

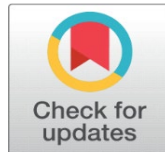
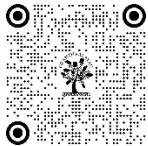
MITIGATING CROSS-BORDER CONFLICTS BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND SOUTH SUDAN

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ABSTRACT

The Ethiopia-South Sudan border, particularly in Gambella Regional State, epitomizes the multifaceted insecurity in the Horn of Africa. The region is marked by a lack of development, political marginalization, and limited access to essential public services, making its residents extremely vulnerable to various forms of insecurity. The porous nature of the border exacerbates these challenges, as the free movement of people and goods facilitates not only illicit trade, but also violent activities such as child abduction, cattle rustling, and arms smuggling. These cross-border conflicts are further fueled by the instability in South Sudan, as well as challenges to economic inclusion and governance on both sides of the border. As a result, Governments should enhance cross-border security operations, targeting insurgent groups and smuggling networks. Improved communication and joint patrols between Ethiopian and South Sudanese security forces can help curtail illicit activities.

Keywords: Ethiopia, South Sudan, Border Conflicts, Gambella, Horn of Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

A key driver of this persistent insecurity is the weak relationship between the central governments of Ethiopia and South Sudan and their border regions. Border communities often feel disconnected from national political processes, leading to a sense of exclusion and abandonment. The lack of effective governance and infrastructure in these regions makes it difficult to curb insurgent activities and provide basic services. In addition, cultural and economic ties between communities on both sides of the border, while a potential source of cooperation, often become a source of tension due to competition over scarce resources such as grazing land and water. The 2013 Ethiopia-South Sudan border conflict cooperation agreement, aimed at addressing marginalization and insecurity faced by border communities, was a promising initiative but was not successfully implemented due to a lack of adequate resources, coordination and balanced implementation. Ethiopia's disarmament efforts on its side of the border were successful, but without corresponding action from South Sudan, they created an uneven security landscape. This imbalance, where unarmed

Ethiopian border communities remained vulnerable while their South Sudanese counterparts remained armed, increased the perception of insecurity in the region.

A soft border approach involves recognizing the cultural and social fluidity of border communities while enforcing necessary regulations. Such a policy would allow for regulated cross-border interactions such as trade, social visits and cultural exchanges, thereby legitimizing existing ties while maintaining security and order. Governments could establish official crossing points or issue special permits for cross-border travel to support this approach (Liu, 2014). This article highlights that governments can organize cross-border cultural events, festivals, and dialogue forums that celebrate shared heritage while promoting respect for national borders. Such initiatives can foster mutual understanding and cooperation, reduce tensions between communities, and encourage peaceful coexistence. Involving local leaders, elders, and influential people in the community in these efforts can amplify their impact.

2. BORDER MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF BORDER AREAS

The formal demarcation of the Ethiopia-South Sudan border is an important step in reducing conflict and insecurity. However, it must be supported by flexible border policies that regulate trade, curb smuggling, and encourage local communities to interact peacefully and legally across the border. By combining these efforts, the two governments can build a safer, more stable, and more economically prosperous border region. Once demarcation is complete, a key challenge will be controlling the flow of illicit goods and weapons across the border. Governments should adopt flexible policies that balance security and economic cooperation. For example, establishing formal border checkpoints and regulated trade routes could help monitor the flow of goods while allowing legal trade, which benefits border communities. The proliferation of small arms is a major cause of conflict in the region. Demarcation alone will not be enough to stop the flow of arms unless it is supported by efforts to combat arms smuggling (Bharti, 2022). Border security forces on both sides must be equipped and trained to detect and intercept arms traffickers. In addition, regional and international cooperation is needed to track and dismantle smuggling networks.

Facilitating legal and regulated cross-border trade would provide border communities with legitimate economic opportunities, reducing their reliance on illicit activities. Creating trade hubs, providing incentives for legal trade, and simplifying customs procedures can encourage local traders to comply with the law. Ethiopia and South Sudan could consider implementing an Integrated Border Management (IBM) approach, which emphasizes coordination between customs, immigration, police, and trade authorities. This approach promotes cooperation among border agencies, helping to address security and economic challenges in a holistic manner. An IBM system would be particularly effective in managing cross-border trade, preventing smuggling, and promoting cooperation among law enforcement agencies. It is essential to establish mechanisms to monitor compliance with border regulations. Joint monitoring committees or observation missions involving Ethiopian and South Sudanese officials, as well as representatives from the African Union or other international partners, could help ensure that both sides respect agreed regulations and maintain peace at the border.

For soft border policies to be effective, communities must understand the importance of respecting international borders, regardless of their shared culture and kinship. Public awareness campaigns can play a crucial role in this effort. Promoting a culture of legality is essential. Campaigns can help raise awareness among communities about the importance of respecting border laws, particularly with regard to issues such as smuggling, illegal crossings and arms circulation. It is also important to highlight the benefits of legal cross-border trade and cooperation that can change attitudes towards illicit activities. Moreover, soft border policies, coupled with public awareness campaigns, can help bridge the gap between respecting international borders and maintaining cross-border cultural ties. These efforts must be community-driven and focused on education, rule of law, and cooperation to succeed in fostering long-term peace and stability in borderland regions.

The Murle people of South Sudan, concentrated in the border regions of Pibor and Boma states, are among the most disadvantaged communities in the country and face severe socio-economic and political marginalization. Poverty, illiteracy and heavy reliance on livestock as their main economic activity have contributed to their vulnerability and involvement in conflict, exacerbating cross-border instability. To address these issues and promote peace and development, the Government of South Sudan, in collaboration with international development partners, could implement integrated development plans that focus on education, job training and infrastructure development. The government, together with international donors and NGOs, could introduce a comprehensive development programme targeting education, vocational training and infrastructure in the border regions of Pibor and Boma. This would not only improve the living conditions of the Murle, but would also reduce the appeal of the insurgency by offering alternative

avenues for economic and social progress. Historically, the Murle people have been excluded from political participation, leading to their marginalization. Ensuring that Murle representatives participate in local and national decision-making processes is critical to reducing feelings of disenfranchisement. The Government of South Sudan can introduce initiatives aimed at increasing Murle representation in the political system and fostering dialogue between the Murle community and the central government (Dejene & Cochrane, 2019).

3. CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACEBUILDING

To prevent further conflict and instability, peacebuilding initiatives must address the root causes of Murle involvement in conflict, such as competition over resources, cattle rustling and inter-ethnic tensions. Community-based peace initiatives, including dialogue and mediation led by local leaders, can help build trust and cooperation with neighbouring communities. The Government of South Sudan should engage with international donors, NGOs and regional organizations to support these development initiatives. The African Union, the United Nations and other development partners can provide technical expertise, funding and capacity-building support to ensure the success of these initiatives (Nataraj & Sekhani, 2015). The cross-border conflict between the Anyuua and Jikany-Nuer communities of Ethiopia and the Murle insurgents of South Sudan, including the abduction of children and cattle rustling, represents a serious human rights crisis. The 2016 incident, in which 208 people were killed, 2,000 cattle were stolen and 131 children were abducted, highlights the level of insecurity and violence faced by these Ethiopian communities. A coordinated response involving national and international actors is essential to address these violations and protect the border population.

The Government of Ethiopia should work closely with the Government of South Sudan to address child abduction and cattle rustling through diplomatic channels. Bilateral agreements that specifically target the prevention of cross-border crime, including the recovery of abducted children, could be strengthened or introduced. International organisations, such as the United Nations and the African Union (AU), could help address these human rights violations by facilitating cross-border cooperation and exerting pressure for accountability. Organisations such as UNICEF could provide child protection services and work to return abducted children to their families (Connors, 1996). Human rights monitoring by international agencies should be stepped up to hold insurgent groups accountable and document abuses, helping victims seek justice and providing a basis for interventions. It is essential to develop systems for better coordination between Regional Special Forces, Regional Police and National Defence Forces. This would ensure timely exchange of information on potential threats, insurgent movements and early warnings of attacks. A dedicated cross-border intelligence task force could help in timely interception of cattle rustlers or child abductors.

Regional authorities, especially in Gambella Regional State, should work in close coordination with the federal government to enable a rapid response to any incursion. Streamlining decision-making channels would reduce bureaucratic delays in mobilizing security forces. Joint command centers involving federal and regional security actors could improve operational coordination. The Ethiopian government, with the support of international humanitarian organizations, should provide psychosocial support to families affected by child abductions and cattle raids. Counselling and legal support services can help families recover from these traumatic events. Rehabilitation programmes for rescued abducted children need to be developed to reintegrate them into their communities. These programmes should include education, medical care and psychological support. The Anyuua and Jikany-Nuer communities requires a multi-faceted approach, combining security improvements, cross-border cooperation, and humanitarian support. By reassessing the security gaps at regional and federal levels, empowering local communities, and engaging international partners, Ethiopia can protect its borderland population and work towards a more stable and peaceful region (Giles, 2018).

4. WAR IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

The conflict, primarily in Tigray, created significant instability not only in Ethiopia but also in neighbouring areas, affecting cross-border movement and trade. Fighting in regions close to the border with Sudan raised security concerns, making trade routes unsafe. In addition, the war strained Ethiopia's overall governance and economic capacity, further hampering its ability to maintain trade routes and infrastructure. The takeover by the Sudanese Armed Forces of Al Fashaga, a fertile border area long disputed by Ethiopia and Sudan, has heightened tensions between the two countries. The territorial dispute has intensified military confrontations, particularly around the Metema-Gallabat area, contributing to the periodic closure of the crossing point. Control of this area is strategically important to both countries, as agricultural lands are at the heart of the conflict, but it has also made the entire region more unstable (Bradshaw & Breakfast, 2019).

5. CONSEQUENCES OF BORDER CLOSURE

The closure of the Metema–Gallabat crossing severely disrupted trade flows, hurting local economies on both sides of the border. Agricultural products, manufactured goods, and livestock trade were particularly affected. Traders and businesses relying on this route for exporting and importing goods faced significant delays and financial losses. The disruption also worsened food and supply shortages in parts of northern Ethiopia, where trade with Sudan often supplemented local markets. The closure had a direct impact on local communities who depend on cross-border trade for their livelihoods. In addition to losing access to markets, many borderland residents also faced increased security risks due to military confrontations. Humanitarian aid efforts were also hampered, as the instability and blocked trade routes made it difficult to deliver assistance to conflict-affected regions. The border closure exacerbated already strained diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Sudan. Sudan's support for Ethiopian refugees and its position on the Al Fashaga dispute added further tension to the relationship. These issues complicated efforts to reopen the border and resume normal trade flows.

Stabilizing the situation in northern Ethiopia and resolving territorial disputes in Al Fashaga will be essential to reopening trade routes and restoring economic activities along the Ethiopia–Sudan border. Diplomatic efforts, possibly mediated by regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), could help facilitate negotiations between the two countries. Ethiopia and Sudan would benefit from formal agreements to secure trade routes and protect cross-border economic activities from disruption. Such agreements could address trade facilitation, border security, and joint infrastructure development, ensuring that both countries have an interest in maintaining stable and open borders. Once the Metema–Gallabat crossing is fully reopened, efforts should be made to rebuild trust and cooperation between traders and authorities on both sides. Infrastructure investment and improved customs processes could help streamline the movement of goods and ensure the crossing remains functional, even in times of political uncertainty. The Ethiopia–Sudan border, particularly at the Metema–Gallabat crossing, will require sustained diplomatic efforts and economic investment from both countries. Resolving the root causes of the conflict and territorial disputes will be key to ensuring the long-term stability of this critical trade route.

The closure of the Ethiopia–Sudan border in 2021 and the sporadic closures throughout 2022 due to the conflict in northern Ethiopia and the seizure of Al Fashaga by Sudanese forces had a significant impact on formal trade, with a major reduction in civilian traffic and commerce at the Metema–Gallabat border crossing. Although informal trade and smuggling persisted along other sections of the border, the primary trade route through Metema–Gallabat saw a sharp decline in activity, as confirmed by satellite imagery analysis. The sharp decline in civilian movement and road traffic indicates a significant decline in official trade between Ethiopia and Sudan. The Metema–Gallabat border crossing is one of the most important land routes for goods and services, and its closure for much of 2021 and intermittently in 2022 effectively halted much legal trade between the two countries (Giles, 2018). The images highlight the disruption not only to economic exchanges but also to the movement of people, limiting cross-border interactions that are vital to communities living along the border. Despite the official border closure, informal trade and smuggling continued on other sections of the Ethiopia–Sudan border. Smugglers and informal traders likely exploited less-policed portions of the border to maintain the flow of goods, bypassing official checkpoints. This informal trade, while providing some economic relief, often involves the illicit movement of goods, including small arms, contraband, and livestock, exacerbating cross-border tensions and insecurity.

Restoring the Metema–Gallabat border crossing to full capacity will be crucial to the revival of formal trade. However, this will depend on resolving political and territorial conflicts, stabilizing northern Ethiopia, and improving security along the border. Regional and international mediation efforts, including involving organizations such as the African Union (AU), could play a critical role in fostering dialogue between Ethiopia and Sudan, paving the way for reopening the border and restoring economic ties. Since the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) launched their incursion into Al Fashaga in November 2020, they have gradually taken control of 95 per cent of the disputed border territory with Ethiopia. This territorial expansion has been accompanied by significant infrastructure developments and a military buildup, strengthening Sudan's claims over the region. The Sudanese Armed Forces have strategically built four bridges across the Atbarah River, which serves as a natural border between Al Fashaga and the Sudanese state of Gedaref. This construction is particularly important because Sudan claims that the international border with Ethiopia lies east of the river, while Ethiopia claims territory extending to Atbarah itself. The bridges allow the movement of troops and supplies, strengthening Sudan's military control over the disputed area and facilitating the integration of Al Fashaga into the rest of Sudanese territory (Ethiopian Monitor, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

The Metema–Gallabat border closure has had a profound impact on formal trade between Ethiopia and Sudan, with satellite imagery offering concrete evidence of the dramatic decline in civilian movement and commercial activity. The continued informal trade highlights the resilience of borderland communities but also underscores the need for a more secure and cooperative framework for managing the border and restoring economic relations between the two countries. The Al Fashaga conflict has its roots in colonial-era border agreements and has been a point of contention between Ethiopia and Sudan for decades. The conflict escalated after Sudan took advantage of Ethiopia's internal conflict (the Tigray War) to gain territory (Mnwana, 2015). The militarization of Al Fashaga, combined with infrastructure development, could make it harder for the two countries to reach a peaceful settlement, especially as the region sinks deeper into Sudanese governance and military control. The Sudanese Armed Forces' (SAF) gradual control over Al Fashaga, reinforced by the development of infrastructure and military outposts, represents a significant change in the Ethiopia-Sudan border conflict. By building bridges across the Atbarah River and establishing a network of military positions, Sudan is asserting its claim to the disputed territory and strengthening its presence in Al Fashaga. This situation continues to strain relations between the two countries, with satellite imagery providing key insights into the evolving dynamics of the border conflict.

The war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rwandan resistance forces is likely to have significant repercussions on Al Fashaga and surrounding areas, although direct conflict has not yet reached the region. The need for the Sudanese Armed Forces to consolidate control and mobilize resources in strategic areas such as Al Fashaga makes the area vulnerable to future militarization and economic pressure. In addition, the risk of spillover from the broader conflict, combined with existing tensions on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border, increases the risk of further instability in this contested territory. The escalation of the conflict in Sudan risks causing further displacement of civilians, both within Sudan and across its borders. Should violence spread to Al Fashaga and Gedaref, the region could experience an influx of displaced people, putting additional pressure on local resources and increasing humanitarian needs. The conflict also increases the risk of increased insecurity along the border, with the potential for increased smuggling, arms trafficking and cross-border violence, complicating the security situation in Sudan and Ethiopia (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Eritrea, 2022).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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