

## President Isaias Afwerki

**“The changes we are witnessing in Eritrea and Ethiopia reflect the two peoples’ resistance and resolve”**



*In an interview conducted with national media outlets on Saturday 3 November 2018, President Isaias Afwerki discussed the significance, progress, and regional ramifications of the recent historic peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia and other related developments. Excerpts of the interview follow.*

**The peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia have waged long and costly struggles for justice and liberation. And in this past June, 16 years after the decision by the Boundary Commission, the new Ethiopian government announced its full acceptance of the Commission’s ruling and its readiness to implement it without equivocation. As a result, both governments have started to take bold measures to put their bilateral ties back on the positive track. What is the political backdrop of this new reality?**

The border problem, the failure to implement the EEBC decision, should not be seen in isolation; outside the larger context. The problem should be seen within the backdrop of unwarranted hostilities waged against Eritrea by the previous three successive US administrations in the past 27 years after Eritrea’s independence. And

this was also closely intertwined with US, post Cold-War, new global strategy. The Hanish dispute (with Yemen) did not occur, out of the blue, suddenly. It was part and parcel of the larger scheme pursued by Washington, and the West in general, of working through regional proxies and surrogates to advance their agenda of the new world order. The political approach in this configuration involved the propping up of pliable regional proxies while punishing and cornering those who did not toe the line.

Eritrea began to be perceived as a hindrance to the pursuit of US/Western regional strategy within the framework of this uni-polar world order. The inevitable corollary of this perception were the formulation and pursuit of hostile policies against Eritrea; to corner and put the country under relentless pressure; to force it to succumb to these adversarial approaches. Otherwise, if Yemen truly entertained good-faith claims on Hanish island, why didn't it raise it before with the powers who had colonized Eritrea? Why were claims to this island and issues of maritime boundary raised immediately after the assertion of Eritrea's sovereignty and independence following a long political and armed struggle spanning for 50 years?

And what people may have failed to notice is the peculiarity and anomaly in the ruling of the Arbitral Court. While the Hanish Island, which was part and parcel of Eritrea in all the previous colonial times, was awarded to Yemen, the Court decided to give Eritrea fishing rights in Yemen's territorial waters in that area. This was done to keep the problem alive and entangle Eritrea in a continuous conflict. The underlying reason of all these complications is transparent indeed. Eritrea's sovereignty was not palatable to those masterminding the new world order. Therefore, the Hanish conundrum was first concocted. And after Hanish, the Badme case ensued.

If the Badme case was really a good-faith border dispute, then it could have been settled through bilateral engagement and various other means. In reality, good-faith border disputes would have been

susceptible to prompt solutions as the borders in our region were established through formal or unambiguous, colonial treaties. Our stance, from the outset, was in fact to resolve the dispute through bilateral means and in the event of failure, through international arbitration.

The US was involved as a facilitator in the early days of the dispute. The US Secretary of State at the time, Madeline Albright, sent her envoys towards that end. We were earnestly engaged in the process hoping for a prompt resolution of the case. Apparently, an enduring solution was not desired on their part. The dispute became more confounded; came under the purview of the OAU (in Ouagadougou) to later explode into a full-fledged and costly war that lasted for two years. The Eritrea-Ethiopia border dispute was later referred to arbitration. Again, the Arbitral Award was not implemented; not because it was rejected by the TPLF regime but primarily by those who were embroiled in compounding the conflict. Because they wanted to use it as an instrument for keeping Eritrea “hostage”. The new reality we see today is indeed a result of the political dynamics in Ethiopia in the past years and the resilience of the Eritrean people. To revert to the prevalent trend, the Djibouti “border dispute” was conceived as another tool for harassing Eritrea. Why were border issues provoked intermittently and given such prominence? We need to ask serious questions to probe the underlying motives and operational modalities in order to avert similar subterfuges in the future as we strive earnestly to cultivate positive bilateral and regional ties

Finally, in 2009, a decision was made to impose sanctions against Eritrea. This may be considered the ultimate attempt to victimize Eritrea after accusing it of supporting Al- Shabaab. This accusation was not based on fact and law. But in similar fashion as the three border issues, the sanctions regime was concocted to force Eritrea into submission and to dominate the region. The TPLF regime was hand-picked to serve as the pliable surrogate in our region to subjugate Eritrea. We can see it as the vehicle that appeared in the third era –

Eritrea was subjugated under for fifty years from 1941 until 1991 where various powers, the British, the US and the UUSR propped up Ethiopian colonial rule in Eritrea; after Eritrea won its independence through a long armed struggle for liberation.

The TPLF's assigned role has however been increasingly weakening in the past years. It survived literally under intensive care and subsidy in the past five to seven years. This must also be juxtaposed with far-reaching changes in the global order. We have to take stock of changes in Europe, the financial crisis in the last decade etc. All these factors are interlinked.

Against this complex backdrop, the political dynamics inside Ethiopia for radical change ultimately became unstoppable. Indeed, this is perhaps best epitomized by the resignation of former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn.

In a nutshell, the recent developments in Ethiopia can be seen as bringing an end the spiraling regional crises that beset our region in the post-Cold War period. The scheme to dominate the region through use of the Ethiopian regime, which lasted almost 30 years, has ended with the coming to power of the new Ethiopian government. The changes we are witnessing in Ethiopia and Eritrea today reflect the outcome of the two peoples' resistance and resolve. We are now entering a new era, marking an end to decades of dominance and resistance that began at the end of World War II.

In 1991, there were prospects for peace and development for the peoples of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the region as a whole. But that was cut short by global and regional factors. The two peoples have learned a lot from the lost opportunities – the Ethiopian government's declaration of its acceptance and readiness to implement the Boundary Commission's ruling, which heralds a new era, demonstrates this. The question now is about the potential of the new era and how we handle it.

**The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship states that, among other things, that the state of war [between Eritrea and Ethiopia] has ended and a new era of peace and friendship has begun. It underlines that the two governments will develop close political, economic, social, and security ties, in addition to implementing the EEBC ruling. What is the progress made so far in the implementation of the Agreement? What are the opportunities and challenges that this new era portends to the peoples of both Eritrea and Ethiopia?**

These new developments must be gauged properly and all our efforts must be marshaled to bolster the conducive climate for its consolidation. This is our first priority and primary responsibility. We have a lot of major tasks that must be accomplished in different sectors in the future; in the times ahead. But, the utmost focus of the people and Government of Eritrea must be the consolidation of the peace process that has ushered in a new epoch. We are working vigorously to create mutual trust; an atmosphere of congenial mutual consultation. Ultimately, we need gauge progress on the basis of concrete benchmarks and figures. We need to strengthen the basic pillars in order to secure future progress and development.

We cannot be complacent and presume that external challenges and conspiracies, both regional and international, have been vanquished; that they will no longer arise to undermine the new era of peace. Accordingly, our utmost priority is to strengthen mutual trust; to better align our respective programmes and perspectives. The reservoir of good will on both sides is huge indeed. We must also take into account that there are internal subversive elements and remnants of the old order whose aim is to curtail progress of the new reality. The mutual trust we have fostered has already enabled us to register rapid progress in many areas. We should not harbor doubts and indulge in speculative analysis on the viability of the process underway. Yes, there will be challenges but we have to confront them resolutely. And as we work vigorously to consolidate the process, we must also keep in mind and lay the basis simultaneously for the larger objectives that we cherish and aspire for.

The challenges we face will be myriad indeed. Various external forces are still bent on creating hindrances and driving a wedge between us. We can see the ethnic strife stoked in several parts of Ethiopia. Certainly, various fault lines and legacies of the past cannot be eliminated overnight. What are the primary political challenges? Naturally, each country has its own political challenges. But there are also aggregate challenges that have regional and global dimensions. The hostilities directed against us, against our national security have been numerous indeed. There are security challenges that have regional dimensions. All these will require mutual effort.

We need to focus on the bigger picture of and enhance the complementarity and synergy to better address economic challenges faced by the two countries. Our horizon cannot be limited to mere transaction of goods with the opening of the border. We need to look beyond this single parameters to recoup lost opportunities and seize the new reality to boost shared economic vision between the two countries. This economic synergy, underpinned by security and political cooperation, can have a strong impact in the region. In this case, an ongoing exchange of ideas is opening new opportunities in the developments of the peace process. What we anticipated three months ago and the momentum we have witnessed on the ground is very promising. The steps we are taking in major sectors, particularly diplomatic, political, security, and economic sectors are very satisfactory.

In the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship, we have underlined the need to take our actions beyond bilateral reconciliation towards regional stability. Indeed, boosting bilateral relations will not be a success when critical matters in the rest of the region remain unsolved. We followed the same principle in 1991 and we still believe and are working together to establish regional stability for common benefit. The situation in Somalia or South Sudan can have a direct or indirect impact on us. Therefore, we need to support positive engagement in those cases and we should not see them as different, in any way, from our bilateral relations. It is very natural to consider the value of added time in this process and I would confidently say that the accomplishment made vis-à-vis the four months of the new epoch is incredible. Yet, we will not relax based on what we have

accomplished so far. In fact, we will increase the pace and strengthen our efforts.

I can say that we have gone beyond what was outlined in the Declaration. Of course, the Declaration includes points anchored on the general vision of the two countries, but in reality, a lot more has been done in a very short time.

the pre-school to junior school level. The junior school began operations in 1999. It was recently renovated, helping to increase enrolments and improve the quality of education. There are also a number of mobile schools that provide educational services to nomadic populations.

**Mr. President, can you elaborate on the regional and international ramifications of the peace and cooperation agreement signed by Eritrea and Ethiopia? What is its likely impact on enhancing regional partnership in particular?**

Before we can talk about regional and international outcomes, we have to consider the context of the region. As we work towards strengthening bilateral relations, it is imperative that we understand the region. This region can be categorized into four sub-regions. To the west we have the Nile, which includes South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt. This part of the region has its own dynamics. The second is the Horn of Africa; this part of the region encompasses Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Sudan. The third part of the region is the Red Sea. The Red Sea has its own dynamics as well, formed by countries bordering the sea. The final and fourth part is the Gulf.

When we denote and amalgamate the four sub-regional components in this geographical mass as one region, we need to fully grasp its over-arching features. What are the communality of interest and relations that bind them together? What are their mutual economic ties and respective geostrategic importance? How does one gauge the economic complementarities and cohesion among them in different sectors and along different parameters? There is also the question of security. What are the challenges and stakes in each sub-region? The domestic realities in each country and the web of interactions within the region must also be gauged. All these factors must be assessed in

their totality and through the prism of complementarity, cooperation and mutual respect. Enhancement of our bilateral ties with Ethiopia will have its positive in the region. Our focus will not be geared or confined to advance our interest only but wider benefits of the region as a whole.

Over the course of the past few decades, the harm inflicted upon Eritreans and Ethiopians, engineered by external agendas and their local surrogates, can never be adequately compensated in any sort of way. The damage inflicted upon countries like Somalia, South Sudan, and the Sudan; the turmoil we are currently witnessing in Yemen and the Red Sea, the direct consequences of such actions that have resulted in the loss of potential economic opportunities, and the subsequent occurrence of famine and instability in the region, must be explained in greater depth.

This region could have registered immense progress had we been allowed to cultivate healthy bilateral relations from 1991 onwards and funnel our combined resources for mutual development without the negative external influences and interferences. Of course, this is history now.

Moving forward, we have to think of how to consolidate the current climate of peace. Peace is a catalyst to development, prosperity, and stability. We can dwell on the past and think about how working towards constructive relations among countries of the Horn could have impacted the region positively. However, the past is the past. Our development goals should be forward looking. This current climate of peace is an opportunity that will have broader benefits, not only for the region, but also for the continent. Without peace, nothing is possible. Peace requires confidence, trust, and willingness. Progress on bilateral ties that has been achieved in the region over the last two to three months is a stepping stone towards further improvements.

For instance, IGADD (the Inter Governmental Authority on Drought and Development) was first formed with the idea to focus on development and environmental control. However, this was succeeded by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) with a view to focus on enhanced development in the region. Nevertheless, since the inception of the organization, it has remained far from achieving its target. IGAD became a tool for external actors to influence others and it has had regional implications.



Going back and reflecting on our experiences over the last century, the war and subsequent border stalemate between Eritrea and Ethiopia denied both countries two decades of opportunities, growth, and peace, while it exposed both countries to foreign intrusion in their internal affairs. Going forward, in order to eliminate such narrow minded thoughts and intrusions in the region from occurring again, countries of this region need to have a sense of complementarity and common understanding. We need to evaluate our common interests, gains, and the ways to achieve this on the ground.

For both countries, the peace deal creates space to prioritize economic development. As such, the people of both countries have big roles in sustaining peace, in terms of experience, shared history, and factoring in the geopolitical location, cooperation towards the realization of socio-economic growth and development.

Populations, in general, have the potential to impact peace and security in any region. Currently, there are about 240 million people in Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea. Include the Gulf States, and that figure increases to 300 million. In 25 years, that number will double. This begs the question, however, of what will the natural resources and human capital of this region look like by then? How do we produce and achieve tangible results in proportion to the needs on the ground. Bearing this in mind, the time between now and then should be used to support peace and stability by increasing the foundation for stability, which in return will strengthen overall regional stability and open new doors for economic trade and prosperity.

If we think about it critically, consolidated peace efforts require innovation based on thorough analysis of the issues at hand and evaluation of what has already been tested and tried to address them. We have to dare to ask the hard questions to solve our mutual problems. What needs to be done in Somalia? How to address the issues in South Sudan? Consolidated peace efforts call for countries of this region that are willing to go “beyond business as usual” and push the frontiers in terms of new and more effective ways to work for peace together. It demands that we ask critical questions such as what is the overarching framework or vision for peace in the Horn of Africa that actors should align to? Have we set out clear, yet comprehensive, aspirational, yet pragmatic, visions around which we can consolidate

our peace building efforts? How do we cope with the dynamic nature of the region and draw from our history and experiences as we move the peace building field forward?

***There are external actors still plotting to disrupt the new epoch of peace in the region. What effects will this have on the ongoing peace consolidation efforts?***

This is something we expected from the beginning. There are a lot of old narratives repeated ad nauseam to no effect. Accounts such as there are considerable positive changes in Ethiopia following the peace deal made with Eritrea but the same cannot be said for Eritrea, no political change and there are political prisoners in the country, national service is still ongoing, and so on and so forth. These are narratives that seem to be churned out by those who have labeled themselves as regional experts. Such descriptions are, most of the time, based on unprincipled opinions that lack any impression of balance. These proliferating misconceptions are fabricated to generate a climate of mistrust and tension-laden region, with a view to create negative public opinion.

Moreover, in this era of flawed information technology, disinformation and sensationalism, and the speed at which they are spread and the magnitude of their influence, cannot be overlooked. They attempt to spread discord among audiences. Our objectives must not be derailed by such attempts. As the saying goes, “the camel marches, while the dog keeps on barking.”

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Generally speaking, the deliberate spread of misinformation has been around a long time. In America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and so on, the incidence and prevalence of fake news and misinformation has had a negative effect on current issues. The news cycle revolves constantly now, and hence news, true and false, is placed before the public on an instant, worldwide scale as never before. Bearing this in mind, it should come as no surprise to find individuals spewing absurd opinions, such as “ the Badme issue should be left for the Tigray people to resolve, rather than left to Eritrea and Ethiopia.” These are intended to mislead people. Moreover, the ongoing developments of open borders and the free movement of people are taken out of context and promulgated into false and misleading accounts designed to

deceive the public. These are driven by actors with hidden agendas who don't favor the current climate of peace and development. The general public needs to stay alert

***Mr. President, what responsibilities for the people and government arise with the new developments?***

Based on our past experiences, we cannot be relaxed assuming that peace and stability are prevailing. We should not only increase awareness and commitment, but we should also work to face the challenges that may arise. We should work double fold in order to make up for lost opportunities. As of today, there is no time for relaxation. We have emerged victorious against all conspiracies to derail our independent political path and development drives. It was because of the continuous external hostilities that we were unable to realize our desires. Now, a new era is emerging and we should make up for the lost opportunities.

Every citizen should actively work for the sustainability and development of the agreement. The new peace opportunity should add impetus and strength for our active engagement in the process. One of the issues we continuously raise is that we integrate our resources and capacity at regional and global level for better outcomes. However, we should not expect external assistance for achieving our desires. Instead, we should mobilize our resources and capacity for achieving our desires. The Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples inside their countries and in the Diaspora should work hard and bring about meaningful progress. For that, we should mobilize our resources and register large economic achievements.

The cooperation and relations that we aspire to create should bring positive changes in the lives of our people. Positive changes can be realized only through hard work and the new reality that is emerging is of significant importance to the Eritrean people. The Eritrean people have a unique geographical and economic situation. We could also mention other various factors. This uniqueness should play a part in development and impact the bilateral relations between the peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia. We should identify our opportunities and potential in order to effectively exploit them. For that, we should prioritize our activities in order to develop our capacity, extend our

achievements, and augment productivity and timely implementation of our programs.

We should multiply our efforts, in terms of time and resources, for better outcomes. The same is expected from the people of Ethiopia. 100 million human resources in Ethiopia, and in the other countries in the region, are not to be seen lightly.

The people of Somalia are currently afflicted by intractable turmoil; they have to emerge from that situation and become part of the new era of peace and development. The people of South Sudan have been in the same situation. They, too, have to be part of the process.

The awareness and contribution of the people in the region should go hand in hand with the new developments. That is where we should concentrate on, in order to develop bilateral relations. We should also do our homework as a country, in terms of developing our capacity and shouldering our responsibility.

Eritrean nationals living in the Diaspora should also become beneficiaries of the new opportunities. In order to do that, strong efforts should be exerted so that they fully comprehend the new reality and development programs and contribute their part. They have to be aware of the political, diplomatic, information, and other development programs.

***Mr. President, the Eritrean people have stood alongside their government in foiling all sorts of external conspiracies and have reached this new era of peace and development. Do you have any message to convey to them in connection to that?***

There are many factors that make the Eritrean people unique. It is not an easy thing for any people to stand firm against conspiracies of such magnitude for over 30 years. It is true that the Eritrean people have not received what they should deserve. The standards of living of the people should be improved and their desires should be met. The new developments emerging in this region are the result of the steadfastness and commitment of the Eritrean people. With the new reality, the people should be ready to work hard and take advantage of the opportunities created.

The Eritrean people have stood firmly for the past 27, 28 years against a number of challenges: the border conflict, economic conspiracy, sanctions, and other external pressures. Therefore, the Eritrean people greatly deserve the new realities that are emerging. If we recognize our path, programs, and vision there is nothing that can stop us from realizing our desires.

***Thank you Mr. President!***