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Truth is Stubborn: Antithesis of the Sanctions Imposed on Eritrea

The recent US-led UN Security Council decision to impose sanctions on Eritrea based on groundless charges has once again shown the world body's total disregard for the truth, especially in dealing with vulnerable Third World nations.

The hasty and ill-conceived decision against Eritrea is troubling and works against the United States' short- and long-term interests. The US' ability to influence events in the region and to fight terrorism effectively will depend upon whether it garners trust in the region by following an even-handed policy. Scapegoating Eritrea is not the solution.

Eritrea is accused of having "provided political, financial and logistical support to armed groups engaged in undermining peace and reconciliation in Somalia and regional instability." Eritrea has consistently denied this allegation, which has not been substantiated with concrete evidence; the baseless nature of the charges has also been proven by many independent observers. The underlying reason for sanctioning Eritrea appears to be punishment for its refusal to endorse flawed and ineffective policies pursued by the United States in Somalia.

Eritrea's position on Somalia has time and again called for an inclusive Somali-driven-and-owned reconciliation process in place of the externally crafted and financed approach seen over the last two decades. Today, support has been thrown behind a non-inclusive transitional federal government that has failed not only to establish the most basic forms of governance, but also to fulfill its paramount responsibility of providing stability, peace and security for its people. A credible and sustainable solution in Somalia must be inclusive and more importantly born out of the Somalis themselves. Anything less is bound to fail, as has been the case since Somalia's internal conflict first erupted in the late 80s.

US policy on the Somali crisis has been either ad hoc or by proxy. Beginning with the humanitarian military intervention *Operation Restore Hope* in December 1992 [1] during [the first] George Bush's administration, close to 30,000 US military personnel were deployed to Somalia. The ill-fated downing of a Black Hawk helicopter after which 19 American soldiers and 1,000 Somalis were killed spurred the US' withdrawal from Somalia under President Bill Clinton in late 1993. [2]. US support for a group of warlords, *the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism*, also proved to be misguided and drew criticism for being shortsighted, including from US diplomats in Nairobi. The US' next major involvement in Somalia has been through its proxy, Ethiopia, whose disastrous intervention has further complicated,—exacerbated and radicalized the situation. [3]. John Prendergast, while a Senior Advisor at the International Crisis Group, challenged policy decisions on Somalia: "They didn't realize their limited engagement would actually make matters worse ... It's ignorance and impecuniousness that have led us to be in a more difficult and disadvantageous position than we were." [3].

As a matter of principle and moral obligation to the support the people of Somalia rendered to Eritrea during the war of independence, Eritrea does not believe that supporting one group or faction over the other will bring about a lasting solution to the conflict in Somalia. Furthermore, it refuses to endorse one-sided, failed policies and engagements that have proven detrimental to the long-term peace and security of the region. Eritrea's objective is to see a united, peaceful and stable Somalia. For this, it is being punished.

The second allegation against Eritrea involves a purported border conflict with Djibouti. "Eritrea has not withdrawn its forces to the status quo ante, as called for by the Security Council ... refusal so far to engage in

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dialogue with Djibouti, or to accept bilateral contacts, mediation or facilitation by sub-regional or regional organizations or to respond positively to the efforts of the Secretary-General." As with many accusations leveled against Eritrea, the history behind the situation as well as the facts is unclear. The position of the borderline is critical for negotiations on maritime boundaries in the Red Sea. Although part of the border was not demarcated, there seems to be a general consensus (both inside and outside the region) that the boundary has been a settled matter on the basis of the colonially drawn agreements, specifically the France-Italy Protocols of 1900 and 1901 [4]. This has been the general understanding of Djiboutians and the basis for their bilateral and fraternal relations with Eritrea. Djibouti and Eritrea had maintained fairly good bilateral relations until June 2008.

On June 12, 2008, the Associated Press reported from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia that an unidentified Djiboutian official claimed: "Eritrean soldiers made an incursion into Djibouti territory two or three days ago in the Ras Doumeira area." Eritrea denied the report and has insisted that it has not occupied any part of Djibouti's territory. Its forces remain in sovereign Eritrean territory. Furthermore, French forces based in Djibouti at the time of the accusation conducted a reconnaissance mission at the request of the Djibouti government and was not able to confirm an incursion [5].

Of further concern, a few weeks before the onset of the alleged Djibouti conflict, the Ethiopian regime set up a new military camp on mount Musa-Ali, building a network of winding roads up the mount, and deployed offensive, long-range artillery and heavy equipment directed at Eritrea [6]. Musa Ali is strategically perched at the border junction of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti. It is also on the route to the Eritrean port of Assab. It is widely known among regional observers that the occupation of Assab by any means has been the obsession of the Ethiopian regime. Why has Ethiopia been allowed to move long-range artillery and heavy equipment onto Musa Ali in pursuit of its dreams of access to the sea in blatant violation of international laws? It is under this threat that Eritrea is unfairly being pressured to withdraw from defensive positions within its own territory.

At the same time, Ethiopia continues to occupy sovereign Eritrean territory in defiance of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission demarcation decision of 2003. Eritrea accepted the decision without reservation. Ethiopia, despite its treaty obligations, has not. With this in mind, the Djibouti-Eritrea border issue cannot be looked at in isolation. The territory in question is located at the trilateral junction of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti's borders. It is unfair to expect Eritrea to withdraw from what it claims is its own territory, and for the UNSC to remain silent on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border issue and de facto allow Ethiopia to continue occupying Eritrean territory.

The Eritrean people and their determination to establish a peaceful, stable and prosperous nation surrounded by a stable and peaceful region are products of their experience. Throughout history, Eritrea has been subjected to gross violations and injustices by different actors. Below are some of these experiences:

1. The British Chief Administrator of Eritrea, 1942-1944, Brig. General Stephen Longrigg, wrote in his book [7]: "It seems, then [1944] that the single Eritrea of today is doomed. Dismemberment, in some form and to some extent, must be the alternative. If this is so -- and the evident racial and cultural and historical diversities suggest it -- it must be in favor of the two greater neighbors of the territory, the Sudan and Ethiopia." The British administrator's statement foreboded coming actions. During the Four Power Commission Report [8], the US proposed to partition Eritrea and grant Ethiopia the southern regions of Denkalia, Akele Guzai and Seraye, but to defer the decision on Asmara and Massawa to the UN General Assembly. France also suggested ceding Denkalia to Ethiopia. On April 5, 1949, the First Committee of the UN voted to divide Eritrea between the Sudan and Ethiopia. The General Assembly, however, rejected this proposal. Soon after, Great Britain proposed assigning the highlands, including Assab and Massawa, to Ethiopia and the western lowlands to the Sudan. At no point during these deliberations were the desires and aspirations of the people of Eritrea considered.

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2. On December 2, 1950, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia for 10 years [UN Resolution 390 A (V)], despite the objections of the Eritrean people. The then US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, stated [9]: "From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea Basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country [Eritrea] has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia."
3. In 1962, the UN remained silent after Ethiopia unilaterally abrogated the federation and annexed Eritrea by force. Left with no other choice, the Eritrean people took up arms. The war of independence lasted for 30 years, costing Eritrea dearly -- some 65,000 people died, 10,000 were disabled, and another 600,000 internally displaced and over 753,000 became refugees around the world, while the country was left in ruins. [10]. Sustained US and Soviet support of the Ethiopian military made it one of the largest and most brutal forces in sub-Saharan Africa, committing mass atrocities against innocent civilian population in Eritrea.
4. Although the UN, US, EU and AU are the architects and guarantors of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), it has become evident that the US has blocked meaningful actions by the UN Security Council to force Ethiopia to respect its treaty obligations. Ethiopia's rejection of the EEBC border decision and its continued illegal occupation of Eritrean territory for over seven years now are in flagrant violation of the final and binding determination and international law. The UNSC should remain seized of this matter, but its actions are otherwise.
5. Against this backdrop, the basis for sanctions against Eritrea is not only shaky but also unfounded. Its purpose and short- and long-term effects on the peace and stability of the Horn region should be questioned. Despite many mischaracterizations, the Eritrean leadership has on many occasions agreed to work jointly with the US on matters of mutual interest, but as any government would be expected not at the expense of Eritrea's peace and security.

The US and Eritrea in fact have many common interests. Within the region, Eritrea has battled foreign and homegrown terrorism since its birth as a nation. It has also played a constructive role in peace building and conflict resolution in Sudan. Now more than ever, the need for constructive and forward-looking engagement is critical. The Horn of Africa has suffered for decades from conflicts and poverty. It is also slowly becoming the next frontline for the war on terror. A peaceful and stable Horn is not only in the best interest of the US and the international community, but also the nations of this region. In the Horn of Africa, everything is linked. The international community, led by the UNSC, must take a fair, balanced and holistic approach to the region's problems if it wants to solve them once and for all. As Americans of Eritrean heritage, we humbly call upon the UN Security Council and the US to reevaluate their policies toward the Horn of Africa and to redirect their efforts to help bring about durable and lasting peace and development to the region.

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