

It is all about access to the sea!

By Mekonnen Kassa

It is natural for individuals to entertain differing views on matters of national importance, but the opinions put forth by some Ethiopian pundits, bloggers and “journalists” on reasons why Ethiopia went to war against Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) are more for pedestrian pandering than anything else. Theirs was not based on prevalent condition in the Horn of Africa and certainly not based on factual evidence on the state of political conditions inside Ethiopia.

The reality was that the extremist UIC organization, as if its own empty threats to use force to annex part of Ethiopia were not enough, had become a host to a new and historical enemies of Ethiopia. The new ones included ONLF, OLF and Shabiya of Eritrea. OLF and ONLF are armed guerella groups fighting for the secession of Southern and Eastern regions of Ethiopia, respectively. Both groups are armed and trained by the government of Eritrea (Shabiya), a former sessionist movement which fought against the rest of Ethiopia for more than 30 and succeeded to declare independence in 1993. The old and historical enemies who have a vested interest to keep Ethiopia mired in conflict include our neighbours Egypt and Sudan, and some other Arab countries.

Ethiopia was within its right to fight an enemy that repeatedly declared war against it, issued an ultimatum, and threatened its access to sea. Had Ethiopia allowed UIC to hold on to power and stay any longer, the whole Somalia would have become a safehaven to all that threaten the security, territorial integrity and economic interest of Ethiopians.

The national security and economic well being of Ethiopia was compromised in 1993 when Ethiopia become a landlocked nation because of the hasitly made decision by the transitional government of Ethiopia. EPRDF leaders who made up the transitional government should have researched precedent cases, consulted experts, and waited until they had the mandate from the people, by the way of election, to enter into lasting international agreements involving Ethiopia. But as the result of their inexperience, EPRDF leaders took Isayas’s word at it’s face value and signed for sessesion of Eritrea without a written and binding agreement that secured access to sea for Ethiopia.

I cannot fanthom how Meles Zenawi who in 1991 told David Mercer that he “wanted to make Ethiopia a big player in the Middle East; ranking alongside Egypt” failed to appreciate the importance of secured access to the Red Sea to achieve his vision.

EPRDF’s blunder of Chambelian proportion has made Ethiopia a hostage to the goodwill of its neighbours Djibouti and Somalia. A goodwill that can easily be reversed at anytime when a political group that harbors ill will towards Ethiopia comes to power or when a rich country pays the right price for their cooperation to deny Ethiopia access to the sea.

There is a heightened concern as we hear news recently that the control of the port of Djibouti has been transferred to a company owned by Dubai. This is the same company which would have managed some US ports had the US Congress not intervened and susquently nullified the contract citing American national security concerns. Given the Arab world’s animosity towards Ethiopia, the ownership of Port of Djibouti by a Dubai company should be a concern to Ethiopians. The long documented hostile Arab activity against Ethiopia aside, it is sufficient to mention that it was Qatar, an Arab nation and the current chair of the UN security council, that

introduced a resolution and called for a unilateral withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from Somalia. Qatar and other Arab countries never voiced a concern while Somalia - a card carrying member of the Arab League- wallowed in a lawless state for over fifteen years. But one becomes suspicious to see them become gravely concerned the day they heard news that Ethiopia is protecting its national interest by engaging the UIC ragtag army.

Given the uncertain future of Port of Djibouti, Ethiopia's access to the sea may become limited to the North West through Port Sudan or to the South through Somalia. Sudan, another Arab League nation, is unreliable as it has its own political problems which forces it to have an on-again and off-again relationship with Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Sudanese government can turn against Ethiopia at anytime. That leaves us with Somalia, and if it were to be controlled by unfriendly government that claims territory from Ethiopia and plays host to our internal and external enemies, then Ethiopia would not be able to gain access to sea through Somalia. We need only point to Eritrea to illustrate the consequence of having unfriendly neighbours.

Fortunately, at least for now, we do not have to worry much. Former transitional government turned current government leaders have wised up and made a farsighted and well thoughtout decision, and mitigated these risks by driving out UIC and helping establish a friendly government in Somalia. Ethiopia's action also has the added benefit of forcing Djibouti to keep its ports open and fiercely compete for our business. And by the way, that is already happening. There is a Pepsi vs. Coca like battle between Barbera and Djibouti ports resulting in reduced cost and better service for Ethiopian import and export business needs.

As for the other alleged reason, namely the governments attempt to draw attention away from domestic political repression and human right violation, of course there is a lot to be desired to improve the situation. But it is comical to claim the government created "bogeymen" and went to war as the result of political problems at home. Because I do not believe the domestic problems in Ethiopia are grave enough to require risking a war with a neighbouring country just to distract the population or the international community. Whatever problem there is may be noise made by a few Ethiopians abroad and a few more at home disgruntled over the incarceration of former CUD leaders. I doubt it if the "pundits" and "journalists" travelled outside of the capital city and polled public opinion in places like Oromo, Afar, Somalia, Tigray, and Benishangul before they broadcasted their allegations. Had they done that, they would have found the situation far from their allegation, and if not a support to the government, then at least they would have found that people are living peacefully and going about their daily business.

We have heard the opposition sympathizers, some of whom never set foot in Ethiopia for over 30 years overload the internet with their account of the situation in Ethiopia. I think their allegation is based on what they hear from the city that overwhelmingly voted for the opposition. If that is the case, then their assessment can be likened to measuring Bush's approval rating by polling the residents of Washington, DC where 90% of the people voted against Bush.

There is nothing new, wars have been fought, deals have been made, borders have been drawn to secure access to the sea and to create a security buffer zone. Ethiopia is not different and has to fight for her right to secure unfettered access to the sea. But I think the war in Somalia is a band-aid solution. The Ethiopian government has a second chance to secure access to sea for Ethiopia through negotiation when the demarcation talks with Eritrea resumes. Unless Ethiopia gains her own access to sea, there will never be a lasting peace in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan or Djibouti. Let us not mistake the "absence of war for peace." Ethiopians will have to continue to go to war for their rightful access to sea because their continued existence depends on it.