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The specious dividends of peace in the Horn of Africa

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The Peace that Led to War: Ethio-Eritrean Relations since 2018

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Abstract:

Two decades after the outbreak of their devastating 1998–2000 war, in 2018 Eritrea and Ethiopia ended the state of no-war-no-peace that had prevailed since the end of fighting. Despite the fanfare that greeted the sudden thawing of relations, the new dynamic between Asmara and Addis Ababa brought with it familiar and new signs of danger. Opaque and without institutional backstopping, the rapprochement ended up changing the alignment of forces in the region before hurtling it back into yet another war. In examining how it is that the 2018 peace let to war in 2020, this paper finds all the four major parties to the conflict variously complicit in the carnage that followed.

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Keywords: EPLF, TPLF, EPRDF, Algiers Agreement, Northern Command.

Introduction

Newly inaugurated Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed turned a new page in Ethio-Eritrean relations in 2018, after a bloody two-year border conflict and 17 years of “no-peace no-war” under two previous premiers. Prime Minister Abiy's rise to power in April that year calmed popular unrest in the towns and held back the country and the region from the edge of the precipice. Under his energetic leadership Ethiopia appeared to be on a path toward sustainable peace and democratic progress. Nevertheless, during the first two years of his rule (2018–2020), Dr Abiy Ahmed also presided over the ominous continuity that contributed to bring the country to the verge of total chaos that catapulted him to power. Indeed, the instability across Ethiopia worsened and, in early November 2020, the country plunged into an all-out brutal two-year civil war in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray. Not only was the rapid thawing

of the relations with Eritrea representative of the contradicting undercurrents of the reforms he presided over in Ethiopia, but between 2020 and 2022, Eritrea became integral to the federal Ethiopian government's war efforts in Tigray, bordering Eritrea. The complex entanglements owe their origins to convergences and divergences of Ethiopian domestic dynamics and factors that are uniquely Eritrean.

This paper examines the wider background and immediate context of PM Abiy's bold rapprochement with Eritrea, which he achieved without giving in to Eritrea's two-decade long position, i.e. implementation to the letter of the April 2002 ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC). The paper also examines how shared enmity toward and joint military action against the northern Ethiopian rebellion of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) overshadowed the contradictions in the newly normalized Ethio-Eritrean relationship, the immanent prospects of its stagnation and the ominous signs of its backsliding.

The Long Shadow of History in Ethiopian-Eritrean Relations

During the second half of the thirty-year Eritrean armed struggle for independence from Ethiopia (1961-1991), the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) scored incremental military, diplomatic and political gains against the Ethiopian military dictatorship of Mengistu Hailemariam that had overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie in a September 1974 coup d'état. EPLF's strategic genius rested on the alliances that it struck with several Ethiopian rebel movements that it deemed would form a "democratic alternative" to the repressive government in Addis Ababa (Markakis 1987; Young 1997; Berhe 2009; Weldemichael 2014). The TPLF was one of these insurgents in the Ethiopian heartland. EPLF's relationship with the TPLF was based on the understanding that, upon defeating the Ethiopian government, the Eritrean people would be allowed to exercise the right to self-determination and their choice be respected. At no point did the TPLF question or do anything to undermine that premise. Nevertheless, its initial goal of seceding from Ethiopia and forming an independent Tigrayan republic strained the relationship between the two armed movements at the outset. Nearly a decade later, their relationship broke down due to number of factors, among them political ideology and military tactics and strategy (Young 1996: 105-120; Weldemichael 2014). During the subsequent four years of hiatus in their comradeship, EPLF kept calling on all progressive Ethiopian movements to form a unified front that was realized with the formation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1989 with active Eritrean support.¹ Eritreans also supported non-EPRDF forces such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). In the end, Eritrean elite mechanized, commando and security units, and logistics teams helped spearhead the advance against the Derg forces inside Ethiopia and all the way into Addis Ababa in May 1991.

Nevertheless, the TPLF continues to diminish the role of their one-time senior Eritrean allies during the final push against the Derg (1989-1991) to no more than a small

technical assistance. It does so in the same fashion that the EPLF minimizes their Tigrayan partners' contributions against large scale Derg offensive inside Eritrea in 1982. Confidential sources of the time indicate that EPLF departments expected to receive anywhere between 3,000 and 5,000 TPLF fighters to aid in the defense of Eritrean positions against Addis Ababa's famed Red Star campaign (dubbed the "Sixth Offensive" among Eritreans). In the end, the number of TPLF fighters who actually arrived in Eritrea and held positions and fought alongside their Eritrean comrades was around 3,000. Similarly, EPLF mechanized units, led by their founding commander Romodan Awliyyay, played a decisive role in reinvigorating TPLF advances against the Derg that had stalemated and nearly faltered at the Battle of Shire in 1989 (Melake 1994).² In most of the subsequent major battles that the TPLF fought against government forces beyond Tigray and toward Addis Ababa, EPLF heavy artillery batteries helped in neutralising government long-range weapons and offering cover to their side's infantry assaults (Hagos and Weldemichael 2023).³

To legalize the military outcome, the EPLF decided to hold the first ever referendum in Eritrea in which voting age Eritreans would take part. To minimise the immediate and long-term effects on Ethiopia of Eritrea's likely separation, Eritreans agreed to delay the vote by two years and granted Ethiopia unfettered access to the Eritrean ports of Massawa and Asseb (Cohen and Berridge 2000). The new interim president of Ethiopia and EPRDF Chairman Meles Zenawi initially hesitated and prevaricated on giving Ethiopia's open support to the process and outcome of the Eritrean referendum, claiming that he "faced stiff Amhara resistance" to Eritrea's independence. Worried and impatient, the president of the Provisional Government of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, instructed his envoy in Addis Ababa to assure Meles that they stood by him, and he should not fear any force.⁴

The public display of the close ties between President Isaias and Prime Minister Meles obscured and often overshadowed the efforts to institutionalise the relationship between their two countries. A formal pact was signed in 1994 that included joint defence commitments and cultural and educational exchanges. A joint ministerial high-level committee met several times until 1998 to work out the details of the pact and hammer out incipient misunderstandings and immanent differences between states. Meanwhile, President Isaias grew increasingly impatient with and started to scoff at Prime Minister Meles for his slower – if not necessarily more deliberative – process of deciding on and implementing their agreements, some of which were not only verbal but also casually communicated indirectly thus, "just tell Meles..."

As the ties at the highest level started to show signs of strain, monetary and economic policy differences between the two countries also came out to the open in such a way that served and empowered hawkish provocateurs, who had been lurking close to the surface in both countries. Officials of the Tigray regional state (*kili*) toured Eritrea and, in the words of then regional president Gebru Asrat, came back alarmed by what

they believed was Eritrea's building of its military capacity through its national service program. Convinced that Eritrean strength was a threat to Tigray and to TPLF, the joint defence and other pacts notwithstanding, some members of the TPLF leadership, among them Gebru Asrat and Siye Abraha, entrapped Meles's government in an open conflict with Eritrea that they helped engineer (Asrat 2014).⁵ On the Eritrean side, a few army generals, who had direct access to President Isaias and on whom the president increasingly relied as he distanced his most seasoned lieutenants, are said to have kept prodding the president to "put Meles in his place", whom they purportedly said had started to look down on the president.

When the 1998-2000 war broke out between the two countries, the same TPLF leaders were instrumental in Ethiopianising the localised clashes. They toured all corners of the country to hold flag ceremonies that steered national sentiment among Ethiopians and enlisted them into the revving war machine against Eritrea.⁶ Whereas TPLF cadres assured their subordinates and recruits that they would march into Asmara,⁷ their topmost generals – among them Chief of Staff General Tsadkan Gebretensae – pushed for the forceful seizure of the Eritrean port of Asseb for Ethiopia.⁸ Several of TPLF's top brass believed that they had to destroy the pride of highland Eritreans (majority Christian, Tigrigna speakers like Tigrayans south of the common border) in order to "break the spinal cord of Eritrea", as at least a founding leader of the TPLF put it in one meeting with the Tigrayan community in the U.S. in August 1999.⁹ Such branding of all Eritreans as enemies and subjecting them for commensurate humiliating treatment over the two decades period was perhaps the worst mistake with immediate and long-term scars.

The war stalemated at the strategic level, even though Ethiopia gained a tactical upper hand at the cost of more than a hundred thousand lives, destruction of property and infrastructure, and loss of incalculable opportunities on both sides. Active fighting came to an end with the signing of the December 2000 Algiers Agreement that stipulated the formation of three bodies: an investigative commission, a Boundary Commission, and a Claims Commission.¹⁰ The entity entrusted with carrying out the investigation on "the incidents of 6 May 1998 and on any other incident prior to that date which could have contributed to a misunderstanding between the parties regarding their common border, including the incidents of July and August 1997" was neither established nor has the issue been raised by either side.¹¹ To this day, the root causes of – and ultimate responsibility for – the destructive war has not been conclusively established in an impartial study. Between mid-2003 and late 2005, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission rendered its series of decisions.¹² That decision placed *Jus ad Bellum* blame on the government of Eritrean, which Ethiopian Premier Abiy Ahmed appeared to challenge in 2021 by blaming the TPLF for provoking it (Berhe and Andemariam 2023). Meanwhile, in April 2002, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission announced its binding verdict that by and large took a middle position but awarded Eritrea the border

town of Badme that was at the center of the conflict.¹³ Ethiopia first rejected the decision; having later failed to alter the final verdict, it demanded negotiations as precondition to its implementation. Eritrea insisted that, per the binding agreement, the arbitral court's ruling was implemented, and Ethiopia vacate territories that had been deemed Eritrean before there could be negotiations. For nearly two decades, the relationship between the two countries practically froze over this matter. Nevertheless, the two governments actively worked to undermine and destabilize each other. Ethiopia succeeded to effectively isolate Eritrea from the region and subject it to a series of international sanctions. For its part, Eritrea gave unrestrained support to practically any force it hoped to mount effective challenge to Addis Ababa – or at least divide its attention. This tug of war and brinkmanship heated up the conflict in at least three occasions (2012, 2015 and 2016) that raised concerns of its escalation to full-on fighting yet again. In mid-March 2012, the Ethiopian military attacked Eritrean positions reportedly in retaliation against alleged Eritrean-support for an Ethiopian rebel group that had been blamed for the attack (killing and kidnapping) on foreign tourists in Ethiopia's Afar region a few months prior.¹⁴

Breaking the Deadlock of No-War-No-Peace

There were several attempts to break the impasse between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The closest any of them got to achieving peace between the two countries was when an initiative between late 2008 and early 2009 extracted the late Prime Minister Meles' commitment to unilateral Ethiopian withdrawal from occupied Eritrean territories and President Isaias's written assurances to immediately normalising relations – with all its security, political, and economic implications. All fell apart when Libya's Muamar al-Gadhaffi took over as African Union Chairman (during its 12th Summit in Addis Ababa) and sought to strongarm both men into a solution by traveling from the AU Summit to Massawa, where Isaias lived at the time.¹⁵

In 2016, the EPRDF quietly decided to fully accept and implement the 2002 EEBC ruling in a bid to normalise relations with Eritrea and ease tensions along the common border. Senior EPRDF officials claimed that they reached that decision upon concluding that they had sufficiently weakened Eritrea and President Isaias. Nevertheless, two other factors had far more to do with the policy change of the Ethiopian ruling coalition. First, the mounting domestic pressure on the government following the 2015 spontaneous unrests (first in Oromia then in Amhara regions) demanded the government's undivided attention. That challenge had to be contained before it spiralled out of control and linked up more directly with the Eritrea-supported Ethiopian opposition that had grown increasingly stronger and bolder in confronting Addis Ababa on multiple arenas. This new pressure reinforced the persistent demands of the people of Tigray to end the state of war in their region and restore peaceful relations with their kith and kin across the border in Eritrea.

Second and equally importantly, the dramatic changes across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden triggered parallel changes in the disposition of countries on the African side of those waters. More specifically, with the escalation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries' war in Yemen and Djibouti's sudden termination of Saudi and Emirati military presence in its territories in May 2015, the Saudi-led coalition found an eager replacement in Eritrea that had been seeking to break out of its isolation.¹⁶ Possibly to forestall prospects of Eritrea forging those ties with the Middle Eastern powers that could adversely affect or disadvantage Ethiopia, in March 2015 the latter bombed targets deep inside Eritrea: a lucrative gold mining site at Bisha and an arms depot at Mai-Edaga.¹⁷ Ethiopia grew so concerned about UAE's subsequent establishment of a state-of-the-art military base near the Eritrean port of Asseb that Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn warned the Emiratis and Saudis about it in late 2015. But that approach opened the doors to those countries' mediation between Ethiopia and arch-rival Eritrea.¹⁸

Rumors abound that large sum of Saudi and UAE funds went into the mending of the Ethio-Eritrean fences. Whatever the veracity of claims of money exchanging hands or funds flowing in one direction or another, the wider regional context of EPRDF's 2016 discrete decision regarding the border and overall relations with Eritrea is unmistakable. At least one known personality who had his ways with the Eritrean leader hand delivered EPRDF's new position with a request to normalise relations. Noting TPLF's continued dominance of the EPRDF and that the Tigrayan leadership had Prime Minister Hailemariam under its thumb, Asmara persisted in its position: Ethiopia had to first withdraw troops from Eritrean territories to enable demarcation of the border before normalisation could start. Unimpressed by Prime Minister Hailemariam's feeble efforts, President Isaias let the initiative fizzle.

In a bid to diffuse the billowing popular unrest inside Ethiopia, divert attention from the grievances and whip up nationalist sentiment, and to move the Eritrean government, in June 2016, the EPRDF government launched an unprovoked, large-scale ground offensive that caught Eritreans by surprise. Three days of intense fighting ensued in which Eritreans held back Ethiopian advance and retook the places they had briefly lost.¹⁹ Then in April 2017 Prime Minister Hailemariam publicly hinted at Addis Ababa's changed approach that he said was going to "emphasize on creating sustainable peace".²⁰ Without changes in TPLF's preponderance in his government, however, Asmara remained unmoved until his resignation.

Meanwhile, with the change of government in the United States, the Eritrean government found a more favourable audience with, on the one hand, seasoned career diplomats who had gone unheard in the previous administrations and, on the other hand, a hawkish team of policy advisors of the new Trump Administration bent on confronting China in the Horn of Africa.²¹ Through Egyptian facilitation since at least late 2017, Asmara and Washington, DC – in parallel to previous Saudi and Emirati quiet

harmonisation of dispositions – hammered out the details of the restored relationship within an integrated region. In the words of Donald Yamamoto, seasoned US diplomat in the Horn of Africa and newly appointed ambassador to Somalia, "[y]ou can't have peace in East Africa without peace in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania. They're all interrelated, and I think they can all benefit from a vibrant economic program. And that's what we're trying to do, not just for Somalia, but for the whole region".²²

For that to happen, Hailemariam Desalegn's government had to unshackle itself from the stranglehold placed on it from within. Failing to do so while in office, the prime minister sought to shake off the TPLF deep state's grip on power by making way for someone else who could. Hailemariam's closely guarded decision to resign the premiership in February 2018 came as a shock to many but it opened the gates for the tectonic changes that catapulted Dr Abiy Ahmed and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO, that was renamed as the Oromo Democratic Party, ODP, before evolving into Prosperity Party) to the helm in Addis Ababa. As Abiy Ahmed's government publicly distanced itself from the TPLF, the latter saw its national significance shrink to its home base in the Tigray regional state or *kilil*.

In his inaugural address to the Ethiopian House of Representatives, newly sworn-in Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assured his audience that he would not spare any effort to resolve the dispute with Eritrea. Two months later, on 5 June, EPRDF Executive Committee publicly announced its decision to abide by and fully implement the 2002 EEBC ruling on the border issue with Eritrea, which in effect was no more than making public its 2016 decision. After two weeks of total silence from Asmara, President Isaias announced on 20 June that Eritrea was dispatching a delegation to Addis Ababa in order to get "to know the current situation directly and in-depth and chart [joint] program for the future".²³

Abiy Ahmed immediately responded with a video recording in Tigrigna (one of the Eritrean government's two working languages), in which he celebrated President Isaias's decision and assured him that the Eritrean delegation would be received as brothers – not as guests. Composed of Foreign Minister Osman Saleh and Presidential Advisor Yemane Gebreab, Eritrea's first delegation to Ethiopia in two decades was indeed accorded a reception normally reserved for visiting head of state. The month of July saw what no one expected a few weeks prior; Prime Minister Abiy visited Asmara on the 8 July, and President Isaias Addis Ababa six days later.²⁴

On the ground, things immediately changed faster than any system or institutions could be put in place to sustain them. By far the best and immediate dividend of the budding relations between the two countries was the ability of families and friends to communicate directly by telephone and later in person. On 8 July direct telephone connection was restored after two decades of interruption.²⁵ Ten days later, Ethiopian Airlines resumed direct flights between Addis Ababa and Asmara and both countries

lifted visa requirements for each other's nationals.²⁶ On 11 September, the two countries opened two border crossings at Bure and Zalambessa,²⁷ and on 7 January at Humera-Omhajar.²⁸ These bold moves enabled the fulfilment of one of the most basic human needs and brought to public display long-bottled up pure human emotions when families and friends who had not spoken to or seen each other for two decades got to speak, embrace, and sob on each other's shoulders, others got on their knees to kiss the feet of their long-missed loved ones. These heart-warming scenes and the admirable political courage that made them possible were, however, matched by problems that started to pop up shortly afterwards.

While the thawing relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea was a cause for celebration, its speed and pivot around the two leaders became a source of as much concern. The person of Dr Abiy and his first visit to Eritrea was electrifying among Eritreans (in the country and abroad). When residents of Asmara thronged the streets between the airport and presidential palace in the city center to receive him, Eritreans elsewhere were glued on television screens to watch the spectacular scene. One of Fitsum Arega's tweets captured the sentiment on both sides when he wrote: "From the Airport to the State House in #Asmara's streets, the Ethiopian delegation was greeted & received with overwhelming joy & love by the kind people of Eritrea. The yearning for peace was palpable & we'll decidedly move forward for the good of our people."²⁹ Such spontaneous outpouring of reception that Eritreans showed Dr Abiy (and his delegation) was indicative of their craving for peace, and their hope and trust that Abiy would deliver. The prime minister's lack of an Eritrea strategy, his full display of an Isaias strategy instead, and ultimately the outbreak of war in Tigray and Eritrea's heavy involvement frustrated many Eritreans' yearnings for peace and hopes that Abiy would realise it. In order to unpack the contradiction of the Ethio-Eritrean peace leading to war within Ethiopia, the remainder of the paper will examine the most relevant aspects of the political dynamics in each country before analysing Prime Minister Abiy's good fortune as well as the prospects and pitfalls of his approach.

Singing Peace while Seeking Vengeance

Increasingly surrounded by survivalist lieutenants adept at justificatory postmortem of his actions and inactions, President Isaias had been progressively distancing himself from sound policies and praxis – both domestic and foreign. His own follies had left him effectively isolated at home and abroad. At the heart of President Isaias's tragic descent from the exalted status of a liberation hero and statesman to one of widespread opprobrium and isolation was the border war with Ethiopia and, more specifically, the conflict with the TPLF.³⁰ He felt aggrieved about it and seized every opportunity to strike at the TPLF for the damage. The rise of Abiy Ahmed to the premiership offered him one such mighty opportunity; it also proved to be an irresistible moment to seek vindication and revive his decayed statesmanship. In his 20 June address, when he announced

Asmara's acceptance of Addis Ababa's overture for peace, President Isaias lambasted the TPLF in the same breath. He condemned it as a vulturine scavenger and declared that its "game [was] over".³¹ In his swift positive response, PM Abiy noticeably skirted around the president's attack on a member of his governing coalition and former senior partner. But President Isaias was unrelenting; he reiterated his intentions that Ethiopia needed to cleans itself from TPLF's political legacy.³² With the uptick of anti-TPLF vitriol across Ethiopia, Isaias' appearance of wanting to exact vengeance against the TPLF and Abiy's silence on the matter – either in the interest of the pursuit of peace or in order to partake in Isaias's dangerous brinkmanship with regard to the TPLF – sent off alarm bells within the Tigrayan organisation. This was on top of TPLF's demurral to fully embrace Abiy Ahmed as the new leader, its active undermining of his executive powers including on issues concerning Eritrea, and its regular swagger about its might in discourse and military parades.

In spite of its initiation of the process to resolve the dispute with Eritrea as a necessity, the TPLF immediately started backpedalling on the matter. It ultimately revived and held on to Addis Ababa's old position of re-negotiating the disputed border. TPLF officials continued to argue that the two peoples on both sides of the border know their territories and should be consulted in the resolution of the border issue – if not left alone to resolve it themselves. Short of that, according to the TPLF position, there would not be any territories changing hands, a position that remained a deal breaker for Eritrea until mid-2018. The fact that the Ethio-Eritrean border had been decided in accordance with international law and is under the purview the federal government in Addis Ababa did not deter the TPLF.

Asmara prioritised strengthening ties with Addis Ababa – as did Addis Ababa with Asmara – over having the occupied territories vacated and the border demarcated per the 2002 ruling of the arbitral court. Having preposterously announced during his welcome of PM Abiy to Asmara on 8 July that Eritrea had not lost anything and had regained what rightfully belonged to it, the border became a non-issue to President Isaias and his government. Bent on making the erstwhile senior EPRDF partner and regional administrator in Tigray, i.e. the TPLF, pay for its past deeds and misdeeds, President Isaias shunned the TPLF and Tigray region while dealing with Addis Ababa as well as with the regional states surrounding Tigray, i.e. Amhara and Afar regions. So determined was the Eritrean president that he did not wish to open the Zalambessa border crossing with Tigray in September 2018, preferring instead to only open the Bure crossing connecting the Ethiopia heartland to the port of Asseb through Afar region/*kilil*. Similarly, during the opening of the Humera-Omhajar border crossing further west along the common border with Tigray region, Isaias is said to have not wanted Tigrayan regional administrator and TPLF Chairman Dr Debretsion Gebremichael to attend the ceremony. It was credit to Abiy's ways with his Eritrean counterpart that the two governments were spared those embarrassing, possibly even dangerous, diplomatic

situations. Beyond contradicting the rhetoric of peace, synergy and integration, the Eritrean President's total disregard of a region that shares the longest border with Eritrea – and the Ethiopian Prime Minister's going along with it – left the peace along the border in limbo.

The overall inter- and intra-regional tensions within Ethiopia³³ indicated the shrivelling authority of the federal government and boded ill to the country's internal stability. When repeatedly pressed on the question of the border, Prime Minister Abiy said that the two countries were in a state of conflict transformation, whereby negotiations on the most divisive issues are deferred to a more opportune future date. The border remained to be one such divisive issue due to the TPLF's refusal to budge and the federal government's inability to enforce its will and international law. Dr Abiy faced difficulties in exercising effective command over the federal forces in Tigray regional state or *kilil* (along the Ethio-Eritrean border) much less implement the 2002 court ruling and hand over territories to Eritrea. Having been quietly denied the prerogative of rotating out of the region some of Ethiopia's heavy weaponry and elite units early on during his tenure, six months later TPLF-spurred Tigrayan civilians twice scuttled the relocation of federal units by openly blocking their movement; when some federal units were eventually rotated out, regional units moved in to fill their place.³⁴ That was tantamount to a constitutional crisis as it undermined the division of powers between the federal government and regional states. All actors were locked in a vicious cycle of destructive steps and rhetoric, reinforcing their respective hawkish dispositions.

Having closely monitored the power dynamics within the Ethiopian ruling elite, the Eritrean military went on a higher gear in preparation for confrontations and clashes – consistent with the president's rhetoric. Experienced combat commanders were remobilized. Beyond its outsized military, however, Eritrea had been reduced to a shell of its former self due to a combination of the consequences of the wars and post-war challenges as well as government actions and inactions. The indefinite national service – and attendant violation of human rights of citizens – has proven to be the worst mismanagement and downright abuse of the country's human resources. The consequent flight of large number of Eritreans from their country has severely degraded its woman/manpower. Misplaced government priorities, incompetent policy formulations and inexplicable punitive interventions practically paralysed the private construction and service sectors in what appear like deliberate policies to emaciate local financial capacity. All that combined with the country's decayed administrative institutions and corroded infrastructure to render Eritrea weak in negotiations and unreliable partner in carrying out and sustaining constructive engagements.

Astutely aware of Eritrea's weaknesses and President Isaias's Achilles heel, Dr Abiy crafted a savvy strategy centered around the person of the President. While through flattery pulling the President out of his isolation to a position of regional statesman,³⁵ Dr. Abiy's government scored a strategic security concession for Ethiopia from Asmara,

i.e. neutralising the Eritrea-based armed Ethiopian opposition movements, which also had the effect of further diminishing Isaias's threat potential.

Over the preceding two decades of hostilities and tension, both Ethiopia and Eritrea had come to host their rival's pre-existing opponents, foster the rise of new opposition groups and prod groups and individuals to organise against the rival government. In this regard, Asmara's record outshined that of Addis Ababa's under the TPLF-dominated previous government. Ethiopia hosted a number of armed and unarmed Eritrean opposition groups that were kept under strict orders of the Tigray dominated Ethiopian security apparatus. All Ethiopia-based Eritrean opposition were kept on a short leash that not only left them weakened but also humiliated and ultimately incapable of posing a meaningful threat to the Eritrean government. After the normalisation of relations in July 2018, all that the federal Ethiopian government did to assure the Eritrean government was to notify Ethiopia-based Eritrean opposition groups to cease operations, which they had no choice but to comply.

By contrast, Ethiopian opposition movements in Eritrea were in much better position in their relationship with their host from the get-go. Asmara thus hosted and actively supported some of Ethiopia's most capable opposition forces that had the potential to destabilise or even overthrow the government in Addis Ababa. That was especially the case in the wake of the popular unrest across Ethiopia since 2015, which helped prompt the Ethiopian government to seek peace with Eritrea in the first place. So, the first substantive thing Abiy sought – and Isaias clearly agreed to – was to take Eritrea-based armed Ethiopian opposition forces out of Eritrea and into Ethiopia through negotiated agreements.

In the month of August of 2018, all Ethiopian opposition movements in Eritrea in quick succession signed such agreements with various Ethiopian government bodies and left Eritrea for Ethiopia. On 7 August, the OLF signed an agreement with the president of Oromia Region/*Kilil*, Lemma Megerssa, and Ethiopian Foreign Minister Workeneh Gebeyehu before going back to Ethiopia. On 16 August, a large delegation from the Amhara Regional/*Kilil* government visited Eritrea and signed reconciliation agreement with the Amhara Democratic Forces Movement (ADFM) that enabled the latter to return to Ethiopia in September. Unlike in the other movements that signed agreements with their respective regional state governments, and consistent with President Isaias's refusal to engage the TPLF and Tigray regional government, neither TPLF nor Tigray regional government's representative came to Eritrea to fetch the Tigrayan armed opposition group in Eritrea. Instead, the federal level director of the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Agency, General Adem Mohammed, traveled to Asmara on 28 August to sign an agreement with the Tigray People's Democratic Movement (TPDM) faction, which had remained in Eritrea, and brought it back to Ethiopia less than two months later.

The Obscure Peace Agreement Before the Open War

As crucial aspects of the budding relationship remained shrouded in secrecy, many observed dismissed the new Ethio-Eritrea relations as geared against and in enmity of something. It is as if Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Isaias Afwerki were in some kind of surreptitious relationship that an exiled young Eritrean journalist perceptively noted in March 2019 that “[s]ince July 2018, [Isaias] Afwerki has met with Abiy [Ahmed] nine times while he has only met with his Cabinet ministers once”.³⁶ Likewise, despite the many meetings, Dr Abiy hardly spoke about their substance nor did he elucidated any joint projects in the making beyond generalities. Not only does such secrecy become of immediate concern to citizens – especially worrisome to Eritreans – but also risks undermining the legitimacy of whatever agreements that are inked in the long-term.

The opacity of the dealings between Addis Ababa and Asmara, the Eritrean president's deafening silence about any of its immediate and long-term tangible aspects, and the Ethiopian prime minister's nonchalant talk about integration have failed to adequately inform citizens of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Spokesperson Fitsum Arega's timely updates were the most detail that has been disclosed about the ongoing deal. In a 8 July tweet, for example, Fitsum reported: “HE PM Dr Abiy after his discussion with HE President Isaias confirmed the normalization of Ethio-#Eritrea relations will start in earnest – flights will resume, utilization of the sea ports will start & the two countries will re-open embassies in each other's capital”.³⁷ Since the signing of the declaration of peace and friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia in July 2018, no details of the understandings, memoranda and/or agreements between the two countries have been disclosed. No one, for example, seems to know the conditions under which Ethiopia rehabilitated the highway (60 km of the 70 km inside Eritrea) that connects the port city of Asseb to Ethiopia.³⁸ Nor the terms of the construction of railways between central Ethiopia and Massawa, the feasibility study of which Italy reportedly promised to fund.³⁹ Nor the Emirati plan to build oil/gas pipelines from the Ethiopian hinterland to the Eritrean coast.⁴⁰ Yet, Ethiopia's Ambassador to Eritrea, Redwan Hussein, announced that the two countries had concluded their studies to lay the ground for implementation following parliamentary approval.⁴¹

While there was no parliament to speak of in Eritrea (still absent), the Speaker of Ethiopia's House of Peoples' Representatives, Tadesse Chafo, told Ethiopian media outlets in February 2019 that no agreements had been signed with Eritrea because agreements come to the parliament for approval, and none had. Such secretive work beneath the thin veneer of publicised regular meetings and fanfare about the peace deal seems to confirm lagging institutionalisation of the ongoing process that some observers have cautioned against.⁴² The risks and pitfalls of a strategy centered around a single person, in this case the two leaders, are far too great to overlook. Dr Abiy has at least once assured his audience that ultimately the Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples

are the guarantors of the peace and not himself and/or President Isaias. But it is not clear how these two peoples were expected to play that role when they are uninformed about and effectively shut out from the agreements that were negotiated and/or signed. Meanwhile, the incendiary discourse, escalating tensions, and sabre rattling culminated in open and heightened military build that foreclosed an off ramp from armed clashes. Ethiopian and Eritrean governments' troop movements that had long been on full display sufficiently worried the European Union that as late as a day before the outbreak of the conflict Brussels urged that all Ethiopian "parties as well as Ethiopia's neighbours must act to reduce tension, eliminate inflammatory language and abstain from provocative military deployments".⁴³

In early 2021, as the war was still raging, Amhara Regional Police Commissioner Abere Adamu made it known that, having "done [their] homework", his forces completed deploying along the Amhara-Tigray border "from east to west. The war started that night after we have already completed our preparations".⁴⁴ The TPLF for its part had planned to knock the Prime Minister off balance and from power by taking out the largest and most heavily armed federal army's Northern Command.⁴⁵

With the alignment of forces clearly delineated in the preceding months and preparations completed days before, full-on civil war broke out on the morning of 4 November 2020 with a TPLF nightly raids on federal military facilities across Tigray region and capture of federal army's weapons. Ethiopian federal troops who either escaped from or fought their way out of TPLF onslaught arrived in Eritrea to a warm welcome. The Prime Minister and his senior military command immediately flew to Asmara to assess the conditions of their surviving soldiers and units and chart out a course of action. Having long enlisted the backing of Amhara region state's special forces and militia, the Ethiopian command in consultation with its Eritrean counterpart decided to strike back. Upon the Prime Minister's return to Addis Ababa, the federal government declared a "law enforcement" operation against the TPLF rebellion.

The TPLF was almost instantly isolated from the world and surrounded in Tigray. The unleashed combined forces pierced through Tigray and took the regional capital Mekelle three weeks later (28 November). The regional governmental disintegrated and its forces scattered but it reorganised itself and put up a stiff resistance. In the ensuing war of attrition, the warring sides made advances and suffered reversals during the two years that the war went on until the November 2022 permanent cessation of hostilities agreement. Tigrayan civilians carried the worst brunt of prolonged siege and various atrocities in the hands of the allied forces as did civilians in Afar and Amhara regions of Ethiopia where TPLF scored military gains. Whereas the full extent and each of the actors' roles in the war crimes await full investigation, in that the parties meted on the Tigrayan civilian in the ensuing war of attrition.

Conclusion

Good neighbourliness, active cooperation, and mutually beneficial, incremental and transparent regional integration between Ethiopia and Eritrea – and the rest of the Horn of Africa countries – is as crucial as peace and good governance within each of them. Both Ethiopia and Eritrea have their respective complex domestic challenges that shaped their past relations, that are currently impacting their improving relations and are likely to determine their long-term trajectory and outcome. However messy and problematic, the changes in Ethiopia and the restoration of relations with Eritrea cannot be overestimated. Nevertheless, the shortfalls persisted and became manifest in their worst form with the outbreak of the conflict in the Tigray region and the attendant atrocities. Resolving the political root causes of the problems in each country, healing the wounds within and between them, and setting their relations on strong foundations of shared interests are crucial for the two countries and their respective peoples.

From a strong and peaceful base at home and positive cooperation between them, Eritrean and Ethiopia also stand to benefit from the global geopolitical significance of their location. The region has drawn the interest and active involvement of more powerful regional and global powers, which is not always in the best interest of the local populations. Although the alignment of United States, Saudi and Emirati interests helped spark anew peaceful Ethio-Eritrean relations, the two leaders and governments have to be wary of overreliance on external support and influence – for they are the shifting sands of international diplomacy. Despite their combined war effort against an internal Ethiopian rebellion, the relations between the two countries is rumoured to be straining due to the nature of the war that they jointly waged in Tigray and international pressure on Addis Ababa to sever ties with Asmara. Given the continued instability in Ethiopia and the unbridled tyranny and repression in Eritrea, the outbreak of civil war in Sudan heightens the risk of the region being engulfed in a wider, regional conflagration.

In order to consolidate what little strides have been made and achieve what remains over and beyond the horizon, both Ethiopian and Eritrean citizens have to own the process and determine the outcome of peacebuilding and cooperation between their two countries. For citizens to play that role, the first thing they require – and must demand and get – is the right to information of what have been negotiated and signed in their respective names. The parallels that some analysts draw between the current Abiy-Isaias dynamics and the past Meles-Isaias relationship are not far-fetched. Yet, Ethiopia and Eritrea have been in uncharted waters since 2018. And the burden of institutionalising the relationship has to be shared with actively engaged civic society groups through transboundary solidarity and social, cultural, economic and other bridges. The starting point for both countries should be an end to secrecy and ushering more transparency in their dealings. The change of course in this regard will inevitably spur a change of discourse to one that recognises and respects the rights

and experiences of the two peoples in their respective countries before thoughtlessly speaking of them – or rushing to lump them together – as a single people.⁴⁶

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Notes:

1 – *The EPLF and its Relationship with the Democratic Movements in Ethiopia*, "Voice of the Broad Masses", [Tigrigna] 31 January–2 February 1985.

2 – Besides this valuable article based on original Derg government sources, Tekeste Melake also confirmed to me in several private conversations that he saw confidential intelligence reports of the Ethiopian troops in the frontline that conclusively established the deployment of EPLF mechanised and other elite units that shifted the balance of power in that battle.

3 – During the seven short years of euphoria and hyper-activity following the 1991 victory, these stories of shared sacrifices and many others, including the tale of Eritrean commando (security), signals and logistics teams across mainland Ethiopia, did not receive the attention that they deserved. As the 1998 conflict broke out, the shared history became not only the first victim but also the basis of mutual acrimony with each side downplaying the contribution of the other while magnifying one's own.

4 – Confidential consultations.

5 – The relevant part of Gebru Asrat's (2014) Amharic language book *Sovereignty and Democracy in Ethiopia* was repeated in his several radio interviews in September 2014. Other provocations included the uprooting of Eritreans from their homes and villages that TPLF said were within the territories that it had unilaterally demarcated as Tigrayan, a process called *metirar* (lit. demarcation). Tigray's regional government *meterar* of the 1990s took place in accordance with a map that the TPLF government unilaterally issued, grafting swathes of Eritrean territories into Tigray/Ethiopia.

6 – Ethiopian national television station live transmitted these events since mid-1998 and throughout the war.

7 – Several interviews conducted with Ethiopian POWs and aired in Eritrea bear this as do remarks by ranking members of the TPLF/EPRDF leadership.

8 – This was recently confirmed in an interview the retired general conducted with Walta TV's Semeneh Bayfers in January 2019 available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iZMRGfmUy0> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

9 – In this National Press Club briefing by Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki on 16 August 1999, Voice of America journalist Adanech quotes Abay Tsehaye as having said so a week prior: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?151605-1/conflict-eritrea-ethiopia> (last visited 18 June 2023).

10 - Articles 3-5 of the "Agreement between the Government of the State of Eritrea and the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia," 12 December, 2000. Because it was signed in Algiers, it is called the Algiers Agreement of 2000. For signed copies of the agreement, see <https://peacemaker.un.org/eritreathioia-agreement2000> (last visited on 17 June 2023).

11 - Algiers Agreement 2000: Article 3.

12 - Like the EEBC, the Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission was housed at the PCA, where its document can be accessed: <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/71/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

13 - The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) was housed at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) where its documents can be access: <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/99/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

14 - William Davidson, "Ethiopian Army attacks Eritrean military post in retaliation for rebel violence," *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 March 2012: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2012/0315/Ethiopian-Army-attacks-Eritrean-military-post-in-retaliation-for-rebel-violence> (last accessed 17 June 2023).

15 - Confidential consultations.

16 - Alex Mello and Michael Knights, *West of Suez for the United Arab Emirates*, "War on the Rocks", 2 September 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

17 - It was, however, unclear if the strike was delivered by warjets and long-range missile. "Ethiopian fighter jets attack Nevsun's Bisha gold mine in East Africa," *Mining Technology*, 22 March 2015: <https://www.mining-technology.com/news/newsethiopian-fighter-jets-attack-nevsuns-bisha-gold-mine-in-east-africa-4538147/> (last accessed 17 June 2023); "Ethiopian Air Force Jets were confirmed not to be the executors of the March 20th Attack on the Eritrean Gold-mine site of Bisha," *Radio Erena*, 27 March 2015: <https://erena.org/ethiopian-air-force-jets-were-confirmed-not-to-be-the-executors-of-the-march-20th-attack-on-the-eritrean-gold-mine-site-of-bisha/> (last accessed 17 June 2023).

18 - *Ethiopia: President Warns Saudi Arabia and UAE of Consequences if Eritrea Attacks*, "Geeska Afrika Online", 2 January 2016, <https://www.geeskaafrika.com/ethiopia-president-warns-saudi-arabia-and-uae-of-consequences-if-eritrea-attacks/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

19 - Salem Solomon, "Heavy Fighting Reported Along Ethiopia-Eritrea Border," *Voice of America*, 13 June 2023: <https://www.voanews.com/a/ethiopia-eritrea-border-tensions/3373659.html> (last accessed 17 June 2023); "Ethiopia and Eritrea trade blame over border clashes," *Al Jazeera*, 13 June 2016: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/6/13/ethiopia-and-eritrea-trade-blame-over-border-clashes> (last accessed on 17 June 2023).

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21 - *Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy*, 13 December 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/#:~:text=Under%20our%20new%20Africa%20Strategy%2C%20we%20will%20expand%20economic%20ties,results%20for%20the%20American%20people> (last accessed on 18 June 2023).

22 - Salem Solomon, *New US Ambassador to Somalia Sees Path to Peace, Prosperity*, "Voice of America", 24 November 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/new-us-ambassador-to-somalia-sees-path-to-peace-prosperity/4672810.html> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

23 - Speech of President Isaias Afwerki on the occasion of Eritrea's Martyr's Day, 20 June 2018 that aired live on EriTV and available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwRApE7LE5Y> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

24 - Ten days later, on 24 July both traveled to the UAE to receive Emirates' highest honor in a ceremony that appeared as if Isaias was an elder interlocutor for the much younger Abiy among the Arab royals. On 16 September, a similar ceremony took place in front of the Saudi royals in Jeddah. These diplomatic theatrics showed an over reliance on the Middle East, which can be disenchanting to Africans and an Africa-centered agenda. The absences of IGAD and African Union representations at the signing ceremonies in front of the Saudi and Emirati monarchs were indeed glaring.

- 25 - Fitsum Arega (@fitsumaregaa), 8 July 2018, <https://twitter.com/fitsumaregaa/status/1015961261509697536> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 26 - Aaron Maasho, *Ethiopian Airlines Says Will Resume Flights to Eritrea's Capital on July 17*, "Reuters", 10 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-eritrea-airlines/ethiopian-airlines-says-will-resume-flights-to-eritreas-capital-on-july-17-idUSKBN1K00J4> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 27 - *Ethiopia-Eritrea border opens for first time in 20 years*, "Al-Jazeera", 11 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/ethiopia-eritrea-border-opens-time-20-years-180911082008249.html> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 28 - Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, *Ethiopia-Eritrea officially open border crossing point*, "AfricaNews", 7 January 2019, <https://www.africanews.com/2019/01/07/abiy-afwerki-officially-open-ethio-eritrea-border-along-tigray-region/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 29 - Fitsum Arega (@fitsumaregaa), 8 July 2018, <https://twitter.com/fitsumaregaa/status/1015906612702310401> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 30 - Critical issues of difference - and even conflict - between Eritrea and Ethiopia as separate entities cannot be denied. The limited scope and purpose of the current paper, however, relegate a comprehensive analysis of the entirety of Ethio-Eritrean relations of the past six decades to a future date and project.
- 31 - Speech of President Isaias Afwerki on the occasion of Eritrea's Martyr's Day, 20 June 2018 that aired live on EriTV and available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwRApE7LE5Y> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 32 - In numerous of his interviews, President Isaias pointed out his misgivings from the start about TPLF's pursuit of ethnic politics. His point about the needed to uproot that system was reiterated in a lengthy seminar he gave in Sawa military training center in late June 2018 to young national service recruits and cadets, in the presence of senior army officers.
- 33 - These include but are not limited to the violent flare ups within Oromia region, the bloody altercations between Oromo and Somali forces, and the unpublicized clashes between militias from the Amhara region and Tigrayan forces in October 2018.
- 34 - Confidential consultations. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian military officially denied these reports in front of parliament.
- 35 - From Prime Minister Abiy's repeated breaking of protocol to address President Isaias with short form names of endearment, to well-orchestrated display of public adulation of the president - be it on his arrival in Addis Ababa or during the ceremonies in Hawassa and at the Millennium Hall - to formal references to him as an elder statesman (in Asmara) and the literal kissing of the President's hand (during the UAE ceremony) can be assumed to have been calculated steps that successfully charmed the Eritrean head of state.
- 36 - Abraham T. Zere, *Eritrea's diplomatic offensive?*, "Africaisacountry", 11 March 2019, <https://africaisacountry.com/2019/03/eritreas-diplomatic-offensive?fbclid=IwAR0RdbJ099bMeYM8TeibfUktb6B03ym590R6ciA6brBNkJdJ6tzm8SbB3l> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 37 - Fitsum Arega (@fitsumaregaa), 8 July 2018, <https://twitter.com/fitsumaregaa/status/1016073362030907392> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).
- 38 - According to state-owned Ethiopian media that broke the news, this road repairing cost more than 120 million Birr.
- 39 - *Italy to Fund Ethiopia-Eritrea Railway Feasibility Study*, "AfricaNews", 22 January 2019, <https://www.africanews.com/2019/01/22/italy-to-fund-ethiopia-eritrea-railway-feasibility-study-abiy/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023). On 21 January, the Prime Minister's official twitter handle (@PMEthiopia) announced for the first time: "PM Abiy Ahmed was received by H.E. Giuseppe Conte in an official welcoming ceremony. The two counterparts held bi-lateral & agreed to take their cooperation to the next level in the Addis Ababa - Massawa railway line". Available at <https://twitter.com/PMEthiopia/status/1087370320628076546> (last accessed 14 June 2023).
- 40 - George Obulutsa and Maggie Fick, *UAE Plans Oil Pipeline from Ethiopia to Eritrea in Latest Horn of Africa Move*, "Reuters", 10 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-eritra-pipeline/uae-plans->

oil-pipeline-from-ethiopia-to-eritrea-in-latest-horn-of-africa-move-idUSKBN1KV0VS (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

41 - *Ethiopian, Eritrean Leaders Set To Sign Detail Deals*, "New Business Ethiopia", <http://www.madote.com/2019/02/ethiopian-eritrean-leaders-set-to-sign.html> (last accessed on 18 June 2023).

42 - See, for example, Goitom Gebreluel, *Ethiopia and Eritrea's Second Rapprochement*, "Al-Jazeera", 18 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/ethiopia-eritrea-rapprochement-180918135547856.html> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

43 - *Ethiopia: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the latest developments*, 2 November 2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ethiopia-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-latest-developments_en (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

44 - The late Commissioner Abere Adamu quoted in *Amhara Region Police Chief Reveals How Region's Police Force Guided Federal Steel-Clad Mechanized Forces to Join 'War' in Tigray*, "Addis Standard", 4 January 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-amhara-region-police-chief-reveals-how-regions-police-force-guided-federal-steel-clad-mechanized-forces-to-join-war-in-tigray/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

45 - TPLF's decision to preemptively attack the federal army's Northern Command across Tigray was a collective one, carefully planned over a considerable amount of time. Whereas, politically, the vilification of the person of the Prime Minister Abiy escalated to rejection of his political legitimacy following the indefinite postponement of the August 2020 elections, militarily General Migbey Haile revealed in an online forum in May 2023 that once they completed their preparations, they sent Siye Abraha, one of their most senior leaders, out of the country owing to his ill-health.

46 - Whereas Prime Minister Abiy repeatedly invoked the blood ties between the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples to speak to their one-ness, President Isaias put it plainly in a unscripted address at the luncheon prepared to welcome him to Addis Ababa on 14 July: "...anyone who, from now onwards, speaks of the people of Eritrea and the people of Ethiopia as two peoples is only someone who does not know the truth". Such a discourse conveniently leaves by the wayside the victims of the most recent war in the region.

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