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An OEA Statement:

(July 20, 2009)

The African Union: The Host Country's Undue Influence

The shameful action the African Union (AU) took last weeks in which the organization asked the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on a member nation, Eritrea, without any basis in fact, show several things about the organization. But, the one thing that comes on top of a long list of what is wrong with this continental organization is the extent of the host country's undue influence and tight political grip it has over it. For example, on conflicts that involve Ethiopia, as all conflicts in the Horn of Africa do, the organization doesn't even pretend to be impartial, always at the beck and call of Meles Zenawi's minority regime with regards to Somalia, Eritrea, and other cases.

Instead of learning from the miserable failures of its predecessor, the OAU (Organization of African Unity), the AU seems to be perpetuating them. The organization, especially its secretariat, seems to operate as an extension of the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, always bending over backwards to do Addis Ababa's bidding.

The AU, in its founding act, said its headquarters would remain in the Ethiopian capital for now. However, unless something is done to ensure that it functions as an independent continental organization, free from the manipulation of the host nation, it will continue to commit blunders that will destroy whatever shred of integrity is left.

To show the host country's manipulation of the AU is just a continuation of the sad legacy of the OAU, here is an article from the Dehai archives written 10 years ago this week:

**The OAU and Ethiopia's IOUs:
Lessons for Somalia and others**

By Asgede Hagos*, July 13, 1999

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi last week called upon the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to try to bring peace to Somalia, in which Addis Ababa seems to be fully and directly involved; not only has Ethiopia taken sides in the conflict, it has also invaded part of this troubled land.

However, though Somalia and Somalis need a lot of things right now, OAU involvement is not one of them--not at least the OAU that has been mishandling the Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict mediation efforts.

One of the most abiding lessons we have learned from the OAU's "mediation" effort in the Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict during the last 15 months is that where Ethiopia is party to a conflict, the organization, headquartered in the Ethiopian capital, abandons the most basic element required of a mediator: neutrality and a sense of fairness. Such a conclusion would effectively eliminate OAU involvement in any existing or potential conflict within the Greater Horn of Africa in which Ethiopia is one of the major players.

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Right from the start, OAU's involvement in this conflict has been characterized by a series of missteps and missed opportunities essentially due to its failure to put a premium on guarding the integrity of the process as well as the institution to achieve the trust of both parties. Instead, the OAU mediation team charged with resolving the border conflict, in which the secretary general and his bureaucratic machinery play a critical role, allowed one party to dictate the mediating process.

The influence of the host nation on the organization is so strong and so complete that many people, but especially Eritreans who have been following each and every action it has taken and every word it has uttered relating to this murderous conflict, have begun to see the OAU secretariat as an instrument of Ethiopia of foreign policy. So, it is not surprising that the Ethiopian prime minister is pushing for OAU involvement in the Somalia crisis as well. However, that would be a tragic mistake now that Ethiopia is deeply involved in that crisis. It is clear that it just cannot play a fair arbiter when Ethiopia's interests are at stake. The secretary general and the members of the secretariat are too beholden to the Ethiopian foreign ministry for services ranging from housing to entertainment, from utilities to residency permits, and from reappointment to another term to validation of one's efforts, to function independent of Addis Ababa's clutches. The IOUs are just too many and the political grip too firm to even contemplate that when Ethiopian demands are on the table--no matter how unreasonable.

This failure to maintain a basic sense of fairness in mediating the border conflict could be seen in different ways throughout the process during the last 15 months. We have seen it in the mediating team's constant bowing to every Ethiopian demand and precondition; one could also see it in the relentless manipulation of information regarding the negotiation to favor the host country; it was also evident in the team's insistence on keeping Djibouti on the three-nation mediation team despite a clear danger of tainting the group's final work--a nation that by its actions and words disqualified itself from such a role since almost the start of the mediation process.

Let us take a brief look at each of these shortcomings.

FIRST, how complete and strong the host country's political grip is on this continental organization can be seen in the mediation team's response to the demands of the two parties. Sometimes one wonders if the team even recognizes there is a second party to the conflict. [Re: The outgoing chairman sent a private letter addressed to Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki to Addis Ababa and Washington three weeks before it was sent to the intended recipient]. It bowed to every Ethiopian precondition to a ceasefire even if that meant undermining the whole peace process enshrined in their own framework already accepted by both Ethiopia and Eritrea.

In fact, there is virtually nothing that the OAU has not done to force Eritrea to accept Ethiopia's positions and preconditions at almost every stage in the process over the last 15 months. On the other hand, there is nothing it has done in public to pressure Ethiopia to meet its end of the deal.

This horrendous failure to guard the integrity of the process in the border dispute has implications for the OAU's conflict prevention, management, and resolution mechanism. The manipulation seems to have started from the get go when the secretary general, who otherwise advocates "African solutions for African problems," maneuvered to push a Washington-inspired proposal which supported Ethiopia's first precondition for Eritrea to withdraw from Badme. U.S. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Susan Rice told a group of Ethiopians and Eritreans last summer that it was the OAU secretary general who insisted on adopting the U.S.-Rwanda plan and take it to the OAU annual meeting. The only thing new in the OAU version of the plan is that it comes even closer to the Ethiopian position by noting that one of the disputed areas was administered by

Ethiopia. Little wonder, many proposed "African solutions" were rejected by Ethiopia because it knew it could dictate the OAU process. All in all, at least nine proposals were rejected.

SECOND, the manipulation of information ranged in form from leaking confidential and private information to the media, to maintaining silence when called upon to speak up to clear issues or confirm positions; from playing spin meisters to enhance the image of one party, or damage that of the other, to covering up culpability under the guise of "they are all doing it" when the culprit is clearly the party the mediating them and secretary general are rooting for, as in the case of Ethiopia's deportation of more than 60,000 Ethiopians of Eritrean origin and Eritreans from Ethiopia.

The mediating team's propensity to cater to the demands of the host country, no matter how unreasonable, reached its height in May this year when the outgoing OAU chairman, President Campaore of Burkina Faso, wrote a letter to President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea in which he tried to be the judge and jury on the ownership of the disputed areas on the 600-mile border between the two warring nations. In effect, in his letter written in French and sent to Washington, D.C., 20 days before it was sent to Asmara, Eritrea, he said the disputed areas belonged to Ethiopia--all by himself, thereby prejudging the issue, and undermining the organization's peace plan, if not rendering it null and void, a peace plan the whole world has been relying on to stop the war which has claimed the lives of tens of thousands, and the displacements of hundreds of thousands more.

What is even worse is the underhanded way the OAU operatives tried to legitimize this letter by leaking it to the press--another shameless attempt to pressure Eritrea to accept yet another one of Ethiopia's many preconditions to a ceasefire. This letter, whose origin and authenticity are still being questioned, destroys the fundamental assumptions on which the framework agreement is based.

This renewed energy the outgoing chairman showed to resolve the conflict was in sharp contrast to the deafening silence that characterized the period after Eritrea accepted the framework and when the chairman and his team were called upon to speak up when Ethiopia came up with what the whole world views as unacceptable interpretation of the central provision of the OAU framework. Why? That would have put the group out of tune with Ethiopia's interests.

THIRD, we can also see this unfairness in the mediation team's insistence on keeping Djibouti as part of the mediating team--a nation that broke diplomatic relations with Eritrea and whose leaders have taken sides publicly and have made public statements that clearly disqualifies them as impartial arbiter in this dispute. The former and current president of that nation never tried to hide where they stand on the issues undergirding the conflict, which is not surprising, given their nation's now almost total dependency for its economic life on the goodwill of Addis Ababa. What should be surprising to all reasonable people, however, is the OAU's insistence, despite Eritrea's repeated objections, on keeping Djibouti on a committee that is supposed to be a fair and neutral arbiter to stop a murderous war. But, maybe it should not surprise anyone given the host country's inappropriate and unhealthy influence over the OAU and especially its Addis Ababa-based secretariat.

FINALLY, this must be viewed as a serious setback to the high hopes that were raised when in 1993 the OAU created the Mechanism of Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution to deal with "African solutions to African problems." It also has serious implications for current and future conflicts in the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopia so far plays a critical, if not central, role. Somalis and others in the region that are greatly affected by what Ethiopia does should draw important lessons from this experience.

In the past, the OAU showed a great deal of hesitation to get involved in Somalia other than to express opposition to Northern Somaliland's declaration of independence, and occasional expression of support for efforts to bring about reconciliation and promotion of agreement among the various factions. However, now that Ethiopia is deeply involved in Somalia, the OAU secretary general and his bureaucratic machinery might choose to get in to legitimize Addis Ababa's invasion and validating Meles Zenawi's "good warlords." It is also clear that Ethiopia does not want to see a strong, centralized state in Somalia which may revive the Ogaden specter.

In conclusion, this is a textbook lesson on how not to mediate any conflict--much less a complicated one--and how a determined host nation can distort, subvert, or dictate a peace process when it is a party to the conflict. The organization stumbled at almost every step of its involvement in the border dispute--it showed one-sidedness when and where evenhandedness was needed; it wilted under strong pressure of the host country when and where it was called upon to be firm; it preferred silence when it was called upon to speak up (to clarify the core provisions of its own framework of agreement). Generally speaking, it spoke when Addis Ababa wanted to speak and remained silent when the host nation wanted it to do so. As a result, this badly flawed approach may have prolonged the conflict, thereby prolonging the suffering, destruction and death that have been the hallmarks of the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict, appropriately called "the biggest war in the world today." There is no question that the OAU has been part of this particular problem--so far.

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