

# A flashback in history to 1998

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I am not intent to supply new sets of information on Ethio-Eritean war of 1998 to 2000. I just wanted to reminisce about it. I thought the month, May 1998, should not be let to pass by. For those of us who were adult at that time, the week of May 12 1998 is memorable and what happened afterwards kaleidoscopic. It is already twenty years to the day and evokes a string of memories.

On the balance of things, the day should better be remembered with sadness. It was a fateful day so to speak. Analysis of events aside, it was a day that unleashed an ordeal of war that left thousands of Ethiopians and Eritreans dead. What followed was a series of first-world-war like battles, a massive blood bath of innocent young people, heaps of bodies that were left to rot or for vultures to prey on.

The news of aggression by Eritrea came as a shock to millions on the day it was announced. It was a shock because of the high likelihood that it would result in the atrophying of the much relished peace, and because almost nobody could foresee the act of aggression. More shocking was however the fact that Ethiopia was ill prepared for such an eventuality. Ethiopia was not a match, at least people thought, to Eritrea militarily speaking. The government of our country, let alone the people, were not prepared for what was to happen on that day and the costly war that followed.

And it was a war, lasting two years, that consumed tens of thousands of young people in the region. Some put the estimate at 70,000, which is a horrendous number by any account. In fact, one Eritrean politician admitted that casualties from this war on the side of Eritrea equaled the casualties of the thirty years war. This is not to speak of the deep human sufferings that the war caused on both sides including dislocations, evictions, family breakups, vanishing of innocent civilians and loss of property.

It is for historians to make full analysis of the situation leading to the war and all the mysteries surrounding it. For all we remember, the two countries were a bit too stiff that year (1990 EC). It is equally to be remembered that the leaders (Meles and Esaias) took turns to reassure citizens that it was business as usual and relationship as warm as before. Esaias earlier had said that the borders of the two countries would soon turn symbolic and nothing to fret over. Meles few months before the war had spoken along the same lines in an interview with *Efoyta* magazine. He had said that the relationship between the two countries was cemented through blood and that it was bound to last. But nothing is beyond the truth. Short of being able to predict the war, it was commonly known that the two ruling parties (or governments) were in a strained relationship already.

The adoption of a new currency in Eritrea (the *Nakfa*) started it all as a proximate reason. The sneaky action of the Ethiopian government to print new issues of the *Birr* added salt to the wound. The closure of the Assab refinery a year ago and the newly found resolve of the Ethiopian government to stand up to the economic sabotage of the EPLF were annoying to the

leader in Eritrea. There were already wily propaganda programs in the Eritrean media (some in the form of a play) accusing the government of the EPRDF of trying to strangle Eritrea in the economic arena. Reportedly, hostilities were being expressed towards the EFFORT group which had started investing in industrial sector in Tigray. Esaias and his cohorts regarded the latter as unfair competition.

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Nowadays,  
some bemoan

openly if the war should have happened in the first place. Partly because of the soft side of humanity taking the better of other emotions, and partly because of political developments since 2000, these people tend to downplay the aggression. They speak as if the war should not have taken place. I know time is a healing factor and there may be little sense of rage in time. As we know, songs of longing for each other abound (including Teddy Afro's); and there is increasing talk of people to people discourse and reunion of sorts. The long separation of the interconnected people on both sides of the border has tipped the balance in favor of regarding the war as sheer rashness; and hence the regret for the war. However, it would be too much in the scheme of things to shrug off the aggression and to not praise the popular resistance to it.

To further dwell on this, it is one thing to deplore the war, the severing of diplomatic ties and the attending huge cost; it is another thing to condone the invasion. Interestingly, even in official accounts, the aggression of Ethiopia by Eritrea is not referred to as 'aggression' as such. A spade is spared from being called a spade. I make a challenge here. Do not we say 'Italian aggression' or 'Egyptian aggression' and so on? And, why should we make an exception of it in this case? The fact that we are brotherly and sisterly people does not take away from us the essence of what happened, which is invasion of Ethiopia – this time by a nation that only had seceded five years earlier with the blessing of our own government. More importantly, this denial has serious implications. It detracts us from valuing the great deeds of our war heroes; and from holding in reverence the martyrs who died in action in defense of sovereignty.

The very first act of aggression by Eritrea took place on May 5, 1998, but took on full scale on Tuesday May 12, 1998. On the latter date, Eritrean tanks rolled onto the plains of Badme and occupied that tiny district in the tip of northern Ethiopia. If only one had taken a survey of how many people in Ethiopia (let alone in Eritrea) had known of 'Badme' before, it would only have been a small percentage. Not by any means because Badme was not within Ethiopia as such, but because of its relative insignificance. For that matter, only after the coming of the EPRDF to power in 1991 did it assume the status of a woreda. It had been only part of Adyiabo Woreda in shire province of Tigrai region.

As history has it, Badme had always been firmly in the hands of Ethiopia from the outset. Even during the long rule of Eritrea by Italy, it was part and parcel of the territory of Ethiopia. As in many places around borders, the population was mixed given that there was naturally migration into and out of this district. During the armed struggle in northern Ethiopia (1975-1991), the district was in the hands of the rebels almost throughout the period. Testimonies from the armed struggle bear out that the area had been for a time occupied by the ELF, the first rebel group in Eritrea. The ELF used to forcibly recruit young people from the area for its

war effort until the TPLF launched a successful onslaught in 1981 and 'liberated' the area. This is to say that, in all instances, Badme was de jure firmly in Ethiopian hands.

Hence, one hastens to say that Badme only provided an excuse for the resentful government of Eritrea to flex muscle and help it snatch concessions. Looking back, it looks like Esaias did not have the intention to invade Ethiopia or to seriously place a claim on Badme as such (even though this is also for history to analyze). Given the military might of the EPLF in 1998, I indulge to say that it could have easily overrun many parts of Ethiopia had it had that intention. The army size of Eritrea was in hundreds of thousands, while that of Ethiopia was less than sixty thousand strong owing to ill-advised retrenchment (demilitarization) policy of the 'naïve' EPRDF.

As Badme soon escalated to be the flashpoint and a rallying cry for everyone to support the war effort, both sides started to dig their heels deep. A day after the invasion (on May 13), the house of representatives deliberated on this issue of aggression. It should arguably be the toughest agenda for the house up until that point. To its credit, the parliament came out boldly with a principled statement that **'there would be no negotiation until status quo ante is restored'**. Then followed a flurry of shuttle diplomacy from Rwanda, the US, the African Union and others. The world was concerned that Ethiopia would not be a match for the 'invincible' Eritrea which was sharpening its war machine for few years, while poor Ethiopia was doing the opposite. The story of the battle-hardened Eritreans was also afloat in the media world which made it appear as if Ethiopians are weak. Add to this the vocal Eritrean Diaspora, acting in unison, joining the war effort in no time while the foreign missions of Ethiopia were caught off guard so to speak. In the diplomacy world, the charm of a small country and a newly liberated one also helped Eritrea a lot.

The Ethiopia government, in the manner of the medieval ages, called upon the whole citizenry to roll on the sleeves for the war. Every meeting, every media talk, every government announcement was about the defense of the nation and the gallant deeds of forefathers. Suddenly, the EPRDF catapulted into drumming up national sentiment of valor. The capacity of the EPRDF to mobilize a population, tested during the armed struggle, was re-awakened. It included getting retrenched former fighters to join, which they did ninety percent (as Gebru Asrat's speech on May 28 confirmed). Young people from across the nation streamed in to the training camps in thousands while demobilized soldiers from the Derg era also did the same. It did not matter what made each individual to tick and respond instantly to the national call. For some, it was like an opportunity to avenge the defeat at the hands of the EPLF; for some it was a response to the acts of conceit of some Eritreans living in Ethiopia in the previous seven years; for some it was just a patriotic duty with the ultimate price of even one's life.

It looks like the Eritrean government did not factor in these developments. It was all lost on vain Esaias Afeworki to the point of getting basic realities of military engagement. The law of 'attrition' as they call it in military parlance tends to ultimately take charge. This law lies down a basic tendency that a country with larger population and resources emerges victorious in the long run. On cool calculation, one would not miss out the logic that the table eventually turns against Eritrea; a country of low resource and low population. No doubt, Eritrea was a country with a united population, abundantly liked by the diplomatic world; but that would not count

much when compared against the heavy weight of resource and population. Besides, there is also the might of the enraged people at work. Ethiopians were furious about the aggression and were resolute to reverse the very act.

I cannot help but amuse myself that many in the EPRDF leadership started recounting stories of the treacherous nature of the EPLF of the time of the struggle and afterwards. They took pain to explain how opportunistic the EPLF was and how patiently the TPLF was trying to pacify it all along. They appeared one after another in Radio and TV interviews to tell stories never heard before, and many a time contradicted themselves. The long stories of treason sat uncomfortably with what the TPLF/EPRDF were known for, a strong tilt for sticking to a storyline.

On realizing that the nook is getting tighter on the neck, the Eritrean government (which was commonly referred to as *Shabia*), waged three hasty parallel attacks in less than a month, around Erdi Mathews near Sheraro, Zalambasa and Bure. The Eritrean government was made to have the first sour taste of defeat. That put it on the defensive for the next 8 months and forced it to focus on digging miles of trenches, fence ringed with mines. The defeat of Eritrean forces at the beginning of June 1998 provided a breathing space for Ethiopia to prepare full scale for what were inevitably to come, the pitched battles of January 1999 to liberate Badme.

The months of May/June 1998 were intensely eventful; the invasion of Badme, the rapid drafting of thousands of young people for the war, a series works of publicity to affirm that Badme is Ethiopian, a fresh wave of invasion by Eritrean forces to encroach further, aerial bombardment of Asmara and Mekele (Ayder) and massive eviction of residents in both countries.

The story continues, and let historians dwell on it in full. History is just history and no qualms in narrating it.

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