



SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT UPDATE REPORT



23 June 2008 No. 7

Djibouti-Eritrea

Expected Council Action

The Council will hold an open debate tomorrow, 24 June, on the recent border fighting between Djibouti and Eritrea. The meeting will be convened at the request of Djibouti under the general agenda item "Peace and Security in Africa." It is intended to provide an opportunity for the parties to present views. But it is unclear whether Eritrea will address the Council. No formal outcome is expected at this stage.

Key Facts

Recent fighting along the Djibouti-Eritrea border has attracted strong international concern as the situation continued to deteriorate. Djibouti authorities complained today of new Eritrean border incursions and further occupation of Djibouti territory.

On 5 May, Djibouti sent a letter to the Council expressing concern about a build-up of Eritrean troops along the common border. Recalling previous tensions in 1996 over border issues, the letter contained a timeline of the build-up starting in February up until April, when Djibouti President Ismael Omar Guelleh advised of Eritrean occupation of the Ras-Doumeira border area. Diplomatic negotiations failed to yield results, the letter asserts. (In 1996, the strategic area of Ras-Doumeira was also a focus of border tensions.)

The letter was preceded by regional initiatives. On 2 May, the AU Peace and Security Council adopted a statement urging both countries to show restraint and resolve any disputes through dialogue, and noting that the AU Commission had formally written to the parties to receive their views on the issue. On 4 May, the Arab League's Peace and Security Council reaffirmed the need for respect for the unity and territorial integrity of states, calling for the peaceful settlement of the problem, and soliciting a mission of the League's Secretary-General to assess the situation and coordinate an "Arab-African" response to the crisis. It seems that this diplomacy defused tensions for some time.

On 10 June, fighting between Djibouti and Eritrean troops erupted. The US issued a statement on 12 June condemning Eritrea's "military aggression," calling on both sides to cease hostilities and on Eritrea to accept third-party mediation. Eritrea rejected the US statement.

On 12 June, the Council issued a statement expressing strong concern about the 10 June incidents and condemning "Eritrea's military action against Djibouti." The statement also called upon the parties to commit to a ceasefire and urged both parties, "in particular Eritrea," to show maximum restraint, withdraw to the status quo ante and engage in diplomatic efforts consistent with international law. It encouraged the Secretary-General to use his good offices in coordination with regional efforts.

On the same day, the Arab League reportedly called for Eritrean withdrawal, urging that country to respect the common border and calling for efforts to settle the issue. Eritrea called the statement "biased" and "unbalanced," saying that it "does not reflect the realities and facts on the ground."

On 14 June, the East African regional bloc Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) also expressed serious concern over Eritrea's "military attack". (IGAD includes Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. Eritrea suspended its membership in 2007 over the planned deployment of IGAD troops in Somalia. Sudan and Kenya have been tasked with convincing Eritrea to resume membership.)

On 16 June, France sent three ships to Djibouti (reportedly to assist with medical care, logistics and intelligence). France maintains a military base in Djibouti, under a defence pact. The US also maintains a base in Djibouti.

Regional good offices are continuing. The prospects are unclear. In a conversation with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki reportedly declined political reconciliation, saying it had no desire to become involved in the recent diplomatic activity, calling the issue "fabricated."

Key Issues

The key issue for the Council is whether the tensions between Djibouti and Eritrea can be defused and the parties reach political reconciliation. A related question is whether the crisis has essentially bilateral roots or whether it is linked to the wider regional situation.

The situation does seem to underscore the extremely delicate regional situation in East Africa, in particular:

- the deteriorating relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the unresolved border situation;
- the future of the UN Mission there (UNMEE); and
- the conflict in Somalia and its regional connections.

Council Dynamics

There is broad sympathy in the Council for Djibouti's situation, and strong concern about the need to avoid escalation of the recent fighting. Members also seem increasingly alarmed by the potential for a generalised conflict in East Africa, not the least involving Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti. Most members seem frustrated about and alienated by Eritrea's actions.

One option in the minds of some members has been a fact-finding mission, but it is unclear if and when members will be ready to adopt a statement or a resolution. This is likely to depend on the prospects of current regional efforts as well as the situation on the ground.

UN Documents

Selected Security Council Presidential Statement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• S/PRST/2008/20 (12 June 2008) called for a ceasefire between Djibouti and Eritrea.
Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• S/2008/294 (5 May 2008) was a letter from Djibouti bringing the border situation to the Council's attention.