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THE SUPERPOWERS AND ETHIOPIA: ADDRESSING THE REAL ISSUES?

For some time now, the two superpowers have been trying to work together to bring to an end the destructive wars in Ethiopia and especially the conflict in Eritrea. The latest signal of concern came during the Bush-Gorbachev summit in early June. While proposing the idea of transporting US food on Soviet aircraft in order to "demonstrate a joint commitment to responding to this tragic problem" the two leaders expressed support for a UN sponsored peace conference.

This commitment to peace in a region of endless wars, commendable as it certainly is, will not by itself mean an end to the ordeals of our peoples.

Although in the context of the Cold war and in quest of support and alliances all the local contending forces have at one time or another blamed "American imperialist intrigues" or "Soviet expansionist designs" for the plight of the region, it should by now be clear that superpower involvement in the Horn has rarely been a decisive factor in the initiation and/or the pursuit of the crippling wars.

Other "local" conflicts like the one which opposed Sandinistas to Contras in Nicaragua developed along clear-cut ideological and political lines and contradictory geostrategic interests of the Superpowers. As "Hot spots" of the Cold war its settlement came partly as a consequence of east-west detente and a condition of its consolidation. The pattern of alignment of forces and alliances in the Horn in general and in Ethiopia in particular have always transcended ideology and superpower geostrategic interests with local contending forces trying to make the best use of east/west rivalries in order to advance their own objectives.

That superpower disengagement or even cooperation in the Horn could not automatically switch off the conflicts and lead to substantial reduction of tension is also a result of the complex regional implications of the problem and the alignment of forces that they entail. Neighbouring and wider conflicts such as the Israel-arab war and rivalries between "radical" and "moderate" arab states have their own and independent bearings on the situation in Ethiopia.

Attitudes range from that of Israel which considers the former empire of the Negus as the "only strategic ally in the region" to that of some Arab governments who have never been far from considering Ethiopia as "a country too much" in the region. This clearly means that irrespective of superpower attitudes, the contending local forces will always be able to count on increased involvement of and support from middle eastern actors unless they decide to move from confrontation to dialogue.

This however does not suggest that the two superpowers do not have any meaningful role to play in bringing peace to Ethiopia. They can, but only if they overcome their apparent failure to address one basic issue at the heart of our country's problems: that of the instauration of a democratic regime in Addis Abeba and the respect of the fundamental human rights of our people.

The long standing and official position of the superpowers concerning peace in Ethiopia in general and the Eritrean question in particular has been a call for negotiations to arrive at a "just solution within the Ethiopian framework".

If this "framework" means - as it certainly should - a democratic Ethiopia then it should be clear that by calling for negotiations and a settlement on the basis of the country's territorial integrity without at the same time clearly including the question of democracy in their proposals the two superpowers are taking for granted something which in fact is a contradiction in terms: Mengistu's regime and democracy.

The unconvincing and quickly forgotten promises of democratic reforms, the recent execution of 12 generals, the arrests and persecution of students that followed should come as a reminder to the fundamentally dictatorial nature of Mengistu's regime. In the face of this, vague pronouncements and repeated calls for negotiations are far from enough. There should also be a "joint commitment" to democracy and human rights, if the superpowers are to play any constructive role in the peace process in Ethiopia and the Horn.

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