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A good wish is not enough to save the ‘cold nation’ from freezing



Traveladventures.org - Eritrean landscape: border with Ethiopia [Visited: January 2004]

Recently I have been following the public debate on the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea triggered by Herman J. ‘Hank’ Cohen, Devid Shinn, Princeton Lyman and then followed by both countries successive opinions. A recent idea was forwarded by Tony Carol.

I think, the ideas of all the Authors revolve around the point that both countries need to normalize their relations though most of them raised the difficulty of achieving it as their biggest concern. They also implicitly acknowledge that the conflict hurts much to Eritrea, whom they labeled as a country living in ‘the cold’ than it does to Ethiopia. So, that means, their effort seems to be a call for saving ‘the cold nation’ from freezing – not much for the little hurt Ethiopia.

To my best knowledge about the strained relation, all of them have not been able to touch the heart of the problem. Only Ambassador David Shin tried to explain the causes with a bit more number of issues than the simple border conflict but does hurriedly recommend for Ethiopia to hand over Badme to Eritrea as a first measure. In my opinion, that is a blind recommendation tantamount to running in the dark where you

don't know what the response of the cold nation's government afterwards may be. It could even lead into a more complicated problem. Second, this idea does not consider the opinion of the Ethiopian side on the matter! It doesn't answer the question why Ethiopia is in control of Badme! If Ethiopia is willing to hand over Badme to Eritrea now, why didn't the former do it before? It will be a big mistake to touch the border issue without first building confidence on both sides. Because: 'Concessions minus Trust plus military threat' seems a very dangerous equation.

The recent Article by Tony Carol deals with mere economic benefits of reconciling the two countries; it never touches the very question why the two countries went into war and why they need reconciliation now. The economic benefits of reconciliation, as pointed out in the article, can only be mythical good wishes so far as the political, security and policy intricacies remain unresolved. Even now, if you ask both parties to the conflict, they will tell you one same myth: "we would have benefited a lot from the relations between the two - had the other side not been creating troubles; it was unnecessary war, etc." the difference could only be that one of them could be genuinely speaking while the other is just playing innocent. Trust is absolutely absent between them – some scholars have already written that both countries were not trusting each other even during the times when their relations seemed amicable!

In my opinion, their strained relation is a serious one that needs a holistic and detailed road-map of negotiations between the two. A series of confidence building measures, but not including the border issue, should prelude negotiations. For example, stop meddling in the internal affairs of the other side (e.g. stop supporting militant opposition groups against the other side, media propaganda, blaming one another, etc); genuinely accepting the principle that whatever system each side applies in its domestic affairs is not pointed against the other: be it federalism or unitary systems; accepting the principle that in all economic relations, one should understand the loss of the other and unbalanced relations will not lead to a mutual benefit; any of them should not be a stumbling block against the other - both sides should clear their doubts in these areas; etc. The point is, even the confidence building measures should be carefully designed in a hierarchical way. The easiest but meaningful things must be done first.

After the above ones and related measures are implemented, a series of negotiations in each sector of relations should be undertaken. Negotiations on political front including the border issue, sanctions, membership in IGAD, preventing future conflicts, regional and internal matters; economic front including the issues of trade, investment, industrialization, market, and access to the sea, etc; social front; and others. The end result will have to be a comprehensive agreement on each sector of relations that will take them even to a regional integration and guarantee them with the economic benefits pointed out by Tony Carol.

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