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Note for the Record

27.09.2024

Ethiopia-Eritrea Crisis : Telephone Conversation
with Dr. Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary of State
for African Affairs of the USA

Dr. Susan Rice telephoned me from Washington on Friday, 19 June 1998 at 2055 hours. Our conversation lasted some 20 minutes i.e. up to 2115 hours. She made the following points :

- She is very concerned that despite commitments to cease hostilities on a temporary basis, there is a real danger of escalation and a full scale war.

- Prime Minister Meles had telephoned her a few hours ago (after the conclusion of the OAU delegation mission) to express his concern.. Though he was not unhappy with the OAU press statement, he felt that increasingly his tolerance and restraint is not really paying the dividends internationally. There is reluctance to put pressure on Eritrea to withdraw and to ensure the return of the Ethiopian territory which has been occupied by force.

- Prime Minister Meles was concerned that the international response to the crisis is being muddied. He referred to the EU statement as being unhelpful and confusing.

 - According to Susan, the Prime Minister who has made use of the favourable international response (to Ethiopia's position) to contain some of the hawkish elements in his country is now faced with overwhelming pressure. "The bottom line is that we are close to Ethiopia launching an all out war". At the same time Eritrea which has been accusing Ethiopia of not respecting the air raids moratorium by "blocking Asmara etc." may also launch a full scale war.

 - It was vital that the OAU's efforts be given urgency. Time is not on our side.

 - At the same time they were of the view that a Security Council Resolution endorsing the Facilitators' recommendations could provide a breathing space. (She wondered whether a decision by council would be sufficient to have Prime Minister Meles go to Parliament and urge it to withdraw the ultimatum).

 - She observed nonetheless that it is not certain that the Security Council can take such a decision given the strong opposition by the Ambassador of Eritrea and supported by the Ambassador of Kenya. The latter has taken the position that the Security Council should not take up the issue since the OAU is handling the matter. The Ambassador of Gabon who had planned to introduce a resolution had "cold feet" after being approached by the Ambassadors of Eritrea and Kenya.
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- She stated that although the Eritreans have rejected the Facilitators' recommendations, they have not stopped communicating with the United States (on the issue).

 - She opined that there is a need for a formula which will make both sides withdraw from the brink.
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