

[dehai-news] SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS PEACE AGREEMENT BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA MARKS VICTORY FOR VOICE OF REASON, POWER OF DIPLOMACY

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SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS PEACE AGREEMENT BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA MARKS VICTORY FOR VOICE OF REASON, POWER OF DIPLOMACY

Following is the statement of Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the signing ceremony of the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in Algiers on 12 December:

We meet today to mark the end of a conflict, and to usher in a new beginning of peace and cooperation for the peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia. This peace agreement reflects the collective will of the leaders and governments of both countries to set aside a destructive dispute, and turn their energies and abilities to advancing the shared needs of both their peoples.

Today marks a victory for the voice of reason, for the power of diplomacy, and for the recognition that neither one of these countries — nor Africa as a whole — can afford another decade, another year, another day of conflict. It is my sincere hope that other leaders will look to this day and this agreement and find the wisdom to end their own wars, and begin to put their peoples' interests first, today and in the future.

On this day of hope for the peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia, I would like to pay tribute to the tireless efforts of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its Secretary-General Salim Salim, and particularly to those of President Bouteflika of Algeria in making this agreement possible. We applaud you, Mr. President, and your team for the efforts you have put into this agreement. I also wish to express my appreciation of President Clinton and the United States team, including Secretary of State Albright and the Representative of the President of the United States, Anthony Lake. And to the Personal Envoy of the Presidency of the European Union, Rino Serri, I say thank you, too. I would also want to thank all the other leaders and peacemakers who have contributed to the attainment of this agreement.

I am confident that the positive spirit that has brought us here will

continue to prevail. Let us now direct our efforts to the essential task of reconstruction and the tasks set forth by the peace agreement signed today.

The United Nations and the international community are determined to work closely with the parties to ensure the implementation of both the 18 July agreement and the one signed today, so that lasting peace can be achieved and that reconstruction can begin. The Security Council has shown its willingness to support the process with the deployment of a peacekeeping operation. Already, nearly 1,800 troops and military observers are in place. In the weeks ahead, that number will grow to more than 4,000 peacekeepers from more than 30 countries. I would like to thank the troop contributors, in particular, for their quick action; as we know, rapid deployment can make an enormous difference in sustaining the momentum of peace. I would also like to stress that the United Nations peacekeepers do not intend to linger. We have a job to do, we shall do it effectively and efficiently, and then we will withdraw. I have no doubt about that.

Another priority is the humanitarian crisis facing both countries. In Eritrea, more than 217,000 internally displaced persons are still accommodated in 25 camps, and 100,000 additional internally displaced persons are in host communities or scattered around the country. In Ethiopia, more than 15 per cent of the total population require emergency assistance, as a result of acute drought, while some 350,000 internally displaced persons continue to face an uncertain future. Bringing aid and assistance to these most vulnerable citizens of the two countries must be a priority not only for the international community, but also for the governments.

Another key challenge will be to dispel the remaining distrust between the two countries. This will require confidence-building measures, including the immediate release and voluntary return of interned civilians; the release and repatriation of all prisoners of war; the release and repatriation or return of all other persons detained as a result of the conflict; and the humane treatment of each other's nationals and persons of each other's national origin within their respective territories.

Indeed, it is not enough to silence the guns. Silencing the guns alone does not mean peace. As we embrace peace, build trust and work for reconciliation, we should remember that words can inflame or soothe. Our words and actions must therefore reinforce the peace agreement we sign today. Having just visited the two countries, I have a very strong sense that the two peoples are genuinely eager to put the war behind them and to get on with their lives.

The two countries face hard work ahead. They will need vision, patience and resources. As they turn to face this challenge -- as they embark upon the essential task of reconstruction and economic and social development -- their wisdom in now choosing the path of peace merits strong support. I call on the international community and particularly those countries with the capacity to give, to give and give generously.

Even as we celebrate the signing of the peace agreement today, we must recognize that it carries with it great responsibilities, above all for the leaders of the two countries. Expectations have been raised and hopes have been kindled, not only in the Horn of Africa, but all over the continent, that wars can end, peoples can cooperate for a better