

Time for development in Ethiopia, Eritrea

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The winds of change are blowing across the Horn of Africa following the signing in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, of the 17 September 2018 peace agreement by Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki. The two countries have ceased hostilities and restored trade and diplomatic ties.



The youth now have a future in both Ethiopia and Eritrea. Image source: Gallo/Getty

“Local trade is flourishing as Eritreans and Ethiopians trade with no currency exchange issues. Birr-nakfa [their respective currencies] exchanged on parity on the ground. Very positive development—but needs institutionalisation!” says Kjetil Tronvoll, a Norwegian professor who follows developments in the Horn of Africa and founder of Oslo-based International Law and Policy Institute, a think tank.

After a bitter war that lasted 20 years (from 1998 to 2018) and during which as many as 100,000 were killed, the agreement has enabled air services to resume, phone lines to reopen, military hostilities to cease and families to reunite.

As the agreement was announced, hundreds of citizens hugged each other in their respective countries and celebrated. Their leaders have also officially opened the crossing points of their shared border, which had been closed for 20 years.

Since 1998, no head of state or government representative had visited either side. Telephone lines had been disconnected, effectively cutting off communication between the two countries. Ethiopia Airlines, which stopped plying the route in 1998,

is now back, flying weekly to Asmara, Eritrea's capital, a move likely to boost trade ties and contribute to economic growth.

"This is my message to Ethiopians: love looks better on you," Prime Minister Ahmed said in Jeddah, adding, "Love is the only way with our Eritrean brothers."

President Afwerki said, "Hate, discrimination and conspiracy are now over. Our focus from now on should be on developing and growing together... Now is the time to make up for the lost times."

Homecoming

The crisis had real-life effects on Eritreans and Ethiopians. Astebeha Tesfaye, an Ethiopian who has been in Eritrea since 1998, now hopes to finally return home. He had gone to visit his friends in Eritrea 20 years ago when hostilities broke, and the borders were closed. He was forced to remain in Eritrea ever since.

"I was going to take the bus the next day [back to Ethiopia], but I heard that the roads were blocked, and that no one was going to move either to Eritrea or Ethiopia," Tesfaye told the BBC.

Many credit Ethiopia's 41-year-old prime minister with accelerating the pace, and changing the tone and direction, of peace negotiations.

On taking office, Ahmed stunned both sides by announcing that Ethiopia would give back to Eritrea the disputed border town of Badme in the Gash-Barka Region, 139 kilometers southwest of Asmara. Justifying the decision to hand over the town, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front noted that, "the Ethiopian and Eritrean people are tied together linguistically, by history and by lineage."

The so-called Jeddah Agreement was the culmination of peace initiatives that began last year on 8 June with the historic embrace between the two leaders in Asmara. That was followed by the signing of a joint declaration in Asmara on 9 July, and then by the Jeddah Agreement and the resumption of diplomatic and trade relations on September 18.

The deal was sponsored by Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who promptly awarded the two leaders the Medal of King Abdulaziz. Among the dignitaries at the signing ceremony were the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

Article one of the seven-point Jeddah Agreement reads: "The state of war between the two countries has ended, and a new era of peace, friendship and comprehensive cooperation has started."

Strengthening relations

Other articles focus on, among other things, strengthening relations in security, defense, trade and investment, and the cultural and social fields; establishing joint economic zones; and combating both terrorism and "trafficking in people, arms and drugs, in accordance with international covenants and conventions."

With the peace pact, landlocked Ethiopia can now use, tax-free, the Red Sea ports in Assab, in the south of Eritrea, and in Massawa in the north. Ethiopia currently spends over \$1.5 billion annually for the use of Djibouti ports. Eritrean industries, on the other hand, will gain access to Ethiopia's 100 million consumers (the second-largest in Africa).

Before the Jeddah Agreement, several unsuccessful attempts had been made to broker peace between the countries. Ethiopia rejected a boundary commission ruling in 2002 that Badme belongs to Eritrea.

In September 2017, the Switzerland-based World Council of Churches, with up to 50 million members in Ethiopia and 2.5 million in Eritrea, failed to reconcile the two countries. Further efforts by the US State Department, the UN and the African Union did not bear fruit, according to *The EastAfrican*, a Nairobi-based publication.

The latest peace deal will be tested in the months ahead, says Martin Plaut, a senior research fellow, Horn of Africa and Southern Africa, at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in the United Kingdom. “For the peace efforts to stick, both Ethiopia and Eritrea must complete internal reforms.”

He adds, “Prime Minister Abiy [Ahmed] has pushed Ethiopia much further down the road of reform, while Eritrea still has a long way to go. Consolidating democracy and internal peace-building will be needed if the dramatic pace of change is to hold in the region.

Source: [*Africa Renewal*](#).

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