

ARTICLE

Fundamental Consequences of the Ethio-Eritrean War [1998-2000]

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Abstract

This is a study of the effects of the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war on both Ethiopia and Eritrea. The purpose is to stimulate informed public discussion on the unending interstate cold war. The paper is a product of field work in Mākällé, Adigrat and its vicinity. The information presented here was gathered using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the residents in the then war zone on the Ethiopian side, Eritrean refugees and Ethiopians deported from Eritrea. Beside the interviews, literature in the form of reports and war narratives are included to balance the information gathered from informants. However, I did not hold interviews with ministers, top-level military commanders, or local administrators. The research adopts a qualitative and historical approach. Though the paper presents pertinent information, the study faced problems in tackling a complex and contentious issue in a situation where much of the information needed for full understanding is not available. Therefore, many deeply contested issues were excluded from this project. It was also extremely difficult to produce a comprehensive picture of all causal connections, for war is never an isolated act. Thus, in this paper I attempt to give meaning to what was seen as a senseless war by assessing the economic, social, political and environmental impacts of the war from an emic perspective.

Keywords

Ethio-Eritrean war, Badmä, Operation Sunset, displacement, denationalization

*Heroism is my inborn character;
And thus also my identity;
I am the doer of miracles in a...heroic battle;
[Šhabiya] has provoked me today;
Wanting enmity and feud as in the old days;
It is unthinkable [to surrender];
I am ready to confront him
As I have made an oath with my blood.¹*

culture and history with the Tigray proper south of the Mereb River (Abbay, 1998:180). However, the low land was either a buffer zone or an area of contention. The advent of colonial rule that procured a foothold in Assab under the guise of missionary services created a historic divide line which was later complicated with the internal contention for the control of state power between Shewa and Tigray. However, the former was primal in shaping the nature and the course of the latter. Thus, external colonial intrusion and the internal power struggle laid down the foundations for the rise of a separatist mentality and quest for secession among the Eritreans who were sandwiched between.

When European powers scrambled territories in Africa and set out to establish stations for their ships along the north-east African coast after the opening of the Suez

1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1880s, the Eritrean plateau was part of the Ethiopian empire state. It shares a common language, religion,

¹ Song composed by Girmay Häilä-Selassie when the Eritrean war erupted. Quoted in Tronvoll (2003), page 165.



Canal, Italy invaded Eritrea. On 1 January 1890, it officially declared Eritrea as part of its north-east African Colonies. After World War Two, the security council of the victorious powers, mainly the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union and the USA, held a discussion to decide on the disposition of the former Italian colonies. However, due to the uncompromised interest of the participants and the amalgam of other exogenous forces operating, along with the antithetical aspirations of Eritreans themselves, the decolonization process of Eritrea was complicated (Othman, 1974:82).

Following the failure of the four point commission to find an all-round, satisfying solution for the liquidation of Eritrea, the case was transferred to the General Assembly of the United Nations (Bahru, 2002:183). The UN assigned five officials, from Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan, South Africa and Burma, to conduct a needs assessment of the interests of the peoples of Eritrea. After a rigorous assessment, unanimity was still impossible and three options were presented to the UN. Guatemala and Pakistan recommended guaranteeing independence whereas Burma and South Africa called for a federation. Norway alone recommended union (Bahru, 2002:183).

The result of this process reflected each country's diplomatic and religious affinity either with Ethiopia or Eritrea. In spite of this lacuna, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 390V on 2 December 1950. Accordingly, Eritrea became an autonomous unit federated with the Ethiopian Crown (Bahru, 2002:183). The federal act came into effect on 15 September 1952 and culminated with the gradual incorporation of Eritrea, which was finalized on 14 November 1962 following the dissolution of the federation by members of the Eritrean Assembly (Semere, 1988:43).

The dissolution of the federal act served as an excuse for the onset of the practical phase of separatist insurgency. The ferment of insurgency was burning inside, waiting only for a favorable time to burst out. The separatist movement broke out in the wake of the complete denial of self-rule and autonomy, to realize the aspiration of Eritreans for self-determination. The struggle to secure those rights has also created the *we/they* divide and thereof the birth of a distinctive identity tainted with the blood of martyrs.

When the imperial monarchy of Haile Selassie was toppled by the popular revolution, the insurgent groups of Eritrea got ample time conducive to organizing themselves and establishing links with the populace and the rest of the world. The post-revolutionary military junta had also perpetuated the forceful centralization and nation-state building project. For this end, a series of military operations was launched to curb the ferment of Eritrean nationalism, which had been ingrained since the onset of the colonial conquest. However, in spite of the enormous military

capacity of the regime, most of the operations were a failure due to relentless resistance.

Ultimately, the EPLF, under a joint military operation with the TPLF, toppled the military regime in 1991, and Eritrea attained the long awaited right of self-determination. Thus, though Eritreans assured their independence by dint of their power in 1993, they confirmed it in a UN supervised referendum. However, the independence of Eritrea was accompanied by socio-economic and boundary delimitation controversies with Ethiopia. Hence, after five years of independence the two states went to a war which has been coined Operation Sunset by the Eritrean side. Many scholars propose different motives for the outbreak of the war. However, the official explanation focuses on the border controversy over Badmä,² a border village and pastoral land in Kunama (Abbink, 2003:2).

On 12 May 1998, Eritrean armed forces supported by tanks and artillery invaded the town of Badmä and the surrounding area. Fighting broke out and quickly escalated to exchanges of artillery and tank fire on three fronts. The war was highly destructive and very pervasive. It cost thousands of lives, caused economic meltdown and complicated domestic affairs, leading to unprecedented military mobilization, and displacement and deportation of citizens (White, 2005:206). This paper outlines the impact of the war and provides suggestions for a lasting solution to the crisis.

2. ECONOMIC DISRUPTION: DURING AND AFTER MATH

The Ethio-Eritrean interstate war imposed a substantial economic downturn. Trade, tourism and investment decreased at an alarming rate due to a heightened sense of risk. It also threatened institutions and the rule of law. Moreover, it introduced tremendous uncertainty into the economic environment by making both public and private investment unsafe.

It is apparent that war impacts economic production first by reducing the level of financial and human capital input. War initiates flight of capital to finance the war and thus dramatically reduces investment. Accordingly, the flight of financial and human capital is the basic economic cost of war. In times of war, a government's shift of expenditure away from investment towards maintenance and expansion of the military creates a spending deficit and public investment becomes dependent on the government's capability to access international loans. As the government is weakened economically and becomes resource-constrained to

2 It is a large stretch of land, relatively arid and sparsely populated, with poor infrastructure. However, recently, mechanized oil exploration has begun. This signals that pre-identified resources could have been one of the causes for the outbreak of the war.



run the war, it often turns on the civilian population to increase revenue.

According to Mädhani G/Mariam, a 62-year old Eritrean immigrant,³ this process was aggressively practiced in Eritrea in the war period. The Eritrean government was trying to generate revenues from diaspora remittance (Lyons, 2006:12), residence fees from Ethiopians and increased taxes levied from the local peoples (Ibid). In fact, voluntary contribution was gargantuan in Ethiopia. All the nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia rose as swarm of bees in defiance of the state, and provided many necessary materials for the war effort (Col. Täwoldä G/Tinsae 2000:303-341). W/ro MéŞélale Kiro, a resident in Adigrat, said that women living around there had marched to the war front to provide food stuff and raise the moral of the Ethiopian army.⁴ Thus, the support given by the 'mothers' on the front and women's enrollment in the engagement was decisive in sustaining the Ethiopian offensive (Tronvoll, 2003:219).

The war was very destructive and two of the world's poorest countries spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the war (*The Independent*, 13 May 2000), which was diverted from much needed development projects to military activities and weapon procurement (Shah, 2000). Thus, the resources that would have helped build up the poor economies had been squandered on building massive armies and on sophisticated weapons (Bahru, 2006). The diversion of economically active forces and resources to the war fundamentally collapsed the weakly performing economies of the two countries and generation of development opportunities was halted (Lyons, 2006:4). The economies of both countries were also weakened in the aftermath as a result of the drought and the concomitant food insecurity (White, 2005: 203). The war exacerbated the famine because prior to the war much of Eritrea's trade had been with Ethiopia and much of Ethiopia's foreign trade was dependent on Eritrean outlets. Moreover, the fighting stopped farmers from planting crops and food production dropped by 62% (World Factbook Report, 2006). Agricultural production was also impaired by intensive bombing and heavy military vehicles traveling over farmland. Consequently, the war ended by producing two hungry states, with a 44% and 58% malnourished population in Ethiopia and Eritrea, respectively (Ibid). This situation inspired researchers to unearth the link between war and famine as well as the hitherto marginalized issue of the utilization of food as a strategic weapon of war.

Starvation further escalated due to the aid conditionality sought by donors and development agencies that felt

that the two states were fighting an unjust war (White, 2005:202). For more than two years, both Ethiopia and Eritrea were denied access to loans from international lending institutions and from the prerogatives of debt cancellations (Ibid). The rhetoric and contempt of Isaias as leader of the self-sufficient and proud people of Eritrea also denied the starving people access to international aid, unlike Ethiopian's appeal to the international community. All these factors culminated in the decline of the GDP and the investment rates of both countries, leading to higher rates of inflation. It also brought about the depreciation of exchange rates, dwindling foreign exchange reserves and increased defense expenditures (Sarbo, 2006:51).

Besides the cost of the war in terms of logistics, ammunitions, health services, vehicles and petroleum, the aggressive foreign policy pursued by Isaias blocked the interaction and economic interdependence of Eritrea with its neighbors. The war had created a critical shortage of skilled manpower and raw materials. The country suffered from a structural food deficit. The war cost Eritrea much to develop its transportation infrastructure in the post-war Warsay Yika'alo Program.

Ethiopia's loss of access to ports (White, 2005:209) and the cancellation of air routes affected Ethiopian farmers as well as Eritrean consumers, who depend on imported food. In fact, Ethiopia turned its eyes towards the ports of its neighbors, i.e., Djibouti, Berbera, Zeila, Mombasa and Port Sudan (Ibid), but political uncertainties and the influence of foreign investors have made it very difficult to rely on them.

The confiscation of about 200,000 tons of emergency food aid (Ibid) and other Ethiopian goods at Eritrean ports created a great hurdle to mitigate the post-war hunger. Mädhana Mäseqäl, an Ethiopian woman repatriated from Massawa by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) following dismissal from her job in the port, disclosed that personal property of workers at the port had also been confiscated.⁵

Homes, roads and bridges were targeted and destroyed during the war (Berhe, 2001:168). The destruction of infrastructure and basic services caused havoc in the daily lives of the people. Water supply systems were contaminated or shut down by bombing of pipelines.⁶ In war zones, the destruction of infrastructures resulted in water contamination and an overall shortage of safe drinking water. The war also resulted in considerable destruction of the homes of the inhabitants. The breakdown of essential infrastructure and other interacting factors increased the economic burden during the post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation process.

3 Informant: Mädhani G/Mariam

4 Informant: W/ro MéŞélale Kiro

5 Informant: Mädhana Mäseqäl

6 Informant: Kiro Gäbru



3. POLITICAL IMPACT

The war caused factions and divisions in the major political parties of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the TPLF (Tigrayan Liberation Front) and the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice), respectively (Lyons, 2006:11). Some TPLF members who were disgruntled with the secession of Eritrea were determined to achieve total annihilation of Eritrea and to bring it under Ethiopian jurisdiction. The rift within the PFDJ with regard to the worth of the war resulted in open opposition, and 15 senior officials raised demands for a renewed democracy in Eritrea. Isaias has been facing growing criticism over the economy, the issues of democratic pluralism, corruption and the government's clamorous anti-Sudanese policy. There have also been some rumbles of discontent in the army. However, among the activists, General Sébhat Afram and Major/Gen. Tākēlay Häbtä Séllassie exposed their own colleagues and had them sent to an underground prison (Col. Täwoldä G/Tinsae, 2000:335).

Since then, political repression by PFDJ has resulted in a mass exodus of Eritreans from their homelands (Ibid: 356). The post-independence promises of peace, development and democracy made by the PFDJ were deferred indefinitely. The failure of peace building between the two states has also led to the continuation of conflicts in the region.

In this regard, the Eritrean leadership has been in armed conflict with all its neighbors and the country is a one-man dictatorship, with Isaias using his people as hostages. For this reason, Eritrea lost support and acceptance from the international community and diplomatic circles (Ibid: 358). This handicapped the flow of international aid for the humanitarian crisis caused by ravaging hunger in the post-war period. Compulsory military service, which prescribes every Eritrean citizen between the age of 18 and 40 to be trained in military camps and undertake military service, has resulted in proliferation of militarization and militarism in the area which in turn has caused security problems. Moreover, those who left the army began to engage in the black market that thrives on contraband.

The pass system and the introduction of *Kalla* (gateway) controls has posed insurmountable problems on the free movement of people within Eritrea, and compounding the sense of insecurity. Many civilians, and soldiers, took asylum in neighboring countries, detesting the system and the compulsory military service (ibid: 357). Reports show that, each year, about 3,000-4,000 Eritreans emigrate to Ethiopia, 5,000-6,000 to Sudan and others to Saudi Arabia and the Yemen (Ibid). Free press, the right of association and religious freedom, and the exercise of political and civil rights are still generally banned. The day favors only individuals belonging to the Yeka'alo military

elites, former 'freedom' fighters (Lyons, 2006:12). The people of Eritrea remain under the repressive and unpredictable regime which is blind to compromise (Col. Täwoldä G/Tinsae, 2000:7).

According to my informant Solomon, informally called Šhabiyawu, many of his colleagues who attempted to leave the country were captured on the way and sent to jail, but those who attempted to cross the borders were shot by soldiers. The war also divided the Trans Mereb Tigrean brothers into two fronts. In his well-known war memoirs, Col. Täwoldä tells the story of two brothers of Tigrean origin, born in EntiĈho, Col. Lägässe Tafär and Col. George Tafär, who fought on opposite sides, Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively (ibid:355-6).

4. SOCIAL IMPACT: THE HUMAN TOLL

There are numerous reports about the toll of the war yet there are hardly any reliable figures. In addition to the toll, another immediate effect of the war has been the displacement and expulsion of thousands of people on both sides. Thus, the war was marked not only by the great destruction of life and property but also by unprecedented mass deportation (Bahru, 2006:15) and denationalization.

4.1. Casualties and displacement

Casualty figures are contested, but most reports put the total number on both sides at around 70,000 and others simply report tens of thousands or as many as 100,000 (Berhe et al., 2001). In spite of all these variations, the war has claimed approximately 135,000 Ethiopian and 19,000 Eritrean casualties (Ibid). The nature of the war, basically trench warfare, contributed to augmenting the figure (US Institute of Peace, 1999:14). The war, from May 1998 to June 2000, resulted in 100,000 deaths (Shah, 2000).

According to Täwoldä G/Tinsae, the fighting led to massive internal displacement in both countries, as civilians fled out of the war zone. Overall, more than 316,000 people were displaced by the conflict and many of these lost their livelihoods in the process. The internal displacement was intense and occurred predominantly among the people residing in: Humära in the west; Badmä and the Yirga triangle around Šheraro, between the Märäb and the Tākäzze rivers; Tsoräna and Zalem-bässa; Alitiena and Irob and the northern Dänkäli depression (Abraham, 2001:530). The most serious clashes were in the Yirga triangle, around Zalem-bessa, Alitiena and in Bore (Ibid) and the displacement was also huge. The internal displacement made thousands of peoples homeless and



devastated their agricultural fields. Moreover, their presence in the towns was also creating a strain on resources and intensifying crimes.

IDP camps, which supplied people with shelter, food, and water, were scarce, and displaced people were expected to integrate with those who had not been victims of the war. In the few camps, basic needs were not always available. There were incidences of violence, looting, vandalism and kidnapping. Most of the IDP camps were suffering from communicable diseases whereby emergency intervention, preventive measures, and medication was hardly available. Immunization programs were seriously affected by the lack of adequate equipment and erratic supply of vaccines. Injuries due to increased societal violence, including sexual abuse, were profound.

The war left ineffaceable imprints in the minds of the schoolchildren in Mäqällä. The inhumane killing of innocent children in Aydär is still fresh in the minds of many residents and families of the victims. The Eritrean leadership claimed that the bombing was targeting a military site but in reality it was the Aydär Elementary School's 58 pupils and civilians that lost their lives and 185 were injured by cluster bombs (Tronvoll, 2003: 186).

In the commemoration anniversary, school principal Gäbrä Mariam Gäbrä-Sélasie stated that the school compound had been full of dismembered bodies and internal organs (Ibid). W/ro Gänät, in tears, also explained how she had stumbled upon the atrocities. Accordingly, when she reached the area, the children's bodies had been cut to pieces, scattered on the ground and the earth was stained with blood. Another mother W/ro Yalämsra Alämayehu, in an interview held with Ethiopian Television (ETV), told of the encounter as follows:

“The depth of my sorrow was more than one can imagine. This is because I lost my little kid [Birtukan Amare] who was only eight years old and was studying in this school in grade two.”

4.2. Denationalization and deportations

Both countries expelled nationals of the other side during and after the war (Berhe et al., 2001). On the fate of Eritreans in Ethiopia, reports are mixed. In 1998, an estimated 120,000 to over 500,000 persons of Eritrean origin were living in Ethiopia (Southwick, 2009). The *raison d'être* for the deportation of Eritreans from Ethiopia was based on two grounds: security risk (Human Rights Watch, 2003) and the acquirement of Eritrean citizenship by voting in the referendum, which amounted to renunciation of their Ethiopian citizenship. Accordingly, those who had voted in the referendum and remained in Ethiopia were called

to register for residence permits, which had to be renewed every six months.

Initially, individuals that seemed to be security threats such as members of the military and politicians with links to Eritrea were expelled (Ibid) and those wishing to reside in their new homeland in Eritrea had to provide their former identification documents issued by Ethiopian authorities to be marked as void (Ibid).

On the Eritrean side, about 7,500 Ethiopians living in Eritrea were interned and thousands deported. Thousands of others who were unable to pay the around 200 USD relocation fee remained in Eritrea. According to my informant, who had been repatriated from Massawa to Mäqällä under the auspices of the ICRC, the government of Eritrea levied 1,000 Naqffa on each of them before deportation. According to him, several thousands were expelled within weeks before selling their business. Their passports were stamped to avoid future return. This observation was also backed by a Human Rights Watch report. Ethiopian detainees were subjected to torture, discrimination and other degrading treatments during deportation (Amnesty International, 1999). They were detained for days, weeks or months before they were bussed up to the Eritrean border or forced to travel through Djibouti. Overall, Eritrea deported around 70,000 (Klein, 1998) Ethiopians during the war. The consequences of the deportations are enormous. Mixed families continue to suffer from prolonged separation, as the war ended communication between the two countries. Men were separated from their wives and children; many missed their beloved neighbors and friends. The separation of families caused psychosocial trauma such as anxiety, depression and suicide. However, the Ethiopian Red Cross Association along with the ICRC worked hard to reunify families.

5. THE ENVIRONMENTAL PERILS

Although ecological destruction brought on by war have been occurring for thousands of years in the region, on this occasion digging gigantic fortresses for the trench warfare, especially on the Eritrean, side resulted in clearing forest cover. In addition, military vehicles and explosives caused unprecedented levels of deforestation and habitat destruction. This resulted in serious disruption of the ecosystem and caused a decline in water quality and food production. Hence, along with the human toll, the war also resulted in ecocide, the destruction of the environment. The environmental destruction from the war has been an enduring legacy. Many lesser-known but significant acts of ecocide have been perpetrated by warring states. Among them are extensive water contamination, soil acidification and the impact on endangered species. These environmental catas-



trophes are aggravated by the fact that ecological protection and restoration become a low priority after war.

Despite the long legacy of environmental destruction caused by warfare, most conventions and protocols have proven inadequate in preventing and redressing environmental degradation (Environmental Law Institute, 1998:7). Some experts maintain that the weakness lies in international laws, which do not hold wartime aggressors accountable for ecological crimes. To make matters worse, international laws protecting the environment are mostly peacetime laws (Ibid). Some experts also maintain that mitigating environmental atrocities from warfare requires clearer standards of conduct enforceable by credible authorities on those found guilty (Ibid). In effect, environmental security should be treated as a desirable end in itself rather than just a means of obtaining a competitive edge. States should therefore respect international law, providing protection for the environment in times of armed conflict.

The growing realization that national security and ecological conservation are inextricably linked has made environmental security an issue worthy of consideration and protection, given that the combination of international support and stringent international laws mitigating environmental destruction has the potential to change the face of combat. The prospect of greater international environmental accountability when coupled with international enforcement of war crimes and human rights violations could make war less appetizing too.

6. REGIONAL DESTABILIZATION

The Ethiopia-Eritrea war has been another menace for regional peace. The deflection of the Ethio-Eritrea border tension into Somalia was a potentially dangerous extension of the 1998 conflict that has thrown regional alliances into uncertainty (US Institute of Peace, 1999:3). After Operation Sunset, Eritrea opened a new front in Somalia for a final offensive in the weakened north. Ethiopia was obliged to wage a two front war in the North and in the South (Bereket, 2006:25).

Moreover, both Ethiopia and Eritrea have given support to and hosted opposition forces. They support each other's domestic rebels and each is convinced that the fall of the other regime is imminent. The Eritrean government has given tremendous support to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Ginbot 7, Ogaden Liberation Front (ONLF) and others. The OLF had committed treason against the people of Ethiopia by taking sides with PFDJ in the 1998-2000 war. It also killed many civilians in blasts in the capital and in its vicinities and it is listed as a terrorist group under the Ethiopian Antiterrorism Law.

The latter two also aspire to create havoc through bombings in major cities or targeting foreign invest-

ment centers. ONLF fighters have been fighting for the secession of Ogaden for the last five decades. The area has been the epicenter of insurgency since 2005 following attacks by ONLF fighters against foreign oil company workers. The incidents have claimed the lives of 76 people. Ethiopia also reacted by supporting and hosting the Eritrean rebel groups. The fierce military punitive in the Ogden has crippled the ONLF threat, and other insurgent groups like the OLF have not been able to pose a significant challenge. If the Eritrean government does not stop inflaming war, the prospect of regional stability will be endangered in spite of Ethiopia's relentless struggle to combat insurgents on many fronts and create a platform for harmonious regional cooperation.

7. THE STALEMATE: NO WAR, NO PEACE

The Ethio-Eritrean fragile peace after the Comprehensive Agreement in Algiers is at the apogee of *mêlée* (ICR, 2005). The relation between the two countries is still marked by mutual recriminations, saber-rattling and destabilization (Bahru, 2006:13). Another round of fighting is building up, with tens of thousands of troops stationed along both sides of the border, often less than a 'football pitch's distance' apart. Though neither side appears eager to go to war, mere saber-rattling could distort the last chance to preserve peace. It is always possible that border skirmishes or accidental incursions could spark a wider conflict that might become a fully-fledged war. Resumption would destabilize the entire Horn, fuelling flows of weapons to armed groups throughout the region, rekindling war in Somalia and undermining the peace process between the two Sudanese Republics (ICR, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

The war, which had many complicated and pervasive effects, has not yet reached its conclusion. The next few years will determine whether Ethiopia and Eritrea resume a path toward a second war after a procrastinated stalemate or solidify their peace agreement. There is no real dialogue between the parties. Each views the other's government as decaying and each supports elements of the other's opposition.

Facilitating normalization of negotiations on granting dual citizenship for the populations in the contested areas will help to avert the disremembering of historically linked peoples and serve as a win-win approach to border claims. Delimiting or demarcating a boundary



that divides the border peoples is worthless because the people on either side of the Mereb share a common history, culture and genealogy. Before the war, the peoples in the border area, and even in the hinterland, worshipped the same God and intermarried. Thus, they have many connections that transcend and counter the claims of the two states.

The flight of criminals from both sides could have been effectively handled if the stalemate had been turned

into peace. Hence, the two governments should draw lessons from the ravaging war and seek to pursue peace at any cost. The peace process should direct its efforts toward bilateral normalization of dialogue that will guarantee sustainable peace. Promotion and financing of cross border development projects that increase cross-border communications and trade with lesser emphasis on territoriality need to be launched. There is a need to work together towards de-escalation and dialogue, disregarding border demarcation. ■

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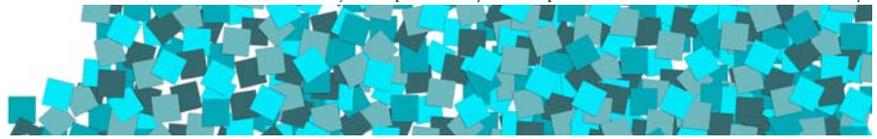
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