

BAD TIMES IN BADME: BITTER WARFARE CONTINUES ALONG THE ERITREA-ETHIOPIA BORDER

Margaret Fielding

INTRODUCTION

The recrudescence of heavy fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia in February 1999 has again forced a border dispute which caught the world community by surprise in May last year onto its attention – a dispute for which there seemed to be relatively little justification, at least to outsiders. It is a textbook example of a rapidly-escalating conflict, originating in a local issue and then fought with means out of all proportion to the original bone of contention. To the weaker of the two protagonists, it is now perceived as a matter of survival; to the stronger and larger, who has consistently taken the initiative in resuming the struggle, is a matter of honour, or face.



By early April, the efforts by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to bring about a cease-fire and a political solution still showed no sign of any breakthrough, despite the mounting cost. In addition to military casualties, the hostilities have already caused the displacement of some 250,000 people, mostly farmers and herders in villages close to the border, on the Eritrean side, and a similar number in Ethiopia. To these one must add the 55,000 persons with Eritrean connections deported from Ethiopia, under inhumane conditions, since the first round of fighting. Particularly in the case of Eritrea, which has a population of only three million people – less than that of Addis Ababa – against the 50 million of its adversary, the human and economic burden is very high. A high-intensity conflict across fixed borders is more difficult to sustain than a sporadic guerrilla struggle. The streets of Asmara, however, seem as peaceful as ever, and while at critical moments people can be seen listening closely to transistor radios, they show no sign to suggest that the country is in practice at war.

UPDATE ON HOSTILITIES

At the end of the last round of fighting in June 1998, neither side was in any mood for concessions in the negotiations over the OAU Framework Agreement, and instead both refurbished their arsenals in preparation for a further military effort. On

5 February 1999, having completed its deployment, Ethiopia claimed that Eritrean aircraft had bombed the town of Adigrat, near Adua. Eritrea described this categorically as a fabrication. Journalists were banned from the area, however, and the Ethiopian authorities refused permission to American and French officials wishing to verify the facts. The following day, Ethiopian forces launched the first of a series of heavy attacks on the Mareb-Setit front, legitimising their use of strike aircraft and helicopter gunships by the fact that their enemy had broken the air moratorium.

Since then, insofar as one could tell from a reading of the respective governmental communiqués, the fortunes of war have alternated, swinging first one way, then the other. Although it also has advanced warplanes, Eritrea has so far not used them. The initially triumphalist tone of its official statements and media changed markedly when the 'new strategy' adopted in the Mareb-Setit sector turned out to mean a retreat of 10km. In the usual way, neither protagonist gave out much information about the exact position of the battle-fronts, but since late February the Eritrean 'fighters', brave no doubt but thought by their people to be almost invincible, have been fighting on their own soil, at least around Badme. On 14-16 March, however, a powerful Ethiopian attack in the centre, near Tsorona, was repulsed, with very heavy losses, perhaps amounting to thousands.

Foreign journalists were taken from Asmara to see gruesome scenes reminiscent of World War I, where infantry advancing on foot in line abreast against trenches strongly defended with machine guns were cut down at the last moment. Over 20 Ethiopian tanks were seen to have been knocked out within a space the size of a football field. Although Eritrea alleged that Ethiopian morale was low, and that officers behind the front line were ready to shoot the first man to retreat, within a few days Ethiopia attacked again, this time on the south-western front. Ethiopian statements became increasingly belligerent, and air strikes were not restricted to the border zone or to areas in dispute: the small town of Golluj, half way between the border town of Um-Hager, near Sudan, and Tessenei, to the north, was hit, as was the sub-regional centre of Shambuko, between Mendefera and Barentu. As in 1998, fighting also took place around Burie, the border crossing point on the road to the port of Assab, far from any territorial claim, raising Eritrean fears that Ethiopian ambitions went far beyond 'regaining' territory. Ethiopian aircraft attempted to bomb Assab's water system, and a helicopter was shot down. Yet, while apparent victories may have momentarily levelled the score for Eritrea, they did not necessarily bring a cease-fire any closer, and in the longer term can only have increased hatred and made future coexistence, let alone reconciliation, more difficult. Though the country is outwardly calm, hospitals are said to be crowded, in particular with the facial injuries associated with trench warfare.

Though neither party has equipped its soldiers with steel helmets, by the standards of Sub-Saharan Africa this a high-technology war. Since last summer, both sides have invested heavily in modern weaponry and are armed to the teeth. Ethiopia is said to have spent US\$400m, and deployed advanced Russian Sukhoi strike aircraft piloted by a group of 200 Eastern European mercenaries. Eritrea is reputed to have bought US\$150m-worth of armaments, including some Mig-29s, from the same suppliers and in North Africa, drawing on the reserves it built up, over decades, from the contributions of the diaspora. These funds are discreetly channelled through the government party, not the state. As a result, neither country, both of which are classed by the UN in the group of Least Developed Nations, has increased its popularity with donors.

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HISTORY

The background to the conflict, otherwise incomprehensible, bears repeating. During the 'Scramble for Africa', from 1865 onwards, Italy's ambitions soon ranged beyond the southern border of Eritrea. This was first demarcated between Italy and Ethiopia

in 1884, and agreed to after the *Treaty of Ucciali*, a small village north of Addis Ababa, in 1900. A further, tripartite demarcation was signed between Ethiopia and Italy, with British participation, on 15 May 1902, after the Italian defeat at the battle of Adua, in Tigray. The area as a whole has seen its share of battles. Whereas Eritrea was an Italian colony for half a century, until the ejection of the Italians by the British in 1941, Ethiopia was Italian for only six years, following its conquest, from bases in Eritrea, in 1935. The excellent, Italian-built roads leading southwards from Asmara today towards the Ethiopian frontier were designed with invasion in mind. Similarly, when it was laid out in 1935, Asmara airport was almost the largest in Africa, and planned on that scale so as to accommodate many squadrons of military aircraft - to be armed, in the event, with poison gas. After the defeat of the isolated Italians, Eritrea was administered by Britain from 1941 until 1952, when the United Nations assigned it to Ethiopia, as a province with a special, more autonomous status. The American role in this decision was rewarded, the following year, by permission to install the huge Kagnew Station listening post outside Asmara.

The experience of half a century of colonialism, however, had forged an Eritrean national consciousness and it was the removal of this status by Haile Selassie in 1960, followed by the wholesale incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia, which triggered the start of the 30-year war of independence. Visitors to Asmara today are shown the auditorium of the Eritrean Assembly, now occupied by the Ministry of Education, where the delegates voted themselves out of existence – with an Ethiopian soldier standing behind every chair. The border therefore became an internal, regional boundary of Ethiopia, one where people in both provinces could mix and move freely, and where possible anomalies of population or administration on one side or the other were of little account. When Eritrea finally became independent in 1991-93, after the defeat of the fanatical Marxist dictator Mengistu – still living untroubled today in an accommodating African country – the border regained its earlier international importance.

Equally split between Coptic-Orthodox Christians on the plateau, 2,200m above the Red Sea, and Moslems in the far hotter lowlands, Eritrea is a one-party state. The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the new name for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), fought alongside the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to overthrow the regime in Addis Ababa. After coming to power in their respective countries, President Essayas Afeworki of Eritrea and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, whose power base is in Tigray, were on close terms and mindless of the unfinished business on their common agenda. Though crystal-clear in theory, in practice, however, or in human terms, one sector of the border – around Badme – remained blurred, with tragic consequences which none could have foreseen.

ECONOMIC CAUSES

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One factor in the gradual souring of relations was the introduction by Eritrea in November 1997 of its own currency, as a basic attribute of statehood and independence: the nakfa, named after the northern town which was a wartime symbol of heroic resistance, and of Ethiopian defeat. Whereas previously Ethiopia had been given access to Eritrea's two ports on advantageous terms, this placed the issue of Ethiopia's having become a land-locked country on the table for the first time. For a proud nation 'never colonized', if one excepts the six Fascist years, the resulting loss of status was distasteful. So long as Eritrea used the same currency, Ethiopia could still entertain the hope that in the longer term, what it had always perceived as a recalcitrant province might yet one day return under the wing of the leading regional power, perhaps through the auspices of a customs union or similar economic grouping.

In retaliation, Ethiopia redirected its trade from Massawa and Assab, only two days' drive from Addis Ababa by an excellent road, to Djibouti and Berbera, with

corresponding loss to Eritrea. Some goods, including international food aid, even entered through Mombasa, despite the huge distance and corresponding freight costs. Close to the border, in Tigray, the Ethiopian authorities began to make life difficult for foreign travellers: their vehicles, for example, were forbidden to refuel without presenting documents, laborious to obtain, proving that none of their currency had been obtained by changing Eritrean nakfas. Eritrea, which had imported much of its food from Ethiopia, including the *teff* grain used to make the national dish *injera*, was obliged to turn for many of its daily supplies to Yemen. It was fortunate for Eritrea, which had few friends among its neighbours, that relations with Yemen had not been compromised by the dispute, in which it used force, over the sovereignty of the Hanish Islands.

THE 1998 WAR

Even before the economic issue became important, however, in July 1997, Ethiopian forces occupied part of the Badda District, a small, remote, but more fertile area close to the Danakil depression, and replaced the Eritrean administration in the village of Adi Murug. The claim was on historical grounds, and based on the “*inaccuracy*” of current maps. The most widely used map of Eritrea, published in 1995 by the Eritrean Government in cooperation with the University of Berne, shows only Eritrean territory; neighbouring countries are simply marked in grey. Unhelpfully, this map shows neither Adi Murug nor Badme nor places just across the Ethiopian border, such as Zalambessa. Despite its claims, the map presented by the Ethiopian government to representatives of the international community in Addis Ababa in May 1998 showed the border in the same way as in all current atlases. A month later, however, the provincial authorities in Mekelle (Tigray) produced a different map – funded, in their case, in cooperation with the German government – which showed several areas hitherto considered part of Eritrea coming within the Ethiopian border.

The two governments agreed to set up a joint, confidential commission to address the issue. In the event, it made no progress beyond spelling out the differences in their respective positions. In May 1998, however, so a widely-held version has it, during the absence of President Essayas on a state visit to Saudi Arabia, four Eritrean officers who had come to Badme to negotiate with their opposite numbers were surrounded by Ethiopian soldiers. They refused to disarm and were shot dead. The local Eritrean commander then drove the Ethiopians out altogether, not intending to do more than settle a local quarrel. In the other area claimed by Ethiopia, however, near Zalambessa, Eritrean forces occupied the Ethiopian part of the town, possibly to use as a bargaining chip or to occupy a better defensive position, though Eritrea is now believed to accept that it will have to withdraw from it. This over-reaction, or invasion, stung Ethiopia to the quick.

THE MEKELLE INCIDENT

Almost a year later, intense controversy still surrounds the timing of the respective airstrikes, on the military side of Asmara airport (Eritrea) and at Mekelle airbase (Ethiopia), which then took place, and which marked a massive and fatal escalation. According to Eritrea, Ethiopia had gone so far as to announce its intention of bombing to other countries beforehand. Just as the Eritreans were celebrating the news that a number of enemy aircraft had been destroyed on the ground at the airbase, President Essayas went on television to apologise for his Air Force also having bombed a school in Mekelle, and – in an almost unprecedented gesture – offered compensation to the families of the victims. He put down the incident, unconvincingly, to the inexperience of the pilot, but witnesses, including the children themselves, say that the school was bombed twice, so the mystery, and the human suffering, remain. Both sides are thought to have an intelligence capability which allows them to know when enemy aircraft take off, and almost simultaneous strikes, in which the fighter-bombers would practically cross in mid-air, cannot be ruled out. In the resulting panic, most of the expatriate community in Asmara were temporarily evacuated. In February 1999, Ethiopia’s very suspect claim regarding the Eritrean

bombing of Adigrat tended to cast doubt, in Eritrean eyes, on its versions of other airstrikes.

DESCRIPTION OF BORDER – BADME

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The border at issue between the two countries runs for 1,000km, through semi-desert, partly mountainous scrubland, from Sudan to Djibouti. It is a fragile, marginal environment of rocky outcrops, home to wild camels and to herders with their ubiquitous flocks of goats, sheep and cattle. Subsistence agriculture is possible in the western half, subject to uncertain rainfall. The line can be divided into four distinct sections. The westernmost portion, of some 130km, adjoining Sudan, first follows the usually sluggish River Setit, or Tekezze, the only permanent river in Eritrea, over which there is no argument between the two sides, and divides the Gash-Barka Zone of Eritrea, to the north, from Tigray. The border then runs straight north-east for a similar distance from the Setit to the River Mereb, which it meets at its confluence – on the rare occasions when there is any water – with the Anbessa. The third stretch then follows the Mereb eastwards, first enclosing the ‘Yirga Triangle’ in Ethiopia, and then along its tributaries the Melessa and finally the Muna, which is no more than a wadi. The last, and longest, section of the frontier runs parallel to the Red Sea coast, at a distance from it of 60km, to produce the characteristic panhandle, in which Assab is the only notable feature of a parched and stony wilderness, where the border separates the Eritrean Southern Red Sea Zone from the Ethiopian province of Afar, across the blistering Danakil desert.

The focus of the conflict lies in the village of Badme, on the Mereb-Setit stretch, which is located 5km west of the internationally-recognised border, as calculated by GPS, and its surroundings, particularly to the south. This is a broken, stony tableland, with few wells, but which in lucky, rainier years can be persuaded, after the thorn-bush and prickly-pear have been cleared with a bulldozer, to produce a fair crop of cereals, such as sorghum or wheat. Badme itself, home to 300 families, is an unprepossessing example of human settlement – though that does not preclude the smiling welcome, with the traditional two glasses of tea, given to the occasional visitor. It is a dusty, one-street place, sited on a slight eminence, and consisting of crude huts, including the traditional conical *tukul*, interspersed with vegetation, a hamlet which nothing whatsoever – so the new cliché has it – predisposed it for its elevation overnight from total obscurity to the corridors of the Security Council.

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Badme is indeed unlikely to draw the attention of the Ministry of Tourism, which is carrying out a national survey of tourist potential, for very long. At one end of the ‘town’, as its former, Ethiopian administrators style it, a flagpole outside the only more modern house, on a small hill, indicates the office where the shooting incident which marked the start of hostilities took place. In February 1999, before the Ethiopian offensive, most of the inhabitants of Badme had moved out, at least during the day, for fear of air raids. Visitors were shown curious lines of circular scorch-marks, stretching across country, caused by sticks of Ethiopian incendiary bombs. The few bored-looking Eritrean soldiers playing cards in a café were incongruous in what was supposed to be the heart of a conflict involving 200,000 men on either side. They knew, however, that, though close to the border, they were out of artillery range, when the front itself was deep inside Ethiopian territory.

When the treaty was drawn up, the Badme area was largely uninhabited, other than by a scattering of Kuneima tribesmen to whom a line on a map meant nothing. Since then, there has been some migration into it from north and south, and today it supports a relatively dense agro-pastoral population. At the end of the War of Independence, in 1991, Eritreans and Ethiopians who had fought a common enemy were on friendly terms. Ethiopians in Badme had their own administration and militia, as an accepted thing, without excluding Eritrean authorities. Final demarcation was shelved *sine die* while more urgent and seemingly more important issues of rebuilding the respective economies were addressed by both sides.

HUMAN RIGHTS ASPECTS

The border conflict has been compounded by the deportation from Ethiopia of 55,000 people with Eritrean connections. Starting immediately after the conflict in June 1998, large numbers of people of Eritrean descent - including women, children, the elderly, even the mentally ill – in many cases Ethiopian nationals who had never been to Eritrea, were rounded up, loaded into convoys of buses, and deposited, often after suffering gratuitous brutalities, close to the Eritrean border. Such deportations were described by the Ethiopian government in March 1999, in a document entitled “*Setting the Record Straight*”, as “*selective*”, and justified on grounds of national security. Many people were picked up at work, in the street, or at 3am, then held in prison for a few days, or in the case of men of military age in the Blaten ‘concentration camp’ in the south of Ethiopia for months, and forced to leave all their possessions behind. A nominal procedure by which deportees were supposed to entrust their property for safe-keeping to a third party proved to be no more than a fig-leaf for confiscation. Parents were dragged away by police from their children, of whom 1,300, according to the “*Citizens for Peace*” human rights organisation in Asmara, were left behind. Until hostilities resumed, all deportations, running at 2,000-2,500 per week, were channelled through Assab, even for those living close to the border with Sudan. Warfare on the Bure front brought the movement to a halt, but successive deportations from Tigray restarted in March near Badme and in the central sector.

Despite one or two verbal condemnations, for example by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson and by Amnesty International, such flagrant and prolonged abuses of human rights, which are independent of the border issue itself, do not appear to have attracted the opprobrium and the concrete action from the international community which ethnic cleansing deserves. But then Africa, as sceptics like to observe, is not Europe. This has caused bitterness on the Eritrean side, who suspect they are the victims of obscure realpolitik. They point to the alleged fragility of “*the TPLF regime*”, which they perceive as a regional clique and which certain powers may be unwilling to see destabilised by military defeat.

Looking for a silver lining, Eritrea has presented the deportations as a windfall of useful labour, some well qualified, to boost its small population and within a few years help develop the country, as well as so many mouths to feed. When class sizes of 50 or more are common in most schools, all teachers arriving, for example, have quickly been employed. In the short-term, however, there is a limit to how many garage mechanics or salesmen, or indeed labourers, Asmara can absorb. While the solidarity shown by families and relatives of the deportees has been remarkable, groups of men standing idle throughout the day are a new feature of the street scene in the capital. Elsewhere, the number of vulnerable people in communities who are hosting large numbers of deportees or displaced persons and who require social assistance has increased sharply.

OPPOSING CASES

The two factors at the heart of the conflict approximately cancel each other out. For Eritrea, Ethiopia’s intolerable “*occupation*” of Badme, which it decided last year to back up with force. For Ethiopia, Eritrea’s over-reaction to the incident and to its “*justified*” historical claim, in which it apparently occupied Ethiopian territory across the border. Eritrea’s claim rests on the “*colonial frontier*”, which has never been modified since the beginning of the century. To alter it, Eritrea maintains, would break a fundamental principle accepted for decades by the OAU, that colonial frontiers shall be inviolate, for to allow any modifications, particularly by force, would open a Pandora’s Box of claim and counter-claim that would throw the entire continent into confusion. Eritrea has declined to withdraw until Ethiopia states its territorial claims openly and clearly, which it has not so far done, unless the map on the banknotes or the one produced in Tigray can be taken as official statements. Until Ethiopia disowns it, Eritrea perceives the map as a grave threat.

In negotiation, however, Ethiopia, while nominally accepting the Framework Agreement, has refused to countenance a cease-fire until certain further conditions are met. Ethiopia had no difficulty in initially agreeing to it, knowing that Eritrea would not do so, since its provisions included a return to the *status quo ante*, which would imply accepting the return of an Ethiopian administration in Badme. For Eritrea, Ethiopia's second thoughts were proof that it had only started a border conflict as a pretext for a far wider "aggression", aimed not only at capturing portions of Eritrean territory, but also overthrowing the present Eritrean government. Ethiopia's case rests on its de facto administration of certain areas of Eritrea before 6 May 1998, and on Eritrean "aggression". It charges that, as a border incident with Djibuti in 1996 and its seizure of the Hanish Islands in 1998 show, Eritrea readily resorts to the use of force, and has now done so again, to gain more Lebensraum. The accusation of irredentism, which is reciprocal, is compounded by a feeling of Eritrean arrogance and condescension, particularly towards Tigrayans. For Eritrea, however, which also accepted the Framework Agreement after its setback on the Badme front, the conflict remains essentially a matter to be resolved, however belatedly, by demarcation.

MEDIA ASPECTS

No less vital than the battle in the trenches is the one for the hearts and minds of the diplomatic and international community, and world opinion. On this front, Ethiopia started with a great advantage over Eritrea. In addition to its 90 embassies, Addis Ababa is the home of the OAU itself, and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. Ethiopia has a far stronger network of missions in the world's capitals and its nationals are well represented at the senior levels of international organisations. Eritrea discovered this to its cost in late 1998 when a proposal to deploy international monitors who would report on alleged abuses of human rights against Ethiopians in Eritrea, and so show up Ethiopian claims as false, was scotched.

In addition to its experience and resources for handling the media, the Ethiopian government has access to the internet. Eritrea, in contrast, has a more informal site, the Dehai network run by a group of academics. Its slight information deficit has been compounded by the relative success of its adversary.¹ President Essayas has expressed his conviction that "the truth will prevail", but in the Information Age that cannot be taken for granted. Statements issued periodically by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have denounced "the TPLF regime's outrageous lies", but whatever the rights and wrongs of the case their often strident tone grates. As the French say, you tend to become what you oppose, and impartial readers have been tempted to dismiss the views of both sides as equally unreliable propaganda.

Initially, the media indeed tended to equate the two, particularly when the deportation of Eritreans by Ethiopia seemed to be matched by a similar process in the other direction. In reality, the departure of Ethiopian nationals from Eritrea, such as stevedores from Assab, was in no sense a deportation, but merely the result of economic circumstances, as the diplomatic community in Asmara attested. More recently, opinion seems to have moved in Eritrea's favour, also in the Security Council, despite reluctance on the part of certain permanent members. This trend has been reinforced by recent statements issued by the Ethiopian side, such as the embarrassing allegation distributed in March to members of the OAU that before its closure – contrary to international conventions – the Eritrean Embassy in Addis Ababa, with a staff of two people, had been responsible for printing counterfeit currency and for storing explosives intended for terrorist acts. When the media can only focus on one or two themes at a time, Eritrea is increasingly frustrated by what it perceives as the world's apathy.

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HUMANITARIAN ASPECTS

While leaders indulge their ambitions, the people suffer. The plight of the internally displaced persons (IDPs), as always, is grim, and no doubt similar on either side of

the border. Many of the most recent cases in Gash-Barka are also deportees from Ethiopia who were obliged to leave their livestock, their sole economic asset, behind, and were just familiarising themselves with their new setting when they were forced to move again. They had indeed probably been resettled by the government around three rural nuclei to the west of the Setit-Mereb line, i.e. in the area claimed by Ethiopia, for political as well as for economic reasons. Many of those now driven from their homes by shelling and airstrikes, sometimes carried out at night with flares, have fled into the bush, often two hours' walk from water, into remote valleys or mountainous parts thought to be safer, where it is difficult for the local authorities to provide relief supplies, so long as they have any. During a visit by aid-workers to Badme in February, a number of children were found to have a phobia for loud noises, and were frightened to go to bed in case the planes came again and killed them. The temporary schools set up in safer areas away from the front – in tents and under large awnings – have been placed where they will have at least a measure of protection from air raids, in practice that means at the foot of cliffs or in ravines, in an unsuitable environment of sharp rocks and spiky thorn-bushes where there is nowhere to play, and no water or latrines. For up to 1,000 students, in classes of up to 70, getting there can mean a two-hour cross-country expedition. Further east, around Tsorona, between the two roads leading South from Asmara, the displaced have been grouped into large makeshift camps, of up to 6,000 people, each consisting of hundreds of tents.

Responsibility for providing aid both to the deportees and to the internally displaced lies with the government, assisted by the international community. At the authorities' request, donors have mostly responded through the bilateral rather than the multilateral channel, but some traditionally generous countries are only represented in Asmara by consulates, who must forward their recommendations through their respective Embassies in Addis Ababa, where the perception may be different.

The Eritrean government's stocks of relief supplies are low, if not for some items exhausted, but the humanitarian effort is a race not only against time but also against Angola, Sierra Leone, Kosovo and other deserving, high-profile causes pressing their claims with donors, in a struggle for attention against indifference and compassion fatigue. The crisis has strained the government's traditional policy of self-reliance and its distaste for hand-outs which perpetuate dependency. Indeed, almost alone among African countries, Eritrea has been unwilling to get into debt with international financial institutions: rather than borrow US\$200m to enable an international contractor to rebuild the railway from Massaua to Asmara, for example, the government has preferred to start the job alone, by hand. In 1997, it declared that in future food aid would in principle be monetised, which caused difficulties with its traditional suppliers. Today, however, almost half a million people, one-sixth of the total population, are at risk and will require assistance. While emergency flights have brought stop-gap supplies of blankets, water tanks, medical equipment and high-energy biscuits, the number at risk is growing. On this occasion, for historical reasons, Italy has again been among the first to come forward, with a generous list of items, including staple foods, and a team of surgical specialists.

Hitherto efforts to address the needs of the displaced have been restricted to the short-term perspective, in the expectation that the conflict will soon come to an end and the displaced will be able to return to their homes. The widespread perception, however, that it is driven by internal political factors in Ethiopia belies this assumption. Ethiopia has indeed stated that it is prepared to continue pursuing the war for a long time, perhaps at a low level or sporadically, but persistently enough to prevent return. This suggests that donors and aid agencies should now be ready to accept the implications, and give some thought not only to feeding, sheltering and caring for the displaced - thousands of whom are not even living in proper camps - for the months ahead, but also to providing them with some alternative means of

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livelihood. The most urgent human need, it goes without saying, is peace, but that cannot be delivered by charter flight from the warehouses in Copenhagen and Pisa quite so easily.

CONCLUSION

So far, unfortunately, efforts by the OAU to implement the Framework Agreement have produced no tangible result. Negotiations have not reached the stage where the parties might accept a concrete timetable for a ceasefire and the deployment of an international peace-keeping force along the border, to be followed by demarcation. If the conflict is indeed driven by internal political factors in Ethiopia, it could continue, sporadically, for a very long time, with corresponding consequences for the development plans of both countries, but particularly for the more vulnerable one. However hardened by the liberation struggle, Eritrea is a country of few resources, and when hundreds of thousands are homeless – in many cases simply sheltering under trees – a large-scale humanitarian disaster is a realistic scenario, especially when, despite a trickle of international assistance, the government's relief efforts are running on empty.

**Margaret Fielding
recently visited
Eritrea.**

¹ Ethiopian Office of the Government Spokesman: <http://www.ethiospokes.net/index.htm>
Dehai Eritrea Online: <http://www.primenet.com/~ephrem/>