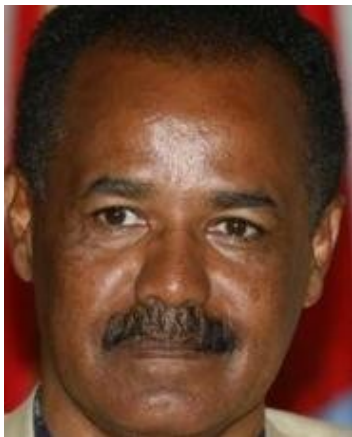


What is Issayas Up To?

The Politics of Border Demarcation

By Genenew Assefa, May 19, 2008



Once again Issayas has drawn our attention by yet another of his hazardous military escapades --- the hallmark of his leadership and Eritrea consistent pattern of belligerence towards neighboring states. According to credible reports and President Ismail Omar Guelleh himself, the Eritrean army is menacing Djibouti by crossing its border in brazen violation of international norms that govern relations between adjacent nations. On these accounts, the Eritrean army is posing an existential threat to this strategic city state. Through, as it were, a military construction project of fortification roughly 9 kilometers deep into the tiny former French colony whose purpose and geo-political implication is yet to be deciphered.

Meanwhile in Ethiopia, the motive behind Issayas' recent military jaunt has become a subject of wide range of speculation tinged with a modicum level of anxiety. Some are concerned that Issayas' objective might be cutting Ethiopia off her chief international trade outlet and subsequently reverse the country's double-digit economic growth below Eritrea's own dismal level. Coming as it did in the immediat aftermath of Eritrea's expulsion of UNMEE, others are worried that Eritrea's sudden thrust into Djibouti could be a tactical maneuver to stretch Ethiopia's defense lines in a build-up to an all-out a multi-pronged offensive.

As it is a daunting task to accurately decode what Issayas may have up his sleeves, these speculative prognostics of Eritrea's intensions cannot be lightly dismissed. However, given its reduced war-making capacity since the tracings it sustained in 1998-2000, it is less likely that

Eritrea's breach of Djibouti's borders has any military objective vis-a-vis Ethiopia per se. Not so much because Issayas does not relish the thought of avenging the ignominious debacle his army suffered during the Bademe war: But rather because he does not have the means to ignite another full-fledged confrontation with Ethiopia. Not at least after Issayas has been served notice of the perilous consequences that he would have to bear if Eritrea openly attacks Ethiopia. Surely Issayas must have taken due note of the meaning of Meles' cryptically worded ominous warning that if Eritrea were to again invade his country, Ethiopia will make sure that it won't happen for the third time around. Full of himself as he is and unaccustomed to heed warnings, especially from those that, at one point at any rate, he contemptuously dismissed as incompetent amateurs, Issayas may not be deterred by any cautionary advice no less from his nemesis, Meles Zenawi. Nevertheless, had Issayas had the military wherewithal, the propitious moment to attack his erstwhile foe would have been in 2006: a time when Ethiopia's army was chasing the Eritrean-backed ragtag UIC Jihadist militia as far as the Somali-Kenyan border. Neither could Issayas' military foray into Djibouti be explained in terms of an Eritrean interim plan to sever Ethiopia from her international commercial life line. For such a plan to work, Eritrea would have had to first overthrow the sovereign and lawful government of the Republic of Djibouti and risk direct collusion with France. Besides, Issayas knows that such a high stakes gamble would also bring Ethiopia into the fray. For blocking a country's legitimate trade route is tantamount to an open declaration of war – a war that Issayas knows that would by no means end before and until a regime change occurs either in Asmara or Finfine.

Plausible explanation of Eritrea's latest aggression must, therefore, be sought elsewhere. As bizarre and dangerous as it may seem to many, Eritrea's sudden military penetration into Djibouti may be motivated by a diplomatic objective in relation to Ethiopia. In other words, Issayas may have an eye on regaining the diplomatic initiative and momentum that, despite the 2002 Ethio-Eritrean Border commission's (EEBC) decision, Ethiopia seized as a result of Meles' 2004 five-point peace proposal presented as a response to the Commission's unfavorable ruling on the flashpoint village of Bademe. To explain this strange puzzle we need to backtrack a little.

As is well known, Issayas has made border demarcation the linchpin of his country's both domestic and foreign policy. Ignoring the damning decision made by the Damage Compensation

Commission that held Eritrea responsible for the 1998-2000 war, Issayas has taken comfort in the EEBC's decision and latched on to the Commission's ruling on Bademe. Small thought it might be in the grand scheme of things, the EEBC'S decision has, at least psychologically, lessened the devastation Eritrea suffered during the 1998-2000 war that Issayas himself caused. But EEBC's ill thought-out conclusion notwithstanding, Eritrea has not been same after the war. The country's promising start and the widespread euphoria both at home and abroad about its bright and prosperous future have all but evaporated. Asmara's self-assured talk of turning Eritrea into an instant Asian Tiger is no longer trumpeted at every forum and on every conceivable occasion. In fact, Eritrea's economy since the war has been continuously declining to a point where, according to FAO, two-thirds of its population has become dependent on food aid. Worse still, starved as it is for raw material and foreign currency, Eritrea's manufacturing sector is also on the verge of collapse amid the disappearance of any productive economic activity. According to a 2007 Chatam House analysis, without Ethiopia, the country's chief pre-war external trade outlet, **'Eritrea's export (in 2007) was 20 million while its import reached 700 millions.** The document further says, **'Eritrea finds itself reliant on economic activity in foreign countries for its own economic survival-a far cry from the nationalist ideals of 'self-reliance'. Remittances have enabled the government to remain despite the disastrous state of the economy. They also fuel (and finance) migration and create a form of parasitic dependency, which paradoxically causes resentment and its aftermath have deprived Eritrea of its key economic role as the external trading partner of Ethiopia'**.

The reverberation of the devastation of the war is also felt in the political and social spheres as well. By all reckoning, Eritrea today has become a virtual police state where its citizens are mortified to even whisper their complaints about the long bread lines. After almost all the top veteran EPLF leaders were suppressed, Issayas, once revered as a founding father, has become a feared man that no one dares to question much less cross. Incidences of disappearances and summery arrests are rampant as are secrete detention camps where no one knows what happens to the unfortunate who are cast into these dreaded gulags. At the social level, although Issayas recently, in a typical Orwellian twist said, **'I can assure you that in spite of the low GDP growth in this country, the quality of life has been improving'**, life in fact has become almost unbearable for Eritrean citizens. The Chatam House report states, **'The Sawa military training**

center served as a laboratory for social engineering and indoctrination with the implicit aim of alienating the youth from their family, faith and community. Mobilization (and the threat of war) was seen to help an authoritarian leadership to keep tight control of the country.' The upshot of all this has been alarming mass exodus of Eritrea's youth that is depleting the already conscription-induced reduction of the country's labor force. The above cited report again says, **'The pressure of outward migration remains high, with an estimated 1000 people a month fleeing to Sudan in late 2006 and early 2007'. Hundreds also flee to Ethiopia every month at the risk of being killed when crossing the tightly guarded border'**. The irony is that after thirty years of struggle to free themselves and barely 17 years of independence from Ethiopia, those who can afford to pay 5000 Nakfa and bold enough to put their lives on the line, trudge to Ethiopia to say in the country or rejoin their families abroad. Never tired of shifting responsibility to others, in a recent interview with Reuters, President Afeworki explained away the alarming rate of flight out of his fearsome regime in these bizarre way. **'It is an orchestrated, organized operation financed by the CIA. It is an orchestrated attempt to deplete this nation of young. CIA station offices are involved.....Brittan's intelligence service and the UNHCR are also behind it.'**

In short, Eritrea today is in dire straits as it unable to come up with any viable policy to address the redoubtable challenges wrought by its own adventurous and incompetent leadership. Desperate as it is, the government's official response to the mounting crisis has been blaming the prolonged no-war no-peace situation with Ethiopia brought ostensibly, according to Issayas, by Meles' dilatory tactic' that stalled the border demarcation process. Issayas is clinging on to this 'delay' as if his regime's life depends on it. Every police failure in Eritrea since then has been attributed to Meles and the border demarcation impasse. As the leadership crises deepen, Issayas' furtive ranting and raving has turned against the international community. He holds the AU, the UN, the EU and especially the US responsible for not putting sufficient pressure on Ethiopia to comply with the EEBC's decision. At a regional level, Eritrea has become a pariah state, isolated from the AU, IGAD, and the Sana Group amid constant bickering with each and every neighboring country in the Horn of Africa.

As frustration soars and the isolation from the international state system worsens, Issayas has sunk to a level where he has to rely on multinational terrorist groups and armed insurgencies to promote his agenda of destabilizing Ethiopia and the sub-region as a whole. Nevertheless, playing the terrorist card against Ethiopia has not yielded the desired results. For Ethiopia continues to successfully foil every one of Issayas' destabilization plots at minimal cost. Compared, that is, to the damage that the country would have inevitably suffered had the government opted for a head on clash with Eritrea. To the contrary, Issayas' covert links with A1 Ithad, the UIC and suchlike outfits has forced the US to review its previous perception of Eritrea as a reliable and strategic ally in its global war on terror. In fact, recently the State Department was very close to including Eritrea in its list of terror-sponsoring states that sent nervous jitters across the entire EPLF leadership. There is no question that such listing would have severely decreased Eritrea's vital remittance inflow, compounding Asmara's marginalization and dismemberment from virtually all international diplomatic arenas.

It is against this background, then, that Eritrea's armed thrust into Djibouti must be seen. As indicated above, Issayas' latest adventurous border crossing does not appear to be motivated by either territorial expansion or a desire to economically strangle Ethiopia. It seems that his objective is to create an artificial crisis and force Djibouti into a negotiated settlement: A settlement that culminates in an internationally monitored and highly profiled border-demarkation. It may be objected here that if Eritrea's goal is effecting boundary demarcation with Djibouti, why would it invade its tiny neighbor and risk international condemnation when it could have achieved the same result through diplomatic channels? Besides, it can be further argued, Djibouti needs no reminding of Eritrea's military capability to reach an agreement with Eritrea regarding their common border, even if the agreement is slightly disadvantageous to it. Granted, with one phone call Eritrea could initiate a border demarcation process with Djibouti. But it chose to take a calculated risk of forceful measure, confident in the knowledge that Djibouti, unlike Ethiopia, would not demand a return to **status-quo-ante** before entering into any face-to-face dialogue with Eritrea. This is partly because the city state does not have its own defense apparatus. In consequence it does not have to deal with a groundswell public pressure for a showdown with Eritrean aggression like the Ethiopia government did during Issayas' occupation of Bademe in 1998. Issayas also knows that France would not go to war with a sovereign African nation over a

patch of sandy real estate in the middle of nowhere and risk being attacked as a former colonially power that relapsed into a state that bullies a tiny black nation. Bounded as it is by a mutual defense pact, France would certainly come to Djibouti's rescue if her government were under immanent threat of being toppled by Eritrea. Short of such a grave scenario, Issayas knows that both Djibouti and France would do anything to avoid any violent conflict and prefer to reach a negotiated settlement, especially when there is no evidence that Issayas' ambition is fuelled by territorial aggrandizement.

But Djibouti is not completely without options in terms of getting rid of Issayas off its back short of consenting to border demarcation at gun point. It could, for instance, through its rich Arab friends approach Issayas with an attractive pecuniary deal, bribe, to call it by its true name, covered as compensation for the transportation cost and fortification expenses he incurred. Given his Mafia-like behavior not averse to using his military for extortionist purposes, Issayas might be seduced by such a deal and abandon whatever his original intention was when he dispatched his army to Djibouti. If this approach fails, president Guelleh could plead France to secretly put intense pressure on Issayas bringing on board the US in the effort that has military installation in the port city in the effort. If Issayas fails to be impressed by western secret pressure-diplomacy, then Djibouti has the option of launching a worldwide diplomatic campaign aimed at bringing the AU, the Arab league, the UN Security Council and the entire world diplomatic community against Eritrea. One or a combination of these options available to Djibouti could diffuse the tension and bring relief to all of us.

To return to our line of argument, on the face of it, it appears that what Issayas is after is a border demarcation. But he is not interested in just any ordinary boundary settlement in the conventional sense of the term which is often preceded by amicable negotiation through a common border commission. What Issayas might be aiming at is a highly publicized border demarcation that appears to be a UN or an AU brokered conflict resolution outcome that can also be showcased as best practice in terms of ending boundary disputes in the region. In this way, Issayas might believe that he would remind the world that the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict too must be solved in a similar fashion and along the way underscore Eritrea's readiness to end all conflicts with any of her neighbors through such globally accepted convention. In other words, since no one seems to

listen what Eritrea has been saying about the need to respect the UN-backed EEBC decision regarding demarcating the Ethio-Eritrean boundary, Issayas might have thought he would have a better chance of achieving his goal by a practical demonstration of how another war in the Horn of Africa could be averted. Hence, Issayas may have reckoned that through such a stratagem Eritrea could regain the diplomatic initiative and bring about international pressure on Ethiopia to comply with the EEBC ruling regarding the demarcation of the Ethio-Eritrea boundary. Given Eritrea's inability to respond to Meles' 2004 Five-Point Peace Proposal that effectively neutralize the diplomatic edge Eritrea had over Ethiopia on account of the EEBC decision, it is not surprising that Issayas could go to this length. For resuscitating the politics of border demarcation with Ethiopia is the only card he has.

Paradoxical as it may appear, the ironic complexity of the situation is such that, Issayas might not, after all, be seriously interested in an actual boundary settlement in Ethiopia—but the politics of it. Not at least as much as he is excited by the domestic propaganda value that the politics of 'border demarcation' has for his government. In other words, it is not too farfetched to assume that Issayas might actually prefer the no-war no-peace situation. For such a state of affairs serves him well to blame the country's miserable social and economic showing on the stalled demarcation process and to indefinitely suspend the Eritrean constitution. If, for instance, Eritrea were to possess Bademe how, then, would Issayas explain his government's disastrous policies? For, according to experts, given the bankruptcy of the leadership, these ill-conceived policies would continue to hurt Eritrea regardless of where in the Ethio-Eritrea border Bademe might fall. As it stands at present, except EPLF's own elites and the most gullible Diaspora elements, hardly any segment of the Eritrean society is naïve enough to believe that Bademe has any thing to do with the country's worsening political and economic situation. Since most Eritrean, in fact, care less about what happens to this village that has never been administered by independent Eritrea - Issayas also knows that his people would rather prefer their government end the impasse with its neighbor over Bademe. Indeed, it is hardly lost on any one that normalization of relations with Ethiopia would be a greater boost to Eritrea's depressed economy than what ever could be possibly had from assertion of jurisdiction over this frontier village. All this can not be a mystery to Issayas. What then explains the obsession with Bademe?

Many believe that Issayas' fixation with this border hamlet has to do with his own personal pride: for it is here where his ego was deflated and his legendary military prowess was tarnished. Ego, aside there appears to be, albeit less publicized, another reason why Issayas was self-destructively obsessed with Bademe, a cause, as it were, that scarcely no part of the Eritrean population feels emotional attachment with since the barren village had never figured in Eritrea's imagined community' during the long struggle for independence. Issayas however, might reckon that by forcing Meles to cede Bademe, he would spark a countrywide nationalist backlash that could result in the ouster of the prime minister and his government. Regardless of what good would Meles' downfall bring to Eritrea, Issayas is right about one thing. Years back, Meles, who alone opposed the war, would have certainly suffered immeasurable political damage had he, in conformity with the EEBC's decision, acceded to relinquish Bademe - once the focal point of a momentous patriotic fervor in Ethiopia. What Issayas forgets is that as time goes by, the heightened patriotic verve over Bademe is gradually receding to the background. In this regard, it is useful to bear in mind that what aroused mass indignation in Ethiopia was not Eritrea's claim over Bademe, but the unacceptable manner it pursued its claim.

In the light of the fact that Eritrean aggregation was reversed, though at great cost, Bademe's future no longer arouses the same level of countrywide emotional animation. As sobriety and levelheaded outlook is bound to prevail among the Ethiopian people, Meles and his government could calmly deliberate on Bademe's fate unperturbed by concerns about a nationalist backlash even if, in the interest of Ethiopia's long-term interest, the Ethiopian leadership is compelled to make an unpopular decision. Like most citizens in Ethiopia, what is today foremost in the minds of the urban population, the vector of mostly unexamined nationalism anywhere in the world, are a different set of issues. Many are preoccupied and will continue to be so for a long time to come by concerns of how to best optimize on the opportunities that are bound to increase with the growing economy. Now that they have seen a better life is possible, thanks to the impressive rapid development program, most Ethiopians are weary of talk of war irrespective of whatever decision the ruling party makes regarding Bademe. In fact, currently urban public concern revolves around issues of inflation, rising price, power outage etc caused by, according to experts, among other management challenges, the rapid growth of the economy itself. It can be argued that

preoccupations with these problems are so recent and can not be considered as real indicators of the shift away from traditional interest in matters of armed conflict. But the same can not be said about the lackluster public response and muted urban reaction to Ethiopian's 2006 anti-Jihadist military expedition into Somalia that took place long before the present high inflation and global food crises. The point here is that there is a discernable decline in enthusiasm for war in this country because the public seems to finally appear to understand that the only war that Ethiopia has to wage is against poverty. If there is any interest in war at all in Ethiopia today, it stems from frustration at Issayas' repeated attempt to sabotage the country's development progress and not from an overriding concern over the fate of a frontier village. The urban population and the elites know that prolonged tension or war, short of defending the country against a clear and present danger, only diminishes their chances of ripping the benefits that inevitably accrue from the country's increased rate of economic growth. Thus, to expect that wresting Bademe from Ethiopia would generate a nationwide anti-government upheaval is nothing but wishful thinking. It is as foolish as Issayas' earlier skewed thinking that the Ethiopian people would not rally behind their government in the face of Eritrea's 1998 naked aggression. After years of betting on the wrong horse i.e. the WSLF, UIC, OLF, Patriotic Front, and the CUD, Issayas has not learned that no amount of proxy war against Ethiopia can alter the government's position towards Eritrea so long as Issayas' remains wedded to his bellicose policy. Soon it is possible that Issayas would try his luck again with the brand new opposition party---- Genbot 7--led by Birhanu Nega whose founding declaration hinted that the movement could cooperate with any neighboring state to bring down the EPRDF by any means necessary. It is lost on no one that what Genbot 7 intends to do is hire itself out to Eritrea to be used as a pawn in Issayas' destabilization project of Ethiopia. For there is no other neighboring state that has the political motive and desire to undermine Ethiopia. Nothing could be more comical – al vaudeville - than a Birhanu/Issayas lineup against Meles whose political farsightedness exceeds by leaps and bound over these two myopic perennial complainers with a chip on their shoulders. On a serious note, however, if Issayas persists with his politics of destabilization, chances are patience in Addis Ababa would wear out and snap. When that happens, Ethiopia could alter its containment policy and adopt a far worse stance than maintaining the no-war no-peace status quo. The right thing to do is to seek reconciliation and bring about normalization between the two countries that, among other things, would help Eritrea's economy to rebound. Ethiopia too would benefit from normalization of relations since, at the very

least, she would have additional outlet to her expanding international commerce. Entrenchment on the question of Bademe that both Eritrea and Ethiopia could do with out is meaningless. However, since, objectively speaking, it is Eritrea that needs normalization most, overture overtures for dialogue must first come from Asmara. For it is less likely that Ethiopia can go any further beyond accepting the EEBC decision as it has openly and officially did on several occasions.