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A Prize Undeserved!

The [Norwegian Nobel Committee](#) has decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2019 to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali of Ethiopia for his efforts to achieve peace and international cooperation and, in particular, for his decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea. Ethiopia's prime minister becomes the one-hundredth (100th) Nobel Peace Laureate. The prevailing situation on the ground, however, renders the award quite premature and totally undeserved. There prevails viable peace neither between Eritrea and Ethiopia nor within Eritrea or Ethiopia. Nor is there any improved international cooperation in the highly strategic but extremely volatile and conflict riven region of the Horn of Africa. The gratuitous award thus makes a mockery of the noble idea of the Nobel Peace Prize itself.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's pronouncement of readiness to unconditionally accept and implement the delimitation and demarcation decisions of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) had given rise to high hopes and great expectations in Eritrea, Ethiopia, the region, and the world at large that the era of bitter hostility and frozen conflict ([link](#)) between Eritrea and Ethiopia would come to an end. The hopes and expectations have yet to materialise. The Prime Minister has yet to *walk the talk* and follow his declarations with concrete action. There is an earnest need to address the root cause (wilful violation of the historical colonial treaty border) and begin the process of healing the gaping wounds of a bloody and destructive war, including the mass evictions, expropriations and deportations, which constitute crimes against humanity under customary international law.

Over a year after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's declaration, the boundary between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains undemarcated. Ethiopian troops continue in occupation of sovereign Eritrean territories. The Ethiopian and Eritrean armies remain entrenched in their respective fortifications along the common border. Eritreans evicted, displaced or deported from the still occupied territories remain unable to return to their home villages. The four border crossings reopened with a lot of fanfare have been unceremoniously closed. The *Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship* between Eritrea and Ethiopia has changed nothing on the ground. The reality in the borderlands evokes a state of *no war, no peace*.

Ethiopia has yet to dismantle its settlements established on occupied Eritrean territory after the [EEBC's delimitation decision of 13 April 2002](#), in defiance of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission's order ([Order of the Commission made pursuant to Article 20 and Article 27\(1\) of the Commission's Rules of Procedure](#)) and UN Security Council resolution ([UNSC Resolution 1430 \(2002\)](#)) to remove these illegal settlements. "*Ethiopia, in failing to remove from Eritrean territory persons of Ethiopian origin who have moved into that territory subsequent to the date of the Delimitation Decision, has not complied with its obligations*" ([EEBC: Determinations, 7 November 2002](#)). Ethiopia must comply with its treaty obligations so Eritreans evicted, displaced or deported from the still occupied Eritrean territories can return to their home villages and resume normal life.

In Eritrea, a brutal regime has brought about economic ruin, political paralysis and societal disintegration, turning the country into an earthly inferno. In Ethiopia, the hopes that the rapid reform measures initially undertaken to transform the *ancien regime* would lead to an inclusive and stable system of democratic governance seem to be fading away. Ethiopia today is facing the pains and pangs of an uncertain transition. Conflict prevails within and between regional states, fanning inter-ethnic strife and largescale internal displacement. Structural instability looms large, with no clear strategy or national consensus on the way forward.

Beyond Eritrea and Ethiopia, the standoff between Eritrea and Djibouti remains unresolved. Somalia has yet to exercise central authority over its entire national territory. Civil war and internecine killings have badly scarred South Sudan. There is hope that the new government of Sudan brought up by the heroic popular resistance movement would overcome the daunting challenges facing its efforts to build an accountable and responsive democratic governance.

A year on, it seems that we are still on square one. No concrete steps have been taken to address the underlying sources of the conflict, resolve the issue of the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia or normalise life for the Eritrean populations in the borderlands. The prevailing situation demonstrates the precarious nature of the peace and overall relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as the unabated volatility of the region.

The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia has proved no more than the cosying of personal relations between the president of Eritrea and the prime minister of Ethiopia while the hopes for peace and reforms in Eritrea have turned into a mirage. There is no betterment in the human condition. The Ethio-Eritrean *Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship* and the Tripartite Agreement between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia remain mere ink on paper.

It is against the backdrop of these domestic and regional realities that we must take stock of the evolution of the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as the events on the ground in Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa over the past year and assess the eligibility of the prime minister for the award of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. The absence of concrete delivery on peace and cooperation, whether due to inability or reluctance, makes the award based on mere pronouncements and unfulfilled promises unjustifiable.

Durable peace demands that Ethiopia and Eritrea normalise and institutionalise their interstate relations. Once transparent state to state relations are set, all outstanding issues between the two countries can be resolved peacefully through bilateral consultation, negotiation, mediation, arbitration or adjudication. First and foremost, the boundary issue. In the context of cordial relations, it is possible to envisage a feasible solution. Given the sanctity of colonial borders in Africa, the restitution of the historical colonial treaty border, facilitated by the UN Cadastral Office and informed by consultations with panels of elders in the borderland populations, would avail a durable solution. As a source of livelihood and identity, land in Eritrea is ancestral. It belongs to the village, irrespective of whether it is privately or communally owned, and each village knows the limits of its land.

It is increasingly clear that authoritarian rule in Eritrea, sustained by brutal repression and wretched human condition, is untenable, instability in Ethiopia is dire and peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia is precarious. Durable peace and viable cooperation require a transformed Eritrea and a stabilised Ethiopia, with both states committed to democratic governance and inclusive development. Notwithstanding the rush in awarding the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, it is possible to envision the evolution of a new relationship built on common strategic interests and shared values of a future of peace, progress and prosperity for Eritrea, Ethiopia and the region at large.

Given real political will, the path to durable peace and viable regional cooperation is simple and straightforward. Full acceptance and unconditional implementation should mean immediate withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from sovereign Eritrean territory as per the EEBC's virtual demarcation, the dismantling of Ethiopian settlements established on sovereign Eritrean territory since July 2002 and enabling the return of the evicted, displaced or deported Eritreans to their home villages. This would pave the way for bilateral dialogue to resolve all outstanding issues contributing to and arising from the boundary conflict and restore viable peace and normal relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia.