

EUSR mission to Ethiopia, 14-16 September 2022

Summary

On mission to Ethiopia from 14-16 September, partly together with MD Africa, Rita Laranjinha, I met DPM/FM Demeke Mekonnen, President Sahlework Zewdie, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tesfaye Yilma, former President Mulatu Teshome, AU representatives, the US and UN Special Envoys, members of key opposition parties, heads of humanitarian organisations (ECHO, UN RHC), EU HoMs, and a number of informal interlocutors. In addition to this, I am in contact with the Tigrayan leadership in Mekelle through regular and frequent phone calls. The purpose of my mission was to help shape immediate prospects for a ceasefire and talks under the AU framework, as well as next steps for the EU and international partners to this end. I work in close collaboration with both US Special Envoy Mike Hammer and UN SEHoA Hanna Tetteh. On 7th October, I will host a larger group of HoA Envoys in Nairobi to further enhance this coordination.

Detail:

Progress towards formal peace negotiations

The AU leadership recognises the urgency of launching the Ethiopian peace process. Prior to coming to Addis, my meeting with Chairperson Moussa Faki in the margins of President Ruto's inauguration, confirmed the **AU's intention to announce, within days, a mediation panel around AUHR President Obasanjo**. This will probably be composed of former President Uhuru Kenyatta, and a female South African. The AU further aims to specify venue and dates to convene the parties for talks before the end of September – in the most optimistic scenario.

Since the end of the 5-months humanitarian truce, the resumption of intense fighting bears the risk of further protraction, and regionalisation of the conflict. The two urgent priorities now are: (1) an immediate, unconditional **Cessation of Hostilities (CoH)**, which can merge into a negotiated permanent ceasefire, and (2) a clear and well-designed **mediation framework for talks** to take off without further delay.

The US has facilitated three informal direct exchanges between the conflict parties (Seychelles, 2 x Djibouti). Now it is time for the **AU to launch its formal process** and bring the conflict parties together for intensive and undistracted negotiations.

In its recent statement on Ethiopian New Year, **the regional Government of Tigray (TPLF)** openly committed to the AU-led peace process and to an unconditional ceasefire. This is a turning point, given the previous objections by the TPLF to the AU's role in general and AUHR Obasanjo in particular. Meanwhile, since the establishment in June 2022 of its 7-member peace committee, the **Federal Government of Ethiopia (GoE)** has expressed its commitment to a mediated solution under a singular and exclusively AU-led process. GoE welcomes international partner support to the AU, and reaffirmed this directly after our meeting with DPM/FM Mekonnen. This is a key success of our latest mission. That **both parties now agree on the AU lead** is an opportunity, which must be seized swiftly and effectively to gain ground on the mediation front.

Conflict intensifies as parties position themselves

Although both the Ethiopian government and the Tigrayan leadership have expressed their readiness to talk, the war rages on with high military build-up on all sides, increased intensity, and Eritrean participation. Tens of thousands are injured or killed on the various battlefronts; many with the belief that surrender is no option. Much is at stake. As long as the AU's negotiation framework is not yet operational, **military consolidation remains each party's priority** and will come at a high human cost.

Meanwhile, not only ENDF and TDF, but also Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) are intent on gaining the upper hand militarily. The situation on the various battlefronts in northern Ethiopia, including the north-western border areas at the trijunction with Sudan and Eritrea, along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border, and in the Amhara region (both bordering Sudan/al-Fashaqa and along the Amhara-Tigray-Afar borders), is exacerbating. Incursions by TDF into both Amhara and Afar, as well as the fighting in Western Tigray, has led to **tens of thousands of IDPs without humanitarian access**. There is some concern that TDF forces may reinvest efforts on the Afar front with the possible objective to control road access between Ethiopia and Djibouti. Yet, the Sudan corridor via Western Tigray remains the most vital one for the TPLF leadership to effectively bypass the blockade. According to GoE, ENDF is obliged to "defend" Ethiopian sovereignty against TDF's renewed incursions beyond Tigray's borders. At the same time, PM Abiy faces increasing pressure from various constituencies to defeat the TPLF irrevocably.

In this vein, **Eritrea has fully mobilised its armed forces**, calling all men below the age of 55 to military service. So far mainly engaged along the border, conducting airstrikes and shelling, President Isaias Afwerki continues to portray TPLF as an existential threat, which must be removed. A new front in Afar is likely to be opened. The uncompromising position of Eritrea's leadership complicates the options of the GoE. PM Abiy faces a dilemma. Although government officials avow that Eritrea is *not invited* to the war, EDF forces are critical for a stretched ENDF to keep TDF in check. ENDF and Amhara forces have been moved into Eritrea to attack from there. However, the ultimate interests of Addis and Asmara will diverge. This could create a much bigger scale of confrontation with regional ramifications. The 2018 Ethio-Eritrean Peace Deal is already null and void.

By contrast, regarding Sudan, DPM/FM Demeke Mekonnen expressed a more optimistic outlook. There is no denying of Sudan's role as a conduit to flights carrying armaments to Tigray and as a host for recruitment and launching of attacks by TDF. Nevertheless, the GoE's **strategy of de-escalation with Sudan** seems to have calmed the tensions around al-Fashaqa and the GERD for the time being. This remains subject to both transboundary and domestic divisions and power struggles. Protracted war in the region spoils the objectives of cross-border integration, development and investment, as envisioned by the Horn of Africa Initiative. The current situation is dangerous.

Uniting efforts in support of the AU-led peace process

In line with the first joint Envoys meeting in early August, the AU expects the UN, US, and EU to be **"active partners" in the mediation process**, and to "co-create" strategies, rather than merely fund logistics. For now, it seems like the AU only aims at such cooperation with UN, US, EU, plus IGAD. However, the idea to involve Russia, China – whose Special Envoy has just arrived back in the region and was received by President Isaias Afwerki on Friday – other members of the P5, or the Gulf states, should be considered a possible reality. In this context, the EU should enhance its ability to continuously promote progress on its three

major asks – ceasefire, full humanitarian access, accountability – and the return of an Ethiopia with which the EU can nourish a strategic engagement at the centre of the Horn of Africa.

The EU faces an additional challenge. Not only government interlocutors, but even members of the political opposition expressed disappointment and frustration about the EU's public positioning in the conflict in favour of the TPLF. The EU is perceived as promoting bias through a selective portrayal of information about the conflict and through exclusive condemnation of one side. Our role as a **neutral and honest broker is being questioned**. If the EU is to remain an influential actor in support of the mediation and peace process, it must not only define and propose concrete actions and contributions to the AU-led mediation framework, but also work in close coordination, complementarity, and aligned messaging with other international partners. As the overall war dynamics are continuously evolving and difficult to capture accurately through specific incidents, portioning blame is difficult. Collective efforts are now focused on incentivising an immediate cessation of hostilities and peace talks.

In this regard, the following are ongoing reflections about how the EU can contribute to creating **positive incentives for peace talks** in an environment, which seems intractably poised for more war and fragmentation:

1. Even though the AU might announce its triad of eminent mediators, these will have to find a way to function together and avoid internal conflicts of leadership. The AU is clear about its interest to retain the ceremonial leadership of AUHR Obasanjo. President Ruto's announcement of former President Kenyatta caused confusion and irritation about how the constellation would work. The EU should use its good offices to promote a clear and **swift mobilisation of the AU's mediators**.
2. While the AU builds its team of African experts for the mediation process, including from UN rosters, I am already working with a prominent consultant mediator to develop context-specific phased approaches to **CoH and ceasefire mechanisms**. The UN Mediation Support Unit is also feeding the AU's roadmap in this regard, leading to its near completion. The EU has further expertise in terms of Confidence Building and Early Response Mechanisms, peace facilitation, and mediation, which should be mobilised now to have concrete and adequate support readily available.
3. In my discussions with both GoE and the Tigrayan leadership, I repeatedly enquire about their respective visions of how the **peace process should be shaped**. The AU agrees that the conflict parties, not the mediators, must play the central role in defining, negotiating and agreeing on the specifics of the peace process. In my continued interactions with the parties, I continue to encourage clarity on this matter.
4. EU and Member States have capacities in terms of satellite imagery, intelligence analysis and reporting, which are invaluable **assets for monitoring ceasefire mechanisms**, without placing boots on the ground. EU's INTCEN will be consulted to help map the existing support capacities and how these can be made available to the AU mediation team.
5. In terms of **restoring services in northern Ethiopia**, several EU MS have already elaborated technical proposals and are ready to implement these. There is no single "switch", which could make all services resume at once. This will only happen gradually. Telecommunications can be restored immediately by GoE, whereas

electricity requires technical interventions, and banking systems need auditing. It should be explored whether the ECB could offer consultations with regard to re-opening banks in Tigray.

6. Peace incentives can also be strengthened through concretised proposals for regional integration frameworks. The Horn of Africa Initiative under the EU's flagship Global Gateway could be strengthened by complementary cross-border projects benefiting local populations on the ground and **building confidence in the benefits of peace**. The EU can explore possible initiatives with UNDP, the AU Border Programme (AUBP), WHO, OCHA, and other relevant partners.
7. The EU is a strong humanitarian partner and can also offer mid- to long-term support in **reconstruction and development**. Mapping available resources of EU and MS, and possibly calling for a humanitarian donor conference, building on the successful resource mobilisation for the drought in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia, would reinforce the importance and leverage of the EU in responding to the effects of crisis.
8. Forum shopping, side-taking, and a divided international community are recipes for failed peace processes. It is of critical importance that the **EU retains its dialogue with both parties of the conflict** in northern Ethiopia and coordinates closely with its international partners to jointly progress towards on the long and fragile road to peace. Ceasefire and talks are the central elements now. Currently, the EU's role and influence in the mediation are in jeopardy. GoE may close access to its key interlocutors. International partners realise lack of coordination in the EU's messaging. "Yo-yo effects" must be avoided at all costs. The EU's principled approach under the three baskets has served as role model, adopted by our international partners. The EU must continue to take an approach that considers the challenges of Ethiopia as a whole and that works in unison with international partners to strengthen the AU's potential for success.