

19

**RECORD OF THE MEETING BETWEEN PRESIDENT ISAIAS AFWERKI  
AND DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU**

**28 MAY, 1998 AT 11.30**

**Present at the meeting were :**

**On the Eritrean side :**

**H.E. Mr. Haile Weldensae, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea,  
Mr. Yemane G/Hebremeskel, Director of the Office of the President,  
Mr. Tesfamariam Tekeste, Director General for Africa, Asia and  
Australia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.**

**On the OAU side :**

- **Mr. S. Basseyy Ibok, Ag. Director of Political Department,**
- **Mr. El Ghassim Wane, Coordinator, Conflict Division,**
- **Mr. Roland Ngong, Conferences Division**

**President Isaias :** I would like to welcome you to Asmara. I have been complaining that you did not come to Eritrea for a long time. Your visit here will be useful in helping to defuse the tension.

**Secretary General :** I would like to thank you for receiving us. It was not easy to come due to the problem of communications between Addis Ababa and Asmara. But thanks to President Gouled, it was possible for me to travel here. One of the most frustrating experiences in the OAU is the difficulty of moving speedily to conflict areas. I received your letter. Ambassador Girma has been very helpful in facilitating contacts with you.

Our concerns are very serious. A confrontation between Ethiopia and Eritrea will have very serious consequences not only for the two countries, but also for the region and the Continent as a whole. There is no other solution than a peaceful one. There will be no winner in case of war. Everybody will lose.

There are very strong and historical relations between the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. In addition, when people talk about the new generation of leaders, they always refer to you and Meles among others. In case of war, we will lose a lot. We, at the OAU, have a vested interest in finding a solution. We support all ongoing initiatives, by the Americans and the Rwandese, to solve the crisis.

To be frank, we were all shocked and surprised at the eruption of this crisis, since we are aware of the close relations between yourself and Prime Minister Meles and between the EPLF and EPRDF. If we do not move with deliberate speed, there is the risk of confrontation especially since the military forces are facing each other at the borders. Furthermore, even in circumstances where there is no confrontation, the deployment of troops alone is a very costly exercise for both Ethiopia and Eritrea.

I am here to convey our concerns and to appeal to you to show restraint and take all the necessary measures to ensure a peaceful settlement. This requires flexibility and taking into account the long-term interest of the two countries. Ordinary people in Africa also share the concerns I have expressed.

**President Isaias :** The concerns are serious. I was talking to Vice President Kagame and he told me that Ordinary Rwandese were very

disappointed by the current crisis and that they were praying that war should not take place. I told him that the citizens of Eritrea and, I am sure, those of Ethiopia were very concerned and do not desire war. There is a clear desire on the part of everyone to see peaceful solution to the current problems.

This crisis come to me as a surprise. We were speculating, trying to find out how and why a simple border dispute could have been blown out of all proportions. Friends can only contribute to a solution, the decisive role remains in the hands of our two parties.

I will not like to take too much of your time providing the background to the current situation which is a legacy from the colonial period. The area in dispute was an open one, wherein everyone was allowed to move in and out. Our people used to move all the way through the area up to Uganda.

Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, villagers were from the highlands (pastoralists) settled in those areas and parts of Ethiopia. We have Nilotic tribes who have lived there peacefully for hundreds of years.

After the Battle of Adwa in 1902, the Italians delineated the border from the area which is disputed now up to the border with Sudan. The Italians were not unequivocal about what they wanted to see - they wanted to move the area in dispute into their colony Eritrea. In 1906, they delineated the border up to Djibouti. There was no controversy as far as the borders are concerned. In spite of the delineations, people continued to migrate. There were cattle rustling – and minor skirmishes which took place even during Emperor Haile Selassie's and Megistu's time.

Serious problems emerged in the early seventies, when the disputed area caused some clashes between ELF and EPLF. The former was trying to settle populations in the area.

Because of these communal clashes, the two Organizations started being involved, but we never took the Treaties seriously.

After the independence of Eritrea, we and the Ethiopians committed ourselves to work closely together and to build exemplary relations. In fact, up to 1994, we treated the issue of the delimitation of borders as a secondary one. Also between 1992 – 94, we complained to Ethiopia that our people were being harassed and cross border trade based on mutually agreeable exchange arrangements.

Late in 1996, the Region of Tigray started redrawing the borders. We tried informally to get more information. The indications were clear : they wanted to modify the boundaries inherited from the colonial period. We were worried as this was a very dangerous political development. We complained about this development to the authorities in Addis Ababa and informed that we will not accept it. Clearly, the Ethiopians were redrawing international boundaries and putting in place administrative machineries which were unacceptable.

In 1997, the Ethiopians brought their army and occupied the area where they resettled refugees from Sudan and armed militia. There was lawlessness. We wanted a proper administrative machinery that would ensure a law and order. We, therefore, called for the establishment of a Joint Commission to find a lasting solution. This urgency of this was underscored when the Ethiopian went up to 30 km in the Eritrea territory in

an area populated by Afars. In July, I again wrote to Meles to tell him that his action was a dangerous precedent and that we should speed up the process to resolve the problem urgently.

Finally we agreed on the need to speed up the work of the Joint Commission. After, we introduced our new currency, the Ethiopians introduced also their new currency with a new map redrawing our common border. Initially, we thought that it was an artist's mistake. In addition, they sent troops in the disputed area and destroyed infrastructures. I called upon Meles on the need for the Joint Commission to work day and night to demarcate the border. I told him that redrawing borders is one thing, but moving in troops and militias to displace people and set up new administration would be most problematic.

When the issue was raised, the Ethiopians said that they did not do their homework and called for the postponement of the discussions to August 1998. I wrote again to Prime Minister Meles, stressing the need for the Joint Commission to resume its work in order to defuse the tension on the border. I also asked him to withdraw his troops and to allow the Eritrean populations to return to their villages. In fact, by this time, the Ethiopians brought in more troops. In spite of my appeals for constraint, there were continued skirmishes and harassment of the villagers. I clearly informed the Prime Minister that we could not allow such a situation to continue indefinitely. I suggested a third party intervention. On 12 May 1998, a major confrontation took place between our forces.

Prime Minister Meles says that they will not negotiate unless we pull out our troops. I spoke to him stressing that there is no need to panic. We should be reasonable in order to find a solution. I called for a de-

escalation of the tension. I proposed that the Joint Committee resumes its work with the involvement of a third party, as well as the setting up of an Investigation Commission to investigate on the incidents which took place at the border. Again Meles insisted on the withdrawal of our troops. I wrote to ask him to indicate which areas belong to Ethiopia. I told him that if he accuses the Eritrean troops of crossing the border he should give evidences. The internationally recognized borders are there. If Eritrea is accused of crossing the borders, let us subject the issue to International arbitration.

When I was in Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Meles told me that he will take the matter to the Parliament. I tried to appeal to him not to go to Parliament and that we can work out solution, through the involvement of a third party. Suddenly, however, the Ethiopians came out with a statement which was later approved by the Parliament. They misinformed the Parliament. This triggered a response from our side. Legally speaking, we cannot pull out from our own territory.

I can only speculate that there are internal problems in Ethiopia. Whatever is the case, we need to find a solution and delineate the border with the assistance of the UN cartographic Unit. If the problem is not resolved we can then resort to international arbitration. To my understanding, the Ethiopia Authorities have put themselves in a very difficult situation on two issues :

1. They went to Parliament and misinformed it by stating that Ethiopian territory was invaded by Eritrea. They know that this was not true, but they find it difficult to reverse that lie.

2. They have threatened to use force to make us withdraw. How can they now be seen to be backing down publicly without losing face. They have raised the threat level and the dilemma now is how to climb down without being seen as having been humiliated.

We have involved facilitators not mediators to help in the resolution of the problems. The demilitarization can be done according to sequences. Regarding the Administration of the disputed area, we can find interim arrangements, if we have guarantees on the delimitation of the border and on the time frame. The phased demilitarization could be facilitated by the deployment of observers and the Rwandese Government is prepared to provide between 30 and 40 observers. This phased demilitarization can start from Bademe where the Ethiopians can reinstate their civil administration. We know that the area is Eritrean territory and ultimately, we shall be proved right.

To us, the central problem is the question of aggrandisement by Ethiopia. On our part, the problem can be easily solved. The sooner we demilitarized and deployed observers in the area the better it will be for everybody. The Ethiopian Government continues to mobilize troops and its population. Ethiopia has also taken some unilateral measures. They have stopped the flights between the two countries and decided to stop using the Port of Assab. These decisions are symptomatic of panic measures. Here in Eritrea, we remain calm. There is no propaganda. We try, as much as possible, to be constructive. We exercise restraint on the ground despite provocations. We are trying to find a peaceful way out of the present crisis. No sensible person will mobilize troops for war unless he really wants to fight. If the facilitators do not succeed, we will appeal to

the International Community. That is where we see the OAU and the UN can play a role.

We have documents and Treaties which are at the disposal of observers and the UN Cartographic Unit. The Ethiopians have asked the Italian to provide them with documents. The Italians have obliged. They have made them available both of us you were absolutely right when you state that a military solution will not serve anybody's interest. We will loose on both sides. There is no justification for a war. We don't want to go to war with Ethiopia. Human beings will be the victims. Nothing can justify putting our people into through such difficulties. We can fight battles, win some and Ethiopia also wins some, but ultimately we shall both be losers. The solution to the crisis is not difficult. The problem is the political will.

There is much goodwill within the International Community to assist in finding a solution. Beyond that, the problem could be dealt with legally, through arbitration. We have already a good experience with the Yemenis after they put their troops on the Hannish Islands. We do not think that they have the muscles to impose a solution between friends and peoples who have fought together in the past and who share a common history.

Ethiopia cannot impose a solution by force. We do to subscribe to the use of force. We have to commit ourselves to a peaceful solution. We want our friends in IGAD, the USA, Rwanda, the OAU and the UN to help us find a solution. The facilitators are doing their best, but we are still far from any agreement, which lack of progress is really frustrating. The Ethiopians are putting unacceptable preconditions on us. Their Parliament want us to implement their Decision. This is not a solution to the dispute. We are using every mechanism to resolve the problem peacefully.



The conditions put forward by the Ethiopians are mere pretexts. They do not seem to realize the danger of their actions.

I appreciate your concern and involvement since the inception of the crisis. I have seen your Statement. It was very positive and in the right direction. We do not want a confrontation. It is our hope that this endeavour will bring about a solution.

We and the facilitators will keep the Secretaries General of OAU and UN and the Chairman of IGAD informed. If there is no progress, we will involve the UN and the OAU, but right now, there is no need for such involvement.

The OAU has a Conflict Management Center and eventhough we are not a party to such a mechanism because we do not believe that it can achieve much, this is a test case. If the two parties are not committed there will not be a solution. I think the OAU should find the best way and timing for its involvement either in the subsequent work of the Facilitators or other initiatives.

**Secretary General:** Thank you listening to you, there are areas of convergence between you and Prime Minister Meles.

- Preference for a peaceful solution,
- Acceptance of the relevant OAU/UN Declarations on international boundaries inherited from colonial times and commitment to OAU and UN Charters,

- Commitment to respect the outcome of a boundary delineation exercise,
- demarcation of boundaries with the assistance of a third party,
- demilitarization – the difficulty does not lie in the concept itself. The Ethiopians are saying that, you through military force, charged the situation on the ground and this has created a dangerous precedent, which has to be resolved before any other action is taken.

The point of convergence between both of you are more than those that separate you. Both of you are against the use of force to impose a solution. Both are committed to respecting the outcome of International arbitration, if a conducive environment is created for such an initiative.

**President Isaias :** I will give you a copy of a letter sent to me by Prime Minister Meles. The Ethiopians used force all the way to create a fait accompli. They killed people and destroy infrastructures. Even for the most recent incident, they shot at our forces, killing 3 officers and wounding 4 others. The use of force was first introduced by the Ethiopian side. We have asked for a Commission which could investigate all the incidents that have taken place along our border. There is a massive building of forces. Ethiopia is embarking on a propaganda campaign which is not new to us. We were challenged politically.

I informed Prime Minister Meles in writing that it was a humiliation for us to have our people complaining that we do not protect them. It will be good to set up a Commission to investigate, to undertake a fact-finding mission.

In Region 2 which is populated by Afar, the Ethiopian forces undertook a hot pursuit against opponents their (Ngugumes) into our territory. We

allowed them access , but their real intention was to change the local administration. Since then, they have refused to leave the area.

To find a durable solution, we should delineate the border. Delaying that will not be helpful. If the Ethiopians agree to relinquish the areas they are occupying now once the delineation exercise indicates that they do not belong to them, we can wait. Let us commit ourselves practically not to use force. We need to move beyond mere rhetorics. The logic of force is not acceptable to me. If Prime Minister Meles commits himself to respect the outcome of neutral arbitration, I will accept the proposal to demilitarize the area.

I would like you to impress upon the Prime Minister, since he is accusing us of using force, to accept the dispatching of a Fact finding mission, especially since he feels he is right.

**Secretary General :** It will be sad not to reach an agreement. Let me understand you very well, the phased demilitarization and interim arrangements e.g. reinstatement of local administration that you are talking about, could start from Bademe.

**President Isaias :** Vice-President Kagame had asked us to make concessions by withdrawing and allowing Ethiopian Administration in the area. I have since informed him that the most important consideration for us, is a clear commitment to delineate the borders, engage in phased demilitarization starting from Bademe and extending to other areas later. There should be an involvement of neutral observers. The Prime Minister Meles can appoint an Administration in Bademe. We have no problem with that. However, we are compromising our sovereign rights on our

territory. The Ethiopians never claimed that the territory belongs to them except that they installed an Administration there. The Administration which will be designated by Prime Minister Meles will stay until the delineation of the border is completed. The time frame of the delineation exercise should be clearly indicated. If at the end, it is decided that the territory belongs to us, the Ethiopians will have to leave it. On the other hand, if it is determined that the territory belongs to Ethiopia, then the Ethiopians continue stay.

The occupation of the disputed area pending the completion of the delineation exercise is a secondary and trivial problem. We have made concessions because we don't want to give pretext to the Ethiopian Government. If the Ethiopians agree on the other major aspects of the settlement plan, there will be no problem. All this will have to depend on Prime Minister Meles.

The Ethiopians are doing a lot of propaganda. There is too much hysteria. They have announced that they will teach us a lesson. We are ready to be taught.

**Secretary General** : The Prime Minister never said that.

**President Isaias** : It was carried by the media. Yesterday, EPRDF made a statement supporting the Parliament decision. Militarily speaking, the Ethiopians can do nothing. If there is a war, all of us will loose. The Ethiopian authorities have approved a budget of 520 million ETB for war. There is no need to spend such an amount of money for Bademe. Here we are waiting the outcome of the peace efforts.

**Secretary General** : The war cannot bring about a solution. It will cause suffering and consternation in Africa. We support the ongoing efforts. Yesterday when I met the American Delegation and the Rwandese representatives, I reiterated our support for their efforts. We are also ready to support the deployment of the Rwandese observers. A strong Ethiopia and Eritrea is in Africa's best interest. When you talk about I phased demilitarization does it also include Bademe.

**President Isaias** : Yes. We don't want to be unequivocal. We are not bargaining. There is no room for bargaining on the real issues. What we want is clarity on principles. We should commit ourselves to find a peaceful solution through binding Agreements. This will help us resolve the problem of the contested areas who will occupy the disputed areas in the interim period is not important. What is important is the ultimate solution. We can sacrifice if it will expedite a resolution of the dispute.

Bademe belongs to the Kunema tribe. Now the Ethiopians are bringing in settlers, trying to impose a solution by force. The people will have to determine where they belong and elect their leadership.

I agree with you that the current situation has very serious consequences on our image. We have to minimize those damages. If the Facilitators don't succeed in their efforts, we will call upon the International Community, in particular the OAU.

**Secretary General** : We appeal to you to exercise restraint OAU will remained seized and we will continue to lend our support to the ongoing efforts. In 1991, when you came to my residence in Addis Ababa, you explained to me your vision of the future of the region and in particular the

relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. I believe that the two countries should continue to work closely together and should not only minimize the damages but also restore the atmosphere which was prevailing before.

**President Isaias :** We keep in touch. We look forward to a peaceful resolution of dispute.

The meeting ended at 1.15 pm.