

‘Dangerous stalemate’ between Ethiopia, Eritrea could force UN to withdraw – Annan

3 January 2006 – The situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea has reached a dangerous stalemate, warns Secretary-General Kofi Annan in a new report to the Security Council, holding out the possibility of withdrawing the United Nations mission (UNMEE) deployed to keep a five-year truce between the two countries.

Ethiopia has failed to comply with a border demarcation decision while Eritrea is restricting the mission deployed in the two Horn of Africa countries.

“As a result of the restrictions imposed on UNMEE,” Mr. Annan says in a report released today, “the present position of the Mission is becoming increasingly untenable.”

The Secretary-General says UNMEE could maintain its present configuration “albeit with a much degraded monitoring capacity” and, despite a reduced presence, “buy time for diplomatic initiatives to unblock the current dangerous stalemate.”

It could also opt for relocation, moving most staff out of the Eritrean capital of Asmara to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Other options outlined in the report include transforming UNMEE into an observer mission or a political liaison mission. An additional option would create a preventive force deployed in strength entirely south of the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) currently held by Ethiopia.

Or, Mr. Annan says, “UNMEE could be withdrawn entirely.”

If the parties do not fully commit and cooperate, he warns, not only the future of the mission, but also the continuation of the peace process between the two countries – which fought a bitter border war between 1998 and 200 – could be called into question.

He says that the worsening situation is being caused by a “protracted stalemate” due to Ethiopia’s refusal to accept the binding Boundary Commission’s decision as required by the accord that ended the fighting, as well as Eritrea’s ban on UNMEE flights and its demand to remove UNMEE staff of certain nationalities.

A lack of dialogue between the two countries and a dangerous forward movement of their troops is also fueling friction, according to the report.

To ease tensions, he says both parties must comply with a 23 November Council resolution which threatened actions, possibly including sanctions against Eritrea if it does not immediately rescind its flight ban, and against both parties if they do not reverse their military build up.

“Obviously,” he adds, “dialogue between the two parties should resume without any pre-condition and in good faith.”

If the stalemate continues, he says he would have to make recommendations for Council action by the end of January concerning force redeployment.

“The Council may also wish to consider imposing deadlines for the implementation of the demands contained in its resolutions,” he says.

None of the redeployment options is perfect, he cautions.