



Armed Conflicts Report

Ethiopia-Eritrea (1998 – first combat deaths)

Update: February 2002

The peace agreement signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000 in Algiers was respected by both sides with no reported fighting or deaths in 2001.

Summary

Type of Conflict

Parties to the Conflict

Status of the Fighting

Number of Deaths

Political Developments

Background

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Summary:

2000 Fighting between Ethiopia and Eritrea renewed on May 12, with Ethiopia attacking across the Plains of Badame, the site of 1999 clashes. After 19 days of heavy fighting Ethiopian troops regained the disputed border territory and advanced miles inside Eritrea. By the end of May the Eritrean army appeared defeated. Brokered by the OAU, a ceasefire agreement was signed in Algiers on June 18. Tens of thousands of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers and likely thousands of civilians from both countries were reported killed during 2000, a high casualty total similar to 1999. However, specific and independently confirmed numbers remain unavailable to date.

1999 Ethiopia and Eritrea accused each other of initiating renewed fighting along unmarked portions of their 1,000 km border in February. It is unclear who first violated a 1998 moratorium on air strikes, but both parties were involved in bombing and shelling attacks on several fronts along the border in 1999. Fighting intensified again in May and June as tens of thousands of combatants were killed by air strikes and trench warfare.

1998 Conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea broke out along their common border in May. After several weeks of ground fighting, both sides launched air strikes in June. A US-brokered moratorium on air strikes was signed shortly after and fighting was reduced to occasional exchanges of artillery. Mediation by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the US, and other governments prevented the fighting from reaching intense levels in the following months but both sides used the time to re-arm and reinforce troops along the border.

Type of Conflict:

Border dispute

Parties to the Conflict:

1) Government of Eritrea, led by President Isaias Afwerki.

2) Government of Ethiopia, led by Negasso Gidada.

Status of Fighting:

2001 The peace agreement signed in Algiers held in 2001 with no reports of fighting. However, tensions remained high along the buffer zone.

2000 Fighting was renewed on May 12 when Ethiopia attacked across the Western front of the contested Plains of Badame, the site of fighting in 1999. Each side confirmed extremely heavy fighting involving artillery, missiles, tanks, combat helicopters, fighter jets and tens of thousands of soldiers. Over 19 days, Ethiopian forces regained all territory on the disputed border, continuing on to capture large areas of Eritrea, and by the end of May the Eritrean army appeared defeated. Eritrea accepted an Organization of African Unity call for a cease-fire and immediately began to redeploy its troops to initial positions prior to the breakout of fighting in May 1998.

[Sources: *Washington Post*, 24 May 2000; *Guardian Weekly*, 25-31 May, 2000; *Washington Post*, 25 May 2000; *Guardian*, 6 June 2000; *Times of India Online*, 30 July, 2000; *Washington Post*, 25, May 2000; *AllAfrica.com*, 19 September 2000]

1999 Ending an eight month stalemate, fighting between Ethiopia and Eritrea re-ignited in early February over the border area of Badme. Reports suggest Ethiopia tried to recapture territory Eritrea occupied in May 1998, although each side continued to blame the other for perpetuating the conflict. A combination of ground fighting and air strikes occurred intermittently throughout the year and intensified in May and June. Using tactics reminiscent of World War I, Ethiopia reportedly sent waves of soldiers in the no man's land in between the trenches. Each country deployed hundreds of thousands of troops in trenches along the contested border. Ethiopia accused Eritrea of arming the rebel group Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) fighting in eastern Ethiopia between May and August, and both sides increased military contact with warring factions in Somalia and engaged in military operations with opposition groups in Sudan.

[Sources: *Panafrican News Agency (PANA)*, www.africanews.org, 2-11 February 1999; *Globe and Mail*, 8-11 February 1999; *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 23 June 1999]

"Last year, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said the conflict in the Horn of Africa was the 'world's largest war' in 1999 because it involved 250 000 soldiers, tens of thousands of casualties and over 60 000 civilians displaced." [InterPress Services, 12 August 2000]

Number of Deaths:

Total: An estimated 70,000 to 120,000 soldiers and civilians have died in the conflict. The total number of deaths is difficult to ascertain as both sides claim to have killed tens of thousands of each other's soldiers since the war began, yet independent confirmation typically has been unavailable.

"The Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, which began in May 1998, has substantially damaged the economic growth and development of Ethiopia and Eritrea and has led to humanitarian suffering on both sides of the border. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost and thousands more have been maimed." [Report of the US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, 25 May 1999]

2001 There were no reported deaths due to the conflict in 2001.

2000 Tens of thousands of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers and likely thousands of civilians from both countries died in the fighting. However, specific and independently confirmed numbers remain unavailable.

"Some 120 000 people are thought to have died in the two-year conflict, many in the last three weeks." [Guardian, 5 June, 2000]

"As diplomacy failed, both sides dug in, remilitarized and commenced a series of deadly battles that military experts say constitutes the most lethal war now being waged on the planet, with casualties in the tens of thousands." [Washington Post, 21 April 2000]

"For its part, Eritrea claimed to have killed or wounded 25,000 Ethiopians in the first two days of combat." [Washington Post, 18 May 2000]

1999 Thousands, possibly tens of thousands, Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers and likely hundreds of civilians from both countries died during 1999.

"Mr. Yermane [the Eritrean presidential adviser] said Eritrean casualties had been 'very slight, especially in comparison to Ethiopian losses,' which he

put at 9,000 killed and 12,000 wounded." [*Globe and Mail*, 1 March 1999]

"But the bloodiest battles came in February. In an offensive that military analysts described as World War I tactics backed by modern weapons, Ethiopia sent waves of infantry into the no man's land between the trench lines. After four days of fighting, the Eritrean positions were overrun and Ethiopia reclaimed Badme Plain, the largest portion of the area under dispute. The death toll ran into the thousands, possibly tens of thousands, according to independent Western analysts. Since then, death counts have become part of the dispute. Eritrea said Sunday that 70,000 Ethiopians have lost their lives on the battlefield. Today, Ethiopia called that figure 'patently false' and claimed that Eritrean killed and wounded have topped 100,000." [*Washington Post*, 3 November 1999]

1998 Hundreds of military and civilian deaths with some reports suggesting at least 1,000.

"The two allies have been at loggerheads since May 6 when a border dispute degenerated into clashes in which hundreds have been killed." [*Reuters*, 23 June 1998]

"The stated reason for the conflict, a dispute over a 390-square-kilometer mountainous region that both countries claim, is not worth the hundreds of lives already lost in hand-to-hand fighting and air strikes." [*Globe and Mail*, 18 June 1998]

"The fighting flared last May, killing 1,000 people before ending two weeks later in a standoff." [*Globe and Mail*, 10 February 1999]

Political Developments:

2000 On May 17, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution to impose an arms embargo on Ethiopia and Eritrea for an initial period of 12 months. Following months of negotiations brokered by Organization for African Unity (OAU) chairman and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a peace accord was signed by the two countries on June 18 under the auspices of the OAU. It called for the withdrawal of rival troops from areas occupied in fighting in the previous two years, the creation of a 15.5 mile buffer zone along the contested border, an international commission to demarcate the border, and the stationing of UN troops -- expected to come mostly from African nations -- on Eritrean soil. On September 19, the Security Council authorized the deployment of 4200 troops for the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE).

[Sources: *Janes Defence Weekly*, 24 May 2000; *InterPress*, 12 August 2000; *Yahoo Asia News*, 22 June 2000; *Washington Post*, 25 May 2000; *InterPress Services*, 12 August, 2000]

1999 In February, Eritrea accepted the framework of a OAU peace plan accepted by Ethiopia when it was proposed in 1998. The OAU plan requires both sides to return to positions held prior to May 6, 1998 and commits them to the principle of non-use of force to settle disputes. The parties also accepted the deployment of military observers under the OAU to carry out the provisions of the agreement. Negotiation of the peace accord details began in August under Algerian mediation but by year-end the two parties remained deadlocked over implementation despite diplomatic efforts by the OAU, US, and several African states.

1998 The United States brokered a moratorium on air strikes between the two parties in June. In a peace plan presented in November, the OAU called on both sides to withdraw to positions held before fighting started, the deployment of a peacekeeping and observer force, and neutral delineation of the border. Ethiopia accepted the proposal, but Eritrea initially reserved its position on the plan.

[Sources: *PANA*, 3 July 1999; *Report of the US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs*, 25 May 1999]

Background:

Roots of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea involve more than a poorly demarcated 1,000 km border. The conflict also stems from disputes between the two sides over economic and political affairs, such as foreign policy and trade, dating from Eritrea's succession from Ethiopia. In 1991, while Eritrea was still a part of Ethiopia, both government parties were allied in a guerilla movement to depose the Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam from power. Eritrea officially became independent from Ethiopia in 1993 by referendum and the two countries initially enjoyed good relations. The border was never properly demarcated, but full delineation was not initially regarded as a high priority. Peaceful relations were disturbed in 1997 when Eritrea launched its own currency much to Ethiopia's protests. Conflict intensified in May 1998 when agreements over demarcation points of the common border broke down. Ground forces clashed along the border and air strikes were exchanged by both sides, killing thousands of people, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians, and causing the migration of tens of thousands from both

countries.

Some reports suggest that resolution of the border dispute will resolve only one of many problems facing the neighbouring countries. Ethiopia reportedly has never really accepted Eritrea's independence and remains upset over having lost valuable access to the Red Sea since its former ports now lie in Eritrean territory.

The two impoverished countries have devoted an estimated \$1.5 billion (US) – including over \$1 billion by Ethiopia alone – to weapons in recent years, and spent as much as \$1.5 million a day on their war efforts. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia a severe drought has caused significant migrations, increased malnutrition, large livestock losses, a higher incidence of diseases, and an increase in the overall vulnerability of the rural population. As of July 2000, the government of Ethiopia estimated that over 10 million people were in need of emergency food assistance and according to international aid agencies in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, the latest clashes displaced up to 1 million Eritreans.

[Sources: *www.EANP.org*, 4 June, 2000; *The Globe and Mail*, 31 May 2000; *InterPress Services*, 12 August 2000; *India Times*, June 15, 2000; *InterPress Services*, 12, August 2000]

Arms Sources:

Ethiopia received arms in 1999 from Bulgaria, Romania and Russia, while Eritrea was supplied by Finland, Russia, Moldova, and Georgia. One report suggests that Eritrea has also unofficially acquired arms from Ethiopia in the past.

"Eritrea has inherited 'mountains and mountains' of arms from the defeated former Ethiopian forces." [*IRIN*, 28 October 1998]

"The Ethiopians have spent millions of dollars buying T55 tanks from Bulgaria and SU-27 fighter bombers from Russia, while Eritrea has acquired an undisclosed number of MiG-29 fighters." [*The Daily Mail and Guardian*, May 10, 1999]

[Additional Sources: *BBC News*, 2 March 1999; *Military Balance 1999/2000*]

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