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Washington, DC

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Washington, D.C.
The House International Relations Committee,
Rm. 2172 Rayburn House Office Building
10:00 AM Thursday, May 18, 2000

Hearing on 'Famine and Conflict in Ethiopia and Eritrea'

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, I thank you and other Members of the House International Relations Committee for the opportunity to appear here today. I will do my best, under present circumstances, to answer the Committee staff's request that I speak to the broader political and military context surrounding the unfolding famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The war that resumed May 12 between Ethiopia and Eritrea is highly fluid, uncertain and dangerous. For this reason, any commentary and projections will by definition be tentative.

One thing is however quite clear: **the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict is today the largest war worldwide**, involving over 600,000 armed combatants and newly arrived heavy artillery and high performance aircraft valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars. This war could again (as in the spring of 1999) generate casualties in the tens of thousands and displaced persons in the hundreds of thousands.

I wish to cluster my remarks around five brief points.

1) First, responsibility for the Horn war that resumed last Friday and that now reaches deep into Eritrea's interior rests with the two adversaries, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and with them alone.

There is plenty of blame on the shoulders of each of these two parties. My purpose here is not to parse blame, and I will not attempt to do so.

Each side at varying moments has attempted to lay blame upon outsiders for failure to resolve the original border dispute. We should disregard these diversions and focus clearly upon the base calculations of the two adversaries themselves, the decisions that got them into this war, and the decisions required of them, if they are to rescue themselves from a potentially protracted and devastating war.

2) Second, the Administration deserves credit for the sustained creative efforts of Special Envoy Anthony Lake, Assistant Secretary Susan Rice and NSC Senior Director Gayle Smith.

In close collaboration with OAU envoy Ahmed Ouyahia, EU envoy Rino Serri and the UN, the American team conducted over many months a full court diplomatic press to resolve the border dispute. It was a continual, diversified engagement that left no diplomatic option untested. Seldom in Africa crises or crises outside Africa have we seen such a sustained internationally-coordinated diplomatic investment aimed at preempting a devastating conflagration.

Sadly, these efforts have revealed the grave, exasperating limits to high level diplomacy and raised troubling questions as to what strategies and approaches can possibly work, when the parties themselves are so resistant to a negotiated settlement. An obvious question, in retrospect, is whether the international mediators should have pressed, early and hard, for controls over massive arms deliveries (that now total over \$1 billion) and begun to condition bilateral and multilateral assistance.

One risk is that we conclude 'never again' and retrench from an activist diplomatic engagement in Africa. That, in my opinion, would be a mistaken and dangerous conclusion. There is simply too much at stake to walk away from the Horn war. Because high level diplomacy has not yet succeeded up to now in the Horn does not mean outside diplomacy will not work elsewhere, or will not succeed in the Horn at other future moments. It does not mean that we cannot do better in the future, with a much more focused set of actions on arms flows.

3) Third, international efforts have revealed that what had been understood as a border dispute is in fact a much more profound, deep-running interstate conflict.

Paradoxically, the two adversaries are by all accounts in essential agreement on the framework to resolve the border war. Yet the closer they have come to final agreement on operational details and the sequencing of actions, the more starkly apparent it has become that they lack the will or capacity to truly close the deal.

The present war is not over a boundary lines over barren stretches of remote territory. It is about two sovereign nations who have lost all trust in one another, and who have at present no workable vision of how to live with one another peaceably. The Horn war is rooted in national honor, enflamed egos, historical grievances and the blowback from an imperfect separation into the two separate nations of Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1993.

If the two parties can be brought back to the table, an effective resolution will require speaking to the deeper causes of the war. The present framework agreement on the border dispute cannot and should not be discarded; it may provide the means to refocus Ethiopia and Eritrea on a path out of war. However, an enduring settlement will likely require an accord that speaks to the breakdown of trust and rebuilds systematically interstate relations between these two highly interdependent entities.

4) Fourth, there is a significant danger that the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has entered a fundamentally new phase.

Based on past history, there is a very high probability the war will drag on and transmute along new fronts. Ambitions of each side are highly uncertain, but could quickly escalate beyond the trench lines and disputed ground around Badme, Zala Anbessa and Assab.

There will be a strong impulse to make use of air power, particularly on the Ethiopian side, where there has been a massive investment and where Ethiopia now enjoys considerable superiority. Just two years ago, we should recall, both sides engaged in aerial bombing of urban civilian targets.

There are other disturbing echoes of the devastating wars of the 1970s and 1980s.

Worsening armed conflict occurs parallel with deepening famine. Both sides engage in mass mobilization of conscripts, with the open expectation of exceptionally high casualty rates.

An international arms bazaar continues apace, an obscene backdrop to the international mobilization to redress the famine. As in the 1970s and 1980s the flood of weapons enables and consolidates hardliners on each side and feeds delusions of military triumph, even though all

recognize there will be no decisive victor. As war commenced last week, each side's commanders entered the fray confident and smiling.

Today it is not the reckless indulgences of the Cold War that fuel war. It is the reckless commercial marketing of weapons to both sides, often from the same vendors in eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, China, Israel and elsewhere. Even-handed aggressive selling to the Horn of Africa, we have discovered, does not achieve deterrence.

The war reaches beyond the boundaries of Ethiopia and Eritrea and has altered fundamentally the regional dynamic of the Horn. Already it has shifted the calculations and regional alliances of Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia. It threatens to drive new mass refugee populations into Sudan. It distracts and weakens regional pressure upon Khartoum to end its internal war, respect human rights, address its massive humanitarian crisis, and end support of international terrorism. It creates new vulnerabilities to attacks upon Djibouti, and encourages arms transfers into already chaotic sectors of southern Somalia.

4) Fourth, the new war will change demands upon international humanitarian operations.

Up to now, the war and famine zones have been largely segregated into separate geographic zones, such that most relief has not been subject to the predations of armed units and there has been no need for cross-line delivery of relief assistance (as became common in the 1980s).

This pattern may now be changing. If fighting persists and results in massive displacement of civilians, war and humanitarian demands will intersect in the interior areas of Eritrea.

If war intensifies, we can also anticipate further forced expulsions of Eritrean and Ethiopian nationals from Addis Ababa and Asmara, respectively.

The rail and road channels from Djibouti, along which the bulk of humanitarian relief and armaments flow, may become a target. These channels are an inviting chokepoint, where humanitarian and military goods are difficult to disentangle.

The Eritrean port of Assab may come under siege. If so, it could endure extensive damage that would have long-term consequences for annual fertilizer fuel and grain shipments into Ethiopia.

6) Fifth, and lastly, the new war calls for new policy actions.

Our interests call for us to adopt a measured detachment from each of the adversaries.

Our interests are dual: to address grave humanitarian demands, as we simultaneously work to contain and eventually defuse this war. Throughout, we and others must grapple with the continued risk that we will be blamed and targeted.

An enduring resolution may be elusive in the near term. It likely requires a strategy that looks out 1-2 years and that rests on building *transatlantic alliance* with the EU member states. Without a coherent, effective transatlantic alliance we cannot begin to see results.

Containment requires changing calculations through new forms of coordinated multilateral pressure.

Arms embargoes are essential, will take time, and require serious efforts at monitoring and enforcement. Action last night by the UN Security Council to impose an international arms embargo was a critical step. We need now to ensure that these commitments are implemented effectively.

We should move rapidly to condition multilateral and bilateral assistance and to limit travel and the ability of the two adversaries to use our soil to raise funds for their respective war efforts.

Thank you.