



Institute for Horn of Africa Studies and Affairs

PRESS RELEASE

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A deteriorating conflict: A call for US engagement on the Ogaden Conflict.

Background:

The Ogaden region (also known as Somali Regional State) is located in southeastern Ethiopia bordering Somalia. Although geographically within Ethiopia, the ethnic Somali population has fragile and weak links to Addis Ababa. The region has been historically marginalized and underdeveloped. From 1935-1941, the Ogaden was administered as part of Italian Somaliland from Mogadishu. In 1941, the British established rule in the Ogaden after the defeat of Italy in WWII. In 1954, without the knowledge or the consent of the Somali inhabitants, the territory was transferred (in three stages) to Ethiopia without any regard to the basic human right of the populations to decide their future. Negotiations began that year between Italy and Ethiopia over the boundary between Somalia and Ethiopia. Italy's position, being the main colonial power, was that the Ogaden should be included in the future state of Somalia. In 1957, Italy and Ethiopia reported to the UN General Assembly that direct negotiations were not successful. The United Nations and Italy were extremely troubled as to the long-term regional consequences of a Somali region being occupied by Ethiopia. The General Assembly then asked the King of Norway to nominate an adviser to assist in resolving the dispute. Trygve Lie, the former UN Secretary General was appointed in August 1959, but he failed to secure an agreement on the status of the Ogaden. *In 1959, Italian, Ethiopian and Somali representatives agreed that a provisional line should remain in force until a final settlement was reached on the Ogaden.* The problem is the international community never bothered again to get involved and disengaged it self from this conflict.

The Ogaden as a Source of Regional Instability:

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In 1960, the US State Department made the correct assessment that *'Peace in the Horn of Africa depends in large measure on the stabilization, if not the ultimate solution of the Ogaden Province of Ethiopia.'* (Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Brubeck Series, Somalia. Confidential. Drafted by Newsom on August 24. A handwritten notation on the source text reads: ``Sent to Mr. Bundy for info. Aug. 26. S.B.).

Regrettably, the Ogaden region still remains as a source of regional instability and one of the most violent political conflicts in postcolonial Africa. Somalia and Ethiopia carried out a full scale conventional war in 1964 and 1977 to solidify their claims of the Ogaden region. Both of these wars have caused two of the poorest countries in the world to expend much of their resources. Since 1994, clashes between the Ethiopian National Defense Forces and the Ogaden National Liberation Front have been taking place with civilians caught in the middle. The conflict intensified in April 2007 after the Ogaden National Liberation Front attacked a Chinese-run oil exploration facility in the Ogaden killing 74 people. The conflict has regional dimensions including Eritrea's support of the ONLF, an arch enemy of Ethiopia. Somalia's lack of central government since 1991 and its largely ungoverned borders is entrenched in this conflict with Ethiopia's view that the ONLF uses Somalia as a staging ground for its attacks.

Potential for Conflict Escalation:

The probability of conflict escalation is high due to the conflict's regional dimensions. Ethiopia considers ONLF as part of a regional network that links Eritrea, the Oromo Liberation Front and the ONLF. In an attempt to prevent this network establishing a stronger hold in the Ogaden, Ethiopia is increasing its military operations in the region. On the other hand, The ONLF has been emboldened by its stepped-up attacks and the international attention generated by its 2007 attack on the Chinese-run oil facilities. If Ethiopia's policy of forcing residents to move into concentrated "protected areas" and the total blockade of commerce and refusal to allow access to humanitarian organizations and international media continue, the suffering and death of civilians will reach catastrophic levels.

Recommendations: A call for US engagement

We firmly believe the Ogaden conflict can never be resolved without the full engagement of the United States. More than any other country, the United States continues to have a greater influence on Ethiopia. The United States and Ethiopia have a long and important relationship. U.S.-Ethiopian relations were established in 1903, after nine days of meetings in Ethiopia between Emperor Menelik II and Robert P. Skinner, an emissary of President Theodore Roosevelt. The formal relations included a grant of Most Favored Nation status. Today, the US considers Ethiopia as a strategic partner in counter-terrorism issues.

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Ethiopia also remains the largest US Aid recipient in Africa. Total U.S. government assistance, including food aid, between 1991 and 2008 is over \$3.3 billion. During the severe drought year of 2003, the U.S. provided a record \$553 million in assistance, of which \$471.7 million was food aid.

The Ogaden region is important to the US because of its large natural gas reserves. The natural gas reserve in Calub and Hilala in the Ogaden is estimated at four trillion cubic feet (4TCF). The gas fields that covers 285 sq m are found 1, 200 km south-east of Addis Ababa. The gas fields were first discovered by an American company called Tenneco during the reign of Emperor Haile-selassie. Tenneco, which drilled three wells in Calub and one in Hilala, was forced to withdraw because of the 1974 revolution that toppled Emperor Haile-selassie. Recently, Ethiopia has signed contracts with China and Malaysia for gas exploration in the Ogaden. The ONLF objects to this and has made threats against international companies not to come to the Ogaden until the conflict is resolved.

Simply put, resolving the Ogaden conflict will stabilize the entire Horn of Africa region. Therefore, we urge the United States:

- To spearhead an international effort aimed at ending the conflict
- To urge all sides to commit an immediate ceasefire.
- To urge the government of Ethiopia to allow the media, humanitarian and human rights organizations full access of the Ogaden region.

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Institute for Horn of Africa Studies and Affairs (IHASA) is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to document, research, analyze, publish and disseminate information on the political and socio-economic justice issues affecting the people in the Horn of Africa and in the Diaspora community. IHASA promotes peace, justice, equality, development and supports policies and actions that contribute to the advancement of good governance and the elimination of conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

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