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Postwar Promise

Africa's Newest Nation, Little Eritrea Emerges As an Oasis of Civility

Independent at Last, It Shows A Seriousness of Purpose Forged in a 30-Year War

Free Market, With a Twist

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ASMARA, Eritrea – The president of this African country wears plastic sandals to official functions, draws no salary and prefers dusty Jeeps to limousines.

The tree-lined streets of the capital are spotless and safe to walk until the wee hours. There isn't a gun to be seen, even at the airport or at government offices.

Eritrea is Africa's newest nation: a Mississippi-sized slice of rugged Red Sea coast that has become an unlikely oasis of peace and civility wedged between the clan-fighting of Somalia and religious war in Sudan. Secretary of State Warren Christopher calls Eritrea, independent since May 1993, "a beacon of hope astride the Horn of Africa."

The U.S., however, long opposed the Eritreans' struggle for independence from Ethiopia. Since the 1960s, successive U.S. administrations had characterized the rebels as leftists and claimed that their secessionist campaign, if supported, would start a chain reaction that could put all of Africa's fragile borders at risk.

African Model

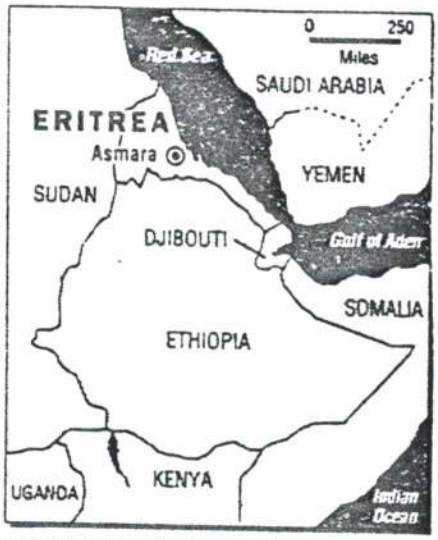
Instead, the country is emerging as an African model, despite a history of misfortune on an almost biblical scale. Eritrea's scorched air swirls with the fine dust of drought-stripped topsoil, and the dry rattle of locust plagues provides a depressingly familiar background tattoo. Too few doctors treat too many famine-ravaged tuberculosis victims, while in the towns, the wheelchair-bound casualties of a 30-year war roll uncertainly down bomb-damaged streets.

A half-Christian, half-Muslim population of 3.5 million is further riven by nine separate ethnic groups and as many languages. With a per-capita income among the lowest in the world, the tiny country seems a prime candidate for the kind of tribal and religious strife tearing at so many other nations, such as Rwanda.

Yet at a political congress in February, the country's mufti, or supreme Muslim leader, sat companionably alongside his Christian Orthodox counterpart. Rural women wearing traditional veils joked with bareheaded city women in shorts. And by the time the conference ended, everybody had agreed to work toward multiparty elections for a democratic, secular government.

Perhaps even more astonishing, Eritrea is beginning to develop without the corruption so common elsewhere on the continent.

"You can't find anyone to bribe here," says a bemused American developer, Joseph Torrito, who is negotiating to build a hotel on the Red Sea and apartment blocks in Asmara. Initially, Mr. Torrito had his eye on a site in Asmara's bougainvillea-splashed colonial center. "In West Africa, I'd have got it with $180,000 slipped to the city planner," he says. "Here, the guy just said, 'Over my dead body you'll build there.' " Citing the Eritreans' intentions to preserve the city's picturesque turn-of-the-century heart, the planner steered Mr. Torrito to less-sensitive sites.



Part of the reason for Eritrea's promise lies in its long and solitary struggle for independence. Colonized late, by Italy at the turn of the century, Eritreans emerged from World War II expecting nationhood; instead, they were swallowed by neighboring Ethiopia in 1962.

For the next three decades, an ill-equipped band of Eritrean rebels resisted the takeover, fighting Africa's longest war. From mountain redoubts where schools, factories and surgical wards were gouged into hillsides tc protect from aerial bombardment, the guerrillas slowly wrestled victory from black Africa's biggest army.

Bargain-Basement War

Ethiopia got millions in military aid from the U.S. during the reign of Haile Selassie and more from the Soviets during the Marxist dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The Eritreans had no significant backers and fought a bargain-basement war, largely with captured weapons. Forced to sink their differences in the face of a common enemy, they gradually developed an egalitarian society in the wartime trenches, blind to gender, class and religion.

"We thought they were just a bunch of Arab-backed terrorists," says an Israeli foreign-ministry official. "Was that ever a mistake." Having supplied military assistance to Ethiopia during the war, Israel now is scrambling to offer aid, providing training in agriculture and hydrology, books for the libraries and even small amounts of military assistance for the new state, whose coastline commands a strategic stretch of the Red Sea.

The U.S., too, is struggling to undo years of enmity. President Clinton has turned to the Eritrean president, Isaias Afwerki, to help mediate the bloody clan-war in neighboring Somalia. U.S. Navy ships are making port visits, and major oil companies are negotiating exploration deals. The U.S. military is in advanced talks on installing powerful over-the-horizon radar in Eritrea that would allow monitoring of the region as far as Iran.

Mr. Torrito, who once owned a gold mine in Sierra Leone, was among the first Americans scouting prospects. A retired U.S. Army colonel, he isn't put off by spartan conditions. His most recent hotel room was "what you might call air-conditioned – by a shell-hole in the wall where a small mortar had ripped through." He says it is Arab businessmen, familiar with the hard-working habits of Eritrean refugees in nearby Persian Gulf countries, who are flocking to explore business opportunities. "It's the smell of money," Mr. Torrito explains. "It's like Faberge."

Inexpensive Lenses

Among projects already under way is a sophisticated laboratory making lenses that can be surgically implanted to cure cataract blindnes An Australian eye surgeon, impressed by a pharmaceutical plant built by the Eritreans during the war, raised donations to equip the factory. With its skilled but extremely cheap labor, Eritrea can make a lens for $10 that Western producers usually sell for $120.

Despite its roots as a leftist guerrilla movement in the 1960s, Eritrea's provisional government now is unabashedly free-market. "I'm glad in a way that the Soviets intervened against us" during the war with Ethiopia, says a foreign-ministry official. "If they hadn't backed Mengistu, we might have kept believing in [the Soviets] and ended up like Angola or Kampuchea."

But while the new investment code is liberal, government policies are shaped by a social agenda. To avoid Africa's typical slum-producing rural migration to the capital, the government has turned away investors who want to finance projects only in Asmara.

"One of the benefits of starting late is that you can learn from others' mistakes," says Saleh Meki, the minister for marine resources, who is moving his own department to the bombed-out rubble of Massawa, the port city that saw the war's worst fighting.

Free Labor

For now, many of his staff are still "fighters" – the term used for members of the 95,000-strong guerrilla force that

waged the war. The government has asked them to donate their labor to the country's reconstruction. They receive only a tiny allowance plus food and barracks-style accommodations.

At first, some objected to the proposal that they work free for two more years, saying they had neglected their families long enough while they were at war. "If I'm a fighter struggling to liberate my land, who cares if my father is starving in Asmara?" says Mr. Meki. "But it's another thing saying I can't help him because I have to build a railway to Massawa."

In protest, many of the former combatants took to the streets. The president, Mr. Afwerki, who led the fighters during the war, waded in among the demonstrators, trying to reason with them. Without firing a shot or throwing a punch, the two sides reached a compromise. The government promised that if the fighters worked for nothing a while longer, the government would cut back on opening embassies and delay development projects in order to find money to pay wages.

Isaias Afwerki

The fighters' sense of duty astonishes outsiders. "Office hours here officially start at 7," says Sei Etoh, a U.N. development expert working in Massawa, "but the fighters always show up early and stay late." Eritreans say it is possible to tell who is a fighter simply by the way a man or woman speaks. "They use less 'I' and 'my,' " explains an Eritrean who recently returned from the U.S. "The way they've lived has made them tend to talk in terms of the group rather than the individual."

But civilian life is putting unexpected strains on that idealism. At a bar in Massawa, a group of young fighters nurse glasses of tea and discuss their predicament. For some, peace has brought bittersweet changes. Fatieha, a slightly built 20-year-old, is glad she won't have to witness any more of the woundings and killings that were a constant during five years in the trenches. She has gladly shed her khaki shorts for a silky dress. She has styled her hair and frosted newly grown fingernails. Still, she misses the sexual equality of the front.

"Some of the civilians don't understand that a woman must be free to go out, to work, to sit in a bar like a man," she says. While the society sees her as a heroine, she worries that it doesn't necessarily see her as an eligible bride. Some fighters who married at the front have been divorced by husbands under family pressure to take submissive civilian wives.

Meanwhile, Fatieha's friend Saleh misses a different kind of equality. At the front, he says, university graduates shared the same status as fighters who had never had a chance to go to school. Now, he works at an unpaid job alongside nonfighters earning fat salaries from the U.N. "It's hard, when you've been at war and they've had the chance to get an education," he says. "When we were at the front, we didn't need money, but in town, you need clothes, you need cash to have a beer."

The rebels' success in war also has raised high peacetime expectations that aren't easily met with a shattered infrastructure and an empty treasury. So committed to education that they carried blackboards into the trenches for literacy classes during breaks in fighting, the Eritreans now have too few teachers to serve the civilian population. In some areas, children draw lots to see who will go to school.

Health care, too, is a problem. "Their health-care system in the war was excellent, but it was an emergency system," says Cesare Manetti, an Eritrean-born pathologist from Rockford, Ill. "When it had to meet the needs of a civilian population, it faltered. People in the cities felt, 'Now our brothers are here – they'll help us.' " Faced by the pent-up demand created by neglect during Ethiopian rule, barefoot doctors from the front lines couldn't cope. For at least a year, the health minister, a surgeon, had to divide his day between the operating theater and his government office because demand for his surgical skills was so high.

Dr. Manetti is trying to set up a volunteer program to have U.S. experts help the Eritreans with training. But the government, faced with an acute housing shortage, hasn't yet been able to figure out where to put the volunteers when they arrive.

The short-term answer is an infusion of foreign aid, but with the demands from Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia, Eritrea hasn't enjoyed the attention from donors that it might have merited a few years ago.

That makes one U.S. aid official wistful. Of more than 20 countries he has worked in, he says, Eritrea "is the one where you feel comfortable that every nickel you put into the place is going to be used properly." He hopes the U.S. will open its purse a bit wider. "They're on a takeoff here," he says. "All they need is a little wind."