



# The Eritrean Refugee Crisis and the International Community Complacency

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### **One of the leading sources of refugees in Europe is the impoverished east African nation of Eritrea. What role has the international community played in this crisis?**

Eritrea's relationship with the international community (IC) has always been complicated. Eritreans see the IC's history with their nation as one fraught with violation, neglect and, perhaps above all else, multiple betrayals. The first betrayal is seen to have taken place during the 1940s decolonisation process when Eritrea, against the wish of its people, was tied with Ethiopia in a UN enacted federal arrangement. The second betrayal occurred when the UN, who sponsored the federal arrangement, looked the other way when the Emperor of Ethiopia annexed Eritrea in violation of the arrangement. This was followed by another betrayal when the IC kept silent during the thirty years [Eritrean War for Independence](#). Yet another betrayal occurred when the guarantors and witnesses of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission abdicated their responsibility to ensure its implementation. The recent imposition of sanctions by the IC on Eritrea added to this feeling of betrayal. All these events have certainly generated a psychology of victimhood among Eritreans and a belief that that the IC have sacrificed the interests of its people for geostrategic interests and politics. The IC's response to Eritrea's refugee crisis represents the latest chapter in this history of betrayal.

This article argues that both the actions taken and those not taken by the IC contributed to the refugee/migration crisis in Eritrea. The actions taken included imposing sanctions and a concerted effort to isolate the country, while

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actions not taken include failure to implement a binding and final verdict of the International Court of Arbitration.

## **Causes of the Exodus from Eritrea**

In recent years, the world has witnessed an unprecedented flow of people from Eritrea. The exodus, which has picked up momentum is the outcome of several factors that have been accumulating over the years. Relative to its population size, Eritrea has produced the largest flow of refugees/migrants in the world. What is driving people to leave the country in such large numbers? There are multiple causes of the exodus.

- The no-war no-peace situation
- The implementation of indefinite national service
- A harsh political environment
- Major economic difficulties such as mass unemployment
- A lack of future opportunities and prospects for the country's youth
- The imposition of sanctions
- A blanket asylum provision by host countries

The rejection of the International Court of Arbitration verdict on the border issue by Ethiopia generated a no-war no-peace situation. The peace agreement was supposed to lead to peaceful coexistence between the Eritrea and Ethiopia. This no-war no-peace situation created constant tensions, a fear of an outbreak of war, and occasional engagement between the armies of the two countries along their common border. This means Eritrea has had to put itself in a constant state of high alert. It also compelled the Eritrean government to extend its national service indefinitely. The majority of capable labour forces in the country are therefore tied to the national service system. Consequently, the

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economy suffered immensely because of a lack of a sufficient labour force. The youth who are in the national service have to pay a high price. They do not get proper salary; and they are not able to pursue a normal social and working life which could include education, building and supporting family, accumulating wealth, etc.

The political environment has also hardened considerably. The country has been under an undeclared state of emergency since 2000. Gradually, the political climate became more authoritarian and less plural: political opposition was not tolerated; deviant views and political differences were perceived as dangers to national unity, stability and survival. Therefore, dissidence was harshly dealt with. Many ended up in prison accused of betraying or endangering the security of the nation. The economy, which was slowly recovering from the thirty years of independence war, suffered immensely from the two-year border war (1998-2000) between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the no-peace no-war situation. A major part of state budget now goes to military expenses and staggering unemployment overshadows the nation. What was primarily a subsistence economy spiralled down due to a shortage of an able workforce.

The UNSC imposed sanctions further exacerbated the economic difficulties because they discouraged external investment and other bilateral relations with the wider world, particularly the West. The international community's policy is geared towards isolation in order to force the Eritrean government to change its policy; however it achieved the opposite effect. Eritrea has been described as "hell on earth" and this was used to justify the blanket asylum provided by European governments. This open asylum policy further attracted a greater number of asylum and refugee seekers, even children who are not affected by

the national service appeared at the doors of European countries claiming that they were fleeing from national service.

### **Abdication of Responsibility**

The international community, represented by the UN, AU, EU and USA, assumed the responsibility of implementing the of the EEBC's verdict which it helped broker. The two-year war between Eritrea and Ethiopia was ended through the signing of the Algiers Agreement in December 2000. The UN AU, EU and USA put down their signatures as witnesses to and guarantors of the agreement.

The main provisions of the [agreement](#) were:

(i) The establishment of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC). The EEBC consisting of eminent international judges was mandated to demarcate and delineate the border between the two countries. The EEBC was instructed, "The Commission shall not have the power to make decisions *ex aequo et bono*" (Article 4(2), Algiers Agreement 2000).

(ii) That the verdict be final and binding. With regards to guaranteeing the implementation, the Cessation of Hostility Agreement of June 2000 notes, "The OAU and the United Nations commit themselves to guarantee the respect for this commitment of the two Parties until the determination of the common border on the basis of pertinent colonial treaties and applicable international laws" (Article 14).

This guarantee shall be comprised of measures to be taken by the international community should one or both of the parties violate this commitment, including appropriate measures to be taken under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter by the UN Security Council (Article 14 (a)).

The EEBC, per its mandate, issued its verdict on 13 April 2002 where it was stipulated to be implemented within a year, but to date it is still awaiting acceptance by Ethiopia. The verdict awarded the flashpoint of the conflict, the village of Badme, to Eritrea. Upon realising the decision, Ethiopia rejected it, calling it illegal, irresponsible and unjust. When the EEBC concluded its work in 2007 and announced that the border was virtually demarcated and the issue closed, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia called it legal nonsense and requested a renegotiation. The witnesses and guarantors, instead of honouring their solemn commitment and invoking Chapter II of the United Nation Charter, opted for appeasement. Indeed, US officials actively and systematically engaged in devising ways of renegotiating the verdict, particularly, Jandyi Frazer, George Bush's Assistant Secretary of African Affairs, and Suzan Rice, Obama's ambassador to the UN, who both played an important role in undermining the [EEBC verdict](#).

Eritrea is of the opinion that the border is delineated and demarcated, and therefore feels that Ethiopia should vacate from the Eritrean territories it illegally occupies. The juxtaposing Ethiopian stance is that the border issue can only be settled through bilateral dialogue, a position that declares the EEBC verdict null and void. Ethiopia has violated UNSC resolutions ordering it to implement the verdict without any consequence. This is because the USA tacitly sides with Ethiopia. Following the footsteps of the USA, the UN, AU and EU remain silent on the issue allowing the festering stalemate to continue with all the consequences effecting the people of the two countries and the region as a whole.

### **The International Community's Double Standards**

After signing the agreement of cessation of hostility in Algiers, in December 2000, the parties directed their attention to conducting proxy wars. Both governments were actively involved in support of opposition to each other's government in the hope of weakening or even deposing. In addition, they intervened in neighbouring countries. Somalia became the obvious victim of the proxy war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. While Eritrea ended up supporting Union of Islamic Court (UIC), Ethiopia sided with warlords and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Finally, Ethiopia invaded Somalia in December 2006 and vanquished the UIC. This contributed to the emergence of al-Shabaab, a radical Islamic extremist group operating in Southern Somalia.

Proxy war has become a rule rather than exception in the Horn of Africa. What has also become a rule is the international community (IC), mostly driven by geostrategic interest of the big powers, punishing and rewarding regional actors participating in wars highly selectively. Many scholars have purported that the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict is the epicentre of conflicts in the Horn of Africa. This means settling the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict would go a long way in helping the larger endeavour to settle all the intricate conflicts in the region. In this respect, it will be in the interests, as well as part of the moral, political and legal obligation, of the IC to address the conflict. There is an obligation the IC to be even-handed, objective, neutral and balanced in treating its members. The reality is, however, that the IC practices double standards and its dealing with Ethiopia and Eritrea is a vivid testimony to this double standard.

Eritrea was accused of supporting al-Shabaab and destabilising the region. But most of the evidence for Eritrea's involvement ironically originates from Ethiopia. For the last five years, the Somalia-Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG), established to check that the sanctions are not violated, has not found any

evidence that Eritrea is supporting al-Shabaab, yet the sanctions have not been lifted. As stated, Eritrea supports Ethiopian opposition groups as Ethiopia supports Eritrean opposition groups. Eritrea supported UIC when Ethiopia invaded Somalia. Ethiopia frequently attacks targets inside Eritrea; it openly threatens to depose the Eritrean government, which is against international law. Eritrea violates human rights as does Ethiopia. However, it is only Eritrea that is under UNSC sanctions and being subjected to isolation from the international community. Ethiopia is considered an indispensable ally of the US global war on terror, therefore it is excused of whatever misdeeds. This is a double standard that damages the credibility and integrity of IC, particularly the UN.

## **Conclusion**

The no-war no-peace situation created a serious sense of insecurity, tension and instability in Eritrea. This in turn necessitated the implementation of indefinite national service in order to not only to defend the country from Ethiopian invasion, but also to ensure the economic and social survival of the nation. Tying the able-bodied Eritreans to national service deprives the economy of vital labour force. This curtails development. The conflict with Ethiopia triggered a chain of causal factors affecting the refugee crisis: constant fear of war, indefinite national service, economic stagnation, political hardship, and hopelessness compelling people to flee the country. It is understandable that few would wish to live under such circumstances.

If the international community had honored its responsibility and upheld the implementation of the International Court of Arbitration per its commitment in 2002, the chain of causal factors producing the exodus might have been avoided. By now the relationship between the two countries could have been



pacified. It would also mean that the actual international pressure on the Eritrean government would have also been effective, morally defensive and legitimate as opposed to hypocritical. The failure of the international community to put pressure on Ethiopia to implement and uphold the final and binding border verdict affects not only Eritrea, but also the region as a whole and, as the recent developments demonstrate, Ethiopia. For Eritreans the current behaviour of the IC is déjà vu, and brings back the ghost they have been trying to exorcise for the last seventy years.

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