

81

**Briefing by the OAU Secretary General to the Central Organ
Members on the Meeting of the OAU High-Level Delegation
on the Border Dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia,
held in Ouagadougou from 7 to 8 November 1998**

*Held at the Conference Room, Building "B"
Addis Ababa, Friday, 13 November 1998*

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I felt it was appropriate for me to convene this meeting to brief you on the important meeting of the OAU High-Level Delegation on the dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which was held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on the 7 and 8 November, 1998.

It is worth noting that the meeting was attended by all the leaders who are members of the OAU High-Level Delegation, namely President Compaoré of Burkina Faso, President Gouled Aptidon of Djibouti and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

The UN Secretary General was represented at the meeting by Ambassador Sahnoun as an Observer.

I wish also to underline the significance of the participation of both President Isaias of Eritrea and Prime Minister Meles of Ethiopia : Their presence was considered as a testimony to their commitment to OAU's efforts.

It is to be recalled that the meeting of the OAU High-Level Delegation was preceded by preparatory work at the level of Ambassadors and Ministers.

You will also recall that, following the decision of the OAU High-Level Delegation which visited Ethiopia and Eritrea on 18 and 19 June, the Committee of Ambassadors undertook a fact-finding mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea from 30 June to 9 July 1998 on the basis of the specific mandate given to them. This mission was undertaken with maximum care and high-level of professionalism and integrity.

The Committee of Ambassadors submitted its report together with its observations to the Ministerial Committee which met in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso on 1st and 2nd August, 1998.

The Ministers endorsed the report and observations of the Committee of Ambassadors. They also considered a set of proposals for a peaceful settlement of the dispute.

These proposals were further examined by the Ministerial Committee at its meeting held on the eve of the recent meeting of the OAU High-Level Delegation.

These proposals were finally considered and approved by the OAU High-Level Delegation. The OAU High-Level Delegation also approved a Statement to be delivered to the two Parties by the Current Chairman on behalf of the Delegation. The Statement basically highlighted the spirit in which the OAU High-Level Delegation had been conducting its work and made a presentation of the proposals submitted to the Parties.

To be specific, I can add that, in its Statement, the OAU High-Level Delegation noted that a gap still existed between the positions of both Parties on the origins of the crisis and ways and the means for solving it.

The OAU High-Level Delegation reaffirmed the conclusions made by the Ministerial Committee that the events which took place between 6 and 12 May, 1998 were a fundamental element of the crisis that evolved between the two countries. Those were the events which brought the crisis to the attention of the international community and with which the OAU was seized. The OAU High-Level Delegation therefore considered fundamental that any search for a peaceful solution should take into account this element.

The OAU High-Level Delegation also came to the conclusion that the events prior to those of 6 May, 1998 contributed to the gradual deterioration of the relations between the two countries. With a view to having a comprehensive and objective overview of the situation, the OAU High-Level Delegation considered it indispensable that appropriate inquiries be carried out on the events of 6 to 12 May, 1998 as well as those that preceded them, including the incidents of July-August, 1997. It was felt that such inquiries will make it possible to understand the evolution of the deteriorating situation between the two countries, given that each side has provided different accounts of the developments concerning the present dispute.

The OAU High-Level Delegation noted that apart from the divergent views of the two Parties on the origins and nature of the conflict, there was a general agreement on the modalities for the settlement of the border dispute based on the delimitation and demarcation of the common border. This convergence of views could not, however, be translated into reality due to the differences that continue to exist between the two Parties regarding the approach :

- Essentially, while the Ethiopian side demands the prior withdrawal of Eritrea forces from Badme and its environs and the restoration of the status quo ante, the Eritrean side proposes the demilitarization of the common border through the simultaneous withdrawal of the forces of the two countries.

Given the issues of principles involved in the current dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea and in a spirit of reconciliation which takes into consideration the requirements of flexibility while upholding basic principles, the OAU High Level Delegation submitted a set of proposals for a comprehensive solution revolving around the following elements:

- commitment of both Parties to put an immediate end to all hostilities;
- the implementation of confidence-building measures in order to defuse tension;
- redeployment of the armed forces present in Badme Town and its environs to the positions held before 6 May 1998;
- deployment of a Group of Military Observers to supervise this redeployment. The Group of Military Observers will also assist the re-

- instated civilian administration in the maintenance of law and order during the interim period ;
- demilitarization of the entire common border;
 - delimitation and demarcation of the border within a timeframe of 6 months;
 - investigation into the incidents of 6 May 1998 and on any other incident prior to that date which could have contributed to a misunderstanding between the two Parties regarding their common border including the events of July-August 1997;
 - commitment of the two Parties to put an end to measures directed against the civilian population and to address the negative socio-economic impact of the crisis on the civilian population, particularly those persons who had been deported;
 - establishment of a Follow-up Committee under the auspices of the OAU High- Level Delegation;
 - mobilization of resources by the OAU and the UN, working closely with the international community, particularly the EU, for the resettlement of displaced persons and the demobilization of troops;
 - guarantee for the respect and implementation of the Peace Agreement to be provided by the OAU in close cooperation with the UN.

In submitting officially its proposals to the Parties, the OAU High-Level Delegation underlined that it endeavoured to put forward fair proposals taking into account the legitimate concerns of both Parties as well as OAU's principles. It underscored that the resolution of the present crisis was as much a challenge for Africa and the to the OAU as it is for Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The proposals were formally submitted to both Parties by the Current Chairman on behalf of the OAU High-Level Delegation on the evening of 7 November, 1998.

I should, however, indicate that the OAU High-level Delegation was not able to meet separately with the two Parties on 7 November as initially planned. This was due to the reservations expressed to the Current Chairman by President Isaias on the presence at the meeting of Djibouti whom he alleged, "is supporting Ethiopia in its war efforts".

The following day and after some consultations undertaken by the Current Chairman and President Mugabe, the OAU High-Level Delegation met separately with the two Parties.

The Delegation met first with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi who welcomed the efforts and proposals of the OAU High-Level Delegation. He sought a number of clarifications from the OAU High-Level Delegation related to the following points:

- Identification of the troops to be redeployed from Badme Town and its environs which are “Eritrean troops”.
- The definition of Badme and its environs which they understand as “all Ethiopian territory occupied after May 6, 1998”.
- The Civilian Administration which, according to him, “should include the restoration of the Administration with its law enforcement organs minus regular troops”.

The OAU High-Level Delegation reacted on the clarifications sought by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

President Isaias also expressed his deep appreciation for the efforts exerted by the OAU High-Level Delegation to help in bringing about a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In his Statement, he highlighted the following :

- He reiterated that “the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is a border dispute which can only be resolved by the scrupulous respect of Eritrea’s inherited Italian colonial boundaries” which, according to him, have been “flagrantly violated by Ethiopia”.
- He also reiterated the fact that “both sides should commit themselves to the cardinal principle of the rejection of the use of force to resolve the dispute”. In this regard, he reaffirmed “Eritrea’s commitment to cessation of hostilities”.

- He considered “the cessation of hostilities as a sufficient condition for the deployment of an observer force and for bringing about an expeditious demarcation”.
- He stated that pending “the investigation to be carried out on the incidents of July-August, 1997 and of May 1998, any pronouncement on the origins of the conflict is not justifiable”. He added that “if it was a matter of goodwill, then the onus should be on both Parties” and that “the same logic applies to the issue of administration”.
- Finally, he stated that “the detention and deportation of innocent civilians on account of their nationality is being carried out solely by Ethiopia and that fairness demands that appeal by the Summit be directed only to the culpable Party”.
- In a nutshell, the Eritrean side did not go along with the proposals relating to redeployment of forces from Badme and its environs and the reinstatement of the Civilian Administration.

Following the separate meetings with the leaders, the OAU High-Level Delegation adopted a Press Communique in which it stated that it listened to preliminary observations made by the Parties and provided them with clarifications on some aspects of the proposals.

The OAU High-Level Delegation reiterated to the two Parties its full disposition to pursue its efforts and urged them to communicate subsequently their definitive responses to the proposals submitted to them.

In the meantime, the Delegation reiterated its appeal to the Parties to continue to exercise maximum restraint. It also expressed its high appreciation to the Parties for the confidence they placed in the OAU.

Finally, the OAU High-Level Delegation undertook to submit a report to the Central Organ at its next session at Summit level.

At the end of the meeting, the members of the OAU High-Level Delegation agreed that the Current Chairman should write to the OAU Heads of State and Government and convey to them the proposals submitted to the Parties.

They also agreed that the representative of the Current Chairman should brief separately the EU and US representatives in Ouagadougou and make the proposals available to them. This decision was made in view of the role and involvement of the EU and USA in the efforts aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the dispute.

It was also decided that President Compaoré and myself should go and meet with President Isaias Afewerki and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi before their departure from Ouagadougou. We seized this opportunity to express the appreciation of the OAU High-Level Delegation for their participation at the meeting and to reiterate the appeal of the OAU High-Level Delegation for restraint while the efforts are still going on.

I wish to add that since the meeting, I have received a copy of a letter addressed by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on 12 November 1998 to the OAU Current Chairman conveying to him the Ethiopian Government's formal and official acceptance of the High-Level Delegation's peace proposal "as clarified at our meeting in Ouagadougou".

This was the briefing I thought I should give you, at this point, on the meeting of the OAU High-Level Delegation held in Ouagadougou.