

Eritrea spurs insecurity in the Horn of Africa

Former rebel leader, now president, Isaias Afwerki has created one of the world's nastiest dictatorships

By Jonathan Manthorpe, Vancouver Sun August 25, 2010

Lying flat in Mogadishu while bullets thudded into the wall behind which we were cowering, an American buddy and I were discussing what to do about the chaos that is Somalia.

"If the world had any sense," said my colleague, who was speaking nearly 20 years ago though the same question is just as valid today, "Somalia would be handed to the Eritreans to run."

"Problem is," he went on, "the Eritreans are far too sensible to take the deal."

At that time, in the early 1990s, the Eritreans stood out as among the most competent and functional nations in a continent without traction.

Eritrea was at that time part of Ethiopia and gave the Horn of Africa nation its only access to the ocean, the Red Sea.

But the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had already liberated most of its country and was the driving force in the rebel armies then closing in on the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa to oust the dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam.

What has happened since is a sad failure of one of the most promising new nations in Africa. Instead of emerging as an example of what can be achieved, Eritrea is now entrenched as a problem whose name always pops up when there is trouble in the Horn of Africa.

Who's sending arms to the al-Shabaab militant Islamists in Somalia as they attempt to overthrow the remnants of the feeble UN-backed transitional government in Mogadishu?

Eritrea.

Just to the north in Puntland, a mini-state created in 1998 in an attempt to fashion a functional nation out of Somalia's chaos, who's sending guns to the anti-government warlord Mohamed Said Atom?

Eritrea.

Whose troops invaded the border region of Djibouti a while ago, perplexing not only the French and Americans who have substantial military bases in the former French colony, but also Ethiopia?

Eritrea, of course.

But it is not Eritrea and Eritreans who are to blame for their country becoming a hub of regional insecurity.

That credit goes to their president, Isaias Afwerki, the former leader of the EPLF, who has achieved the sorry distinction of creating one of the world's nastiest dictatorships.

Afwerki's approach to personal political survival depends on fomenting disputes with his neighbours while brooking no opposition or transparency at home.

Even though Eritrea emerged from the Ethiopian civil war with many problems, there was much optimism that Afwerki was the man for the job after the 1993 UN-supervised referendum created the new nation.

But Afwerki soon displayed his dictatorial instincts. Within months of the referendum, he ordered imprisonment of injured war veterans who had the temerity to protest against their difficult living conditions.

Then he shut down human rights organizations and expelled international development agencies.

The media are now totally government owned and directed. Would-be independent journalists make up a large group among the country's political prisoners.

There was meant to be the introduction of a democratic constitution and elections in 1997. But these never happened and a couple of years ago Afwerki said he believes it will be "three or four decades" before the country is ready for elections.

As always happens, the more he has consolidated power, the more paranoid and suspicious he has become about the loyalty of those around him.

In 2001 a dozen or so of the top officials in his government, most of whom had been friends and allies since the early days of their separatist uprising, were detained on suspicion of treason.

But Afwerki's special fear is neighbouring Ethiopia, which is a bit ironic because that's where his family comes from.

He pushed disputes over the new Eritrea-Ethiopia border into a full-blown war in 1998 and has done all he can to cause problems for the Addis Ababa government ever since.

Late last year the UN and the United States imposed sanctions on Afwerki's regime for its arms shipments to al-Shabaab in Somalia and incursions into Djibouti.

Afwerki has withdrawn from Djibouti, but there are as-yet unconfirmed reports he has taken on a new role as a proxy for Iran in its contest with Saudi Arabia and Egypt for influence in the region.

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