

## **ERITREA: THE SIEGE STATE**

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## ERITREA: THE SIEGE STATE

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eritrea has been deeply troubled since independence in 1991. Following the devastating war with Ethiopia (1998-2000), an authoritarian, militarised regime has further tightened political space, tolerating neither opposition nor dissent. Relations are difficult with the region and the wider international community. At African Union (AU) behest, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions in 2009 for its support of the Somali Islamic insurgency. It has become, in effect, a siege state, whose government is suspicious of its own population, neighbours and the wider world. Economically crippled at birth, it is a poor country from which tens of thousands of youths are fleeing, forming large asylum-seeking communities in Europe and North America. But Eritrea is an extreme reflection of its region's rough political environment, not its sole spoiler. More effort to understand the roots of its suspicions and greater engagement rather than further isolation would be a more promising international prescription for dealing with the genuine risks it represents.

The militarism and authoritarianism which now define the political culture have their roots in the region's violent history. The 30-year war of independence was part of a network of conflicts which devastated north-east Africa. The real significance of that legacy has only become clear in the last decade, as President Isaias Afwerki and a small cohort of ex-fighters have strengthened their grip on power, while suppressing social freedoms and economic development in favour of an agenda centred on an obedient national unity and the notion that Eritrea is surrounded by enemies. Isaias's supporters, diminishing in number, assert that only he has the vision to guide it through difficult times; the growing ranks of his critics argue that he has hijacked the nation-building process; betrayed the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands who achieved and defended independence, and brought ruin to the country.

Conditions are worsening dramatically. Since the 2001 crackdown that ended a brief period of public debate, jails have been filled with political prisoners and critics, religious dissidents, journalists, draft evaders and failed escapees. Isaias uses the standoff with Ethiopia to justify severe internal discipline and military adventures across the region. Ethiopia has reneged on part of the Algiers

Agreement that ended the war, in particular by not accepting what was to have been a special commission's binding decision on the border. The Security Council's failure to compel compliance reinforced the sense in Asmara that the international community is inherently hostile. Eritrea subsequently placed restrictions on UN peacekeepers that led to their withdrawal in 2008 from the demilitarised zone between the belligerents, citing total lack of cooperation. Isaias's foreign policy became even more fixated on forcing Ethiopia to accept the border decision, with proxy warfare rather than conventional diplomacy the favoured tool.

Militarised politics has spilled into foreign policy, the latter frequently involving armed responses and aggressive adventurism at the expense of conventional diplomacy. To date, Eritrea has fought, directly or indirectly, with Ethiopia, Yemen, Djibouti and Sudan and involved itself in various ways in the conflicts in eastern Sudan, Darfur and Somalia. While it asserts that it is pursuing legitimate national security interests and lambasts the U.S. in particular for intervening in the affairs of others, the aggressive approach and abrasive tone have left it increasingly isolated. The willingness of potential friends to consider the legitimacy of at least some of its concerns is diminished by Eritrea's unwillingness to demilitarise its foreign policy and to make concessions on any level.

The economy has been shattered by the vagaries of regional rainfall, the state's destruction of the private sector and the huge costs of military mobilisation. Society more broadly is under enormous strain. Remarkably, there have not yet been serious protests, but pressure is building, both inside the borders and in the extensive diaspora, whose remittances have been a major financial support. A range of external opposition groups – though still deeply divided – are lining up against the regime.

To avoid a fresh crisis in the Horn of Africa, the international community and the Eritreans alike will need to demonstrate a new level of imagination and flexibility. It is vital that the international community engages with Eritrea, politically and economically, and rigorously assesses the country's internal problems as well as its external

pressures. Development assistance and improved trade links should be tied to holding long-promised national elections and implementing the long-delayed constitution. At the same time, in particular the UN Security Council should pressure Ethiopia to accept the border ruling. All this is necessary to prevent another failed state from emerging in the Horn. That outcome is otherwise distinctly possible given the widespread lack of support for the government within the country and the deteriorating state of the army, whose ability to either sustain Isaias Afwerki's regime or to successfully manage regime transition is increasingly questionable.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 21 September 2010**

## ERITREA: THE SIEGE STATE

### I. INTRODUCTION

Almost twenty years ago, Eritrea became Africa's newest country – de facto in 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) entered Asmara in triumph, and de jure in 1993, following a UN-sponsored referendum on independence. At the time, there was optimism that northeast Africa might finally achieve political and economic stability, and regional development might be founded upon a new relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Within a few years, however, there was heightened repression inside Eritrea and a devastating return to war with Ethiopia.

Covering about 125,000 sq km and with a population of some 5.5 million, Eritrea is a fraction of the size of its main neighbours, Ethiopia and Sudan, but it contains considerable diversity.<sup>1</sup> Broadly, it is divided between the highlands – including the central plateau (the *kebessa*) and the rugged mountains to the north – and the lowlands to the west, the coastal plain and the Danakil desert to the south. It is ethnically and religiously mixed, with nine official ethnic groups and large Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic and Protestant communities. The bulk of the population lives in the central highlands. Regardless of its small size, it occupies a critical geopolitical position in the region, including some 1,150km of Red Sea coastline – and it is this which has shaped much of its troubled history.

Created in a contested and volatile region, first as an Italian colony and then as an Ethiopian province, Eritrea's defining experience has primarily been violent instability and political conflict. The political culture of the EPLF has its roots in the liberation struggle against Ethiopia (1961-1991). Engaged in a life and death struggle, its leadership has long been intolerant of internal dissent and external opposition, and it forged its political program – essentially that of a state in waiting – during the years when its rear base was in the harsh northern mountains. The EPLF's character evolved in those formative years –

the early- and mid-1970s – through its elimination of rivals during the civil war and ultimately its defeat of the Ethiopian *Derg* regime in 1991.<sup>2</sup> After a brief respite with independence, it became increasingly oppressive, particularly following the 2001 crackdown.

Eritrea today is defined by military or national service and by a culture of militarism that profoundly impacts its politics, society and economy, causes the fragility which characterises national life and affects foreign policy and the stability of the surrounding region. It has had troubled and frequently violent relations with all its neighbours, including interventions in Darfur and Somalia and conflict with Yemen and Djibouti, as well as, more famously, with the governments in Khartoum and Addis Ababa. Above all, its relations with and perceptions of Ethiopia are fundamental to an understanding of much of its behaviour.

Because Eritrea's internal stability and external relations will have much wider implications in north-east Africa and the Red Sea region, this report seeks to trace the routes by which Eritrea has come to be as it is today, examining both internal autocracy and aggressive foreign policy. It draws upon more than ten years of work on and field research in the country. Given the government's restrictions – most foreigners are not allowed to travel outside of Asmara – no field work was conducted in Eritrea during the current year. Crisis Group has attempted to fill that gap through interviews with a wide range of Eritreans who have recently left the country (or are travelling abroad), as well as diplomats, aid workers and others who have recently been active in Eritrea.<sup>3</sup> Except as otherwise indicated in the text or the footnotes, conclusions expressed are the result of that direct work by Crisis Group.

<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia is 1.1 million sq km and has an estimated population of 88 million. Sudan is 2.5 million sq km and has about 42 million people.

<sup>2</sup> The *Derg*, which means “committee” or “council” in Amharic, was the socialist military junta that came to power in Ethiopia following the ousting of Emperor Haile Selassie I. It formally ended in 1987, but its chairman, Mengistu Haile Mariam, retained power as the president of a new government until he was overthrown four years later.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group shared an advance copy of the report with the Eritrean authorities prior to publication.

## II. THE MAKING OF INDEPENDENT ERITREA

### A. THE FOUNDATION

Eritrea's roots lie in the contests between several expanding states in the late 1880s and early 1890s, chiefly between the Italians on the Red Sea coast and the Amhara-Tigrayan state – the nucleus of modern Ethiopia – that was extending its reach over the northern highland plateau.<sup>4</sup> To the west was the Mahdist state in Sudan while the British, French and Italians were staking territorial claims in the hot southern plains of the Afar and the Somali. The Italians used Eritrea as a springboard to invade Ethiopia but were defeated at the battle of Adwa in 1896. However, Emperor Menelik eschewed an advance to the coast in favour of consolidation, so he decided to recognise the Italian colony of Eritrea.<sup>5</sup> The Italians had better success in the mid-1890s against the Mahdists, pushing their new colony's western boundary into the Sudanese lowlands. In the course of the late 1890s and early 1900s, a series of agreements established the modern borders of Eritrea, bounded by Ethiopia and French Somaliland (Djibouti) to the south and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan to the west and north. Stretches of these frontiers, however, remained unmarked on the ground.

Although a light manufacturing base did emerge, colonial Eritrea experienced limited economic development and never attracted the large numbers of Italian settlers initially envisaged.<sup>6</sup> After a major uprising in 1894, the Italians imposed a relative peace that lasted into the 1920s, in large part by governing through local chiefs and acting cautiously in the expropriation of land for commercial purposes. However, low-level resistance rumbled on throughout the half-century of Italian administration, often in the form of banditry. These attacks were not always explicitly anti-colonial but rather reflected local dynamics and patterns of violence, notably cattle-raiding and inter-community feuds.<sup>7</sup> At times the Italians also struggled to

maintain control of the borders, including with Sudan and Ethiopia. Nonetheless, the enduring impact of colonial rule was the fostering of some sense, often ill-defined, of a distinctive Eritrean identity.<sup>8</sup> The Italian era was the main reference point for later efforts by nationalists to emphasise distinctiveness from the neighbouring Ethiopian empire.<sup>9</sup>

In the early- and mid-1930s, tens of thousands of Italian soldiers arrived in the build-up to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. This period also witnessed significant urban development and the imposition of race laws regulating "native" society. Those laws notwithstanding, many Eritreans served in the Italian forces that invaded Ethiopia in October 1935.<sup>10</sup> Urbanisation and military service contributed to the development of an Eritrean national identity.

Italy's occupation of Ethiopia was brief and troubled, and Eritrea's days as an Italian colony were numbered. In 1941 Allied forces defeated the Italians in the region, and Eritrea came under a British Military Administration (BMA). Charged with stabilising the volatile territory pending decisions on its future, British stewardship facilitated a degree of public debate between newly-founded political parties and through the brief flourishing of newspapers, in English, Tigrinya and Arabic. While an Eritrean elite pondered the future of the territory, a Four Power Commission, comprising representatives of the main wartime allies, was dispatched. The status of the Italian territories – including Eritrea, Somalia and Libya – was one of the key issues in the post-war dispensation of power.<sup>11</sup>

When the Four Power Commission was unable to reach a decision, the Eritrean question was referred to the UN, which sent a mission in 1948 to ascertain the wishes of the population, by this time divided along a spectrum between outright independence and unconditional union with Ethiopia. Eritrean Muslims broadly favoured independence, having long been the target of raids by Chris-

<sup>4</sup>For example, G. N. Sanderson, "The Nile Basin and the Eastern Horn, 1870-1908", in R. Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa: from 1870 to 1905* (Cambridge, 1985), Vol. 6; S. Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London, 1976).

<sup>5</sup>S. Rubenson, "Adwa 1896: The Resounding Protest", in R. Rotberg and A. Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, 1970).

<sup>6</sup>Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation, 1890-1991* (Trenton, 2007); R. Caulk, "Ethiopia and the Horn", in A. D. Roberts (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa: from 1905 to 1940* (Cambridge, 1986), Vol. 7.

<sup>7</sup>R. Caulk, "'Black Snake, White Snake': Bahta Hagos and his Revolt Against Italian Overrule in Eritrea, 1894", and T. Fernyhough, "Social Mobility and Dissident Elites in Northern

Ethiopia: The Role of Banditry, 1900-1969", both in D. Crumey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (London, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>This was most present in certain population groups – notably the Tigrinya highlanders – and certain socio-economic sectors, particularly thousands of Eritreans who served as *ascari* (colonial troops).

<sup>9</sup>Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge, 1995); Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea*; R. Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Lawrenceville, 1998).

<sup>10</sup>A. Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War: The Italian-Ethiopian Campaign, 1935-1941* (New York, 1984).

<sup>11</sup>Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics* (Gainesville, 1991).

tian Ethiopians and fearing Orthodox Church domination. The Tigrinya-speaking Christian highlanders were divided between independence and union with Ethiopia. By the late 1940s, two broad groupings – the pro-Ethiopia Unionist Party and the separatist Independence Bloc – faced one another in an increasingly tense and violent political environment; the debates of the era demonstrated the deep fissures between communities and regions, and political violence – mostly by unionists against those favouring independence – increased markedly.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, international considerations were proving more influential than local desires and aspirations. The UN commission, under pressure from the U.S., finally recommended the compromise of federation, whereby Eritrea would become an autonomous territory, with a separate legislative assembly, within Ethiopia. In exchange for their support, Emperor Haile Selassie's government granted the Americans a military base in Asmara. Ultimately, Eritrean wishes were set aside in favour of Washington's interests in the region.

The federation came into effect in 1952, but from the outset Ethiopia sought to undermine it. Addis gradually weakened the powers of the assembly, and it was eventually reduced to rubber-stamping the emperor's decrees, communicated by his representative in Asmara. The government also dismantled other aspects of autonomy, such as replacing Tigrinya and Arabic with Amharic and substituting the Ethiopian flag for the Eritrean. It was swiftly clear that there was no intention to honour the terms of the federal constitution, and Haile Selassie's increasingly aggressive infringements drove ever larger numbers of Eritreans – highland and lowland, Christian and Muslim alike – into the pro-independence movement. Political resistance began to be better organised, inspired in part by models of nationalism elsewhere in the region, notably Sudan.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in 1962, the Ethiopian government formally abrogated the federation, and the Eritrean Assembly – with Ethiopian soldiers surrounding the buildings – voted itself out of existence.

Under the terms of the federal constitution, the UN Security Council should have stepped in to protect Eritrean autonomy, but it failed to do so, and Ethiopia annexed

Eritrea with barely a murmur of international protest.<sup>14</sup> Two enduring beliefs branded themselves on the nationalist imagination as a result. The first was that Ethiopia was an enemy, which would stop at nothing to eradicate Eritrean identity and so could never be trusted. The second was that the international community could likewise never be trusted, since it had betrayed the Eritrean people by neglecting the principle of self-determination and sacrificing their rights under international law for the sake of Western geopolitical advantage. An appreciation of these beliefs goes some way to explaining current Eritrean political culture.

## B. WARS OF LIBERATION

Even before formal annexation, liberation organisations were being established. The Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was founded in Port Sudan in 1958 by Muslims and communist activists, while the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) became simultaneously active in Cairo.<sup>15</sup> Sharp divisions were clear from the outset. The ELM was adept at mobilising support in towns, but the ELF was more effective, forming armed units in the western lowlands and recruiting from the predominantly Muslim Tigre and their subgroups in the north and west. By the mid-1960s, Tigrinya highlanders were also joining, but within a few years serious fissures emerged, mainly between Christian and Muslim recruits and between young radicals (including Isaias Afwerki) and older leaders. The radicals believed Christians were oppressed within the ELF and that the ELM was insufficiently revolutionary.<sup>16</sup> Several splinters from the ELF in the early 1970s coalesced into the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).<sup>17</sup> The EPLF brought together people from various ethnic backgrounds and included both Christians and Muslims, but the core leadership was Tigrinya highlander and quickly formed around Isaias.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup>L. Ellingson, "The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950", *Journal of African History*, 18:2 (1977); Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, op. cit.; G. K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* (London, 1960).

<sup>13</sup>Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton, 1989); T. Killion, "Eritrean workers' organisation and early nationalist mobilisation: 1948-1958", *Eritrean Studies Review*, 2:1 (1997); Wolde-Yesus Ammar, "The Role of Asmara Students in the Eritrean Nationalist Movement, 1958-1968", *Eritrean Studies Review*, 2:1 (1997).

<sup>14</sup>Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, op. cit.; H. Erlich, "The Eritrean Autonomy, 1952-1962: Its Failure and its Contribution to Further Escalation", in Y. Dinstein (ed.), *Models of Autonomy* (New York, 1981).

<sup>15</sup>J. Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26:1 (1988). 1 September 1961 is conventionally regarded as the beginning of the armed struggle.

<sup>16</sup>When the ELM decided to change its tactics and launch its own armed struggle, in 1965, it was violently crushed by the ELF. Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>17</sup>D. Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (Oxford, 2001) pp. 49-70; Markakis, "Nationalist Revolution", op. cit.; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, pp. 109-122, 123-135.

<sup>18</sup>The ELF leadership was also replaced by a younger cohort, and both movements were by the mid-1970s led by secret parties with their roots in the 1960s student radicalism of Asmara:

The years between the early 1970s and early 1980s witnessed intermittent war between the ELF and the EPLF, broken by periods of armistice and military cooperation. It was a bloody period still never discussed openly in Eritrea.<sup>19</sup> Both movements gained recruits, but it was the EPLF that was increasingly effective, politically and militarily. By 1977, the liberation fronts controlled, directly or indirectly, the vast bulk of Eritrea outside the major towns.

The overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 and ensuing turmoil had greatly undermined Ethiopia's military capacity, but the nationalists suffered a serious setback in 1978-1979, with the arrival of massive Soviet military support for the Marxist *Derg* regime.<sup>20</sup> In the face of Ethiopian offensives, the EPLF was forced to carry out a "strategic withdrawal" to the northern mountains of Sahel, around the town of Nakfa.<sup>21</sup> In this stronghold, it operated as a state-in-waiting, creating an entire system of government and way of life. The EPLF held out against further Ethiopian offensives against all odds,<sup>22</sup> and by the mid-1980s was beginning to launch limited offensives. In the face of enormous danger and difficulty, the EPLF went from strength to strength, both politically and militarily. The key to its success was the inculcation of a fierce, self-supporting loyalty and the enforcement of strict discipline among its fighters.

While still fighting the Ethiopians, the liberation groups continued their internecine struggle. In 1981, the EPLF emerged victorious, expelling the ELF into Sudan, after which it lost domestic relevance. Thereafter, it set about presenting itself as the sole legitimate expression of nationalist aspirations.

Meanwhile, there were difficult relations with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in northern Ethiopia. The TPLF had been created in 1975 with some assistance from the EPLF.<sup>23</sup> While its initial goal had been to free Tigray, it came to regard itself as a vanguard movement for the emancipation of Ethiopia as a whole. Despite some cooperation during the late 1970s and early 1980s,

there were increasing tensions between the two fronts.<sup>24</sup> They disagreed sharply over military strategy and, more importantly, the questions of ethnicity and nationality. The TPLF considered Eritrea a multi-national territory, within which various groups should be allowed the right of secession. It also defined as "Tigrayan" anyone who spoke Tigrinya – which included Eritrean speakers of that language.

The EPLF dismissed the idea, arguing that their struggle was anti-colonial, and that Eritrea had a distinctive identity and legal status, and democratic unity made the right of secession for Eritrea's nationalities irrelevant. It distanced itself from the TPLF's struggle, dismissing the viability of an independent Tigray and urging the TPLF to become part of a pan-Ethiopian revolution. The issue of several contested points along the Eritrean border could not be resolved during the liberation struggle, so was set aside; but it would return to haunt the two movements, whose relationship was marked by increasing rancour; indeed, between 1985 and 1988 their links were severed completely.

By the time relatively normal relations were restored, the two fronts were making significant advances against the *Derg*, which was weakened by years of war and famine and by the sudden decline of Soviet support. In 1988 the EPLF broke out of its rear base, in effect splitting the Ethiopian forces in two; further attacks in eastern Eritrea culminated in the seizure of the port city of Massawa in early 1990.<sup>25</sup> In the months that followed, the EPLF advanced toward Asmara, while the TPLF – now the dominant part of a coalition of guerrillas and militias, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – swept south toward Addis Ababa. In May 1991, the EPLF and TPLF/EPRDF captured Asmara and Addis Ababa respectively and set about forming new regimes.

### C. SOVEREIGNTY AND RETURN TO ARMS

Hopes were initially high that the EPLF could bring political stability and economic reconstruction, despite misgivings some had about the brutal path the movement had followed during the armed struggle. It certainly had considerable political capital, which many saw as compensating

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the Labour Party in the ELF and the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party in the EPLF.

<sup>19</sup> Pool, *Guerrillas*, op. cit., chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Awet Weldemichael, "The Eritrean Long March: The Strategic Withdrawal of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), 1978-79", *Journal of Military History*, 73:4 (2009).

<sup>22</sup> D. Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> J. Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (Cambridge, 1997).

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<sup>24</sup> J. Young, "The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34:1 (1996); R. J. Reid, "Old Problems in New Conflicts: Some Observations on Eritrea and its Relations with Tigray, from Liberation Struggle to Interstate War", *Africa*, 73:3 (2003).

<sup>25</sup> Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven, 2009).



for the country's material devastation.<sup>26</sup> In a 1993 UN-monitored referendum, 99.8 per cent voted for independence from Ethiopia.<sup>27</sup> The EPLF took this as popular endorsement of its assumption of power and Isaias as head of state. It dissolved itself in early 1994 to become the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the sole legal party.

Although elections were promised, and a commission was established to craft a new constitution that would enshrine the rights and obligations espoused by the EPLF during the struggle, the movement clearly had no intention of relinquishing power any time soon or of testing itself against serious opposition. This was not necessarily seen as problematic, at least immediately, since the government was widely admired for its vigour, discipline and determination and thought to be the best for national development.<sup>28</sup> In the interests of peace and stability, many Eritreans and foreign observers alike reserved judgement even on early human rights abuses and authoritarian tendencies.

However, worrying trends and problems soon became more obvious. The government increasingly clashed with foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and neighbouring states and displayed an alarming tendency to fight first and talk later. Initially admired as feisty, self-sufficient and un beholden to outside influences, the country quickly came to be seen as bellicose. Particular groups were persecuted, and the state attacked those it regarded as non-citizens. The once admired tight ship was becoming an oppressive regime with clear disregard for due process, disinterested in rights and only concerned with obligations.<sup>29</sup> The EPLF was still behaving like a guerrilla movement with absolute power of life and death over its constituents, and its foreign policy was often conducted aggressively, even naively. Squeezed between Sudan and Ethiopia and in a generally hostile neighbourhood, the EPLF did have much to do to make the country secure, but its liberation skills needed to be augmented by new political and diplomatic proficiency.

The biggest problem was Ethiopia, now controlled by the TPLF/EPRDF, with which the EPLF had for years had troubled relations. It appeared for a time that the new governments were prepared to open an era of cooperation. Most obviously, Ethiopia gave its public blessing to Eritrean independence. Eritrea and Ethiopia had long had close economic ties and these seemed set to continue, pursuant to agreements made in September 1993 and

January 1997.<sup>30</sup> Economic interdependency was expected to strengthen. But a series of disputes escalated through the mid-1990s.<sup>31</sup> These included clashes at the border and the demarcation issue that had been a cause of conflict between the EPLF and the TPLF twenty years earlier.<sup>32</sup> The tensions were particularly explosive at Badme, on the western border. Relations deteriorated against the backdrop of Ethiopia's new landlocked status, brought about by the creation of independent Eritrea.

The Eritreans, as agreed, introduced their own currency, the nakfa, in November 1997, but this sparked a trade war and increased levels of mutual vitriol. Ethiopia also complained bitterly about taxes on its goods at Assab, which, though in Eritrea, was to all intents and purposes an Ethiopian port, since almost all its cargo came from or was destined for that country.<sup>33</sup> Many in Addis Ababa even began to wonder why Eritrea needed Assab.<sup>34</sup> All this was exacerbated by deep anger in both countries at perceived slights and threats, past and present: Ethiopians believed Eritreans were arrogant and uncooperative; Eritreans perceived Ethiopians as untrustworthy and expansionist. When the shooting war erupted in May 1998, it swept rapidly out of control.

The course of the war and the ceasefire that concluded it in 2000, once the armies had fought to a standstill, are outlined below. The conflict was devastating for Eritrea, politically and economically. It shattered any chance for significant growth and greatly exacerbated the government's militaristic and authoritarian tendencies. Ethiopia now dominates its worldview and external relations, as the enemy at the gates, whose actions are seen as proof that the international community is perennially hostile and routinely fails to appreciate the challenges Eritrea faces.

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<sup>26</sup> Connell, *Against All Odds*, op. cit., chapter 15, brilliantly captures the spirit of this moment.

<sup>27</sup> Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones*, op. cit., chapters 10 and 11.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see the Eritrea entry in "Amnesty International Report 1997".

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<sup>30</sup> Tekeste Negash and K. Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* (Oxford, 2000), appendices 1 and 2; and Amare Tekle, "The Basis of Eritrean-Ethiopian Cooperation", in Amare Tekle (ed.), *Eritrea and Ethiopia: From Conflict to Cooperation* (Lawrenceville, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Negash and Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, op. cit.; D. Jacquin-Berdal and M. Plaut (eds.), *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at war* (Lawrenceville, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Reid, "Old Problems", op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> D. Styan, "Twisting Ethio-Eritrean Economic Ties: Misperceptions of War and the Misplaced Priorities of Peace, 1997-2002", in Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut, *Unfinished Business*, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> The issue would grow in intensity. See, for example, the speculation over the status of Assab in late 1998, in Negash and Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, op. cit., p. 72. A Crisis Group analyst was present in another capacity at a meeting on the region in December 2002, where a group of Ethiopian academics declared that Ethiopia wanted nothing to do with Eritrea, but "only wants Assab".

### III. THE EVOLUTION OF THE MILITARY STATE

#### A. THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE EPLF/PFDJ

The military state has been several decades in the making, and its roots lie in the liberation struggle. The violent disunity of the early armed struggle meant that the political culture of the liberation organisations became ever more authoritarian and increasingly intolerant of dissent. The political structures created within the EPLF were designed to deal with internal opposition. The much-discussed clampdown on public debate and criticism in September 2001 was foreshadowed by events within the movement nearly 30 years earlier. In 1973 a number of new recruits – nicknamed the *menqa* (“bats”), because they met at night – began criticising the leadership, drawing attention to its dictatorial tendencies and openly discussing perceived organisational problems of the movement.<sup>35</sup> The leadership, centred on Isaias, regarded the group as “ultra-left” and swiftly rounded up the leading critics, executing some and compelling others to publicly recant. It was clear from this point that unity and unquestioning loyalty were valued above everything; no significant internal opposition would be voiced again until after the 1998-2000 war.

During the 1970s, the EPLF refined its “democratic centralism”, under which leadership decisions were filtered through the rungs of command to the rank and file and at every level were expected to be accepted and followed. The central committee was formally established at the First Congress of the movement in 1977, where the first secretary general, Romedan Mohamed Nur, was appointed as a unifying figure, with Isaias as assistant secretary general.<sup>36</sup> Also chosen was the political bureau, the top tier of leadership, to preside over broad branches of the organisation, including administrative departments (ranging from health and social affairs to political education and intelligence); national unions (of peasants, workers, women, students and “professionals”); and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Army.

The elements of the front, political and military, reached into zonal, sub-zonal and village administrations.<sup>37</sup> The 1987 congress modified this somewhat, reducing the politburo (from thirteen to nine members) and increasing the central committee (from 37 to 71), while Isaias became secretary general, changes that increased the top leadership’s authority, in particular that of Isaias.<sup>38</sup>

Above all, the EPLF and its political and military operations were run by a secret party, the Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), whose existence was unknown to the vast majority of fighters and even most leaders until Isaias revealed it at the third congress in 1994 (the last to date).<sup>39</sup> Isaias stated that this “inner party” had functioned as a revolutionary vanguard, directing the wider organisation through its most difficult years, until it was disbanded in 1989, when, on the eve of independence, many questioned its necessity in view of the impending requirements of nation-building. Whether the EPRP really was disbanded or simply suspended remains a matter of some debate. It is clear, however, that its culture remains. From the mid-1990s and especially since 2001, the key decisions have essentially been made by the president, not by a cabinet or the defunct national assembly.<sup>40</sup> Though there is no evidence of a formal inner party, Eritrea is run by an amorphous, continually shifting group of people surrounding Isaias whose actual rank is irrelevant, because their authority stems from whatever personal favour he chooses to bestow upon them.<sup>41</sup>

The other major decision at the third congress was the disbanding of the EPLF and its reconstitution as the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).<sup>42</sup> That body is the EPLF in everything but name and remains the sole legal political party, with Isaias as its chairman as well as head of state.

In the mid-1990s, the government promised to produce a constitution, introduce multi-party politics and hold national elections. A constitutional commission drafted a constitution that was ratified by a constituent assembly in

<sup>35</sup> Pool, *Guerrillas*, op. cit., pp. 76-80; Kidane Mengisteab and Okbazghi Yohannes, *Anatomy of an African Tragedy: Political, Economic and Foreign Policy Crisis in Post-Independence Eritrea* (Trenton, 2005), pp. 46-54; Gaim Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence* (Trenton, 2008), pp. 223-276.

<sup>36</sup> Pool, *Guerrillas*, op. cit., pp. 82-87. For good analysis of early organisation, see David Pool’s other essays, including “The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front”, in C. Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, 1998) and “Eritrean Nationalism”, in I. M. Lewis (ed.), *Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa* (London, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> R. Leonard, “Popular Participation in Liberation and Revolution”, in L. Cliffe and B. Davidson (eds.), *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace* (Trenton, 1988), p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> Pool, *Guerrillas*, op. cit., pp. 86-7.

<sup>39</sup> D. Connell, “Inside the EPLF: The Origins of the ‘People’s Party’ and its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 89 (2001).

<sup>40</sup> D. Connell, “The EPLF/PFDJ Experience and How it Shapes Eritrea’s Regional Strategy”, in R. J. Reid (ed.), *Eritrea’s External Relations: Understanding its Regional Role and Foreign Policy* (London, 2009), pp. 28-31.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July-August 2006 and August 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Connell, “Inside the EPLF”, op. cit.

May 1997 but never implemented.<sup>43</sup> As with a number of other political promises, its neglect was justified by the outbreak of war, in 1998, although there was no clear explanation why it gathered dust for months beforehand. A national assembly was created in 1993 (and reorganised the following year) to which the cabinet was in theory responsible; it frequently passed resolutions on elections, but they were never held.

During the war, power was concentrated even further. Important ministers were excluded from key political and military decisions, and the national assembly was never consulted. The imperiousness with which Isaias directed policy and strategy became a matter of grave concern.<sup>44</sup> During the critical weeks of the third phase of fighting in May and June 2000, when Ethiopian forces broke the Eritrean lines in the west, Isaias sidelined the defence ministry and personally directed operations. Many maintain his interference and refusal to consult or delegate was the cause of military failures during that period.<sup>45</sup> Deep rifts opened within the leadership but only later became public. As the dust began to settle in the latter half of 2000, critics emerged, and vocal opposition grew.

In October, professionals in the diaspora met in Berlin and drafted a letter to Isaias – known as the “Berlin Manifesto” – criticising the tendency toward one-man rule.<sup>46</sup> The president met with them in Asmara and dismissed their concerns (his contempt for “mere intellectuals” is well known), but more serious attacks came late that year and in early 2001, as senior liberation war veterans (some founding fathers of the EPLF), known as the “Group of 15” or “G15”, began to voice disquiet over the president’s conduct.<sup>47</sup> They published an open letter on the internet that condemned his high-handed leadership and failure to consult the national assembly, especially over the war.<sup>48</sup> Isaias’s circle regarded the critics as having broken a cardinal EPLF rule, never to wash dirty linen in public. They argued that it was not the time for discussions about democracy and elections; indeed, “now is not the time” became the defining principle of the regime.

Isaias waited several months and made his move a week after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., when the world’s attention was diverted.<sup>49</sup> Over the weekend of 18-19 September, the crackdown swung into action.<sup>50</sup> Eleven of the fifteen open letter signatories were imprisoned, including such senior figures as Petros Solomon (a former military commander who since independence had served, successively, as defence, foreign and marine resources minister) and Haile Woldensae (ex-foreign minister, recently shunted to trade and industry). Three, including Mesfin Hagos, an architect of the EPLF’s victory in 1991, were out of the country, so escaped detention; one recanted. Those arrested are now either dead or remain in jail without trial at an unknown location. In addition, the offices of the private press were raided and closed and a number of editors and journalists incarcerated indefinitely. None of those arrested in September 2001 have ever been charged, let alone tried.<sup>51</sup>

The public debate which had flourished all too briefly was over as quickly as it had begun. The affair was entirely predictable for a president who once reportedly declared: “When I am challenged, I become more stubborn – more and more rigid”.<sup>52</sup> In many respects, these events marked the completion of a process begun in the mid-1970s, whereby the destiny of the revolution – and thus of the nation itself – was increasingly in the hands of an overly powerful executive that brooked neither dissent nor debate. While the war with Ethiopia brought forward the endgame – in effect, the G15 forced Isaias’s hand – the hardening of presidential authority had been evident for several years, and the G15 had waited too long to move. Since 2001, the political system has ossified, and while the state cannot strictly be considered totalitarian, since it lacks the bureaucratic and technological resources to control its citizens quite so effectively, the regime has become highly authoritarian.

<sup>43</sup>Yohannes Gebremedhin, *The Challenges of a Society in Transition: Legal Development in Eritrea* (Trenton, 2004).

<sup>44</sup>Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, July 2001-August 2002.

<sup>45</sup>D. Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton, 2005).

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup>They waited until after the ceasefire agreement had been formally signed in December 2000 to go public.

<sup>48</sup>Connell, *Conversations*, op. cit., pp. 171-89.

<sup>49</sup>A series of party meetings were held during these months in which members were mobilised to support the forthcoming purge. The G15 were excluded from these meetings.

<sup>50</sup>Crisis Group analyst’s field notes in another capacity, September 2001; also Connell, *Conversations*, op. cit., pp. 13-14; and Gaim Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred* (Woodbridge, 2009), chapter 2.

<sup>51</sup>According to a report by Reporters without Borders, an Eritrean former prison guard who recently fled to Ethiopia affirmed that six government officials and five journalists arrested in 2001 have died in prison. Among others, he named a former vice president, and a former army chief of staff, who were sent to isolated camps where conditions were inhuman. In 2001 there were said to be 35 prisoners in the camps, but fifteen died, including five journalists. “Prominent journalist arrested, ex-prison guard reveals fate of other detained journalists”, 12 May 2010.

<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Connell, *Against All Odds*, op. cit., p. 173.

The PFDJ is the sole legal political movement and has dominated public and private life. At first glance, there is no distinction between party and state. However, the party is only one element of an amorphous apparatus centred on the president's office. The PFDJ funded the war effort, as the government lacked resources. The party rather than government ministries inherited the EPLF legacy and its financial and moral capital, but it is only as important as the president allows at any given time. Since independence, and especially since 2001, his favour has alternated between the party and the army.<sup>53</sup> Creating rivalry between the two institutions for Isaias's favour is one of the strategies deployed by the Office of the President to maintain its importance.

EPLF/PFDJ members dominate state institutions. From the early 1990s, all the main ministries – defence, interior, education, health, labour – have been headed by leading ex-fighters. Many of the lower rungs in the administrative structure have likewise been occupied by *tegadelay*.<sup>54</sup> Posts were reserved for ex-fighters, and only exceptionally – notably in the banking sector – were key figures brought in who had not seen combat. It was axiomatic that there was no job – technical, commercial or administrative – that an ex-fighter could not do. This created a gulf between ex-combatants and everyone else, for whom there were relatively few opportunities.<sup>55</sup> An independent, professional civil service is virtually non-existent, and those who work in the lower levels of an increasingly stultifying bureaucracy are demoralised, underpaid and inadequately trained. Civilians predominate in only a few areas, such as teaching. The university was led by a non-fighter between the mid-1990s and early 2000s and for a time was harnessed to the nation-building process, but as a key institution that is potentially a seedbed for alternative views, it has never been trusted.<sup>56</sup>

Even before the crackdown, the president frequently rotated ministers.<sup>57</sup> Individuals who were out of favour were sidelined in largely meaningless posts.<sup>58</sup> Today, those who criticise or question presidential edicts are “frozen” from their posts for lengthy periods, permitted to do little but collect their salaries and not much else. Few of the early leaders remain in high public office, and the country

is mostly run by second- or even third-tier revolutionaries or close associates of the president. Moreover, there is often duplication of responsibilities, with the president creating what are in effect shadow ministries; run by people who report to him directly, while the official ministry is left to compete for attention.<sup>59</sup> Isaias increasingly appoints malleable individuals who lack a sense of direction or even discernible abilities but are eager to do his bidding.<sup>60</sup>

## B. THE OMNIPOTENT PRESIDENT?

Inevitably, there is much fascination with the president. Whatever system exists revolves around him. Highland Eritrean society has traditionally been characterised by modesty and communality,<sup>61</sup> so it is little wonder that Isaias, who directs both foreign and domestic policy (often even at the micro level) and appoints everyone from high court judges, senior military commanders and cabinet ministers to middle-ranking officials, mesmerises Eritreans and foreigners alike. During the armed struggle, the EPLF assiduously eschewed personality cults, and rank was rarely displayed ostentatiously. Unnecessary swagger and expressions of ego were frowned upon. Yet, even when Ramadan Muhammad Nur was EPLF secretary general and Isaias his deputy, few doubted who led the movement and increasingly personified the struggle. In hindsight, there was already a creeping personality cult.

Over four decades, Isaias has displayed both ruthless brutality and enormous dexterity in intimidating and outwitting rivals and opponents. Even those bitterly opposed to him cannot quite eradicate a lingering (if quietly expressed) admiration; it has sometimes been said that he is the leader even of the opposition, whose gaze is fixed upon him, horrified and awed simultaneously.<sup>62</sup> While far from a great orator, he delivers his message with a tireless resolve from which Eritreans for years have drawn strength and inspiration. Only in interviews with foreign journalists does he publicly display flashes of the temper for which he is known, batting away provocative questions

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July-August 2006 and December 2007.

<sup>54</sup> The term is Tigrinya for EPLF fighter.

<sup>55</sup> This is one of the central themes in Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> R. J. Reid, “Caught in the Headlights of History: Eritrea, the EPLF and the Post-War Nation-State”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 43:3 (2005). Many university staff are foreigners.

<sup>57</sup> Connell, *Conversations*, op. cit., pp. 6-7; Connell, “The EPLF/PFDJ Experience”, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Asmara, 2004-2008.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July-August 2006, December 2007 and August 2008; Connell, “The EPLF/PFDJ Experience”, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews, Asmara, 2004-2008.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group analyst interview, Asmara, August 2006. Various proverbs in Tigrinya attest to the dangers of “standing out”, and placing oneself above others, for example, “the tall stalk of sorghum is only for birds and for cutting”, ie, it is marked for death.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, Asmara, August 2006.

with an angry contempt that betrays his hostility for the world his interlocutors supposedly represent.<sup>63</sup>

Austere and often taciturn, Isaias commanded enormous affection, even devotion, in the 1990s, except among those associated with the ELF or otherwise not reconciled to the new EPLF order. He carefully managed the image of the dedicated, almost monastic leader in war and in peace. Early in the liberation war, he and his closest associates often used the tactic of denigrating other leaders of the movement by accusing them of losing their way and becoming morally and materially corrupt.<sup>64</sup> Isaias, by contrast, was the great incorruptible leader, who stood head and shoulders (often literally) above his lieutenants. This is no longer the case. Although some still grudgingly see him as the only figure capable of holding Eritrea together, ever more regard him at least sceptically and often with outright hostility as the man who has single-handedly ruined the country and whose stubbornness, once such a valuable asset, has become a serious liability.<sup>65</sup> Escapees complain of a lost grip on reality. In most Eritreans' eyes, he is no longer the stout-hearted, beloved leader of the nation-at-arms, but a mentally unstable autocrat with a bad temper and an alcohol problem.<sup>66</sup>

Isaias is indeed the fulcrum on which the system rests, and the powers of appointment, promotion and demotion which have become entrenched in his person define the shape and direction of the government.<sup>67</sup> As long as he retains the army's loyalty, there are no alternative sources of power.<sup>68</sup> But two points are worth considering. First, no power base is unassailable. Isaias's strength – his ability to balance various poles of the Eritrean polity, keeping them at arm's length from one another and controlling

them through his office – is also a potential weakness. He must continue to manage army, party and government to maintain his position. Secondly, while he has been remarkably successful at out-manoeuvring rivals and imposing himself on other parts of the system, this state of affairs cannot last for ever. It is necessary to look beyond the president to analyse especially the political culture that has evolved over a half-century and of which he is a product.

## C. THE MILITARY

Eritrea is a highly militarised society shaped by war, run by warriors and in which citizenship has come to be equated with indefinite national service – associated not with rights but with obligations.<sup>69</sup> The ethos of the armed struggle permeates all aspects of public life, and the country has proved unable, as yet, to escape its violent past. Immediately after independence, the EPLF created a system of national service, the core component of which was military, centred on the training camp at Sawa, where it sought to inculcate the next generation with the culture and spirit of the liberation struggle.<sup>70</sup> Sawa was conceived as the foundation stone of the nation-building process.<sup>71</sup> Initially, it was a potentially constructive arrangement: all men and women between the ages of eighteen and 50 were to undergo six months of military training, followed by twelve months either of active duty deployment or developmental work.

Several such rounds were completed between 1993 and 1998. However, the war with Ethiopia brought a fundamental change, as the national service commitment became, in effect, indefinite. Young Eritreans were swiftly absorbed into a military machine with little prospect of eventual demobilisation or even appropriate levels of leave. In 2002, this was formalised by the creation of the Warsai Yikalo<sup>72</sup> development campaign, which amounted to the institutionalisation of the liberation struggle on a massive scale.<sup>73</sup> Today hundreds of thousands are trapped in the system, since despite commitments made after the 2000 ceasefire, the demobilisation program is largely suspended.<sup>74</sup> The small groups which have been released

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<sup>63</sup> For example, see "Eritrea's leader defends curbs", BBC News, 16 April 2003; and "Talk to Al Jazeera: President Isaias Afwerki", Aljazeera.net, 22 February 2010.

<sup>64</sup> This was a tactic frequently employed in China during the Cultural Revolution, which Isaias and several others witnessed first hand as young trainee guerrillas. See the interviews with Petros Solomon and Haile Woldensae in Connell, *Conversations*, op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes in another capacity, Asmara, August 2008. In Eritrea, dark jokes are quietly told in bars which attest to this fact, although Isaias himself is never mentioned; President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is a popular surrogate.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, 2003-2008. See also the burgeoning debate in diaspora websites and blogs, such as [www.awate.com](http://www.awate.com) and [www.dehai.org](http://www.dehai.org). Isaias, a highland Christian by birth, has long had a reputation as a hard drinker. See, for example, Michaela Wrong, *I Didn't Do It For You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation* (London, 2005), pp. 375-376.

<sup>67</sup> D. Connell, "Eritrea", in *Countries at the Crossroads 2007*, Freedom House (Washington, 2007), pp. 3-4.

<sup>68</sup> Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit., pp. 375-384.

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<sup>69</sup> "Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea", Human Rights Watch, April 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Reid, "Caught in the Headlights", op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, Asmara, August 2006.

<sup>72</sup> The phrase literally means "those who follow the powerful": the *warsai* are the young generation who have come of age since independence, while the *yikalo*, "the all-powerful", are EPLF fighters.

<sup>73</sup> Gaim Kibreab, "Forced Labour in Eritrea", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 47:1 (2009).

<sup>74</sup> "Service for Life", op. cit. Salaries in the national service are extremely low. Many are drafted back into the national service

from time to time are often composed of those who are chronically ill, and their numbers are swiftly replaced by new recruits caught in periodic round-ups.<sup>75</sup>

The government's position is that national service is necessary for nation-building, to imbue younger people with a sense of loyalty, discipline and patriotism and to break down regional, ethnic and religious barriers. It defends the prominent role of the military, arguing that Eritrea is surrounded by enemies, so cannot afford to let down its guard.<sup>76</sup> According to the familiar refrain, now is not the time for demobilisation and a weakening of its guard. However, the growing domestic crisis results in part from the dogged pursuit of national service to the virtual exclusion of all else. Sawa receives a level of investment wholly absent from higher education. Indeed, while Sawa was being expanded, the University of Asmara was run into the ground.

The indefinite nature of the Warsai Yikalo campaign has crushed morale, especially among the young. Sawa and everything it represents have come to be loathed by successive generations of school-leavers, for whom there are no opportunities for advancement, only the prospect of indefinite assignment to military duty. The resulting militarisation, moreover, reflects and in turn reinforces the frequently disastrous conviction that all the nation's problems have a military solution.

The Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) are descended directly from the Eritrean People's Liberation Army, which was once widely admired as one of the most effective fighting organisations in the world. That reputation began to erode in May-June 2000, when the EDF was forced to abandon a third of the country in the face of the Ethiopian offensive. This was also politically catastrophic, as the military was considered one of the nation's greatest strengths. The country is divided into five theatres of operation, headed by generals, all under the direct command of the president. The long-serving defence minister, Sebhat Ephrem, is frequently ignored (as he was during the 1998-

2000 war). The separate national security service is also ultimately under Isaias's direct control.<sup>77</sup>

As in the political sphere, military decision-making is impossibly centralised. The generals – the most powerful figures after Isaias – are the de facto governors of the regions.<sup>78</sup> There are frequently bitter rivalries between them, and their commands suffer from deteriorating morale and large-scale desertion. Along some stretches of the border, forces reportedly often operate at well under half-strength.<sup>79</sup> The army is haemorrhaging capacity, as hundreds of youths attempt to escape to Sudan, Ethiopia or, less commonly, Djibouti every month,<sup>80</sup> while tensions between the older *tegadelay* and the younger *warsai* generations threaten to destroy EDF cohesion.<sup>81</sup>

Worse still, corruption and misuse of resources is rife in the EDF. Isaias has reportedly had to detain and reprimand senior officers for allowing this, although he is reluctant to do so publicly. It is widely suspected that some senior officers themselves are involved in illicit activities. Would-be deserters can pay agents – some of whom are officers – to facilitate their escape across the border; fees vary, but up to \$10,000 can ensure that at least part of the trip is in a land cruiser, while smaller sums may cause an officer to turn his back at the decisive moment.<sup>82</sup> Captured deserters are brutally treated in special military holding centres, where torture and extrajudicial deaths are common.<sup>83</sup> Increasingly scarce building materials, foodstuffs, soft drinks and alcohol are hoarded and smuggled

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several times, for example after a prison sentence, as a punishment for attempting to flee, doing "illegal business" or because they have specific needed skills or education. Crisis Group email correspondence with diplomat formerly based in Asmara, 21 August 2010.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes in another capacity, various locations in Eritrea, 1999-2008. People vanish into hiding for days, sometimes even weeks, at a time. The analyst has known individuals who basically lived "underground" for months at a stretch trying to avoid recruitment round-ups.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July 2006, December 2007 and August 2008.

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<sup>77</sup> Connell, "Eritrea", op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July-August 2006 and December 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, Asmara, August 2008.

<sup>80</sup> There are currently some 209,000 Eritrean refugees. In 2009, there were 43,300 new asylum claims from Eritrea. "Global Trends 2009", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Division of Program Support and Management, 15 June 2010, pp. 8, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Asmara, 2006-2008. When people flee and the government finds out (regular door-to-door checks are conducted of family members), the family has to pay a large fine or its members must serve a prison sentence. Crisis Group email correspondence with diplomat formerly based in Asmara, 21 August 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Asmara, since 2004. Deserters are said always to be told, however, to leave their weapons.

<sup>83</sup> There is extensive testimony in K. Tronvoll, *The Lasting Struggle for Freedom in Eritrea: Human Rights and Political Development, 1991-2009* (Oslo, 2009), pp. 76-88; also in "Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscriptation in Eritrea", Human Rights Watch, 16 April 2009; and Eritrea entries in Amnesty International's annual reports at <http://thereport.amnesty.org/>.

by senior officers. Commanders frequently use recruits for personal projects, such as constructing homes, and as attendants.<sup>84</sup> In effect, the army is currently organised unofficially into economic and political fiefdoms under commanders who pursue their own interests, while military capacities deteriorate rapidly.

Yet, while they may no longer always see eye to eye after the inconclusive result of the war with Ethiopia that generals tend to blame on the president's mismanagement, Isaias owes his position to a large extent to the loyalty of the core leadership of the military, including the national security forces. It is the guardian of whatever internal stability there is and would be the arbiter of the transition should anything happen to him in the near term. But the army's growing weakness – materially, in terms of its morale and manpower and in its standing in the country as a whole<sup>85</sup> – means that in the medium term it may no longer be in a position either to protect the president or to manage political change.

#### D. THE PENAL STATE

Eritrea can aptly be described as a prison state, without rule of law or independent judiciary and where the legal process is routinely ignored, and internal security is ever more oppressive and ubiquitous.<sup>86</sup> The government has long demonstrated a cavalier attitude toward the law, including the safeguards critical to protection of civil society.<sup>87</sup> From the early 1990s, the police were deliberately given excessive power, with no checks or monitors to curb them. State security targets suspect groups with relative impunity. One is Jehovah's Witnesses, whose members refused to acknowledge the earthly kingdom being created by the EPLF, so did not participate in the 1993 referendum and refuse national service. To the EPLF, this renders them non-citizens and a legitimate target. The legal system functions primarily to bring dissenters to heel, without a formal legal code.<sup>88</sup> Judges are not independent and are closely monitored. Moreover, the legal profession, like the enfeebled civil service, suffers from a chronic lack of skills and training.<sup>89</sup>

For a brief period, some independent-minded judges attempted to assert themselves. Most famously, in July 2001 the chief justice, Teame Beyene, publicly criticised

the president's interference in civil courts and establishment of the Special Court. He was promptly dismissed.<sup>90</sup> The Special Court was established in 1996 by Isaias. Its original purpose was purportedly to arrest the decline in moral standards among key public figures.<sup>91</sup> It has come to be used to deal with corruption, capital offences and political cases. Its judges are EPLF officials and army commanders appointed personally by the president and accountable solely to him. Its sessions are usually held in secret.

Intolerance of opposition appears to be worsening. Between 2001 and 2010 there have been tens of thousands of arrests of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, most of whom have yet to be brought to trial.<sup>92</sup> In detention, they endure horrendous conditions and are routinely tortured.<sup>93</sup> Extrajudicial killing is commonplace.<sup>94</sup> This has been documented in detail through research by both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, particularly among Eritrean refugees.<sup>95</sup>

The government has become extremely suspicious of the outside world and paranoid about any Eritrean associated with "external influences" and not fully committed to the "national cause". Enemies of the state and "non-citizens" are seen to come in many guises. In addition to that of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the persecution of Pentecostal Christians has escalated dramatically in recent years.<sup>96</sup> Internal security forces monitor, harass and routinely detain those identified as practising "illegal" faiths. The state recognises as legal faiths only the Lutheran Church, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism and Islam. All others are regarded as dangerous, unpatriotic and "foreign". Muslims belonging to new, unrecognised groups are likewise targeted, as are followers of the Bahai faith.

Others who are jailed include, failed asylum seekers, businessmen and merchants suspected of hoarding goods or

<sup>84</sup> Kibreab, "Forced Labour", op. cit.

<sup>85</sup> A common joke in recent years has been that "EDF" actually stands for Eat, Drink, F\*\*\*.

<sup>86</sup> Tronvoll, *Lasting Struggle for Freedom*, op. cit., chapters 5 and 6; Connell, "Eritrea", op. cit., pp. 9-15.

<sup>87</sup> Gebremedhin, *Challenges of a Society*, op. cit.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Tronvoll, *Lasting Struggle for Freedom*, op. cit., chapters 2 and 3; Connell, "Eritrea", op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>90</sup> Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit., pp. 32, 61.

<sup>91</sup> Tronvoll, *Lasting Struggle for Freedom*, op. cit., pp. 38-45.

<sup>92</sup> "Service for Life", op. cit., pp. 24-29. Diaspora websites contain detailed accounts of arrested and "disappeared" individuals. See, for example, [www.awate.com](http://www.awate.com), [www.delina.org](http://www.delina.org) and [www.ehrea.org](http://www.ehrea.org).

<sup>93</sup> Tronvoll, *Lasting Struggle for Freedom*, op. cit., chapter 5; diaspora websites.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.; "Service for Life", op. cit., pp. 38-41.

<sup>95</sup> See "Service for Life", Human Rights Watch, op. cit.; and Eritrea entries in Amnesty International's annual reports, op. cit.

<sup>96</sup> Pentecostal denominations are historically less than 2 per cent of the population, but young Eritreans have increasingly been drawn to their message, and thousands of overseas asylum seekers are – or claim to be – Pentecostal. Some 3,000 Christians from non-state sanctioned religions were in detention in 2009. Eritrea entry in "Amnesty International Report 2010", op. cit., p. 137.

otherwise engaging in black market activities, journalists who have been critical or are suspected of being potential critics and a range of political dissidents, real or imagined, including those who in 2000-2002 expressed misgivings about the government. Draft evaders and deserters have swollen jails more than any other single category. There is deep and widespread fear of the security forces, and contrary political thoughts are rarely, if ever, voiced in public, and then only in hushed tones.<sup>97</sup>

## E. OPPOSING THE STATE

Political debate and pluralism have rarely flourished in Eritrea: briefly in the late 1940s; as part of the underground nationalist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s; and then even more briefly in 2000-2001.<sup>98</sup> The EPLF is the product of a splinter opposition movement to the then-dominant ELF. The civil war between the ELF and EPLF confirmed in the minds of its leadership that there was no room for debate and dissent in the vortex of violent competing nationalisms and in the face of the powerful Ethiopian enemy. Therefore, the EPLF permitted no other liberation front to operate within the country, just as it accepted no disunity within its own ranks. Once driven into Sudan in 1981 and then scattered into European and North American exile, however, the ELF spawned a range of movements that opposed the EPLF from abroad. While some fighters and factions rejoined the EPLF in the late 1980s, the rest remained firmly outside the political fold.

There consequently has always been a broad opposition outside the country,<sup>99</sup> ranging from branches of the ELF; to ethnocentric “liberation” organisations (notably Kunama and Afar); to new parties fronted by former EPLF leaders and other dissidents in exile. These remain divided. Some advocate constitutional, negotiated transition and thus a degree of engagement with the EPLF; others call for renewal of armed struggle. There are also starkly different perceptions of the regime, whether as a Tigrinya dictatorship or a manifestation of Christian hegemony. Thus, there are sometimes sharp disagreements between Tigrinya highlanders in exile – especially those associated with the armed struggle – and Muslims – especially those from or purporting to represent the lowlands.<sup>100</sup> There are likewise disagreements over leadership and structure.

No legal opposition party or broad opposition movement exists – yet – in the country.<sup>101</sup> Hostility to the government is manifest in silent, fearful, brooding disengagement from the state and tacit withdrawal of support from the *tegadelay* generation. Yet, despite the deep disillusionment and low morale, overseas opposition parties are regarded somewhat sceptically. Ordinary citizens are not yet persuaded that any of them would significantly improve their lot. Many believe the leaders of some of these movements are cut from much the same cloth as the president and are at the least unsure of their democratic credentials.<sup>102</sup> This is true with respect to such key opposition leaders as Mesfin Hagos, one of the G15, and Heruy Tedla Bairu, formerly a key ELF leader. The cause of some opposition groups is not helped by the fact that they regularly congregate in Addis Ababa and have met with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Few Eritreans would welcome an Ethiopian-backed movement.<sup>103</sup>

The only opposition movement of any significance which operates inside Eritrea, at least part of the time, is Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ), an armed, radical Islamic front. Founded in the early 1980s, it enjoyed the support of both the Sudanese government and Osama bin Laden in the 1990s.<sup>104</sup> It continues to operate covertly at a relatively low level in the western lowlands and northern mountains. Until the recent thaw in relations with Sudan, Asmara regularly accused Khartoum of providing support and bases to enable it to cross the remote border with ease. Despite the low-level of its activities, EIJ has potential to tap into the alienation of young Muslims, who are increasingly aggrieved at state interference in Muslim institutions, land alienation, the economic domination of highlanders (especially in the western lowlands), the state’s refusal to recognise Arabic as an official language, the lack of Muslim representation in the upper echelons of the political

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some dozen organisations. Ibid; Connell, “Eritrea”, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

<sup>101</sup> The government considers the Pentecostal churches an opposition movement.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes in another capacity, Asmara, since 2004.

<sup>103</sup> Eritrea claims Ethiopia has stepped up efforts to destabilise it by hosting a meeting of opposition groups in Addis and offering to coordinate their activities and give military and logistical support. Crisis Group interview, Eritrean permanent representative to the UN, New York, 16 August 2010.

<sup>104</sup> A. de Waal, “The Politics of Destabilisation in the Horn, 1989-2001”, in A. de Waal (ed.), *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (London, 2004), p. 201; A. de Waal and A.H. Abdel Salam, “Africa, Islamism and America’s ‘War on Terror’ after September 11”, in *ibid*, p. 248; D. Connell, “Eritrea: on a Slow Fuse”, in R. I. Rotberg (ed.), *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Washington, 2005), pp. 77-82.

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<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, 2003-2008.

<sup>98</sup> Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism*, op. cit.; Connell, *Conversations*, op. cit.

<sup>99</sup> Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit., pp. 316-23.

<sup>100</sup> In recent years, the sprawling Eritrean National Alliance coalition founded in October 2002 has morphed into the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (established in March 2005), with



and military leadership and the recruitment of Muslim women into the army.<sup>105</sup>

The government is dismissive of talk of elections and democratic change.<sup>106</sup> The refrain remains “this is not the right time”. Isaias Afwerki and his followers believe that nobody in the exiled opposition understands the country’s perils and that such adversaries are at best naive and foolish, at worst, traitors. National security must always come first, they say, whatever the cost – but that cost is mounting.

## IV. SOCIETY AND ECONOMY UNDER SIEGE

### A. THE “WAR” ECONOMY

Rarely, has Eritrea enjoyed economic security. While there were periods of growth in particular sectors – for example, under the Italians light manufacturing and infrastructure expanded in the 1920s and 1930s – these have always been at a low level.<sup>107</sup> It has also been consistently vulnerable to environmental calamity, especially drought and hunger since the late nineteenth century.<sup>108</sup> Periods of depression and unemployment in the towns and poor harvests in the countryside have spurred political action and facilitated the expansion of political consciousness – notably in the 1940s and 1950s, and again in the 1970s and 1980s. The long liberation war, as well as material neglect under Ethiopia from the 1950s to the 1980s, destroyed the economy, so that on independence, the government faced an enormous task of reconstruction.

For several years in the 1990s, it seemed a combination of good harvests and the social and political capital enjoyed by the EPLF would enable the government to lay the foundations for recovery. The doctrine of self-reliance, developed during the armed struggle, was pursued with vigour and won plaudits from the donor community. The government made a great deal of its *human* capital in the absence of financial capital, and aimed at a long-haul, gradual rebuilding program.<sup>109</sup> However, whatever foundations were laid were destroyed by the war, which was far more devastating for Eritrea than for Ethiopia. Money needed for infrastructure and basic social services was poured into the purchase of war material, while the huge army strained the already fragile industrial and agricultural sectors. At one point more than 10 per cent of the population was mobilised.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> For historical overviews, see Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*; Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism*; Bereketab, *Eritrea*; and R. Caulk, “Ethiopia and the Horn”, in *Cambridge History of Africa, 1905-1940*, all op. cit.

<sup>108</sup> For a regional overview, see J. McCann, *People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800-1990* (London, 1995).

<sup>109</sup> Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, op. cit., pp. 136-148; Connell, *Against All Odds*, op. cit., pp. 263-277.

<sup>110</sup> Negash and Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, op. cit.; P. Gilkes and M. Plaut, *War in the Horn: The Conflict Between Eritrea and Ethiopia* (London, 1999); M. Plaut, “The Conflict and its Aftermath”, in Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut, *Unfinished Business*, op. cit. 10 per cent is the generally accepted figure beyond which a society ceases to function normally. For historical analysis of mobilisation and its socio-economic effects, see, for example, P. H. Wilson, “European Warfare 1815-2000”, in J. Black (ed.), *War in the Modern World Since 1815* (London,

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, various locations in Eritrea, since 2001; Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, Asmara, August 2006.

A high level of mobilisation has been maintained, with crippling economic effects. Hundreds of thousands of the most productive citizens – men and women between their late teens and 40s – are trapped in national service, unable to contribute significantly to economic growth. In the meantime, hundreds of young people illegally flee every month, a brain- and skill-drain that is a socio-economic catastrophe.<sup>111</sup> The government appears not to appreciate the full implications of this, or if it does, appears not to know what to do about it.

The upshot is that the economy has been in suspended animation for several years.<sup>112</sup> GDP growth has been declining steadily;<sup>113</sup> foreign currency reserves are close to depleted; and the banking sector is crippled. One of the chief problems is that Ethiopia constituted about two thirds of Eritrea's export market; the closure of that market has been devastating, and factories and labour have been idle as a result. Sudan now accounts for the vast bulk of Eritrea's exports; imports – mostly machinery and transport equipment, food and live animals and manufactured goods – come from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with smaller amounts from Italy and other European Union (EU) countries.<sup>114</sup> There is scarcely an internal market, as ordinary Eritreans increasingly struggle merely to survive. National service conscripts earn less than \$20 monthly in real terms.

National service puts large pools of labour at the state's disposal for commercial agricultural projects and the building of roads and dams; however, these are exercises in state control rather than significant contributions to economic development – many such projects are largely irrelevant, such as roads which carry little commercial traffic. National service labour is also frequently idle and unproductive. The transfer of youthful labour from rural areas to the army has crippled agricultural production.<sup>115</sup>

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2003), pp. 208-212; A. Gat, *War in Human Civilisation* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 526-527.

<sup>111</sup> There may eventually be a benefit if these Eritreans eventually return, better educated, with experience and transferrable skills.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, various locations in Eritrea, since 2000.

<sup>113</sup> According to the World Bank, GDP grew on an annual average by 0.4 per cent from 1998-2008, and per capita GDP declined by 3.3 per cent during the same period. This is in sharp contrast to 9.2 per cent annual GDP growth and 8 per cent per capita GDP growth during the previous ten years. "Eritrea at a glance", World Bank, 12 September 2009.

<sup>114</sup> "Country Report: Eritrea", The Economist Intelligence Unit, August 2006.

<sup>115</sup> A. Poole, "The Youth has Gone from our Soil: Place and Politics in Refugee Settlement and Agrarian Development", in D. O'Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds.), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and Oxford, 2009).

There is little or no domestic investment in agriculture, industry or services. Poverty is extensive and visible, even in Asmara.

The result is that millions rely on their kin overseas. Increasingly, foreign currency is sent outside official channels to avoid unrealistic exchange rates. The currency black market is huge, though risky.<sup>116</sup> The one major bright spot is the potential for mineral extraction, particularly gold. Large-scale gold production, expected to begin in 2010, would improve the state's foreign currency position.<sup>117</sup> Many companies are already involved in exploration and/or mining, with others negotiating for permission. The government would likely use the windfall it anticipates mainly for armaments, which could, therefore, increase the chance of a new conflict. Plans to operate free trade zones at the ports of Massawa and Assab<sup>118</sup> remain to be implemented.

It is difficult to obtain hard economic and financial data, because there are no public records or published national budget. Like the political system, the economic sector is largely inscrutable; there is little auditing and certainly none by external actors.<sup>119</sup> Several other factors are relevant to an assessment of the economic crisis. The first, which has wider social implications, relates to land. The 1994 proclamation asserting that the state owns all land has created anxiety and bitterness, not least because the government is willing to ignore local concerns in order to pursue its programs.<sup>120</sup> It believes customary tenure and usage is inefficient and an obstacle to progress, though there is no indication yet that its commercial development policy will succeed. Additionally, it has tried to settle nomadic pastoralists – whose traditional mobility it distrusts because it makes them difficult to control – in more sedentary communities. This has created resentment, especially in the western lowlands, and may well cause future turbulence.<sup>121</sup>

Secondly, the PFDJ and the state control absolutely the private sector, co-owning the main financial and com-

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<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, especially since 2002.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, "Eritrea 'to start gold mining by 2009'", www.gold.org, 14 May 2008; "Experts see Eritrea leading regional mining surge", www.africagoodnews.com, 1 February 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Cawthorne, "Interview: Eritrea to launch Massawa, Assab free trade zones", Reuters, 19 May 2009.

<sup>119</sup> One of the few recent attempts at statistical analysis is The Economist Intelligence Unit's country report for Eritrea, published in August 2006. The IMF produces data from time to time, most recently in December 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Gebremedhin, *Challenges of a Society*, op. cit., pp. 181-214; Mengisteab and Yohannes, *Anatomy*, op. cit., pp. 109-116.

<sup>121</sup> Gebremedhin, *Challenges of a Society*, op. cit., pp. 196-214; Connell, "Eritrea", op. cit., pp. 14, 17.

mercial institutions and running most industrial and agricultural enterprises and supporting services. The party has an enormous portfolio of commercial and industrial concerns and is the sole owner of, or senior partner in, a wide range of trade, financial services, transport, construction and other industrial enterprises.<sup>122</sup> The private sector, such as it is, is extremely fragile. Would-be investors, particularly from the diaspora, have been discouraged by state interference, as well as the precarious economic and political environment. Foreign businesses frequently find themselves under pressure to include the PFDJ as a partner, particularly in the mining sector. Failure to do so means withdrawal of cooperation, in effect rendering business impossible. Small firms come under close scrutiny from the state, with recently updated bureaucratic procedures forming an enormous obstacle.<sup>123</sup>

Thirdly, the doctrine of self-reliance increasingly looks like folly. While much was made of this during the liberation struggle and the 1990s, when several major NGOs were asked to leave after they refused to hand over funds for the sole use of the state, Eritrea is now in increasingly desperate need of assistance. Though national television often claims the country is exempt from the drought affecting the rest of the region,<sup>124</sup> a series of bad harvests has left many people in need of food aid. Exact numbers are difficult to establish, because aid agencies are not permitted to operate in the worst affected areas of the countryside. But it is clear that the government regards food aid as tantamount to an infringement of sovereignty. In December 2009, for example, it announced that it was confiscating food aid, declaring that such outside assistance made people 'lazy'.<sup>125</sup> It appears to be withholding the aid as a way of punishing or controlling the population; if this persists, there will soon be a humanitarian crisis.

## B. SOCIETY UNDER STRAIN

The social fabric is now under a great deal of strain. While the government has long believed that it can rely on a fundamental patriotism and that Eritreans can accept prolonged hardship, millions are increasingly disengaging from the state and even their own communities – and focus only on immediate family, preoccupied with seeking ways to survive and ultimately escape. Community life is suffering, especially as fear of informants grows: it is widely held that such low-paid individuals are everywhere and that a careless word can lead to arrest and disappearance.

Taxi drivers are often recruited, while other informants patrol bars and cafes; but it is believed that such spies can be anyone, including friends and even family.<sup>126</sup>

Crime remains remarkably low, considering the economic desperation, although it is higher than a decade ago. Among young people, especially, there is evidence of severe trauma and depression, with psychological disorders commonplace and bleak views of the future routinely expressed.<sup>127</sup> An entire generation – those born in the 1980s and 1990s – feels that its future has been taken away. No ordinary citizen between the ages of eighteen and 50 can leave the country legally, other than in the most exceptional circumstances or through official connections.<sup>128</sup> Thousands of young people dream of escaping to Europe or North America, for example to pursue education. That many who cross the borders languish in refugee camps or live in squalid conditions in European and North American cities while pursuing asylum applications does not seem to have dampened the ambitions of those left behind. The refrain is that “there is no life in Eritrea”, and therefore any alternative is preferable.<sup>129</sup>

While there is no organised opposition inside Eritrea, there is a silent hostility to and a lack of trust in the government.<sup>130</sup> A great gulf has opened between the state and its citizens, and there is some evidence that the government has at times recognised this, for example organising public seminars in 2005 at which invitees were allowed to air grievances.<sup>131</sup> But this has not translated into any serious attempt to re-engage, for the political elite essentially believes that the people will ultimately follow orders and not move against it, at least not as long as the perceived threat from Ethiopia remains. This may hold true in the short term, but it is a dangerous calculation for the medium to long term.

One of the main causes of this crisis is a disastrous tertiary education policy. In recent years, the government has effectively closed the University of Asmara and replaced it with colleges outside the capital that are run in the fashion of military camps.<sup>132</sup> While certain principles of this

<sup>122</sup> Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit., chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>123</sup> The national service requirement presents a huge problem for small businesses to find and retain skilled labour.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes in another capacity, Asmara, especially 2006-2008.

<sup>125</sup> “Eritrea's controversial push to feed itself”, BBC News, 24 December 2009.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, Asmara, especially since 2003.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> “Service for Life”, Human Rights Watch, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, London, since 2008.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, 2003-2008.

<sup>131</sup> R. J. Reid, “The Politics of Silence: Interpreting Stasis in Contemporary Eritrea”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 2009, p. 120.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid; T. Muller, “Human Resource Development and the State: Higher Education in Post-Revolutionary Eritrea”, in O' Kane and Hepner, *Biopolitics*, op. cit.

new policy were sound – the decentralisation of higher education and the location of particular disciplines in relevant parts of the country (marine biology in Massawa, on the coast, for example) – it seems increasingly clear that the policy is driven by contempt for education (and certainly critical thinking) and an attempt to control school-leavers. The party has also become involved in political education, to expand the ranks of its cadres. The PFDJ-run “cadre school” in Nafka is one of the institutions that has largely replaced conventional higher education.<sup>133</sup>

Independent civil society does not exist in any meaningful way. The party dominates what passes for the non-governmental sector.<sup>134</sup> It runs national unions for youths and students, women and workers, much as during the armed struggle branches of the EPLF were responsible for socio-economic entities that were to participate in the “social revolution”. No independent civil society groups, trade unions or NGOs are permitted; strikes are not allowed under any circumstances; and advocacy or lobby groups cannot be organised outside PFDJ structures. Leaders of the party unions are carefully vetted. Religious organisations, both Christian and Muslim, are closely monitored. Their leaders are cowed and take no public stance on policy or any other social issue. The last time a senior non-government figure was publicly outspoken was in 2005, when the deeply revered Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church criticised state interference in the church’s affairs. He was stripped of his authority and has been under house arrest ever since.<sup>135</sup>

Eritrea is regarded as one of the worst offenders in terms of press freedom.<sup>136</sup> No independent media has been permitted since 2001. Already in the early 1990s, the government demonstrated it was at best ambivalent about a free media; journalists were a target from the outset. One was Ruth Simon, an Agence France-Presse local who was detained in 1997 for reporting a “private” speech by Isaias.<sup>137</sup> A private press did flourish briefly in the late 1990s, largely buoyed by its ability to report on the war.<sup>138</sup> But as soon as it began to criticise the government in 2000-2001, its days were numbered. Its outlets have been closed since September 2001. Many journalists

languish in prison, and several have almost certainly died in detention.<sup>139</sup>

Today, only state-run media operate, including the newspapers *Hadas Eritrea* (Tigrinya); *Eritrea al-Hadisa* (Arabic); *the Eritrea Profile* (English); the television channel EriTV; a radio station (*Dimtsi Hafash*, “voice of the masses”); and the website Shaebia.org. Other publications and news services are controlled by the government. All produce carefully-vetted material and militaristic propaganda. Journalists at the information ministry – often largely untrained national service personnel – are closely monitored, not least because they occasionally flee the country.<sup>140</sup> The ministry is the voice of the state, and its head, Ali Abdu, is sometimes seen as being groomed as a possible successor to Isaias.<sup>141</sup> There are few foreign journalists. Those who make it through the rigorous accreditation process find their movements highly restricted; when they become too critical, they are “frozen” or expelled.<sup>142</sup> Internet and email are closely monitored, though Eritreans frequently access opposition websites.<sup>143</sup>

The government’s attitude toward the media highlights two key and interrelated anxieties. The first is paranoia about nefarious external influences. Isaias is on record as believing that the private media were tools of the CIA, which planted stories to undermine the government.<sup>144</sup> Secondly, there is obsession with unity and stability at the expense of basic freedoms. The 1996 Press Law was supposed to guarantee a free media, but it also made clear that no outlet should produce material which promoted dissension and division or might “disturb the peace”. The government can intervene at any time to prevent the dissemination of “undesirable” material. The deep concern for preservation of unity reflects the leadership’s worry about the ultimate trustworthiness of its citizens and the country’s very viability.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July-August 2006.

<sup>134</sup> Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit., chapter 3.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>136</sup> For example, see “World Report: Eritrea”, Reporters without Borders, April 2009; “Service for Life”, op. cit., pp. 56-58.

<sup>137</sup> Mengisteab and Yohannes, *Anatomy*, op. cit., pp. 87-88. She was also a former EPLF fighter.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, Asmara, 1999-2000.

<sup>139</sup> According to Amnesty International, ten journalists who protested against the closure of the media in 2001 remain in detention, and four may have died. In February 2009, at least 50 employees of Radio Bana were arrested; an unknown number remain in detention. “Amnesty International Report 2010”, p. 138.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July-August 2006 and August 2008.

<sup>141</sup> Reid, “Eritrea’s Role and Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa: Past and Present Perspectives”, in *External Relations*, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, 2003-2008.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, Asmara, especially since 2004. Many are as sceptical about these as they are about their own government’s propaganda.

<sup>144</sup> Mohamed Keita, “Eritrean president slams ‘CIA-financed’ media”, www.cpj.org, 2 June 2009.

### C. THE MULTI-FAITH AND MULTI-ETHNIC NATION

Eritrea contains enormous physical, cultural and ethnic diversity, from the highland plateau (known as the *ke-bessa*) in the centre to the hot coastal plains and the Danakil depression stretching to the south, to the western lowlands abutting Sudan (the *metahit*).<sup>145</sup> Within those regions are the distinctive but interconnected economic, cultural and linguistic groupings which comprise the nine official ethnicities. There is also the divide between Christians and Muslims, whose numbers are currently fairly equally balanced. Considering such diversity, and the presence of so many potential fault lines, a history of conflict is unsurprising. It has included clashes over farmland and access to vital trade routes, as well as between seasonally migrating herdsmen and settled agriculturists. There have been sporadic tensions between the dominant group of the highlands, the Tigrinya – a Semitic culture with close links to the Tigrinya and the Amhara of Ethiopia – and a range of smaller adjacent groups. Yet, the main roots of historical volatility and instability have long been connected with violence and political upheaval in northern Ethiopia and eastern Sudan.

Despite occasional conflict and the marked diversity, Eritrea has by and large avoided the kind of serious inter-ethnic and religious strife associated with the region.<sup>146</sup> Economic lifestyles, cultures, faiths and ethnicities have mostly coexisted peacefully. Church and mosque have stood side by side, occasional clashes notwithstanding. There are sometimes perceptions that the Tigrinya dominate politics, but this has rarely translated into direct political action. They are the largest single ethnic and cultural grouping, and through much of the country's history this has been accepted, on the whole, by others. Within the highlands themselves, there have been at times tense rivalries between the historical provinces of Hamasien, Akele Guzai and Serae, but this has not led to significant political confrontation, at least since the late nineteenth century.<sup>147</sup> Contrary to what might be expected, Eritrea has thus remained at relative peace with itself to a remarkable extent. Some have attributed this to historically-rooted "social capital" – intra- and inter-community cooperation – which has usually kept conflicts local and resolvable by networks of understanding and diplomacy.<sup>148</sup>

This said, there are worrying signs that enormous strain has been placed on this culture of local conflict resolution and tolerance and that the fault lines are potentially extremely volatile. In spite of relatively harmonious socio-economic relations at the micro level, Eritrea has long been politically fractured at the macro level. The 1940s and 1950s demonstrated the fragmented nature of its politics, with groups holding markedly divergent views about the nature and the future of the territory. This was evident again in the 1970s, with the ELF-EPLF civil war. Even if, as is often argued, that conflict was essentially fought by leadership elites and their guerrilla forces rather than the wider population, it demonstrated a potential for massive political rupture that has haunted the polity ever since. Moreover, economic desperation could create motives for wider patterns of violence.

The government's commitment to secularism is to be applauded, but any gains in social equality are now under threat as it aggressively persecutes certain faiths, most notably the Pentecostal churches but also mainstream Islam and Orthodox Christianity. Muslims are increasingly alienated from the state, and Islamic identities are becoming more entrenched. The government's contemptuous attitudes toward certain Christian denominations are radicalising the young in particular. Practising Muslims and Christians alike are roundly abused in the army.<sup>149</sup>

Land policy also has potential to increase conflict within and between communities, as swathes of territory in the western lowlands are set aside for Tigrinya highlanders. The perception among some groups – notably agropastoralist communities in the west and north – of the Tigrinya as overbearing land-grabbers will continue to grow as long as a distant highland government imposes its developmental agenda. Settled farming is systemically privileged above pastoralism, raising tensions between the Tigrinya and the Kunama, Beni Amer and Tigre groups of the west and north.<sup>150</sup>

The state is clearly terrified of national disunity but has removed all legitimate channels of protest, thus driving resistance abroad and underground, where it will likely become more radicalised. The impact of militarised authoritarianism has been devastating on society. Enormous social-economic pressures are now at work, and long-dormant cultural, religious and ethnic fissures may well be prised open, the unintended outcome of the political program of enforced unity.

<sup>145</sup> Connell, "Eritrea", op. cit., p. 12; *Eritrea: A Country Handbook*, information ministry (Asmara, 2002), pp. 36-37.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, Asmara, August 2006.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes in another capacity, Asmara, especially since 2004.

<sup>148</sup> Kibreab, *Critical Reflections*, op. cit.

<sup>149</sup> This is borne out by research among refugees undertaken by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. See "Service for Life", Human Rights Watch, op. cit., and Eritrea entries in Amnesty International's annual reports, op. cit.; also, Crisis Group analyst's field notes on asylum cases in another capacity.  
<sup>150</sup> Mengisteab and Yohannes, *Anatomy*, op. cit., pp. 114-115.

## D. ERITREA OVERSEAS: THE ROLE OF THE DIASPORA

The large diaspora has been hugely significant in the making of modern Eritrea.<sup>151</sup> The first wave fled overseas in the 1970s and 1980s, when the liberation war was at its height, and continued the struggle in Europe, North America and Australia by organising events, debating policy and collecting critical funds.<sup>152</sup> Since then, it has swollen in size, supplemented by growing numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers fleeing from the very movement the previous generation had sacrificed to support. Large communities are now in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Scandinavia, Canada and the U.S. – the latter notably in the Washington DC area and California.<sup>153</sup> There are also swelling pockets of “transit” Eritreans in Kenya, Uganda and Sudan, who have not yet quite made it out of the region; South Africa is an important transit stage. This new influx has heightened tensions within the diaspora community by highlighting differing degrees of support for or antipathy toward the government. The arrival of so many new members has also placed severe financial strains on families who already often have responsibility for kin inside the country.

Many members of the older diaspora were educated in the West and had skills and professions to offer an independent Eritrea that, however, proved reluctant to use them, suspicious as it was of anyone who had not participated directly in the struggle. In the early 1990s, many came back enthusiastically to offer their services but encountered either an institutional cold shoulder or a bureaucracy that kept them at arm’s length,<sup>154</sup> and many soon returned to Europe or North America. Wealthier diaspora members who wished to invest and represented a major opportunity for socio-economic development experienced much the same. They, too, were increasingly disappointed to find that tight controls were being placed on the embryonic private sector and that the government was deeply suspicious of the diaspora entrepreneur.<sup>155</sup> As the ruling party showed its intention to dominate the private sector, many would-be investors withdrew and have not returned.

Yet, the diaspora’s financial contributions have always been critical. In the 1970s and 1980s, the money it raised – and the wider awareness especially the activities of the Eritrean Relief Association – were vital in sustaining the armed struggle. Remittances were critical during the 1998-2000 war and have become ever more important. In order to maintain their full rights as citizens – particularly valuable if at some later date they wish to return and claim property or open a business – Eritreans abroad are expected to “voluntarily” pay 2 per cent of their monthly salaries to the government.<sup>156</sup> This tax is mainly managed through local embassies and consulates. Many do pay, but increasing numbers, especially of the newly arrived, do not, whether because of their economic situations or hostility to the regime.<sup>157</sup>

More important is the money sent back to family and friends. While this is sometimes through official channels – Himbol, the government’s official exchange and remittance organisation – increasingly it is done through illegal channels in order to bypass the unfavourable official exchange rate. As noted above, the hard currency black market thrives despite attempts to suppress it, and diaspora members have created or tapped into informal networks to get desperately-needed money to relatives and friends.<sup>158</sup> The same diaspora whose funds were so important in warding off the Ethiopian army thus now uses its resources to support victims of the government’s disastrous economic and social policies.<sup>159</sup>

Any eventual redistribution of political or economic power will need to take account of Eritreans overseas. At the same time, however, the diaspora is perhaps more divided than ever before. During the liberation struggle, it was split in ways that mirrored the ELF-EPLF feud within the country, but more recently cleavages have developed in terms of life experience and aspiration as well as political opinion.<sup>160</sup> There is broad opposition to the government, but some members of the older diaspora continue to believe that the regime remains, despite its flaws, the best and only option. This is not a view generally shared by the new generation, which is at most apolitical but also has many members who are vehemently

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<sup>151</sup> Ruth Iyob, “The Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict: Diasporic vs. Hegemonic States in the Horn of Africa, 1991-2000”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 38:4 (2000).

<sup>152</sup> The best account is Tricia Redeker Hepner, *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors, and Exiles: Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora* (Philadelphia, 2009).

<sup>153</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Crisis Group analyst’s field notes and interviews in another capacity, Asmara, since 2001, especially July-August 2006. Eritrea has been ranked 175th out of 183 economies in the ease of doing business. “Doing Business 2010”, World Bank and International Finance Corporation, [www.doingbusiness.org](http://www.doingbusiness.org), 2009.

<sup>155</sup> Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, *op. cit.*, chapters 5 and 6.

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<sup>156</sup> If they do not pay, family in Eritrea is often pressured or punished, and it will be impossible to obtain an entry visa or renew an Eritrean passport.

<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group analyst interviews, London, especially since 2004.

<sup>158</sup> A Crisis Group analyst has observed this at close quarters.

<sup>159</sup> It is estimated that remittances amount to some \$400 million per year, about one-third of GDP. David Styan, “Discussion Paper: The Evolution, Uses and Abuses of Remittances in the Eritrean Economy”, in Sally Healy (ed.), “Eritrea’s Economic Survival: summary record of a conference held on 20 April 2007”, Chatham House.

<sup>160</sup> Hepner, *Soldiers*, *op. cit.*

opposed to what they unabashedly describe as a military dictatorship.<sup>161</sup>

The division between these groups is at least partly rooted in experience with the regime. Older patterns of loyalty reflect an unwillingness to accept that the struggle to which so many dedicated their lives has failed. Some also do not speak out, even abroad, for fear of reprisals against family.<sup>162</sup> Eritrean security has increased its presence among the diaspora, and the fear of informants is justified. But while the presence of so many competing political parties and groupings abroad has fragmented opinion, Eritreans abroad often share more common ground than they sometimes care to admit. The recent imposition of targeted UN Security Council sanctions swiftly led to angry demonstrations in the diaspora by people who might normally be bitterly opposed to the government but were outraged that Eritrea was treated in this way.<sup>163</sup> To a degree, therefore, the sanctions issue plays into Asmara's hands.

## V. FOREIGN RELATIONS: PERMANENT INTERESTS, ENDURING ENEMIES

### A. REGIONAL RELATIONS AND THE ETHIOPIAN WAR

Contrary to the EPLF's myths, the war of independence was not fought alone and in isolation. The liberation fronts developed intricate relations with other political organisations and governments across the region and beyond. The ELF long enjoyed support from the Arab world and at different times had good relations with Egypt and Syria among others. It also received succour from Sudan, which used the struggle as a means of attacking Ethiopia.<sup>164</sup> North East Africa in the mid- and late-twentieth century experienced a series of inter-connected proxy wars in which guerrilla movements were able to take advantage of regional tensions and superpower rivalries. The ELF's vaguely Arab-world tendencies were a cause of dissent, and the largely Christian-led EPLF at least partly represented a rejection of those connections.<sup>165</sup>

The EPLF eschewed external patronage – none was really on offer – and made much of its isolation in the northern mountains, where it built its military state-in-waiting, unsullied by foreign influences. But it was never quite so self-sufficient as the subsequent myth would have it; the leadership developed pragmatic, and mutually beneficial, ties with a range of revolutionary groups in Ethiopia, including, for a time, the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). It also had an effective foreign relations department, known as "Protocol", which dealt with journalists, aid workers and other foreign visitors to the "liberated areas".<sup>166</sup> It likewise was adept at representation in Europe and the U.S.

Nevertheless, the idea that Eritrea was betrayed by the international community and then won independence on its own – ignored by the world until it was forced to take notice – was at the heart of the new state's worldview in the early 1990s. At first this was manifest only in a prickliness that was even grudgingly admired by some donors. Isaias was not afraid to openly insult his audience, as in his first address to the Organisation of African Unity, which he rebuked for rarely doing anything constructive

<sup>161</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, 2003-2008.

<sup>162</sup> Tricia Redeker Hepner, "Seeking Asylum in a Transnational Social Field: New Refugees and Struggles for Autonomy and Human Rights", in O'Kane and Hepner, *Biopolitics*, op. cit.

<sup>163</sup> "Eritreans rally against UN sanctions", BBC News, 22 February 2010.

<sup>164</sup> Pool, *Guerrillas*, op. cit., pp. 49-57; Kibreab, "Eritrean-Sudanese Relations in Historical Perspective", in Reid, *External Relations*, op. cit.

<sup>165</sup> J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge, 1987), chapter 5.

<sup>166</sup> J. Firebrace, et al., *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea* (Trenton, 1985); J. Harding, *Small Wars, Small Mercies: Journeys in Africa's Disputed Nations* (London, 1993), pp. 327-412.

(such as supporting Eritrea's independence struggle).<sup>167</sup> But it was soon clear that this went beyond merely a rough-and-ready approach to diplomacy, as Asmara clashed with each of its neighbours in the 1990s, culminating in the war with Ethiopia.

Eritrea is not solely to blame for its increasingly difficult regional relations. It has had legitimate concerns about the intentions of both Ethiopia and Sudan. At times, too, it has shown faith in international arbitration and the binding character of treaties that has not always been rewarded. There is a danger of it being made the whipping boy in a region where no state's external dealings are beyond reproach. The problem is that Isaias has regularly shown a readiness to respond disproportionately to perceived threats and a willingness to abandon diplomacy for military adventurism.<sup>168</sup> Eritrea has always been pragmatic externally; but that pragmatism is becoming brutal and cynical to the point of diminishing its international standing. While national security is indeed a constant concern, Isaias's unwillingness to bend or compromise has closed options and led to potentially useful allies being abandoned and often publicly scorned.

Relations with Sudan quickly soured after the National Islamic Front came to power in Khartoum. Sudan and Eritrea hosted one another's rebel movements – Sudan in particular promoting Islamist groups, including Eritrean Islamic Jihad, Eritrea facilitating the rebel coalition known as the National Democratic Alliance – and cut diplomatic ties in 1994. Tensions continued for the rest of the decade.<sup>169</sup>

Yemen is another friend turned enemy, and they fought a brief but intense war over the Hanish Islands in 1996. The dispute was referred to an international tribunal, and both parties abided by the ruling.<sup>170</sup> There have also been disputes with Djibouti, including minor border clashes in 1996 and 1998. Relations collapsed during the war with Ethiopia, when Eritrea considered Djibouti an Ethiopian stooge, and were restored only following the Algiers Agreement that ended the major conflict. While the two signed cooperation agreements in 2004 and 2006, there was once again trouble on the border in 2008 when Eritrean forces allegedly occupied a strip of Djibouti's land and fired on its troops. Asmara denied anything had happened but was censured by the UN Security Council.<sup>171</sup> In

June 2010, the two governments agreed to resolve the dispute through mediation by Qatar.<sup>172</sup>

Ethiopia, though traditionally Eritrea's most valuable economic, even strategic partner, is, of course, the country with which relations have been most fraught. While the EPLF and TPLF often cooperated in war against the *Derg*, underlying tensions – over border demarcation, military strategy, political vision, and ethnic, nationality and identity issues – continued into the 1990s.<sup>173</sup> At first, their seriousness was not obvious: various agreements were signed in 1993, and there was collaboration on a number of topics, including banking and defence. But escalating border friction, particularly around Badme, followed by the pre-agreed introduction of Eritrea's own national currency in 1997, led to rapid deterioration in relations.<sup>174</sup>

This was a reversion to the confrontational and exclusionist politics of the liberation struggle, a brittle relationship made all the more volatile by the historical links between highland Eritrea and Tigray – links which both drew the regions together and yet also created lines of tension between them. In addition to past difficulties specific to the relationship between the EPLF and the TPLF, moreover, there were larger dynamics at work. Elements within the new Ethiopia did not truly accept an independent Eritrea, at least as shaped by the EPLF;<sup>175</sup> while the EPLF's militarised view of the region – and of Ethiopia under the EPRDF in particular – increased the likelihood of conflict.

Nonetheless, when the war erupted in May 1998 – following an exchange of fire at Badme and a large-scale Eritrean armed response – it came as a surprise to many in both countries as well as to most observers. Its scale may also have taken Asmara by surprise. Within weeks,

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son, the text of the subsequent sanctions resolution gives as much attention to the conflict with Djibouti. UN Security Council Resolution 1907, 23 December 2009.

<sup>172</sup> See "East Africa: UN welcomes steps by Eritrea and Djibouti to end border dispute", UN News Service, 20 July 2010; "Copy of Eritrea-Djibouti pact lodged with Arab League", *Gulf Times*, 16 June 2010. In the 1990s, Eritrea dispatched a contingent of troops to the Congo (DRC) to assist the Ugandans and Rwandans in installing Laurent-Désiré Kabila in Kinshasa. "The Eritrea-Djibouti Border Dispute", Institute for Security Studies, situation report, September 2008.

<sup>173</sup> Reid, "Old Problems", op. cit. R. J. Reid, "'Ethiopians believe in God, *Sha'abiya* believe in mountains': the EPLF and the 1998-2000 war in historical perspective", in Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut, *Unfinished Business*, op. cit.

<sup>174</sup> A good overview is in Negash and Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, op. cit.

<sup>175</sup> See, for example, K. Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia: The Making of Enemies and Allies in the Horn of Africa* (Rochester, 2009); Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Addis Ababa, August-September 2005.

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<sup>167</sup> Connell, *Against All Odds*, op. cit., pp. 282-283.

<sup>168</sup> Kidane Mengisteab, "What has Gone Wrong with Eritrea's Foreign Relations?", in Reid, *External Relations*, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>169</sup> Kibreab, "Eritrean-Sudanese Relations", op. cit.

<sup>170</sup> Mengisteab and Yohannes, *Anatomy*, op. cit., pp. 216-225. The court awarded the islands to Yemen, and Eritrea has abided by the ruling.

<sup>171</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1862, 14 January 2009. This was an important first step towards imposing sanctions on Eritrea. While support for Somali groups was the primary rea-



fighting spread to several other stretches of border,<sup>176</sup> and the conflict became a foreign policy and intelligence failure for Eritrea, much more serious than strained relations with Sudan, Yemen or Djibouti. The initial U.S.-Rwanda peace plan failed, and fighting continued amid bitter recriminations and deportations, mostly of Eritreans from Ethiopia. Isaias, in something of a climbdown, indicated a willingness to accept the OAU peace plan only in February 1999, when the Ethiopians recaptured Badme. However, the war instead entered one of its most destructive phases, with fierce combat between April and June along the central front, particularly around Zalambessa and Tsorona south east of Asmara.

The Eritreans argued with some justification that Ethiopia's larger war aims had been exposed: not simply the recapture of contested border points but the overthrow of the government. After June 1999, the war entered another relative lull, but the diplomacy of various external actors was to no avail. In May 2000, the Ethiopians' largest offensive smashed Eritrean positions in the western lowlands, forcing the army to pull back onto the plateau to positions in the hills west of Mendefera and south of Adi Quala which were easier to defend. These held, preventing an advance toward Asmara and producing a bloody standstill by June. An armistice was followed, in December 2000, by the Algiers Agreement, which supposedly brought the war to a formal end. As events have proved, it has not.<sup>177</sup> UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) peacekeepers sat between the armies in a demilitarised zone for the next few years but did not prevent the proliferation of proxy wars elsewhere, as both belligerents – but particularly Eritrea – sought to undermine the other.

It is commonplace to say Eritrea lost the war.<sup>178</sup> It did not lose it in 2000, however; at that time, neither side was able to continue, and while Ethiopia could claim to have given Isaias a severe beating, the Eritreans could declare that they had warded off Ethiopian aggression. In the longer term, nonetheless, the war has proved much more devastating for Eritrea, both economically and politically. It opened deep rifts within the government and put the country on a permanent war-footing, which it could afford neither socially nor economically. But that is only part of the story. The regime's combative style of diplomacy

had been a contributing factor to the conflict and left it comparatively friendless once the fighting began. Moreover, the experience heightened the feeling in Isaias's circle that it was alone in the world and could trust no one, not even, it would seem, its own citizens, and it set Eritrea on a path of further confrontation.

However, there was nothing inevitable about this: the main problem arose after the Boundary Commission, set up as part of the Algiers Agreement, reported its findings in 2002.<sup>179</sup> The chief aims of the Algiers Agreement included permanent cessation of hostilities; release and repatriation of all prisoners and other detainees; and creation of two neutral bodies, the Boundary and Claims Commissions. While the Claims Commission was to assess financial liability for government claims against each other, the Boundary Commission was to deal with the thorny border question, ostensibly the cause of the war. Both governments pledged to accept its findings as binding. In the event, only Eritrea did so. When it lost Badme in the ruling, Ethiopia equivocated, then demanded renegotiation. Asmara refused – and, from a legal standpoint, they were correct.<sup>180</sup> The international community, in particular donors and the Security Council, repeatedly failed to pressure Ethiopia to comply. Eritrea's sense of outrage heightened, notwithstanding that the Claims Commission ruled that it violated international law during its military operations in May 1998, in effect, had started the war.<sup>181</sup>

The key point is that the Eritreans felt Ethiopia was once again being appeased by an international community that was tacitly or explicitly hostile to Eritrea. The already deep-rooted sense of isolation and betrayal was reinforced. Relations with the UN deteriorated rapidly, as the regime increasingly placed restrictions on UNMEE, until the peacekeepers withdrew, citing a total lack of Eritrean cooperation. Unable to complete the actual border demarcation, the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission undertook a virtual demarcation, with which Isaias proclaimed himself content; but by this time, Eritrean foreign policy had taken new directions.

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<sup>176</sup> Negash and Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, op. cit.; Gilkes and Plaut, *War in the Horn*, op. cit.

<sup>177</sup> Redie Bereketeab, "The Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict and the Algiers Agreement: Eritrea's Road to Isolation", in Reid, *External Relations*, op. cit.; Plaut, "The Conflict and its Aftermath", op. cit.

<sup>178</sup> S. Healy and M. Plaut, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Allergic to Persuasion* (London, 2007); S. Healy, *Lost Opportunities in the Horn of Africa: How Conflicts Connect and Peace Agreements Unravel* (London, 2008).

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<sup>179</sup> The entire report can be viewed at [www.un.org/NewLinks/eebc Arbitration/EEBC-Decision.pdf](http://www.un.org/NewLinks/eebc Arbitration/EEBC-Decision.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> Healy, *Lost Opportunities*, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

<sup>181</sup> See "Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission", at [www.pca-cpa.org](http://www.pca-cpa.org).

## B. WAR AS FOREIGN POLICY: ETHIOPIA AND BEYOND

During and after the war with Ethiopia, a network of proxy conflicts and furtive military adventures spread rapidly across the region, in many respects seemingly taking the place of conventional diplomacy.<sup>182</sup> Eritrea was not alone in this tactic – states throughout the region have at various times become involved in proxy wars and rebel movements – but it used it with special vigour, owing to its ongoing confrontation with Ethiopia. That struggle and Isaias's desire to acquire a pivotal regional role for the regime dominate political vision in Asmara. The regime routinely denies involvement in most of the conflicts discussed below, and Isaias readily declares that the border issue has been resolved, and he has “no problem” with Ethiopia.<sup>183</sup> Both assertions are disingenuous.

While many of these adventures are the outcome of the standoff along the border, others predate that conflict and have roots in the era of liberation struggle, when intertwining conflicts were unavoidable and even desirable. For example, Eritrea's ongoing support for the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in Ethiopia dates to the 1980s, when both fought the *Derg*. When the OLF resumed its insurgency in the mid-1990s, having withdrawn from the EPRDF coalition, Asmara was again sympathetic. Similarly, the EPLF also supported the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) from the mid-1980s and renewed that relationship in the mid-1990s, when the ONLF also renewed armed struggle. Both Oromo territory and the Ogaden have long been fruitful fields of intrigue for an Eritrean movement always ready to take advantage of opportunities.<sup>184</sup>

Opportunism is also evident in EPLF involvement in Sudan.<sup>185</sup> As relations collapsed in the early 1990s, both sides started supporting the other's rebels. The Sudanese backed jihadists against Asmara, and Isaias played a key role in bringing a coalition of insurgent groups, including the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) from the South and the Beja Congress and Rashaida Free Lions from the East, under the National Democratic Alliance umbrella. He also sought to enlist Chad's president, Idris Déby, in opening a western front against Khartoum in Darfur. That initiative failed, but in 2003, when the Dar-

fur rebellion erupted, Asmara was quick to offer material and logistical support to the main insurgents.<sup>186</sup> Eritrean “observers” were even stationed in Darfur itself. For a time, Asmara was the base for many Darfur and other Sudanese rebels and Eritrea a main avenue for weapons and supplies.

Isaias' true aim was not to resolve Sudan's wars but to gain a dominant regional position and improve his negotiating position with Khartoum. In 2006, he pressured the Beja Congress and Rashaida Free Lions to sign a peace agreement with Khartoum in exchange for oil and local security guarantees<sup>187</sup> – a brutally cynical but effective move that initiated a thaw in bilateral relations that sacrificed smaller local actors on the altar of national expedience. Eritrea was less effective in Darfur, largely because Sudan proved much too powerful to have its arm twisted by Asmara on this issue, and the rebels increasingly had other, wealthier patrons.

It is perhaps in Somalia that the realpolitik justification of the proxy war has been most apparent. Eritrea had long maintained an interest in Somali affairs, most obviously through its support for the Ogaden insurgency, but involvement increased markedly in the early 2000s.<sup>188</sup> Though it actively discouraged the growth of Islamism in both the ONLF and various Somali groups, it was nonetheless prepared to strengthen links in pursuit of larger regional concerns – chiefly, attacking Ethiopia's southern flank. In particular, the Eritreans developed ties to key Islamist leaders within the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which Asmara supported against the Ethiopia-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

By the middle of 2006, the UIC had expelled the TFG and allied warlords from Mogadishu and was governing southern Somalia more effectively than anyone had since the early 1990s, with Eritrea offering advice and some material assistance. It was the UIC's espousal of hard-line Islamism and irredentism, which prompted the Ethiopian invasion in late 2006.<sup>189</sup> Unable to directly confront the Ethiopian army, UIC forces dispersed, and the Ethiopians occupied Mogadishu and the rest of south and central

<sup>182</sup> Healy, *Lost Opportunities*, op. cit.; Reid, “Eritrea's Role and Foreign Policy”, op. cit.

<sup>183</sup> See, for example, his recent interview with Al Jazeera, “Talk to Al Jazeera: President Isaias Afwerki”, 22 February 2010.

<sup>184</sup> Healy, *Lost Opportunities*, op. cit.; see also Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, op. cit.

<sup>185</sup> Kibreab, “Eritrean-Sudanese Relations”, op. cit.; and more specific detail regarding Darfur in A. de Waal (ed.), *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* (London, 2007).

<sup>186</sup> The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

<sup>187</sup> A. de Waal, “Darfur's Elusive Peace”, *War in Darfur*, op. cit., pp. 384-385; Connell, “The EPLF/PFDJ Experience”, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

<sup>188</sup> Healy, *Lost Opportunities*, op. cit.; Connell, “The EPLF/PFDJ Experience”, op. cit., p. 39. The Somalia government assisted the EPLF during its liberation struggle. As in other cases, those ties were reactivated.

<sup>189</sup> Healy, *Lost Opportunities*, op. cit.; K. Menkhaus, “The Crisis in Somalia: Tragedy in Five Acts”, *African Affairs*, 106:424 (2007). Ethiopia was also concerned about calls within the UIC that the Ogaden should become part of Somalia.

Somalia. But within weeks an insurgency erupted, with continued Eritrean backing.

The extent of that backing has almost certainly been exaggerated, but there is little doubt that Asmara has given local insurgent groups arms and money to fight Ethiopian occupation and, after the Ethiopian withdrawal in early 2009, the new Somali administration.<sup>190</sup> Further, it hosted the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), a coalition of Islamists, warlords and other exiled leaders opposed to Ethiopian involvement and the new government. The ARS includes individuals on the UN list of persons linked to terrorism, including Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, and it was associations of this nature that culminated in Eritrea's increasing regional and wider international isolation. While some ARS figures took part in a reconciliation conference in Djibouti in 2008<sup>191</sup> and began to return to Somalia – including the current president, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, Eritrea has remained bitterly unreconciled to the new order and to anything with the Ethiopian or U.S. stamp of approval.

Eritrea's obduracy put it on a collision course with much of the international community. The Bush administration in the U.S. warned that it might be labelled a state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>192</sup> In an unprecedented step, the African Union (AU) called for targeted sanctions on Eritrea for alleged support of terrorist groups in Somalia. This was aggressively pushed by Uganda, which has peacekeepers in Somalia, as well as Ethiopia, and the UN Security Council acted in December 2009.<sup>193</sup> The sanctions include suspension of military trade links, freezing of assets and travel bans on designated individuals found violating the arms embargo on Somalia.<sup>194</sup> While Eritrea has undoubtedly supported elements of the Somali insurgency, there

is a powerful sense in Asmara that it has been made a scapegoat for others' failings in that country.<sup>195</sup> Certainly, Ethiopia bears much greater responsibility for recent disasters in Somalia than Eritrea does.

It might appear ironic that Asmara would associate with Islamists considering its own earlier struggles with Islamic radicalism; but policy on Somalia is consistent with the objectives of the long conflict with Ethiopia.<sup>196</sup> The EPLF has always been prepared to enter short-term alliances in defence of perceived national interests, even when doing so appears to damage its international standing. It is emboldened at present owing to the anticipated gold bonanza, which it hopes will greatly strengthen its regional standing, regardless of other internal economic challenges.

### C. AFRICA AND THE WEST

These events have also revealed much about Eritrea's relations with wider Africa, including the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the AU.<sup>197</sup> The call for sanctions originated in IGAD, which is dominated by Ethiopia and had reached a consensus on Somalia policy, prompting Eritrea to abandon the organisation in 2007.<sup>198</sup> But the regime has long been critical, indeed contemptuous, of much of what it interprets as going on in Africa more broadly. Isaias is especially scornful of Western influence, and the media regularly dismisses what are described as farcical consensus-building and power-sharing arrangements in Zimbabwe and Kenya that are seen as appeasement of donors. It also argues that its form of government is more honest and realistic than that of states on the continent that feel a need to please the West with democratic gestures.<sup>199</sup>

Eritrea has had solid relations which individual African states at particular times – notably Rwanda, Uganda and Libya – but it has never been comfortable in the AU. This is partly because its headquarters is in Addis Ababa, and Ethiopia has always wielded disproportionate influence in it. But more generally, the EPLF is convinced that the AU (and its OAU predecessor), like the UN, has never supported it and cannot be trusted.<sup>200</sup> As with many of the country's external relationships, this has been something

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<sup>190</sup>Connell, "The EPLF/PFDJ Experience", op. cit.; Healy, *Lost Opportunities*, op. cit.; A. McGregor, "Who's Who in the Somali Insurgency: A Reference Guide", The Jamestown Foundation, September 2009. See "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)", S/2010/91, 10 March 2010, pp. 20-24.

<sup>191</sup>This was almost certainly one factor behind the confrontation between Eritrean and Djiboutian forces in that year.

<sup>192</sup>The threat was vocalised by then-Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer, one of the administration's most outspoken critics of Eritrea. Elizabeth Blunt, "U.S. gives stark warning to Eritrea", BBC News, 8 September 2007. She continued this call after she left office. See for example, Jendayi E. Frazer, "Four Ways to Help Africa", *Wall Street Journal*, 25 August 2009.

<sup>193</sup>"Eritrea hit with UN sanctions for 'aiding insurgents'", BBC News, 23 December 2009. The resolution is UN Security Council Resolution 1907 (2009), S/Res/1907(2009) 23 December 2009.

<sup>194</sup>UN Security Council Resolution 1907, 23 December 2009. The resolution also allows for the freezing of funds, other financial assets and economic resources of Eritrean entities violating the arms embargo.

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<sup>195</sup>Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews in another capacity, 2003-2008.

<sup>196</sup>Connell, "The EPLF/PFDJ Experience", op. cit.

<sup>197</sup>Mengisteab, "What has Gone Wrong", op. cit., pp. 45-46.

<sup>198</sup>Eritrea had already withdraw from the AU, in November 2003, when it refused to condemn Ethiopia for not implementing the Border Commission ruling, as required by the Algiers Agreement. It returned only in July 2010.

<sup>199</sup>Crisis Group analyst interviews in another capacity, Asmara, July 2006, December 2007 and August 2008.

<sup>200</sup>Connell, *Against All Odds*, op. cit., pp. 282-283.

of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Eritrea's refusal to engage in conventional diplomatic networking (something at which Ethiopia is skilled), and its officials' tendency to use abrasive, even insulting language,<sup>201</sup> have consistently damaged relationships that were not necessarily doomed from the outset.

Relations with the West have long been problematic, as evidenced locally by interactions with the NGO sector. Fierce espousal of self-reliance drew plaudits in the 1990s but also led to a clash with some major NGOs.<sup>202</sup> The Eritrean position was that too much of the budgets of such entities went to overhead and that they frequently infringed on national sovereignty. The government welcomed funding but demanded total control over its use. NGO workers often mistook pride and sensitivity for hubris and misunderstood the traumatic historical context they worked in.<sup>203</sup> In the months before the war in 1998, most NGOs left the country, some angrily; after 2000, many were asked to return, but the relationship has deteriorated to the point where no major NGOs are active. The government says it has no use for culturally insensitive, political ignorant Western charity, and there is no problem Eritreans cannot solve. The breakdown is starkest with human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which are never granted visas; the regime is contemptuous of the idea a Western entity would lecture it on internal affairs.

Nonetheless, the path to the country's current predicament has not been linear. During the independence struggle, the EPLF may have scorned the notion of superpower patrons and converted its relative isolation into a political philosophy; but from the early 1990s, the government indicated a strong desire for Western alliances. Through that decade, relations were reasonably good with the U.S.<sup>204</sup> The Pentagon in particular saw Eritrea as a strong, unitary state in a hostile region, thus a potentially useful ally. President Clinton counted both Isaias and Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi as part of Africa's "renaissance". Isaias undoubtedly saw advantages in such an alliance.<sup>205</sup>

After independence, Israel regarded Eritrea as a potentially useful non-Arab, secular and military-minded partner in the Red Sea. The relationship was boosted when a

desperately ill Isaias was flown to Israel for medical treatment in 1993.<sup>206</sup> The Eritrean leadership admired the country and saw in its historical and geographical experience much that was familiar: a highly militarised state, surrounded by Arab and Islamist enemies and with an enviable combination of relative economic security and a well-tuned system of national service. A number of agreements were signed in the mid-1990s, and the strengthening ties complemented Isaias's pro-U.S. position. He was happy to openly insult partners in the Arab world if it meant improved relations, rejected joining the Arab League and made clear that he would resist an Arabised Red Sea, where, with Eritrean cooperation, Israel maintained a naval and military presence.<sup>207</sup>

During the war, Eritrea suspected a pro-Ethiopia bias in both Israel and the U.S., but the relationships recovered for a time. The Israelis continued to see Eritrea as a friend, and the U.S. appreciated its support following the 11 September 2001 attacks and again when it (like Ethiopia) joined the "coalition of the willing" in the build-up to the war in Iraq. But matters soon began to unravel.<sup>208</sup> The U.S. irritated Isaias by reacting cautiously to an offer of a military base, in part because it was not persuaded that Eritrea provided the most stable environment. There were also growing concerns about Eritrea's increasingly poor human rights record; even the Pentagon was chary about full cooperation with such a prickly, apparently trigger-happy government.<sup>209</sup> In the burgeoning war on terror, Ethiopia was a more attractive option.

Eritrea blamed the U.S. in particular for failing to persuade Ethiopia to abide by the Boundary Commission ruling. By the time the U.S. endorsed (albeit reluctantly) Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in 2006, relations had reached a nadir and descended into public slanging matches.<sup>210</sup> Washington was increasingly irate at the prolonged detention of four Eritrean employees who had worked at its Asmara embassy; these individuals, accused of sedition and in effect of spying for the U.S., remain in prison.<sup>211</sup> Washington closed Eritrea's consulate in Oakland, Cali-

<sup>201</sup> For example, Isaias has bluntly and publicly told off both the OAU and the Arab League at various times in undiplomatic language; see *ibid*, pp. 282-283, and Mengisteab and Yohannes, *Anatomy*, op. cit., pp. 192-193.

<sup>202</sup> Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, op. cit., chapter 3.

<sup>203</sup> Crisis Group analyst's field notes and interviews, various locations in Eritrea, 1997 to 2000.

<sup>204</sup> D. Connell, "Eritrea and the United States: Towards a New U.S. Policy", in Reid, *External Relations*, op. cit., pp. 135-136. The U.S. military was also interested in port facilities.

<sup>205</sup> Mengisteab and Yohannes, *Anatomy*, op. cit., pp. 164-192.

<sup>206</sup> Historically Israel had stronger ties with Ethiopia and at times was actively hostile to the movements fighting for Eritrean independence.

<sup>207</sup> Mengisteab and Yohannes, *Anatomy*, op. cit., pp. 192-201. It is widely believed that a 1995 agreement gave Israel a base in the Eritrean Dahlak Islands – a claim Asmara continually denies.

<sup>208</sup> D. Connell, "Eritrea: On A Slow Fuse" in R. I. Rotberg (ed.), *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Washington, 2005); Connell, "The EPLF/PFDJ Experience", op. cit.

<sup>209</sup> Connell, "Eritrea and the United States", op. cit., pp. 136-137.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>211</sup> The total of arrested or detained embassy employees and family members was 48. In addition, no visas are being issued to U.S. government employees even to repair the embassy. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, 22 August 2010.

fornia, a financial lifeline between the west-coast diaspora and the homeland, and, as noted, threatened to put Eritrea on its state sponsors of terrorism list. The arrival of the Obama administration has made little difference, although at the outset there were several efforts to explore a better relationship with Isaias that, U.S. officials said, were rebuffed.<sup>212</sup> Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and other U.S. officials have since issued repeated warnings about Asmara's behaviour in Somalia.<sup>213</sup>

The Eritreans are especially angry at the U.S. because they feel unreasonably rebuffed and misjudged by the one Western power with which they felt they might work closely. But ties are similarly poor with the Security Council. The UN is seen as a toothless organisation, which usually does the bidding of its most powerful members; often does nothing at all of significance; and ignores the needs of small states. It is condemned for not protecting Eritrea in the 1950s and 1960s, then ignoring it once it was compelled to turn to violence. Relations have often been reasonably good with individual European states, notably Italy, Germany and the Scandinavians, but the EU – though a major past donor – has clashed with the regime over human rights and Somalia. The UK, seen as a key ally of Ethiopia and the U.S., is a particular target of opprobrium.

#### D. CURRENT DIRECTIONS

Eritrea's foreign policy can be considered the product of its geopolitical position at the southern end of the Red Sea, adjacent to a vast, turbulent north-east African hinterland and an equally volatile Middle East. Its regional relations over twenty years reflect an effort to use to advantage a strategic location that has often been a curse. Modern history has been shaped by the fact that it has been fought over by external actors and was a Cold War battleground.<sup>214</sup> The recent escalation in competition between Israel and Iran in the Red Sea demonstrates the case. Eritrea seems to play a double game, maintaining enough of a relationship with Israel, while reaching out to that old partner's nemesis, Iran. Since 2008, Eritreans and Iranians have agreed to collaborate on vague economic and cultural projects; ambassadors have been exchanged, and talk abounds of an Iranian presence in some form around Assab. Asmara denies any Iranian military presence in the area; an Iranian interest in the Assab oil refinery is

more likely.<sup>215</sup> Israel is alarmed, and Eritrea presumably hopes to benefit from a standoff in the southern waters of the Red Sea.<sup>216</sup> It is a dangerous game.

Other relationships appear more conventional, aimed at developing badly-needed commercial links and diplomatic support. Libya, Qatar and China, for example, have each in their way and for different reasons been willing to cooperate. The regime is seeking to recoup a decade and more of foreign policy losses. While some of these losses are the result of its own mistakes, not all are.

The EPLF's foreign policy is dominated by a political culture characterised by deep-seated militarism, in internal as well as external dealings, suspicion of outsiders, however defined, and long cycles of violence in the region.<sup>217</sup> It is the result also of chronic disunity that has characterised politics over a half-century and which the EPLF has sought to resolve once and for all. This isolationist and angry political culture is rooted in the perceptions of past betrayal and the brutal, uncompromising nature of the liberation struggle. For the EPLF to overcome that aspect of its inheritance would have required a degree of imagination and flexibility of which the current leadership seems incapable. But similar imagination and flexibility are needed by the international community when dealing with that leadership.

The EPLF also has had to contend with the special status Ethiopia enjoys as the region's powerhouse, the focus of international attention and (on the whole) favour. Asmara has not always helped itself in terms of image abroad;<sup>218</sup> but there is logic in its pursuit of particular goals, and its regional wars and interventions need to be understood in those terms. Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and Ethiopia are Eritrea's backyard. While the EPLF's responses to the foreign policy opportunities and challenges they present are usually militaristic in nature, there is a thin line between insecurity and arrogance, and Eritrea exhibits both. The international community erred seriously in 2002 in not putting greater pressure on Ethiopia to fully implement the Boundary Commission's findings. Asmara's resulting perception that the world is behind Ethiopia, no matter what it does, is one of the most dangerous sources of instability in the region today.

<sup>212</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, November 2009, Washington, D.C.

<sup>213</sup> See, for example, "Off to Africa, Clinton to pledge new Somali aid", Associated Press, 2 August 2009.

<sup>214</sup> Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn*, op. cit.

<sup>215</sup> "No limit for Iran-Eritrea cooperation: president", *Tehran Times*, 20 May 2008; see also [www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/eritrea-iran-foreign-relations](http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/eritrea-iran-foreign-relations).

<sup>216</sup> "Iran and Israel in Africa: a search for allies in a hostile world", *The Economist*, 4 February 2010.

<sup>217</sup> Reid, "Eritrea's Role and Foreign Policy", op. cit.

<sup>218</sup> S. Healy, "Hard and Soft Power: Some Thoughts on the Practice of Eritrean Foreign Policy", in Reid, *External Relations*, op. cit.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Just a decade ago, Eritrea might reasonably have been described as challenged but stable; today it is under severe stress, if not yet in full-blown crisis and the basic stability on which the government has relied for so long is increasingly illusory. While Eritrea is not likely to undergo dramatic upheaval in the near future, it is weakening steadily. Its economy is in freefall, the expected gold boom notwithstanding, poverty is rife, and the authoritarian political system is haemorrhaging its legitimacy in the eyes of millions. Sovereignty is being compromised from within – in terms of the flight of Eritreans from the country and the withdrawal of support for the regime – in what is potentially a graver long-term crisis for the regime than even the 1998-2000 war. It is a question of when, not if change comes; Eritrea cannot continue on its trajectory without serious worsening of current problems, which would open fissures in the socio-economic and political landscape. Income anticipated from gold production will likely not be used to restore the ailing domestic economy but rather to enhance military capacity, with dangerous regional implications.

President Isaias shows no willingness to modify his authoritarian stance, and there is little prospect of internal reform. If anything, the regime can be expected to intensify repression in the face of growing disengagement by the population and greater opposition outside the country. Increased international isolation, and in particular difficulties with immediate neighbours, will, if the past is a good basis for judging, be used to justify continued military mobilisation. The opposition in exile can be expected to gain strength over time and pose a more coherent threat to the regime. Whether it can form a convincing government in waiting remains to be seen, as does whether the members of the main opposition coalition can overcome serious differences. If there is not a cogent, united opposition, regional, ethnic and religious groupings might emerge around particular parties and sectional interests, which could potentially be catastrophic for national unity. Young Muslims are a possible source of serious opposition, awaiting only mobilisation.

More broadly, the bulk of the population is disengaged from the state, but although there is no open protest, the government cannot take this for granted over the long term. Eritreans are famously long suffering; but the armed liberation struggle was the product of desperation, and the same could happen again if the current situation continues. Increasingly angry and anxious citizens cannot be expected to maintain their silence much longer, especially if economic conditions continue to deteriorate. The country is full of increasingly desperate young men with access to guns, thus potentially a force for sudden change. At present, protest manifests itself only in illegal flight

from the country, but a point may soon be reached when anger is turned inward toward the state itself.

A professional core of the Eritrean Defence Forces remains loyal, either to Isaias himself or to particular generals. As long as the president and the generals need one another, that core will remain loyal to the state, but the situation will become more complex if their relationship begins to break down. The army has for some time been the key stabilising force in Eritrea, indeed the focal point of the EPLF's social engineering project, but it is becoming less stable, riddled with corruption and increasingly weak in terms of trained men, adequate equipment and morale. Conscripts are underpaid, undernourished and deeply frustrated. National service could well prove one of the catalysts for the regime's eventual collapse. Some form of demobilisation is urgently needed but cannot happen overnight, as society and the economy are incapable of absorbing tens of thousands of former soldiers without serious upheaval. A holistic approach to economic development and demobilisation is crucial and requires outside help.

There is a clear relationship between Eritrea's militarised foreign policy and its brand of domestic authoritarianism. The government claims that the tough neighbourhood it lives in and the consequent security threats require constant and pro-active vigilance and thus a high degree of mobilisation. It is not wholly wrong in this, and though it overstates the case and seriously overreacts to its situation, it is inadequate and unhelpful to portray Eritrea as the regional spoiler. It is the product of the political environment of the Horn as a whole. Ultimately, everything is interconnected, and a more comprehensive, integrated approach is needed by the international community to treat the severe problems confronting Eritrea and the region.

It would be folly to push the regime into a corner: isolation might well embolden Ethiopia while fuelling Isaias's determination to wage war by other means and prove he was right all along about the international community. On the other hand, political and economic engagement – based on a clear-eyed assessment that conditions aid and improved trade to long-promised national elections and implementation of the long-delayed constitution but also on greater understanding of Eritrea's past and current grievances, particularly with Ethiopia, might just remove one of the regime's key rationales and ultimately empower more reform-minded and outward-looking elements within the PFDJ and wider Eritrean society.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 21 September 2010**



APPENDIX A

MAP OF THE HORN OF AFRICA



## APPENDIX B

### GLOSSARY

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ARS	Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia
AU	African Union
<i>Derg</i>	Amharic for “committee” or “council”, shorthand for the socialist regime in Ethiopia, 1974-1987
EDF	Eritrean Defence Forces
EIJ	Eritrean Islamic Jihad
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NIF	National Islamic Front
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
PFDJ	People’s Front for Democracy and Justice
SPLA	Sudan People’s Liberation Army
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front
UIC	Union of Islamic Courts
UNMEE	United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea