



ERITREA IN CONTEXT

**IS CANADA'S FOREIGN POLICY ON ERITREA
DETERMINED TO CHALLENGE THE VICTIM AND
IGNORE THE PERPETRATORS**

ERITREA IN CONTEXT

A PRIMER ON DISCUSSING ERITREA WITH CANADIANS

The oversimplified media coverage of Eritrea has made it challenging for the ordinary Canadian to appreciate the true nature of its current state. CECCO has assembled some oft-ignored analysis and corrections to a few of the most commonly articulated propositions surrounding the State of Eritrea.

1. Eritrea is the ``North Korea`` of Africa and sanctions will force it to change.

Policymakers and individuals who favor sanctions avail themselves of an oversimplified comparison between Eritrea and North Korea to justify the punishment imposed on the small Red Sea state. We believe sanctions will not help improve Eritrea, but instead play into its deeply rooted historical narrative of persecution at the hands of the West. Like the colonial system before it, there has been an established engagement of African countries that has been in place since the second half of twentieth century. For many years after the second world war, we did these things in the name of preventing the spread of communism, as in Canada's support for pro-western leaders like Emperor Haile Selassie—who caused much suffering in Eritrea as a result of human rights violations carried out by imperial soldiers. [2] Eritreans turned to countries like Canada for support but much of this fell onto deaf ears because of our pre-occupation at the time with stemming the tide of communism. Canada's foreign policy at the time

ABOUT US

The CECCO is a national body that represents Eritrean-Canadian communities in Canada. The primary purpose of this body is to foster good relations between Eritrea and Canada and between the people of both countries, promote cultural exchange and trade relations and represent our communities with a collective voice.
www.eritreacanada.org

justified an alliance with Ethiopia and eventually became the tacit tolerance for the repressive practices conducted against the people of Eritrea. Today, the pendulum has only shifted slightly in the opposite direction. Canada continues to work and cooperate with monarchies and repressive regimes that resist political change. Acknowledging the double standard in the application of sanctions may be the first constructive step towards improving the diplomatic relationship between Canada and Eritrea and re-establishing peace and security in the Horn of Africa.



Insert. Emperor Haile Selassie I, shaking hands with Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent and Governor General Vincent Massey in 1954. The emperor used Western military and economic aid to subvert Eritrean languages, political parties, independent press, and labor union throughout the 1950s. Canada valued its friendship with Ethiopia and regarded it as a pro-Western ally in the era of Cold War politics.

2. Canadian sanctions are necessary because Eritrea funds an Al-Qaeda radical movement known as Al-Shabaab.

Since the media first began reporting it, this line has been used to support the case in favor of sanctions on Eritrea. It is a statement that disregards contradictory or nuanced statements made by the same organization that first published the claim back in 2009. Early in 2011, versions of the rumor that Eritrea supported Al-Shabaab were written in the National Post. Since 2012, the UN itself found no evidence of support by Eritrea or its Diaspora to Al-Shabaab during the course of its mandate. [3] Despite this, the National Post continued to report, even as late as July 2014 that Eritrea backed Al-Shabaab. The Somalia-Eritrea monitoring group does not rule out the possibility that Eritrea may be providing some assistance to elements without detection; it however does not present evidence to support this claim and the National Post has made no attempt to report this nuance in its stories.

The same is true for a confidential RCMP report from 2012 that we obtained via a Freedom of Information Request, stating that allegations of funds being used to support Al-Shabaab come entirely from complainants referred to as, individual members of political groups opposed to the

Eritrean Government. The RCMP later confirms in the same report that proving that money paid in taxes or contributions goes to Al-Shabaab is impossible given the lack of evidence. [4]

Additional the findings of the former U.S. Assistant Secretary for Africa Herman Cohen, who said in a widely published article last year, “All available intelligence indicates that Eritrea has not had any contact [with Somali insurgents] since 2009.” Ambassador Cohen also dismissed outright the preposterous attempts in the past to link this young African nation to Islamic extremism. “Those of us who know Eritrea well,” he said, “understand that the Eritrean leadership fears Islamic militancy as much as any other country in the Horn of Africa region.”

3. Eritrea refugees flee their country because of the oppressive human rights and political situation at home.

According to Human Rights Watch, Eritreans flee because of mass torture, random political repression, and severe restrictions on freedom of religion. Nearly all-major news organizations in Canada have routinely used HRW reports when reporting on the current state Eritrea. Solid facts about the situation in Eritrea are hard to come by, but a more recent 2014 report from the Danish government considers that a more plausible explanation for Eritreans leaving Eritrea in increasing numbers could be the challenging socio-economic situation in the country (something that plagues most countries in the continent).

The availability of source specific information relevant to the migratory push factors in Eritrea is published by organizations like HRW who are granted little or no direct access to Eritrea. That is why individuals who visit Eritrea on vacation or on diplomatic mission, for example, notice a disparity between what is reported by HRW and what things appear to be on the ground. The report states that hardly anyone leaves Eritrea for political reasons alone. [5]

On the issue of military service, it may be said that resolving the long-standing occupation of Eritrea's sovereign territory by Ethiopia, in violation and in disregard of international law, could help accelerate the demobilization of National Service conscripts and curb the volume of individuals leaving their homeland. The Canadian parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade accepted that resolving this occupation was central to improving the human rights situation in the region. In 2005, the Honorable Lloyd Axworthy said,

...The lack of resolution of the conflict is such a large and powerful force that impedes any efforts, whether it's human rights improvement or poverty reduction or agricultural reform. It's like that big 800-pound gorilla that's sitting there, and you just can't get around it. Until the conflict itself is resolved, any efforts in these other areas I think would be severely impeded. [6]

Canada publicly recognized the 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement and the final and binding resolution of the Border Commission awarding disputed territory to Eritrea. [7]

More recently, a report issued by the British Home Office determined that defectors from the Eritrean army to not face life-threatening danger in Eritrea and may be inadmissible for refugee status in other countries. The report also claims that those who leave the country illegally are not at risk upon return to their homeland provided they have paid the 2% Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Tax(RRT).

Geopolitical concerns though prove that Eritrea remains a victim of counterproductive and destructive policies followed by the major powers and guarantors of the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. In his recently published memoir – “Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad” (Threshold Editions) – former U.S.Ambassador to the U.N. Bolton states that in February 2006, Frazer informed him that she wanted him to “reopen” the 2002 EEBC decision, “which she had concluded was wrong, and award a major piece of disputed territory to Ethiopia” (Page 347). Bolton describes his surprise at Frazer’s position, because in January 2006, he had gotten the Security Council to agree to a Frazer-led “U.S. initiative” on the border issue on the basis that this initiative would be solely focused on rapid implementation of the EEBC decision.

Bolton also describes in detail what he believes was the singular focus of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Annan’s deputy Mark Brown (now the UK’s Minister for Africa and Asia) and many Security Council members on punishing Eritrea for its restrictions on the UN peacekeeping force known as UNMEE and the lack of focus on the main issue: Ethiopia’s obstruction of demarcation. Bolton notes that UNMEE “was simply propping up Ethiopia’s flat violation of its commitments” (page 344). Moreover, Bolton believes “Eritrea had a point. Ethiopia had agreed on a mechanism to resolve the border dispute in 2000 and was now welching on the deal” (Page 344).

Lord Avebury’s response to Ethiopia Ambassador, Berhane Kebede, states :

“There are no mechanisms whatsoever to revisit the court’s decision and in fact the first step towards normalization of relation with Eritrea is ONLY if Ethiopia unconditionally accept the final and binding nature of the Commission’s findings, as provided by the Algiers agreement.”

In his letter to the Ethiopian Ambassador in the UK concludes “The decision of the Lauterpacht Commission was **‘final and binding**, and futile attempts to renege on that agreement have obstructed the resumption of normal relations between your country and Eritrea, at great cost to human life and economic development.”

The US Congressman Rohrabacher made these remarks at a hearing on the growing tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt on water sharing, and particularly in a response to suggestion that Washington could arbitrate the dispute between the two African nations.

“I thought the behavior of our government in that whole episode [the Eritrea-Ethiopia border dispute] was disgraceful, and has undermined our ability to arbitrate other disputes “

4. Canadian sanctions and restrictions on Eritrea are an effective policy tool?

The answer will depend on what Canada’s policy objectives towards Eritrea should be. We believe Canada’s main interest in the Horn should be the peaceful development of Eritrea as a stable trade and cultural partner. There are already reasons to do so. Eritrea is already Canada’s largest source of gold in Sub-Saharan Africa and it is strategically located at the southern end of the Red Sea—a prime location for the lucrative trade with Asia and Europe. Because of its proximity to the Middle East it also carries broader strategic implications for Canada. Whatever affects Eritrea, sooner or later, will affect Canada—whether it is preventing a blockade of oil lanes or keeping the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region free from threats of piracy terrorism.

To achieve these objectives Canada chooses to define its national interest in moralistic terms. It uses sanctions to aggressively promote Eritrean cooperation, democracy and human rights. But on the other hand, it is unwilling promote what we believe are the investment and industrialization that necessarily precedes democratic reforms in new nations. There are lessons that Canada can learn from the EU experience in relations with Eritrea. This year the EU announced it would address social and economic issues in Eritrea by committing 312 million euros in aid between now and 2020. If economic renewal and democratization go hand in hand, Canada is doing all of one and none of the other.

Conclusion

Questions about Eritrea and its people, of its alleged role as a destabilizer in the horn of Africa or as a victim of western misadventure, are not new ones. Politicians and ordinary persons have debated these questions with vigor, with both fact and fancy, for many years since its independence. As community leaders we believe that sanctions encroach more upon the freedoms of civilian populations. We view sanctions at the very least as a bad way of promoting ones concrete interests, and at worst an indefensible method of achieving policy objectives through the collective punishing a people struggling to become self-sufficient. It is ordinary Eritreans who are paying the price associated with the burden of political and economic isolation, on the basis of fabricated political charges. We hope that the information and context provide the foundation for better understanding of Eritrea and its challenges.

Footnotes:

[1] <http://canadagazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p2/2010/2010-05-12/html/sor-dors84-eng.html>

[2] The Pillage of Sustainability in Eritrea, 1600s–1990s: Rural Communities and the Creeping Shadows of Hegemony, Niaz Murtaza, Greenwood Press, 1998

[3] http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/727

[4] Confidential RCMP overview of 2% Eritrean `Diaspora Tax` in Canada.

[5](<http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/B28905F5-5C3F-409B-8A22-0DF0DACBDAEF/0/EritreareportEndeligversion.pdf>)

[6] Said on by Lloyd Axworthy on March 24, 2005 before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

[7]http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/sudan-soudan/bilateral_relations_bilaterales/eritrea-erythree.aspx?lang=eng