

Ethiopia, Eritrea trade charges in UN assembly

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The long peace-process impasse has left Security Council members with a tough juggling act when the mandate of the U.N. mission policing the border between the two Horn of Africa neighbors expires on Friday.

Ethiopia and Eritrea used a U.N. General Assembly debate this week to accuse each other of using illegal tactics to block the stalemated peace process launched in 2000 to end their two-year border war.

Ethiopian diplomat Negash Kebret Batora accused Eritrea on Wednesday of seeking to perpetuate "an interminable boundary problem with Ethiopia" while Eritrean Health Minister Dr. Saleh Meki, speaking two days earlier, faulted Ethiopia for defying international law for years with help from the United States.

The long peace-process impasse has left Security Council members with a tough juggling act when the mandate of the U.N. mission policing the border between the two Horn of Africa neighbors expires on Friday, council diplomats said.

They said the 15-nation council must decide by Friday how to balance the two nations' intransigence against fears that cutting back on the mission out of frustration could lead to a fresh outbreak of fighting in the highly unstable region.

The council previously voted in May to trim the peacekeeping force to 2,300 troops from 3,300. Council members said they would likely adopt a resolution on Friday extending the mission for a few more months but warning of further cutbacks if the impasse continued.

U.N. troops were sent to Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000 to enforce a cease-fire agreement ending the border conflict that killed more than 70,000 people. As part of the agreement, both countries pledged to accept a new border marked out by an international commission.

Eritrea sees U.S. "scheme"

But Ethiopia rejected the border and insisted on further talks, prompting Eritrea to restrict peacekeepers' movements, including a ban on helicopter flights over its territory. The October 2005 restrictions, which remain in place, stoked tensions on both sides of the border by limiting peacekeepers' ability to monitor troop movements.

They also irritated the governments that contributed troops to the mission, because they limited the ability to carry out medical evacuations and keep the soldiers' bases supplied. Eritrea further aggravated the international community by arresting civilian U.N. employees and holding some of them for weeks without charges and cut off from U.N. officials.

The United States earlier this year launched a diplomatic initiative to complete the task of marking out the new border. But border commission meetings scheduled for June and August were canceled after Eritrea refused to attend. Washington also proposed an outside facilitator to work with the parties to break the impasse. But Eritrea's Meki described that idea to the General Assembly as a "scheme" to help Ethiopia violate the peace agreement.

U.S. Ambassador John Bolton rejected accusations that Washington had taken sides. "The failure to make progress on the boundary delineation is obviously still a problem and a reflection that the peacekeeping mission itself is not accomplishing its objective," Bolton told reporters on Tuesday. "But we're not trying to tilt it one way or another. We want the parties to carry through on the agreement that they made and have not been living up to."

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