



# Situation Report

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## The Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute

‘Any state can have a border problem if it wants one; the real causes of conflict are present everywhere, and it takes a policy decision and effort not to pursue them rather than the reverse.’

William Zartman, *Ripe for resolution: conflict and intervention in Africa*, 1989, p 15

‘When I am challenged, I become more stubborn – more and more rigid.  
I am very emotional.’

Eritrean President Issayas Afewerki, quoted in Dan Connell, *Against all odds: a chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*, 1997, p 173

### Introduction

The objective of this situation report is to provide timely and relevant information and analysis on the border dispute that recently broke out between Eritrea and Djibouti. The facts at hand being fragmented, it is too early and difficult to provide a definite judgement on the diverse set of factors that caused the border dispute, its exact course, and long-term implications for bilateral relations and regional security. Yet, some significant observations can be made on some of the most important issues involved.

This report comprises three sections. In the first section, relations between Eritrea and Djibouti since 1991 are described, including prior border disputes. In the second section, the colonial source of the border dispute is traced and details are given of its course. The third section examines the most significant and recent developments which lie at the centre of the lack of peace and security in the Horn of Africa, where the present borders were arbitrarily established at the end of the nineteenth century by treaties drawn up by the British, Italian and French colonial powers. Finally, the report provides a conclusion and a number of recommendations to find a durable basis for peaceful relations between the two states.

It is important to note at the outset that the terms Eritrea, Djibouti or Ethiopia used in this report for the purpose of convenience refer primarily to the group of decision-makers who, by virtue of their governmental position, have the power to make decisions binding on the populations of their respective states and commit their resources.

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### *The 1996 border dispute*

Seventeen-year-old Eritrea and thirty-one-year-old Djibouti share a border of almost 110 kilometres in length. In April 1996, Eritrea and Djibouti nearly went to war when a Djibouti official claimed that Eritrea had shelled Ras Doumeirah, a border village which is home to the Afar, an ethnic group living in the disputed area. Other reports suggested that Eritrea floated a map which incorporated the same border area into its territory, thus unilaterally redrawing the established border. Eritrea denied the incidents and any territorial claims. The crisis was defused after Eritrean forces retreated from the area and Djibouti retracted the allegations in May 1996.

### *Djibouti and the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict*

The 1998–2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea<sup>1</sup> constituted both a threat and an opportunity for Djibouti. Because of the war, Ethiopia diverted to Djibouti all the trade it had previously sent through Eritrean ports, greatly reinforcing the economic, political and security ties developed since a trade protocol was signed in 1996. In 1999, Djibouti and Ethiopia even concluded a military cooperation protocol. The emergence, in April 1999, of Ismaël Omar Guelleh as president strengthened these ties.<sup>2</sup> President Guelleh is an ethnic Somali who was born in Ethiopia, where he feels at home, culturally and linguistically.<sup>3</sup>

In 1998, Eritrea accused Djibouti of allowing Ethiopia to use its port for importing military equipment for use in the war. In June 1998, Djibouti deployed its military forces to the north in order to patrol its border with Eritrea and prevent any incursion. Some French military units joined the Djiboutian troops, officially to participate in a de-mining programme. In 1999, France<sup>4</sup> made two frigates available to patrol the coast and prevent military incursion from either Ethiopia or Eritrea.<sup>5</sup>

Djibouti's President Hasan Gouled Aptidon tried in June 1998 to mediate in the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, but during the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) summit in November 1998 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, President Aptidon was rejected as mediator by Eritrea on the grounds that he was not sufficiently independent. At this time Djibouti also severed its relations with Eritrea and recalled its ambassador. Subsequently the former executive secretary of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Tekest Ghebrai, who is an Eritrean national, was refused entry into Djibouti, which is the host of the IGAD headquarters. Apparently the five-year agreement to increase contacts and cooperation signed by Eritrea and Djibouti in December 1997 had not sufficiently strengthened relations between the two states. In 1999, Eritrea again accused Djibouti of siding with Ethiopia, while Djibouti alleged Eritrea was supporting Djiboutian rebels and had designs on the Ras Doumeirah area, which Eritrea denied.<sup>6</sup>

### *The economic dimension*

Djibouti does not want to jeopardise its overall relationship with the much larger and expanding economy of landlocked Ethiopia which is of great importance for it, both politically and economically. Indeed, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea brought substantial economic benefits to Djibouti. Its revenue has increased substantially as a result of the five-fold rise in Ethiopian cargo traffic since 1998. Cargo traffic increased from 1,3 million tonnes in 1994 and 1,7 million tonnes in 1997, 3,1 million tonnes in 1998 and 4,2 million tonnes in 2002.<sup>7, 8</sup> This increase in goods and services transiting to and from Ethiopia has become a mainstay of Djibouti's economy. Indeed, with few natural resources, 60 per cent unemployment and domestic consumption falling 35 per cent from 1999 up to 2006, Djibouti now relies strongly on its greatly expanded economic ties with Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup>

In the contest for Ethiopia's business, Djibouti is logically in a much better position than the other states of the Horn of Africa and is investing millions of dollars to expand and improve the port of Djibouti. This may allow Djibouti to serve



Map 1 Eritrea and northern Ethiopia

as a regional transshipment hub, and its expanding port capacity could further speed up regional trade.<sup>10</sup> With Ethiopia routing all its import and export traffic to Djibouti, Eritrea lost hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue, revenue which is clearly non-recoverable, and the future does not seem promising either. Even if the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia improves and Ethiopia starts using the ports of Assab and Massawa which it had exclusively used before 1998 (around 3 million tonnes per year of cargo traffic), the competition between the ports of Eritrea and Djibouti is going to be intense and could easily deteriorate into a never-ending conflict.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Competition for a US military base*

Eritrea was greatly disappointed that the US chose to establish a military base<sup>12</sup> in Djibouti despite the latter's small size and inhospitable climate. This development was a serious blow to Eritrea in terms of investment opportunities lost and, most importantly, the security guarantee which could have accompanied it.

Eritrea had forcefully lobbied to host a US base. In October 2002, Eritrea had circulated a paper in the US entitled 'Why not Eritrea?' In order to solicit a closer alliance with the US, it had hired Greenberg Traurig, the law firm which included a lobbying team headed by the scandal-plagued Jack Abramoff. Abramoff was a central figure in a series of high-profile political scandals and had close ties to the then House majority leader, Republican Tom DeLay.<sup>13</sup>

Eritrea paid Greenberg Traurig US\$50 000 a month for helping it in implementing its public policy goals in Washington, amounting to US\$600 000 for the year-long engagement from 15 April 2002 to 14 April 2003. Padgett Wilson, director of

governmental affairs at Greenberg Traurig, said that ‘their [Eritrea’s] biggest issue is they want to reach out to America and have better relations’.<sup>14</sup> The US seemed to have determined that Djibouti, a smaller state with a Western patron-protector, was more appealing as a site for a military base, given that its internal politics is more predictable and thus manageable and that its reliability is more easily guaranteed than that of the larger Eritrea.

The US was suspicious of the erratic and bellicose tendencies of President Issayas Afeworki and his reputation as a regional troublemaker<sup>15</sup> (see his profile below). This suspicion was over the strategic location of Eritrea, its longer coastline, its relatively stronger military and secure operational environment with more than one location to base troops and conduct operations, and its two ports and airfield facilities.<sup>16</sup> It also had to take into account the sensitivity and interests of Ethiopia, with which it had built a more important relationship. Ethiopia was arguably the most important state in the Horn of Africa, endowed with a very large geographic size, a sizeable and growing population, a variety of economic assets, an enduringly superior diplomatic standing, the best equipped and most potent military and an effective intelligence apparatus.<sup>17</sup>

### **President Issayas Afeworki**

Information available shows that the real political, military and diplomatic power in Eritrea is concentrated in the hands of a single individual, President Issayas Afeworki. He was born in Asmara, Eritrea’s capital city, on 2 February 1946. He comes from the highland Tigrinya-speaking area of Eritrea and speaks fluent Tigrinya, English, Arabic and Amharic. He attended secondary school at Prince Makonnen in Asmara (1961–1965), took the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate in 1965, and joined Haile Selassie I University in 1966, studying there for only one year. He dropped out and joined the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was established in 1961. He received military training in China in the late 1960s and served as a political commissar within ELF military units. He was one of the founders of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). From 1977 to 1987, President Issayas was the deputy secretary-general of the EPLF. In 1987, he officially assumed the post of secretary-general of the EPLF. In January 1993 he contracted cerebral malaria and was airlifted to a hospital in Israel which has established a military base on the Eritrean island of Dahlak. In May 1993, he was elected president of Eritrea by the National Assembly. President Issayas used his inaugural speech in 1993 during the OAU summit in Cairo, Egypt, to denigrate the OAU for failing to live up to its lofty ideals. He was particularly upset by the OAU’s silence throughout Eritrea’s thirty-year struggle for independence.

In the collective Eritrean memory, President Issayas used to be the unquestioned embodiment of the 1961–1991 struggle against Ethiopia. Austere and unpretentious, he used to drive himself to work and moved around with few bodyguards in Asmara. Recently, however, he has moved to a palace in Massawa, about 110 kilometres north-west of Asmara. He does not tolerate criticism of his political orientations – to the extent of criminalising it – and non-conforming advice differing from his predispositions. He has consolidated his power through raw repression and displays a strong contempt for Western-style democracy and a near-paranoiac suspicion towards foreigners. He is regarded as a remarkably stubborn and diffident man who does not respond to threats and diplomatic influence and, in fact, has a distaste for compromise and diplomacy, both of which he considers weaknesses. President Issayas has shown a relish for intrigues and displayed an extraordinary taste for undercover manoeuvres with wide regional repercussions in relations with neighbouring states. His militaristic or trigger-happy pattern of behaviour in foreign relations has transpired over an extended period (Sudan in 1994, Yemen in 1995, Djibouti in 1996 and 2008, and Ethiopia in 1998). The misguided policy that he loves to

call 'forward policy' has not been conducive to the building of a stable regional security in the Horn of Africa.

President Issayas has thus established a reputation and record for toughness and ruthlessness, trying to alter borders by force, willing to go to war for what he perceives to be Eritrea's interests, regardless of the outcome of past confrontations.<sup>18</sup> He has tried to sustain war-time discipline and instil a spirit of national pride and sacrifice to the younger generation which did not fight during the struggle against Ethiopia. At present, he is facing multiple challenges including:

- An internal legitimacy crisis coupled with mounting grievances and dissatisfaction from the subdued and distressed population who have lost family members during the two major struggles with Ethiopia (1961–1991 and 1998–2000), have seen little reward for these sacrifices, and may pledge loyalty to whoever promises them a better life
- Limited institutional capacity and few resources with which to respond to the general population's needs and despair
- An increasing level of dissent within the EPLF which had transformed into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice
- Open dissent from high-profile intellectuals and former supporters
- A progressively dilapidated economy dependent for foreign currency on remittances from increasingly recalcitrant Eritreans living abroad
- Deterioration of relations with the US which is considering adding Eritrea to its shortlist of rogue states supporting terrorism
- Isolation in the Horn of Africa where an alliance was formed between Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen, all of which had experienced military confrontations with Eritrea
- Few diplomatic and military sources of support
- The revitalisation of opposition groups which not only established a government in exile but are calling for the military seriously affected by desertions to rise up against the president

#### *A shaky rapprochement?*

Djibouti's relations with Eritrea were restored in March 2000 following mediation by Libya. In 2001, President Issayas visited Djibouti and President Guelleh made a reciprocal visit to Eritrea. This resulted in an agreement to establish a joint commission which would meet annually to review cooperation between the two states, and in 2004 Eritrea and Djibouti signed cooperation agreements in the political, economic and social sectors. President Guelleh had sought to establish friendly, if not neutral, relations with Eritrea, recognising the power imbalance – especially the military imbalance – that existed between the two states.

Chatham House's Horn of Africa specialist Sally Healy rightly said in February 2008 that 'with the fallout between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Djibouti is needed far more by Ethiopia than it was before. So it is in a fairly good position there but it has to be careful of the potential for destabilisation to come from Eritrea.'<sup>19</sup> Referring to the relations between Eritrea and Djibouti, Healy believed that 'it is a thinner relationship than the one with Ethiopia but it is just about [courteous]. Eritrea does not have good relations with any of its neighbours.'<sup>20</sup>

#### *The colonial legacy*

The border between Eritrea and Djibouti – that is, the border between the former Italian colony of Eritrea and the former French Somali Coast – was first delimited in a protocol signed in Rome by France and Italy in 1900 following a dispute in 1898. The north-east section of the border was defined from the northernmost tip of Ras Doumeirah on the Red Sea coast, through the watershed along the

peninsula for approximately 15 kilometres and then along a straight line towards the south-west to Bisidiro on the banks of the We'ima River.<sup>21</sup> Article 1 of the 1900 Protocol reads, in French, as follows (Protocol 1900):

Les possessions Italiens et les possessions Françaises sur la côte de la Mer Rouge sont séparées par une ligne ayant son point de départ à l'extrémité du Ras Doumeirah, suivant la ligne de partage des eaux du promontoire de ce nom, et se prolongeant ensuite, dans la direction du sud-ouest, pour atteindre, après un parcours d'environ 60 kilomètres depuis Ras Doumeirah, un point à fixer d'après les données suivantes: après avoir pris comme point de repère, sur une ligne suivante, à environ 60 kilomètres d'écart, la direction générale de la Mer Rouge, le point équidistant du littoral Italien d'Assab et du littoral Français de Tadjoura, on fixera, comme point extrême de la ligne de démarcation dont il est question ci-dessus, un point à nord-ouest du point de repère, à une distance de 15 à 20 kilomètres.

Article 3 of the 1900 Protocol also specified that until France and Italy could resolve the issue of which state held sovereignty over the island of Doumeirah, both colonial powers would refrain from attempting to occupy it.<sup>22</sup> The alignment of the border was set in another protocol signed in 1901 after the conclusion of demarcation by a special joint commission. The 1901 Protocol, which was also signed in Rome, identified the border as running from Ras Doumeirah for 15 kilometres, after which it follows a straight line towards Bisidiro on the banks of the We'ima River.<sup>23</sup>

France and Italy signed another agreement in 1935 which would have allocated a chunk of territory to Italian-ruled Eritrea (see map 2). In fact, Article 4 of the agreement readjusted the border which was to go on a straight line from Der Eloua to Daddato on the We'ima River. Furthermore, in Article 6, France recognises the sovereignty of Italy over the island of Doumeirah.<sup>24</sup> France wanted to safeguard its colonial position and economic interests in Tunisia and Djibouti, and acquiesced to Italy's plans over Ethiopia in order to gain its support in Europe in the face of Germany's political and military resurgence.<sup>25</sup> However, the agreement was never ratified by France and was repudiated by Italy in 1938. It is presumed that the 1900 Protocol still applies.<sup>26</sup>

#### *The course of the border dispute*

From information that has been slowly accumulating, it transpires that, since February 2008, Eritrean forces had begun preparing military positions in the Ras Doumeirah area of the Eritrea-Djibouti land border. The buildup included the preparation of fortification and battlements on Djibouti's side of the Ras Doumeirah area. However, heavy military equipment was not dispatched to the area at that precise moment, as confirmed by aerial reconnaissance undertaken by French forces.<sup>27</sup> On 22 April 2008, President Guelleh led a joint political and military tour of the area, and Djibouti's Foreign Ministry subsequently claimed that the Eritrean positions were being constructed several hundred metres within Djiboutian territory.<sup>28</sup> Eritrea denied accusations that its soldiers had dug trenches on both sides of the border, and on 24 April 2008 military officials from both states even met to compare border maps.

Djibouti had little choice but to respond by sending troops to the border as well. On 9 May 2008 President Guelleh said that 'the two armies are facing each other. The situation is explosive'.<sup>29</sup> He asserted that 'there is a hostile action which poses real problems because it is a blatant violation of our territorial integrity, of our borders'.<sup>30</sup> There were reports of significant diplomatic activity between the two states, with Qatar mediating to resolve the dispute.<sup>31</sup> President Guelleh is also reported to have called President Issayas on 23 April 2008 to discuss the stand-off. During the telephone conversation, they reportedly agreed to resolve the border dispute through peaceful negotiation.<sup>32</sup>



----- Line of the 1900/1901 Franco-Italian Protocols  
 - - - - - Line agreed in the Rome Accord of 7 January 1935

Map 2 Eritrea-Djibouti border modifications (1900–1935)

**Table 1 The Eritrea-Djibouti military (im)balance**

State	Eritrea	Djibouti
<b>Budget (US\$ million)</b>	65	26
<b>Personnel strength (regular)</b>	201 750	10 950
Ground Force	200 000	8 000
Air Force	350	250
Naval Force	1 400	200
<b>Tanks</b>	150	–
<b>Combat aircraft</b>	14	–
<b>Helicopters</b>	5	2

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies 2007: 271–273.

Ethiopia, which depends almost totally on Djibouti's port for its imports and exports, declared on 12 May 2008 that it has the means to secure its vital trade corridor in the event of a wider conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi indicated that 'the recent Eritrea-Djibouti row was a threat to the peace and security of the whole Horn of Africa'.<sup>33</sup> He reportedly said during a meeting with members of the Ethiopia business community that the Eritreans 'do act silly sometimes, but I don't think they would go totally insane'.<sup>34</sup> 'Even so, 'Ethiopia has a capacity of protecting the safety of the [900-kilometre] Ethiopian-Djibouti trade corridor' added Prime Minister Meles, failing to elaborate which capacity Ethiopia will use and how it would use it.<sup>35</sup>

On 2 May 2008, the African Union Peace and Security Council urged Djibouti and Eritrea 'to show utmost restraint and resort to dialogue to resolve any bilateral dispute'.<sup>36</sup> On 4 May 2008, the Arab League decided to send a fact-finding mission to the disputed border area between Eritrea and Djibouti to evaluate the prevailing situation and prepare a report to the league. The Arab League Peace and Security

Council approved Djibouti's request to send the mission in an effort to solve the dispute between the two states. The Council discussed the border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti in an emergency session held at Djibouti's request, its first ever meeting at delegates' level. The Council also requested that the secretary-general of the Arab League, Amr Mussa, contact the concerned parties, the chairperson of the African Union Commission and the African Union Peace and Security Council in a bid to secure an Arab-African joint action to address the dispute. Djibouti indicated, on the sidelines of the meeting, that it sought regional and international efforts after the failure of bilateral dialogue.<sup>37</sup>

On 10 June 2008, fighting erupted between the military forces of Djibouti and Eritrea.<sup>38</sup> It seems that Eritrean soldiers opportunistically defected to Djibouti and that Eritrean officers demanded that they be handed over to them. At least nine Djiboutian soldiers were killed and more than fifty were wounded in the resulting fighting. On 16 June 2008, France sent three ships, including a helicopter carrier and a frigate, 'reportedly to assist with medical care, logistics and intelligence'.<sup>39</sup> There has been no compelling evidence of additional French military involvement, except that France has established a temporary base including a combat unit and a logistical team at Mouhoule, which is some 30 kilometres from Ras Doumeirah, supposedly for further support of the largely weaker Djiboutian military. It is worth noting that, in January 1999, France had established a 520-strong Khor Angar mission and sent it to Djibouti in order to protect it from any fallout of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. It had also sent two air-defence frigates, *Le Cassard* and *Jean-Bart*, armed with Mistral surface-to-air missiles.<sup>40</sup> It should also be noted that, if Djibouti accuses Eritrea of direct armed attack, it is entitled to invoke French military assistance.

#### *Kidnapping of British tourists*

On 1 March 2007, five British tourists were kidnapped, along with their Ethiopian drivers and interpreters, in the Denakil Depression on the Ethiopian side of the border with Eritrea by an Afar armed group which allegedly has a tactical relationship with Eritrea.<sup>41</sup> The British were released on 13 March 2007 and their Ethiopian companions on 23 April 2007. It was widely held that, regardless of its role in the kidnapping, Eritrea used the opportunity to embarrass Ethiopia.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Increased tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea*

Eritrea's relationship with Ethiopia took a turn for the worse after the failed meeting of the Eritrean-Ethiopian Boundary Commission (EEBC) in September 2007, after which the military buildup along the border reached alarming proportions. Estimates suggest that Eritrea and Ethiopia deployed and maintained 124 000 and 100 000 troops<sup>43</sup> respectively along the border. The border area has been relatively stable since January 2008, despite an exchange of gunfire on 25 December 2007. Tensions along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border have continued to escalate, however, especially after Eritrea precipitously ceased to provide fuel for the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE).

UNMEE's subsequent withdrawal from Eritrea in February 2008 heightened tensions between the two states, with Eritrea even accusing Ethiopia of launching attacks on the Tsorena front. There is abundant evidence that, beyond their incessant war rhetoric, both states have been acquiring new weapons, upgrading supply bases, moving large amounts of military equipment and readying troops along their common border. Thus, there still is a high probability of another war<sup>44</sup> between them, especially as a result of an upward spiral of either premeditated or unintentional hostile actions. On 30 July 2008 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1827 terminating, without any follow-on mission, the mandate of UNMEE.

#### *The Somalia factor*

Eritrea has been backing opposing armed groups in Somalia as proxies for its long-standing conflict with Ethiopia. In 1999, both Ethiopia and Eritrea opened a second front in Somalia by supporting rival proxies. Anything that Ethiopia supports, Eritrea goes against – Ethiopia's support to the Transitional Federal

Government (TFG) and Eritrea's support to the United Islamic Courts (UIC) being a case in point. Eritrea has also been supplying weapons and giving training to armed Ethiopian opposition groups operating from Somalia to put additional pressure on Ethiopia. These include the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), both of which were allegedly aligned with the UIC against the TFG and Ethiopia.

Despite Ethiopia's 2006 military victory over the UIC, Eritrea benefited by helping Ethiopia get bogged down in Somalia's protracted conflict. Eritrea may continue to provide support to anti-TFG forces in order to tie up Ethiopian troops in Somalia for as long as possible. Immediately after the TFG-organised Somali National Reconciliation Conference ended, Eritrea convened the Somali Congress for Liberation and Reconstruction, inviting anti-TFG forces.

Unless the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is resolved, it would be difficult to settle the issue of Somalia peacefully. Since the prospect to end this conflict peacefully in the near future is becoming less likely, the resolution of Somalia's problems in the foreseeable future has correspondingly become more difficult.<sup>45</sup>

#### *United States air-strike and Somali talks in Djibouti*

On 1 May 2008, Hashi Ayro, the man widely believed to be the leader of the group Al-Shabbab,<sup>46</sup> was killed by a US air-strike in the central Somali city of Dusamareeb.<sup>47</sup> He was accused of being involved in terrorist attacks including the murder of four foreign aid workers, a British journalist and a prominent Somali peace activist named Abdulqadir Yahya Ali. These allegations have made Ayro the most sought-after leader of Al-Shabbab. On 16 May 2008, the United Nations organised negotiations between the TFG and the Eritrea-based Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS).<sup>48</sup> The ARS, a broad-based group comprising both moderates and hard-line Islamists, initially would not agree to be involved in direct talks until the TFG settled on a timetable for Ethiopian troops to withdraw. However, the two sides met directly and eventually signed a peace agreement on 9 June 2008 according to which Ethiopian troops would withdraw after the deployment of UN forces. The agreement only led to awkward divisions within both the ARS and the TFG and did little to improve security.

#### *Serious security threat in the Ogaden*

The Somali conflict has had an impact on Ethiopia's internal security, especially contributing to the escalation of tension in the Ogaden. Ethiopian military forces have been extended deep into Somalia, leaving a vacuum for the ONLF to exploit. Indeed, on 24 April 2007, the ONLF was able to attack a Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau oil facility killing 74 people and abducting 7 Chinese nationals, who were later released. This attack forced Ethiopia to launch, in May 2007, a series of counter-insurgency operations accompanied by the denial of access to commercial goods and humanitarian aid in the areas which were considered to be ONLF strongholds. These counter-insurgency operations have displaced thousands of people and placed the Ogaden issue under substantial international scrutiny.

#### *Ethiopia's severance of diplomatic relations with Qatar*

On 21 April 2008, Ethiopia announced it was severing diplomatic relations with Qatar, where the US Central Command has put in place a new forward headquarters for the Persian Gulf region, citing strong links with Eritrea and hostile behaviour towards Ethiopia. More generally, Ethiopia claimed that Qatar has become 'a major source of instability in the Horn of Africa' and provided direct and indirect assistance to 'terrorist organisations in Somalia and other areas'.<sup>49</sup> It was widely assumed that Ethiopia was especially displeased by the Qatar-based news network al-Jazeera broadcasting detrimental TV reports on the Ogaden.

#### *Establishment of an Eritrean government in exile*

The Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA), composed of thirteen Eritrean opposition groups, held a meeting in Ethiopia on 5–11 May 2008. It adopted a charter and

bylaws which would help it launch a popular uprising and formed a 26-member central committee. The EDA has repeatedly declared that if it came to power, it would resolve the conflict with Ethiopia through dialogue. On 8 May 2008, they elected Tewelde Gebresselase as secretary-general of the Executive Council and Abdella Mahmoud as chairman of the Legislative Council.<sup>50</sup> The EDA meeting's concluding statement surprisingly included a call to Somalis to resolve their differences peacefully and confirmed its support for the peace process initiated by the UN in Djibouti.<sup>51</sup>

#### *Political situation in Djibouti*

The most serious conflict confronting Djibouti involves the Afar ethnic group, which has long been challenging the hegemony of the Somali ethnic group in general and that of the Issa clan in particular. In 1991, an armed rebellion erupted over demands for autonomy, which slowly weakened after an initial agreement in 1995. However, the insurgents transformed themselves into a political opposition, the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD). The FRUD signed a peace agreement with the government in May 2001, laying down arms in return for the implementation of decentralisation and the allocation of government seats.

Djibouti was a one-party state until 1992, when other parties were allowed to register after constitutional changes were made. In 1999, President Guelleh succeeded Djibouti's first president, Hasan Gouled Aptidon, who was elected in 1993 in elections which were boycotted by the opposition. President Guelleh won the April 1999 presidential elections with 74 per cent of the vote as the candidate of the People's Rally for Progress (RPP), which joined with a faction of FRUD to form a new ruling coalition, the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP). In September 2002, the constitutional limit on the number of political parties (four) was lifted, thus completing the transition to a multi-party system.

The UMP won all 65 seats in the Chamber of Deputies in the elections of January 2003. Four opposition parties had formed the Union for a Democratic Alternative (UAD) to contest the elections. The UAD won 38 per cent of the vote, but this did not translate into any seats under Djibouti's first-past-the-post electoral system. The Union subsequently claimed extensive vote rigging and manipulation of constituency boundaries. When presidential elections were held in April 2005, President Guelleh stood unopposed as the UMP candidate and claimed 96,85 per cent of the vote on a 78,9 per cent turnout. The opposition UAD, who had failed to field a candidate, disputed the high turnout figure and called for a boycott of the polls. Parliamentary elections were held in January 2008 and the UMP again won all 65 seats.<sup>52</sup> President Guelleh, who is now serving his second six-year term, will not be eligible to stand in the 2011 presidential elections.<sup>53</sup>

President Guelleh, a former head of the security services, has an intimate knowledge of Djibouti's political forces and has used it to practise a policy of divide and rule.<sup>54</sup> In order to maintain his dominance, President Guelleh has kept a delicate balance between keeping the favour of France and lambasting it with nationalist rhetoric, as demonstrated by an interview which appeared in *Jeune Afrique* (3–9 February 2008). He has been able to get France to pay more rent for its base, at the same time that he has continued to irritate it by refusing to cooperate in a longstanding investigation of the 1995 suspicious death of French judge Bernard Borrel in Djibouti. Witnesses said that Borrel – who had been advising Djibouti's Ministry of Justice – uncovered evidence which implicated President Guelleh in weapons trafficking and that the judge might have been assassinated to keep him quiet.<sup>55</sup>

In order to reduce Djibouti's dependence on France and to increase the financial strength of the state and appeal to further investment, President Guelleh allowed the US to establish a military base in Djibouti and has adeptly cultivated ties with wealthy Persian Gulf states, particularly Dubai. Such moves have forced the domestic opposition into a situation in which it can no longer expect the US

and France to pressure Djibouti to open up the political space. In securing his dominant political position, President Guelleh has amply used his control over the state apparatus and the gainful port, played upon Issa-Somali interests and marginalised the opposition which has been reduced to mounting ineffective boycotts. Thus, President Guelleh's grip on political power appears to be secure in the short term. Discontent among the Afar and disaffection in the general population due to persistent poverty and unemployment constitute compelling threats to Djibouti's stability in the medium term. In the long term, if the economy fails to pick up, pressures on President Guelleh, and maybe his successor, could build, recruits to the armed Afar resistance could increase and the leaderless political opposition could gain renewed life.<sup>56</sup>

#### *A bizarre deportation*

On 29 April 2008, Djibouti deported an unspecified number of Eritrean citizens who lived in Mogadishu in Somalia, including an Eritrean of Afar descent who had been questioned in connection with bombings near the Ethiopian city of Dire Dawa and was suspected of links to al-Qaeda's Horn of Africa wing. Eritrea sent its border officials to collect the Eritrean suspects, who had been detained in the Djiboutian capital on 3 January 2008.<sup>57</sup>

#### *President Guelleh's 'investment' in Ethiopia*

In July 2008, President Guelleh, who had already built a five-storey guest house in the Ethiopian city of Dire Dawa, where he was born, was given a large tract of land estimated to be 20 hectares in Sebeta for flower growing and 10 000 square metres in the city of Debre Zeit for the construction of a house. He also received more than 5 000 hectares in Bale for wheat farming.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Inauguration of the 200-billion-dollar bridge*

On 28 July 2008, a company owned by Osama bin-Laden's half-brother launched a project to build a bridge of 29 kilometres bridge at a cost of some US\$200 billion across the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits on the Red Sea in order to connect Djibouti and Yemen, as well as Africa and the Middle East. The bridge will have a six-lane highway, four light-rail lines, as well as water and oil pipelines.<sup>59</sup>



Map 3 The contested border area and the bridge project

## Conclusion

Any careful analyst will be at a loss on what to make of the border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti, especially of its timing. Yet, she or he will reckon that the border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti is not an important dispute in itself and that the value placed on the area being contested was never high. In fact, it seems reasonable to believe that the dispute merely a continuation of the unfinished Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, which has proved too intractable to accommodate the divergent interests of both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Eritrea, in particular, has been exploiting opportunities and tensions in neighbouring states such as Sudan and Somalia to suit its overall foreign policy and even military strategy. There is one plausible explanation for Eritrea to have deployed its troops around the contested border area with Djibouti at this particular juncture. In a simple cost-benefit calculus, it is waging a multi-pronged proxy war against

Ethiopia either to pressure it to reach a compromise agreement favourable to Eritrea or even bring about the demise of its current government and the establishment of a new more amenable government.<sup>60</sup>

In order to do so, it had to disrupt the Somali talks taking place in Djibouti and at the same time prove that it still possesses sufficient military strength in the face of an exile government established by the EDA in Ethiopia.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Djibouti was, is, and would still be, the conduit of all the weapons purchased by Ethiopia in its continuing conflict with Eritrea. Eritrea may thus be preparing for another round of armed confrontation with Ethiopia, and its military action against Djibouti may be a strategic move meant to show that it could disrupt Ethiopia's flow of goods and services passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits.<sup>62</sup> The motivation behind Eritrea's military deployment on its border with Djibouti could also be to prevent any future attack coming through that area as it may have sensed a threat and may have positioned its troops in a forward strategic position. Some credibility could be lent to this last supposition by the statement attributed to Prime Minister Meles, who declared that Ethiopia has the capacity to guarantee the security of the corridor linking the port of Djibouti to Ethiopia.<sup>63</sup>

### *Recommendations*

The African Union (AU) cannot stand on the sidelines and watch as the situation in the Horn of Africa continues to deteriorate. Yet, the very fact that Ethiopia, an unwilling party to the Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute, is the host of its headquarters may impose limits on its intervention. Nonetheless, the AU should first adopt a patient approach because of the suspicion of Eritrea which has clearly lost faith in the AU as a forum for furthering its strategic regional interests, recalling its ambassador in November 2003, and which has not shown any real urgency in resolving the border dispute with Djibouti.<sup>64</sup>

The AU should get to the root of the border dispute, taking into account extraneous and short-term political factors. It should expend greater effort to gather missing data and facts to obtain a complete picture of the dispute. It should study the geography of the border, which has never been demarcated officially on the ground, and the diplomatic history (letters, notes, notifications of claims, treaties) which may be clouded by political problems. It should ascertain the relevant arguments of the two states from available maps and find out whether there are disputed features the political or technical status of which is uncertain and could lead to recurrent conflict. Only then can it bring about a permanent and win-win solution which could be acceptable to both states.

The AU should ensure that, from the early phases of the resolution of this dispute, the two states take up a common perspective about the means available to them. These means include direct talks at expert level, at foreign minister level and at presidential level. Direct talks could help provide a constructive atmosphere and produce a basis of arrangement which could, for instance, regulate the steps and stages of withdrawal of military forces. Indeed, both states could immediately withdraw troops from the contested area and its environs, and a demilitarised zone controlled by neutral observers, on behalf of either the AU or the UN, could eventually be established. If direct talks are not successful, recourse may be made to mediation by one state trusted by both states which could again take the initiative on behalf of the AU. If the two states are still not able to settle their differences and the dispute keeps escalating, they could resort to a joint commission or judicial settlement.

All in all, the AU should make sure that Eritrea and Djibouti conclude a comprehensive and final agreement ultimately defining their entire border. Such an agreement may serve as a prelude to maintain long-term regional stability in the Horn of Africa.<sup>65</sup>

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- 1 A former Ethiopian official told the author of this report that 'before the 1998 war, Ethiopia's foreign policy-makers were not able to move beyond rhetoric to applying a fallacious policy of good neighbourly relations in a region as unstable as the Horn of Africa, and simply neglected the importance of the possession of military strength during both peacetime and wartime even if some aspects of such a complacency can be sufficiently justified. They watched passively Eritrea strengthen its military forces, maintain conscription, militarily provoke Sudan, Djibouti and Yemen. More seriously, they could not foresee and were not prepared for the May 1998 Eritrean military incursion into Badme, despite some insistent warnings.' He added that 'the Ethiopian government had made a strategic mistake in not laying claim to an outlet to the sea at Assab, Ethiopia's most significant point of access to the Red Sea, subjecting Ethiopia to the goodwill of Eritrea and then Djibouti for imports and exports'.
  - 2 For further details on and analysis of Djibouti's internal politics, see the section entitled 'Key recent developments in the Horn of Africa'.
  - 3 Economist Intelligence Unit 2004:14.
  - 4 For France, Djibouti represents an invaluable strategic asset. It overlooks the access to the Bab-el-Mandeb Straits, between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, thus marking out the passage of oil tankers. It supplies France with a staging post and refueling point for its outposts in the Indian Ocean. The Djibouti airbase also provides France with an invaluable tactical support for military operations with in very short notice to any part of eastern and northern Africa and the Persian Gulf. Djibouti also provides France with the site for a sophisticated facility monitoring military activities and an exceptionally low-cost training site. It should be noted that France has used its military presence and attendant leverage to diligently advance its strategic and economic interests, but also to promote relative stability in the Horn of Africa, for instance supervising the truce between Eritrea and Yemen during their dispute over the Hanish islands (see, in particular, Vice-amiral Valin 2008).
  - 5 See 'The 2008 border dispute' below.
  - 6 IRIN 1999; Anonymous 2005:171–174.
  - 7 In May 2000, the port of Djibouti and Dubai Ports International signed a 20-year agreement of management and concession. Furthermore, in April 2002 Ethiopia and Djibouti signed an Agreement on the Utilisation of the Port of Djibouti and Services to Cargo in Transit. In June 2008, Dubai Ports International announced its intention of adjusting tariffs for all the services provided by the increasingly congested port of Djibouti supposedly because of rising oil prices and inflation, potentially leading to additional costs for Ethiopia which immediately reacted to ensure their suspension.
  - 8 Cabanius 2003:4.
  - 9 Moran 2008.
  - 10 Frazer 2008:4.
  - 11 Alem 2008:2.
  - 12 The US established the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) headquartered in Djibouti. This represented a major shift in US policy as relations with Djibouti had been minimal. The military base was established at Camp Lemonier near Djibouti International Airport, where some 1 800 troops are based. The mission of the CJTF-HOA is to regularly gather intelligence, deter, preempt and disable terrorist threats from wherever they may emanate in the region, although the most serious threats are mainly in Somalia and Yemen.
  - 13 Schmidt and Grimaldi 2006.
  - 14 Sarasohn 2002:1; Schmidt and Grimaldi 2006; Indian Ocean Newsletter 2002.
  - 15 The US is mainly interested in preventing war between Ethiopia and Eritrea as well as deterring other military adventures because its priority in the Horn of Africa is to have strong and stable governments helping it in the war against terror. Thus, it had tried its utmost to end the Ethiopia-Eritrea stalemate in a way which was supposed to please both states, that is, Eritrea's demand for demarcation and Ethiopia's demand for negotiation. Recent developments have clearly shown the limits of the US which, nonetheless, remains the sole superpower that could force the two states, as it has done it before (Prendergast 2001), to communicate in ways that are mutually reassuring. This remains to be seen however, as relations between Eritrea and the US have deteriorated to an all-time low. The US, after unsuccessfully trying diplomatic persuasion to dissuade Eritrea from supporting Somalia's Islamists (who are allegedly linked to al-Qaeda), has tried to increase pressure on Eritrea by threatening to add it to its shortlist of rogue states which includes states such as Iran, Syria, North Korea and Cuba. The deeper question to consider is whether such an approach will work with Eritrea and will not actually embolden Ethiopia to unrestrainedly serve its interests, which are not always congruent with those of the US. A European diplomat told the author of this report that such 'a confrontational approach, born partly from a parallelism of views between Washington and Addis Ababa and partly from a narrowing of both short-term and long-term options, could unwittingly increase the likelihood of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea the major preoccupation of which is neutralising one another's efforts and alliances'. He added that 'the supposedly dependable Ethiopian leadership is, in truth, as minimally pliable to US interests and demands as the one in Eritrea'.
  - 16 Crawford 2005:9–10; Tally 2003; Geslin 2003.
  - 17 US 2002:12.
  - 18 A former Eritrean official said that '[President] Issayas is very experienced and is rational in his own logic, and would roll the dice several times against the advice of his rather apprehensive generals'. He felt that

- ‘[President] Issayas would ally himself not only with both Libya and Israel at the same time, but even to the devil himself, to get his way’. He added that ‘[President] Issayas had sought to ally with the US by playing on an Islamist threat within Eritrea, and then got on supporting Islamists in Somalia’.
- 19 Moran 2008.
  - 20 Moran 2008.
  - 21 International Boundaries Research Unit 2008.
  - 22 Protocol 1900.
  - 23 Protocol 1901.
  - 24 Traité 1935.
  - 25 Miège 1969; Strang 2001; Askew 1953; Young 1985; Shorrocks 1983; Crozier 1983.
  - 26 International Boundaries Research Unit 2008.
  - 27 *Le Monde* 2008b.
  - 28 Agence France-Presse 2008b; International Boundaries Research Unit 2008.
  - 29 BBC 2008b.
  - 30 Agence France Presse 2008b.
  - 31 Awate 2008c.
  - 32 African Press Agency 2008.
  - 33 Reuters 2008a.
  - 34 Reuters 2008a.
  - 35 Reuters 2008a.
  - 36 PANAPRESS 2008.
  - 37 African Press International 2008.
  - 38 A military expert pointed out that ‘given that decision-making is centralised at the higher level in Eritrea, even for the coordination of the operations of subordinate units, there is little room for lower-level officers to initiate such attacks on their own’.
  - 39 United Nations Security Council Report 2008:2.
  - 40 *Africa Research Bulletin* 2000:14127.
  - 41 Penketh and Milmo 2007; Ramidus 2007; *The Economist* 2007; Associated Press 2007.
  - 42 BBC 2007.
  - 43 Ethiopia, twenty times more populous, can raise much more fresh forces, mobilise more resources and muster more diplomatic support during protracted war situations. In the case of a second war with Eritrea, it could be easily tempted to go for the knockout blow. A former official of the Eritrean military intelligence living in Khartoum apprehensively asked the author of this report if ‘the political objective of Ethiopia would be, in case of war, the removal of [President] Issayas, the destruction of the Eritrean army’s strength or the repudiation of Eritrea’s status as an independent political entity’.
  - 44 On the one hand, Ethiopia, which is preoccupied by the Somali conflict, has consistently maintained that it can protect its interests and reduce the threat from militarily weaker Eritrea without resorting to war and thereby avoid both the political and financial costs attendant to military action. On the other hand, Eritrea, which is being handicapped by ever-increasing economic and financial problems, seems to refrain from becoming engaged in a war which, based on relative military capabilities, it could never win. All in all, the decisions taken by either Ethiopia or Eritrea will depend on the prevailing military balance, the cohesion of the high command, the logistic reality and the availability of foreign services, the rather subjective understanding of the strategic environment, and the fundamental political objectives, variables that are never static or absolute. These decisions will also be influenced by the trade-off between the political advantages (both domestic and international) which maybe obtained and the justifiable sacrifices and uncertain risks (of inaction, compromise or military action) which may accrue. They will eventually be taken by very few individuals, who have a particular past and concrete preoccupations related to their future, maybe staking their very political survival, and will be undoubtedly be subjected to immense emotional pressures. Moreover, these individuals may not fully discern, in an objective and timely manner and to the fullest degree possible, the intentions of their opponents.
  - 45 Reuters 2008c.
  - 46 Al-Shabbab, which was designated by the US as a terrorist group, is the military wing of the UIC, which was led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, who now resides in Eritrea.
  - 47 BBC 2008a.
  - 48 Associated Press 2008a.
  - 49 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2008; Associated Press 2008b.
  - 50 Awate 2008b; Reuters 2008b; Reuters 2008d.
  - 51 Awate 2008a.
  - 52 Economist Intelligence Unit 2004; Weinstein 2005; Agence France-Presse 2008d.
  - 53 During his July 2008 visit to Ethiopia, President Guelleh said that he would complete his term of office and would not run for a third term (Secures 2008:15).
  - 54 Weinstein 2005:2.
  - 55 Weinstein 2005:3; Bamago 2007; Bollée 2003.
  - 56 Weinstein 2005:3.
  - 57 HAN 2008.
  - 58 Presidential investment 2008:14; Geulleh secures plot for farm 2008:1.

59 *The Economist* 2008.

60 An African diplomat posited that, 'in the long term, Eritrea seems to pursue a dangerous double-aimed strategy of bringing the international community to pressurise Ethiopia and, at the same time, of destabilising it by provoking an internal political crisis and sustaining security problems in Somalia'. The diplomat went on to add that 'this strategy could backfire as it could rather lead Ethiopia to resort to military action, from aggressive military deployment to selected air attacks, in order to counter this strategy, thereby possibly provoking a larger war'.

61 A former Eritrean official explained to the author of this report that 'the very idea of an alternative government was an affront to the legitimacy of [President] Issayas' regime'.

62 It is hard to conceive that Eritrea could successfully disrupt this flow and, by default, the entire Ethiopian economy as it is constrained by genuinely depleted offensive capabilities and a crumbling morale. A military expert, nonetheless, holds the view that 'an Eritrean surprise assault against military command centers, installations and bases in northern Ethiopia, the same type of assault that enabled Ethiopia to control one third of Eritrea's territory in a manner not anticipated and expected in 2000, would be the best, if not only, chance to throw the Ethiopian military into disarray'.

63 Reuters 2008a; Agence France-Presse 2008a.

64 Eritrea has, in fact, malevolently adopted a stonewalling approach, basically trying to ignore Djibouti and the international community alike. One close observer of regional politics in the Horn of Africa told the author of this report that 'Eritrea has not clarified its intentions, either in a clear-cut manner or even deceitfully'.

65 A knowledgeable individual working in Djibouti told the author of this report that 'the fluidity and the polarisation of politics and the intractability of conflicts in the Horn of Africa may effectively complicate the search for long-term and tenable solution to the border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti'. He added that 'both Eritrea and Djibouti might tacitly let the border dispute die down quietly without any formal agreement even if it continues to sputter occasionally'. But he was afraid that 'although the dispute largely reflects the political temperature, personal ambitions and structural rivalries in the region, it might develop, over time, a life of its own especially as numerous other outside powers are involved'.