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Note for the Record

**Meeting with Senator Rino Serri, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs
of Italy at a VIP room at Fiumicino International Airport,
Rome, Wednesday, June 17, 1998**

Present at the meeting which took place immediately after my disembarkation from flight TW 846 from John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York, were Ambassador Maurizio Melani, former Italian Ambassador to Ethiopia and now Director of the African Department, a female interpreter and John Mdoe.

The meeting lasted from about 1000 to 1115 hours. I had met the Italian Vice Minister and his delegation last week on the margins of the Ouagadougou Summit. Since then he had been on a mission to both Addis Ababa and Asmara. When he learnt that I was passing through Rome on my way from Washington, Vice Minister Rino Serri had informed our mission in New York that he would welcome a meeting with me to exchange views and brief me on his mission to both Ethiopia and Eritrea.

In the course of our meeting which lasted more than one hour, the following salient elements were identified by the Italian side (the Senator and Ambassador Melani) as representing the observations resulting from their visit.

1. Italy's mission contributed (in addition to the efforts of the United States) to have an agreement on the cessation of air bombardments.
 2. Italy has also proposed:
 - avoiding clashes between the two parties in border areas with third countries e.g. Djibouti and Sudan.
 - Avoiding or at least minimizing the escalation of reciprocal expulsion of nationals of the two countries.
 3. How long the understanding on non-use of airforce will last is a matter of conjecture. But the situation remains extremely tense especially between the two leaders (Meles and Isaias).
 4. The U.S.-Rwanda Facilitation is an intensive care. The Eritreans manifest opposition to it. They do not feel comfortable with American facilitation at this point.
 5. While it is known that OAU supports the Facilitators' Plan and the OAU delegation derives its mandate from the OAU Summit, the OAU cannot (and I stressed would not) merely confine itself to the reiteration of the Plan. A sort of "updating" or overcoming some problems would be in order while the fundamentals of the Plan remain (I stressed). I recalled that Prime Minister Meles had left some margin, however limited, of flexibility when he observed that points can be made here and there, a coma here and there!! Furthermore,
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the situation that has evolved since Badme would necessitate some additional steps to be taken.

6. While agreement on the demarcation and delimitation of the border is central and is called for by both parties, an acceptable solution now will not be easy. The Eritreans refer to the colonial boundary while the Ethiopians give prominence to the Treaty between Italy and Ethiopia of 1902 etc. What is needed is a mechanism which can go with this and devise appropriate modalities for mediation and if necessary adjudication.
 7. Eritrea does not believe that the OAU mission comprising 5 Heads of State could resolve the problem as such. A more practical mechanism would be required.
 8. Italy would encourage the role of the President of Tunisia in helping to defuse the crisis but as part of OAU efforts.
 9. Ethiopia insists on withdrawal from Badme before the issue of demilitarisation. Eritrea insists on demilitarisation first.
 10. Ethiopia insists on return of civilian administration to Badme. Eritrea has once accepted this (though later reversed) but insists that no police and militia should return.
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11. Eritrea wants direct negotiations. Ethiopia rejects this for as long as Eritrea occupies Ethiopian territory. (Similarly Ethiopia rejects the idea of cessation of all hostilities without the withdrawal of Eritrean forces).
12. Italy's view is that there is a possibility for movement encompassing the following:
 - Eritrea should be urged to declare its acceptance and readiness to withdraw from Badme.
 - The details should be worked out with contacts between officials/military of the two countries.
13. **Strategic relationship**
 - Prime Minister Meles' position: We can be neighbours and not friends.
 - Too early to talk about future relations.
 - President Isaias values the future strategic relationship (?). Understands the implication of continued animosity.
14. High possibility conflict can be kept under control.
15. Military situation still tense – Badme, Zalambesa, Assab, Adigrat.