

(IV) BRIEFING NOTES

AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa, H.E. Olusegun Obasanjo, Briefs the Peace and Security Council on his Activities, Addis Ababa, 04 August 2022

I. BACKGROUND

1. On 26 August 2021, the Chairperson of the Commission, H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, nominated H.E. Olusegun Obasanjo as the African Union High Representative for the Horn of Africa, following an escalation of the conflict in Ethiopia [1]. The High Representative was mandated to *'intensify engagements with all relevant political actors and stakeholders towards promoting and entrenching durable peace and stability within Ethiopia and the entire Horn of Africa. In addition to this, his role is to also support AU-led strategies and diplomatic interventions in the region through the facilitation of inclusive political dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion processes'*. This initiative is part of the African Union's drive to promote peace, security, stability and political dialogue all over the Horn of Africa region.
2. Over the past one year, the High Representative has been engaging with the Ethiopian parties and consistently maintaining calls for them to embrace an immediate and unconditional comprehensive ceasefire and cessation of hostilities, engage in political dialogue without any preconditions and to ensure immediate and unhindered humanitarian access. These calls have positively paid off with the situation witnessing important positive developments, as a negotiated settlement appears in sight [2].

[1] It would be more accurate to say that Pres. Obasanjo was appointed following the unexpected defeat of the Ethiopian army in Tigray in June-July 2021.

[2] Obasanjo's optimism refers to the Seychelles and Djibouti talks and what happened thereafter. After the Djibouti talks, the Federal Government of Ethiopia tested the commitment of the international community and the Government of Tigray and found that there was no penalty for reneging on commitments that they had made, and the Tigrayans were ready to talk nonetheless.

3. Meanwhile, as the crisis in the northern Tigray region Ethiopia offers hope for a diplomatic solution, key challenges in other parts of the country warrant attention to avoid any surprises. A few of these challenges include the internal ethnic tensions in western Ethiopia; **on-and-off tensions between Eritrea and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) [3]**; recent deteriorating security situation between Ethiopia and Sudan over alleged skirmishes at their common border; reports of the arrest of suspects allegedly plotting terror attacks in Addis Ababa; and the attacks by al Shabab in the Ferfer district of Ethiopia near the border with Somalia.

II. THE MEDIATION EFFORTS

4. Since September 2021, the High Representative has been **actively involved in shuttle diplomacy [4]** to facilitate sustained engagement with both parties in Addis Ababa and Mekelle, with the primary aim of bringing them to the dialogue table to chat an end to the conflict. In his engagement, he has consistently called on the parties to embrace an immediate and unconditional comprehensive ceasefire and cessation of hostilities, engage in political dialogue without any preconditions and to ensure immediate and unhindered humanitarian access. He also been calling on them to undertake confidence-building measures to help them regain eroded trust.
5. The parties' receptibility and acceptability to these calls have allowed them to undertake meaningful confidence-building measures, which include:
- **the declaration of a humanitarian truce by both parties and the granting of humanitarian access [5]**, an action which all of us had long wished for;
 - **the withdrawal of TPLF from the Afar region and notable lull in violent clashes [6]**;

[3] This massively underplays the animosity between Eritrea and Tigray. Note also the High Representative refers to the TPLF, not the Government of Tigray or the Tigrayan authorities. [The first occasion on which the AU used the correct naming](#) was on September 11, responding to the Tigrayan statement in support of a cessation of hostilities and peace.

[4] "Actively involved" is a generous reading of the High Representative's part-time engagement.

[5] The choice of the word "granting" for humanitarian access is revealing. It implies that a sovereign government is under no obligation to abide by the provisions of IHL and ICL and does so out of magnanimity.

[6] The issue of the Tigray Defense Forces presence in some areas of Afar became contentious after the common understanding on humanitarian access in March-April, with the FGE insisting that TDF withdrawal was a precondition for permitting convoys to move.

- the establishment of the National Dialogue Commission [7];
- the explicit consent of both parties to commit to a political solution through dialogue; and
- the formation of the respective negotiation teams by both parties.

[7] The National Dialogue Commission has not been mentioned let alone agreed to by the Government of Tigray.

6. Henceforth, these developments offer hope that a diplomatic solution to the conflict is imminent. The recent pronouncements by the Federal Government of Ethiopia affirming commitment to peaceful resolution of the conflict under the AU-led process which the High Representative is leading, is a welcome development in the right direction. Another key positive development is that both parties have committed to a peaceful resolution and announced their respective negotiating teams.

7. In an effort to further leverage the goodwill demonstrated by the parties and to maximise the positive gains achieved through the aforementioned confidence-building measures, and following the improvement in the overall security situation in the country, the AU has developed a roadmap for direct engagements between the parties, to be preceded by pre-talks. Although the date of the talks has not yet been decided, there is convergence of choice over the venue and preparations are underway to convene the pre-talks in earnest. Securing a negotiated ceasefire and formal declaration of cessation of hostilities [8] remain a paramount goal and all efforts should be exerted to bring the parties to the table as soon as possible for direct pre-talks. The parties should be commended for the confidence-building measures they have so far undertaken, especially for their commitment to humanitarian access which has helped to save lives in affected.

[8] It is odd to place a negotiated ceasefire before a formal declaration of cessation of hostilities. One would expect them to be the other way around.

III. POLITICAL/SECURITY SITUATION

a. Ethnic Tension in Western Ethiopia

8. Apart from the conflict in Tigray, western Ethiopia continues to be confronted by ethnic violence that is taking a heavy toll on inter-communal relations including in parts of the Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz regions. These ethnic tensions have dates back to several decades but have seen a sharp increase over the past three years. [9] The most recent violence took place on 18 June and reportedly claimed the lives of more than 250 civilians from the Amhara ethnic group who were reportedly resettled in Gimbi district about 30 years ago under a resettlement program. The onslaught by Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), [10] came after months of reports of clashes in the Benishangul Gumuz region. Similar attack took place on 14 June in Gambella city. The OLA confirmed in a statement that it staged an operation together with its allied Gambella Liberation Front (GLF) against governmental targets in the capital of Gambella region. It is reported that more than 100 people, mostly from the Amhara ethnic group, were killed in Ethiopia's Oromia region in the aftermath of the Gambella attack. The Federal Government blames OLA for the intermittent attacks, but these allegations are denied by the group. Recently, federal forces have been engaged in fierce fighting with the OLA in the Oromia region, despite the declaration of a humanitarian truce with the TPLF. [11]

[9] In this section, the High Representative entirely removes the political dimension from the conflicts in other parts of Ethiopia including Oromiya.

[10] Referring to the OLA "onslaught" without reference to Federal Government repression is one-sided. It reflects the abiding theme of Obasanjo's engagement, namely that a legitimate government is threatened by illegitimate rebellions.

[11] The FGE declared its intention to crush the "terrorist" OLA while talking about peace with Tigray. This casts serious doubt on the FGE's sincere or strategic commitment to peace in Ethiopia.

b. The Deteriorating Security Situation between Ethiopia And Sudan

9. Unresolved dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan over the Al-Fashaqa area remains a source of tension and potential conflict between the two countries. Tensions have recently escalated between

the two neighbours following reports by Sudan of the capturing and killing by Ethiopian military of seven of its soldiers and a civilian. A day later, there were reports of clashes at the contested Al-Fashaqa border area, complicating strained relations between the two countries. In addition to this, the two countries have accused each other of cross-border skirmishes, with Ethiopia accusing its neighbour of harbouring elements of the TPLF in its territories.

c. Tension between Eritrea and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)

10. There is a deep rift between Eritrea and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) who view each other as an existential threat. [12] Since Eritrea sided with Ethiopia in the conflict with the TPLF, wounds from the Ethiopia-Eritrea war in the late 1990s have been reopened. Occasional skirmishes along the border between the two sides have been reported including the exchange of artillery fire around the hitherto contested town of Badme raising questions about the prospects for peace between the two former allies turned foes. However, realities continue to prove that brokering genuine peace between Addis Ababa and Mekelle requires the involvement of Asmara. [13]

IV. CONCLUSION

11. Meaningful confidence-building measures by Addis Ababa and Mekelle are helping to re-establish, to some extent, eroded trust between parties and continue to offer hope that a diplomatic solution to the crisis in northern Ethiopia is imminent.
12. However, as our hope for a negotiated settlement remains firm due to ongoing positive developments, an increase in violent ethnic-related clashes in the

[12] This more accurate than the formulation in point 3. However, Obasanjo makes no mention of the fact that the Tigrayan fear may be founded on the experience of mass atrocity, widespread and systematic, targeted against them during the Eritrean occupation following the outbreak of the war in November 2020, and statements by the Eritrean leaders of their intention to "crush" Tigray.

[13] This is a significant and controversial point. Eritrea is a belligerent and peace must be made among all belligerents. There are merits and demerits to the engagement of Eritrea in the negotiations. If Eritrea were to be involved, it would be necessary to redefine the nature of the conflict and the conflict resolution process. Among other things, it would be essential to know the status of forces agreements whereby Eritrean forces are in Ethiopia and Ethiopian forces are in Eritrea, as well as Eritrean political objectives in Ethiopia.

Oromia and Benishangu Gumuz regions of Western Ethiopia that have claimed so many innocent lives and taken a heavy toll on inter-communal relations require attention.

13. Also, intermittent tensions between Eritrea and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that often leads to skirmishes; reports of the presence of terror suspects on Ethiopian soil, as well as recent attacks by al Shabab in the Ferfer district near the border with Somalia, are worrisome developments for attention. Although the situation has been calmed, the recent deteriorating security situation between Ethiopia and Sudan over alleged skirmishes at their common border constitutes threat to transboundary peace and stability and needs to be addressed.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

14. In order to broker sustained peace and stability in Ethiopia through a negotiated settlement of its conflict, and in order to avoid a further deterioration of the situation between Ethiopia and Sudan, for the sake of a stable the Horn of Africa region, the Commission may wish to consider the following steps as a matter of high priority:

- a. The PSC may wish to commend the Ethiopian parties for the confidence-building measures they have undertaken, especially for their commitment to ongoing humanitarian access.
- b. The PSC may wish to commend the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) for their explicit consent to commit to a political solution through dialogue and the formation and announcement of their respective negotiation teams.

- c. The Chairperson of the Commission may wish to welcome recent pronouncements by the Federal Government of Ethiopia affirming commitment to peaceful resolution of the conflict under the AU-led process, and encourage the support of the TPLF in this regard in order to move the process forward.
- d. The Chairperson of the Commission may wish to congratulate the AU High Representative and his technical team for the development of a roadmap for direct engagements between the parties. [14]
- e. The PSC may wish to call on the Federal Government of Ethiopia to continue to address ethnic violence in the west of the country through the National Dialogue Commission as a mean of re-establishing strained inter-communal relations in parts of Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz regions. [15]
- f. The PSC may seek to encourage Ethiopia and Sudan to use existing mechanisms agreed and accepted by the parties for the amicable resolution of the Al- Fashaqa border dispute; the PSC may equally express AU's readiness to assist the parties with existing capacities through its AU Border Programme.
- g. The AU Commission may wish to extend a formal invitation to the Republic of Eritrea to join ongoing AU-led efforts aimed at finding lasting diplomatic solutions to the conflict between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF. [16]

[14] No roadmap was made public.

[15] This reduces the political conflicts between the FGE and different opposition groups including the OLA to a matter of inter-communal relations.

[16] This is the most striking and significant sentence in Obasanjo's briefing. (In passing, the correct title is the *State of Eritrea*) It follows on from the point outlined in note 12, moving to a concrete proposal without consulting the Tigrayans, who have rejected Eritrean involvement in the negotiations. (We may assume that he consulted the Federal Government in advance.) Regardless of the merits and demerits of involving Eritrea, this statement sent a powerful signal, legitimizing Eritrea's involvement in the war. As Pres. Obasanjo is the preferred candidate for the AU Commission and the FGE for chairing the proposed mediation panel for Ethiopia, it is essential for him to explain what he meant in this proposal.