

# Go Ethiopia Go: Ethiopia's Smart War of Attrition

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The news of the engagement on June 12, 2016 between the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops in the areas around Tsorona, which are areas administered by Eritrea, had at first created high hopes on both sides of the citizenship divide. Many Ethiopians and Eritreans had stretched their imagination and hoped that this was going to be a final blow to the Eritrean regime, which was condemned for committing crimes against humanity on its own citizens by a report that was made public only days ago by the United Nations. Ethiopians wished that the war would once and for all remove the Eritrean criminal junta that had been a menace in the Horn of Africa for a very long time through its funding, training and supplying of terrorist networks ranging from Al Shabab in Somalia to remnants and sympathizers of the blood-soaked Derg regime who have now branded themselves as Ethiopian freedom fighters. In just 7 years of its independence from Ethiopia, unable to live in peace with itself, Eritrea attacked all of its neighbours—Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sudan, and Yemen—like a mad dog probably setting a record in world history and practically alienating its most important friends including Western nations. Its invasion of Ethiopia in 1998 was the most shocking act it committed. Not only was this a stab in the back (both literally and figuratively) for Ethiopia, which was Eritrea's ally and was busy recovering from its own civil war neglecting military spending in favour of building its economy and infrastructure, it was also the most stupid act for Eritrea because it was committed against a country that was one of Eritrea's largest trading partner and foreign currency source by far. For their part, Eritreans saw this conflict as the only way to remove a regime that has systematically enslaved its own people and committed extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, and extortion with impunity on an industrial scale with little or no precedents in Africa. However, since the ordinary citizens have been unable to deal with such a monster on their own, they looked up to Ethiopia to do the bidding for them for a win-win solution. So why did Ethiopia, for all intents and purposes, refuse to turn this opportunity into an all-out war to remove the Eritrean regime? Good question.

That question raises another question: Who said an all-out war is in the best interest of Ethiopia, regardless of what Eritreans wish at this particular point in their history? Enter War of Attrition. War of attrition is "a military strategy in which a belligerent attempts to win a war by wearing down the enemy to the point of collapse through continuous losses in personnel and materiel" (Wikipedia). Although there is no doubt that Ethiopia will easily win an all-out war against the Eritrean regime, the political, diplomatic, social and economic cost of such a war (not to mention the actual loss of life and military hardware at the battle fields), will be enormous for Ethiopia and Eritrea even if Ethiopia was a superpower. This is mainly because Ethiopia shares a common long border with its northern rival. When you share a common boarder, you have to think twice (or should I say a thousand times) before you attack your neighbor in a full-scale militarily confrontation because of physical proximity that will wreak havoc on communities and infrastructure and lead to being bypassed by tourists and investors with long-term consequences. Moreover, since the Horn of Africa is not known to be the most peaceful neighbourhood in the world, the global perception about peace in Ethiopia and its neighbourhood, which Ethiopia is working hard to correct, will revert back to the commonly held negative stereotyping

of the region. Even airlines will be forbidden to fly over the war zone even years after the war is over (USA only lifted the ban it placed against its carriers to fly over northern Ethiopia only recently, which was a legacy of the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war), with severe economic consequences. Instead of a military victory through a full-scale war, Ethiopia will win even more by allowing the Eritrean regime to bleed to death with minimal sacrifice on the part of Ethiopia such as by destroying strategic military areas in surprise attacks such as it did on June 12th with the frequency and severity of Ethiopia's choice. (As long as it serves Ethiopia's interest, Ethiopians should not care who started the June 12th, 2016 confrontation. That's food for thought.)

It is extremely smart for Ethiopia to ignore the temptation to teach its tiny wannabe neighbor a lesson by striking it with the full force of an all-out war aimed at removing its blood-soaked dictator. It takes maturity, especially in Africa, to restrain yourself when you have all the military power and legal grounds to act as you wish (notice that the key word is "wish" and not "ought to.") We may wish to act in a hurry with adrenaline rushing through our veins, but it is a sign of immaturity to act at the spur of the moment without putting in place a long-term plan. You see, Ethiopia currently has a lot on its plate. It is currently facing the worst drought in a century and it needs to concentrate all of its energy and resources at making sure that its citizens are fed and no life is lost due to the drought. Ethiopia has Africa's largest and most successful productive safety net program which is saving millions of lives but a lot is being done to ensure that families can sustain themselves and not rely on public safety nets in the first place. This needs the implementation of pro-poor projects including massive investments in irrigation, rural electrification, eradication of illiteracy and diseases, as well as construction of roads, schools, and hospitals. Ethiopia is also looking for massive foreign investments that would create 2 million jobs per annum for the next 10 years just to cope with its population growth, in addition to working to complete the many mega projects it has started to construct and the many more that are in the pipeline designed to ensure it becomes a middle income country by 2025. Ethiopia can achieve all these and still see the death of the Eritrean regime without an all-out war that will alarm investors and drive away the much needed foreign investment and the goodwill bestowed on the country by the international community, which the Eritrean regime enviously loves to hate and ridicule.

It is extremely smart for Ethiopia to selectively attack the Eritrean military positions with a limited scope as it has been doing and should continue to do every few months or years without risking the death of tens of thousands of forced Eritrean conscripts in a full-out war. This is humane and honourable and Eritreans will one day recognize this as a favour from Ethiopia. There is no doubt that a full-out war will cause the suffering and death of more Eritreans than Ethiopians because of Ethiopia's superior defense capabilities (which were demonstrated in the 1998-2000 war), especially its superior air force which can carpet bomb the Eritrean trenches that had been compared to the trenches of World War I. Ethiopia's air force controlled the skies during the Ethiopian counter-offensive in 2000, relentlessly pounding Eritrean trenches and defensive positions killing, unavoidable as it was, countless Eritrean conscripts. It is said that the first Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) caused the death of an estimated 60,000 people. I have no doubt that most of the casualties were Eritrean soldiers precisely because of Ethiopia's surprise attack supported by its superior air force. (The capabilities of the Ethiopian air force is probably unmatched in Africa as demonstrated in its heroic achievements during the war that followed Somalia's invasion of Ethiopia in the 1970's and later during the Ethio-Eritrean war which completely destroyed the paltry Eritrean air force before it even knew that it was under attack.) Even by the Eritrean regime's own admission, 22,000 of the 60,000 deaths were Eritrean soldiers. However, for a country that never

publishes its budget or any other vital statistics that a normal government does, it was highly unusual for it to provide the number of its dead soldiers, which makes the information all the more suspicious. So the real number may be a lot higher, perhaps as high as 40,000 to 50,000. However, even taking the 22,000 number as real (roughly 1/3 of the casualties), it provides that Eritrea had 10 times more casualties per a unit of its population compared to Ethiopia whose population is 16 times stronger. Since in all likelihood the Eritrean government provided false information as it always does, Eritrea might have paid the lives of 20 times more soldiers per a unit of population than Ethiopia's in that war, in addition to the unthinkable social and economic decay it has now descended into because of cascading events that are related to the sole and puzzling reason of attacking its hitherto staunchest friend, Ethiopia. Most Eritreans now look back with nostalgia to the time of the military Derg dictatorship under which all of Ethiopia, including the then northern province of Eritrea, suffered. Considering their euphoria at their independence (which Ethiopia in good faith recognized allowing other nations to do so, which otherwise would have left Eritrea in political limbo as Somaliland is to this day), who could have thought that Eritreans would look back to such a time of the bloody Derg regime and wish that they were still ruled under it? That many Eritreans remember the Derg regime, which the rest of Ethiopians think was the worst government in recent memory, with nostalgia while a regime made up of their own kind has turned Eritrea into hell on earth is extremely heartbreaking even for Ethiopians who still consider Eritreans as their brothers and sisters.

It is extremely smart for Ethiopia to refuse to do the bidding for Eritreans in removing their government in an all-out war, because only the will and action of the Eritrean people can ensure that never will such a regime rise again to torment its people and project its insanity to neighbouring countries. If Ethiopia would have decided to 'finish the job' in the 2000 surprise attack and remove the Eritrean regime, which it could have done as the Ethiopian army was close to entering Asmara, it would probably have caused the condemnation of the international community and, most importantly, would still have failed to ensure lasting peace because Eritreans were at that time still infatuated with the person of President Isaias Afewerki, the supreme leader of Eritrea, and they would never have forgiven Ethiopia for it. That Eritreans were blinded by the unquestioning love they had for the president, who was a rebel leader with the blood of his comrades on his hand even during the years of the struggle, is a showcase of human depravity. For such a sophisticated nation to have developed a personality cult for the president even as recently as a few years ago even when the regime didn't make explicit efforts for it (although it did so subtly) like the North Korean regime does, for example, is beyond comprehension. Fortunately, now, the Eritreans seem to have awakened. The Isaias regime has raped Eritrea (both literally and figuratively) in plain sight of the world for more than a quarter century and Eritreans are now furious for it. Raping girls and women and exposing them to sexual slavery, especially in the military camps, are only a fraction of the regimes horror stories. Since it audaciously rounded up in 2001 the so called Group 15, who were the president's most trusted comrades during the struggle and who held high government positions after independence, for criticizing the president for creating and mishandling the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, it completely lost what little moral compass it had and has since been committing all sorts of crimes against humanity on its people with impunity. Putting men and women incommunicado mostly in shipping containers in the searing Eritrean desert temperatures from which many die, accompanied by extortion, torture, and extrajudicial killings are routinely practiced as means to punish those who are suspected of opposition to the regime and warn anyone who might try to follow their examples. These are the signs of a dying regime and a populace who has finally discovered on their own who the president and his cronies truly are behind the veil of appearing to be national heroes. These are

dangerous combinations and will lead to the only possible outcome—a revolution. That whether or not the Isaias Afewerki regime will fall is not the question. The question is how soon will the Eritrean people remove this bloody regime without allowing it to continue to torment them and destroy their country under their feet anymore.

No, Ethiopia should not engage Eritrea in an all-out war. Time is on Ethiopia's side, but not on the side of the ailing and aging Isaias Afewerki and his regime. Ethiopia has everything to gain and nothing to lose by continuing its smart war of attrition against Eritrea. Let Eritrea continue to waste away its hard currency and its human resources in its misguided effort to augment its military to support its false grandiosity. Dollar for dollar, Eritrea loses about 16 times more financial opportunity for the same amount of military size as Ethiopia has because of its tiny workforce and almost inexistent economy. However, if that's the regime's choice, Ethiopia should live with it because Ethiopia's loss is relatively small. It is the Eritreans who allowed their government to rule over them, and it should be the Eritreans and only the Eritreans who should bring it down if they don't like the way it is ruling over them. That is not to say that Ethiopia does not have sovereign right to defend itself even as far as going to effect a regime change in Asmara, if it feels threatened by it and if it thinks that it is the most effective way to remove the menace. But that doesn't seem to be the case and Ethiopia should do what is in its best interest over the long term. Therefore, Ethiopia should only beat the regime with its stick of *temetatany irimijja* with just enough intensity and interval to bleed it to death without causing any major news of war that can have negative consequences on Ethiopia's hard earned economic progress and future development trajectory.

God bless Ethiopia (and the Eritrean people).