Chapter XIV

Post-conflict Eritrea – a land of pride and indeed some prejudice

Emblem of Eritrea

This Chapter examines another experience gained in a little known, somewhat sad and troubled faraway country which shares a number of parallels with countries like the Chittagong Hill Tracts or its neighbour Yemen across the Red Sea - or even Albania. I see it as a country very much in transition. Not much is known of the country so I trust I shall be forgiven for dwelling in a little detail on the situation there as our mission team discovered it.

Eritrea is the youngest sovereign state in Africa, having achieved formal independence only in 1993. Two thirds of the population live in rural and semi-rural areas. Agriculture and pastoralism are the main sources of livelihood for 80% of Eritrea’s population. Approximately one third of the population are nomads. Eritrea’s GDP per capita is estimated at US$200. The Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper indicates that an estimated 66% of the population are poor. Of these UNICEF estimates that some 37% are extremely poor and live below the food poverty line. Eritrea ranks 157 out of 177 countries according to the Human Development Report 2006.

The history of Eritrea is tied to its strategic position on the African side of the Red Sea; with a coastline that extends more than 1,000 km. Many scientists believe that it is from this area that anatomically modern humans first expanded out of Africa. Later from across the Red Sea came various invaders (and colonizers) such as the Saudi

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85 It lost this position in 2012 when South Sudan proclaimed its independence.
86 Source: IMF Article IV Consultations 2005, Staff Report.
88 I’m indebted to Wikipedia for some of the following historical background.
Arabians hailing from the present-day Yemen area, the Ottoman Turks, the Portuguese from Goa (India), the Egyptians, the British and, in the 19th century, the Italians. Over the centuries, invaders also came from the neighbouring countries of Africa to the south (Ethiopia) and to the west (Sudan). However, present-day Eritrea was largely impacted and most strongly influenced by the Italian invaders in the 19th century.

In the period following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, when the European powers scrambled for territory in Africa and tried to establish coaling stations for their ships, Italy invaded and occupied Eritrea. On January 1, 1890 Eritrea officially became a colony of Italy. In 1936 it became a province of Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana), along with Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. The British armed forces expelled those of Italy in 1941 and took over the administration of the country which had been set up by the Italians. The British continued to administer the territory under a UN Mandate until 1951 when Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia as per UN resolution 390(A) under the prompting of the United States and adopted in December 1950.

Destroyed Ethiopian weapons and hardware are to be found all over the country as evidence of the hard fought war of independence.

The strategic importance of Eritrea, due to its Red Sea coastline and mineral resources, was the main cause for Eritrea's annexation by Ethiopia as its 14th province in 1962. This was the culmination of a gradual process of takeover by the Ethiopian authorities; a process which included a 1959 edict establishing the compulsory teaching of Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia, in all Eritrean schools. Strange that this long war broke out between two Christian or largely Christian countries situated just across the Red Sea from Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. In contrast to East and
Southern African countries the country has been Christian since the 1st Century AD. It wasn’t necessary to send in the missionaries to these Coptic peoples.

The lack of regard for the wishes of the majority of the Eritrean population led to the formation of an independence movement in the early 1960s, which erupted into a 30-year war against successive Ethiopian governments that ended in 1991. Following an UN-supervised referendum in Eritrea (dubbed UNOVER) in which the Eritrean people overwhelmingly voted for independence, Eritrea declared its independence and gained international recognition in 1993.

The thirty year-long bitter border conflict with neighbouring Ethiopia led to the death of approximately 10% of the population estimated then at 4 million. The war has displaced farmers and households. Then the frequent droughts have reduced the availability of water for human consumption and livestock production. The problem of food security has exacerbated malnutrition affecting more than 40 percent of under-five year old children in some regions.

On Saturday 19th June 2010 there were some 10,000 people holding a vigil and marching together through Asmara with their candles to commemorate the dead of the long war with Ethiopia. I was very moved by it.

My earliest memories of post-independent Ireland governed by the Fianna Fail (Soldiers of Freedom) gave me some insights into Eritrean political realities. There was the Government composed of military people and far removed from civilian administrators. There was the same immense pride in the sacrifices leading to achievement of independence coupled to concepts of sacrifice and faithfulness to the memory of the lost comrades who had made the ultimate sacrifice. But there was little flexibility either in the way the Eritrean Government pandered to the UN or other international agencies. In mitigation there has to be recognition of the way the UN earlier had sold them down the river to Ethiopia and against their wishes.

A contradiction in Government policies relates to its dealings with the international Eritrean Diaspora. There are some millions living abroad and emigrants’ remittances are taxed. Indeed the Government in recent times has refused visas for travelling
abroad to citizens aged less than 53 years for women and an even older age for men. They insist they remain in the Defence Reserves in the event of another war with Ethiopia or another of the country’s neighbours. Sadly many of the most educated try to cross into the neighbouring countries for better jobs and as a first step towards ultimate migration to the West. I was advised that about 50% of those who attempt succeed. Anecdotal evidence assumes that another 25% are shot attempting escape and the remainder are caught and imprisoned. Certainly we were informed that Ministers travelling abroad are usually given a hard time by the members of the Eritrean diaspora they visit. There is much resentment and ill-feeling between the representatives of the emigrant communities and the Government.

There is nothing like a site visit to a school to provide information on focus and direction. Here in a provincial school in Eritrea we see colour and brightness as well as a sign on the wall proclaiming “Girls are at least as intelligent as boys.” And “Educate a woman and you educate a whole family”.

Despite these challenges, Eritrea happens to be one of the only three sub-Saharan countries that are on track to meet “Millennium Development Goal 4 (MDG 4)” with its child survival targets and one of the seven countries to have managed to reduce child mortality by more than 50%. In addition, the country has been able to reduce malaria morbidity by more than 86% and mortality due to malaria by more than 82%, making it one of the few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to have met the Abuja "Roll Back Malaria" targets. Eritrea is projected to achieve eight of the ten MDG targets by 2015. This is no small achievement for a small beleaguered country.

The country has long-term prospects for revenues from the development of offshore oil, offshore fishing, exploitation of mineral resources and tourism. But it's economic future depends on its ability to master fundamental social and economic problems, e.g., overcoming illiteracy, promoting job creation, expanding technical training, attracting foreign investment, and streamlining the bureaucracy. The key to all these improvements have to depend on a breakthrough in relations with neighbouring states.

Eritrea is a single-party state. Though its constitution, adopted in 1997, stipulates that the state is a presidential republic with a unicameral parliamentary democracy, it has
yet to be implemented. According to the government this is due to the prevailing border conflict with Ethiopia, which began in May 1998. Independent local sources of political information on Eritrean domestic politics are scarce; in September 2001 the government closed down all of the nation's privately owned print media. Outspoken critics of the government have been arrested and held without trial, according to various international observers, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Asmara: serving myself at a Ministerial reception. It certainly wasn’t all like this. The World Bank Task Master and an old friend from Pakistan, is on my left with senior Ministry officials on my right.

There have been significant changes at domestic and sub-regional levels: there is the recent resolution of the protracted border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia but with continuing border tensions, the departure from Eritrea of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) and the problems associated with a continuing ‘no war no peace’ situation. These factors collectively impose upon Eritrea considerable social, political and economic consequences at national and local levels. The present situation is exacerbated by the impact of the global economic downturn and its impact on investment and donor decision-making as well as deteriorating global food insecurity, escalating prices for essential food items and the effect of climate change on an already precarious domestic food production sector and limited water resources.

Then there is the plight of children caught up in these hostilities. UNICEF records from the Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare (MOLHW) that preliminary findings from a national survey conducted in 2005 indicate that there are 120,000 orphans in the country. Close to ten per cent of children under-15 lost one or both biological parents due to war, drought, and displacement and to some extent HIV/AIDS. Similarly, the number of street children is growing due to economic factors. The MOLHW estimate stands at about 5,000 street children, mainly in major urban areas.
The location of Eritrea presents a huge geographical conundrum. Tragically for Eritrea with a population of less than four million it cuts off its much larger neighbour Ethiopia with ten times its population from direct access to the Red Sea. The undemarcated border with Ethiopia is the primary external issue currently facing Eritrea. Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia turned from that of cautious mutual tolerance, following the 30-year war for Eritrean independence to a deadly rivalry that led to the outbreak of hostilities from May 1998 to June 2000 which claimed approximately 70,000 Eritrean and Ethiopian casualties.

I felt that over time and when memories of the terrible war have faded somewhat that it might be possible for agreement to be reached which allows Ethiopia access through an international tax free agreement to the sea much like the way that Afghanistan used to enjoy access to the Pakistani warm water ports on the Arabian Sea. But given the adversarial approaches of both countries I wouldn't be too optimistic. Sadly, I anticipate continuous destabilisation in the region until some such arrangement is brokered: maybe by the United Nations although it has to be borne in mind that the UN was complicit in starting the long war by transferring the sovereignty of Eritrea to Ethiopia in the first place.

For a small poor country Eritrea's relations with its other neighbours are very complicated as well as being somewhat downright cantankerous. Obviously they have been strained due to a series of wars and disputes and the suspicions engendered by them. These include an undemarcated border with Sudan, a war with Yemen over the Hanish Islands in 1996, and a recent border conflict with Ethiopia. As part of an agreement to cease hostilities the two nations agreed to refer the issue to the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in 1998. Yemen was granted full ownership of the larger islands while Eritrea was awarded the peripheral islands to the southwest of the larger islands. At the conclusion of the proceedings, both nations acquiesced to the decision. Since 1996, both governments have remained wary of one another but relations are relatively normal. The undemarcated border with Sudan has posed a problem for Eritrean external relations for most of the nation's existence. Somewhat ironically, Eritrea has been recognized as a broker for peace between the separate factions of the recent Sudanese civil war.

In terms of other international relationships the country follows its own somewhat austere path. Its relationship with the United States is complicated. Although the two nations have a close working relationship regarding the on-going war on terror there has been a growing tension in other areas. Relations worsened\(^\text{89}\) as recently as October 2008 when a U.S. Assistant Secretary of State called the nation a 'state sponsor of terrorism' and stated that the U.S. government might add Eritrea to its list of rogue states, along with Iran and Sudan. The reason for this was the presence of an exiled Somali Islamist leader, whom the U.S. suspects of having links to Al Qaeda, at a recent Somali opposition conference in Asmara.

\(^{89}\) It is quite possible that this souring of relations has caused the U.S. Government to put pressure on Eritrea by insisting that the World Bank suspend further assistance to the country based on a fairly superficial reason; Eritrea as a HIPPIIC beneficiary is required to inform the Bank when it takes out further loans or credits from whatever source. While most indebted HIPPIIC countries do this Eritrea with its touchy sense of pride refuses to.
During the week of August 2, 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed that Eritrea was supplying weapons to a Somalian militant group. Although Eritrea denied this accusation in a public statement the following day, the United Nations, with the backing of the African Union, imposed sanctions and an arms embargo on Eritrea under Resolution 1907 for its role in Somalia and refusal to withdraw troops from the border with Djibouti. On its part, Eritrea is hosting members of the ousted Union of Islamic Courts and the Somali Free Parliament. The Eritrean government has been accused of sponsoring, arming and hosting numerous militant leaderships and separatist rebels in the Horn of Africa. In contrast, Eritrea's relationships with Italy and the EU generally are still reasonably strong and don’t not seem to be as fraught as is its relationship with the U.S.

Outside the Italian Roman Catholic Cathedral – so Italian!

While the Eritrean Coptic Church is an historic institution spanning over two thousand years of history it also has to take into consideration two other important Christian communities – the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholics. Then approximately half of the population down in the coastal areas is Moslem. I found it strangely ecumenical in Asmara to be woken at 5am by the Muezzin calling on his fellows to get out of bed. Then at 6am it was followed by the Angelus bells calling out the Christians.

The Italians as noted earlier had established Eritrea and Ethiopia as the bases for their East African Empire and first began to colonise the country in the 1860s. While they were here they spent a huge amount of energy in creating Italian habitats with Italian

EC support to Eritrea for the period 2011 – 2014 will amount to €122 million.
design; this included converting the main city of Asmara and the larger towns into facsimiles of Southern Italian cities and towns. Sometimes I felt it necessary to pinch myself and to wake up and tell myself that this was Eritrea in Eastern Africa and not a part of Italy to the south of Rome or Naples.

It is obvious that the Eritreans liked and adopted much of the Italian culture. I’m sure there must have been a considerable amount of inter-racial relationships and inter-marriage. One thing which struck me very forcibly was the prevalence of sidewalk cafes all along the streets of Asmara and frequented by a heterogeneous groups from all backgrounds including bureaucrats, teachers, farmers and herdsmen and their womenfolk visiting for the day. There was still a fair amount of Italian spoken.

Bird watching with our guide just outside Asmara. We saw 28 different species including a crested eagle in just 3 hours.

There was a very dignified and elegant Italian Club with an open square shaded by tall palm trees where we all loved to go after work. The proprietor had lived for more than twenty years and ran a restaurant with his family near Turino. He somehow through his remaining family there was able to lay his hands on Italian prosciutto – a traditional finely sliced ham, which he served up with the local cold white wine. Sometimes I felt bolted to my seat. We’d sit and observe the young people holding hands and drinking their coffees as the sun moved from behind the relevant palm tree or in the evening when the stars came out. Yes, people were poor but somehow they cherished these old Italian cultural habits they had inherited.

Another strong custom of the Eritreans is the two to three hour coffee ceremony which is performed domestically in traditional homes maybe three times a day. I witnessed it once. There is duty and elegance and the whole is done with a quiet dignity and with flowers. I felt so very privileged to be present. Sadly all coffee traditionally comes from the benighted neighbouring Ethiopia. The Eritreans want it
but have to pay more because there is no open border between it and Ethiopia. They have to import it indirectly from the Sudan or even Egypt and at inflated prices.

Between May and July 2010 I was team leader of a group consisting of two ladies; one Dutch, one Finnish, a Welsh architect and myself. Our task was to review the state of progress by the EC and the World Bank in relation to the EC-Support for Education in Eritrea (EC-SEE) which was signed in 2005 between the EC in Brussels and the Government of Eritrea. Before coming out I had read very little about the country’s very complex politics or of its relations with its neighbours. The team leader from the previous EC mission there when with me in Vietnam had advised me he didn’t like the place much and had no intention of visiting it a second time. He emphasised that as team leader he had spent most of his time organising security passes to enable the team to move outside Asmara and organising supplies of fuel for the four wheel drives. It also was well known that the previous EC mission had been a disaster with two British professors having a very public fall-out and with very unwise and personalised emails flooding the air waves. We were determined this wasn’t going to happen on our watch. Happily it didn’t and all four of us got on very well together. A glass of wine together each evening certainly helped!

The team was based in Asmara the Italianate capital at about 2,500m up in the Eritrean Highlands. It spent most of its time organising interviews with most of the education stakeholders in the capital of approximately 300,000 people. Occasionally - but not often enough - we went on site visits to particular Zobas or regions. The Ministry of Education (MoE) generally responded well to all our appointments and questions. The feedback we had from senior government officials was that central government appeared to be in a quandary between the imminent closure of the EC project supporting education in a few months – in December 2010 to be precise - should a rider for a three-year extension to the project fail to be approved by EC HQ in Brussels.
Expenditures under the project were seen to be falling far short of the amounts contained in the Financing Agreement. After five years of implementation and with only 6 months to go only about half the budget had been expended. It was unlikely that the some of the most important EC funded infrastructure could be completed in the absence of the three-year extension sought. This was being implemented for the EC by the World Bank. The expected outcomes could be expected to have major implications for a range of priority education services and delivery systems planned.

Finally the mission gleaned from discussions with senior officials that there was awareness that the EC under the current project made no provision for an exit strategy. The World Bank had signalled its intention to close its portion of the overall project without adequate time to complete the schools and infrastructures it had contracted to execute with EC funding. Nor was there at this stage in time any provision in sight for a follow-on project from either the EC or the World Bank which would act to ensure that the progress in quality made under the project could be bedded in and become sustainable. Thus, the situation presented had little to commend it. Much but not all of the responsibility could be seen to lie at the feet either of the local EC Delegation in Asmara or the World Bank.

To be precise the whole project was in a state of uncertainty due to the prolonged processing by the EC of the Rider to extend the timeframe of the project for EC funded construction to 2013; the imminent expiry of the Administrative Agreement with the World Bank for the Trust Fund on August 31st and oversights in recognising administrative deadlines for processing an extension. All this was further seriously compounded by targeted closure of the World Bank education project by 28th February 2011 and the announcement of its intention not to extend or renew activities in Eritrea. The World Bank also announced that despite the closing date of the Trust Fund Agreement with the EC and the government, the Bank’s procedures would prevent further use of EC funds. As might be expected there was a public breakdown in communications between the local resident office of the World Bank and the EC Delegation.

Our report findings satisfied neither the EC nor the World Bank. Amongst our findings was that “in its management of project implementation the European Commission Delegation has tried hard to reach a balance between “objectives achievement” and “compliance” the latter with tight procedural and reporting requirements. Relations between the Delegation and the Ministry and the Ministry’s Project Management Unit (PMU) had gone through several difficult patches since project commencement. In chronicling these events and in divining their causes it was clear to us as a team that the donor agencies had fallen out and were accusing each other for the less than successful outcomes now expected. Personally, I am of the strong opinion that the ECD was very genuine in its policy of providing support to Eritrea. It just hadn’t been realistic or effective in the way it had planned, communicated and managed its side of the project.

At the same time the mission was aware of many claims and counter claims between the ECD and the World Bank as a background to the withdrawal of the World Bank. Unhelpful and sometimes very direct and somewhat less than diplomatic letters were being fired off by these two major agencies - now turned protagonists. At the same
time my colleagues and I had a feeling that as sometimes happens - when the U.S. Government wants to - it can put pressure on a government through exerting pressures through agencies over which it has control such as the World Bank.

Whatever the story is - we as a team came away with a great deal of disappointment. We knew the real stakeholders, those who would inevitably lose out, were the girls and boys at primary level who would miss the possibility of ever having an education and who would as a result likely face a future “as hewers of wood and drawers of water”. We recognised too that perhaps the Ministry could have been more au fait with dealing with these major international donors and to have moved things onwards from time to time. At the same time this was a first experience for a Ministry of Education emerging from a post-conflict situation with all the baggage that entails and it was apparent that they did try to cope as best they could.

As we prepared our report and we reflected on all of these issues we were reminded of that old African saying that “when the elephants fight only the grass gets trampled”.