



# The Churches and Political Conflict in the Horn of Africa

An Unconventional Mediation Effort



# Contents

Map Horn of Africa	4	<b>The Focus of the KdK in the Post-War Period</b>	<b>38</b>
Preface	5	The Religious Leaders' Initiative	38
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>	Further Talks between the Ethiopian Government and OLF	39
The KdK Group - its Origin and Identity	6	Ethiopia and Eritrea: Proliferation of Difficulties after 2000	40
<b>Background: Developments in Ethiopia and Eritrea</b>	<b>9</b>	Democracy Aborted in Eritrea	40
After the End of the Liberation War	9	The Consolidation of a Benevolent Dictatorship in Ethiopia	42
The Formation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia	10	KdK at a Crossroads	43
Breakup of the TGE	10	The Fragmentation of the OLF	43
Eritrean Independence	12	<b>The Final Period (2005-2010)</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>From ERD to KdK</b>	<b>14</b>	Supporting Reconciliation Efforts	44
Formation and the Methodology of the KdK Group	14	The Closing Act	44
Openness to the Parties	16	<b>The KdK Group in Perspective</b>	<b>45</b>
Structural Strengths and Weaknesses	16	The KdK Group and its Activities as Seen by Outsiders	45
<b>The KdK Group and its Activities from the Inside</b>	<b>18</b>	The "Family's" Perspectives	45
The Initial Period from 1996-1998	18	The German Government's Perspective	45
<b>Engagements in Germany</b>	<b>22</b>	The Dutch Government's Perspective	46
Two Phases	22	The Perspective of the Norwegian Government	46
The Mülheim Process (1986 to 1990)	22	An American Perspective	47
The Period 1991 to 1994	24	<b>Observations and Conclusions</b>	<b>48</b>
The "Bonn Talks"	25	Introduction	48
Preparations for the "Bonn Talks"	25	How the ERD Prepared the Ground for the KdK	48
The First Round	27	From ERD to KdK	52
The Second Round	28	The Significance of the Ecumenical Context	53
The Third Round	28	Assessment	54
Important non-Ethiopian Actors	29	Changing Contexts and the End	56
Assessment	30	Lessons Learned	58
<b>The Eritrean-Ethiopian War from 1998-2000</b>	<b>32</b>	A Word of Caution from the Chairman	59
Clouds Gathering	32	<b>Annexes</b>	<b>60</b>
Superficial Causes	32	Time Lines of Ethio-Eritrean History	60
Underlying Deeper Causes	32	<b>Research and Documentation</b>	<b>63</b>
The Deadly Mix of Revanchism, Sabotage and Miscalculation	33	Documents	63
The Triggering Incident and its Political Implications	34	People Interviewed	64
A KdK Analysis and Action	35	<b>Acknowledgement</b>	<b>65</b>
Regional "Fall-out"	36		
The Algiers Agreement	36		

# Horn of Africa



University of Texas Libraries

## Preface

“...Memories are the fertilizer for history...” (borrowed from Remco Campert, who at the age of 83, makes this statement about culture). The story about the KdK Group in this booklet is based on memories derived from interviews with the members and others involved in the story. This account therefore is a personalized description of events in the Horn of Africa over more than one and a half decade.

Professional historians will strongly disagree with the methodology of this “history”. The facts are correct, the interpretation of those facts as well as the underlying analysis are not impartial and open for debate. Hence we call it a “Living History”. This is an account by a group of friends who look back at a common history. We walked a long and winding road. For most it started already in the late seventies of the last century when war and drought plagued the Horn of Africa. Members of the later KdK Group were involved in the developments in the region in various capacities. In that sense the KdK Group was the finishing touch of that long and winding road.

For some time members of the KdK Group felt they had to document their experiences. At the same time there is some hesitation since some of the matters at hand during these 15 years are ongoing till today. With the passing of the years however, the urge was growing and the potential risks for those still involved was diminishing. And when one of the main players in the “KdK saga”, Meles Zenawi, suddenly died, it was about time to start the work.

We call it a “living history”. The story starts in the last decennium of the 20th century. Perhaps some 15 years earlier, when one includes the history of the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD). Most of the friends who constituted the KdK Group had a relationship to this unique cross-border relief operation, which supplied the suffering people in the war zones of Eritrea and Ethiopia with food, medicines and other life-saving aid.

Only a few years after the war ended, Eritrea became independent and Ethiopia was ruled by a “grand coalition”. A group of long-term humanitarian aid workers from European church agencies and some close friends from their counterpart agencies during the liberation war, were spurred into action again. Their great vision: an inclusive and participatory society.

JACQUES WILLEMSE

Former Chairman of the KdK Group

# Introduction

## The KdK Group – its Origin and Identity

In the mid-1990s, the so-called “KdK Group” was established by individuals who had commenced their involvement in the affairs of the Horn of Africa by conducting a peculiarly unconventional humanitarian programme in the 1970s and 1980s. Their prior involvement in this work laid the foundation for their subsequent initiative to promote peace and reconciliation among the liberation fronts who had been their counterparts in this humanitarian undertaking. The peace and reconciliation effort described in this paper became the defining mission of the KdK Group. The group’s story dates back to the early 1980s when the “Emergency Relief Desk” (ERD) was established under the auspices of the Sudan Council of Churches with the aim of conducting an unconventional humanitarian relief operation.

Thus, understanding how the ERD came into existence is essential for grasping how the members of the KdK Group developed a deep commitment to the wellbeing of the people of the Horn of Africa – so much so that its chairman once described the group as “shareholders” in the post-war development in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The “Emergency Relief Desk” (ERD) was jointly established by the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in 1981 to oversee a clandestine delivery of relief aid to war and drought-ravaged parts of northern Ethiopia and what has now become independent Eritrea. The ERD grew into a consortium of eight humanitarian church organizations from Europe and Northern America and ultimately involved twelve such agencies. The Sudan Council of Churches assumed the responsibility of providing the institutional anchor for the activities of the ERD. The first Executive Secretary of the ERD later participated in forming the KdK Group.

ERD’s mission was channeling famine relief to the population living in the areas of northern Ethiopia and today’s Eritrea controlled by the Eritrean and Tigrean liberation fronts. The area was hit by recurrent droughts causing severe famine in the 1970ies and 1980ies. The liberation movements, unable to provide food for the population under their control, readily cooperated with the ERD. In order to reach the affected people the ERD set up a clandestine cross-border operation from Sudan into regions of Ethiopia and Eritrea controlled by the liberation movements. The Sudanese government of the time tolerated these activities.

Three significant liberation movements were fighting against the Ethiopian military regime – the Derg – of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. They were: the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF); the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Each one of these liberation fronts had established its own relief wing namely the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and the Oromo Relief Association (ORA) respectively. These relief organizations cooperated with the ERD in implementing its cross-border operation, which was carried out intentionally ignoring the sovereignty of the Ethiopian government of the day. Such an unconventional delivery of relief was quite unprecedented at the time.

The humanitarian organizations of the liberation movements worked very closely with the ERD by participating in discussions about its operations and programmes and implementing them under ERD’s supervision. The back donors of the relief supplies expressed serious concerns about the possibility of the liberation movements diverting resources channeled into northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. In response to these concerns, ERD strictly monitored the delivery of relief to the affected population. While ERD itself monitored the operation, the implementation of the relief activities remained in the hands of the humanitarian organizations of the liberation movements. They in turn were dependent on their respective liberation movements for the safety of their work and staff. This arrangement forced the ERD also to enter into a relationship of cooperation with the leadership of the liberation movements in order to carry out its work on the ground.

This is an important aspect of the history of the ERD. The ERD did not merely have a donor-recipient relationship with the humanitarian organizations of the liberation movements. Instead, it had a relationship of partnership in which both sides sat together and jointly discussed and reached decisions concerning their joint mission of alleviating suffering. Some officials of the humanitarian organizations of the liberation movements even became members of the ERD Board. This cooperation between partners on an almost equal footing was quite new in those days and was pioneered by the ERD. Through its unconventional style of work, the ERD succeeded in building the trust of the leaders of the liberation movements.

In the discussions with the liberation movements the ERD went beyond issues pertaining to its relief operations by challenging the leaderships of the movements to

start thinking about the future of Ethiopia after the Mengistu regime. This level of engagement was not without problems as ERD members and the officials of the liberation movements at times had serious disagreements. Nevertheless, this did not affect their solidarity with the local people who were suffering under the combination of war, drought and the resultant famine. It was this relationship of critical engagement and collaboration which set the indispensable background and precondition for the subsequent emergence of the KdK Group.

ERD in the beginning was a purely emergency relief operation. However, as the war situation continued it later on expanded its mandate and started also to implement development programmes in cooperation with the relief organizations of the liberation fronts. The eight organizations constituting the ERD consortium jointly decided on how best to use the funds and how to handle problems. An important feature of this inter-agency cooperation was the fact that there was no competition among these organizations. The wellbeing of the people who were to benefit from the support was always at the forefront of all decisions. This truly “joint” operation had the advantages of greater outreach, measurable impact and credibility, which enabled ERD to attract a stronger support from donors.

The ERD’s cross-border operation was very successful in preventing a huge humanitarian disaster in the area of its operation. Despite its success on the ground, however, the activities of the ERD were highly controversial in Europe and North America where many governments and organizations opposed its operations. Even within the churches the positions were controversial. The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) distanced themselves from the activities of the ERD. In the early 1980s, together with Caritas Internationalis they established a “Joint Relief Programme” (JRP) for the people plagued by drought and hunger in areas controlled by the Ethiopian government. In spite of reservations by some governments and organizations, the ERD managed to develop a large network of supporters within the home countries of the consortium composing it. Its network of international churches and church-related organizations ultimately evolved into the “European Working Group on the Horn of Africa” (EWGHoA). The EWGHoA became a lobby instrument which greatly contributed to raising awareness about the issues at stake in the Horn of Africa in political circles, mainly in Europe.

Among the three movements relations remained good until tensions surfaced between the EPLF and TPLF starting in 1985 which lasted until the late 1980s when they were reconciled. Disagreements arose between the TPLF and the OLF due to the latter’s suspicion that the TPLF leaders were aspiring to emerge as the new masters of Ethiopia by overthrowing and stepping into the shoes of the Mengistu regime. This concern heightened the OLF’s worry to become, once again, oppressed by the new rulers. The distrust resulting from this concern could never be really overcome.

Members of the ERD throughout this period of tense relations between the movements maintained good relationships with the leaders of all the liberation movements. Some of them over time even became friends. This friendship between some ERD officials and the leaders of the liberation fronts was a very important precondition for the later activities of the KdK Group and constitute its defining feature. The spirit of friendship extended even into the period after the Derg regime had been overthrown and some of these leaders of the liberation fronts had become the new political leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The Mengistu regime had the largest standing army in Sub-Saharan Africa at the time. In spite of its overwhelming military potential it was ultimately defeated and overthrown in May 1991. A KdK member attributes the defeat of the Mengistu regime not just to the strength and the increasingly coordinated superior military strategies of the liberation movements but also to the fact that the Derg’s support from the Soviet Union rapidly declined when the then Secretary General of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, decided to stop providing unlimited military and political support to regimes in Africa in the late 1980s.

With the end of Derg rule in Ethiopia in 1991 the environment under which the ERD was born and functioned changed fundamentally. ERD’s partners - the humanitarian organizations of the liberations movements - had moved into the country. Its counterparts within the movements had gone to the capitals of Ethiopia and Eritrea as state officials. The cross-border operation was no more necessary.

After reviewing the new situation, the Board of the ERD decided to dissolve it. However, this decision was not unanimous. Some members of the Board wanted to use the chance of the transition in Eritrea and Ethiopia and the unique type of relationships the ERD staff had developed with key actors both within the liberations movements - now Transitional Governments - and the

relief organizations to engage the new governments in a dialogue on democratization. However, the majority of the ERD Board members and the supporting organizations did not see these unique relationships as something to be maintained and built upon and decided to dissolve the ERD. A consortium founded under and held together by the pressures of war and responding to humanitarian needs created by war could not be sustained under totally different circumstances was the key argument.

The focus of this work is the activities of the KdK Group. Therefore, not much more needs to be said here about the ERD. Anyone interested in the full story of the ERD is referred to “Without Troops & Tanks: The Emergency Relief Desk and the Cross Border Operation Into Eritrea and Tigray” by Mark R. Duffield and John Prendergast, The Red Sea Press, 1994.

The following parts of this paper will outline developments in Ethiopia and Eritrea after the overthrow of the Derg regime which are relevant background for the establishment and the activities of the KdK Group. In particular, the troubled relations between the OLF and TPLF will be presented briefly. How the two cooperated in establishing the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) and later went their separate ways will be touched upon. The unprecedented event in Africa’s history, the breakup of a state into two separate ones, will be discussed regarding the process that led to the formalization of Eritrean independence. It will elaborate how the KdK Group emerged by tapping into the acquaintances, relationships trust and goodwill built during the ERD operations - between staff of church-related agencies but also between former ERD staff and key actors in Ethiopia and Eritrea.



# Background: Developments in Ethiopia and Eritrea

## After the End of the Liberation War

Already before the Derg regime was overthrown, the three liberation fronts had negotiated about the future of Ethiopia and Eritrea. With the end of the Derg regime the EPLF had achieved the objective for which it had always been struggling: the de facto independence of Eritrea. The TPLF spearheaded the formation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of political organizations under the leadership of the TPLF, which took over power in Ethiopia. At the time it came to power, the EPRDF was supported by European governments and the US administration who considered Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afewerki as members of a "new generation of African leaders". At this stage the government of the Sudan and EPLF leaders persuaded the OLF to join the incoming Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE).

The Sudanese government and the EPLF had tried to resolve the differences between the EPRDF and the OLF already prior to the overthrow of the Derg regime. One of the main issues of disagreement concerned the formation of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) by the TPLF. The OLF argued that the TPLF had formed the OPDO in order to portray itself as the representative of the Oromo people in the new government. The OLF refused to recognize the OPDO as a legitimate representative of the Oromo people. While this impasse persisted, a meeting about the future of Ethiopia was convened in London. It was at that meeting that the United States government persuaded the OLF to join the new Ethiopian government. It promised the OLF that the US government will support the democratization of Ethiopia.

The Sudanese government and members of the ERD also put pressure on the OLF to join the new government. Since no agreement was reached in London, the designated president of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki, invited the leader of the EPRDF, Meles Zenawi, and an OLF representative for further negotiations in Eritrea. At these subsequent talks the OLF delegate presented a Transitional Charter that he had drafted. Meles Zenawi accepted the proposed Transitional Charter with some minor modifications. It was to serve as the guiding document until elections were held.

After Meles Zenawi had approved the Charter the OLF leadership decided to join the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. At this point it is necessary to under-

score that the EPRDF did not eagerly seek the participation of the OLF in the new government. The OLF's participation was mainly the result of pressure by the EPLF and the governments of the US and Sudan.

The EPLF leaders and the governments of the US and Sudan felt that it would be better for the OLF to influence the new government by working within it rather than by remaining outside. They hoped that the articles concerning federalism in the Transitional Charter would safeguard meaningful space for the Oromo people to govern Oromia. Based upon such an expectation, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia was established by all the groups that had fought against the Mengistu regime.

When the OLF leaders joined the Transitional Government, there had been little preparation or articulation of a master plan for the post-Mengistu era in the OLF. It joined the government without sorting out internal differences and formulating a clear political platform that would be attractive beyond the Oromo people as the TPLF had done. The OLF also lacked trained and skilled staff to run a government.

The OLF hence faced the challenge of shifting from being a guerrilla movement to a political party in a very short time. This was further exacerbated by the fact that the OLF was divided into a more militant and a more moderate wing. There were those OLF members, perhaps constituting the majority, who strongly advocated the independence of Oromia. Others held that the ambitions of the Oromo people could also be realized within a truly federal and democratic system of governance in Ethiopia. Hence, the OLF leaders did not have a unified clear position on key issues of post-Derg politics in Ethiopia. This contributed to the incoherence of the OLF's actions. This predicament was at various occasions cleverly exploited by the EPRDF.

In contrast, the TPLF leaders had a strong party discipline and elaborate strategies and action plans by the time they came to power. They had already decided four or five years earlier on how to govern the whole country and strategically prepared for it. Naturally, there was a big difference between what the TPLF did from what it said - its words were more democratic than its deeds. The TPLF relatively easily gained control of the bureaucracy, which carried on serving the new government, at least for the first years.

## The Formation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia

After the fall of the Mengistu regime a national conference was convened in June 1991 to discuss and ratify the Transitional Charter. This established the basis for the EPRDF and OLF to become partners in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). Although they also had slightly different assessments, the ERD officials perceived the Charter as a great document that reflected high aspirations. The future KdK members and European and US governments had high hopes for a democratic development. The Charter made Ethiopia the first African country to recognize ethnic identity. Ethiopia, being a multi-ethnic state, arrived at a framework which made it possible for all ethnic communities to live together on a voluntary basis. The Charter went further even to recognize the right to self-determination up to and including the right to secede.

The weakness of the Charter, however, revolved on how to practically implement these ambitious goals. This challenge was further exacerbated by the dominance of the military, which was compounded by the security interests of the EPLF. The TPLF, as the major military movement, wanted to make sure that their share of political power reflected their decisive role in the struggle to bring down the Mengistu regime. In addition, they were particularly concerned that Amhara parties could pose a threat to their own ambitions of ruling the country. The Charter stipulated that elections should be held within two years. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) was, thus, expected to govern the country from 1991 until the national election were to be held in 1993.

The OLF began its engagement in the TGE with high aspirations in the government and its ability to transform society and the state. But gradually its representatives in the TGE began to feel like hostages. Working in the TGE was difficult for them because the TPLF clearly was the dominant political and military group in the coalition. The OLF increasingly became critical of the EPRDF and tensions and aversions heightened between them. Some KdK members believe that the TPLF never really intended to establish a genuinely democratic system when they formed the TGE. Despite representing a minority group in Ethiopia, the TPLF wanted primarily to replace Amhara rule.

On the other hand, the Oromo were by far the largest ethnic group. According to one KdK member, the TPLF's

real reason to enter into a coalition with the OLF was to fend off Amhara interests by drawing on the demographic weight of the Oromo people. For some KdK members it was soon clear that the leaders of the TPLF were striving to achieve a long-term dominant position in Ethiopian politics and never intended to establish and maintain cooperative politics. As TPLF leaders realized that democracy would empower the majority, they abandoned the idea of establishing a democratic system of governance.

In the beginning, future KdK members trusted that the TPLF actually wanted to establish an inclusive democratic development and a genuine federal system in post-Derg Ethiopia. But with the passage of time it became obvious that the federalism was fake as it was centrally controlled by the EPRDF. On the other hand, one could also question whether the OLF intended to share power with other parties. Contradicting statements by OLF officials and various actions did not help to build trust in the OLF's democratic ambitions. A German state official mentioned that, in his opinion, the OLF also intended to monopolize power. OLF leaders, he observed, tried to gain more influence while in government and claimed to be democrats because they represent the largest ethnic group. As already mentioned, there was no unified OLF position, because some wanted an independent Oromia while others wanted to give the Transitional Government a chance.

## Breakup of the TGE

The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. The TPLF may have tried to suppress OLF influence in Ethiopian politics because it feared their preponderance. Whatever the reasons, from day one there were crucial points of disagreement in the TGE. These pertained to the influence of the TPLF and its increasing control of the economy through party owned business ventures. Another contentious issue was the movement of resources to Tigray. Whether true or not, the allocation of state resources was in large parts of the Ethiopian public perceived as giving preferential treatment to Tigray. Apart from resource distribution, the TPLF and the OLF disagreed on issues about agricultural development and land ownership. Ethiopia is a very complex country with huge ethnic, religious, economic and ideological differences. The history of conquests, military subjugation and political and economic domination had resulted in only a very limited sense of national belonging.

The OLF did not feel that it was respected and treated fairly by the TPLF as an equal partner in the TGE. Rather, they felt accepted in the government only due to external pressures and were treated as a junior partner. A KdK member pointed out the specific Marxist-Leninist vanguard ideology of the former liberation movements, which does not accommodate others besides themselves. The EPRDF, which was controlled by the TPLF, left no space for other possibly influential parties in the TGE such as the OLF. The TPLF did not tolerate other thoughts and different approaches and least of all a pluralistic way of managing politics. These tensions created an atmosphere of mistrust between the TPLF/EPRDF and the OLF. There were also internal disagreements on both sides and there were wings in both parties, which wanted the breakup and the failure of the coalition. During the whole period of the Transitional Government, the OLF leaders took no time to reflect on their situation and arrive at a unified position. The OLF planned a meeting of its Central Committee but was unable to do so due to permanent quarrels with the TPLF, whose troops were spread throughout Oromia. According to one member of the KdK Group, there was not a single day that went by without a violent incident occurring somewhere in Oromia.

The crucial issue, which led to the complete collapse of cooperation between the TPLF/EPRDF and the OLF, was the disarmament and the reorganization of the armed forces. The protagonists had signed an agreement according to which the troops of both liberation fronts were to be encamped. While the OLF took the agreement serious and began to encamp its troops, the TPLF showed no signs of complying with it. Not only the OLF but also other parties felt that their security was not guaranteed. They hoped for the support the US and European governments had promised to establish democratic governance and human rights in Ethiopia. But they were disappointed. When the first local and district elections were about to be held in 1992, relations between the TPLF and the OLF had significantly deteriorated. Shortly before the elections, the tensions between the two groups escalated in some areas of Oromia. The number of violent incidents between the EPRDF and OLF troops were on the rise. OLF offices were destroyed and OLF candidates were imprisoned, some were even murdered on the streets.

In addition, the OLF started recruiting soldiers from the former Mengistu regime. In the run up to the local and district elections, the agreement to encamp all troops

was concluded. Just days before the election, OLF troops left their encampment sites and resumed fighting against EPRDF forces. At the same time OLF leaders announced the OLF's withdrawal from the local and district elections. Thereby they violated the agreement with the EPRDF and the Transitional Charter.

The OLF's recruitment of demobilized Derg soldiers signaled to the TPLF leaders that the OLF could become a serious military threat. This they could not tolerate. The EPRDF and the US criticized the OLF strongly for this action. The EPRDF, on the other hand, violently oppressed and even murdered OLF candidates who ran for office, thereby exacerbating the feeling of insecurity among the Oromo people. Right after the OLF leaders announced the party's withdrawal from the elections it instructed its representatives in the TGE to leave the government. As a result, the TGE lasted only for one year and then broke apart partly because of tensions between the EPRDF and the OLF, partly due to divergent positions and strategies within the parties.

Immediately after the withdrawal of the OLF from the elections and its withdrawal from the government - or expulsion by the EPRDF, depending on one's point of view - fighting erupted between their troops. The OLF's decision to completely withdraw from the government was also questioned by the later KdK members. After it had left the political arena to the dominant party, the OLF was no longer able to expand its narrow influence on political developments in Ethiopia. The OLF leadership committed an additional - and some say fatal - mistake by ultimately going into exile in Eritrea.

The reaction to the collapse of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in the international community was mostly indifference. None of the governments in Europe or North America really cared about the OLF. They had returned to business as usual. Politicians and diplomats argued that they did not see a reverse trend and that "[...] we need to be patient and there are challenges to be overcome".

This obvious attitude of the so-called international community reassured the TPLF and strengthened the already existing "Calimero-trauma" of the OLF leadership. KdK members learned from discussions with diplomats that the US and European governments had never really believed in any democratic development after the fall of Mengistu. From the beginning, they felt that one dictatorship would be replaced another and they bet on Meles and the TPLF to be the better partner to deal with.

This feeling about the international community's indifference towards democratization was further compounded by developments in neighbouring Somalia. When Somalia disintegrated and collapsed after the fall of the Siad Barré regime in 1991, European and the US governments worried that the entire region on the Horn of Africa could be destabilized. They became also increasingly concerned about the situation in Sudan. Sudan was then providing shelter to the international top-terrorist Carlos and rumours started circulating that the Sudanese army was developing or trying to get a hold of chemical and biological weapons. Based on such rumours, the US administration decided to bomb a factory in Khartoum, which actually was not producing any sort of weapons. The resulting outcry in Africa upset the politics of the US in the Horn of Africa, as they struggled to maintain their influence in the region. In the US and European security strategies all of these developments made Ethiopia a very important, if not the most important, country in the Horn of Africa for a long time - especially for the United States. The US even saw a possibility of a stable Ethiopia under the autocratic control of the EPRDF in an otherwise very unstable region. As the US needed a foothold and stability anchor in the region and as the Ethiopian government could provide that, a democratic Ethiopia which complied with human rights was not of first priority in the interests of the US foreign policy. The European governments did not really challenge that position. Therefore, there was no international outcry when the TGE and the process of democratization derailed in Ethiopia.

On the contrary, the international community bent over backwards to tolerate the TPLF's violation of the encampment agreement, the consensus enshrined in the Charter to establish democracy and federalism in Ethiopia. For example, the international observers of the 1992 District and Local Election made very critical remarks about its conduct. In spite of the critical assessment the Paris Club - a group of donor countries - approved significant funds for the Ethiopian government just days after the elections were declared neither free nor fair. According to a KdK member, this only confirmed Meles Zenawi and his government to continue on their path towards autocracy.

In retrospect, one could conclude that the late Prime Minister very early installed a very clever autocracy by holding regular elections, which the EPRDF manipulated in order to make sure that they always win.

When all these developments were happening in 1993/1994, KdK as a group did not yet exist. However, the

prospective KdK members were closely following developments and some had already become active.

The new constitution of Ethiopia was ratified on December 12th 1994, and the elections for the national assembly were scheduled for May 1995. Several opposition parties - including the OLF - boycotted those elections. Even though election observers and several governments criticized the elections as not free and fair, most governments readily accepted the TPLF/EPRDF's promise that they wanted to establish a democratic system but just needed more time and financial support.

## Eritrean Independence

A referendum on Eritrea's independence was scheduled for April 1993. It was to be monitored by the United Nations. In the two years between the defeat of the Mengistu regime and formal independence, Eritreans intensively prepared for the referendum. At that time, the former ERD and future KdK members were optimistic that the Eritrean government would remain open and would allow other political organizations to function in Eritrea. The Eritrean government even supported the formation of labour unions. The long-term development plans of the government looked promising and there were intensive debates about the Eritrean constitution. In spite of these encouraging first years, some future KdK members were sceptical and expected the EPLF to become more autocratic. It had a military history and mindset and it was running a one-party government. Still, KdK members thought that overall the conditions in Eritrea would be strong enough that upcoming troubles would not inevitably lead to drastic swings back towards a totalitarian regime.

Eritrea's independence was openly supported by the Ethiopian government and the parties in the government, while other groups in Ethiopia, particularly members of the Amhara elite strongly rejected it. Among the Amhara elite there is a strong self-conception as the "entitled leaders" of Ethiopia. Many Ethiopians rejected Eritrean independence and continued to consider Eritrea as a part of Ethiopia.

While these mood swings affected relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the atmosphere in Eritrea changed with the more or less collective leadership style steadily degenerating into the single source of power - "the President's office". Internal debate was silenced and input

from outside was more and more bluntly rejected. As an organization with a dominant military mind set, the EPLF - renamed as People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994 - was unfamiliar with open discussions about decisions taken. In addition, key members of the EPLF/PFDJ leadership harboured deep-seated resentments against outsiders, particularly representatives of the international community. This may be due to the international community's "determined ignorance" of the Eritrean case for independence and the way they were treated during the struggle. So increasingly, EPLF leaders began to mistrust everyone and therefore suspected any other opinion.

After the Eritrean population had voted for independence, one of the future members of the KdK Group established the "Regional Centre of Human Rights and Development" (RCHRD). The Human Rights Centre was concerned about the rights and freedom of the people. The new government, however, defined development basically in economic terms and paid little attention to the views of the people. The aim of the founder of the RCHRD was to assist the government by working from the outside as a human rights campaigner. In the beginning, Isaias Afewerki supported the Centre perhaps because he did not expect it to be so active in such a short time. The Human Rights Centre organized a referendum-monitoring group and coordinated with the United Nations, the European Union and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). In addition, the Centre trained journalists in independent thinking. It also trained 400 Eritreans from all over the country in election monitoring. The Human Rights Centre's initiatives shocked the Eritrean government, which had no intentions of seeing the emergence of democratic structures and an educated and independent public. Eventually, the government refused to register the Human Rights Centre. This is but one example of a long list of incidents in which the Eritrean government brutalized civic society, religious organizations and even former ERD agencies.

During these first years, Eritrea seemed to have good relations with its neighbours and there were intensive debates throughout the country about the content of the future constitution. In spite of the autocratic tendencies, the Constitutional Assembly ratified the new Constitution of Eritrea in 1997. However, it was never signed by President Isaias Afewerki. In order to prepare for the implementation of the Eritrean Constitution, election and political party laws were drafted. But before parties

were established and elections were held war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998. This put a permanent stop to any progress towards inclusive and democratic governance in Eritrea.

Whether and how Eritrea's independence negatively influenced political developments in Ethiopia is an issue that needs to be considered. KdK members expressed the opinion that Eritrean independence did play a negative role. During the first years after taking over power, the TPLF and EPLF maintained good relations. Both had agreed on the independence of Eritrea and had cooperated in achieving that goal. But domestically, the atmosphere changed in Ethiopia. Members of the Amhara elite strongly objected to the Eritrean independence and there was also opposition among the other ethnic groups. These groups accused Meles Zenawi of "selling out" Ethiopia's interests. Some go to the extent of stating that Ethiopians would never forgive Meles for agreeing to Eritrea's independence. These circumstances might also have contributed towards the worsening of relations between OLF and TPLF for the increasing repressions against Oromo activists and organizations. The aspiration to realize an independent Oromia voiced by many Oromo activists and also by members of the OLF leadership certainly did not relax TPLF's anxieties. For economic and societal reasons this was not an option the TPLF was willing to accept. A KdK member supports that argument by pointing out that some domestic groups in Ethiopia did not accept the independence of Eritrea and this had "an impact on political stability and harmony in Ethiopia".

However, all in all the developments in the first years after the defeat of the Mengistu-regime seemed promising, in spite of frictions and obvious tensions. In 1992 and 1993, the former members of the ERD remained optimistic, especially regarding Eritrea. The first authoritarian tendencies and tensions were already observable in both countries, most visibly in Ethiopia in the growing conflict between the EPRDF and the OLF and in Eritrea in the delays in implementing the new constitution in Eritrea. Future KdK members were alarmed and continued to cautiously monitor developments.

## From ERD to KdK

When the war ended with the takeover of power in Addis Ababa and in Asmara by the liberation movements, the ERD faced multiple problems. The humanitarian assistance channeled through the ERD declined. The cohesion and efficiency of the ERD resulted to a large extent from the pressures of the war and a generally shared view that humanitarian organizations were “fighting against all odds”. Under the radically changed circumstances after the end of the war ERD could not simply continue. The former leaders of liberation movements and present leaders of the states now had direct access to leaders and resources of other states. The support of the ERD in the form of humanitarian assistance and dialogue was no longer needed.

Starting in late 1992, the ERD’s Board took stock of the changed circumstances and concluded to dissolve it.



A ceremonial dance in the morning of the Eritrean referendum (Asmara; 1993).

Some ERD officials wished to continue working in the Horn of Africa. They had observed problems emerging first in Ethiopia and later in Eritrea and were convinced that they could contribute to resolve them. As individuals they had accumulated a wealth of knowledge of the movements, their leaders and the situation in the two countries. Some of them had built relationships of trust, even friendships with key actors in the new government and considered themselves as a group that would be balanced enough to be acceptable by all movements. However, this did not happen. ERD was dissolved, one official was allowed to stay in the region to handover “the knowledge gained through twelve years of engagement in the cross-border operation”. This was a futile effort for two reasons. First, the ERD’s approach to humanitarian work differed too significantly from other approaches and raised too many difficult questions. Secondly, in many agencies the general attitude of “returning to business as usual” asserted itself.

### Formation and the Methodology of the KdK Group

In 1995 the first meeting of what was later called the “KdK Group” was convened on the initiative of its later chairman. It brought together former ERD staff and staff of agencies which had supported ERD, their friends from Eritrea and from Ethiopia. They deliberated on how developments in Eritrea and Ethiopia during the critical phase of transition to democracy could be supported and moved in a positive direction. They explored how they could tap the capital of trust and solidarity they had accumulated during the ERD phase. The resources they had at their disposal were their deep understanding of the region and the former liberation fronts and good personal relationships with the leaders of the former liberation fronts now turned state leaders. They were convinced that they could offer good offices and provide channels of communication, particularly between the OLF and the Transitional Government of Ethiopia after the breakup.

This first meeting took place at a former Catholic Mission institute, turned training centre for development workers in the Netherlands called “Kontakt der Kontinenten”. The main outcome of this initial meeting was the decision to stay committed to the wellbeing of the peoples of the Horn of Africa and to maintain contact as a group for mutual support. The group adopted the name of their first venue as their name: Kdk Group.

The KdK Group resulted from the assessment of a few former ERD staff based on their intimate knowledge of the region that developments in Ethiopia and Eritrea were not going well and deserved close monitoring. The KdK Group emerged as the mechanism for building on foundations which were laid by ERD's humanitarian assistance and political work. The core members of the KdK Group were former officials of the ERD. In so far, the KdK Group became a logical continuation of the ERD with different objectives and self-assigned tasks. It picked up some of the ideas and suggestions that had been on the table before the ERD was dissolved.

One of the members of the KdK Group described it as a "loose fellowship of comrades in the humanitarian field" who got to know each other well during the Ethiopian civil war from 1974 to 1991. Their continued engagement in Ethiopia after the regime change was bolstered, when senior TPLF leader agreed that "ERD staff were shareholders" in the wellbeing of the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea due to their 12 years of commitment. Members of the KdK Group occasionally reminded the parties that they are shareholders and thus wanted to continue to promote freedom, participation and wellbeing of the population.

In the first years of its operation the focus of the KdK Group were the increasingly tense relationships between the EPRDF and the OLF. Therefore, to a subsequent meeting in 1996 members of the OLF leadership were invited.

The founding members of the KdK Group were all working for church agencies. This and the shared Christian values constituted part of their identity and helped to strengthen their moral arguments. They all were senior and highly experienced humanitarian and development workers. They had earned the trust of many people in the Horn of Africa and in many European and international institutions due to their earlier work in the ERD. The KdK Group was not envisioned as a full-fledged organization but rather as a network of close friends who knew each other for decades and went through pretty rough times during the ERD period. It never had a formal secretariat and its members shouldered the organizational and logistical tasks. It was a "low budget exercise" depending for financial resources and institutional backing on the agencies of its members. These agencies allowed KdK members to use resources and spend time on the activities of the group. The group had no statute and worked together on an ad-hoc basis and shared information. While sharing of information and discussion was free and open within the

group, to the outside the group strictly communicated on a "need to know basis" only.

The KdK Group met up to three times a year for several days to analyze and assess the developments in the Horn of Africa and to debate options for possible involvement. Usually, the chairman prepared the agenda, the members gave briefings and inputs about issues of concern. The fact that KdK members knew many people in the region and maintained continuous communication with them served this purpose well. As the result, the group had an effective "intelligence" network on the ground. Particularly the initiatives of governments and other international actors and how they affected internal political dynamics were analyzed and discussed.

The KdK Group kept a loose coordination and had good contacts with several European government institutions. For example, when the KdK chairman visited Oslo, Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) would arrange for him to meet representatives of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to have an informal talk. Similarly, if he happened to be in Germany, the German church agencies would organize an informal meeting with relevant people in the German Foreign Ministry. The KdK Group could provide information to the personnel of these Foreign Ministries from sources which otherwise were not accessible for the ministries so such meetings were appreciated by both sides. The KdK Group was also able to shuttle messages, discussion points or questions between state leaders and opposition groups in a manner not amenable for regular diplomacy. In exchange, the KdK Group could draw on the cooperation of the various Foreign Ministries for visas when needed. Personnel of the Foreign Ministries saw the KdK Group as a potentially useful instrument from which they could distance themselves while encouraging and supporting it at other times.

The members of the KdK Group carried out the group's activities while working full time for their respective agencies. This was quite helpful because everyone had other tasks in his agency and therefore could bring in something different from that. At the same time this was a substantial "quiet contribution" to the group's efforts as some of the activities consumed a lot of time. The KdK served as a forum where everyone shared information and could take back an informed analysis and assessment of events and developments to his institution. Two KdK members had exceptionally good knowledge of, and relationships with, the ecumenical world. Another one had a profound knowledge of the region and yet another

had a good connection to the UN and the international legal system. Every member of the KdK Group had specific knowledge, skills and capacities to contribute.

The group's members conducted the group's activities in addition to and on top of their regular work in their agencies on voluntary basis. The basis of collaboration was equality, concern, consensus, frankness and openness. They cooperated with each other as friends without power or leverage. Their relationship was based on their past and present commitment. As long-time friends, KdK members could criticize each other and challenge each other's perceptions, convictions or actions. They did not need to flatter each other. They could frankly say in confidence: "I don't think you are doing the right thing at the moment." Every member showed commitment to and solidarity with the peoples of the Horn of Africa.

The members of the KdK Group, as mentioned, regarded themselves as stakeholders in the wellbeing of the Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples. They repeatedly reminded the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea of this fact. They challenged the leaders to think outside the box by drawing on their good connections and previous relationship of cooperation. They were honest with them and worked with all parties on the basis of trust, friendship and openness. The KdK Group had neither power nor leverage to pressure the parties. The source of its strength was its moral arguments and their advice reflected this moral approach.

Even though the KdK Group was not a formally established institution and its members were part of the group strictly in their personal capacities, at the same time they also represented the organizations they worked for and were seen as such by the parties and some of their counterparts in European governmental institutions. This allowed the group to access and to use the networks of their organizations. At the beginning, relevant people in their home organizations knew what the KdK members were doing. Over time, however, the group started operating very informally, using quite unconventional and new unprecedented approaches in order to influence political leaders. This was done in part also to protect the agencies from possible negative reactions in case the activities of the group triggered negative reactions. The group's aim was to initiate change by presenting alternatives to the status quo. This peculiar unconventional approach of the KdK Group was often incomprehensible to outsiders. In the perspective of the German government, the KdK was associated with Association of the Churches' Development

Service (AG KED) while for the Dutch government it was mainly the individual group members whom they knew. Similarly, the Norwegian government thought the KdK was its Norwegian member with whom they interacted.

## Openness to the Parties

Most organizations operate according to clearly articulated policies and on the basis of institutional frameworks. The KdK approach had a different dynamic as it drew on improvisation and the reconciliation of competing goals. But the KdK Group had one ground rule: it always informed all concerned parties about interactions with any other group. For example, they would brief the Ethiopian government about impending meetings with the OLF. And afterwards they would convey to the government their observations from the meeting. And the OLF on its part, was informed and well aware of this procedure. This was done in order to allay fears that things were being done behind someone's back.

When talking to OLF members or to Meles Zenawi or to Isaias Afewerki in person, KdK members raised any issue of concern with the interlocutor. At other times, the KdK members made up their mind about the issues to be discussed and confronted their counterparts with their own ideas, worries and criticisms. Their overall message, however, was: "It is your problem. We are part of it, but it is your problem. We cannot solve it for you, you have to solve it. We can help you to communicate with each other. If you don't want to talk to each other directly, talk to us and we will pass it to the other side....." Most importantly, what had to stay behind closed doors would remain there.

## Structural Strengths and Weaknesses

The approach of the KdK Group to diplomatic work, hence, differed significantly from that of other organizations. As has already been mentioned, the KdK Group operated without clearly articulated agenda and regular financial support. It was free and open and operated without institutional constraints. Their church agencies, fortunately, did not try to influence or limit the activities of the KdK Group. The KdK Group cooperated with many institutions such as the Life and Peace Institute (LPI) in Uppsala or the Christian-Michelsen-Institute in Bergen,



Norway. The LPI is a Swedish church-based research institute for which a KdK member worked for some time. Another KdK affiliate was head of the Horn of Africa Programme of LPI and could hence be tapped by the KdK for academic knowledge and deeper analysis. He worked with the KdK Group without formally becoming a member. Again, this connection went back to the ERD period. Another KdK member sometimes brought KdK issues to the “Horn of Africa Group” of the German Evangelical Church (EKD). And during the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, the KdK Group could use the Norwegian facilities to travel into the war zone. In this way, the KdK Group could access the resources and facilities of their own organizations as well as of others. Many agencies contributed to KdK activities without becoming formal members due to its very informal structure. They operated mostly as supporters and stayed in the background.

This is one recollection of how the KdK functioned. According to another, the KdK Group suffered from institutional constraints. The most prominent constraint concerned the paucity of regular funding. The KdK Group was depending on the home organizations of its members, mainly DIA/ICCO, EED and NCA, for operational costs. The KdK group never had a long-term contract with any of these church agencies and needed to consult them regularly for funding on a case-by-case basis.

Another constraint was the change of personnel in the church agencies and the gradual changes within these agencies themselves. Some of them merged with other organizations. This was the case with DIA in the Netherlands and the EED in Germany. Over time the gap between the working mode of the KdK Group and the institutional routine of the domestic agencies became deeper. Another constraint was posed by the “country offices” which some of the agencies had established in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. With these offices established the KdK Group had to be extra careful not to jeopardize the primary mandate of these country offices and the security of their staff. At the same time some country representations were a source of logistical support as well as a source of information. Nevertheless, minor tensions were inevitable.

When the KdK Group was launched in 1996, its members either were hired staff in their church-related organizations or had just recently left them. They all had strong connections with their home organizations. Personnel changes were another factor that weakened the KdK Group over time. Some members of the KdK group went

into retirement while others left their organizations for other employment. It gradually became increasingly difficult to mobilize the institutional support of the key supporters EED, ICCO, NCA and of other church-related organizations. KdK members had to invest more time and effort maintaining the institutional base of the group. This difficulty was compounded by the dwindling of interest in the Horn of Africa in many agencies. Due to these developments, the linkages between the KdK Group and the various agencies became increasingly problematic. The institutional backing over time became the most pivotal weakness of the KdK group. What was the source of strength ultimately evolved into a structural weakness.

# The KdK Group and its Activities from the Inside

## The Initial Period from 1996–1998

When the KdK Group started to work on the Horn of Africa in 1996, it focused on the developments in Ethiopia. KdK members in an unofficial manner brought together members of the leadership of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The aim was to facilitate reconciliation between these former allies in the liberation struggle. The ultimate aim, in that early stage, was to bring the OLF back into Ethiopia's political arena.

The KdK Group's approach was based on the expectation that the key people in both camps could quite easily come to an understanding once they engaged in a direct dialogue because they all knew each other personally. The Oromos as the largest ethnic community in the perspective of the KdK Group were the most important population group in Ethiopia in the long run. The Oromos constitute roughly 40 percent of the total Ethiopian population. Most of the country's natural resources are located in the Oromo inhabited territory. Important grassland areas and fertile farming zones, stretching from east to west and from the north to the south of Ethiopia are located in Oromo territory. Consequently, the KdK Group feared that Ethiopia could fall apart and descend into chaos unless the aspirations of the Oromo people were met and the conflict between their representative movement, the OLF, and the Ethiopian government is settled. This apprehension made the Oromo issue the KdK Group's top priority. KdK members had open doors at different levels of the Ethiopian government, including the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. They planned to harness these in order to influence the Ethiopian government. They wished to create awareness in the Ethiopian leadership that certain issues need to be addressed and resolved through negotiations for the stability and development of the country. Resolving the conflict between the OLF and the government was one of these critical challenges.

However, because they were neither diplomats nor state officials, the KdK Group experienced some difficulties in arranging talks between the EPRDF and OLF. The only assets the KdK Group could deploy were their intimate knowledge of personalities, policies and interests in the region, their long standing trustful relationships to key actors, creative ideas, ideals and well-prepared arguments. They could articulate alternative observations and views. Such a candid sharing of critical views is rarely possible in regular diplomatic conversations. But critical

perceptions and analysis could be formulated by friends and from a humanitarian perspective. KdK members maintained that they could intervene in the internal affairs of Ethiopia and of the Oromos because they were friends. They had earned the right to do so by the long years of support during the liberation struggle. This assumption was not challenged as no one in Ethiopia accused the KdK members for interfering in the country's internal affairs. Even persons with whom they had strong disagreements never doubted their right to get engaged. So the KdK Group used its creativity, flexibility and contacts to push for direct talks between the government and the OLF.

They conducted shuttle diplomacy between the government and the OLF leadership in order to realize direct talks. However, they did not meet the OLF leadership as such or the government as such but important key members within these groups. They travelled to Addis Ababa and held talks with key individuals in the government and the TPLF leadership about a possible meeting with the OLF. Then they informed the key people in the OLF leadership about the discussion with the TPLF and similarly challenged them. By this means, they shuttled messages, exchanged information and held informal conversations. After each meeting with the government or the OLF, the KdK members together analyzed the discussion, drew their conclusions and produced "observation papers", which they shared with both sides.

Thus, KdK members tried to facilitate talks and tried to influence both sides to think differently by talking to them as individuals. They were doing more than just carrying messages. They became active participants in the whole process by challenging and trying to influence both parties with their own observations.

At their first meeting with Meles Zenawi, the KdK members briefed him about their intention of bringing the OLF back into Ethiopian politics and possibly the government. They wanted to start a process aimed at realizing a meeting between the government and OLF. Meles expressed support for the initiative and appointed a committee consisting of three senior politicians. The fact that the committee was filled with high-ranking personalities evidenced that Meles took the issue seriously. Meles agreed that the break-up of the coalition with the OLF was a problem for the country. He expressed the desire to engage the OLF in a dialogue provided, however, some preconditions were fulfilled. Although these preconditions would make the process difficult it was agreed to embark on such a process. The committee was set up

and the KdK Group started the EPRDF-OLF initiative in late 1996/early 1997.

Members of the KdK Group had several meetings with the committee set up by Meles. KdK members at that stage were optimistic that making progress was possible due to the prevailing spirit of openness among key personalities. The KdK members were acquainted with the members of the committee with relationships going back to the time of the struggle. This made cooperation quite promising. KdK members talked to both sides very openly and sometimes frankly. They challenged them about the preconditions and conditions for the talks and pushed them towards a potential meeting.

In April 1996, the KdK group met with an OLF delegation in London at which the OLF also agreed to resume the dialogue with the Ethiopian government in the presence of a third party acting as a facilitator. The Swedish Life and Peace Institute (LPI) was tasked with preparing issue papers, which would facilitate discussions with the government. When the KdK Group subsequently met with the Ethiopian government delegation in October 1996, they discussed the reasons for the break-up of the TGE and the relationship between the government and the OLF. The government delegation held the OLF responsible for starting the conflict by boycotting the Local and District Elections and by also withdrawing their troops from the camps. They attributed these actions to the OLF's fear of losing those elections. Nevertheless, they also stated that they wanted the OLF to return to the political process by stopping the armed conflict. And they expressed the desire to conduct democratic reforms as soon as the country was stable and peaceful.

The KdK Group produced an observation paper after this discussion and presented it to the OLF delegation after the government had confirmed that the paper adequately confirmed its perception. In their own observations, KdK members pointed out that the OLF and the government viewed the same matter of concern from different perspectives and positions. This posed the most difficult obstacle to reconciling the positions of the two sides. However, the most important difference was the position of the two parties regarding armed struggle. For the OLF armed struggle was a legitimate and a necessary ultimate means for being able to achieve its aims. The government, however, considered armed struggle as counter-productive and aimed against the Transitional Charter. From its point of view the option of armed struggle had to be ruled out from the beginning so a peaceful set-

tlement of the conflict could be found. The OLF repeatedly confirmed its priority interest in a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but in the eyes of the Ethiopian government this was not communicated unambiguously.

In August 1997, the KdK group facilitated a meeting of representatives of the OLF in Germany in order to work out a consistent strategy. This appeared necessary because the KdK Group felt that a major obstacle for negotiations between the OLF and the Ethiopian government were internal differences within the OLF itself. Some OLF functionaries were quite aggressively accusing the Ethiopian government of dictatorship; some cells within the OLF were even tending towards terrorism. At this meeting OLF delegates stated that they had never really talked to the TPLF - not even when they were in the Transitional Government, and that there was no open political space in Ethiopia. They demanded the introduction of democratic rules and the termination of human rights abuses before meaningful talks could take place. The KdK Group in return demanded that the OLF formulate precise objectives which they, as facilitators, could communicate to the Ethiopian government. Ultimately, OLF delegates made some concessions and indicated that they would like to participate in the forthcoming elections, for which they would require political support.

One of the main obstacles for starting face-to-face negotiations between the OLF and the government was the issue of preconditions. The government demanded that the OLF should officially declare an end to armed resistance before it was willing to engage in negotiations. The OLF, however, maintained that the renunciation of armed struggle could only be an outcome of discussion. The two sides also approached the talks from different perspectives. The government preferred a negotiation-style of discussion with a prepared agenda and timelines, while the OLF appeared to prefer a dialogue-style of discussion with no preconditions at all. The KdK tried to organize a setting in which the arguments of the OLF would have the same weight as those of the government and in which both parties could meet in an atmosphere of confidence and trust. The OLF, as the weaker party, accepted this approach while the TPLF insisted on a negotiation in which they could support their argument with the authority of an acting government, if necessary.

There were ups and downs during this process and occasionally the KdK members left the discussions disillusioned. But they were determined to keep the discussions going and felt that they had to some extent chal-

lenged the positions of the TPLF/EPRDF and the OLF. They strongly challenged the two parties particularly on preconditions for direct talks. They were able to convince the government to drop its precondition that the OLF should officially disband its army and to declare that the use of force was not anymore its primary option for achieving its goals. On the other hand, KdK members persuaded the OLF to drop its demand that the government abandons any preconditions for the start of talks and, instead, engages in talks focused on reforming the existing political system in Ethiopia. Getting the groups to these positions proved very valuable for the talks that were later held in Bonn (see below). It had become increasingly clear to the KdK members that as long as the OLF insisted on staying armed the Ethiopian government would not be willing to even consider the reintegration of the OLF into the political life of the country. The government just could not work with an armed political party.

The process ground to a halt in March 1998 when one member of the KdK informed its chairman that they had been taken for a ride by the government. From information he had received he concluded that at no time the TPLF had been seriously interested in any negotiated settlement with the OLF. At this stage, KdK delegates met with Meles, confronted him with their personal disappointment and informed him of their decision to end their facilitation unless he personally reassured them that he wanted the process to continue. Meles assured the KdK Group that he personally was interested in a settlement with the OLF and that he wished the process to continue.

After getting this reassurance, the chairman of the KdK group drew up an elaborate timetable for the dialogue between the OLF and the Ethiopian government until 2000. In his paper of April 1998, he proposed a plan divided into six phases for talks between the two parties. After identifying areas of common interests and goals in a dialogue between the delegations, both sides should develop position papers and forward them to the KdK Group. The KdK Group would in turn prepare an observation paper and share it with the OLF and the government. Finally, on the basis of the observation paper, delegations of both parties would agree on a process leading to direct negotiations between them. In the same month, the KdK Group drafted a detailed concept paper for the next steps. They scheduled a meeting with OLF leaders in Oslo in late May to be followed by an internal Oromo conference. Another meeting of a wider Ethiopian constituency was scheduled to take place in Addis Ababa in

June to be followed by a meeting of several Oromo diaspora leaders in Sweden in July 1998. Regarding their interaction with the EPRDF, the KdK Group planned to work with the "InterAfrica Group", an NGO based in Addis Ababa, which advocates peace and development and whose founder also had good personal contacts to both TPLF and OLF leaders. Its mandate includes conflict resolution in the Horn of Africa through research, dialogue and networking as well as penal reform. In addition, some members of the KdK Group planned to conduct an investigation about human rights violations in Ethiopia during 1998.

At this stage, the KdK Group had come very close to convening a face-to-face meeting between the OLF and the government. The governments of Norway and other European countries had agreed to serve as guarantors allowing travel for OLF representatives. Unfortunately, this meeting never happened. Only a month after the parties had agreed to meet the war of 1998 to 2000 broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This outbreak of war put an abrupt end to the negotiation process with the OLF.

Parallel to the promotion of the TPLF-EPRDF /OLF talks, the KdK Group was also involved in supporting some initiatives inside Ethiopia. A "group of elders" was trying to maintain contact between the exiled OLF leadership and its constituencies inside the country to communicate the views from the Oromo constituency into the political debates of the party in exile. KdK members supported this initiative by building contacts and keeping the elders informed about their own activities. They also tried to create good relations between the government administration and the Oromo population as there was a widespread suspicion in governmental bodies that all Oromos were members of a "secret army" of the OLF. There were many conflicts between the local administration and Oromo groups at local and regional levels. The KdK Group assisted the elders to resolve some of these conflicts. In another initiative KdK supported a group of religious leaders who wanted to broker peaceful relations between the Oromo population and the other ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

An important ongoing part of the KdK Group's work was challenging the OLF leadership to formulate a coherent vision and political agenda for Ethiopia and define its relations to other parties and opposition groups. The KdK Group and its network of supporting institutions brought representatives of most groups to a hotel in Norway to discuss and agree on peaceful means to challenge the

Ethiopian government politically instead of continuing to seek a military settlement. The KdK Group hoped that bringing the groups together in a pleasant environment would positively influence the atmosphere between these predominantly adverse persons. At this occasion, the KdK Group brought together most, if not all, the Ethiopian opposition forces in Norway. However, this was not a secret activity. On the contrary, the KdK Group informed Meles Zenawi in advance about their intention and the planned conference. They argued that it was in the interest of everyone in Ethiopia that the parties “stop fighting and begin thinking about a more intelligent way of disagreeing” as the chairman put it. Although Meles most probably was not happy about this idea he did not interfere. Some of the persons present took up that challenge and later participated in the elections. Some even won seats in the parliament, which was an encouraging example for all.

Another initiative went on parallel to that of the KdK Group between February and October 1997 aiming at bringing together the OLF and the Ethiopian government. The process of the so-called “Bonn talks” was not owned by the KdK Group. The KdK Group knew about it and supported it with expertise and sometimes KdK members were also physically present. The Bonn talks will be discussed in more detail below.

During this entire period, the KdK Group had not initiated any activities regarding Eritrea. Although there were signs of authoritarianism, no member of the group considered them serious enough to trigger reaction from the KdK Group. As the result, the people advocating for democratic structures in Eritrea were “... fighting lonely battles [and] were more individuals than organized groups”, as one KdK member later commented.

# Engagements in Germany

## Two Phases

In Germany, churches and church-related agencies became involved in peace activities early in the 1980ies. Later, after the engagement of the KdK-Group had started, many of the activities in Germany were supported by the KdK. Like in Norway, long time mission and development relations inspired individuals and institutions in church circles to step into the arena and use the knowledge, relations and experience obtained through long years of engagement in Ethiopia to at least try to facilitate reconciliation processes in Ethiopia.

The activities in Germany can be divided into two phases. The later phase, the so-called “Bonn talks,” built on the relationships from the earlier phase, the so-called “Mülheim Process” which took place whilst the war against the military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam was still raging. In those days Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe (Diakonie Emergency Aid) was a solid and important partner in the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD) and its cross-border program from Sudan. The Evangelische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe (EZE - Protestant Central Agency for Development) and Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World) were active in Ethiopia supporting partners in government controlled parts of the country. Both used own funds as well as funds provided by the German protestant churches through Kirchlicher Entwicklungsdienst (KED - The Churches’ Development Service). Several German mission societies were also supporting the work of the churches in Ethiopia, particularly in Southern Ethiopia and the Oromo inhabited areas.

As in many European and North American countries, agencies, churches and influential individuals had very different perceptions and took very different positions concerning the events in Ethiopia. The conflicts in the Horn were mirrored in many ways in Europe and North America as well. So much so, that the only known assassination attempt by the Mengistu regime in Europe targeted the Secretary for the Horn of Africa of the Berliner Missionswerk, Dr. Gunnar Hasselblatt. Fortunately, it failed. However, West German intelligence allowed the two would be assassins to escape to East Berlin thereby averting a political confrontation with the Addis regime. The incident showed that the Oromo issue was high on the agenda of the Mengistu regime.

## The Mülheim Process (1986 to 1990)

In the early 1980ies the political debate in Germany about the situation in Ethiopia - the rule of a military dictatorship, the ongoing liberation struggle of the Eritrean movement and the increased activities of the TPLF and the OLF - had run into an impasse. Within the German churches and their agencies, a controversy was going on whether or not it was appropriate to stay engaged in Ethiopia - and if yes, how. At the political level, it proved to be impossible to change the “business as usual” practice of German political actors. This was mainly due to internal disagreement between the German churches and their agencies. But the fact that the claims and agendas of the liberation movements were contradictory and mutually exclusive did not make things easier for the churches. “There was no one who provided a realistic alternative to the existing regime” as one high-ranking government official put it.

In response to the difficulties in mobilizing international support for a mediation process to end the civil war in Ethiopia, two leading personalities of the churches in Ethiopia discussed with the director of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Kirchlicher Entwicklungsdienst (AG KED, Association of the Churches’ Development Services), Manfred Drewes, possibilities to establish a platform with the objective of providing space for the various Ethiopian Diaspora groups in Germany (and possibly other European countries as well) to engage in a discussion about the political perspectives and options for the Ethiopian people. The politically active Diaspora groups all had their respective relations to the liberation movements and other political actors in the Horn of Africa, including the government. It was hoped, therefore, that by engaging the Diaspora groups one would indirectly also engage the political parties and movements as well.

In a parallel process, the chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Bishop Martin Kruse, challenged the churches and church-related agencies in Germany to address their controversies about the way how to stay engaged with partners in Ethiopia in a systematic way. The director of the Churches Development Service (KED), Rev. Warner Conring, picked up the challenge. As a result, the Consultative Board on the Horn of Africa of the Evangelical Church in Germany was established. Its mandate, established by the Council of the EKD, was to organize a systematic debate among the German churches and church-related agencies which

had relationships to partners in the region, about the political issues pertaining to the developments in the Horn of Africa and possibly to come to a shared assessment and to formulate common positions and develop joint activities.

In 1986, Manfred Drewes presented the idea of a “diaspora platform” to the newly established Consultative Board. After extensive discussions it was decided that the Churches Development Service (KED) and the Association of the Churches Development Services (AG KED) would take the lead in organizing a pilot project. They partnered with the Evangelische Akademie Mülheim/Ruhr (Evangelical Academy of Mülheim/Ruhr) to benefit from the experience of the Akademie in organizing open spaces for free political debates. Dr. Wolf-Dieter Just of the Evangelische Akademie Mülheim agreed to join the process.

A series of conferences were organized as early as June 1986. The first conference was designed as a closed workshop. Using the personal contacts of KED and AG KED staff, leading representatives of the various diaspora groups - including some which were known to support the Ethiopian government - were invited to discuss the idea of an open “diaspora platform”. A difficult and controversial debate at that conference finally resulted in the majority of the representatives of diaspora groups agreeing to form a “steering group” that would play a consultative role in planning and organizing the next event. The groups close to the Ethiopian government opted not to join. It was clear, however, that the process would be under the leadership of the Akademie and the churches’ development organizations. Following the “principles” of the Akademie it was also agreed that future conferences would be open to anyone and that they were intended to provide open space for free political debate. A set of “rules of engagement” were discussed and agreed upon.

From 1987 to 1990 a series of conferences were organized in the premises of the Evangelische Akademie Mülheim/Ruhr. They facilitated discussions and exchange of information between the opposition groups about the institutional and normative requirements for a peaceful cooperation in the region after the end of the struggle.

Even though the different opposition groups shared the same immediate goal - an end to the military regime in Ethiopia -, they did not really want to cooperate in the beginning. There was a lot of mistrust and suspicion not only between the various diaspora groups but also between the various German solidarity groups supporting different political parties. Sometimes it proved to be more dif-

ficult to convince German solidarity groups to engage in a serious debate about a common future after the end of the civil war than convincing members of the Diaspora.

Up to the end in 1990, the Ethiopian government intervened with the German government in order to have the conferences stopped. Even though the German Foreign Office, members of the German parliament (Bundestag) and the Ethiopian Ambassador were always formally invited, it took the German government a number of years to accept the invitation. Members of the German Bundestag, however, e.g. MdB Werner Schuster (SPD) and MdB Joachim Tappe (SPD), very early used the opportunity of these conferences to challenge the Ethiopian participants about the necessity to come up with a shared and convincing post-war political agenda. Without such a convincing programmatic alternative which was shared by a wider group of opposition parties, they argued, it would be impossible to convince governments in Europe to change their policies towards the existing regime.

As the process moved on, members of the German parliament, which had an interest in the developments in Africa, and officials of the German government ministries, particularly the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Development Cooperation (BMZ), increasingly participated in the conferences. At the same time, the political movements, particularly the EPLF, TPLF and OLF, as well as other opposition parties began to send official representatives, initially at lower levels. For the German participants from the political arena the conferences provided informal opportunities to talk to the opposition delegation leaders, to listen to their grievances and complaints about the Mengistu regime.

Each conference - besides being a space for informal meetings and exchanges - also had an official agenda. They addressed various issues relevant for the long-term development in the region. External experts on issues like agricultural development, international legal systems, regional relations, management of regional issues like water management or drought prevention etc. were invited to provide inputs and discuss with the parties’ representatives.

The organizing staff of the Akademie Mülheim, KED and AG KED strictly maintained their role of facilitators. They did not intervene in the content matter of discussions. Part of the facilitating role was the ongoing - and difficult - negotiations with the German Foreign Office and the Ethiopian Ambassador.

During the “Mülheim Process”, the representatives of the Ethiopian opposition parties began to build trust in





the Ethiopian participants who had returned to Ethiopia after the fall of the military regime - and quite a few had taken up government positions - suggested to continue the process - but in Ethiopia. Also some of the opposition groups not represented in the Transitional Government argued for a process similar to the Mülheim one to be conducted inside Ethiopia. The idea of an “organized open space for free political debate” - the underlying mission of the “Evangelische Akademie” when they were established in post-war Germany - seemed to be attractive to many Ethiopians who had returned. Many saw the necessity of engaging a wider spectrum of groups and organizations in Ethiopia in formulating a post-war agenda for the country. Thus, in 1991, KED and AG KED in collaboration with Dr. Wolf-Dieter Just together with Ethiopian partners started a process inside Ethiopia. From 1991 to 1994 the organizers of the Mülheim Process set up a series of conferences and workshops. Each of these workshops was arranged in collaboration with an Ethiopian organization. In 1991, the Ethiopian Red Cross Society was the local partner, in 1992 it was the “Ad Hoc Peace Committee”. However, an important precondition for actually making it a locally rooted process could not be met. It was not possible to find an institutional base for a longer-term process within an Ethiopian organization. Ethiopian organizations were willing to partner for a single event, but none was willing to engage with a longer-term perspective and take full ownership of the process. The German church staff, however, maintained that the process had to become fully locally owned to make a meaningful contribution.

Organizing these conferences proved exceedingly difficult and demanding. Dr. Wolf-Dieter Just and staff of the AG KED spent weeks, sometimes months, in Ethiopia for the preparation and execution of individual programme parts. Each one required long and sometimes tedious negotiations with the Ethiopian authorities, the political parties, the continuously growing spectrum of civil society actors and, last but not least, an Ethiopian partner organization. In this process AG KED staff got in official contact with the OLF leadership for the first time.

Mistrust and suspicion amongst key political actors in Ethiopia grew very quickly and visibly. In 1992, the different organizations involved in the planning of the conference developed a plan to arrange for a large meeting of all opposition groups, Christian and Muslim leaders, traditional elders and local administration from all parts of the country for September 1992. The Transitional Gov-

ernment of Ethiopia after long and tedious discussions about the intentions and objectives of the conference agreed to participate in the meeting and actively support it. However, following the principles of the Akademie that the conferences should be free and open spaces, the AG KED and its partners in this process at that time did not allow the representative of the Transitional Government in the planning group to have the final say in determining the agenda and the list of participants. The Transitional Government eventually withdrew from the process. The conference had to be drastically downscaled. It was characterized by a mood of distrust among the political participants and apprehension on the part of civil society participants. In 1993 and 1994, two more conferences were organized. By then, it had become evident that the process was still externally driven, politely accepted and half-heartedly supported by Ethiopian partners. AG KED, therefore, decided to terminate the process.

## The “Bonn Talks”

### Preparations for the “Bonn Talks”

After the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) had disintegrated and the OLF had decided to go into exile, some of the leading OLF politicians moved to Germany. In 1994, they approached the AG KED, remembering the Mülheim Process and the active role of the German Evangelical Church. Fearing that the political conflict between the TPLF and the OLF could again result in violent confrontation, they proposed another dialogue with the Ethiopian government. They preferred a process hosted in Germany, because in contrast to the US and the British governments, the German government was not perceived as pursuing strong interests of its own in Ethiopia. In addition, the German Ambassador Dr. Winkelmann had played a very positive and encouraging role in Ethiopia in the first years of the new government after the fall of the Mengistu regime. He had maintained an active and open-minded dialogue with the various political parties as well as with Ethiopian civil society organizations and the churches.

In April 1994 an OLF delegation met members of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and AG KED staff in Hanover. During the discussions, the OLF delegates indicated that they were willing to engage with the Ethiopian government and to officially declare their intention to engage in a peaceful conflict resolution

through negotiations and a political agreement. Based on that declaration of intent, the design, formal requirements and agenda items of such a dialogue were discussed. In a parallel development, the German Ambassador to Ethiopia, Dr. Horst Winkelmann, discussed with Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi the same concerns. Meles confirmed that the Ethiopian government was interested in negotiating with the OLF. However, as a precondition for talks he expected from the OLF to officially renounce the use of violence.

Following his discussion with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Dr. Winkelmann approached AG KED staff to explore the possibilities of organizing an informal meeting between him and the OLF leadership. On July 13 and on July 29, 1994, the German Ambassador met OLF delegates in a church venue in Bonn. They discussed the possibilities of negotiations between them and the Ethiopian government. Dr. Winkelmann also explained to what extent the German government could contribute to a negotiation process.

From his discussions with both sides, Dr. Winkelmann and senior officers in the German Foreign Office concluded that a settlement between the OLF and the EPRDF-led Ethiopian government could only be achieved in a long-term process. The OLF delegation requested Dr. Winkelmann to act as a moderator of the talks with the Ethiopian government. In another personal meeting, Dr. Winkelmann persuaded Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to officially offer talks with the OLF.

As a follow up to these talks, AG KED staff had several informal meetings with the OLF and representatives of the Ethiopian government. One consultation with the OLF leadership was particularly important. In January 1995, AG KED staff wanted to convince the OLF to stay engaged in Ethiopian politics and to run in the upcoming elections. At this meeting, the OLF delegation declared its willingness to negotiate with the Ethiopian government without any preconditions. AG KED staff took this information to the German Foreign Office. With the FO's Representative for Africa, Harald Ganns, they discussed the options for an initiative in Germany and the involvement of Dr. Winkelmann. With senior officers of the Foreign Office there was agreement about the urgency of the matter and the concern about potential armed conflict. After internal discussions, the German Foreign Office eventually agreed to provide visa for high-level OLF representatives to come to Germany for political negotiations and to allow Dr. Winkelmann to

act as a moderator. However, the Foreign Office refused any official involvement of the German government. It welcomed the initiative as a church initiative but officially they would not participate in the meetings and Dr. Winkelmann would have to act as a private person without the institutional backing of the German government. In case media got to know about this initiative it would have to be an exclusively church-owned process. Asked about an interpretation of the German government's position, one KdK member stated that from his observation the top leadership of the German Foreign Office at that time had no policy regarding Ethiopia. From his observation it was mainly concerned to avoid any activity that might be perceived as acting against the perceived or real interests of the US administration. He remembered that in mid-1994 in a meeting with Ethiopian civil society organization, the US ambassador was asked about the priorities of US policy in Ethiopia. The US ambassador replied that the US administration had three priorities: "No 1: stability, No 2: stability and No 3: stability" and concluded by stating that from the US administration's point of view "the current government is the only one that is able to provide stability".

According to Dr. Winkelmann himself, it was a grave mistake and inbuilt weakness of the process that he could not act in the name of the German government. This decision, he observed, limited the authority he could bring to bear in the mediation process. Although he had a good standing in Ethiopia as a private person, he could have had much more leverage with the official support of the German government. During the talks, however, it was not communicated to the parties that he did not officially represent the German government. This allowed him to maintain some political clout in spite of the German government's reluctance. After the German Foreign Office had confirmed its support, the AG KED used its personal contacts to inform and secure the support of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). This had to be handled very confidentially. Any breach of secrecy would have aborted the entire process. With the backing of the German government and the German protestant churches, AG KED then approached the OLF and the Ethiopian government to convince them to engage in this process. In a first phase, a series of shuttle-consultations took place to establish the framework, the "rules of the game" and to draw up a list of agenda items. Several "talks about the talks" were organized involving low-level representatives of the Ethiopian

government and the OLF. In December 1996, Dr. Winkelmann and AG KED staff met once more with leading OLF representatives for final preparatory discussions. The OLF delegation declared its readiness to start the negotiations with the Ethiopian government.

### The First Round

On February 24 and 25, 1997, the first round of negotiations took place in Bonn, Germany. The Deutsche Afrika-Stiftung<sup>1</sup> agreed to host the meeting. Three delegates each from the Ethiopian government and the OLF were present at the meeting. As moderator, Dr. Winkelmann - at that time he was not any more the German ambassador to Ethiopia - opened the meeting. AG KED staff remained on the side to support the moderator and to take care of organizational matters. The first round of the Bonn talks focused mainly on the conditions that would make it possible for the OLF to return to Ethiopia. The key issue was the option of armed resistance. Since this issue was seen as the thorniest, the moderator excluded this question from the first round and worked towards practical agreements first. During this round, Dr. Winkelmann observed that the AG KED staff mainly engaged with the OLF delegation and consulted with them, because it relied on some technical and practical advice in the negotiations with the Ethiopian government. In spite of that, however, he confirmed that the AG KED staff did not participate in the discussions. They provided networks and supported the process in the background. Dr. Winkelmann himself focused his attention on the Ethiopian government delegation, because they trusted him. This allowed him to talk to them openly and to express his opinion frankly.

The first meeting was very encouraging. Kinfe Gebremedhin, the chief representative of the Ethiopian government, and also Dima Nogo, chief representative of the OLF, expressed high hopes that the OLF would return to the government soon. Both were, in the view of moderator Dr. Winkelmann, very honest and sincerely interested in an agreement. But as the process progressed it became more and more clear that there were actors pre-

sent, on both sides, who seemed to have an interest in the failure of the meetings.

On the first evening of the meeting, a member of the Ethiopian government delegation told Dr. Winkelmann that he was dissatisfied with the imprecise argumentation of the OLF. Dr. Winkelmann reacted by asking the OLF delegation to prepare an agenda of topics they wanted to have discussed the next day. The OLF prepared the list of agenda items, but at 10:00 am the direct negotiations seemed to have stalled. Dr. Winkelmann talked to the leaders of both delegations and to both delegations separately. After long discussions with Dr. Winkelmann, the OLF conceded to acknowledge the Ethiopian Constitution and to end the armed struggle. Due to this declaration, the talks continued. Later the parties agreed that the next meeting should be held from July 9 to 12, 1997 in Bonn.

From this first session, Dr. Winkelmann had the impression that especially the OLF delegation was divided amongst itself. One group seemed to be willing to return to Addis Ababa and was seriously engaged in the discussions. But there were also some in the delegation who seemed to prefer another outcome. Nonetheless, Dr. Winkelmann at that moment was convinced that the negotiations would succeed in a few months.

Right after the first meeting, the OLF delegation sent a letter to Dr. Winkelmann thanking him for his efforts. But they also insisted that progress achieved in the negotiation was due to themselves. The OLF had made several concessions - on the issue of the Constitution and the option of armed struggle. Hence, they expected the Ethiopian government delegation to make some concessions in return. About one and a half months after the first round of negotiations, the AG KED clarified the role of the German Foreign Office in the further negotiations to be that of an official authority. It was arranged that Dr. Winkelmann would continue his role as a mediator. At the same time, it was agreed to request the Deutsche Afrika Stiftung again to host the next round of negotiations as well.

In April 1997, the OLF leadership wanted to organize a conference to discuss the political perspectives with a larger group of OLF members. It felt such a discussion was necessary to build support for their strategy within

---

<sup>1</sup> — The „Deutsche Afrika Stiftung“ (German Africa Foundation) is a non-profit foundation established in 1978. Its objective is to intensify the relationships between Germany and African states by strengthening freedom, the respect of human rights, democracy and sustainable development. It was established as an initiative of German Members of Parliament (Bundestag) and academics. The current chairperson is MdB Hartwig Fischer. Though many of its members are from the federal parliament and staff of Ministries of the German government, it is a non-partisan foundation.

the wider OLF constituency. They felt they needed to have a strong mandate for the next round of negotiations with the EPRDF delegation. KED and AG KED were asked for financial support. Even though it would be difficult to organize, both signaled their support. However, this conference or consultation never took place. The internal contradictions in the OLF were too deep.

Already before the second round of negotiations, the general atmosphere became tense due to “irritating communication” from the German embassy in Ethiopia. Despite this, Dr. Winkelmann met with the OLF delegation twice before the second meeting of the “Bonn talks”. In these meetings they analyzed the obstacles and potentials and discussed the OLF’s negotiation strategy.

### **The Second Round**

The second round of negotiations was held between July 9 and 12, 1997 in Bonn. Again, the AfrikaStiftung was the host of the negotiations with Dr. Winkelmann acting as a mediator. Surprisingly, Kinfe Gebremedhin did not arrive with his delegation as expected. Instead, an EPRDF delegation consisting of only two persons arrived. In a personal letter to Dr. Winkelmann, Kinfe explained that illness was the reason for his absence. Kinfe’s absence was a disappointment for the OLF delegation. They regarded him as the most important representative within the government delegation. At the opening of the talks, the EPRDF delegation emphasized that they had been given a comprehensive mandate to reach and conclude an agreement. Still, the atmosphere was very tense on the first day. On the second day, the atmosphere became friendlier and in the afternoon both sides formulated an agreement to meet a third time in this informal environment. A date was set for – maybe – September. In addition, the delegations agreed on some issues, which should be discussed the next time: the Constitution, the human rights situation, economic and social problems, environmental policies, the next elections, and access to the media. In spite of these statements, according to the mediator’s perception the delegates did not really move and there was no substantial progress in the negotiations.

Following this round of negotiations between the OLF and the EPRDF, the OLF again requested organizational and financial support for an Oromo conference. This time, a German political foundation agreed to back the meeting. From August 25 to 29, 1997, forty Oromo rep-

resentatives met in Germany to discuss the OLF’s strategy for the negotiations with the Ethiopian government. Members of the OLF leadership, representatives of the Oromo Relief Association (ORA), and members of important diaspora groups and of Oromo civil groups were present at the meeting. The participants had a very controversial debate about the peace process with the EPRDF. It was apparent that many representatives were very frustrated with the Ethiopian government’s behavior and had their doubts concerning the Bonn talks. However, in the end the conference gave the OLF delegation a strong mandate for the negotiations. According to the observers from the political foundation and the AG KED, this was an important success for the members of the OLF delegation. Most of all, it was a signal to the wider public that the Oromo were interested in a peaceful settlement of the conflict with the Ethiopian government.

### **The Third Round**

The third round of direct negotiations between the OLF and the EPRDF from October 6 to 7, 1997 was again hosted by the Deutsche Afrika Stiftung in Bonn. Dr. Winkelmann opened the discussions on the 6th at 10:30 am. At the end of the following morning, the negotiations were about to fail. In contrast to the previous talks, the government delegation arrived with clear instructions from Meles Zenawi. They demanded from the OLF a public abdication of violence as a precondition before the government would be willing to negotiate on the topics agreed in the second round. The OLF delegation was not willing and not able to accept such a demand. In the afternoon, the negotiations stalled. The parties did not agree on another meeting. Dr. Winkelmann declared his role as a mediator terminated.

This third – and last – round of negotiation was a disaster. Again, the Ethiopian government had changed its delegation and had sent another chief representative, an army general. In addition it did not come prepared with any constructive suggestions or proposals. The government delegation refused – even in personal talks with the mediator – to explain, why they were blocking any progress in the negotiations. Dr. Winkelmann felt frustrated, angry and abused – particularly by the Ethiopian government delegation. In retrospect, it seems the EPRDF government – and in particular Meles Zenawi – had intended the negotiations to fail – if not right from the beginning, then latest when he decided to remove Kinfe from the negotiations.

After the collapse of the negotiations, the OLF published a declaration. It put the responsibility for the failure squarely on the Ethiopian government and accused it not to honour the understanding reached in the previous talks. Dr. Winkelmann wrote an angry letter to Meles Zenawi complaining about the behaviour of his delegation. In his reply Meles accused the OLF of continuing armed struggle whilst the negotiations were going on. Therefore, the government delegation had been instructed to block any progress as long as the OLF continued armed struggle. Whether Meles' accusation was true or not and the OLF in fact continued fighting could not be verified by the organizers. Anyhow, this was the end of the Bonn talks.

In retrospect, some KdK members feel Meles's claim might have been correct. But, why play this card at this crucial moment? It was well known, that not all OLF armed groups were under central control and there were regular clashes. The assumption by many, that it was Meles' strategy from the outset to further split the OLF by creating tensions between the moderate and the more belligerent factions inside the OLF, most probably is correct. Demanding a renunciation of the option of armed struggle clearly served that purpose. Unfortunately, the more belligerent factions within the OLF did not see - or did not want to see - the trap Meles had set up for them. According to AG KED staff, this strategy could either mean that Meles had no interest whatsoever in any settlement with the OLF, or that he intended to split and weaken the OLF before any part of it would be readmitted into Ethiopian politics.

One and a half weeks after the end of the "Bonn talks", the OLF approached AG KED to discuss possibilities for a continuation of the talks with the Ethiopian government. With the experience of the first attempt still fresh in their minds, AG KED staff requested time to consider the request. Soon after that, the Eritrean-Ethiopian war stopped all preparations and consultations for a "rapprochement" of the parties.

### **Important Non-Ethiopian Actors**

The dialogue process in Germany unfolded independently from KdK's initiatives. But to the extent possible, information was shared between both the KdK and German initiatives. In both processes, confidentiality was of highest importance for two reasons: both processes relied on a certain level of trust particularly by the parties

concerned and both processes needed to be protected from external influences attempting to spoil any constructive outcome. It was possible to share information between the two processes while maintaining a high level of confidentiality because the members of the KdK Group and some of the key actors in Germany had long standing personal relationships. Some of them had already collaborated on political issues as members of the European Working Group on the Horn of Africa in the 1980s.

In the dialogue process in Germany, Dr. Winkelmann certainly was a central actor. During his tenure as German ambassador to Ethiopia he had gained the trust of the government, but also of the opposition parties and Ethiopian civil society organizations. During his term of office from 1992 to 1995, he was in close contact with the government, opposition parties, labour unions, churches and Muslim leaders. An observer noted that Dr. Winkelmann defined his role as being the representative of a democratic and pluralistic society. As such, he felt obliged to be in touch with all relevant actors in the Ethiopian society. This, the observer noted, differs distinctly from a concept often encountered in practice of a diplomat as a representative of a government vis-à-vis another government. As ambassador, Dr. Winkelmann wanted to support the new Ethiopian government to deal with the challenges facing a war-torn society and a country wounded by decades of civil war. At the same time, he wanted to strengthen the democratic progress and compliance with human rights standards. He approached the different political and societal actors and established good relationships with them. He was also in close contact with the staff of the German church organizations. He came to know the AG KED and KED staff involved in the "Mülheim Process" when they were preparing for the conferences in Ethiopia after the fall of the military regime. He met them frequently, participated in some of the sessions, they shared their observations and they discussed ways to strengthen the democratic process in the Ethiopian society. When the Transitional Government began to derail, he shared their concern to keep the OLF engaged in Ethiopian politics. When the process of the "Bonn talks" was designed, it was almost natural that they worked together.

Another important actor was a high official in the German Foreign Office. He represented the German government and organized the Foreign Office's support in the background. He had deep sympathies for the African continent and supported the German ambassador and the Bonn talks - sometimes in very unconventional ways

- as much as was possible within an institution that was at best disinterested. He also had a personal history of good contacts with the German churches and church-related agencies. During his time in office, they had met frequently to share assessments of situations and discuss ongoing activities. Without his support and influence in the Foreign Office, the “Bonn talks” would not have happened, as Dr. Winkelmann and the church staff confirmed. He was aware of the importance of this activity and the sensitivity of the process. But unfortunately, even he was not able to mobilize a more active official political support for the initiative.

The staff of the AG KED was the third actor engaged in the “Bonn talks”. They acted as facilitators and organizers but were only rarely present at the negotiation table. Their main task was to organize the space, protect the process from outside interference and provide logistical support. They kept in the background, organized the meetings and the accommodation and during the discussion rounds they took care of the accompanying tasks. Apart from that, they also consulted with the OLF delegations, shared their observations and - if requested - experiences. However, the role of the AG KED staff was possible only because they were supported by the director of KED, Rev. Warner Conring, and the director of AG KED, Rev. Rainer Lingscheidt. Both agreed to accept almost exclusively verbal reporting to maintain the confidentiality of the process. They secured funding and occasionally official backing from high-ranking church representatives.

An invisible actor, who had some share in the formation of the Bonn talks, was the KdK Group. As a group, they were not directly involved in these negotiations. But due to the fact that one of the German church staff was also a member of KdK, and KdK’s own efforts to push the OLF and the EPRDF coalition towards another meeting, “KdK prepared the ground and the framework for the Bonn talks”. Without KdK’s separate meetings with both parties, in which they challenged them and their positions, the “Bonn talks” would not have gone as far as they did. To some extent this is in line with one of the self-assigned tasks of the KdK Group. Apart from engaging with the political actors in Ethiopia directly it also wanted to stimulate European governments and churches to get involved.

## Assessment

It is difficult to assess the impact of the initiatives in Germany and particularly the “Bonn talks”. Several fac-

tors have to be considered. First, there is a difference between the process of negotiations itself and its outcome. Second, AG KED and Dr. Winkelmann had different tasks. From the interviews it seems they also pursued slightly different goals.

The “Mülheim Process” succeeded in bringing the opposition forces together and stimulated a debate that went beyond the criticism of the status quo. An indicator of success was the shift in the German government’s position concerning the Eritrean struggle. Another indicator is that the opposition groups participating in the Mülheim Process increasingly were able to communicate a coherent post-war agenda to the political actors in Germany. This drew the attention first of members of the Bundestag and later also of Foreign Office officials. However, the Mülheim Process failed in including the Ethiopian government. On the other hand it was - unintentionally - successful in creating favourable conditions for the “Bonn talks” five years later.

Of course, both Dr. Winkelmann and the AG KED staff wanted to achieve a positive result of the “Bonn talks”: the return of the OLF to the Ethiopian government coalition. Dr. Winkelmann was directly involved in the negotiations between the delegations. The AG KED played a supportive role and was not involved in the talks. The aim of the AG KED staff was mainly to make the negotiations happen. Their point of departure was that the two parties had to come to a solution of their conflict themselves. Of course, they actively tried to establish a framework for all parties, which would support a positive outcome, but in the end it was up to the negotiating parties - and the mediator to a certain extent - to reach an agreement. In addition, AG KED staff had a longer-term objective. If a return of the OLF into the acting government coalition failed they hoped that the negotiation process would prepare the ground for further engagement to ensure a constructive role of the OLF in Ethiopian politics in the long run. Hence, AG KED reached its goal of facilitating direct negotiations between the Ethiopian government and the OLF. The fact that three direct meetings did actually take place can be considered a success from the AGKED staff’s point of view.

As the mediator and as a professional diplomat, Dr. Winkelmann directly interacted with the parties. He was in control of the process and influenced the discussions. To some extent - though to different degrees - he also had an influence on the parties. As part of the negotiations, it was his task to guide the discussions and to raise the

important topics. As a result, Dr. Winkelmann's personal aim was the resumption of the parties' cooperation in the Ethiopian government as the outcome of his engagement. The negotiation process ended without an agreement. Therefore, personally Dr. Winkelmann perceived this as a process that failed to reach its objective.

This raises the question whether all conditions were in place to safeguard a successful outcome. Did Dr. Winkelmann have all means at his disposal to ensure success? As the moderator even Dr. Winkelmann, who enjoyed tremendous trust from both parties, could only initiate discussions or agreements. Neither the moderator nor the organizers possessed the means to also exert pressure if any of the parties proved unwilling to reach an agreement. And neither of them had any means to fend off negative interference from within any of the parties. All the mediator and the organizers had at their disposal was an ethically grounded position and good arguments. The latter, however, obviously did not prove to be politically convincing.

In the end success or failure could be determined neither by the organizers nor by the mediator. EPRDF and the OLF had to resolve their conflict. They controlled the outcome. Due to the fact that Dr. Winkelmann - and also the AG KED - tried everything they could to push the parties towards an agreement, one has to question, whether the Ethiopian government and the OLF seriously wanted a positive outcome. There are strong indications, however, that the TPLF was not seriously interested. But the mediator observed that at least in the first rounds also the OLF delegation was clearly not united.

One can also only speculate whether the process would have had another outcome if the German Foreign Office had played a more active official role, thereby adding political clout to the moral stance of the individual persons immediately involved.

Compared to the KdK initiative going on at the same time, both seem to have suffered from the same conditions. In terms of networks, relationships, knowledge, trust and skills both KdK and the actors in Germany provided excellent resources to facilitate constructive political negotiations. Both, however, lacked sufficient official political backing.

# The Eritrean-Ethiopian War from 1998–2000

## Clouds Gathering

The outbreak of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in early May 1998 was not entirely unexpected but it happened much earlier than anyone had thought. Nobody in the KdK Group or relief organizations had anticipated the armed conflict between the neighbouring countries at this time. On the surface, relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia had appeared solid and the leaders of both countries cooperated in many ways, including the energy sector, education and security. They met on a regular basis and worked closely together in preventing Sudan's ambitions to export radical Islam to the region and supported the ambitions of Southern Sudan for self-determination. Moreover, they gave life to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, IGAD, which aims for the development of its member states.

## Superficial Causes

While the leaders of the two countries seemed to cooperate well on a number of issues, tensions were rising between the two countries due to a series of unresolved issues. First, economic issues like cross-border trade and the use of the common currency, the Ethiopian Birr, were fuelling tensions. Cross-border trade, especially in agricultural products, was very important for Eritrea because it lacked the wherewithal to feed its population and thus depended on food imports from Ethiopia. However, the treaties needed for regulating these trade relations and other crucial issues like the currency and Ethiopia's dependence on the port of Assab were never negotiated and signed. Under the prevailing practice, Eritrean merchants just travelled to Ethiopia and bought huge amounts of Ethiopian harvest. Particularly, they bought coffee just after the harvests, when prices were low in Ethiopia and resold it back to Ethiopia when the prices became higher. Understandably, the Ethiopian authorities resented such practice and parties in Ethiopia that had opposed Eritrea's independence in the first place used these practices to attack the government for its leniency towards Asmara. Over time the Ethiopian government came under increasing pressure to do something about it.

While the controversies concerning unbeloved bilateral issues were brewing, the Eritrean government decided to introduce its own currency, the Nakfa, in 1997 in order to replace the Ethiopian Birr. While the Birr had

been a common currency both in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Ethiopian National Bank was in the position to unilaterally control the currency of both countries. The Eritrean government had requested to also have representatives on the Board of the National Bank in order to have a say on monetary policy. When this request was rejected by the Ethiopian government the Eritrean government's frustration grew even more culminating in its decision to introduce its own currency. Ethiopian officials expressed some very negative feelings about the new Eritrean currency, which the Eritreans ignored. However, the introduction of the Eritrean Nakfa considerably complicated the cross-border trade issue.

Further contributing to the souring of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea at this time was Ethiopia's continued dependence on and use of the port of Assab. Ethiopia had become landlocked with Eritrea's independence but still depended on the port of Assab for its imports and exports. Over time the Ethiopian authorities requested more and more privileges in their use of the Assab harbour. When the Eritrean authorities raised port fees and taxes, the Ethiopian government reacted with anger. This, they felt, was contrary to the initial understanding that Ethiopia could use Assab as its own domestic port. One KdK member argued that Eritrea could have been more generous and could have allowed Ethiopia to have unconditional access to Assab because it was Ethiopia's link to the outside world. However, all of these tensions were not sufficient to justify another war.

## Underlying Deeper Causes

The first of the deeper causes is the deep-seated culture of violence in the region. Due to their history as liberation fronts both the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea view violence not as the last but as the most effective means for resolving conflicts. As explained by the KdK chair, they harboured the mentality: "... where they don't know how to sort out things, you use force!" Relationships between the EPLF and TPLF had always been difficult. Their relationship was never based on trust and friendship despite sharing a long common history. There has always been a strong competition between EPLF and TPLF. In the late 1980s, they had fought vicious verbal battles with each other even while the liberation war was still going on. Both the EPLF and the TPLF saw themselves as the rightful and natural supreme leader in the region.



When Meles Zenawi and his group went into the bush to form a liberation movement, the EPLF was already a highly trained, extremely well-organized and armed resistance force. The EPLF helped the TPLF by training them politically, militarily and organizationally. The EPLF therefore felt that it had contributed greatly in enabling the TPLF to take power in Ethiopia. As a result, Isaias Afewerki felt he was the natural hegemon in the Horn of Africa. On the other hand, the TPLF and Meles personally felt that the EPLF owed them a lot because they supported the EPLF's cause and made Eritrean independence possible. In addition, Ethiopia was the much larger country with a bigger population and abundant resources. As a result, Meles saw himself as the regional hegemon. These diametrically opposite self-perceptions were never openly articulated, but were constantly communicated in signals and innuendos.

The psychology of Meles and Isaias thus inevitably became a contributory factor to the outbreak of conflict. Meles and Isaias were both convinced that the other man owed him a lot. Isaias was convinced that Meles owed him the defeat of the Derg regime and, hence, his power. For this reason, he saw Meles's behaviour as a personal insult and the minimization of his achievements and generosity. Likewise, Meles remained convinced that Isaias owed him the independence of Eritrea and his power. Therefore, the policies of the Eritrean government regarding the border trade, the use of the port and the Eritrean currency were perceived by Meles as abuses of his noble concessions. Thus, wounded vanity seemed to be another reason for the outbreak and escalation of the conflict.

## **The Deadly Mix of Revanchism, Sabotage and Miscalculation**

Active sabotage also played a role in this sad saga. Many problems were created by the bureaucracies of both countries and some societal groups, which pushed them into armed conflict. Especially in Ethiopia, members of the Amhara elite never accepted the independence of Eritrea and remained determined to reverse history. They remained convinced that Eritrea was part and parcel of their country and were willing to regain it by force if necessary. In addition, the regional government in Tigray, run by TPLF high-ranking politicians and military commanders, had an interest in the escalation of the conflict.

As Eritrea profited most from the border trade and migrant labour, they were the ones who felt its first-hand impact. Moreover, they were then engaged in an internal power struggle with the TPLF leadership in Addis Ababa. Consequently, for the TPLF cadres in Tigray an outbreak of the border conflict would serve two issues: the unresolved cross-border trade and their personal aspirations within the party.

Apart from that, the leaders of both countries, but Isaias in particular, grossly miscalculated. Isaias was convinced that his troops would defeat the TPLF, because it were his troops who defeated the Derg army and entered Addis Ababa first. Also, the EPLF had trained TPLF troops. He believed he had a good assessment of the TPLF's fighting power. Years later, the independent Claims Commission ultimately found the Eritrean government liable for starting the border war by over-reacting to the minor border incident of May 1998. In an attempt to pressure Meles, Isaias pushed a minor armed incident near the town called Badme into a full-scale war. He wanted to shock the Ethiopian government and expected Meles to request for a quick meeting in which they could resolve the outstanding problems. He did not read the internal mood and situation in Ethiopia correctly and was, thus, taken by surprise when the conflict escalated out of his control.

There had been a number of prior border incidents initiated by both sides. According to a KdK member, there had been attempts by Tigrayan authorities to absorb territory which belonged to Eritrea into Tigray. Then the Ethiopian government put more and more sanctions on Eritrea because of unresolved economic issues. The Ethiopian government at one instant closed the border with Eritrea blocking the thriving border trade and migrant work. This measure hit Eritrea much harder than Ethiopia. There were no functioning institutional mechanisms through which the parties could communicate and resolve such problem. The ambassadors of European or North American governments were in no position to moderate. In Eritrea, they were not listened to in the first place due to the international community's position on Eritrean independence since the beginning of the liberation struggle up to almost its end. Or their advice was smothered in the bureaucracy on both sides. Thus, Meles and Isaias ended up dealing with these problems personally but both were too proud and stubborn to work out a compromise. One KdK member stated that they could have stopped the war if they had wanted.



People gather in a joyful mood at a polling station during the referendum in Eritrea.

Since nobody expected it at this time and outsiders continued to see the leaders of the two nations as old comrades-in-arms, it was impossible to prevent the war. The KdK Group had been aware of the tensions between the two leaderships but was unable to discuss about them with either side as both sides denied the existence of these tensions.

The start of the battles was accompanied by a massive ethnic mobilization in Ethiopia, which had a disastrous impact on the society. The Ethiopian government used ethnic mobilization against Eritrean during the war, which meant a drastic change in Ethiopian history. Even after the start of the Eritrean war of liberation in 1960, many Eritreans continued to live, work and raise families in Ethiopia. Three, four and even five generations of Eritreans had been working even in the Ethiopian government bureaucracy. With this ethnic mobilization, the Ethiopian government for the first time discriminated against one particular group as a matter of government policy. Tens of thousands of Eritreans were deported – including business people, entrepreneurs, university professors, government employees and whole families. One

of the KdK members described this action as a policy of ethnic cleansing. This targeted discrimination against Eritreans had additional negative implications for the Ethiopian society itself, particularly for the Oromos and the OLF. As already mentioned, the OLF leadership had gone into exile in Asmara and in connection with the new war, the TPLF perceived the OLF as a “fifth column” of the Eritrean government. However, the most important impact of this campaign against Eritrean civilians living in Ethiopia was that opposition parties like the OLF and ethnic minorities had to realize that the government was willing to engage even in policies of ethnic cleansing if it served their political purposes.

## The Triggering Incident and its Political Implications

The border incident of May 1998 erupted when eight Eritrean officers were killed after allegedly crossing into Tigrayan territory in order to discuss an earlier incident with Tigrayan border guards. What likely followed is the

movement of Eritrean troops towards the border, a decision taken by field commanders without the authorization of senior officials. However, it cannot be ruled out that the entire incident could also have been pre-planned. The Eritrean troops that crossed into Tigray initially fought against Tigrayan militia forces, because the Ethiopian army had not yet been deployed to the border area. As the ensuing battles continued to worsen, both Isaias and Meles failed to interfere. It may even be possible that the war was already underway before Isaias was informed. One of the KdK members refers to information he got from his local office which operated a radio on the same frequency as the Eritrean armed forces. It picked up an enormous flurry of radio communication between local commanders to the tune: "...we will teach them a lesson,... we will revenge our comrades..." Isaias' pride might have prevented him from accepting that his officers started a conflict without his consent.

Another KdK member pointed out that both leaders had run into so many domestic problems that they "needed" an outside threat to re-direct public discontent and challenges to their leadership within the "inner circles of power".

The conflict entered a new stage after the Eritrean army invaded Tigrayan territory on May 8th. Meles initially downplayed the incident in his first statement on Badme. He wanted to de-escalate the situation and ordered the border army post to handle the situation. After a few days, his rhetoric changed describing the conflict as an affair between Eritrea and Tigray region and not concerning Ethiopia's central government. But Meles came under growing internal pressure from TPLF forces, the army and the Amhara elite. Various political circles started criticizing him publicly for being too lenient with the Eritrean government, some going to the extent of accusing him of selling Tigrayan territory to Eritrea. Meles had to show the resolve and the will to defend Ethiopia. This led him to finally declare the Badme incident to be a "national issue". Thereby he escalated the situation in order to assert that he was the national leader and not just a Tigrayan rebel. And intentionally or not, he unleashed a full-scale war.

On the other side, Isaias also exploited the conflict in order to assert his internal position of power, to gain internal public support and to portray himself as the true national leader who stood up against the Ethiopians. Both leaders thought they could not afford to back down. Both believed they needed the war in order to consolidate

their power. And this is precisely how it worked out. After the declaration of the war, Meles started being seen in Ethiopia as the liberator who defended his motherland. An overwhelming majority of the Eritrean population was ready to forget their dislike of Isaias' authoritarian leadership, the economic hardships and even the persecution of relatives, out of fear of the Ethiopian enemy. The memories of the cruel occupation and the long liberation war were fresh and intensely and cleverly exploited by the dictatorship.

The severity and the intensity of the fighting were shocking for those aware of it. Soon after the outbreak of the war, on May 20th to be exact, the American administration, in cooperation with the Rwandan government, rushed in and recommended some kind of cease fire. They reduced the conflict to a simple border issue and demanded the Eritrean government to redeploy to locations under their control prior to the outbreak of the war. The Eritrean government, naturally, rejected this redeployment because Eritrea and Ethiopia had not agreed on the precise location of the border in the past. The ceasefire, which the American/Rwandan intervention tried to enforce, only deepened the aversions and tensions between the two belligerents instead of serving as a solution. Battles continued to rage and enmity between the two sides only got deeper. In the first rounds of the war, Meles's troops were on the defensive and were pushed out of the areas they were holding. In a later round of fighting, the Ethiopian troops went on the offensive and drove the Eritrean troops out of the area they had taken under their control. At this stage, the Ethiopian army appeared to be prepared, ready and willing to continue its way to Keren and was also approaching Assab. It was at that point that Meles halted the offensive and ordered the Ethiopian troops to return to Ethiopian territory proper. Up to this point the war had obviously served its purpose: it had asserted his position in the party and as an Ethiopian national leader and it had taught Isaias the lesson that Ethiopia was and would be the regional hegemon. Meles had no interest in reversing Eritrea's independence.

## A KdK Analysis and Action

Immediately after the outbreak of the fighting between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the KdK Group held a meeting with friends from Ethiopia and Eritrea. They made a very

thorough analysis of the situation. They came to the conclusion that the US/Rwandan mission aimed at the wrong target and Badme was not the core issue of the conflict. They assessed that the critical issues that caused the war were economic relations, fiscal policy, the port of Assab and citizenship. They felt that these problems needed to be resolved in order to return to peaceful bilateral relations between the two governments. The KdK Group and their friends formulated suggestions on how to address these issues. In late 1998, they approached the Organization of African Unity and the Algerian government, which was delegated by the OAU to resolve the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict. The KdK Group presented its analysis and proposals for a solution to the concerned authorities but failed to convince them.

At the same time, the KdK Group also tried to bring both leaders together to avert an escalation. One KdK member shuttled between Asmara and Addis Ababa to keep communication between Isaias and Meles open. Although they were not trained diplomats he and another KdK member attempted to act as brokers between Isaias and Meles. They were always concerned that they misunderstood or overlooked something in the discussions with Isaias and Meles or were not able to carry the messages correctly and entirely. After all, they tried to facilitate communications between two nations who were at war. Nonetheless, they shuttled messages and proposed solutions from one to the other. Already during the war, the Eritrean leader, Isaias, became more and more autocratic and increasingly refused to even listen to KdK members or other people from the outside.

A few months after the beginning of fighting the OAU held a meeting and decided to officially handle the process and take over from the US/Rwandan initiative. Both the Ethiopian and the Eritrean government preferred the OAU's high-level diplomacy. The KdK Group therefore discontinued its efforts. Some KdK members, though, felt that if they had allowed themselves more time, there could have been a breakthrough. When Meles and Isaias eventually met under the auspices of the OAU, they started to argue and their disagreements hardened. The second round of war broke out as constant crossfire along the border again escalated. The "international community" - the OAU and the UN but also some European governments and the USA - failed to secure the border and separate the armies.

Apart from lobbying with the OAU, the KdK Group engaged with the UN to establish a UN peacekeeping

force to monitor the peace agreement ultimately signed to settle the conflict. They lobbied their respective governments in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden for the financial and personnel resources and also for the governments' political engagement in the UN bodies. This initiative was successful. The Dutch government contributed troops to the UNMEE (United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea) and the Norwegian government supported it financially.

## Regional "Fall-out"

During the war, the other countries of the Horn of Africa got involved in the war to varying degrees. Conflicts in the Horn of Africa were always interlinked and reverberated throughout the whole region as the result of the various parties interfering in each other's affairs. In the Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998-2000, the government of Sudan supported Eritrea while the South Sudanese opposition group backed Ethiopia. Eritrea also backed various Somali groups in their then ongoing civil war. The resulting tension was compounded by the fact that the Somali population inside Ethiopia always wanted to join Somalia thus driving Ethiopia to consider Somalia as an historic enemy.

Apart from lobbying the OAU, the KdK Group addressed their own respective governments - Germany, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden - to get a sufficiently mandated UN peacekeeping force to monitor the peace agreement ultimately signed to settle the conflict. They lobbied for adequate financial and personnel resources and also for their government's engagement in the UN bodies. This initiative showed some success. The Dutch government contributed troops to the UNMEE (United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea) and the Norwegian government supported it with a lot of money.

## The Algiers Agreement

In 2000, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed the Algiers Peace Agreement (APA) under pressure from the international community. The agreement ended the armed conflict between the two countries, it however did not solve the conflict. The war, while it lasted, cost both countries tens of thousands of lives and the economic damage was significant. The APA focused primarily on the border issue, particularly the town of Badme. It failed to address the

underlying causes for the conflict. And another mistake was added. The armed conflict had raised the people's emotions who were influenced by the vicious propaganda and would not accept any military defeat or loss of territory. In the Algiers Agreement no provisions were made for organized reconciliation between the people. This omission soon allowed bitterness, hatred and the desire for revenge to fester. The APA merely managed to stop the actual fighting. However, the conflict continues since then, its underlying causes are still not addressed and the affected people are still not reconciled.

Implementing the APA the Boundary Commission ruled in favour of Eritrea by granting it Badme. Ceding Badme, however, was unacceptable to Meles and many Ethiopians due to several reasons. First, the Ethiopian side had always argued that Badme was part and parcel of sovereign Ethiopian territory, which Eritrea violated in May 1998. Second, regaining it cost some 70,000 lives. Therefore, Meles was in no position to let Badme go. Refusing to cede Badme was, however, contrary to the terms of the APA, according to which the ruling of the Boundary Commission should be final and binding for both parties. When the Ethiopian government violated the APA by refusing to accept the final and binding status of the Commission's ruling, the international community remained silent. There was no visible attempt to exert pressure to have the APA implemented fully. This once more confirmed Isaias' perception and contempt of the international community. The UN and the OAU or any other international body in his eyes were anything but fair and neutral in their dealing with Eritrea. Their behavior clearly demonstrated that Ethiopia was far more important to the international community than Eritrea. The APA was openly sabotaged by Ethiopia without any consequences. The failure to force Ethiopia to respect and implement the final and binding ruling of the Boundary Commission as agreed in the peace agreement became the pivotal cause for Isaias and his government to break links with the international community.

The Eritrean leadership withdrew more and more into isolationism. The Ethiopian leadership considered its policy of ignoring international law and non-cooperation as a success. Furthermore, the Ethiopian government felt they could deal with Eritrea militarily at any time it was felt necessary.

On the torn relations between the Ethiopian and Eritrean government there was obviously no need for a dialogue partner like the KdK Group.

## The Focus of the KdK in the Post-War Period

After failing to contribute to the resolution of the Ethio-Eritrea conflict, the KdK Group launched a number of unconventional initiatives at societal level. It supported the launching of an initiative to bring together religious leaders from Eritrea and Ethiopia. And it resumed addressing the conflict between the OLF and the Ethiopian government. These initiatives will be discussed one after the other hereunder.

### The Religious Leaders' Initiative

In 1998 NCA launched the "Religious Leaders' Initiative" in consultation with the KdK Group. This was not a KdK initiative as such but one in which some of its members were involved while keeping the others informed. Members of the KdK Group contributed to the initiative by providing contacts, analysis and advice and keeping doors open.

The Religious Leaders' Initiative intended to bring together leaders from the different Christian churches and the Muslim communities in Ethiopia and Eritrea. It was hoped that this group, as religious leaders, could prepare the ground for understanding and reconciliation at the society level and to influence the political leaderships of both countries by acting in concert and speaking with one voice. The initiators were aware that governments could easily play the religious communities off against each other if they acted separately. Religious leaders had the authority to act on behalf of their peoples by communicating their sufferings to the governments. The overall aim of the Religious Leaders' Initiative was uniting the various religious groups for peace and reconciliation in order to influence their respective governments to end the war. For the initiative to succeed it was necessary also to inform the governments. Without their consent nothing could be done.

The initiative was kicked off by bringing together the different religious groups in each country. At the initial meeting, participants were encouraged to arrive at a joint position regarding the war and its possible resolutions. Later on, participants from both countries were assembled at one venue. The first such meeting took place in Norway. Observers were surprised to see how quickly nationalistic views and sentiments were dropped by both groups. This positive atmosphere enabled the religious leaders to formulate a common paper. The common paper reflected their shared values, principles and commitment. According to a participating KdK member, this was a crucial point because whenever the discussions got

bogged down later on, this document reminded the religious leaders of their common commitment. Difficulties always arose when the religious leaders felt obliged to act on behalf of the political leaders or even under their instructions. Whenever this happened, nationalistic resentments resurfaced and subverted the process.

The religious leaders appealed to the people and the governments by calling for peace and reducing the ongoing mutual hatred. Their efforts contributed to opening up communication between the two countries by restoring telephone and postal services. This process culminated in holding public events in Addis Ababa and Asmara, in March 2002, at which the religious leaders from both countries worshipped together and held joint press conferences. These events were publicized the world over. Even the United Nations Security Council was regularly informed about the Religious Leaders' Initiative since it was the only reconciliation effort going on at that time.

However, the Religious Leaders' Initiative central aim of supporting reconciliation between the peoples of the two countries ran into difficulties after the Algiers Agreement and after 9/11. A joint meeting that was supposed to take place in Kenya could not take place because the religious leaders were not allowed to leave their respective countries. Another more symbolic action, where the religious leaders wanted to meet at the border and jointly cross it, was stopped less than 24 hours in advance by the Ethiopian Prime Minister. Regardless of the disappointment, this indicated the importance of such activities.

In the following years, both the Eritrean Christian and Muslim leaderships were silenced or corrupted by the growingly totalitarian regime in Asmara. The Religious Leaders' Initiative came to a halt. The space for the churches to engage in reconciliation activities had proven to be extremely limited in both Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Attempts by members of the KdK Group to "soften" the growing negative attitude of the governments by involving regional and even pan-African religious organizations also stranded. Both governments in various ways and degrees set up obstacles varying from visa restrictions, agenda problems to "deafening silence" at any approach to make contact. The KdK Group was also not equipped to deal with large continental bodies like the All Africa Conference of Churches and others.

The Religious Leaders' Initiative persisted and was supported by NCA until 2011 on a very low profile. Due to the ever worsening situation in Eritrea, it looked impossible to move substantially forward in the following years.

## Further Talks between the Ethiopian Government and OLF

The KdK Group resumed addressing the OLF-EPRDF conflict after its attempts to contribute to the solution of the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict had failed. However, by then the situation of the KdK Group had significantly changed. Many of their friends in the Ethiopian government had been removed from influential positions, some were side-lined. Meles began surrounding himself with new people to whom the KdK Group did not have access. And even when he himself was accessible, Meles mostly agreed but proved to be non-committal.

In spite of these crucial changes, the KdK Group continued its efforts in Ethiopia to give the Oromo society a decent share in the political life of the country. The issue of the OLF was an important part of that. KdK members had meetings with key people in the TPLF and the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), and above all, with Meles himself.

Between 2002 and 2003 this process again ground to a halt. This became self-evident when the KdK Group carried out another assessment of its work in early 2003. This assessment exposed several shortcomings confronting the group. First, its financial and institutional backing was steadily diminishing. Secondly, the lack of success coupled with mounting difficulties were sapping the group's resolve.

Despite these shortcomings, members of the KdK Group remained convinced that they could still play a role by relying on their moral authority. One initiative resulting from this conviction was supporting a conference of Oromo elders from Europe, Ethiopia and North America. The OLF leadership was invited to the conference held in Norway at the Christian Michelsen Institute in September 2004. The conference ended by releasing a statement declaring that everyone wanted a peaceful settlement of the conflict with the EPRDF/TPLF. Translating the resolution of the conference into actionable policy, however, came to nothing. Some KdK members questioned the political will of the OLF leadership to actually take responsibility, move out of its comfort zone in exile and face the challenges of day-to-day politics.

The efforts of the KdK Group to facilitate talks between the OLF and the Ethiopian government appeared to come to life once again when one KdK member met Meles in Oslo in late 2005. This meeting took place at a particular historical juncture when Meles had lost a significant share of seats in the parliamentary elec-

tions to the Amhara-dominated opposition. The KdK Group saw this development as a window of opportunity to revive the EPRDF-OLF talks. This new initiative was based on the expectation that Meles might want to shore up his position by seeking support from the Oromos.

The KdK member pioneering the initiative had prepared a proposal on how to get both parties to the negotiating table which was approved by Meles. A short time after this meeting in Oslo, Meles publicly declared that he was in talks with the OLF and initial contacts had already been established. This public statement and reversal of the previous government stand heightened the confusion of the OLF leadership thereby negatively influencing their support for the initiative.

In due course, however, the OLF leadership also supported the initiative. But the OLF leadership tried to undermine the influence of the KdK member who started it. Under this circumstance, the initiative could not progress and a potential meeting between the concerned parties became increasingly unpromising. In addition the Ethiopian government set up a new obstacle as Meles had by then presented his new "developmental party strategy" ideology, which is tailored to justify indefinite rule by his party. At the same time, the OLF declared a country-wide uprising to overthrow the TPLF/EPRDF government. Although the country-wide uprising was mere fiction its declaration brought the initiative effectively to an end.

At the next KdK meeting of November 2006, it became obvious that things had not changed. Neither the Ethiopian government nor the OLF were willing to abandon their "all or nothing-strategies". This mentality has always been the pivotal obstacle to negotiations between them. In addition, the EPRDF was reluctant to allow the OLF to return into the political system fearing its deep-seated influence among the Oromo population. This is one of the reasons why the Ethiopian government was not interested in any negotiations with the OLF. And after the large gains of the Amhara opposition in the 2005 elections, the Ethiopian government stepped up the policy of destabilizing opposition parties and intimidating voters.

Another development at this time was the formation of the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD). The AFD emerged as a broad coalition embracing the OLF, a number of pan-Ethiopian opposition parties and some ethnically-based movements. Unfortunately, lack of resolve by its leadership coupled with perennial inter-Ethiopian suspicion rendered the AFD dysfunctional. The Eritrean government jealously guarding its

control over some Ethiopian opposition groups certainly played a destructive role here too. Thereafter, hopes for a democratic challenge to the EPRDF in the forthcoming elections of 2009 and 2010 were gone. The results of the elections of 2010 demonstrate how far democracy has suffered a setback in Ethiopia. The EPRDF took 99.6 percent of the votes by restricting the movements of opposition group and intimidating voters. A system called “electoral authoritarianism” by a KdK member had been installed in Ethiopia.

## Ethiopia and Eritrea: Proliferation of Difficulties After 2000

The KdK Group faced rising obstacles in influencing the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea already during the Ethio-Eritrea war of 1998 - 2000. After the cessation of hostilities in 2000, it became even harder for the group to accomplish its aspiration. The difficulties reaching the leaders of the two countries were compounded by the reduction of financial and institutional support. In addition, both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments prioritized the “task” of staying in power, especially after the end of the war.

Furthermore, both regimes adopted the policy of frustrating and constraining the activities of NGOs. Eritrea took the measure of completely closing down NGOs very early after the end of the liberation war. In contrast, Ethiopia allowed NGOs to remain active but increasingly limited their space and scope of action. Things came to a head when the Ethiopian government passed a new NGO legislation in February 2009. The “Proclamation to Provide for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies” in particular prohibited Ethiopian NGOs from engaging in human rights and advocacy work, if they received more than ten percent of their overall income from foreign sources. This law made it almost impossible for the European relief and development organizations to support such NGOs or civil society groups in Ethiopia. Under the emerging atmosphere, Ethiopian NGOs aspiring to promote human rights and democratization had to either close down their work or change to other missions. This trend hampered the activities of European ecumenical relief and development organizations as well because they used to support their local partners engaged in human rights monitoring and advocacy work. This had implications also for the KdK Group. There had always been some tension between the country staff of the con-

cerned agencies and some members of the KdK Group. These were exacerbated by the emerging development in Ethiopia as it raised fears within the agencies that the KdK’s activities could provoke repercussions for the development or humanitarian work in the country.

In Asmara, most NGO’s had already been forced to close down operations by then anyway.

## Democracy Aborted in Eritrea

After active fighting between Eritrean and Ethiopia had ended, it became very clear that the consequences were far more devastating for Eritrea. Prospects towards an open society were completely destroyed and replaced by an obsession with security and militarism. The international community’s failure to sanction Ethiopia for renegeing on the Algiers Agreement was considered a betrayal by the Eritrean leadership. The resulting resentment led Eritrea’s government to increasingly close up.

Eritrean leaders started according the highest priority to military and security concerns. The resulting militarization of the society had a number of disastrous implications. The main one is the so-called “voluntary” military service for all Eritreans between 12 and 55 years, which in reality was obligatory. The “endless” military service lasting up to ten years had the devastating effect of destroying the spirit and hope of the youth. The Eritrean leadership’s rationale for this level of militarization was the perceived threat posed by Ethiopia. Its true outcome, however, was enabling the Eritrean leadership to exercise total control over the population.

Another of its even more devastating implication was ruining the economy by hampering development and thereby exacerbating the impoverishment of the people. Families could not farm as before having lost the labour of those taken away by the military service. The regime itself survived partly by taxing Eritreans living in exile by pressuring them in various ways going as far as extortions. This included punishing the families of Eritreans refusing to pay the tax or supporting opposition groups.

People who dared to challenge or disagree with the decisions and behaviour of the leadership faced imprisonment or worse. Even members of the inner circle of the government were not immune to such a fate. One such case was a dispute between the “Office of the President” and several senior members of the PFDJ, lasting from January 2000 until September 2001, in which a group of



ministers and other high-rank officials from within the government expressed dissatisfaction with Isaias' style of government. They approached him privately and advised him to change his behaviour. Despite admitting his mistakes, Isaias refused to change it.

This simmering controversy heated up after the conclusion of the Algiers Peace Agreement when some members of the leadership tabled a series of demands. This included the demand for the continuation of the democratic process as well as the implementation of the Constitution. Members of the senior leadership went further and wrote a letter to Isaias demanding discussions about what happened before and during the war. They criticized, advised and asked questions like: "How did the war come upon us? How was it managed? How was the peace process handled? Where are we now economically?" During the war there were no consultations within the cabinet or the relevant government authorities at any point in time. All decisions had been taken by a very small group around Isaias.

Isaias's reaction was drastic. He just replied by saying that they did not know what they were talking about. In addition, the Central Office of the PFDJ raised allegations of treason against these senior members of the party and launched a propaganda campaign against them. As Isaias refused to have any meeting with them they responded to the campaign unleashed against them by going to the private press and publicly criticizing Isaias for miscalculating the situation prevailing before the war. After the publication, those editors of the newspapers and the concerned officials who were not able to escape into exile, were arrested, the newspapers were closed down. Thirteen people who signed the publication are missing ever since and nobody knows their whereabouts or whether they are still alive. In the opinion of a member of the KdK group, Isaias took that letter personally. He regarded it as an attack on his person and his style of management and policies.

After the end of the war the members of the KdK Group could no longer do much to influence developments in Eritrea. The KdK Group tried to convince European governments to engage with Eritrea but were not successful. Governments, increasingly frustrated with arrogance and contempt displayed by Eritrean functionaries, closed their embassies, almost all NGOs either voluntarily discontinued their work in Eritrea or were forced to leave. Bread for the World staff stated that they withdrew from Eritrea, because their partners could no longer

act independently and pursue their goals and development policies anymore. They either had to stop operating or carry out state-owned programmes.

Though many other international NGO had decided to close their operations, NCA decided to remain despite having its activities totally curtailed. KdK members also continued in their effort to create forums for discussions in Eritrea by bringing together Eritrean intellectuals. In one such forum participants discussed and wrote a letter to Isaias offering to help him in resolving the issues. Some KdK members personally met with Isaias and other senior leaders. They used the opportunities to raise issues dealing with development, human rights and religious freedom in a non-threatening manner - as friends and former partners. The KdK Group attempted to persuade Isaias to adopt a less aggressive attitude and style towards the international community, despite his justified feeling that the Eritrean people had been betrayed during the liberation struggle and after the Algiers Peace Accord. They advised him to be more flexible concerning the border demarcation so that he could emerge the winner in the long run.

These discussions between Isaias and members of the KdK Group lasted for quite a long time, while the KdK Group was witnessing that its influence was fading. Isaias continued provoking the international community and Ethiopia. This included constraining the movements of the UNMEE peacekeepers and ultimately driving them out of Eritrea. When UNMEE troops were finally withdrawn, he organized a huge party to celebrate the withdrawal as victory. This sense of victory was further bolstered after the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission ruled in favour of Eritrea regarding Badme. Driven by its feelings of anger, disappointment and betrayal, the Eritrean leadership adopted a position of "structural denial" towards the international community.

KdK members tried to remain in touch with their Eritrean friends and contacts who were ousted or sidelined by the regime in order not to give cause for their feeling of being totally abandoned by the outside world. This was - and is - important because isolation works in the interest of the regime. Keeping communication channels open undermines dictatorships.

KdK members discussed the feasibility of another initiative in 2006. The idea was building a network of influential Eritreans in exile in order to allow them to have discussions with the aim of producing a baseline document. The forum was to embrace diverse views on

Eritrea and to be as inclusive as possible. Those who ultimately met, however, lacked any meaningful support in the Eritrean population or diaspora.

The Eritrean opposition abroad was politically very diverse. It ranged from the old ELF, then still residing in Damascus, to the Ethiopian-controlled groups based in Addis Ababa. In view of this prevailing diversity and deep-seated long running enmities between the groups, the idea of creating a common platform did not prove to be feasible and had to be abandoned. Contacts inside Eritrea became increasingly difficult for the KdK Group to sustain. Repeatedly members were denied visas to enter Eritrea finally bringing this effort to an end.

## **The Consolidation of a Benevolent Dictatorship in Ethiopia**

The negative impact of the Ethio-Eritrean war was less severe in Ethiopia than in Eritrea but felt in every aspect of life. Many people experienced suffering as the result of the war, especially in the poorer rural areas. The war had negatively affected the economy, exacerbating hunger and poverty. The severity of the situation became obvious when the Ethiopian government announced that a famine threatened millions of people in 2002. KdK members were convinced that the need to feed a massively increased army for the war, added to the paucity of infrastructure and diminished income from cash crops, contributed to the famine.

The war also contributed to the rise of tensions within the TPLF leadership ultimately exposing the EPRDF coalition to its most serious crisis. One cause of this crisis was disagreement on the aims of the war itself. Some Amhara and Tigrean hardliners harboured the aspiration to humiliate the Eritreans. These publicly criticized Meles when he stopped the fighting after regaining Badme.

Nevertheless, Ethiopia continued to be one of the largest recipients of ODA (Official Development Assistance) in Africa, out of which the Tigray region got a lion's share. Ethiopian leaders cleverly outmanoeuvred both the international community and Eritrea. They patiently stuck to their guns and waited until the controversy surrounding the compensation and demarcation process petered out. Meanwhile, they used every opportunity to continuously provoke the Eritrean leadership. The success of the Ethiopian approach coupled with Eritrea's policy of cold-shouldering the international community

became self-evident in the context of unfolding geopolitical developments.

Ethiopia emerged as the most important US partner in the Horn of Africa after 9/11 and the ongoing "war on terror." Thereafter, the relationship between Ethiopia and the international community became cosier than ever. Eritrea's aggressive behaviour on the other hand alienated it from its long-time friends even in European governments and parties. They switched their support to Ethiopia. Ethiopia's profile continued to rise with the late Meles Zenawi becoming a spokesman for Africa. His leadership style was appreciated all over Africa and beyond. All these developments in Meles' eyes must have proved that his ideology underpinning his one-party dictatorship had been the right decision.

The Ethiopian government did improve the general situation of the population to some extent. The policy of allowing the Oromos and others to use their languages in schools, administration and courts had an uplifting effect. The Oromo language in particular is presently being taught all the way to the university. On the downside, the government exercised a strong control over the various population groups. The ruling party continued to abide by its Marxist-Leninist ideology and convinced itself that it alone can develop the country. Its leaders remained obsessed with the notion of: "We mean well for the people so the people have to do what we tell them, for it is for their own best interest." The government monopolized the sale of fuel, fertilizer and seeds. Its central control extended to accessing the market and to dictating to farmers what crops they had to grow. The resulting economic situation was further compounded by the government's regular violations of human rights. Repressive acts targeting those perceived as members of opposition groups and excluding them negatively affected the right to self-rule enshrined in the Constitution of 1994.

On the surface, the situation in Ethiopia looks quite well. Elections are regularly conducted. There is a functioning parliament where public policies are debated. The reality on the ground, however, is quite the opposite.

The fall out of the Ethio-Eritrea war for Ethiopia's economy is much less dramatic than in Eritrea. But its implications for the population, especially the ethnic minorities, were quite severe. Even the apparently constructive policy of allowing the various ethnic groups to use their languages had a downside. It contributed to heightening the already prevailing inter-religious and inter-communal tensions.

During its war with Eritrea the Ethiopian government had failed to avert another drought from causing widespread famine due to its preoccupation with the war. Many KdK members had a déjà-vu feeling, since all the ingredients of the Mengistu era were there again; war, drought, famine and communal tensions. This led them to conclude that the government was abusing the principle of recognizing ethnic diversity as a divide-and-rule strategy, rather than as a means to create unity with the diversity of the Ethiopian peoples as intended in the Charter of 1991. By intimidating political opposition groups, the government managed to consolidate its one-party dictatorship. It refused to uphold democratic decision-making processes. The system that crystallized in Ethiopia after the war could be characterized as a “benevolent dictatorship”. The top leaders of the country did not accumulate large amounts of capital for themselves and thus seemed to have remained authentic. They also tried to make sure that the economic development was fairly evenly allocated across the country. The region occupied by Somali-speakers, called “Region 5”, was a notable exception. It became the scene of fighting in recent years and is thus discriminated against as before. According to one KdK member, this is one major reason why the regime was able to maintain power and stabilize the country.

## KdK at a Crossroads

The main focus of the KdK Group after the war, however, remained the OLF dialogue. The KdK Group still maintained that the OLF was the only political movement with a high level of credibility among the Oromo population. The OPDO had never gained the trust of the Oromo people to the same extent. However, as its leadership remained in exile in Asmara, the linkage between the OLF and its constituency inside Ethiopia continued to weaken year after year. The KdK Group, therefore, tried to persuade the OLF leadership to leave Asmara as their base. So long as it remained in Asmara, the fate of the OLF remains tied to the conflict between the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments. One of the KdK members described his observations as follows: “...some in the OLF leadership start copying the autocratic militarism of their hosts...not that they are forced to, but they internalise the climate they are in... Like the various Somali groups, for the Eritrean government the OLF is only one more party to fight their proxy war with Ethiopia...”

The Ethiopian government considers Eritrea as an enemy and the same sentiment would apply to the OLF leadership as long as it remained in Asmara and had close contacts with the Eritrean government. This follows both government’s conviction that “my enemy’s enemy is my ally.” Under the prevailing circumstance, the OLF in effect became a hostage in Eritrea. The various Eritrean opposition groups stationed in Addis Ababa similarly became the hostages of their host. And any progress achieved by the KdK Group with the OLF could be and was repeatedly spoiled by the Eritrean government. The Ethiopian government did no longer look at the OLF issue as an internal issue and an issue of its own but as part and parcel of subversion by the Eritrea government.

## The Fragmentation of the OLF

While these external complications were dragging on, the OLF started experiencing internal difficulties. Disputes over the conduct of the armed struggle, clan or regional representation and other policy issues culminated in the OLF splitting into three factions. The split was not restricted to the Central Committee of the OLF but also extended to the Oromo community in exile. The arrival of high-ranking Ethiopian officers of Oromo origin in Eritrea worsened the situation. These defectors from the Ethiopian army were treated as an alternative to the OLF by the Eritrean leadership. Under the unfolding circumstance, the primary aim of the KdK Group of pushing the OLF towards a more coherent political position could not be achieved. The dialogue that the KdK Group all the years had tried to facilitate was no more feasible. The effort finally had to be abandoned in 2009.

## The Final Period (2005-2010)

### Supporting Reconciliation Efforts

From 2005/06 onwards, KdK members concentrated on various reconciliation efforts. Either initiated by themselves or utilizing opportunities as they appeared.

Though the Algiers Agreement had ended open warfare, it failed to address the actual causes of the conflict and broker peace. What remained was a frozen conflict that caused tremendous suffering primarily in the border regions and the relatives of deceased or expelled people.

At this stage, one KdK member working for an African organization succeeded in including restoring peace between the Eritrean and Ethiopian people in the mission of his agency. The idea was facilitating contacts and cooperation by opening up channels of communication at the professional level. This effort coincided with another KdK initiative aimed at bringing together respected and influential persons from Eritrea and Ethiopia in order to facilitate reconciliation between the peoples. Cooperation between these initiatives was natural. When the meeting took place, the KdK Group could observe some difficulties. However, sensible questions were brought to the table and the process was moving forward. However, after a few successful initial meetings the initiative was terminated by both governments when the Eritrean participants were denied visas to travel to Ethiopia or elsewhere. Still, for the participants, just coming together and being able to discuss with each other, meant a lot.

The final effort to keep the KdK Group was taken in 2010 when its chairman proposed turning the group from an action-oriented into a discussion-oriented initiative. According to his proposal, the KdK group could act as a place for discussion, analysis and the development of ideas particularly concerning mid- and long-term trend and as a network to link relevant activities. His idea was welcomed by some European church-related agencies but failed to mobilize sufficient institutional backing and financial support to put it into practice. The members of the KdK group decided to discontinue their activities after almost 15 years in 2010.

### The Closing Act

In the aftermath of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, the KdK Group's ability to influence actors in and beyond the region steadily diminished driving it to search for new ways of staying active. One of these alternative ways of staying engaged was discussed in a meeting in August 2008. Based on several discussions with representatives of the AACC and churches in the Horn of Africa region, the KdK Group considered transforming itself into a resource group for the "Horn of Africa /Great Lakes Initiative." The "Horn of Africa/Great Lakes Initiative" was part of the activities of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). However, as key people within the AACC suspected the KdK Group of pursuing its own agenda the idea had to be abandoned. Institutional competition, staff changes and an EU funding bid which fell through aborted this idea.

# The KdK Group in Perspective

## The KdK Group and its Activities as Seen by Outsiders

All through its time of operation the KdK Group functioned as a network often operating within wider and diverse networks. Its cooperation with other entities varied over time in terms of both intensity and purpose. Some cooperation was based on common values, others on mutual interests. Especially when interacting with governments, the KdK Group always exercised vigilance in order to guard its independence. The diverse composition of the group, the differing assessment of actors and the culture of frank and open discussion within the group helped to maintain and safeguard the group's autonomy. Since the members of the group had access to a wide range of actors, they were used to floating ideas and getting off the record opinions from all sides. Through their trustful relationships with personalities in governmental institutions the KdK members were able to get support also from governments, such as visas or safe and secluded meeting places. But sometimes the cooperation with governments, particularly the Ethiopian and the Eritrean governments, was a real balancing act.

## The “Family’s” Perspectives

First and foremost, it is important to emphasize that the KdK Group was designed and functioned as assembly of friends from within ecumenical church agencies. Due to its amorphous nature, most people and agency staff who cooperated with the group had very little knowledge about the group and its activities. Even within the agencies employing members of the KdK Group, there was limited exchange of information. The exchange of information was guided by the “need to know” code. The high level of confidentiality was introduced and maintained for several reasons. First and foremost to protect personalities engaged in the processes, particularly those from the Horn of Africa region. Then it served to protect the processes themselves from negative outside interference. Finally, it also allowed the staff of the agencies in Eritrea and Ethiopia to operate on the premise that “you cannot be blamed for what you do not know”.

Hence, up to the end when the interviews for this study were conducted most of the staff of German church organizations supporting the KdK Group had little knowledge about the latter and its activities or even none

at all. At best, they just marginally noticed the existence of a group called KdK. The nature of its work, however, for most was a subject of conjecture. For example, the staff of Bread for the World, an ecumenical development agency, thought they never directly supported the KdK Group financially. They assumed its support was coming from the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) if there had been any at all. All they knew was that the KdK group was engaged in political activities. Its members were assumed to be persons having some influence and personal contacts with the political classes in Ethiopia and Eritrea. They knew the German member of the Group and its chairman. Many thought that some of the members of the “European Working Group on the Horn of Africa” were also KdK members. This ambivalence about the real identity and mission of the KdK Group evidences the effectiveness of the “need to know” policy. Despite lacking clarity about the identity and mission of the KdK Group, the concerned staff of the supporting agencies approved of the group.

## The German Government’s Perspective

We have discussed how the German Ambassador to Ethiopia from 1992 to 1995 got involved in facilitating talks between the Ethiopian government and the OLF. He wanted to support the new government to deal with the post-civil war situation. He also wanted to work towards the development of a more democratic political system. He was concerned about the human rights situation in Ethiopia and realized that the conflict between OLF and EPRDF/TPLF was a key obstacle progress in this area. Already while he was ambassador in Addis Ababa he brought together spokespersons from both sides. That was when the German members of the KdK Group first caught his attention.

He realized that the long-time contacts between the various European relief organizations and the Oromo society could play a pivotal role in the settlement of the conflict between the government and OLF. Although he was aware of the existence of an initiative by ecumenical relief agencies, he did not know anything about the KdK Group itself. He only knew some of the individuals engaged in the facilitation of talks between the government and the OLF. He was well aware that some of these individuals had excellent contacts with important OLF leaders.

Other institutions in the German government were more suspicious of the activities by church-related organizations. Whether this included the KdK Group and any detailed information about it, cannot be ascertained. The German Intelligence Service at one point informed the Ambassador that some German church groups were providing the Oromo groups with financial support for the purchase of armaments. The former German ambassador, however, was certain that the members of the KdK Group he knew were not involved in any such activities. He cooperated very closely with individual KdK members, they frequently met while he was ambassador to exchange information. After he had left Ethiopia, they cooperated in the “Bonn talks,” as has already discussed above.

## The Dutch Government’s Perspective

The paths of the KdK Group and Dutch State institutions crossed at various moments. It has already been mentioned that the first meeting of the KdK Group with OLF leadership took place in “Kontakt der Kontinenten”, a former mission training institute in central Holland. The meeting was possible only thanks to visas issued by the Dutch authorities. This was made possible by a ‘special visa delivery’ process arranged between the Chairman of the KdK Group and the then Dutch Development Minister.

However, the bureaucracy, particularly the embassies in the region, unquestioningly embraced the new rulers of Ethiopia and Eritrea, as they had embraced the previous one. They showed little room for doubt, at least openly. Dutch KdK members had to keep their distance from those governmental institutions and personalities that pursued the official policy and therefore they consciously restricted contacts with officialdom. This situation changed drastically in the aftermath of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. All KdK members campaigned with their respective governments for the involvement of their governments in the UN Peacekeeping operation. The Dutch members of the group actively campaigned for a significant Dutch involvement in the UN Peacekeeping Mission. They spoke at parliamentary hearings and supported the lobby of the Dutch military to get a meaningful mandate as well as the required manpower and equipment. They were invited to brief the military intelligence officers preparing for the peacekeeping mission. Dutch churches and several development agencies jointly issued

calls for Dutch participation in the UN peacekeeping mission. This bolstered the “pro participation” camp in Parliament and culminated in the Dutch assuming the leadership of UNMEE in the initial period.

## The Perspective of the Norwegian Government

In Norway and within the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) there has since long been a high interest for the development in the Horn, and in particular how things developed in Ethiopia and Eritrea, including the relation between the two countries.

Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) significantly contributed to this because of its long time and intensive involvement in famine relief assistance in Ethiopia already since 1974, and more so because of NCA’s involvement and leading role in ERD, the humanitarian lifeline into Eritrea and Ethiopia. NCA played a significant role in influencing Norwegian official policy on the region, and the disbursement of MFA funds for humanitarian assistance for ERD. In Norway, NCA since the beginning of its engagement in Ethiopia and Eritrea until the fall of Mengistu in 1991 had built a platform of trust and a solid network with the new leaders in both countries.

A future member of KdK in 1993 had been appointed member of a government commission mandated to review Norwegian foreign assistance and give recommendations to the Parliament on future actions. The report presented early 1995 suggested both Ethiopia and Eritrea as main cooperation countries for Norway. Being main cooperation countries the Norwegian government put a focus on both the political as well as the humanitarian developments. NCA had offices and activities in both countries in good cooperation with partners, including government institutions. Later, as a member of the KdK Group the former involvement in the government commission opened relevant doors to the Norwegian government when needed.

NCA as an organization was not a member of KdK, as none of the European church agencies were members themselves. But former and present NCA staff was. Similar to other group members who were employed staff of European church organizations NCA staff was involved in various activities such as peace talks, shuttle diplomacy, the Oromo issue and the exercise with the religious leaders with the tacit or expressed support of the organization.

Norwegian members of KdK and Norwegian MFA kept open and frequent contacts on most of these issues KdK dealt with. However, this was never a formal cooperation, rather an informal exchange of information and discussions. This kind of cooperation and tight contact between NGO's and MFA has often been labelled "The Norwegian Model".

After the end of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000) and Meles' refusal to abide by the decisions of the Boundary Commission, the Norwegian government officially tried in various ways to bring progress in the stalemate between the two countries.

For quite some years, dating back to before the war, Norway had also played a helpful role in the "Oromo issue". It assisted with visa for OLF leaders and others involved. It also used its diplomatic and political contacts to raise a wide number of issues related to human rights and political participation of wide sections of the population in the post-Mengistu era, which were matters of concern to the KdK Group, too. Even though the differences in position and motivation between state officials and "politico-humanitarians" such as the KdK Group were certainly noted by their Norwegian government counterparts, there was a mutual respect and trust. This relationship of trust was very obvious in 2005 when the Norwegian government facilitated a meeting of a KdK member with Meles during his official visit to Norway.

Norway may have acted with too high a profile on some controversial issues. Norway certainly irritated the Ethiopian government in the years following the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. In 2007, eventually six Norwegian diplomats were expelled from Ethiopia. No western government protested or commented on this act. By remaining silent the western governments confirmed Meles' perception that his position and his policies would never be seriously challenged. It also confirmed the KdK Group's analysis, that already by that time the EU member states and the US administration had chosen to ignore the legitimate claims of the Eritrean government concerning Ethiopia's obstruction of the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement. It also confirmed the KdK Groups analysis that the western governments had chosen "stability" at the expense of democracy, human rights and inclusive politics in Ethiopia. Economic, geo-political and security concerns had been cleverly manipulated by Meles and his team to their benefit.

This episode cooled the relations between the Norwegian MFA and NCA for some time. In the same line, the

KdK Group came close to being "persona non grata" in Norway as the Norwegian government scrambled to mend its relations with Ethiopia.

## An American Perspective

All throughout its existence the KdK Group had sporadic contacts with the staff of the US administration. Contact was most intensive in the mid 1990ies, when ex-ERD staff and other friends entered the American administration. They shared the same worries about the breakdown of the TGE and the worsening political climate in Eritrea. Those relations however, remained of a personal nature. The philosophy of the KdK Group and that of the US administration were deeply opposed. This had become clear to future KdK Group members already in the final stages of the liberation war. The US government was instrumental in ushering Mengistu out and it welcomed the TPLF and EPLF replacing the old regime. However, this was not based on principled convictions but more a "damage control operation" as one KdK member remarked. "Realpolitik" was the order of the day, even though rhetoric from Washington was praising "a new generation of African leaders". The humiliating defeat of the American intervention in Somalia, the souring relations with Sudan, the renewed war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and especially 9/11 drove the US government to pursue a policy of containment, giving absolute priority to its own security interests. KdK members had to struggle with this official policy line and attitude when they tried to influence the Algiers Peace talks. The American administration was not at all interested in helping both countries to tackle some of the underlying causes for the conflict. Washington wanted a quick peace deal that would strengthen the position of its key ally in the region, Meles Zenawi. Soon after its signing Washington allowed Ethiopia to derail its implementation.

Over time contacts between members of the KdK Group and representatives of the US administration, therefore, became scarce. In retrospect this fact complicated matters when the OLF started fragmenting and an important faction was based in Washington.

# Observations and Conclusions

## Introduction

During its time of operation the KdK Group interacted with many different organizations, groups and individuals inside Ethiopia and Eritrea and various countries in the region and beyond. However, the focus of its interaction were three major actors: most of its activities focused on the Ethiopian government and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). More precisely, the KdK Group interacted with individuals within the OLF and the Ethiopian government. After the outbreak of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war in 1998, the KdK members also focused on dealing with persons in and around the Eritrean government.

Therefore, it seems to be useful to structure the following conclusions accordingly. First, the achievements of the KdK group are discussed and evaluated. Second, the reasons why they did not attain their goals of bringing about reconciliation will be dealt with. Third, the reasons and causes for the failure of the aspiration of the KdK Group will be set in the context of developments in the Horn of Africa during the group's years of activity. Finally, the lessons that could be learned from the KdK group's experience will be discussed. This chapter is also an exercise in self-assessment. During KdK meetings critical self-assessments were a regular item on the agenda as well as "morale boosting exercises".

Strictly focusing on the actual outcome one could conclude that the KdK effort was a failure. The members of the KdK group often debated that, when it comes to hard facts, the initiatives and efforts of the group did not significantly change the developments on the ground. This overall conclusion, however, would be much too short-sighted.

The main effort of the KdK group in Ethiopia was an attempt to facilitate dialogue between the Ethiopian government and the OLF. The group's "theory of change" was that the particular type of relationship that had developed between key political actors from different political camps in the region and the members of the KdK group would allow for and provide opportunities to rebuild positive relations and open dialogue. However, the KdK group's initiatives in reality never led to a direct meeting between the government and the OLF<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, members of the group agree that they could not achieve their goal of facilitating talks between the two

protagonists. One can, however, also take a different perspective by asking: Did their efforts influence the positions of the parties despite failing to lead to a direct meeting? Did it have an impact on the perceptions of the parties of each other? And finally, did it lead the parties to take a different approach towards developments in the country?

To answer that question we looked back at both the ERD period and the time the KdK Group was active. The reason being, that most actors were part of the story in the whole period between the early 1980ies and 2010. Secondly, the process of change we describe began when the people organizing the cross-border relief operation interacted with the then leaders of the various liberation movements fighting the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Our analysis is based on a "contribution from the inside" by a few people engaged in the process, either in the field or in exile. Secondly we review the involvement of actual or former staff of the ecumenical agencies in this unorthodox undertaking.

## How the ERD Prepared the Ground for the KdK

The style of interaction or communication between members of the KdK Group and the leaders of the three liberation fronts EPLF, TPLF and OLF evolved and took a peculiar shape during the lifetime of the ERD's cross-border operation. In this regard the ERD was a critical precursor of the KdK. By the time the leaders of the liberation fronts became leaders of governments, the perceptions and attitudes of at least some of them had been significantly transformed as the result of their interactions with each other as well as some of the officials of the ERD. Perhaps as significantly, the mind-set of some of the officials of the ERD had also undergone noticeable changes.

A number of factors influenced the mentality of the leaders of the liberation fronts while the struggle against the military regime was ongoing. First, each of the three liberation fronts saw itself as the midwife of a new state. The EPLF was unambiguously committed to the realization of an independent Eritrea. The OLF comes second in this regard due to its rhetoric displaying an aspiration to realize an independent Oromia. The TPLF started off by advocating the right of the minority Tigrean society

---

2 — The „Bonn talks“ described above were no „KdK activities“ in the strict sense even though that initiative was closely linked to the KdK Group.



within a reconfigured new Ethiopian state. However, its recognition of the right of the Eritreans to independence meant that it too was aspiring to realize an Ethiopian state significantly different from the extant one.

This self-perception of the leaders of the liberation fronts as the rulers of a state in the making had one very important implication. As the supposed embodiment of the sovereignty of the state they were aspiring to bring about they tended to reject any interference in their internal affairs. One of the most remarkable successes of the key officials of the ERD then interacting with the leaders of the liberation fronts was breaking through this jealously guarded aversion to interference in their internal affairs. This was not achieved overnight but through a patient, gradual, step-by-step process that involved at times tension-ridden exchanges. Only after the leaders of the liberation fronts started seeing the positive implications of these tense exchanges did they begin to tolerate critical comments of the concerned ERD officials.

One area in which this positive change became noticeable had to do with the comments of the ERD officials regarding the publicity of the liberation fronts in the western media. This publicity was often incomprehensible to common people in the West. At other times, the publicity of the liberation fronts had even damaging effects. As citizens of the western countries, ERD officials of course noticed the awkward nature of this publicity and its effects and they were not reluctant to point these out to the leaders of the liberation fronts. Despite initial irritations, the movement's leaders over time began seeing the value of this criticism of their style of self-portrayal. Once their aversion to interference was eased with regards to publicity, the leaders of the liberation fronts increasingly became amenable to other critical comments by the ERD officials.

This gradual easing of the invocation of conventional sovereignty as a barrier to interference in internal affairs by the liberation fronts had a surprising and long-lasting implication in the Horn of Africa. The Cross-Border Operation of the ERD was conducted in violation of Ethiopia's sovereignty as has already been stated. Saving lives by subordinating sovereignty to humanitarian concerns was pioneered by the ERD and soon spread to the region and ultimately became a global trend by the mid-1990s. This trend was initiated by some of the liberation fronts, particularly the TPLF, publicly and persistently demand-

ing a humanitarian corridor for the delivery of aid to the starving population in areas under their control. This demand was absolutely unprecedented at the time. Even more remarkable was the success of the international aid community in forcing the Ethiopian government to allow the shipment of relief goods through areas under its control to those controlled by the liberation fronts. The same practice was also applied in Sudan when Operation Lifeline Sudan made it possible to transport relief assistance to areas under the control of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army SPLM/A, the anti-government insurgent movement, with the consent of the Sudan government starting in 1989.

By the time they became state officials in Ethiopia and Eritrea, it seemed the leaders of the TPLF and EPLF had embraced the principle of subordinating state sovereignty to humanitarian concerns - with radical implications. They collaborated in convening a summit of regional state leaders to discuss how to formally allow humanitarian corridors through battle lines in the still raging civil wars in the region. This initiative was partly sponsored by the InterAfrica Group, a civil society outfit which had loose contacts with the KdK Group. The content of the discussion and the agreements forged at this summit were not widely publicized and is thus not amenable to serious evaluation. However, the fact that this principle was even considered is striking.

Unfortunately, the direct opposite trend unfolded during the last two decades. Conventional attitudes about state sovereignty have become dominant with disastrous implications. The protection of human rights and the establishment of democratic forms of governance have become overshadowed by conventional notions of state sovereignty and security of the state. This trend was also accelerated by developments within the international community, particularly the persistent narrow focus on governmental structures and state security rather than a concept human development and human security as suggested by the ICISS in its report "The Responsibility to Protect"<sup>3</sup>. Today again in some of the countries in the Horn of Africa systematic violations of human rights and the suppression of basic liberties and freedoms are rampant.

Another factor that strongly influenced the mentality of the leaders of the liberation fronts was their subscrip-

---

3 — International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) (2001): *The Responsibility to Protect*. Ottawa

tion to Marxist ideology and the Marxist-Leninist (ML) vanguard party model of political organization. They believed in the supposed ability of Marxism to produce scientific truths. The scientific nature of Marxism meant that only by strictly adhering to its methodology could one arrive at the single correct understanding regarding political questions. The ownership and implementation of this single correct political line had to be protected from external and internal challenges by every possible means. The entity that has discovered and is implementing this single correct understanding qualifies as the irreplaceable vanguard party.

The universe of the vanguard party is populated by virtuous revolutionaries on the one side and evil reactionaries on the other in which the former and the latter are engaged in a life or death struggle. Adherence to the vanguard party ideology totally contravenes tolerating political diversity or pluralism in the internal as well as external sphere. The liberation fronts, particularly EPLF and TPLF, often demanded that anyone interacting with them first recognize them as the single vanguard of their respective constituencies.

As in every other respect, the EPLF had the most advanced and sophisticated vanguard party structure. The EPLF was seen as the sole vanguard of the Eritrean society that itself was guided by a clandestine vanguard, the Eritrean Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP). This “vanguard within the vanguard” setup was perhaps unparalleled elsewhere in Africa. The TPLF duplicated this vanguard within the vanguard structure after 1985 when it formed the Marxist-Leninist League-Tigray (MLLT) as the vanguard of the TPLF, which perceived itself as the vanguard of Tigrean society. The OLF was the least developed in this regard although it too would most likely not have tolerated another entity posing as the spokesperson of the Oromo society.

To outsiders, the adherence of these liberation fronts to Marxism was quite baffling because the regime they were fighting against also styled itself as Marxist. The normal expectation of outsiders was for these liberation fronts to subscribe to an ideology opposed to the regime’s Marxist stand. As it turned out, the struggle was over whether the liberation fronts or the military regime was the most authentic Marxist party. This contest over authenticity even affected relations among the liberation fronts, especially after the TPLF formed MLLT and started criticizing the EPLF and OLF for not being sufficiently Marxist. The TPLF, under the vanguard leader-

ship of MLLT, was in due course declared as one of only two truly Marxist-Leninist organizations in the world, the other being the party ruling Albania at the time.

Particularly in the second half of the 1980s when the TPLF started publicly criticizing the EPLF ERD officials found themselves in an awkward position in their interaction with the liberation fronts. Soon the same time tensions marred the TPLF’s relations with the OLF especially after the former created the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), an alternative Oromo political organization suiting its political objectives. Except for calling for restraint ERD officials could not do much to avert this triangular configuration of conflicting relations.

By the late 1980s, a number of factors came together to soften the subscription of the liberation fronts to the Marxist-Leninist vanguard party model. Having physically driven its main rival, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), out of Eritrea the EPLF became increasingly confident that it would assume the sole leadership of Eritrean society. In addition, managing its clandestine vanguard party, the EPRP, was becoming increasingly unwieldy for the liberation front, culminating in its dissolution in 1989. Around the same time, the TPLF also quietly dropped any public reference to the role of MLLT.

This softening of subscription to the ML vanguard party model started having positive implications on the relations among the liberation fronts. Without this development, the reconciliation of the EPLF and TPLF in the late 1980s would not have been likely. Those ideology ridden years changed many of the later KdK members. But it remained a delicate and difficult job to defend the humanitarian concerns of the besieged people in the war zones, maintain a committed and at the same time neutral stand in the midst of the ideological warfare between the fronts without alienating the movements’ leadership, in order to maintain access. Fortunately, church people, even “ecumenical” ones, are not very well trained in the finesse of the ML debate. “Ignorance” became a virtue and a “secret weapon” at the same time. In the midst of this ideological conflict ERD maintained its iron rule: we sit around the same table and on the basis of the same information we plan relief operations into the various territories under different control. This is a pragmatic as well as ideological approach: humanitarian needs first, in our opinion; contributed to a return to reality between the liberation movements.

This allowed some ERD officials to quietly advise all sides of the advantages of pooling their assets in order to



Members of the KdK Group, ex-ERD workers and an EPRDF delegation at a reception hosted by the Ethiopian President (Addis; 1995).

hasten the downfall of the Ethiopian regime and end the suffering of the people.

Once its reconciliation with the TPLF was successfully completed, the EPLF started mediating between the OLF and TPLF to pave the way for forming an interim government in Ethiopia, an initiative which was still ongoing when the regime was unseated in 1991.

At this stage, ERD officials joined various other actors pressuring the OLF to cooperate with the TPLF in forming the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). The OLF's agreement to participate in drafting the Transitional Charter which was later ratified at the July Conference 1991 would not have been possible without the application of this pressure.

OLF - TPLF relations remained rocky as the Transitional Government got underway. The obvious tensions, however, failed to draw the attention of ERD officials who were mostly pre-occupied with the future of their peculiar humanitarian agency. Between the time when

the ERD was dissolved and KdK Group was formed, no effort was exerted to address the OLF - TPLF dispute by tapping the trust and goodwill built up during the Cross-Border Operation.

Another area where ERD officials influenced the activities of the liberation fronts concerned their communication with western governments. The liberation fronts' conversation with western government officials, when they occurred, initially used to be quite awkward. The fronts' leaders often displayed absolute certainty about their understanding and positions when talking to western government officials. Any attempt to question this certainty was considered offensive, often resulting in a breakdown of communication.

ERD officials were able to appreciate the different positions from which the fronts' leaders and western government interlocutors came from. This put ERD officials in a convenient situation to bridge the mismatch of communication styles. ERD officials, therefore, often pre-

pared the leaders of the liberation fronts as well as the concerned western government officials ahead of meetings. This often involved posing questions to the leaders of the liberation fronts on issues likely to be raised by government officials. This sometimes troubled the leaders of the liberation fronts for whom their case was crystal clear. Many of these sessions were tension-ridden exchanges but often resulted in the fronts' leaders refining the delivery of their messages. At the same time, ERD officials also enlightened western government officials on the mentality and the situation of the liberation fronts and their leaders, thus preparing the ground for communication whenever it occurred. This role of ERD officials of acting as "interpreters" became even more prominent after the KdK Group was initiated in 1996.

An important effect of the ERD' interaction with the leaders of the liberation fronts stemmed from the need to account for the use of relief aid. As has already been discussed, the ERD's Cross-Border Operation was quite controversial in western government circles and among traditional relief organizations. As the result, the ERD had to go an extra-mile in demonstrating that relief assistance was not being abused by the liberation fronts. This made stringent monitoring of relief delivery by the ERD an important aspect of the Cross-Border Operation. In order to carry out this monitoring, the relief wings of the liberation front had to be organizationally capable partners. The relief wings of the EPLF, ERA, and of TPLF, REST, had to refine their accounting systems in order to cooperate in this monitoring exercise. The relief wing of the OLF, ORA, was quite unable to fulfil this role, often accusing ERD officials of wanting to exert political control. For various reasons the volume of relief channeled into OLF controlled areas though ORA was quite insignificant in comparison to what was entering the areas under the control of the EPLF and TPLF through their respective humanitarian wings. Therefore, the ORA's deficiency in accounting, monitoring and reporting remained of little consequence during the struggle.

The repercussion of being sufficiently organized in order to qualify as able and reliable partners of the ERD also spread to other spheres of the EPLF's and TPLF's activities. The EPLF, which was already a well-organized front when it started interacting with the ERD, refined its structures and practices as the result of the demand of the ERD. The TPLF followed suit and polished not only its relief wing but also its political and military organizational approach. The overall result of the development

was enabling the liberation fronts to start assuming the shape of a government even before coming to power. When they captured the capitals of Eritrea and Ethiopia, they moved into power and administrative responsibilities with very little difficulties.

By the time the KdK Group was formed in 1996 with the aim of easing the tensions between the OLF and TPLF, the mood within the leadership of the two fronts was souring fast. The OLF leaders were frustrated to find themselves in an untenable situation between the TPLF's demands, the requirements of western donors and the expectations of their constituency. They were easily angered by any criticism levelled against their views and positions. They saw criticism as blaming the victim of aggression and harassment. Despite this some OLF leaders cooperated with members of the KdK Group in searching for the resolution of their dispute with the TPLF-led Ethiopian government.

While the initiative to restore relations between the OLF and TPLF was going on, trouble was apparently brewing between the TPLF and EPLF. Even though KdK members were aware of these tensions and raised them during meetings only after actual fighting erupted in 1998 between the militaries of both sides did the KdK Group realize the dimension of these tensions. The inter-party tension was soon followed by the emergence of brewing trouble within both the EPLF and the TPLF. Both the top leaders of the EPLF and TPLF sensed internal challenges coming from their rivals within their respective fronts. Both resorted to different forms of repression to assert their control. Perhaps more than anything else, this concern of the leaders on both sides obstructed the efforts of the KdK Group to avert the outbreak of full-scale war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This can be attributed to one important factor: leaders who have to look over their shoulders lest they are undermined by their internal challengers cannot make bold decisions as advised by the KdK Group.

### **From ERD to KdK**

The KdK Group was an unconventional initiative born out of its equally unconventional precursor, the ERD. Members of both the ERD and the KdK Group were conscious of the fact that their approach was controversial to both relief delivery agencies as well as peace initiatives. They consciously experimented with this unconventional approach. Despite their patchy success record, one

important conclusion can be drawn from their efforts. They were determined to bring about change and worked hard towards that goal. And they were convinced that change cannot come about by applying mainstream conventional methods. Appropriate, tailor-made approaches were needed. Only by thinking outside the box could problems that had endured and accumulated over decades be resolved. KdK members thought outside the box and urged their interlocutors within the leaderships of the liberation fronts to do the same.

The ERD in its public and political actions prioritized the channeling of relief to populations in need over other concerns. The KdK Group was more modest after it was formed in 1996. Relations among its members were not hierarchical but were marked by collegiality and solidarity. The group's composition remained very stable over the years and trust grew among them. This enabled its members to be frank and honest in the internal debates and to be frank when interacting with their contact persons within the liberation fronts and European governments.

The members of the KdK Group built their conflict mediation and peace-building efforts on their experience and their contacts and relations when they were active during the ERD era. Their personal credentials were an established fact with some of the key leaders in the new governments due to their involvement during the long liberation wars against the Mengistu regime.

## The Significance of the Ecumenical Context

The ERD dissolved itself in 1991/92. As an organized network the KdK Group started operating in 1995/96. There had been a hot and controversial debate about the decision to close the ERD operations and to end the consortium of 12 ecumenical agencies. Some felt that the trust built and the good relations with the new rulers should be used to lobby for inclusive development models in both Ethiopia and Eritrea. But a majority of the ERD members argued that ERD had been formed and maintained, often against all odds, by the humanitarian imperative to address the humanitarian needs created by the mixture of protracted war and recurrent drought. The war was now over. ERD had served its purpose. To address the needs of a post-war era new structures were necessary. In addition it was pointed out that until very close to the fall of the Mengistu regime the ERD consor-

tium had been treated like a pariah by most mainstream aid and development agencies, most northern governments and all but one or two African governments and also the whole UN family of agencies.

This controversial debate also took place within the ecumenical agencies. Most of the ERD member agencies prior to 1991 also had a partner network in Ethiopia working in government held parts of Eritrea. Some also had field offices in Ethiopia. National European and North American churches had often long-standing relations with various churches and agencies in Ethiopia and Eritrea. All had one or another form of relation with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The liberation movements, on the other hand, had anything but "Christian credentials". Therefore, during the war there had been a strong tendency to stay with the Ethiopian partners working in government controlled areas and not to alienate the Mengistu regime. Within the ecumenical agencies there was a clear preference to try to deal with the "beast one knew" over getting involved with the beasts mainly unknown.

Some European mission societies who for many decades had been on the ground in Oromo inhabited areas of Ethiopia had different positions. Their staff had witnessed the repression of Oromo people and the devastation created by forced resettlement programmes and overall neglect of the interests of the Oromo people by both the previous imperial government as well as the military regime.

A generation of ecumenically-minded people from the first decade after the Second World War had come to positions of leadership by the mid 1980ies especially in Western European and some progressive Northern American churches and ecumenical agencies. Many of those had personally been exposed to and engaged in the thriving ecumenical movement, from the local ecumenical youth movement to positions in the World Council of Churches (WCC). This "ecumenical exposure" had opened their view on the world outside their own church, country and continent. Many of them also either had firsthand experience of the evils of WW II, or direct access to that recent history.

One important aspect in the development of the ecumenical agencies was the increasing public support for church-based agencies. While church attendance and membership was beginning to decline the role of church as "Diaconia" both at home as well as abroad remained close to the heart of people. Increasingly also governments provide public funds for the churches' humanitar-

ian and development activities. This created a fairly stable economic position for the agencies.

Over time in many countries the churches surrendered ownership of the institutions they had once created to professional staff. The influence of governmental donors and institutional donors like the EU or the World Bank in many countries increasingly turned non-governmental agencies into “sub-contractors”. The understanding of development also changed along with the growing influence of governmental donors and their think-tanks within many of church-related agencies following the mainstream. It shifted from a conception of holistic societal change envisioned over a long period to a focus on “effective and efficient” interventions that deliver “measurable result” in a short period. Together with these changes in the mode of operations went changes in institutional structures and staffing.

One major institutional change concerns staff mobility. This was far less frequent until the early 1990ies than presently is usual. The conception of development as long-term processes of holistic societal change, the economic stability of the agencies and the expansion of both content and volume of their programmes allowed for people to have a career within the same institution and often in the same line of work. This provided for the steady accumulation of (not only) personal knowledge, relationships and a deepening of understanding. It also contributed to building relationships of trust and built an institutional body of knowledge over a longer period.

The institutional conditions in the mid 1980ies, therefore, were favorable for an operation like ERD and the activities of the KdK Group. Even though both created tensions within the various ecumenical agencies there nevertheless also was space to accommodate “unconventional” approaches.

One of the most important factors of success all through the ERD period - and also important enabling condition for the later KdK period - was the solid backing the leadership in the agencies provided to their involved staff. There were many and various complaints over the Cross Border Operation. Pressure was exerted by various parties to get it stopped. Some of these complaints were directly lodged against individual staff. The leadership of the agencies, however, shielded their staff that often only became aware of such incidents many years later.

Within diplomatic circles the KdK group’s activities were considered by many as interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Mediating between a govern-

ment and a so-called “rebel movement” or shuttling between two leaders of parties at war, was highly unusual for mainstream relief and development agencies. But this was not unusual in the “ecumenical movement”. But also within the ecumenical movement many controversial debates took place. On the Ethiopia-Eritrea issue prior to 1991 especially African church circles found it difficult to accept that some staff of European or North American church-related agencies supported changing the map of Africa by accepting Eritrea’s claim of independence. In fact, African ecumenical circles systematically ignored the Ethiopia-Eritrea issue in stark contrast to the African churches engagement in the Anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa.

Due to the African churches the official line within the WCC, therefore, was that of non-involvement. Also the “orthodox world” strongly supported the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which at least on the level of leadership supported the Mengistu regime up to its final days as it had supported the imperial government before and the EPRDF government of recent years.

However, at working level KdK members and WCC staff kept in contact and mutually used the knowledge and experience of each other and tried to make use of the different access points KdK members and WCC staff had respectively. This ecumenical involvement started in the time when the liberation movements were still “in the bush”. Later, one of the first rounds of discussion between the EPLF and an African government delegation took place in the outskirts of Geneva with the WCC playing an active role in getting it organized.

## Assessment

Despite the efforts of the KdK Group, controversies within the OLF surrounding primarily the question of continuing the armed struggle or not, continued to weaken the movement. This internal controversy consumed most of the movement’s energies and prevented it from playing a role in the rapidly changing Ethiopian and African political arena. Under these circumstances, it increasingly became a futile exercise to work towards a meeting between the OLF and the Ethiopian government.

The other major KdK effort after 1998 was attempting to facilitate communication between the Ethiopian and the Eritrean leaderships during the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. KdK members shuttled between the two parties to

convince them to directly talk to each other. By reminding both leaders of their common history of struggle against oppression and their promise to the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1991 that there would never be war and famine gain KdK members hoped to avert another full-scale war. They travelled back and forth from Isaias Afewerki to Meles Zenawi. However, they were not able to convince neither Meles nor Isaias to take the first step to stop the war. Their interaction with both leaders and their respective circles of consultants and officers obviously did not significantly affect the developments on the ground.

Even though there had been indications of rising tension between the two governments and KdK members had referred to them in their interaction the war broke out unexpectedly. The members of the KdK Group had not anticipated it at this time and, thus, had to react to unfolding events and had little chance to prevent an armed conflict. They had about three months to convince Meles and Isaias to end the war. At the same time more powerful and influential actors had engaged themselves following primarily their own agendas. The African Union advised and supported by the US administration and some European governments became the dominant players bringing the efforts of the KdK Group to an end.

However, in contrast to the AU and its supporting governments the KdK group maintained its engagement after the Algiers Agreement which officially ended the war. By then it had become very difficult to reach the Eritrean leaders and talk to them about necessary reforms. After the end of the war the Eritrean government tightened its autocratic rule and tight grip on power. Also in Ethiopia the EPRDF leadership became increasingly intolerant to criticism.

Nevertheless, discussions between members of the KdK Group and contact persons in the Eritrean leadership continued. KdK members maintained contact with some people in the (semi-) leadership and raised different issues, such as religious freedoms and human rights in general. All members of the KdK Group concede that they could do nothing more to approach the Eritrean Government. One KdK member pointed out that the KdK Group was “just not important enough” to influence the leadership. The situation in Eritrea continued to deteriorate in the subsequent years rendering also the continuation of this KdK effort futile.

Two of the agencies related to the KdK group (NCA and DIA) had operational offices in Eritrea. The KdK Group was able to receive information on what was then

unfolding in Eritrea. But it was also the presence of personnel of these agencies in Eritrea that in a way contributed to KdK group’ reluctance to become more active regarding Eritrea. KdK members did not want to appear as if they were watching over the shoulders of their colleagues stationed in Eritrea. And the local staff members were not too happy with the arrival of KdK members for this often caused problems with the Eritrean Government. Under the emerging circumstances, the staff of participating agencies stationed in Eritrea could not really cooperate and coordinate with the KdK Group for a long time. The KdK group members realized too late that their church agencies were focused on maintaining the space for continuing their development projects and humanitarian activities.

According to a KdK member, soon after the end of the war those in Eritrea struggling for change were working individually and fighting lonely battles. The KdK chair ruefully recalls how the group consciously decided to “stay in the background” and thus consciously decided against campaigning to draw public and political attention to the emerging autocratic tendencies in Eritrea.

Evaluating the efforts of the KdK group, at first sight the conclusion could be that it was a complete failure. However, assessing these efforts at a deeper level shows the group’s achievements. The KdK group was not able to push the three main actors to resolve their differences but the group succeeded in influencing the parties in various ways. Building on the trust that had grown over long years of interaction with political leaders in Ethiopia and in Eritrea and using only the authority of the “moral argument” as one KdK member put it, the KdK group was able to challenge and influence the stands of the conflicting parties on some of the central issues. A German state official supports this view by emphasizing the very positive impact church organizations can have in conflict settlement. What is more, he regards the approach of the KdK Group as a very useful contribution to the German government’s attempt at that time to resolve the conflicts in the Horn of Africa. Especially the unconventional contacts and channels the group was able to use were of great value for the German government.

One indicator of achievement – as two KdK members remarked – is the fact that the group’s involvement was never questioned by the Ethiopian leadership even when they fiercely argued with each other. Most probably members of the KdK group were one of the few who did not produce “diplomatic smoke screens” when raising contro-

versial issues. Many people consulted during the research, concur with this assessment. It seems likely that the KdK group influenced the positions and attitudes of the parties towards each other. Otherwise, the parties would not have lowered their preconditions and by 1998 had almost reached the point of having a direct meeting. We will, however, never know, since the outbreak of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war aborted the process.

The KdK group also challenged the OLF leadership to sort out its internal differences and to develop a coherent strategy for a meaningful participation in the political life of Ethiopia. Even though the OLF today is an ineffective and exiled organization, the debate in the OLF and, more importantly, the wider Oromo community is continuing and will not fall silent anymore. The KdK group contributed to opening space for a more open and pluralistic debate in the Oromo constituency, both in and outside Ethiopia.

Despite lack of success, also the group's activities in Eritrea were worthwhile. By maintaining a visible engagement the group encouraged many people through its solidarity and communicating that they had not been totally abandoned by the outside world. During the Eritrean-Ethiopian war from 1998 till 2000, the KdK group had focused its activities on approaching both governments to end the fighting. After the Algiers Agreement its members played an active role in supporting the United Nations (UN) peace keeping forces that monitored the ceasefire by the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE). They lobbied in their respective countries and had a stake in convincing the Norwegian government to provide financial resources. They also lobbied the Dutch government - and especially Parliament - to provide peace-keeping troops. Thus, indirectly members of the KdK group took a very active role in maintaining at least the "negative peace" established by the Agreement between the two belligerents through the intervention of the UN.

Besides these involvements with political actors, the KdK group also supported the Religious Leaders' Initiative with some remarkable achievements. As early as 2002 they were able to draw the attention of media and even the UN Security Council to the ongoing border tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the need for reconciliation amongst the peoples of both countries. The Religious Leaders' Initiative created space for cooperation and understanding between the religious groups of both countries. This is quite remarkable since reconciliation

between the peoples as well as between the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia has not taken place until today.

One last aspect, which all members of the KdK group share, was the fact that "they honestly tried", as they tend to describe their motivation. The KdK group was one of the few non-governmental actors which was able to use the contacts they had built over many years to appeal to the conscience of the leaders and which did so. They were able to stay engaged even when they strongly disagreed with a policy of one of the main actors. The repeatedly encouraged change in the region, even though they faced several setbacks. The members were - and still are - concerned and care about the wellbeing of the people.

## Changing Contexts and the End

The interaction between the actors in the region changed over time. The OLF was not able to develop and internally push through a political, non-violent strategy. Moderates within the OLF seemed to frame the discussions in the first years. The OLF participated in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and was initially interested in a rapprochement and reintegration after the Transitional Government broke apart. They constructively cooperated with the KdK group to facilitate direct discussions to settle the conflict with the EPRDF/TPLF government. Later, as the peaceful strategy did not progress, the more militant wing of the OLF grew stronger. This eventually caused the split and the consequent weakening of the OLF.

Also the Ethiopian government and particularly Meles Zenawi himself initially seemed willing to reintegrate the OLF in the government and endorsed the KdK's initiative to facilitate direct meetings with the OLF. He entrusted a high-ranking delegation with the task to prepare for such a meeting and even dispensed with most of his preconditions for direct negotiations. Unfortunately, also the Ethiopian government departed from the inclusive strategy and began to favour a solution with the OLF outside the government. It took actions that led to a deepening of the mistrust and the continuation of the armed conflict. The leaders of the EPRDF lost interest in a coalition with the OLF and in sharing power with it after some time. Reasons for this might be found in the structure of the TPLF and their self-perception as legitimate leaders of the country. The TPLF's ideology - which stretches back to the founda-



tion of the TPLF in the liberation struggle - never really changed, not even when the struggle was over. Its leaders had no sincere interest in a pluralistic political system and a political opposition which had the capacity to act and restrict their absolute power.

The Ethiopian government's behaviour towards Eritrea exhibited a similar pattern. While Meles Zenawi and the political leadership maintained friendly relations with its neighbour in the years before and after Eritrean independence, gradually, due to increasing tensions and hostile activities as well as internal pressure, the Ethiopian government changed its attitude towards Eritrea. The former friendship slowly turned into deep mistrust, jealousy and even hatred.

Most dramatically, the Eritrean government and Isaias Afewerki himself changed their agenda and behaviour. In the first years after the victory over the Mengistu regime and also after Eritrea's independence, developments in Eritrea indicated positive changes and much hope for democratic progress. The government handled the referendum in an exemplary manner and supported the public debate on the content of the constitution. Although hints of autocratic tendencies were already visible, the overall behaviour of the government was promising. But like the OLF and the Ethiopian government the Eritrean government altered as well. On the one hand, it abandoned the cooperative and friendly policies towards Ethiopia and replaced them with a provocative and hostile attitude. At the same time, the internal democratic progress was erased and substituted with an autocratic and repressive regime.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the initiatives of the KdK group to mediate between the parties and to facilitate dialogue could not succeed and even the best intentions did not change these developments in the end.

Over time, finally, the situation of the KdK members and the character of the supporting agencies changed drastically. The positions and responsibilities or even the jobs of some KdK members changed. During the fifteen years of its existence most of the KdK group members went into new positions or retired. Some left positions as secretary general or regional representative for Eastern Africa in their agencies, which had allowed them to mobilize financial and organizational support for the KdK group's initiatives and which had given them credibility and clout to act on behalf of their agency. As members of the KdK group either moved on to different jobs - some-

times on very different topics and regions - or retired, they lost the kind of authority that was linked to their function within a church agency and remained merely concerned individuals. Though their moral authority did not decline their institutional backing very obviously was decreasing and so the respect of the political leaders in Eritrea and Ethiopia decreased as well.

Their church agencies underwent structural changes as well. This complicated the work of the KdK group even further. Dutch Inter-church Aid (DIA) and the AG KED were either dissolved or merged into new associations. Structures were changed and existing channels, principles and procedures were altered. At the same time, personnel changes in the agencies - EED, ICCO, NCA - caused unexpected challenges for the institutional and financial support from the agencies for the KdK group's activities. The loose linkages between the KdK group and the agencies its members worked for and cooperated with - initially one of the strengths of the KdK group - in effect altered into a major structural weakness of the initiative.

A further contributing factor is the fact that the overall geo-political circumstances in the Horn of Africa changed between 1996 and 2010. When the KdK group was founded in 1996, they faced two countries which struggled to stabilize after a long period of civil war. The new governments were still inexperienced and some of the personalities were not used to leading a country. Thus, they welcomed the support and advice from their old friends and members of the KdK Group. Moreover, the relationship between Ethiopia and newly independent Eritrea was quite good and apart from some conflicts and autocratic tendencies, positive developments were likely and expected. However, certain events and developments changed the positive prospects and played an important role in creating the negative tendencies which ultimately convinced the KdK group to disband.

One important event was the tragic failure of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) in 1995 and - even more so - the conclusions the international community drew from it. Until then, the majority of the international community supporting democratic progress in Eritrea and Ethiopia had critically observed the Ethiopian government and its attitude towards the Oromos. After the debacle in Somalia, the priorities of the international community changed in two ways. First, rather than the promotion of democratization the maintenance of what it defined as "stability" became the dominant policy in the region. Particularly the United States

administration wanted to prevent that the Somali catastrophe would repeat itself in Ethiopia. It henceforth focused on establishing the EPRDF coalition as the guarantor for a stable Ethiopia and for the entire region.

The international community also gave up on the OLF. This of course weakened the OLF's bargaining position. At the same time this move provided additional backing to the Ethiopian government. It was increasingly able to act almost without restrictions - including its behaviour towards Eritrea, the Oromos or its dismal human rights record. Understandably, with such a degree of international tolerance, the EPRDF/TPLF government felt increasingly more comfortable and confident to ignore the advice of the KdK members. It even felt encouraged to establish an autocratic one-party system which enjoyed little democratic legitimacy, which certainly was not inclusive - but it provided "stability".

The deepening crisis in Somalia at the same time opened up a playing field for the more radical wings within the conflicting parties. The OLF intensified its presence in Somalia. Both Eritrea and Ethiopia engaged in a proxy war by supporting various factions in Somalia - a game that continues to this day. Both regimes resumed what has been a long and sickening tradition in the Horn of Africa: policies based on the rule "the enemy of my enemy is my friend".

Another significant turning point were the terror attacks on September 11, 2001 and their global consequences. The Ethiopian government became a strategic partner of the United States administration in its "global war against terror". It gained even greater scope to act against Eritrea, the OLF, other political opposition groups, independent media and eventually all forms of an independent civil society. The international community played an active role in establishing the EPRDF/TPLF government as the regional hegemon in the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopian government became more important for the region, for Africa and also globally and was internationally respected for this role.

The consequences of these developments for the OLF were that the Ethiopian government used the opportunity to declare it a "terrorist organization" and treat it as such and denounce the Eritrean government as the host of a "terrorist organization". The return to meaningful discussions about the reintegration of the OLF into Ethiopian politics under this dominant framework of an "anti-international-terrorism ideology" became impossible. The split of the OLF into different factions with dif-

ferent degrees of militancy and goals that were more and less not negotiable was a logical result of that policy. As the Ethiopian government was flattered by political leaders all over the world and enjoyed international community's respect and uncritical support, the influence of a small group of individuals with nothing but moral arguments diminished. The TPLF cadres now perceiving themselves as important and powerful political leaders not only in Africa but as members of the global power elite did no longer want to be reminded of the past. In their discussions with members of the TPLF, the EPLF as well as the OLF KdK members repeatedly reminded them of their past and their promises of peace and prosperity for the peoples of their countries, back when they were rebels in the bush.

As the United States administration and most of the European governments lavishly supported the Ethiopian government, the Eritrean government lost most of its international support. For the Eritrean government this development was a "déjà vue" - the repetition of the international community's denial of the Eritrean cause during its three decades of struggle against Ethiopian dominance. It thus became increasingly averse to any external interference. The biased interventions by the international community during and after the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, particularly the activities of the African Union and the United Nations, actually made progress between the three main actors of the KdK group's interventions extremely difficult. The AU unintentionally fuelled and deepened the hostilities and aversion between Eritrea and Ethiopia by the peace process it sponsored and the different ways it interacted with the two governments. By ignoring the underlying causes of Ethio-Eritrea conflict the AU prevented the realization of a sustainable settlement between the two countries and their populations.

## Lessons Learned

The story of the KdK initiative provides valuable lessons for peace interventions and organizations working in the humanitarian field in the context of violent conflicts. There are projects today which operate in a similar way as the KdK members did and conclusions drawn from the KdK initiative might be relevant for future initiatives and programmes:

- Humanitarian agencies and workers can make use of trust they have built and the credits they have earned due to their work and performance. Aid workers can use their personal contacts to decision makers effectively.
- Relations of trust can open doors and facilitate honest, open and serious discussions which otherwise would not be possible.
- Trust and moral arguments are necessary but in no way sufficient factors to influence the political leadership of countries and political parties, at least not in the long run. Initially, trust and a credible moral argument may open space for discussion but other factors to provide for political leverage are needed to move from discussion to serious negotiation.
- Creative and informal initiatives such as the KdK need reliable institutional and financial support and strong (personal) relations to different actors within NGOs and governments to build on and to create space for innovative approaches. However, such institutional support in most cases cannot be based on formal mechanisms of reporting and control. The security of persons and the sensitivity of issues will often require that most information remains confidential during the process which can extend over many years.
- Relief organizations should be encouraged to undertake such innovative initiatives and to test innovative possibilities to influence parties and groups in conflict. However, the KdK story also shows quite clearly: for such initiatives the agencies and the staff involved need networks, knowledge and skills that are not built and gained within a short period of time. They require “deep knowledge” of systems, processes and personalities that is not learned by books.

## A Word of Caution from the Chairman

To these Lessons Learned there are at least two cautionary remarks. The last we want to do is encourage “adventurism” in this very sensitive work of conflict resolution. We have more than enough of that today. Hence some words of caution:

Institutional changes in the (European) relief and development organizations caused most organizations to be (more) “state-oriented/donor-driven” and (therefore) “non-political”. There is a need for a redirection before the type of conflict resolution described in this paper can be taken on board.

Intensity and endurance of involvement from the earliest stages of a humanitarian emergency intervention also require some self-reflection in (European) church agencies and relief organizations. An engagement in building sustainable peaceful relations can only bring change in the long run and would need the will to get involved politically and the courage to accept and to deal with failure.

There certainly is work to be done!

## Annexes

### Time Lines of Ethio-Eritrean History

January 1, 1890

Italy proclaims the establishment of its colony on the western shore of the Red Sea and names it Eritrea

March 1896

Italy's first attempt to conquer neighbouring Ethiopia ends in disaster with its defeat at the Battle of Adwa

October 26, 1896

Italy and Ethiopia conclude a peace treaty which formalized the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea

October 3, 1935 to May 9, 1936

Italy's second attempt to conquer Ethiopia succeeds leading to the proclamation of Italian Empire in East Africa in which Eritrea is merged with the Tigray province of northern Ethiopia

November 27, 1941

With the last Italian troops surrendering to the British-led allied forces, the Italian Empire in East Africa comes to an end. Emperor Haile Selassie is restored to his throne, Eritrea's pre-1935 border with Ethiopia is restored and it comes under the British Military Administration

November 12, 1947 to January 3, 1948

The Four Power Commission visits Eritrea and canvasses popular opinion finding deep division between those espousing union with Ethiopia and those advocating independence. The deadlock among the four powers leads to the referral of the Eritrean case to the United Nations

December 2, 1950

The UN passes Resolution 390A (V) federating Eritrea with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown

July 1960

The formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) is proclaimed by mostly Muslim exiles living in Cairo

December 1960

The Emperor's own bodyguard stages a coup and the leader of the conspirators appeals to students at Uni-

versity College of Addis Ababa for support. Students stage the first public demonstration in support of the coup thus launching a practice that became increasingly common in the following decade. The resulting radicalization of the students meant that many of them ended up participating in the armed struggles conducted by the EPLF, TPLF and OLF

September 1961

The ELF launches the armed struggle for independence by raiding police stations in Western Eritrean lowlands

September 1962

The Emperor's government manipulates the Eritrean Assembly to vote an end to the federal arrangement and proceeds to incorporate Eritrea as just another province

1970-71

Three splinter groups break away from the ELF, thereby triggering the infighting that was destined to last until 1981. The three factions ultimately merge and forge the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1977

September 1974

Emperor Haile Selassie is overthrown by the so-called "creeping coup". A committee of junior officers, called the Derg, assumes power

February 1975

Tigrayan youngsters who withdrew from the university hold their first congress and establish the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and step up armed struggle against the Derg in close cooperation with the EPLF

1977/78

The Derg government suffers serious internal crises coupled with armed opposition in the urban areas spearheaded by the EPRP and invasion by the forces of neighbouring Somalia. At the same time, the ELF and EPLF take control of almost the whole of Eritrea except a couple of towns

Late 1978 and early 1979

With the support of troops from Cuba and South Yemen and the provision of a massive Soviet military hardware, Ethiopia drives out Somalia's forces. In a number of subsequent offensive operations, the Derg regains the territories lost to the ELF and EPLF except the northern Sahel corner, which the EPLF continued to hold and parts of the Western lowlands controlled by the ELF

1979 to 1980

The Derg launches six large-scale offensives to liquidate the EPLF and ELF without success

Mid 1981

The EPLF and TPLF launch a joint offensive against the ELF resulting in its expulsion from Eritrea. From then on the struggle for Eritrean independence becomes the monopoly of the EPLF

March 1988

The EPLF launches a major offensive against Derg army stationed at Afabet and kills or captures about 18000 troops as well as dozens of tanks, BMs, and other heavy weapons. This heralded the beginning of the end of Ethiopian rule over Eritrea

May 15, 1988

The Derg declares a state of emergency in Eritrea and Tigray

March 1, 1989

The TPLF announces the liberation of the whole of Tigray subsequent to the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from the province

May 16, 1989

An attempted coup to overthrow Mengistu Hailemariam while he was on a visit to East Germany ends in failure

September 7-19, 1989

Delegations of the Derg and EPLF hold the first round of negotiations in Atlanta, Georgia, under the auspices of former President Jimmy Carter. An agreement on a 13-point procedural agenda is inked

November 20-29, 1989

The Derg and EPLF engage in the second round of negotiations in Nairobi, Kenya and agree on a number of procedural issues to pave the way for substantive talks

February 1990

The EPLF resumes fighting against Derg troops successfully capturing Massawa after which the troops stationed in Eritrea were completely cut off and could only be supplied by air

March 20-29, 1990

The third round of talks between the Derg and TPLF breaks down because of the latter's insistence that a member of its EPRDF coalition, the EPDM, also participate

May 21, 1990

The EPLF captures Asmara and takes control of the whole of Eritrea thus ushering in Eritrea's de facto independence

May 24, 1991

TPLF/EPRDF troops enter Addis Ababa and the formation of the provisional government of Ethiopia is announced

The TPLF/EPRDF convenes the Conference on Peace and Democracy, which leads to the formation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia with the OLF as the second most important participant

The Conference approves Eritrea's referendum on whether to separate and become independent or not. In order to stem the ever-escalating fighting between their troops, the OLF and TPLF conclude a peace agreement and to thus pave the way for conducting the impending district and local elections

The OLF boycotts the district and local elections claiming major irregularities, which led to its withdrawal from the Transitional Government

November 13, 1997

The Eritrean government announces the introduction of its currency, Nakfa, which complicates cross-border trade thus heightening tensions between the rulers of the neighbouring countries

May 5 1998

Concerned about rising conflicts on the border areas, President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea writes to Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, suggesting the formation of a joint boundary commission

May 12 1998

The first meeting of the joint boundary commission convenes and agrees to establish a technical subcommittee

May 13 1998

The first clashes between Eritrean and Ethiopian troops stationed close to the village called Badme occur and spread to other points on the common border in the following days

Eritrean troops supported by tanks penetrate deep into Ethiopian-administered areas, particularly the contentious village called Badme

Ethiopian parliament condemns Eritrea's aggression and demands unconditional withdrawal failing which it threatens to resort to force in order to regain lost territory

June 3 1998

Rwandan and US diplomats recommend a number of proposals to halt the escalation of conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia to no avail

November 7 1998

The OAU expands the Rwanda-US proposals and tables them as the Framework Agreement, which was rejected by Eritrea

February 28, 1999

Ethiopian troops push Eritrean troops out of the Badme area forcing them to withdraw 20 kilometres deep inside Eritrea

May 1999

Eritrea's counter-attack to retake positions lost in February ends in failure

July 1999 to May 2000

Diplomats from the US and Algeria, representing the OAU, work on three documents - the Framework Agreement, the Modalities and the Technical Arrangements - which one side rejects if the other side accepts. Meanwhile, Ethiopia was preparing for the final push to defeat the Eritrean army.

Ethiopia launches an offensive and succeeded to penetrate deep into Eritrean territory taking control of such important towns as Tessenie, Barentu and Sanafe

May 2000

Intense mediation and international pressures results in the conclusion of cessation of hostilities agreement

December 12 2000

The Algiers Peace Agreement is finally signed by the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia bringing the war to an end

April 13, 2002

The Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission publicizes its ruling on the boundary awarding the flash-point of the war Badme to Eritrea

September 9 & 22 2003

Ethiopia's Prime Minister writes two letters to the UN Security Council criticizing the Boundary Commission to which the Commission's chairman responds by citing the "final and binding" status of its ruling according to the Algiers Agreement

November 9, 2003

Eritrean government releases a statement ruling out further negotiations on the border ruling, as demanded by Ethiopian leaders

July 2008

The UN terminates the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) after demarcating the border on the basis of the ruling the Boundary Commission completely stalls

## Research and Documentation

In many ways this history fits the African oral tradition. KdK did not produce many written statements, neither annual reports, nor press releases. Most documents produced were intended for discussions during planning and strategy meetings. The two AGKED sponsored initiatives provide a better share of written material. But still a good body of documents was consulted in the process of composing this history.

### Documents

- Cramer, Stefan (1997): Kurzbericht von der Oromo-Konferenz in Falkenberg.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997a): Bericht ueber die Taetigkeit der Informationsstelle „Horn von Afrika“. Berichtszeitraum Maerz 1992 bis April 1996.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997b): Conference on Democracy and Peace in the Horn of Africa.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997c): Die wichtigsten Stationen des Muelheimer Prozesses.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997d): Dritte Gesprächsrunde im Rahmen der Dr. W.-Initiative am 6. und 7. Oktober 1997 in Bad Honnef.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997e): Fortführung der Dr. W.-Initiative.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997f): Interview with a leader of the OLF.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997g): KdK-Dialog.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997h): Treffen von Vertretern der aethiopischen Regierung und der OLF vom 9. bis 12. Juni in Bonn.
- Drewes, Manfred (1997i): Zwischenbericht ueber den Stand der Gespraechе zwischen Vertretern der EPRDF und OLF.
- Drewes, Manfred (1996a): Notizen zu einer Dialogveranstaltung zwischen Vertretern der EPRDF und der sogenannten KdK Gruppe in Addis Abeba vom 28. bis 30. Oktober 1996.
- Drewes, Manfred (1996b): Unterredung am 14. April 1996 in London.
- Drewes, Manfred (1996c): Vermerk.
- Drewes, Manfred (1995a): Die Lage der Opposition in Aethiopien angesichts der Wahlen zum Nationalen Parlament im Mai 1995.
- Drewes, Manfred (1995b): Eine Wahl ohne Opposition.
- Drewes, Manfred (1994a): Gespräch mit Vertretern der Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) am 13. Juli 1994 im Kirchenamt der EKD in Hannover.
- Drewes, Manfred (1994b): Vermerk.
- Drewes, Manfred (1992): Ein Jahr nach Ende des Buergerkrieges ist der Friede erneut gefaehrdet.
- Duffield, Mark/ John Prendergast (1994): Without troops and tanks: Humanitarian Intervention in Ethiopia and Eritrea, Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press Inc.
- Faigle, Volker (1994): Auszug aus einem Vermerk.
- Ferris, Elizabeth (1992): Humanitarian Politics: Cross-Border Operations in the Horn of Africa, unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Mexico, 22nd-27th March 1992.
- Inter Africa Group (No Year): Aims and principles, URL: <http://www.interafricagroup.org/index.html> (Access: 02/09/2012).
- International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) (2009): NGO Law Monitor. Ethiopia, URL: <http://chilot.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/ngo-law-monitor-ethiopia.pdf> (Access: 03/12/2012).
- KdK (2003): Fostering peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. A proposal by the KdK group.

Nogo, Dima (1997): Interpretation of the understanding reached.

Oromo Liberation Front Central Committee (OLF) (1997): Statement on the talks with the regime in Ethiopia.

Pausewang, Siegfried (2004): Some remarks about the background to the Oromo seminar in Bergen.

Willemse, Jacques (2010): KdK proposal for the immediate future.

Willemse, Jacques (2008): Notes and action points. Ad Hoc Working Group meeting.

Willemse, Jacques (2007a): KdK meeting for purposes of reporting and updating.

Willemse, Jacques (2007b): Notes on a KdK meeting.

Willemse, Jacques (2003): Memo.

Willemse, Jacques (2002): Memo.

Willemse, Jacques (2001): The situation in the Horn. Briefing for the KdK group.

Willemse, Jacques (1999a): Discussions between the OLF and KdK held in Oslo.

Willemse, Jacques (1999b): Notes on combined KdK and Justice for Africa Meeting.

Willemse, Jacques (1998a): KdK group - Plan 2000. A proposal for dialogue.

Willemse, Jacques (1998b): Sustainable peace in Ethiopia. Concept paper by KdK group.

Willemse, Jacques (1997): OLF consultation proposal.

Willemse, Jacques (1996): Observation paper. KdK group consultations with the OLF and EPRDF.

## People Interviewed<sup>4</sup>

Conring, Warner (2011): Personal interview by the author, Hannover, February 25th 2011.

Drewes, Manfred (2011): Personal interview by the author, Bonn, February 21st 2011.

Ericson, Jan (2011): Personal interview by the author, Oslo, February, 15th 2011.

Ganns, Harald (2011): Personal interview by the author, Bonn, March 1st 2011.

Heinrich, Wolfgang (2011): Personal interview by the author, Bonn, March 14th 2011.

Hensle, Hannelore (2011): Personal interview by the author, Stuttgart, February, 23rd 2011.

Hess, Helmut/Johannes Weitekämper (2011): Personal interview by the author, Stuttgart, February 23rd 2011.

Lata, Leenco (2011): Personal interview by the author, Oslo, February, 14th 2011.

Normark, Sture (2011): Personal interview by the author, Uppsala, March, 15th 2011.

Stolte, Bea (2011): Personal interview by the author, Utrecht, March 11th 2011.

Tesfagiorgis, Paulos (2011): Personal interview by the author, Frankfurt/Main, March 9th 2011.

Villumstad, Stein (2011): Personal interview by the author, Oslo, February 15th 2011.

Willemse, Jacques (2011): Personal interview by the author, Utrecht, March 10th 2011.

Winkelmann, Horst (2011): Personal interview by the author, Berlin, April 7th, 2011.

---

4 — A wide range of people were either interviewed or contacted with targeted questions. There was a generous cooperation, which both was rewarding as well as creating a difficult task of sifting. Initially, KdK members had intended to also include representatives of their counterparts in the region in the research and interviewing process. This idea ultimately had to be abandoned. It quickly became clear that it would not be possible to gather a representative response of all actors the KdK group had been involved with over those 15 years. It was therefore decided to restrict this undertaking to the inner circle of KdK's contacts.



## Acknowledgement

The KdK Group wishes to thank first and foremost Marius Labahn who during his time as an intern at Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED) agreed to take up the initiative of capturing and documenting the “KdK history”. What was conceived of as an activity of reading, interviewing and writing that would at the most take a few months turned out to be a process that in the end took two and a half years to complete. Marius Labahn’s initial text triggered intensive debates within the KdK group and a drawn out process of internal critical self-reflection. By then, the KdK Group had already unceremoniously disbanded and it became the laborious task of the chairman to organize and focus this process of reflection. Leenco Lata supported the process by providing much of the outsider’s critical assessment.

The group also wishes to thank all the persons who were willing to be interviewed on this process. Without their support this project would not have been possible and an assessment of the KdK initiative would have remained wishful thinking. For some who were involved only in certain stages this meant digging in their own archives and memories. Some provided useful additional documents from their personal notes.

Finally, the KdK Group wishes to particularly appreciate Brot für die Welt - Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst for its willingness to support this initiative all through to its end. Without this the work started by Marius Labahn would not have been concluded. And with the departure of staff the KdK story might have evaporated into oblivion.

The KdK Group is aware of the fact that this report does not meet the requirements of a formal evaluation. In fact, it was not intended to do so. This report aims at capturing the story of a very informal innovative initiative of concerned agencies and people who wished to seize opportunities as they presented themselves to contribute towards building sustainable peaceful relations among key actors in the Horn of Africa. And the report aims at extracting some lessons that may be useful for the ecumenical agencies in times to come. The challenge remains: we are still far away from a sustainable and just peace for the people in the Horn of Africa. And the calls remain the same: the churches and the ecumenical community should maintain and strengthen their efforts to make justice and peace become a reality for the people in the Horn of Africa - and beyond.

The KdK Group hopes that this report will be found useful for that.



**Published by**

Bread for the World - Protestant Agency  
for Diakonie and Development  
Caroline-Michaelis- Straße 1  
10115 Berlin, Germany  
Phone +49 30 65211 0  
info@brot-fuer-die-welt.de  
www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de

**Authors** Wolfgang Heinrich, Marius Laban (research and interviews), Jacques Willemse

**Editors** Leenco Lata, Maike Lukow, Mechtild Ritter

**Layout** János Theil

**Responsible under German press law** Dr. Klaus Seitz

**Photos** Willy Bröchle (Title), Jacques Willemse

**Art. No.** 129 501 970

**Donations**

Brot für die Welt

Account number: 500 500 500

Bank für Kirche und Diakonie, Bank code (BLZ): 1006 1006

IBAN: DE10100610060500500500, BIC: GENODED1KDB

Vereinte Evangelische Mission

IBAN DE45 3506 0190 0009 0909 08

KD-Bank eG

BIC GENODED1DKD

Berlin, August 2015

**Bread for the World -  
Protestant Development Service  
Protestant Agency  
for Diakonie and Development**

---

Caroline-Michaelis-Straße 1  
D-10115 Berlin

---

Phone +49 30 65211 0  
Fax +49 30 65211 3333  
E-Mail [info@brot-fuer-die-welt.de](mailto:info@brot-fuer-die-welt.de)  
[www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de](http://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de)