

“How double-dealing built a pariah state”

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International crises never flare up at random. However “unexpected” a development seems, closer examination reveals it to have been as clearly-signalled as the ticking black bomb in a Tom and Jerry cartoon. The UN Monitoring Group’s recent explosive report on Somalia and Eritrea is just such an event. Its fuse has been fizzing merrily for nine long years.

The UN report, published as a new famine in southern Somalia reminds us of the region’s fragility, makes for a devastating read. The Red Sea state of Eritrea, whose principled rebel movement won the admiration of Western left-wingers in the 1970s and 80s, is shown in 417 carefully-documented pages to have matured into the most cynical of rogue players.

The individual examples are bad enough. Confirmation that Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki’s regime last January dispatched a commando unit with orders to explode bombs in Addis Ababa’s bustling Merkato district and other prime sites, to coincide with an African Union summit, is particularly shocking. The death toll would have been horrendous.

But the bigger picture painted by the report, which comes a few months after Eritrea marked 20 years of independence, is equally dismaying. The men and women who ran off to join the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front in its mountain trenches believed they were fighting for a better society. What they got instead was a militarised regime which funds and trains insurgent groups from Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sudan and Somalia, including Al-Shabaab, the Islamist group behind last year’s World Cup bombings in Uganda. The Eritrean army enthusiastically trafficks both weapons and its own society’s fleeing youngsters, whose parents must then pay ransom.

The report will trigger anguished debate in Eritrea’s diaspora, whose tax contributions keep the regime afloat. At the UN, there will be calls to toughen sanctions slapped on Eritrea in 2009. In the US, Italy and Switzerland, there are likely to be police investigations into Eritrean embassies’ shadowy financial dealings.

But as Security Council members weigh their response, they should bear one thing in mind. The West played its part in creating the current crisis with a foreign policy so one-sided it smacked of the Cold War era. If it wants to lance the boil, it will have to show it grasps the concept of even-handedness. That means demonstrating some degree of backbone in future dealings with Ethiopia’s Meles Zenawi, Isaias’ hegemonic rival.

Isaias’ regional meddling is premised on a genuine sense of outrage at a single act of international hypocrisy. In 1998, a clash near the frontier village of Badme escalated into a new war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, its former colonial master. Both sides went to arbitration, agreeing that the decision by an international boundary commission would be “final and binding”. But when the commission ruled in 2002 that Badme belonged to tiny Eritrea, rather than its giant neighbour, Addis Ababa jibbed. Western powers, generous contributors to the Ethiopian budget, were hardly short of levers to pull to encourage Meles to keep his word. But real politik, worries about Islamic extremism in Somalia, and – not least – the humanitarian imperative that was the legacy of Live Aid all persuaded the West to quietly ignore Ethiopia’s violation of international law.

It’s hard to convey, to those who have never visited Eritrea, quite how deep resentment at that injustice goes, how poisonous its impact has been. For Eritreans, who have never forgotten how the UN turned a blind eye to Emperor Haile Selassie’s illegal annexation of their nation, it fits all too neatly into a historic pattern of Western double-dealing and disrespect. Like most states that declare they don’t give a fig for world opinion, Eritrea craves external validation.

The continuing presence of Ethiopian troops on Eritrean soil gives Isaias an excuse to keep his country on a permanent war footing, justifying his failure to enact a multiparty constitution, the arrest of opponents, the requirement for Eritreans to do open-ended military service. “We have no choice, we could be invaded at any moment,” even youngsters who loathe the regime will tell you.

Similarly, once international law is exposed as a fraud, all methods – however dirty - can be presented as morally equivalent. So Eritrea hosts rebel movements dedicated to overthrowing neighbouring governments? Ethiopia does the same with opposition groups campaigning for Isaias’ overthrow. So Isaias is in cahoots with Al-Shabaab? Ethiopia – as the UN report makes clear – sends its own soldiers into Somali territory to fight on the side of a discredited transitional government.

This shabby proxy war demeans both Asmara and Addis, but Isaias’ error was to fail to recognise that in a post 9/11 world, supporting an Islamist movement with a jihadist agenda would seem qualitatively distinct, in Western eyes, from the “my enemy’s enemy is my friend’ games played in the past by African leaders.

He will now learn the price for that mistake. But any international response that fails to address Eritrea’s legitimate grievance over its undemarcated border with Ethiopia will be so much wasted energy. As the Somali families streaming into camps in northern Kenya attest, pandering to Meles Zenawi on this issue has come at a massive price. However bizarre it may sound, the route to a peaceful Somalia runs through the dusty village of Badme.

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