



Challenges to Peace in the “Horn of Africa”

What is the issue?

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- Resolution of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict brings hope for stability and development in the region.
- But there are credible political challenges in both the countries that need to be sorted out to further the peace initiative.

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What is the context of the conflict?

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- Eritrea was a region in Ethiopia that seceded from it in 1993 after a prolonged violent guerrilla war.
- Both have since been independent countries that lie in close proximity to the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa.

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- They were engaged in a conflict for territorial control over the economically insignificant border town of Badme since the late 1990s.

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- A peace agreement signed by the two countries in December 2000 and a subsequent border commission awarded Badme to Eritrea.

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- But Ethiopia refused to honour the pact and continued to exercise control over Badme by treating it as part of its own territory.

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- This resulted in a prolonged standoff between the two countries for almost 2 decades and claimed more than 50,000 lives.

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What is the political situation in Ethiopia?

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- **Positives** - The decision to honour the terms of the peace accord is credited to Ethiopia's current popularly elected Prime Minister "Abiy Ahmed".

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- The Eritrean outreach is one of the many democratic reforms that Mr. Ahmed has unleashed since assuming office a few months ago.

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- Significantly, he lifted the emergency, released many political prisoners, and delisted some opposition parties that were classified as terrorists.

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- **Challenges** - Nonetheless, rumblings in the ruling “Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front” is posing problems to the government.

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- Traditional tensions between the country’s ethnic Oromo majority and the politically dominant Tigrayan minority are playing out as always.

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- Notably, Mr. Ahmed (who is an Oromo) was strategically chosen to ease the churn and ensure a better political balance in the country.

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- Unless managed tactfully, these internal tensions within the governing coalition could impede the peace process.

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What is the political situation in Eritrea?

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- **History** - Eritrea is ruled by an autocratic president Isaias Afwerki, who rose from through the country’s secessionist guerrilla war with the Ethiopia.

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- He has been at the helm since independence by resisting elections and even failed to even honour the 1997 constitution.

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- Notably, Ethiopian aggression also provided strong grounds for Eritrean masses to fall in line with the dictates of its dictatorial ruler.

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- **Oppression** - Mr. Isaias used the conflict as a pretext to expand his army and suppress dissent with force, thereby triggering a socio-political crisis.

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- This led to mass exodus of people from Eritrea, who has sought refuge in Europe and other countries.

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- **Future** - The end of hostilities could mean a diminishing role for the military and a loosening of President Afwerki’s grip over the state apparatus.

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- This could open up a Pandora’s Box in Eritrea and the resulting power struggle needs to be managed well to avoid a violent conflict.

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What is the way ahead?

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- Restoration of peace and democracy is an urgent priority in both countries, which are among the poorest in the world.

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- Peace will allow landlocked Ethiopia to access Eritrean ports, and tie the two countries into greater economic cooperation.

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- Greater political accountability at home is a prerequisite for stability across the borders, which demands both sides to display better political wisdom.

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- The international community must also step up to engage Ethiopia and Eritrea on fairer terms than it has during the course of the bitter conflict.

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- Notably, Ethiopia and Eritrea are strategically located, both as gateways for global trade and for counter-terrorism operations.

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Source: The Hindu

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