

AFAR-SOMALI CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA

Addressing Root Causes, Promoting Reconciliation,
Strengthening Peace



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INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has faced various inter-ethnic conflicts throughout its history, with the Afar-Somali conflict being one of the most persistent and impactful.

Although this conflict primarily revolves around territorial disputes, competition over resources, historical grievances, and political representation, the negative influences of external actors have made this conflict more volatile for the Horn of Africa region.

The Afar and Somali communities, residing in Ethiopia's eastern and southeastern regions respectively, have experienced violence and tension, undermining stability and development in these areas.

This policy paper is based on the Roundtable Discussion organized by the **Afro-Asia Institute for Strategic Studies** on July 11, 2024 in Nairobi (Kenya), examining the root causes of the conflict and titled “*Afar-Somali Conflict: Addressing Root Causes, Promoting Reconciliation, Strengthening Peace*”, that brought together experts from Afar and Somali backgrounds and who had constructive and honest discussions on the critical issues mentioned above that affect both communities' political, economic, and social trajectory, and the security of the Horn of Africa region and the African continent at large.

This conflict, simmering for years, has profoundly impacted the region, affecting communities, economies, and overall stability. The continuous Afar-Somali violence has often been viewed as resource-oriented; specifically, conflict over scarce pastoralist resources and territory. However, this recurring conflict, spanning decades, has morphed into a proxy war, which now threatens to endanger the Horn of Africa region as a whole.

ROOT CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

1. Territorial Disputes:

Historically, there have been disagreements over land boundaries and resource ownership between Afar and Somali pastoralist communities. Demographic changes, migration patterns, and conflicting maps about border delineations of successful Ethiopian administrations have exacerbated this.

2. Resource Competition:

Both Afar and Somali communities heavily depend on pastoralism for their livelihoods, leading to competition over grazing lands, water sources, and strategic locations for trade routes.

3. Historical Grievances:

Past conflicts, power struggles, and perceived injustices have contributed to deep-rooted animosities and a cycle of retaliatory violence between both communities.

4. Political Representation:

Issues of political marginalization, unequal access to resources, and inadequate representation in decision-making processes within the Ethiopian federal government have fueled resentment and mistrust among the Afar and Somali populations.

5. Foreign Interference:

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has shown interest in the disputed lands of Awash Valley, seeking strategic influence through economic investments and military partnerships with the Central government of Ethiopia, further complicating local dynamics.

6. Proxy Dynamics:

The government of Djibouti has engaged in proxy warfare, exacerbating tensions between the two communities by supporting and arming both factions, thus perpetuating instability and insecurity.

CURRENT SITUATION

The Afar-Somali conflict has manifested in various forms including armed clashes, cattle raids, and displacement of populations.

Despite sporadic efforts at ceasefire agreements and peace talks, sustainable peace remains elusive due to underlying socio-economic, political, and historical factors.

Humanitarian agencies have also highlighted the humanitarian toll, with significant displacements and humanitarian needs among affected populations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

The Roundtable discussion on the Afar-Somali conflict organized by the Afro-Asia Institute for Strategic Studies has yielded significant progress in bringing about peace in the region. The Federal Government of Ethiopia has shown signs of willingness to finally resolve the conflict by bringing the two regional leaders of the Somali and Afar regions to the negotiating table for a 3-day meeting.

Heads of both Somali and Afar regional states have issued statements regarding the end of hostilities, with key points of the agreements established being the following:

1. *Ceasefire without preconditions,*
2. *End the avoidable loss of life and property on both sides,*
3. *Hold a public discussion to achieve a lasting peace,*
4. *The IDPs must return to their homes,*
5. *Resolution of the root cause must be achieved through legal and peaceful means.*

Despite the uncertainties surrounding this peace agreement, the outcome of the Roundtable discussion marks a significant milestone for the Afro-Asia Institute for Strategic Studies, dedicated to promoting African solutions to African problems. This development is potentially promising, and the Afro-Asia Institute for Strategic Studies is recommending the following Policy Recommendations for the federal government of Ethiopia to achieve a genuine effort towards peace:

1. Conflict Resolution and Mediation

Strengthen efforts to mediate and resolve disputes through dialogue, involving community leaders, elders, and relevant stakeholders from both Afar and Somali communities. Support conflict resolution mechanisms at local levels to address grievances promptly.

2. Resource Management

Develop and implement joint resource management frameworks that regulate access to grazing lands, water points, and trade routes fairly and equitably. Promote sustainable pastoralist practices that mitigate environmental degradation.

3. Political Inclusion

Ensure equitable representation of Afar and Somali communities in federal governance structures. Enhance participation in the federal decision-making processes, resource allocation, and public service delivery to address grievances related to political marginalization.

4. Security and Law Enforcement

Strengthen security measures to prevent and respond to inter-communal violence through the establishment of a Rapid Response Force made up of both regional states. Enhance law enforcement capacity to uphold the rule of law, protect civilians, and disarm militia groups that contribute to insecurity.

5. Regional Diplomatic Initiatives

Engage diplomatically with UAE and Djibouti governments to encourage constructive involvement that respects Ethiopian sovereignty, cease their military support to local militias, and instead support Ethiopian-led peace initiatives. Regional organizations such as IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) can play a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution.

6. Strengthening IGAD's conflict prevention capacity in the sub-region

This IGAD effort could be constrained by the present situation of its members, who will need strong support from regional and international organizations (such as the AU) and other concerned countries.

7. Community Reconciliation and Peacebuilding

Invest in long-term peacebuilding efforts that address underlying grievances, promote reconciliation between ethnic communities, and foster inclusive governance and development in the affected Afar and Somali regions. Support grassroots initiatives for reconciliation and peacebuilding through inter-communal dialogue, cultural exchanges, and joint economic ventures. Foster social cohesion and mutual understanding through education and awareness programs.

CONCLUSION

The Afar-Somali conflict in Ethiopia demands comprehensive approaches to addressing local grievances, managing resources sustainably, promoting equitable resource-sharing, enhancing governance structures, fostering reconciliation, and countering external interference.

Ethiopia can mitigate conflict impacts and advance stability, prosperity, and sustainable development in the affected regions by working collaboratively with all stakeholders, including government institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners to implement inclusive policies and strengthen local capacities.

International cooperation is crucial to managing external influences and promoting lasting peace in Ethiopia's eastern and southeastern regions.

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