 1000 kms in length and 25 kms in width inside the Eritrean boundary, accounting for more than one-fifth of the country's territory.

Non-implementation of the EEBC's decision resulted in a stalemate and both countries re-deployed their forces close to the border in 2004-05. Mr Meles Zenawi tabled a five-point proposal⁹ for peaceful resolution of the conflict, in which Ethiopia accepted the EEBC decision in principle and wanted negotiations for implementation of the verdict. Eritrea, with an aim to break the impasse put pressure on the UN to act in its interests with actions such as; ban of all helicopter flights; restrictions on the erstwhile free movement of the UN; and on 06 December 2005 ordered UN troops and civilians from the Western countries to leave within 10 days. The UN had to pull down some of its posts that had become vulnerable as a result of the ban on helicopter flights.

The UN Security Council threatened the two nations with economic sanctions unless restrictions are removed and their military forces move back to previously known areas and levels. Whereas the Ethiopian Armed Forces (EAF) fell back to its previous deployment areas, the Eritreans did not revert any of its restrictions.

In October 2006, in an open violation of the Algiers Agreement, the Eritreans inducted a large number of Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) troops and heavy arms and equipment inside the TSZ. Consequent to all these developments, the Eritrean Army, Police, Militia and Administration adopted a more hostile attitude towards UNMEE personnel in the field. Eritrea also restricted supply of fuel to UNMEE partially. A large number of UN patrols were detained. It also prevented UNMEE from manning the entry points, meant for monitoring induction of regular troops inside the TSZ. As a result, twice in 2006, the mandate did not get extended automatically. Probably, the UN wished to keep its footprint in the area even under adverse circumstances.

The EEBC, having exhausted all its possible options, decided to wind up on 30 Nov 2007¹⁰, leaving the border undemarcated on ground but having declared that the map coordinates were final. Eritrea stopped fuel supply knowing fully well that the UN kept a reserve for three months only. Meanwhile, the Security Council on 31 Jan 2008 extended the existing mandate by a period of six months lasting till 31 Jul 2008¹¹, probably hoping that the working environment might improve in the coming days. Alternatives such as, maintaining oil supplies through Ethiopia or importing its own requirement through sea were rejected¹². By Feb 2008, the UN had to take a decision to relocate the troops and the observer team sites out of Eritrea into Ethiopia. This was objected to by Eritrea who stopped movement across land borders forcing the UN to relocate the contingents back to their home countries. Having exhausted all its options, a divided Security Council finally terminated the Mission on 31 Jul 2008.

The status quo achieved has resulted in an advantageous position for Ethiopia as it gets to keep Badme (the *casus belli*) and they have neutralised the value of Eritrean ports by developing its alternative in Djibouti. Incidentally, trade with Ethiopia now accounts for 70 per cent revenue of Djibouti, a clear loss to Eritrea. On the other hand, Eritrea, already placed by the USA on the list of 'Countries of Particular Concern' might graduate to a 'Terror Sponsoring State'. The USA has banned arms sale to Eritrea over concerns that it is aiding terrorists in the Horn of Africa¹³, and the way it has supported insurgency in the neighbouring Somalia, Chad and Sudan

Afwerki has also been accused of having links and providing arms to the LTTE leader Prabhakaran¹⁵. Also, Afwerki's undemocratic ways are reflected in an interview with Al Jazeera (English) where he stated that elections might not take place for "three to four" decades.

Lessons Derived

Zenawi chose to opt for an external arbiter to solve the boundary issue. The only success story for the UN is prevention of an all out conflict. Pulling out the UN troops from the border areas resulted in apprehension that removal of this buffer could result in a Badme-like incident of 1998. But nothing of this sort happened in the ensuing months. Ethiopia, does not wish to derail its economy. On the other hand, Eritrea impoverished as a result of its chosen path of shunning all foreign aid, can simply not afford a war. Both nations are hoping for a regime change in the adversary's camp to be the only remedy to the border problem and openly support asylum seekers.

Important lessons learnt could be summarised as under :-

- (a) Petty issues such as trade tariff, currency denomination and a couple of square kms of area brought a huge amount of animosity between the two erstwhile allies. In this conflict, give and take policy was not attempted by the big brother Ethiopia.
- (b) Tactical battles should not be allowed to hijack the overall foreign policy of a nation. A small skirmish at the border town of Badme escalated into a full scale conventional conflict from which both the nations found it difficult to backtrack.
- (c) History tells us that losing side should not be humiliated. Insult was imposed on Eritrea by converting its own territory into TSZ, which was subjected to monitoring by outside agencies.
- (d) The UN's deployment pattern in both the countries was not balanced. There were only two contingent posts on the Ethiopian side as compared to nearly three battalions deployed on the Eritrean side. The lopsided deployment could have been more balanced to give a feeling that only Eritrea was not being subjected to inspections
- (e) While incorporating legal provisions of EEBC's framework, pertinent clauses such as arbitration in case of disputes should have been added. By deciding that the ruling arrived at by the Commission would be final and binding on both the sides, the two nations did not leave any elbow space for diplomacy to succeed. In addition, rather than stating that the colonial boundaries would dictate the outcome: specifics such as, members to visit the area; known history of local administration; geographic alignment; provisions to ensure that the adopted boundary lines did not divide the villages; referendum of the people to decide on the nationality they wished to adopt, ought have been given their due weight. Such provisions would have provided a more holistic solution that could have been acceptable to the leadership as well as the population.
- (f) Adequate pressure should have been brought down on both sides for violation of terms and conditions agreed to earlier.
- (g) The UN did not have a clear exit strategy in mind. Having reached an impasse on non resolution of the demarcation process and before getting subjected to humiliating restrictions, it should have pulled out with its dignity intact.
- (h) Importance of diplomacy was evident in the way Ethiopia led its calculated diplomatic assault, which proved to be too good for its novice adversary. Eritrea, a young nation, did not have the political acumen to match the seasoned Ethiopians. Ethiopia adopted delay tactics, whereas Eritrea chose to pressurise the UN and the West; thereby alienating all its sympathisers and allies who, until then, had felt that legally the Eritrean point of view on the border demarcation was more logical. Ethiopia slowly and steadily gained sympathy of the international diplomatic community.
- (j) The UN could have chosen a difficult but possible option of converting the status of peace enforcement (under Chapter VII) to include demarcation of the boundary. Economic, travel or diplomatic sanctions, a normal whip under the circumstances, could not have been used as Eritrea shunned aid in all forms, thereby going further into a state of solitude
- (k) Eritrea lost a golden opportunity to turn its economy on its head at the end of the war. Since the entire length of its boundary had a presence of the UN, it should have brought down the strength of its military and concentrated on developing its economy. But Afwerki chose to maintain his policy of forced conscription¹⁹ by misguiding the nation of a non-existent threat leading to large scale defections

The Way Forward

At heart, people of the Tigray region of Ethiopia and the highlands of Eritrea are inseparable. They share a common language, follow the ancient orthodox Christianity and even share the same dietary habits. ²¹ Ideally, a new arrangement should be looked at wherein relevance of borders is diminished and a free movement of goods and people is permissible.

Primarily, the USA, China and the EU should try and make Zenawi and Afwerki come to the negotiating table to resolve their differences. The USA, which already has a military base in Djibouti, has failed in its effort to shift HQs of the newly formed United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM)²² from Stuttgart due to strong resistance from the regional leaders, who have instead pushed for an African standby Force

The oil prospects in Sudan and Ethiopia remain lucrative to the USA and China.

A possible future driver of conflict i.e. sharing the Nile's water should be prevented by signing an accord. Economic stability and interdependency could prove to be a boon for stability. Assab port of Eritrea, which acted as a hub for Ethiopia's exports, now stands deserted. Eritrea could benefit from the thriving economy of Ethiopia due to its geographic advantages.

The international community should provide carrot and stick policy of undertaking development projects with a rider to de-escalate military presence on the border.

Conclusion

The present impasse has resulted in war by proxy as Eritrea is backing insurgents to fight the Ethiopian army²⁴ in Somalia. Ethiopia clearly does not intend getting sandwiched between two hostile nations, namely Eritrea to its North and Somalia to its South. Its apprehension that Ethiopian Muslims should not get swayed by the radical Islamists of Somalia is genuine. There is a likelihood of deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission again in Somalia but Eritrea based faction continues to oppose the move stating that the Ethiopian army must pull out first. Therefore, in order to achieve peace in the region, a face saving exit formula for the Ethiopian army is mandatory.

With Southern Sudan about to achieve separation from Sudan, history seems to be getting repeated as all the possible future drivers of conflict i.e. border demarcation and rights over oil/trade have similar underpinnings as the premature carving of Eritrea out of Ethiopia. Similarly, the Darfur Peace Agreement signed in May 2006²⁵ also did not address core issues. The UN's next big challenge is the continuity of United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) as the rift between Criminal Court of Justice and the Government of Sudan intensifies. The ill treatment of UNMEE by President Awerki might encourage other leaders to prove a point against the West.

Possibility of another UN mission in the region is very remote. But for that to happen, Eritrea has to first accept the need for a dialogue and Ethiopia should accept the border without any riders. In order to reinitiate bilateral diplomacy, it should consider appointing an envoy that is acceptable to both the countries.

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