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**MEETING BETWEEN H.E. DR SALIM AHMED SALIM, SECRETARY GENERAL
OF THE OAU AND H.E. MR. DAVID SHINN, THE UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR
TO ETHIOPIA , HELD ON TUESDAY 19 MAY, 1998, IN THE SECRETARY
GENERAL'S OFFICE**

In attendance :

Ms Julie Winn - US Embassy to Ethiopia
Mr. Sam Ibok - OAU

SECRETARY GENERAL

Thank you for responding to my invitation at such a short notice. I wanted to touch base with you on my return from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am concerned over the current tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

AMBASSADOR

We are worried now. Yesterday, we were optimistic. The US is involved in a shuttle Diplomacy between the two countries involving 7 officials who are very familiar with the Region led by Ms Susan Rice. The team arrived in Asmara on Saturday and met with senior officials and the President. From Asmara, they arrived Addis on Sunday and met with the Prime Minister and his officials. Later, they returned to Asmara on Sunday. There were intensive discussions with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and President Isayas Aferweki. On Sunday evening, they returned to Addis Ababa and met with Prime Minister Meles for 3 hours. They also had a good meeting with Vice President Kagame of Rwanda on Sunday night. The US and Rwandese positions virtually converge on all the issues.

They met again with Meles who was very optimistic that a solution had been found. However, they returned to Asmara only to discover that their understanding of the way forward was totally different. Consequently, when they returned on Monday night to meet with Prime Minister Meles, he was very disappointed with the news from Asmara which was quite different from the information he had on Sunday.

I am not as optimistic as I was on Sunday. We are dealing with very stubborn people. Meles is trying to be very flexible. I don't know about Isayas. I was not at their meetings. But there are people around Meles who are not so flexible. The body language is changing. There is anger. Meles feels disappointed and betrayed and we are very concerned.

Prime Minister Meles is angered by the fact that Eritrea has moved in tanks and heavy artillery into the area. He feels that they must pull back because he will not allow tanks to change the situation on the ground. There are accusations and counter accusations. It is not likely that Ethiopia has moved into Eritrean territory as alleged by Eritrea. We are trying to couch a statement in such a way that both sides can live with it and pull back to allow the ongoing efforts to achieve results. We will fax the new statement to Vice President Kagame in Brussels. We don't envisage any problem with him. Thereafter, we will fax the statement to President Isayas for his consideration.

Susan Rice is due to leave tonight. She moved her departure from Monday to Tuesday either from Addis or Asmara. She will leave behind three people to continue the dialogue. They were supposed to follow up on the implementation not negotiate, but we will have to see what can be done. We are worried about the damage that could be done not only to the two countries, but to Africa's reputation, for after all, we had said so much about the new leadership emerging on the Continent including the two bases. But we need to prepare for the worst case scenario. The implications for the region and the continent are far-reaching.

SECRETARY GENERAL

I was under the impression that the Eritreans were willing to move out under certain conditions.

AMBASSADOR

That is true but the devil is always in the details. This is an area that has been administered by Ethiopia, through its militia. Will Ethiopia swallow its pride after claiming that its territory had been invaded and remove the militia , which had been maintaining civil authority as demanded by Eritrea. The problem with the Eritrean demand for demilitarization according to the Ethiopians is that it puts both sides on the same level. We urgently need to see how the massive build-up around the border could be de-escalated.

SECRETARY GENERAL

Is there anything at stake in the area ?

AMBASSADOR

None that I know of by way of gold, oil or minerals. I have heard people talk about a fertile part of the land.

SECRETARY GENERAL

Is it possible for Meles to concede more, given the pressures he faces on being soft with the Eritreans and wanting to make peace at any cost ?

AMBASSADOR

That is part of the problem. Its very difficult for Meles to back down given the pressures he finds himself confronted with. Both sides talk about principles. But beyond principles, there is not much left.

SECRETARY GENERAL

For the Ethiopians, there is more than principles involved. I have spoken to many Ambassadors since my return. The impression is that the movement was on the part of the Eritreans into Ethiopian territory. The short term situation is most disturbing for the people on both sides of the divide.

I have met with the Eritrean Ambassador. I was also briefed by Ato Seyoum Mesfin. He was optimistic around midday on Monday. But then I became disturbed in the evening when I heard about the troop movements in the evening. What of President Gouled's initiative, any linkages ?

AMBASSADOR

No, we have not met with him. He is acting on behalf of IGAD. There is not much contact. I don't think Meles sees President Gouled playing a significant role. I have no idea what he had done in Asmara. Vice President Kagame is playing a more important role. He is liked and respected by both leaders. He has spent a lot of time with them.

Whatever, you can do to hold them back from the precipice will be useful. There is not much time left. This is a great challenge for Africa. There is a massive build up on the Ethiopian side, I don't know about the other side.

SECRETARY GENERAL

There is a lot at stake. These are experienced fighters. A fight would be very bloody. The African implication is serious.

AMBASSADOR

On Nigeria, the American Ambassador said they had received communication from their Embassy in Lome indicating that President Eyadema had intervened with General Abacha, on behalf of the people condemned to death for plotting a coup d'etat. The impression seems to be that they will not be executed before the Referendum which is supposed to make General Abacha, assume the Office of President of Nigeria.

SECRETARY GENERAL

I have been in touch with several African leaders to intervene with General Abacha to spare the lives of those condemned to death. These include ex-President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, President Nujoma of Namibia and President Mandela of South Africa, through Deputy Thabo Mbeki. I have requested them to take up this issue quietly with General Abacha. It would be a costly mistake for Nigeria if those condemned were to be executed. If General Abacha is hoping as people claim, to make himself the next President of Nigeria, it would send such a wrong signal if the first action he took as a civilian President would be to execute those people. I will try my best to ensure that the people are not executed.