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## heritage



### The End of a 1000-Day War: Ethiopia and Eritrea Sign Peace Accord

Photo: Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, right, and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki shake hands after signing a peace agreement Tuesday, Dec. 12, 2000, near Algiers, Algeria to halt a bloody conflict between the two impoverished nations over a barren patch of land. At center is Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Others are unidentified. AP Photo

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On Tuesday, December 12, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace agreement ending their two-year border war. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi signed the accord in a ceremony in the Algerian capital, Algiers. The event was attended by a number of diplomats, including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who were involved in the six months of diplomatic efforts leading up to the signing.

Many hope the peace accord will bring a definitive end to a war that has claimed as many as 100,000 lives and cost Ethiopia and Eritrea, both impoverished countries, more than \$1 billion in arms purchases.

The fighting broke out on May 6, 1998, when Eritrea, which in 1993 won its independence from Ethiopia after a 30-year liberation struggle, "invaded what Ethiopia considered its territory," according to CNN.

The leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Isaias and Meles, were comrades in arms as recently as May 1991, when together -- Meles as leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, and Isaias as leader of the Ethiopian People's Liberation Front -- they overthrew the ruling military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam. As leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Isaias and Meles disagreed sharply over issues of foreign policy, economic

development, and access to Red Sea seaports -- disagreements that culminated in the outbreak of violence in 1998.

The recent peace accord calls for Ethiopia to withdraw from positions occupied during the war, and for Eritrea to move back 15 miles from Ethiopia's new positions. The accord also calls for the establishment of a neutral 15-member commission based in Geneva that will patrol the 620-mile border and demarcate a frontier based on colonial treaties within the next three years. "Each party shall respect the border so determined, as well as the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the other party," reads the agreement. Both countries have 45 days after the signing to present their "territorial claims" to UN officials.

International committees will also oversee the exchange of prisoners, the resettlement of displaced people, and hear war damage compensation claims. After the signing, the Ethiopian government issued a statement calling on Ethiopians who have suffered loss, damage, or been dispossessed by the "Eritrean war of aggression" to present their claims to the established National Committee for Collecting Compensation Claims.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric on both sides, Eritrea and Ethiopia seem satisfied with the agreement. The Ethiopian government described the accord as "final and comprehensive" and stated that it "has been formally endorsed by the Ethiopian Parliament and Council of Ministers, which is confident that the accord ensures respect for Ethiopia's fundamental national interests and satisfactorily addresses important issues." Eritrea, which by most accounts fared worse in the fighting, has also expressed committed support for the agreement.

Anthony Lake participated in the peace talks as President Clinton's envoy. Lake said he is "convinced the peace agreement would stick" and that it represented a landmark for conflict resolution in Africa. "There is a very significant thing about this agreement in an African context, that is...the underlying cause of conflicts in Africa is the kind of winner-takes-all political culture," he said. Lake added that he hoped the accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea would "become a precedent for elsewhere in Africa in which people learn to accept less than complete victory."

Secretary General Kofi Annan praised the accord and called on the international community to help the countries rebuild their economies, but noted that there's still much work to be done. "It is not enough to silence the guns," he said. "As we embrace peace, build trust and work for reconciliation, we must remember that words can inflame or soothe. We need the best possible atmosphere for the interpretation of this agreement." Annan said the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which includes military personnel from 27 countries, would work with both sides to build confidence.

In a written statement, President Clinton saluted the two signatory countries. "I congratulate the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea for the final peace agreement signed today in Algiers. My relief and happiness on this occasion mirrors the sadness I felt when I witnessed two allies and friends embroiled in a tragic conflict. I look forward to resuming our strong cooperation with Ethiopia and Eritrea across the spectrum of bilateral issues."

Some analysts are not so sanguine about the accord's potential success. "Signing an agreement will not repair the once close relations between these two neighbors," argues British commentator Martin Plaut, who

foresees problems with the agreement's implementation. "For a start, the UN Cartographic Unit, which has to demarcate the border, has an enormous task. The border is 1000 kilometers long, and contains some of the driest, hottest and most hostile territory in the world."

Plaut fears that the process of defining the border could spark conflicts. "The demarcation will take into account the treaties signed between Ethiopia and Italy at the start of the 19th century, but these are not entirely clear, and contain elements that will be far from easy to interpret," he notes. "Some areas of both countries have been traditionally administered from each other's territory, and this will further cloud any decision on where the border lies."

Others are even more critical, denouncing the US's failure to intervene sooner and its friendly ties to both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Isaias and Meles were "embraced by Washington as promising reformers, princes of what President Clinton called an 'African Renaissance,'" complained one commentator in the *New York Times*. "But they proved to be fundamentally men of the gun." Like numerous critics, the *Times* editorialist deplored the Clinton administration's belated support for an arms embargo, its initial refusal to impose sanctions on the two combatants, and its failure to block \$1 billion in World Bank loans that Ethiopia and Eritrea used to buy weapons. "As this war comes to a close, there is reason to wonder whether lives could have been spared with a less accommodating form of engagement," concluded the editorial. "Washington and the rest of the world should refrain from lavishing praise or aid or either until they have demonstrated a commitment to peaceful and accountable governing." Mekonnen Abraha, president of New York's Tigray Self-Help Community Center, an Ethiopian organization in Manhattan, is more encouraged by the accord but doubts that it's a long-term solution. "I support the peace process," he says. "But the deal they're doing now could have been done before anyone was killed -- before any bomb was dropped. There is no change in the situation now from the one before the war. The military leaderships in both countries are strong, but their political stance is short-sighted. Both people share a common historical process. I support a process which ends the war fever, whereby both countries get their legitimate claims, and both peoples can work together for mutual benefit."

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