

Eritrea Emerges as America's Newest Ally

Tiny Nation Seen as Bulwark Against Sudanese-Backed Terror

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ASMARA, Eritrea — This tiny North African country is becoming a hot spot in the new cold war.

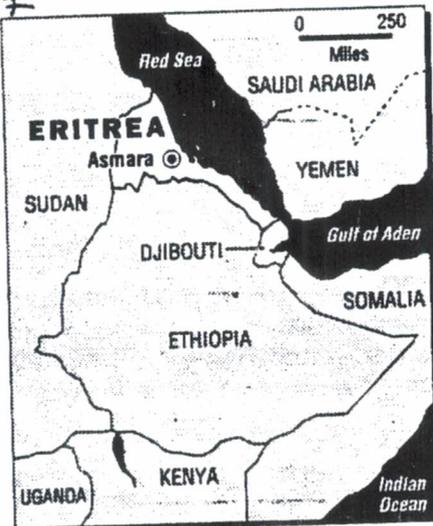
The capital, Asmara, an easygoing mountaintop city lined with palm trees and Italian colonial buildings, is the headquarters for groups who in January launched a bid to overthrow the Islamic fundamentalist government of neighboring Sudan. At a base near the border, Eritrean soldiers, who fought a 30-year guerilla war for independence from Ethiopia, help toughen up Sudanese-opposition recruits in a six-month training course.

The stakes in the battle for Sudan are higher than ever. While it is a poor country, a Canadian-Chinese-Malaysian consortium is preparing to tap its central oil fields. The U.S. makes little secret that it would like a new Sudanese government, accusing the current one of harboring and inciting terrorists.

Meanwhile, Eritrea alleges a Sudanese role in a roadside slaying of five foreign tourists in Eritrea two months ago. With tensions rising, some diplomats fear open hostilities between Eritrea and Sudan could trigger a refugee crisis or even a wider war.

The U.S. says it has no defense commitments to Eritrea, and denies Sudanese claims that it is backing the Eritrean-based rebels. But the U.S. does have a budding military interest in Eritrea, which was established as a republic four years ago after it gained its independence from Ethiopia.

Citing threats from Sudan, the U.S. is delivering as much as \$20 million of military tents, trucks, radios and the like to Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda, and now calls them "front-line states." A four-star U.S. general dropped by recently to consult with top Eritrean officials. Air Force planes have flown into Asmara's airport for maintenance, a Navy ship is docked at the Eritrean port of Masawa and an American company is seeking permission for a ship-refueling facility nearby that foreign



navies could use.

"This has nothing to do with a defense relationship," maintains Yemane Ghebrea, a top Eritrean party official. The nation of about 3.5 million people has a fierce independent streak from its long, lonely war with Ethiopia; despite its poverty, for instance, it has put so many restrictions on foreign charities that some have pulled out. The war also gave Eritreans a reputation for being jumpy. As one proverb in Tigrinya, the native tongue, puts it, "A person threatened by a snake can be afraid of a stick."

Sudan was one of the few friends of Eritrea during its independence struggle. Eritrean fighters used Sudan as a base, and even helped Sudan beat back the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which was battling the government from Sudan's fertile but underdeveloped south. Plans for joint economic projects were hatched.

The friendship soured in 1994, when Eritrea accused Sudan of trying to export Islamic extremism. Eritrea is roughly half-Christian and half-Muslim, with Muslims dominating the rural western lowlands. Some 120,000 Eritrean Muslims still live in refugee camps run by Sudan west of

the border. Although there has been little religious tension, Eritrea's proposed first constitution would ban religious parties.

Eritrea broke diplomatic relations with Sudan. The SPLA and rival Sudanese rebel groups were welcomed in Asmara, where they united as the National Democratic Alliance and moved into the former Sudanese embassy. Tensions between Eritrea and Sudan rose in October, when Sadiq el-Mahdi, Sudan's former prime minister, escaped house arrest in Khartoum and got an enthusiastic welcome in Asmara.

In December, diplomats here say, British tourists traveling a dirt road near Asmara found the bodies of five Belgian tourists and their Eritrean driver, all shot in the head. Eritrea's government-controlled radio mentioned the massacre only briefly as a robbery gone awry.

But in an interview, Tewolde Woldemichael, an Eritrean foreign-affairs official, says Eritrean troops tracked the culprits and killed one in a shootout. Evidence, he adds, linked the slain suspect to "extremist elements from across the border," a small Sudan-backed group called Islamic Jihad Eritrea. A Sudanese official in London calls the charge "ridiculous," contending that "armed gangsters have long operated in rural areas of Eritrea."

Eritrea's hard line carries risks. Sudan's government has held tough despite recent military gains by the rebels. Eritrean officials have asked rebels why it's taking so long for a popular revolt in Sudan to materialize. Because many opposition leaders in Khartoum were arrested in January, the rebel alliance says it has to develop a second tier to lead a revolt.

Even if it ousts the Sudanese government, there are doubts the alliance will hold. The SPLA, led by the charismatic Christian Col. John Garang, has a rocky history with Mr. el-Mahdi, whose Umma Party has only a token military force but provides legitimacy among moderate Muslims. In 1985, shortly after the two leaders helped restore democracy to Sudan, Col. Garang was at war with Mr. el-Mahdi's government, calling its leaders "war-mongering sectarian bigots." The National Islamic Front overthrew Mr. el-Mahdi in 1989 and has ruled Sudan ever since.

For now, it's uncertain when the two Sudanese opposition leaders will bury the hatchet. Mr. el-Mahdi and Mr. Garang have met for only two hours since Mr. el-Mahdi's arrival in Asmara. Aides to the two insist that they have solved their differences, by agreeing that parts of Sudan should be able to vote on their own destiny.

