

Ethiopia and Eritrea

On 7 December 2005, Eritrea ordered the expulsion of Canadian, European, and US personnel from the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea, capping a period of sharply escalating tension in the region. Eritrea's earlier flight ban on UN helicopters remained in place, as did its restrictions on the movement of UNMEE staff and vehicles in the temporary security zone (TSZ). In late November, Ethiopia and Eritrea's deployment of troops to the border region prompted the Security Council to adopt Resolution 1640 demanding that Ethiopia accept the boundary commission's 2002 decision that awarded a disputed town to Eritrea, that Eritrea reverse its ban on UN helicopter flights and other restrictions on UNMEE, and that both parties return to their December 2004 levels of troop deployment within thirty days. Thus, the last months of 2005 saw continued stalemate over the boundary demarcation, threats to the security

of UNMEE staff, and severe curtailments on the operational capacity of the mission.

UNMEE was established in July 2000 to monitor a cessation of hostilities agreement (the Algiers Agreement) between Ethiopia and Eritrea signed the month before. That agreement was followed in December 2000 by a comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) between the two countries, the core feature of which was the establishment of an agreed process leading to demarcation of the boundary. While both agreements were negotiated under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the UN was called on to assist in their implementation. The mission is headed by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), Legwaila Joseph Legwaila, who maintains close contact with the political and military leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as with the OAU. Although initially limited to 100 military observers and civilian support staff, UNMEE has grown to a mission of over 3,000 personnel.

UNMEE's principal tasks are to monitor the cessation of hostilities, the redeployment of Ethiopian forces, and the position of Eritrean troops, who are to remain twenty-five kilometers from their Ethiopian counterparts, creating the TSZ. The mission also coordinates human rights, mine action, and other humanitarian activities in and around the TSZ. It chairs the Military Coordination Commission (MCC), which is composed of representatives of the parties, and is tasked with resolving issues related to the implementation of UNMEE's mandate.

UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE)

• Resolution passage and start date	31 July 2000 (UNSC Res. 1312)
• SRSG	Legwaila Joseph Legwaila (Botswana)
• Force commander	Major-General Rajender Singh (India)
• Budget	\$176.64 million (1 July 2005–30 June 2006)
• Strength as of 31 October 2005	Troops: 3,080 Military observers: 205 International civilian staff: 191 Local civilian staff: 244 UN volunteers: 74

An independent boundary commission set up pursuant to the CPA rendered its ruling on the demarcation in April 2002. Although decisions of the commission were meant to be “final and binding,” Ethiopia rejected the ruling on the grounds that it was “not in the interest of peace” between the two countries or in the subregion, and called for direct talks between the two neighbors. Eritrea, for its part, insisted that the commission’s decision was binding and that any further dialogue with Ethiopia was contingent upon its full implementation.

In November 2004, the Ethiopian government announced a five-point proposal that accepted the boundary commission’s decision in principle. Eritrea dismissed the proposal, claiming that it failed to signal Ethiopia’s unconditional respect for the work of the commission. Meanwhile, Eritrea has been unwilling to engage with the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Ethiopia and Eritrea, Lloyd Axworthy, fearing that doing so would open the door to renegotiating the commission’s decision. The boundary commission itself has been frustrated by Ethiopia’s repeated obstruction of efforts to implement the decision, despite the government’s professed acceptance of it.

Although neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea have called for renewed conflict, increasing incidents of violence in the border region and troop incursions into the neutral zone occurred over the course of the past year and became more frequent in November. In December 2004, Ethiopia redeployed troops south of the TSZ, in what Eritrea viewed as a provocation. Restrictions were placed on UNMEE’s military police in Asmara, direct flights between Addis Ababa and Asmara were suspended, and Eritrea closed the mission’s main supply route to its contingent in Sector West, citing unexplained “illegal” activities by UN personnel.

In early October 2005, Eritrea banned UN helicopter flights in its airspace forcing peacekeepers to abandon eighteen out of a total of forty small posts along the border and to end

demining activities. The helicopter restrictions curtailed UNMEE’s operational efficiency and reconnaissance along the border region by more than half. In November, Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi confirmed that he had moved thousands of troops to the north of the country, stating that the move intended to prevent an invasion by Eritrea. However, in response to the Security Council’s demand, Ethiopia redeployed its forces away from the border to pre-December 2004 levels by December 2005.

At the end of October 2005, Eritrea imposed further restrictions on UNMEE’s operational capabilities by limiting night ground operations and restricting land patrols to main roads. Applying to the central and western sector of the buffer zone in Eritrean territory, these restrictions prevented UNMEE from operating in nearly 60 percent of the area, and from reporting with certainty on military activities on the Eritrean side of the border. In November, the security zone along the border was declared off-limits to all UN staff except peacekeeping troops. Eritrea repeatedly denied requests to either explain or withdraw its ban on helicopter flights and restrictions on ground patrols. It also repeatedly warned of looming conflict due to Ethiopia’s refusal to accept the 2002 border demarcation decision.

In his capacity as chair of the Working Group on Peacekeeping Operations, Ambassador Kenzo Oshima (Japan) visited the region to meet with local officials and UNMEE troops to convey the Security Council’s continued support for their presence on the ground. The Council condemned the expulsion of UNMEE personnel in early December, but agreed to relocate them temporarily to Ethiopia. The year ended with serious concerns about the possible outbreak of war, and options being weighed for the future of the mission, ranging from the status quo, to complete withdrawal, to converting UNMEE into a preventative force.