

The Outbreak of Peace and Symbolism of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Border

By Rida Lyammouri

Summary

The opening of the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea symbolized an important phase in the newfound relations between the two. Since their rapprochement in June 2018, events have occurred at a frenzied pace, yet much was still in the political arena and removed from demonstrating tangible benefits to average citizens. By opening the border, the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea changed that. Yet the border opening also reveals an insight into a previously isolated and largely closed nation in Eritrea, raising crucial questions in the process.

A red carpet was placed to welcome Eritreans to Ethiopia as two land border crossings between the countries were reopened in September, in Zalambessa, Ethiopia.



Source: AFP

The Multiple Lives of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border

The Ethiopia-Eritrean border is a powerful symbol of the status of relations between the two countries. In one sense, the meaning of the border itself has changed frequently over time. It first gained importance during the Italian colonial period, when Eritrea was formed as a colony of the emerging European power, while Ethiopia resisted such advances. Following the defeat of Italy in World War II and a period of British oversight, the border became less significant with Eritrea's incorporation into Ethiopia, albeit with a great deal of autonomy. Then in 1962 the border's reducing importance continued, when the Eritrean Parliament voted to abolish its federal agreement with Ethiopia, and instead become a more integral part of the country.¹

¹ Jon Abbink, "Briefing: The Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Dispute," *African Affairs*, 551-565 (1998).

Following this period of decline, however, the border began to rise in significance once again. This came to a head in 1991, when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) emerged victorious in their struggle against the Derg dictatorship in Addis Ababa and Asmara respectively. Defeat of Derg against EPLF Thisled to Eritrea's independence in 1993, restoring the border back to one of international sovereign status.²

Nonetheless, given the close relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the fact that the Tigray and Afar ethnic groups live on both sides, it was never too much of a hard border. For example, economic agreements between the sides agreed they would utilize one currency for a time, while the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa would be free ports for Ethiopia.³

Yet the border did harden over time, particularly as Eritrea and Ethiopia began to differ on a range of considerations, most notably in the realm of economics. Matters came to a head when fighting broke out in 1998 in what became known as the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. At this point the border assumed a new significance – a source of overt conflict between two previously brotherly nations.⁴

The seeds of conflict lay in both economic disagreement and a personal history between the leaders of both nations, Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia and Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea, who had served as rebel commanders against a common enemy for some time.⁵ But the main flashpoint centered around where the border actually lay, given that it hadn't been officially demarcated. In this sense, the nondescript border town of Badme assumed a greater significance.⁶

2. Ibid.

3. Kjetil Tronvoll and Tekeste Negash , "Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War," 2000.

4 Jon Abbink, "Ethiopia–Eritrea: proxy wars and prospects of peace in the horn of Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*," Volume 21, 2003, Issue 3, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0258900032000142446?journalCode=cjca20>

5. Jon Abbink, Review of Negash,T. and Tronvoll,K. "Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War", *African Affairs*, 100 (401), 656 - 658 (2001).

6. Terrence Lyons, "The Ethiopia–Eritrea Conflict and the Search for Peace in the Horn of Africa," *Review of African Political Economy*, Volume 36, 2009, Issue 120, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03056240903068053>

International Re-involvement

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) was established as a result of the Algiers Agreement to end the war between the two neighbors in 2000, bring the international community back into the picture regarding Ethiopia-Eritrea border dynamics. The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was also set up in 2000 to keep each other apart along the border. In this sense, the border morphed into a frozen flashpoint, which required international management in determining its final status, but also to maintain peace across it.

The EEBC actually ruled that Badme was part of Eritrea, yet the decision went unimplemented by Ethiopia, while a vitiated UNMEE pulled out in 2008. The failure of both the EEBC and UNMEE, symbolized the inability of international efforts to resolve the disputed border, which in turn became a militarized zone.

Eritrea's policy of indefinite national conscription has led it to become one of the largest sources of non-war time migration in the world (see below), with many of those attempting to clandestinely flee across the nation's borders.⁷ Combined with the militarization along the Ethiopia border, and a reported a shoot-to-kill policy, the border became both a source of hope for those who could cross it, but also a source of fear for those brazen enough to risk the journey.⁸

In this sense, the Ethiopia-Eritrea border has seen many lives, ranging from an inconsequential internal administrative division, to one of the most militarized boundaries in the world. With the surprising Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement of 2018, the border now plays another new and crucial role – that of a symbolic indicator of the emerging peace between the erstwhile foes.

7. Patrick Kinglsey, "It's Not at War, But up to 3% of its People have Fled. What is Going on in Eritrea?," July 22, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/22/eritrea-migrants-child-soldier-fled-what-is-going>

8. Martin Plaut, "Eritrea – Evidence of Shoot to Kill Policy as Group Gunned Down," December 16, 2016, <https://martinplaut.wordpress.com/2016/12/16/eritrea-evidence-of-shoot-to-kill-policy-as-group-gunned-down/>

A Border Opening?

On 11 September 2018, the date of the local New Year celebrated in parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Debay Sime-Bure and Serha-Zalambessa border crossings were officially re-opened after twenty years of closure. As two of the four major crossing points between the two nations, their opening was a symbolic step forward in the emerging peace being nurtured between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

In many ways, this was the first step with truly local significance. Various peace accords had been signed at a leadership level prior to this signaling a new era, but little concrete aspects had translated down to change ordinary lives. The border opening did just that – along with the resumption of flight and telecommunication connections. All three are indicative of the power of people-to-people relations, all the more important for communities that had been needlessly divided by politics and war for a generation. Many Eritreans have family in Ethiopia and vice-versa, and the resumed connections resulted in many heartwarming stories of long-lost relatives finally getting a chance to see each other. By allowing communities that have been divided for 20 years (for example, the Tigray ethnic group is found on both sides of the border) to interact, the peace process is strengthened to a point where reversing it becomes increasingly unlikely.

On 7 January, the local date for the celebration of Christmas, the Omhajer-Humera border crossing was also opened. In between these two events, there were indications that Eritrea has begun imposing restrictions on Ethiopian travelers across a border that had for a few months been free for Ethiopian and Eritrean citizens to cross without concern.⁹

Nonetheless, the openings have proceeded to change the nature of dynamics along the border, ushering in a new era of trade and people-to-people relations. Items such as construction materials are flowing from Ethiopia to Eritrea, while in return clothing and electronics flow in the other direction.¹⁰ The process has proceeded without much technical regulation regarding trade and tariffs

– aspects that contributed to the previous outbreak of hostilities between the two sides. Rather, with the openings centered around important local holidays, they appeared designed with public relations in mind more than anything, underpinning a lack of technical preparations. Instead, authorities thus far appear content to let the process unfold as an experiment, while they then study the results and make rules accordingly.¹¹ Yet the challenge is once the box has been opened, it will be difficult to come in and regulate it there after.

The Challenge of an Open Border to Eritrea

With that in mind, the potential restrictions imposed by Eritrea around the border make sense – even if the Eritrean population itself was not affected. The border opening is also a huge risk for Eritrea and especially its leader, Isaias Afwerki, given the high levels of migration from his country. Estimates centered around approximately 5,000 Eritreans leaving their country each month, prior to the outbreak of peace with Ethiopia.¹² The primary reason cited behind this is Eritrea's national service program, which is technically supposed to last 18 months, but in reality serves as an indefinite conscription program. This was partly a response to the Ethiopia war, and justified by Eritrea's leaders that the threat of additional conflict with its larger neighbor was always looming. With the new peace with Ethiopia, the legitimacy of the conscription program has been called into question – though little evidence of changes to its structure have been forthcoming from the Eritrean side.

In this sense, given the prevailing narrative of Eritrean migration, it would seem that opening the border with Ethiopia would serve as a major risk for Eritrea's political leadership. If there was a sudden mass exodus from the country, it would symbolize their mismanagement of the population, and serve as a key indicator of the illegitimacy of their governance system. In other words, by voting with their feet, Eritrean citizens would lay the hypocrisy of the Eritrean regime bare for all to see. Given the lack of technical preparations to regulate border traffic, the

9. Reuters, "Eritrea Closes Border Crossing to Ethiopians, Official and Residents Say," December 28, 2018, <https://af.reuters.com/article/eritreanews/idAFL8N1YX39G>

10. Elias Gebreselassie, "Business Hopes and Refugee Woes After Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Deal," October 23, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/business-hopes-refugee-woes-eritrea-ethiopia-peace-deal-181023102329405.html>

11. Ezega News, "Ethiopian Ministry of Revenues Preparing Trade Rules with Eritrea," November 2, 2018, <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/6749/Ethiopian-Ministry-of-Revenue-Preparing-Trade-Rules-with-Eritrea>

12. Alessandro Lanni, "5 Things Everyone Should Know About Eritrean Refugees," February 23, 2016, <https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/5-things-everyone-should-know-about-eritrean-refugees/>

risk of this occurring was heightened. In addition, the influx of materials, ideas, and people from Ethiopia also risk undermining the closed system which has been built exactly to keep out such potentially destabilizing influences.

Thus, after years of actively patrolling its borders in order to keep people in, Eritrea is suddenly allowing everyone to leave. It is a dramatic about-face, and one in which official communication regarding the dynamics of the new policy have not been forthcoming. Therefore, given the prevailing notion of the conditions within Eritrea, and the unclear direction as to how long and in what manner the border will remain functional, it would be natural to assume that a significant amount of the population would make an attempt to leave the country.

Yet, the results have perhaps not been as dramatic as that. By December 20, 2018 the European Commission reported 27,500 Eritrean refugees registration since September 11, 2018 when the borders opened.¹³ This is a clear increase from previous dynamics, as 4,000 refugees arrived in September and another 10,000 in October, up from an average of 2,000 per month previously in 2018.¹⁴ Very high numbers, but as high as one would expect when the border in a country like Eritrea is suddenly open for business? Eritrea's official population is unclear given the lack of a census and the years of migration, but is estimated to be 5,273,318 as of March 2019.¹⁵ In this sense, in the one-and-a-half months since citizens were given a free pass out of the country, less than 1% have taken up that offer.

Mitigating Factors

There are some mitigating factors to this of course. For starters, Eritrean citizens have been fleeing for years, depopulating the nation perhaps of those able and willing to take advantage of the new dynamics. Many of these have been the youth, escaping the aforementioned national conscription policy. Some have even speculated that Eritrea was willing to allow such a dynamic, in order to ensure that the youth do not form a ground swelling of anti-regime sentiment, similar to protest movements in

the Arab Spring and beyond.¹⁶

Additionally, given the family linkages, many new arrivals have not been registering as refugees, but rather staying with their families. Furthermore, many of the arrivals in Ethiopia have been women and children, attempting to unite with family members who had already fled. Some estimates have run as high as 90% of the population initially coming across the border has been women and children.¹⁷ Other studies have pointed to family reunification as an important motivation for cross-border movement.¹⁸

Yet on the other hand, the estimates of non-registered arrivals by November 2018 stood at about 5,000 – not an insignificant number, but not an overwhelming margin either.¹⁹ The motivation behind women and children wanting to reunite with family members may also suggest that pull factors may be just as important as the push factors of the situation in Eritrea itself. Finally, there has also been a number of Eritreans who have crossed the border for trade or other reasons, but plan to return back.²⁰

In this sense, the dynamics behind the border opening serve as a sort of quasi-victory for Afwerki. Yes, many have left, but really not as much as envisioned. UNHCR has already even reportedly revised their planning estimates downwards from 40,000 in the first three months to 24,000.²¹

There may be other explanations to consider as well. Travel within Eritrea is likely still regulated at some level, so it might be only those near the border who can take advantage of the new dynamics. Similarly, those who share ethnicity with groups in Ethiopia (primarily the Tigray and Afar group) may be more inclined to seek refuge there, while others in the country still try to flee towards Sudan with an eye to onwards travel to Europe and beyond. And others may be waiting to see how the

16. Valerie Frank, "The Questions no One is Asking About Eritrea," January 6, 2016, <https://africanarguments.org/2016/01/06/the-questions-no-one-is-asking-about-eritrea/>

17. Interview with humanitarian worker, November 2018.

18. European Commission, "Ethiopia: Influx of Eritrean Refugees," December 20, 2018, https://ercportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ercmaps/ECDM_20181220_Ethiopia_Eritrean_refugee.pdf

19. Interview with journalist, November 2018.

20. Adigrat and Zalambessa, "For the First Time in Years, Eritreans Can Leave their Country Freely," October 11, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/10/11/for-the-first-time-in-years-eritreans-can-leave-their-country-freely>

21. Interview with United Nations employee, November 2018.

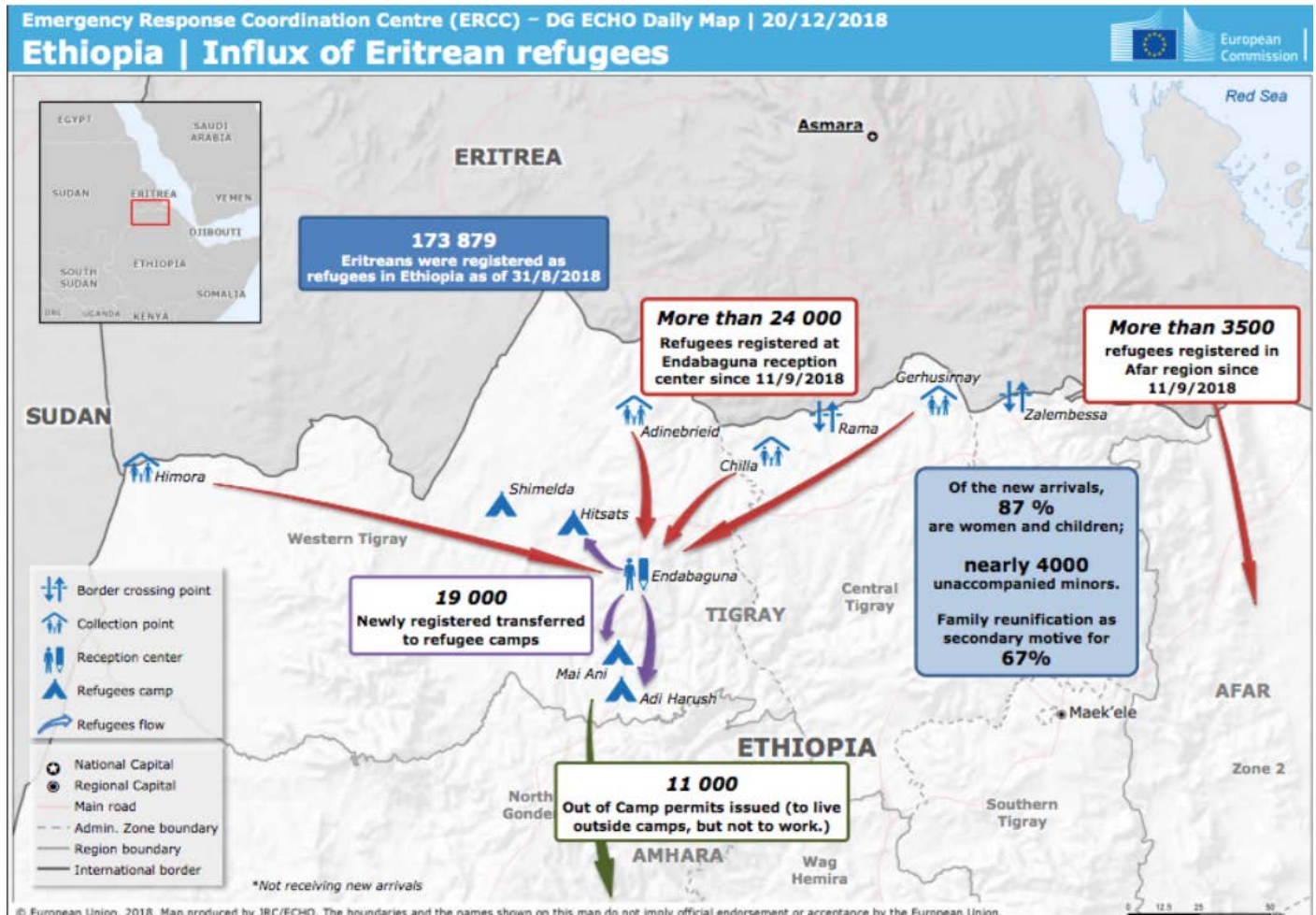
13. European Commission, "Ethiopia: Influx of Eritrean Refugees," December 20, 2018, https://ercportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ercmaps/ECDM_20181220_Ethiopia_Eritrean_refugee.pdf

14. Interview with humanitarian worker, November 2018.

15. World O Meters, "Eritrea Population," Accessed March 17, 2019, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/eritrea-population/>

whole situation plays out, given the evolving dynamics and the unclear communication about new policies. If things are changing this quickly, perhaps the ramifications

will be felt in Eritrea soon enough – so for this who are risk-averse and/or have waited it out this long, perhaps waiting a bit longer will result in rewards internally.



Influx of Eritrean Refugees as of December 20, 2018. Source: European Union.

The Border as a Boost to Afwerki?

Yet it is hard not to see how the results thus far have in fact bolstered Afwerki’s legitimacy, rather than tarnished it. For years, Eritrea has been saying their domestic situation is not that bad, and those fleeing in large droves are economic migrants, rather than political asylum seekers.²² Yet the prevailing narrative from some has

been that Eritrea is essentially an ‘open air prison.’²³ If the situation is closer to the latter than the former, then one would expect a deluge of Eritreans fleeing to Ethiopia at the first chance they got.

The opening of the border in that sense would be a huge risk for Isaias Afwerki, who has already taken a major risk by embracing a former foe, and one in which his entire system of rule has been built around combatting. His ability to manage this reform process is a key X-factor going forward, given that it is inevitable, the changes to foreign policy eventually lead to demands of changes to

22. Madote.com, “Eritrean Migrants Know What to Say to Falsely Gain Political Asylum in the West: Yemane Gebreab,” September 2016, <http://www.madote.com/2016/09/eritrean-migrants-know-what-to-say-to.html>

23. Fatma Naib, “Escaping Eritrea’s ‘open prison,’” October 4, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/10/eritrean-refugees-lampedusa-africa-migrants-2014102135056166549.html>

domestic policy. Yet the initial results from the border's opening and the limited repercussions internally point to positive returns for him.

The situation is still evolving of course, and greater numbers of citizens could come in the following months once word spreads about conditions in Ethiopia. Yet Afwerki clearly felt secure enough to allow the border to open, a major risk to his legitimacy if much of his country had voted against him with their feet. For the moment, however, it seems his calculation paid off. As one prominent New York Times headline in the past read, 'It's Bad in Eritrea, but Not That Bad.'²⁴ The significant but not overwhelming migration from Eritrea in the aftermath of its open border policy with Ethiopia would attest to that.

In this sense, the Ethiopia-Eritrea border is taking on a new meaning once again – both as a clear symbol of peace in the emerging friendship between the historically allied nations, but surprisingly also one of reaffirming rather than challenging current leadership dynamics on both sides.

24. Bronwyn Bruton, "It's Bad in Eritrea, but Not That Bad," June 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/opinion/its-bad-in-eritrea-but-not-that-bad.html>

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