

Crisis in the Horn of Africa

Ethiopian-Eritrean Border Battles, 1998

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Since both Ethiopia and Eritrea maintain large armies, by regional standards, their border hostilities of the summer of 1998 are worth examining. Both countries were important to the U.S. policy of containing the Sudan, and both had populations with extensive combat experience. The Ethiopian Army, in particular, had a staff trained in Soviet Cold War conventional tactics.

In 1998 Eritrea's standing army numbered about 40,000 and Ethiopia's, 120,000. If fully mobilized, both countries could field a combined force of around half a million combat-veteran fighters of both sexes. The Ethiopians have 350 to 400 T-55 tanks and the Eritreans 200 to 300, though not all of them battle-worthy.

The Eritreans gained formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, after helping the rebels end 17 years of harsh

military rule. But relations between the one-time allies soured when Eritrea triggered a trade war by introducing its own currency in November 1997. Ethiopia's occupation by force (with more than 1,000 troops) of eastern Eritrea's Adi Murug area in July 1997—followed by the Ethiopian publication in October of a new map of Tigray that incorporated large areas of Eritrea—did not ease tensions.

Eritrea claimed that the crisis in the summer of 1998 had been triggered on 6 May by an unprovoked Ethiopian attack on Eritrean troops in southwestern Eritrea. Both sides began massing troops and equipment along the border immediately after its government in Addis Ababa alleged that Eritrean forces had invaded and occupied the land around the town of Erde Matios (Tigray, its northwestern territory) on

12 May. Known as the Badme area, this rocky 400-square-kilometer triangle is claimed by both sides.

On 13 May 1998 Ethiopia's Parliament declared war on Eritrea. The Eritrean government officials in Asmara claimed that the Ethiopian army had launched four attacks inside their border on 22, 23, and 25 May in the Setit area; and, on 31 May, in the Alga-Aliteina areas. On 31 May and 1 June Addis Ababa countered that Eritrean forces had made incursions into Ethiopian territory around Alitena (near Mt. Asimba in the central area of the border). Regardless of who initiated it, heavy fighting was reported with artillery, mortars, and small arms across the broad valley.

Another Eritrean probe was launched at Zalambessa (or Zala Anbessa, a strip of buildings on either side of the road),

on the main highway between Addis Ababa and Asmara, but was repulsed. By 2 June the border was quiet again. The Eritrean offensive was hampered by the beginning of the winter rainy season, and a normally dry riverbed in the Badme region that now flooded and presented an obstacle to Eritrean supply efforts.

At that point, even Libya's Colonel Muammar Qaddafi suggested sending troops from the six-nation Sahelian-Saharan Group (Libya, Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Sudan) to the disputed border area.

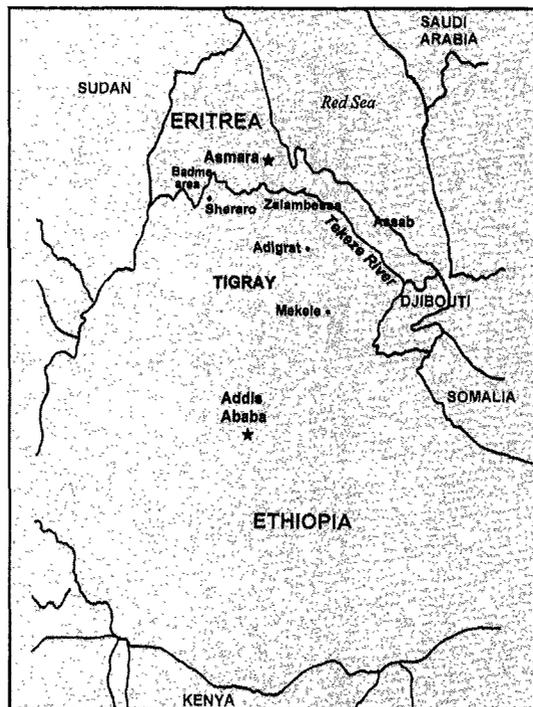
Around this same time, Djibouti, as a precautionary measure, began mobilizing troops along its northern border with Ethiopia and Eritrea in response to the proximity of the fighting. (The overthrow of the former Ethiopian ruler, Colonel Mengistu, in 1991, had led to a civil war in Djibouti.)

Ethiopia claimed that the Eritrean Brigade that occupied Zalambessa was driven out on 6-7 June by the Ethiopian units. The local Eritrean commander, claimed, however, that 200 Ethiopians were killed in the initial assault on the Eritrean border post, and morale was nonexistent among those who were taken prisoners. Three tanks captured from Ethiopian troops were immediately reissued to Eritrean units.

In the air, Eritrean MB-339 light support aircraft attacked Tigray's capital Mekele, while two pairs of Ethiopian MiG23s bombed Asmara's military/civilian airport. Aside from civilian casualties on both sides, the military value of the attacks was negligible. One MiG23 was confirmed downed at Asmara with a second claimed, while Addis counter-claimed an Eritrean MB-339.

On 9 June, residents 27 kilometers to the south of Adigrat could hear intense tank, mortar, and artillery fire. The Eritreans claimed that the Ethiopians had begun their counterattack at 0515 hrs (the fourth in two weeks), while the Ethiopians countered that the Eritreans attacked at dawn, only to be repulsed four times with heavy casualties.

Seesaw fighting raged through the



empty border town of Zalambessa, and outside of town the Eritreans lost four T-62s. Ethiopia had moved at least a pair of multiple rocket launchers and one six-gun 130mm M46 battery up to the battle. The fourth attempt took place at around 1400, allegedly while the Eritreans at the Organization of African Unity summit were calling for an end to hostilities.

The fighting had turned thousands of civilians into refugees. At 0600 on the 10th, Ethiopia accused Eritrea of launching a fresh attack, with large numbers of troops supported by tanks, on an Ethiopian post on the Badme-Sheraro front at Erde Mattios near the Tekeze River, which forms the border between the two countries.

A third fighting front around Assab—a drier region 500 kilometers south where warfare could be carried out more effectively—was reported at the same time. By the 12th Ethiopian officials reported heavy fighting in Bure (about 45 miles inland from Assab) and farther east than earlier clashes.

On the 11th, Eritrean jets and a helicopter dropped eight bombs on an army base and a part of refugee-crowded Adigrat. Four persons were reported killed and 30 injured. Although a U.S.-brokered ban on air strikes was put in place over the weekend of 13-14 June, both Eritrea and Ethiopia continued to

reinforce their front lines, and a stalemate on all three fronts continued for about two weeks.

As of 1700 on 14 June, the official Ethiopian figures for Eritrean casualties on the Badme Front were 1,808 killed and 3,606 wounded. On the Zalambessa Front, there were 1,392 Eritreans dead and 2,784 wounded, while on the Bure-Assab Front, Addis claimed 900 Eritreans killed and 500 wounded.

On the morning of the 24th, there was a brief artillery exchange at Zalambessa (which Asmara denied), though there was no apparent follow-up action. On 28 August Eritrea released the first batch of 71 Ethiopian soldiers captured along the border.

The troops were kept on the front line throughout the winter and past the Ethiopian New Year (11 September) with little diplomatic headway being made. Since then, arms purchases have been made, which will guarantee that the next bout of fighting will be even bloodier. When Bulgaria announced in December that they were selling 210 T-55s to Uganda and Ethiopia, the potential for future fighting increased dramatically.

These border skirmishes were little more than meeting engagements, but they would set the stage for the large-scale, set-piece battles of February and March 1999. (EDITOR'S NOTE: This period will be covered in the author's next article.)

These and similar conflicts across the globe show how fragile peace is in those regions, and demand that the United States remain vigilant. If and when military and political unrest appears likely to affect U.S. interests in a region, we must be prepared—psychologically and militarily—to respond.

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