

## **Eritrea: An International Catch-22**

**By Meles Alem**

The request of the state of Eritrea to rejoin the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the recent visit of President Isaias Afewerki — Africa's Ivan the Terrible — to Kampala, the Ugandan capital, have been topping the headlines for the past few days. Both have boggled the minds of many analysts. Speculations were rife regarding the visit and the motive of Eritrea to reactivate its IGAD membership with immediate effect. Many asked, why now? Those who are familiar with the twisting strategy of Asmara, however, were not surprised by the move.

### **Conspiracy**

Four years after suspending itself from IGAD, Eritrea abruptly decided to reactivate its membership. Eritrea withdrew from the regional block under the pretext of Ethiopia's action in Somalia in 2006 and support of member states when sanctions were imposed. By the same token, their secretive and recursive leader paid a three-day rare visit, by 'invitation', to Uganda. Kiflu Hussein, Ethiopian Human rights defender, said the Eritrean ruler has knocked the door of his Ugandan counterpart." Of course, the official word is that he was here at the

invitation of President Yueri Museveni,” he added. These successive events have raised eyebrows about the motives and its details.

In a letter written by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea to IGAD, Eritrea claimed that it wanted to rejoin because there is need for peace and stability in the region and Eritrea should contribute its part. The independence of South Sudan and their current humanitarian situation were also put forth as well as multiple more *raison d'êtres*. With regards to the visit of President Isaias, it aimed at supporting efforts at stabilizing the Horn of Africa that is ploughed by inter and intra-state clashes.

When taken at face value, these are commendable imitations. But past experiences show that the rogue regime in Asmara does not comprehend the words ‘peace’ and ‘stability’. It is a war profiteer government engaged in harbouring and sponsoring terrorist groups and so called liberation fronts. Many observers termed the visit as a notable attempt aimed at ‘mending fences’ with neighbours in the East and Horn of Africa. Some analysts consider the visit as a vigorous fight-back to avoid expected Security Council sanctions on the Red Sea State. The Kenyan Citizen Television pigeonholed it as a charming diplomatic exercise.

On the other hand, some analysts attached the move to Museveni’s ambition of becoming a major regional player. And the South African Institute for Security

Studies said the visit may also be connected with the Museveni's design for regional leadership and personal prestige: "Museveni considers himself as one of the key regional, if not continental, political figures and would want to shape events in the region and beyond," it said. But, in the eyes of many regional observers, these arguments do not hold water.

I simply don't buy the idea that there is a change of policy in Asmara. Not least of all because there is no sense of optimism. According to many observers, Isaias is intimidated by the call from IGAD member states for tougher sanctions on Eritrea for its destabilizing role in the sub-region. The visit is, therefore, meant to neutralize the sanctions and weaken the unity of IGAD states. The track record of Eritrea shows that Isaias succumbs to pressure easily when severe consequences are threatened. A case in point is the regime's acceptance of the peaceful resolution of the Ethio-Eritrea conflict after the Ethiopian army crossed into the hinterland of the Red Sea State. Dan Connel, journalist and professor on African Politics in Summons College, said that Eritrean President called former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to inform him about his acceptance of the peaceful resolution of the border dispute after persistent rebuttal. Likewise, Eritrean authorities swallowed their pride and asked to renew their membership, and he paid a visit with his own request. Kiflu said that the regime in Asmara has been more isolated by the 'international community'; that they have ganged up against it. Eritrea can't afford

to ignore this fact,” he concludes. Eritrea has learned that the upcoming sanction will be biting.

### **Why Sanctions?**

In December 2009, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo, severe travel restrictions and a total asset freeze on top Eritrean political and military leaders over their support for Al-Qaeda’s East African proxy, Al-Shabaab. Eritrea has denied accusations that it is fuelling the conflict in Somalia by channelling funds and training terrorists. Nevertheless, the facts on the ground and UN Monitoring Reports, which indicate otherwise, speak for themselves.

A recent United Nations Monitoring Group report on Somalia and Eritrea confirmed that Eritrea is behind the July 2010 Kampala bombings that claimed the lives of 80 people (including Eritrean refugees) and left scores injured. In early 2011, Eritrea conspired to bomb targets in and around Addis Ababa at the time of the 16th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union. And if that barbaric plan was executed it would have caused innumerable civilian casualties and disrupted the African Union Summit.

“During the course of current mandate, the Monitoring Group has also obtained documentary evidence of Eritrean payment to a number of individuals with links to Al-Shabaab. The documents obtained were received directly from the Embassy of

Eritrea in Nairobi,” the report indicated. To the amazement of many, Eritrea has also attempted to sabotage the newly independent African country, South Sudan, by supporting dissident groups led by General George Athor and others. The Monitoring Group go on to accuse Eritrea of serving as a safe haven for so called ‘liberation movements’ in the region as a platform for operation, deployment and training.

As a result, in the past few weeks, IGAD asked that United Nations Security Council for more sanctions against international companies, preventing investment in the mining sector and gold imports from Eritrea. A two percent tax levied on Eritreans living in the diaspora, excluding remittance is also included in the proposal. This is necessitated, the request claims, by Asmara’s continuous role in destabilizing activities.

### **Wrong Argument for Wrong Cause**

The leadership in Asmara has made it a habit of behaving like a bully in the region because it has a problem with Ethiopia. As for Ethiopia, the government has unconditionally accepted the Ethio-Eritrean Boundary Commission’s decision long ago and requested Eritrea to sit back for its implementation. But it seems that the Eritrean government is less interested in resolving the problem than talking about resolving the problem. Probably because the regime in Asmara has already gone

too far in oppressing its citizens that it cannot simply survive without putting Ethiopia as an enemy. In short, if the Ethio-Eritrea quagmire manages to get some sort of a solution, the Eritrean government will quickly become accountable for a host of domestic tragedies.

It is unimaginable to have a country that functions without a constitution, opposition parties, private media, parliament and election. Unfortunately, that has been the case in Eritrea since gaining independence in the early 1990s. Even the “Failed State” Somalia has a parliament and election, among others. So a government that is not accountable to its people and failed the nation so miserably could not be expected to suddenly contribute genuinely to peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

### **The way out**

Rumours suggest President Isaias is tactically exerting relentless efforts to unlock Eritrea from its international isolation. The request to rejoin IGAD, and the visit to Kampala, is part and parcel of that tactic. Time will tell if this effort bears fruit. However, either way, Eritrea is left with dwindling options. Without a solution, it has to choose between the support of terrorist groups and disgruntled elements of the international community and face further marginalization or attempt to play a less lucrative, more constructive role in the East African peace process.

Speaking in Kampala Isaias pledged to support efforts aimed at stabilizing the East African region that has faced decades of war. Be that as it may, the international community should not allow Eritrea to undermine stability in the region any more. It is time to issue a stern warning to the Eritrean government and cure it from its addiction to subversive activities. Otherwise, more sanctions are the only option on a country that must reap what it sowed. The surgical sanction never affects the wellbeing of Eritreans. As Eritrea stands tall among terrorist groups, it deserves unwavering punitive measures. Therefore, Eritrea has to race against time, while the world is counting the days to impose more sanctions.

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