

Glossary of Acronyms

ALF	Afar Liberation Front
AMC	Agricultural Marketing Corporation
Birr	Ethiopian Dollar (approx. equal to US\$0.47)
Dergue	Provisional Military Administrative Committee (government after 1974)
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (a part of EPRDF)
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
Kebele Urban Dwellers' Association	
MEISON	All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement
MT	Metric tonnes
OIF	Oromo Islamic Front
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
PA	Peasant Association
REST	Relief Society of Tigray
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SALF	Somali Abo Liberation Front
SNM	Somali National Movement
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (a part of EPRDF)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPE	Workers' Party of Ethiopia
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front

EVIL DAYS

30 YEARS OF WAR AND FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA

An Africa Watch Report

September 1991

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PREFACE

This report was initially planned at a time when it was not possible for Africa Watch to undertake research in government-held areas of Ethiopia, and access to rebel-held areas had not yet been obtained. Primary research consisted of interviews with refugees and other Ethiopians abroad. After the fall of the Mengistu government, access is now possible, and extensive research in all parts of Ethiopia would be able to paint a much more detailed picture of the abuses associated with the war. However, for reasons of time, that research remains to be done. This should be the task of an investigative commission set up by the new government.

Instead, the report relies heavily on secondary sources, including relief workers, journalists, and others who have travelled to Ethiopia or who have talked to Ethiopians. As a result, there are many blank areas: whole campaigns, particularly in the south, have scarcely been documented at all in this report. Another result is that in some cases the incidents reported cannot be fully cross-checked with independent sources. Where reported by sources known to be generally reliable, such incidents have been included. The source and status of information that has not been independently verified has been indicated.

Previous reports on human rights abuses in Ethiopia which have been compiled without visits to government-held areas have been subject to criticism, chiefly from defenders of the previous government, that such sources are wholly biased and unreliable. On these grounds a highly critical report by Cultural Survival on the government's resettlement program¹ was dismissed by Professor Richard Pankhurst² and Mr Kurt Jansson, head of the UN famine relief operation in Ethiopia.³ As shown in chapter 12, those dismissals were premature.

In compiling this report, Africa Watch has used as extensive a range of sources as possible. Between 1978 and 1988, the Ethiopian government denied the existence of the war altogether, and at no time did it allow independent access to the war zones. There is virtually no reliable information available about human rights abuses associated with the war from official Ethiopian sources. The Ethiopian government displayed an unhealthy obsession with statistics, and ostensibly-precise numbers for damage to property and "affected populations" form the greater part of its assessment of the impact of the wars and famines. Given that the government consistently overlooked the existence of a million people in Tigray, and invented half a million returning refugees who did not exist, such figures must be treated with caution.

¹ Cultural Survival (Jason W. Clay and Bonnie K. Holcombe), Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985, Cambridge, Mass., 1985.

² Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Famine: Cultural Survival's Report Assessed," Anthropology Today, 2.3, June 1986, pp. 4-5.

³ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, The Ethiopian Famine, London, 1987, p. 26.

Concerning famine, Africa Watch has made extensive use of official documents, aid agency reports and the research undertaken by Ethiopian and foreign scholars working in government-held areas. In many cases it is necessary to "read between the lines" as these scholars were anxious not to endanger their sources, careers, liberty or lives by telling the truth in plain words.

A significant part of the information contained in this report originates from the reports, newspaper articles, diaries and testimonies of foreign visitors to areas controlled by the rebel fronts, principally the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF, which after January 1989 was the leading member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF). Though these fronts gave greater access to the war zones, that access was never unrestricted. Visitors were usually accompanied by armed guards, primarily to protect them from government saboteurs, but which also identified them with the relevant front. The information obtained is therefore less than ideally independent. However, no visitor -- including those who were unsympathetic to the fronts and subsequently wrote critical reports of their activities -- has made a substantial criticism of his or her access to the civilian population, or come away with the belief that the people he or she spoke to were influenced by the presence of EPLF or TPLF-EPRDF⁴ representatives. Consequently, some of this information has been used, after careful scrutiny and cross-checking.

Much of the information obtained by visitors to rebel-held areas consists of eye-witness accounts of atrocities and their aftermath; this is not subject to the same problems of potential distortion.

Other information originates from refugees. In refugee camps, independent access to civilians is possible. Refugee testimony cannot be regarded as distorted simply because the refugee has made a political statement by fleeing his or her country; neither of course can it be used uncritically. In addition, contrary to the allegations of some defenders of the government, many refugees (particularly in the late 1980s) fled to neighboring countries precisely because they were unsympathetic to the rebel fronts. For example, most of the refugees who arrived in Sudan from Eritrea in 1988/9 were not supporters of the EPLF: displaced civilians who supported the EPLF had remained behind in relief camps run by the EPLF and the Eritrean Relief Association.

The EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF also displayed an abiding preoccupation with numbers. These may or may not have been more accurate than government figures. On the rare occasions when these figures have been alluded to, their origin and our view of their reliability has been noted.

⁴ The designation TPLF-EPRDF is intended to encompass the TPLF from its inception up until the formation of the EPRDF, and the EPRDF thereafter.

This report covers abuses by all sides. Where documented, abuses by the rebel fronts have been included as well as those committed by the government. However, the great majority of abuses against civilians, and actions leading to famine, were committed by the government. The fronts certainly had authoritarian political structures and tolerated little dissent in their own ranks, but -- like the government's crackdown on the institutions of civil society -- such abuses fall outside the scope of this report.

The relative paucity of rebel abuses noted in these pages is not a matter of the absence of reliable sources of critical information on the activities of the fronts. All the fronts have their dissenters, who are fiercely critical of certain of their actions and policies. These people have provided information on some abuses by the fronts, but generally agree that the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war has been good, even exemplary. These critics include refugees interviewed in Sudan.

This report does not seek to justify or condemn the decision by rebel fronts to engage in armed struggle, nor the decision by the government to respond with military action. Africa Watch's mandate does not extend to directly promoting peace. Instead the focus is on the manner in which the wars were fought.

Statistics

This report contains discussions of the available statistics for the number of deaths attributable to the famines and forced relocations in Ethiopia, and the controversy over the size of the population of Tigray. The technical aspects of statistical analysis and demographic modelling have been kept to a minimum. The reason for the inclusion of this material is that it is important to know how many people suffered and died. It is the least respect that is due to the victims to have the fact of their living and dying taken seriously.

The United Nations and other concerned institutions have been remarkably cavalier about the numbers of people who died, especially in the 1983-5 famine. Usually the figure of one million famine deaths is quoted for 1983-5. This figure has absolutely no scientific basis whatsoever. It is a trivialization and dehumanization of human misery for such a figure to be produced without even a minimal pretense at a systematic investigation. If the UN were to be equally cavalier about numbers of political detainees, or numbers of people killed when security forces fire on protesters, it would be rightly condemned as ignorant and irresponsible. Yet in Ethiopia and other countries which receive little international attention, it appears able to quote wholly fictional figures for famine deaths and remain unchallenged.

It is now too late for a proper demographic investigation into famine mortality during 1983-5, and Africa Watch lacks the resources to carry out such an inquiry in any case. The analysis is therefore very cursory, and based on existing surveys. Nevertheless, it is the first time that such an analysis has been done, and it certainly provides a more accurate assessment of the human impact of the famine than other figures produced to date. Throughout, lower figures for deaths have been used, so all estimates err on the side of caution (or optimism).⁵

⁵ This is contrary to the general practice of citing only the upper limits to estimates of famine mortality.

Geographical Terms

Ethiopia is beset by conflicting territorial claims; the status of Eritrea is only the best-known instance. Eritrea is referred to as a "territory", a word that aspires to be neutral between the conflicting claims that it is a province and that it is by right an independent country.

In addition, the provinces that existed under Haile Selassie had their boundaries and names revised on certain occasions, became "administrative regions" after the revolution, and then were completely reconstituted in 1987, with the introduction of a larger number of regions and some autonomous zones. This report used the term "province" to refer to geographical and administrative entities such as Harerghe and Shewa in the form in which they existed up to 1987.

"Gonder" is used for the province formerly known as "Begemdir". There are conflicting claims as to the geographical extent of Tigray. Purely for convenience, the smaller government-defined Tigray is used in this report; the Tigrinya-speaking areas of north Gonder and Wollo claimed by the TPLF are generally referred to as the "borderlands" of Tigray. The post-1987 names and boundaries are not used, because they were instituted only very late in the day, and only incompletely. "The Ogaden" is used to refer to the lowland area of Harerghe, Bale and eastern Sidamo inhabited by ethnic Somalis, most of whom belong to the Ogadeni clan.

Acknowledgements

This report was researched and written by Alex de Waal, Associate Director of Africa Watch. It was made possible by the cooperation of many people who have lived, worked or fought in Ethiopia, or who have worked with refugees in neighboring countries. Many of these people are credited in the text, others have had to remain anonymous.

This report is dedicated to the many unknown victims of thirty years of war and famine in Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

In May 1991 there was a dramatic change of government in Ethiopia, in which the government of former President Mengistu Haile Mariam was militarily defeated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). If the new government of Ethiopia and the administration in Eritrea abide by their promises of ensuring democracy and respect for human rights, there is the very real prospect that war and famine will be banished, for the first time in a generation.

This report is concerned with the thirty years of wars and famines in Ethiopia between September 1961 and the overthrow of the Mengistu government in May 1991. The starting date is inevitably somewhat arbitrary: alternatives could have been chosen at various dates between 1960 and 1966. September 1, 1961, was the occasion of the first armed clash between the newly-formed Eritrean Liberation Front and the army, and is generally recognized by Ethiopians as the "official" outbreak of the war in Eritrea. Other wars started at dates ranging from 1962 to 1975.

Why this Report Now?

The principal wars in Ethiopia are now over. It is now too late to influence the policies of the Mengistu government, or those of the international community towards that government. Yet there are a number of reasons for continuing concern with the past. One is that justice demands that many of those were responsible for perpetrating human rights abuses during the war should be brought to trial. Africa Watch welcomes the promise by the new government headed by the EPRDF that such trials will take place in accordance with internationally-accepted norms of due process and in the presence of international observers. This report, while not intended to provide the specific evidence needed to obtain criminal convictions against individuals for violations of the humanitarian laws of war, documents the range and extent of abuses that such trials should be concerned with.

A second reason is that the sufferings of the Ethiopian people need to be documented. The minimum duty of a human rights organization to the hundreds of thousands of victims of war and famine is to record their plight, so that they are not forgotten by history, and that history is not rewritten to conceal or distort embarrassing facts. In order to understand the problems facing the peoples of Ethiopia at the present time, it is also necessary to understand the horrors they have suffered.

A third reason is that the documentation of the abuses inflicted upon the civilian population by successive Ethiopian governments leads directly to an obligation on present and future governments not to repeat the same crimes. By showing that the methods of

counter-insurgency warfare adopted in Ethiopia have led to a wide range of abuses, Africa Watch hopes to discourage the adoption of such methods in future, not only in Ethiopia but in other countries as well. When governments face insurgencies, their response must be constrained by human rights considerations.

In addition, the analysis of the genesis of famine contained in this report has broad implications. The repeated famines that have struck Ethiopia, and in particular the great famine of 1983-5, were in large part created by government policies, especially counter-insurgency strategies.

It is possible that, at the time, neither government, army nor international relief agencies were fully aware of the way in which these actions were creating exceptionally severe famine. Members of these institutions could thus plead ignorance when faced with the unacceptable consequences of what they did and failed to do. Ignorance is the flimsiest of excuses, especially when -- as in this instance -- there was a notable lack of investigation into the causes of the famine.

After the examination of the evidence which we have relied on in compiling this report, no such plea of ignorance should be acceptable in the future. This report is intended to demonstrate conclusively, not only that war created famine, but that particular strategies which the government adopted to fight the wars created a particularly severe form of famine. Moreover, international aid supplied to the government and to relief agencies working alongside the government became part of the counter-insurgency strategy of the government, and thus -- while meeting real and immediate need -- also served to further the government's war aims, and prolong its life.

The findings of this report therefore have implications, not only for the Ethiopian government and other governments faced with insurgencies, but for relief agencies faced with the humanitarian needs resulting from civil strife elsewhere in the world. This report raises disturbing questions about the nature of the relationship between humanitarian agencies and the host government. It calls into question the ethic of relieving actual suffering wherever it is to be found, without preconditions other than safe access and accountability for donations given. In the wider context of a counter-insurgency operation, the supply of such relief may actually extend, intensify, or legitimize that counter-insurgency operation, which is creating more suffering than is being relieved by the humanitarian intervention. This is a tough ethical dilemma with no easy solutions, but one that must be faced and debated by the international community. Putting conditions on the provision of humanitarian assistance is bound to provoke the criticism of "playing politics with the hungry." But, when more powerful actors are already playing politics with the hungry, for a relief agency to ignore this fact is naive and may merely result in it becoming their unwitting tool.

Main Findings

Violence against Civilians

The most characteristic feature of the war has been indiscriminate violence against civilians by the Ethiopian army and air force. The army deliberately killed and wounded tens of thousands of civilians and the air force bombed civilians and civilian targets. It is not possible to produce an accurate estimate for the number of innocent people killed over the decades, but it undoubtedly exceeds 150,000 (leaving aside those killed by famine and the resettlement program). The atrocities discussed in this report are but a fraction of the total number which occurred, although most of the major massacres, especially in the north, are mentioned. Every investigation uncovers more abuses, and many investigations into massacres already documented discover more victims -- injured people who died later and forgotten victims who had no relatives in the vicinity to pronounce them missing. Very few incidents of killings turn out to be less than has been reported.

Deaths from the war will continue even after the fighting is over, because many areas remain heavily mined, and unexploded munitions lie buried in many marketplaces, fields and roads, waiting to claim victims.

These gross violations have occurred consistently over thirty years. Some years have been worse than others, but throughout the rule of the Emperor Haile Selassie, his immediate successors, and Colonel (later President) Mengistu Haile Mariam, there was no significant attempt to curtail such abuses.

Counter-Insurgency Strategy

Throughout the war, the government followed a more-or-less consistent set of counter-insurgency strategies, with significant variations. These consisted of:

- (1) The forcible relocation and control of much of the rural population, using protected villages, forced resettlement from the insurgent zone, and restrictions on movement.
- (2) The systematic restriction of food supplies (both commercial and relief) in insurgent areas, by cutting key roads or by bombing marketplaces and transport links.
- (3) The use of indiscriminate violence and exemplary terror against civilians who remained outside the controlled zones, using both ground forces and aerial bombardment.
- (4) The fostering of divisions within the insurgent movements, and the use of rebel forces opposed to neighboring governments to fight against insurgents inside Ethiopia.

The strategies were implemented differently in different parts of the country. Villagization was enforced in the south-east, the west and Eritrea, but not in Tigray, where

restrictions on movement, forcible resettlement (after late 1984) and the use of terror were used instead.

This combination of strategies is familiar from many insurgencies around the world. The Ethiopian case stands out as particularly destructive because of the extraordinarily prolonged level of sustained violence, and the frequent lack of any compensatory assistance to the relocated and restricted population. Because of the fragile rural economy and the dependence of rural people on mobility and a range of economic activities, this was particularly damaging, and a major contributor to famine.

The Creation of Famine

One consequence of the government's military policies, particularly during the early 1980s, was the creation of famine. The great famine of 1983-5 is officially ascribed to drought. While climatic adversity and related factors certainly played a part in the tragedy, closer investigation shows that widespread drought occurred only some months after the famine was already under way, and that information on food production and food prices gives an account which contradicts important elements of the drought hypothesis.

In recent years, "war and drought" has become the favored explanation for famine. This is closer to the truth, but remains vague. It is not war itself that creates famine, but war fought in particular ways.

The most important factors explaining the famine are the counter-insurgency strategy adopted by the government, and restrictions and burdens imposed on the population of non-insurgent areas in the name of social transformation.

Repeated military offensives destroyed the crops in surplus-producing areas, and with them much rural employment. The bombing of marketplaces restricted rural trade and exchange, impeding the redistribution of the surpluses that existed locally. In the areas where the government retained some control, restrictions on migration, labor and trade, and policies of forcible relocation in protected villages, served to prevent hungry people from utilizing time-honored strategies for obtaining food, by labor migration and petty trade.

These restrictions were enforced far beyond the areas of insurgent activity, partly from fear that the insurgency would spread, and partly from ambitions for socialist transformation. Other burdens on the peasantry such as punitively high delivery quotas of staple grains to the Agricultural Marketing Corporation and heavy taxation also contributed to the famine. Economic policies themselves are not within the mandate of a human rights organization. However, when these policies are implemented with a ferocity and single-mindedness that leaves no room for dissent leading to possible revision, and when they do in the event contribute to famine, at least

the manner in which they are enforced warrants consideration as an abuse of basic human rights.

Some responses to the famine only served to make matters worse. The government's resettlement program was a disaster when considered from almost any angle, and killed a minimum of 50,000 people. The large-scale provision of food relief to the government-controlled areas of the north was a controversial initiative, which allowed the government to extend its control to contested areas, and maintain that control longer than would otherwise have been the case. Despite the fact that the government had access to only a minority of the famine-stricken population in the north, the great majority of relief was channelled through the government side. This almost certainly prolonged the war: the rebel fronts only regained the military position they held in 1983/4 (at the beginning of the famine), some four to five years later.

The famine of 1983-5 in northern Ethiopia is estimated to have killed a minimum of 400,000 people (not counting those killed by resettlement). Something over half of this mortality can be attributed to human rights abuses causing the famine to come earlier, strike harder, and extend further than would otherwise have been the case. Famine also struck other areas of Ethiopia, for similar reasons, causing tens of thousands of deaths. The famines of 1973-5 killed at least 40,000 in Wollo and 55,000 in the Ogaden; the famine of 1965/6 also killed tens of thousands.

The Treatment of Soldiers

Soldiers were victims of the war too. At least 100,000 soldiers were killed. From the mid-1970s onwards, the government was continually increasing the size of its army, which numbered over 450,000 by 1990. Conscripts were increasingly obtained by forceful and deceitful means, such as press-ganging or using food aid as a bait. Many were below the age limit for military service according to international and domestic law. In the army, they were subjected to a range of abuses, including summary execution for disciplinary offenses. While not formally conscripted, women were subjected to rape and kidnapping by soldiers. The EPLF and Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF, a founder member of the EPRDF in January 1989) treated prisoners of war well, though the International Committee of the Red Cross had disagreements with both fronts concerning the latter's access. Prisoners of war were attacked by government airplanes, and were subject to detention and torture or worse by the government following their release. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) and Somali army treated prisoners less well, and frequently killed them. The rebel fronts also used methods of conscription which on occasion were violent.

Inflaming Local and Neighboring Conflicts

Deliberately or inadvertently, the Ethiopian government inflamed other conflicts. It supported insurgent groups in Sudan and Somalia, which committed human rights abuses. The destabilization of border areas and the availability of modern weaponry through the market or through militias and insurgents in neighboring countries helped to make local disputes between ethnic groups more violent. Several small groups in southwest Ethiopia have suffered severely from the depredations of their well-armed neighbors, as a direct if unforeseen consequence of government policy.

The Record of the Rebel Fronts

The rebel fronts committed abuses against civilians and prisoners of war. Some of the rebel fronts have extremely poor human rights records. However, in the case of the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF, these abuses were on a much smaller scale than those committed by the government forces.

The policies of respecting civilians were the EPLF's and TPLF-EPRDF's "secret weapon," and meant that with every atrocity committed by the government, more civilians supported -- at least passively -- the rebels. Similarly, the released prisoners of war were the best propagandists for the rebel cause within the government army. The history of the war is therefore, in a very real sense, a demonstration of the futility of evil.

The war in the north was essentially not fought between the government army and the fronts; it was fought between the army and large sections of the people. It is this asymmetry between the contending parties that was the major reason why one side behaved in a manner radically unlike the other. It was an appreciation of this fact that enabled the fronts to win.

The Impact on Civil Politics

With one exceptions, this report does not deal directly with civil institutions, either in government- or rebel-held areas of the country. This exception is chapter 6, which deals with the Red Terror of 1977/8, in which the urban insurgency of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was crushed by the government, in the process killing a minimum of 10,000 educated people and suppressing any form of dissent for over a decade. This bloody episode was civil repression turned into all out warfare, which is the principal reason why it is included in this report.

More generally, the wars seriously stunted the growth of civil society in Ethiopia. The war was an excuse for the indefinite continuation of military rule -- albeit under a civilian mask during 1987-90 -- and the creation and maintenance of security forces empowered to violate human rights with impunity; it was an excuse for severe censorship and the restriction of civil and political rights. Even after Marxism-Leninism was formally abandoned by President Mengistu in March 1990, there was no progress towards the respect for civil and political rights, and even regression, with the establishment of a *de facto* state of emergency throughout the country, under military administrators.¹ One casualty of the war, not documented in this report, has been the stifling of any initiatives towards democracy, the rule of law, and the development of civil society. These will be documented in future Africa Watch publications.

The International Role

The international community has played a mixed role in Ethiopia's recent history. Until 1977, Ethiopia was a close ally of the United States, and received extensive military and economic assistance. Thereafter, it was a close ally of the USSR, and was shunned by the US, which provided no development nor military aid, and was a constant critic of government actions. Other western countries, such as members of the European Community, provided extensive economic assistance though not military supplies, although the west's ally Israel broke with that policy in 1989, when it supplied armaments in return for the emigration of the Ethiopian Jews.

Between 1977 and 1991 western aid to Ethiopia rose tenfold. Much of this aid was humanitarian famine relief. Though not achieving all that its proponents claim, this aid no doubt saved many lives and livelihoods. However, there is a more questionable side to aid. In the crucial year 1985, about 90 per cent of the aid was given to the government and to humanitarian

¹ See: "Ethiopia: Mengistu's Empty Democracy," *News from Africa Watch*, March 5, 1991.

agencies working on the government side, despite the fact that they had access to only a minority of the famine-affected population. Much assistance was given without scrutinizing the context in which it would be utilized, and in fact served to support the counter-insurgency strategies of the Mengistu government. Instances include the "rehabilitation" assistance to the south-east during 1980-2, the Food for the North Initiative of 1985-6, and the outpouring of aid in 1987-8. More generally, international assistance undoubtedly prolonged the Mengistu government's life.

The US government was consistently critical of the Mengistu government's human rights record. However, the main US investigation into government culpability in creating the famine was given a restricted agenda which obliged it to find the Ethiopian government "not guilty" of deliberately using starvation as a weapon of war. Had the investigation been mandated to examine a slightly broader set of issues and a longer time period, the verdict would have been much more likely to be "guilty." The British government was also critical, but to a lesser degree. Most other major donors did not include a significant consideration of human rights concerns in determining their relations with the Ethiopian government. The UN in particular was more eager to conceal evidence of abuses, especially those associated with famine and famine relief, than expose them, and the European Community gave substantial aid with no questions asked.

The US was the only major donor to direct the majority of its assistance to the rebel held areas in 1989-91, in accordance with an objective assessment of the numbers of needy people to be found there.

During 1989-91, a major concern of Israel and the US was the population of Ethiopian Jews, known as Falashas. Israel supplied arms to the Ethiopian government in exchange for allowing the Falashas to leave. The US lobbied for the Falashas to be allowed to emigrate but objected to the arms supply.

Despite repeated approaches by the Mengistu government, the US refused to give economic or military assistance. Apart from humanitarian concerns and the Falasha issue, the US was active in trying to obtain a negotiated peace. The US was ultimately successful in assisting the handover of power from the Mengistu government to the EPRDF and EPLF with less bloodshed than would otherwise have occurred. This was achieved through persistent diplomatic efforts and through pragmatism, notably the abandonment of the long-standing US objection to Eritrean independence.

Structure

For the most part, this report is structured chronologically. Some parts may appear repetitive -- but the war was repetitive: there were thirteen major offensives in Eritrea alone, ten in Tigray, and a dozen in the southeast. Following the historical background, it breaks naturally

into five sections, which cover the following periods, provinces and topics:

- (1) Insurgency and counter-insurgency under Haile Selassie and during the first years of the revolution, up to and including the Somali invasion (chapters 2-4).
- (2) Counter-insurgency in the years between 1978 and 1984, when the army was newly equipped and expanded with Soviet assistance, leading to victory over the insurgencies in the southeast, the Red Terror in the cities, and the creation of famine in the north (chapters 5-9).
- (3) The use of humanitarian relief for war and programs of social engineering, including pacification in Eritrea, the withholding of relief from Tigray, resettlement and villagization, in the period 1985-8 (chapters 10-13).
- (4) War and famine during the last years of the Mengistu government, when the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF had won the military advantage (chapters 14-16).
- (5) Neglected issues and regions: conscription and the treatment of soldiers and prisoners of war; the wars in the southwest, and the wars in the east including those involving Ethiopian refugees in Somalia (chapters 17-19).

A final chapter deals with the policies of western governments to Ethiopia, with a focus on the United States.

Wars and Famines, 1961-77

The "official" outbreak of the war in Eritrea was September 1961, when the army first engaged the forces of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Over the following decade the army acted in a brutal and destructive manner towards civilians and their villages, farms and animal herds. There were numerous massacres of civilians, hundreds of villages were burned, and much of the population was forced to relocate in fortified government villages. The worst atrocities occurred during 1967 and 1970-1. The ELF and the younger EPLF also engaged in abuses such as kidnappings and assassinations, and fought against each other.

Shortly after the 1974 revolution, the ELF and EPLF combined in a major attempt to defeat the army in Asmara. 1975 was to be the most bloody year of the war to date. The government continued to use indiscriminate violence against civilians, it instituted a food blockade of the Eritrean highlands, and tried to mobilize a huge peasant army to overwhelm the fronts by sheer weight of numbers.

From the start, the policies of scorched earth and the use of a food blockade as a weapon meant that the war was fought at the cost of creating hunger among the civilian population.

Haile Selassie also faced insurrections in the northern provinces. In the 1960s the main such revolt was in Gojjam, due to discontent over taxation and land measurement. In Wollo,

inter-ethnic fighting in the lowlands, coupled with government-promoted or sanctioned processes of land alienation and enforcement of crippling tenancy agreements in times of drought all contributed to the creation of famine in 1972-4, a famine made worse by the government's concealment of it and refusal to consider assistance. After the revolution, there were insurgencies led by feudal leaders in all the northern provinces. The suppression of the Afar revolt in 1975 was particularly bloody and led to much loss of civilian life.

In the southeastern part of Ethiopia there were two separate insurgencies during the 1960s and 1970s. One insurgency was in the Ogaden, where the WSLF, supported by the Somali government, was active. The second insurgency involved a number of Oromo movements; in the 1960s led by Wako Gutu in Bale and Sheikh Hussein in Harerghe, in the 1970s led by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF) in the 1970s. The government's military response included indiscriminate violence against civilians and war against the economic base -- killing animals, poisoning wells, cutting food supplies, and restricting movement. These military strategies were instrumental in creating the famines which struck the area in 1973-4.

In 1977 the Somali army invaded the Ethiopian Ogaden, first secretly and then openly, leading to a large-scale conventional war. Both sides in the war committed abuses against the civilian population.

Counter-Insurgency, 1978-84

In 1977 a number of simultaneous military changes occurred which heralded a significant break with the past. These included: the Somali invasion of the Ogaden, Ethiopia's break with the US and the turn to the USSR, the massive enlargement and re-equipment of the army, the prosecution of the Red Terror, and the undisputed ascendancy of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The defeat of the Somali army in 1978 was followed by six years of intense counter-insurgency warfare against the forces of the WSLF and the OLF. The continuing war was waged largely in secret, and ended in the defeat of the WSLF and the eclipse of the OLF. Other rebel fronts such as the SALF and the Sidama Liberation Front were also defeated. The government strategy included:

- *Repeated military offensives, involving many abuses against civilians, including indiscriminate aerial bombardment of villages;
- *A policy of forcible relocation in protected villages;
- *The use of Somali opposition movements to fight against the WSLF.
- *Pressure on Somalia and the international community to obtain the repatriation of refugees.

A particularly insidious element in the government strategy was the utilization of

international humanitarian aid for counter-insurgency purposes.

1977/8 also was the year of the Red Terror, in which Colonel Mengistu crushed the urban opposition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) by a massive campaign of killing, detention and torture, and intimidation. Later, the terror was turned on the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement, the government's erstwhile ally. Tens of thousands of young people were killed, and the government became addicted to the use of terror as a weapon of war.

The Mengistu government was simultaneously fighting an intensified war in Eritrea, seeking to crush the Eritrean insurgency with a vastly-expanded and re-equipped army and air force. The years 1978-84 saw an expansion of the scorched earth and forced relocation policies of earlier years, together with saturation bombing of areas of rebel strength. A series of large-scale offensives culminated in the huge "Red Star" offensive of 1982. These years witnessed the demise of the ELF, and the retreat of the EPLF to the mountainous Sahel district close to Sudan. Government policies led to wholesale ecological destruction, which, together with the damage to livelihoods caused by the war and restrictions, were major factors creating famine.

Meanwhile, in Tigray, the government faced the insurgency of the TPLF, which was fighting a classic guerrilla war throughout the province. The government's counter-insurgency strategy included:

- (1) Military offensives into the TPLF heartlands, which were also the richer, surplus-producing districts of the province;
- (2) The bombing of marketplaces to disrupt commerce;
- (3) The imposition of strict bans on the movement of petty traders and migrant laborers.

As well as directly causing large-scale civilian suffering and death, this combination of policies meant that the normal processes of redistribution of surplus grain to poorer areas and migration of seasonal laborers to richer areas were no longer able to occur, leading to intense famine in the food deficit areas. A close investigation of the evidence for drought and production failures confirms that these cannot account for the timing, severity or extent of the famine of 1983-5. Instead, an analysis of the timing and location of the major offensives of 1980-1, 1983 and 1984, and the timing and scope of the restrictions, confirms that the government's counter-insurgency strategy was the prime culprit for the disaster.

Simultaneously, a set of restrictions and impositions placed upon rural people in government-controlled areas, including punitive taxation, requisitioning of food for the Agricultural Marketing Corporation, forced labor on government projects and state farms, and bans on labor, migration and trade. Poor people were often forced to sell their reserves of food to meet these demands, which were backed up by sanctions such as imprisonment. These brought large sections of the population close to the brink of famine. These policies were pursued partly

for reasons of counter-insurgency and partly from ambitions for socialist transformation.

The famine killed in excess of 400,000 people. The human rights abuses made it come earlier, strike harder, and reach further. Most of these deaths can be attributed, not to the weather, but to the government's gross violations of human rights.

Humanitarian Relief as a Weapon of War, 1985-88

In late 1984 the famine reached the television screens of the west. This caused a massive inflow of relief, which was utilized by the government in its counter-insurgency strategy in the north. It coincided with renewed offensives in Eritrea and Tigray and the launching of the programs of resettlement and villagization.

The relief aid generously provided to the Ethiopian government and the humanitarian agencies working alongside it was a boon to the government's war plans. The politics of aid resulted in the government side receiving a disproportionate share of the assistance compared to the rebel-held areas. In Eritrea, aid was used as part of a military pacification strategy, with aid agencies moving in behind the military to secure newly-occupied areas. This allowed the government to score significant military successes in 1985, and to control areas it had been unable to hold on to before. Most aid agencies, in particular the United Nations, preferred not to face the dilemmas of providing aid in such a situation, and thus actively abetted the army's efforts. Some relief was supplied directly to the army and militia.

When counter-attacking in 1987, the EPLF disrupted the relief programs. These actions gained international condemnation, but the government continued to object to plans to allow safe passage to humanitarian supplies. The relief programs have also to be considered within the wider context of the pacification strategy.

In Tigray, the government preferred to withhold aid from the province, thus starving the people. The government attempted to conceal this fact, and in doing so was abetted by the United Nations, which in August 1985 produced a mendacious report endorsing the government's claim that it was feeding most of the famine victims in Tigray, at a time when it was in fact feeding very few indeed. A huge army offensive into Tigray in 1985, as well as being particularly bloody and destructive, was aimed at preventing clandestine relief supplies coming across the Sudanese border to TPLF-held areas. Relief convoys, feeding centers and refugees were all attacked from the air. As in Eritrea, the government was able to make substantial military gains on account of the famine, but it also deeply alienated the rural people, who realized that they would never be free from famine while the Mengistu government remained in power. They were thus prepared to undergo great hardships in order to fight against it.

The government's main response to the famine was a gargantuan program of forced

resettlement. This involved numerous abuses of human rights, including the violent and arbitrary manner in which resettlers were taken, appalling conditions in transit and on arrival, the displacement of indigenous people in the resettlement areas, and violence against resettlers who attempted to escape, including enslavement by soldiers of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The resettlement program is estimated to have killed at least 50,000 people.

The famine period also saw the beginnings of a comprehensive villagization program. First implemented in the east as a counter-insurgency measure, it was spread to other areas as an attempt at social engineering. The implementation of this program also involved violence and coercion, especially in the war zones.

The EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF Ascendancy, 1988-91

Early 1988 marked another watershed, in which the rebel fronts in Eritrea and Tigray decisively gained the military initiative. The stalemate in the war was broken, and their military victory duly followed three years later. The government continued to fight the war with total disregard for the rights of civilians, and the army and air force engaged in reprisal killings of civilians. 1988 was a particularly bloody year in the war, during which the government cast aside all restraint in its repeated attacks on civilian targets. The massacre of 400 Eritrean civilians by the army at Sheib and the death of 1,800 people when the Tigrayan market town of Hausien was bombed are two of the most notorious examples.

In 1989 the TPLF defeated the army in Tigray and occupied the whole province. The government attempted to destroy what it could before leaving, and then sent bombing missions against major towns including the capital, Megele. In 1990, the EPLF captured the port of Massawa, which the government then tried to destroy using aerial bombardment. Meanwhile the war intensified in the provinces of Gonder and Wollo and spread to Gojjam and Shewa, where the army continued to commit numerous abuses against civilians. Abuses continued up until the last days of the Mengistu regime in May 1991 -- for example, just a few weeks before, over 100 Tigrayan prisoners were summarily executed in Gonder prison.

The years 1988-91 also saw continued food shortages, and belated efforts by the international community to ensure that civilians on all sides had access to relief. These plans were continually subject to political interference, to a certain extent by the fronts but very largely so on the part of the government. The besieged Eritrean capital, Asmara, witnessed the worst extremes of hunger during 1990-91, where military requisitioning of food and the imposition of a blockade created severe suffering. In Tigray, despite the exceptionally severe drought, severe famine was avoided because the TPLF did not impose the same burdens and restrictions on the populace as the government had done earlier in the decade.

Other Wars

From the 1960s, and increasing in intensity during the 1980s, there has been a series of wars in western and southwestern Ethiopia. These have included:

- *An insurgency by the EPRP in western Gojjam, against the Mengistu government and (latterly) the EPRDF.
- *An insurgency by the OLF in western Wollega, against the government. This and the war in Gojjam were also inflamed by the resettlement and villagization programs, and saw large-scale violations of human rights during 1989-91.
- *Conflict between the OLF and the SPLA, which had a wing of its own army inside Ethiopia, operating in alliance with the Ethiopian army. The SPLA committed atrocities against local civilians, and the OLF attacked a Sudanese refugee camp in 1990. The main exodus of Sudanese refugees back to Sudan in May-June 1991 was not, however, related to attacks by the OLF or EPRDF.
- *Conflict between the Anuak of Illubabor province and the government, inflamed by resettlement, villagization and the presence of the SPLA.
- *Local warfare by pastoralist groups in Gamu Gofa who are either self-armed or armed by a neighbor. These wars are local disputes intensified by the selective availability of arms to certain groups following on alliances with pastoralist militias in southern Sudan. The Kenyan government has also been responsible for abuses against these pastoralists.

In eastern Ethiopia, following the defeat of the WSLF and OLF in the early 1980s, fragmented wars have continued on both sides of the Ethiopia-Somalia border. Both governments supported insurgent groups operating in each other's territory; Ethiopian refugees were armed by the Somali government, and the insurgent groups clashed with each other and with the two national armies. The war between the Somali National Movement (backed by Ethiopia) and a Somali-backed Oromo front, inside northern Somalia during 1988 was a result of this process of fragmentation and manipulation.

Following the EPRDF victory in May-June 1991, there was an upsurge of local violence in southern and eastern Ethiopia, involving banditry, inter-communal strife, and resistance to the imposition of any form of central authority.

The Total Impact

The cost to Ethiopia, in human, economic and social terms of the last thirty years of war and famine has been literally incalculable. According to the very conservative estimates

contained in this report, the wars and famines have cost a minimum of one million lives, and possibly as many as 1.5 million. An even greater number have been wounded, traumatized, forced to flee as refugees, or have been displaced within the country. The economy is bankrupt, the natural environment irreparably damaged, the country torn apart, and the growth of civil politics aborted. The last thirty years have indeed been evil days.

Recommendations

Africa Watch's recommendations to the government of Ethiopia and the administration in Eritrea include:

- *That those primarily responsible for gross abuses of human rights be brought to trial, before an independent court, with due process of law.
- *That a permanent Human Rights Commission be set up with wide ranging powers to investigate allegations of human rights abuse.
- *That an inquiry into the causes of famine be set up.

Africa Watch considers that the aid donors need to reconsider carefully their role in providing humanitarian assistance in situations of armed conflict and human rights abuse. Africa Watch's recommendations to the aid donors include:

- *That they should cooperate with the inquiry into the causes of famine, and accept responsibility for any instances in which they have abetted or failed to prevent human rights abuses.
- *That they adopt human rights conditions for the delivery of emergency aid.

1. BACKGROUND TO WAR AND FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA

"The introduction of billeting into Gayint led to the death of a peasant. The king's response to an appeal for justice was terse. 'Soldiers eat, peasants provide.'"¹

Histories of Ethiopia

There is no impartial history of Ethiopia: every presentation of historical facts is laden with modern-day political implications.

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state -- Christians and Moslems are present in approximately equal numbers, and there are also followers traditional religions and -- until very recently -- there was a community of Jews. Ethiopian nationalism, however, is largely based upon political and cultural symbols that derive from the Amhara-Tigray tradition of the northern highlands: Orthodox Christianity, an almost unbroken tradition of independence, literacy in the ancient Ge'ez script, and the use of ox-plough agriculture. One of the main reasons for the last thirty years of warfare has been the unwillingness of marginalized people in Ethiopia to accept the northern-highland definition of national identity.

Ethiopia as we know it today is the product of the expansion of a state centered in the northern highlands into adjoining areas, mostly to the south. The northern highlands are inhabited by the Amhara and Tigray, who are culturally and politically dominant, and a range of minorities, notably the Agau. The Ethiopian Jews, known as Falasha, are ethnically a sub-category of the Agau. The states located in this region claim a continuous tradition going back to the kingdom of Axum in the early middle-ages and beforehand, to the offspring of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Until 1974, the Emperors claimed to rule by virtue of royal descent in the line of Solomon, and by being anointed by the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Until the mid-twentieth century, this state was known as "Abyssinia," and in the historical context, will be called that in order to distinguish it from the larger area of modern-day Ethiopia. In the region, highland Amhara and Tigray are commonly called "habash," a word with the same derivation.

History lives in Ethiopia. The question of whether the ancient Abyssinian state controlled all or part of modern-day Eritrea generates acrimonious dispute among scholars and politicians. Contemporary claims and counter-claims on the Eritrean issue are based on

¹ Quoted in: Donald Crummey, "Banditry and Resistance: Noble and Peasant in 19th Century Ethiopia," in D. Crummey (ed.) Banditry, Rebellion and Protest in Africa, London, 1986, p. 142. The king in question was the Emperor Teodros, who ruled the northwestern part of modern-day Ethiopia from 1855 to 1868.

differing readings of historical texts, which purport to show either that the territory was traditionally independent of north-central Ethiopia, or the "cradle of Ethiopian civilization," and inextricably linked to Ethiopia.

A similar dispute rages over the origins of what today are the southern provinces of Ethiopia. South of Gojjam and north Shewa, Ethiopia is dominated by the Oromo (the largest ethnic group in the country), with significant representations of a range of other ethnic groups. Advocates of "greater Ethiopia" claim that these areas -- and sometimes territories even further afield in Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya and Uganda -- were ruled by Abyssinian Emperors in the middle ages, until the sixteenth-century "invasions" of the Moslems from the east and the Oromo from the south. Others argue that the homelands of the "invaders" fall within the boundaries of modern Ethiopia, and that a reading of history that regards them as extraenous to Ethiopian history gives undue primacy to an Abyssinian version of events. They dispute the territorial extent of the Abyssinian empire, and claim that western historians have been seduced by the allure of the literate Christian legacy of Abyssinia into regarding its people as somehow superior to their non-literate Moslem and pagan neighbors, thereby endorsing the legitimacy of Abyssinian imperial expansion -- and facilitating it through the supply of firearms.

What is certain is that from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century there was no hegemony of a single group over modern-day Ethiopia. At times, independent Amhara kingdoms appeared to be on the point of being vanquished by the Moslems and the Oromo. In the mid-nineteenth century, this began to change, as the northern kingdoms began a process of political centralization, acquisition of European weaponry, and conquest of their southern neighbors -- a process called "unification" by its advocates and "colonization" by its detractors. This reached its climax under Menelik, King of Shewa and Emperor (1889-1913). The Emperor Menelik doubled the size of the empire within a few decades and established the boundaries of modern Ethiopia, and established the supremacy of the Shewan Amhara, not just over the Oromo and other southern groups, but over the Gonder, Gojjam and Wollo Amhara and the Tigray as well.

Ethiopia and the West

To an older generation of people in the west, the name "Ethiopia" is linked to the Italian fascist invasion of 1935; to a younger generation, it is linked to the famine of 1984. There is a common thread to these two momentous events: violations of the humanitarian laws of war.

The Italians invaded Ethiopia, deployed chemical weapons, bombed Red Cross ambulances, and when in control massacred most of the country's educated elite. These abuses, against a fellow member of the League of Nations, scandalized liberal public opinion in Europe

and America, and led to widespread sympathy and support for the exiled Emperor Haile Selassie. Ironically, Haile Selassie was later to violate international law in his annexation of Eritrea, and his army was to engage in gross violations of human rights in combatting insurrection in different parts of the empire -- but he was still able to play upon the west's conscience and exploit his image as "victim." John Spencer, Haile Selassie's longstanding advisor on international law, with unconscious irony concluded his book Ethiopia at Bay with a quotation from Herodotus: "thank the gods that they have not put it into the heart of the sons of the Ethiops to covet countries which do not belong to them."²

Similar but intensified methods of warfare conducted against subjugated peoples in Ethiopia by the Emperor's successor, Colonel (later President) Mengistu Haile Mariam were instrumental in reducing much of the rural population of Ethiopia from a state of poverty and hardship to one of outright famine. International sympathy for Ethiopia's plight led to the greatest outpouring of charitable donation in modern history -- a sympathy which again deflected attention from the gross human rights violations in the country.

Ethiopia: Military and State

Army and state in Ethiopia are traditionally so close as to be at times indistinguishable.

The traditional Abyssinian state (or self-proclaimed empire) was founded upon the principles of conquest of neighboring peoples, and the settlement of soldiers on peasant communities. The soldier-settlers were entitled to administer the locality, raise taxes and requisition produce from the farmers. Their chief obligation in return was to be prepared to fight for the king, and to raise a levy of peasants to do the same. One Ethiopian historian has described the system of conquest and rule thus:

All the Christian provinces of the north were originally acquired by wars of conquest ... [The king] appropriated all the people and their land, and reserved the right to dispose of them according to his wishes. He executed all resistance fighters who fell into his hands, and reduced to slavery other captives of war ... These acts of cruel repression were deliberately committed ... to force the people to surrender and to give them a terrible example of the destructive force of the Christian army in case of further revolts.³

The twin themes of brutality in conquest -- including the use of exemplary violence to instil fear and subservience -- and the military mode of administration, which are here referred

² John D. Spencer, Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years, Algonac, Mich., 1984, p. 369.

³ Tadesse Tamrat, Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527, Oxford, 1972, p. 99.

to in the context of the 15th century, recur in more recent history.

Traditional Forms of Warfare

There were two basic forms of traditional warfare in Ethiopia. One form was that practiced by centralized states, including the Christian Abyssinian kingdoms located in the northern highlands, and the Moslem sultanates in the east. The second type of warfare was practiced by non-centralized states, including both small-scale societies on the peripheries of Ethiopia, and the large but decentralized confederacy of the Oromo.

Warfare by Centralized States

Abyssinian armies consisted of a group of permanent soldiers attached to the court, and a mass levy in times of emergency. Only the permanent soldiers were trained. The levy method could be remarkably effective in raising huge armies, though for relatively short campaigns. Armies of over 100,000 men were not uncommon in the late 19th century. In 1935, Haile Selassie raised an army of up to 350,000 to fight the Italians.

A central element in traditional warfare in Ethiopia was the unremitting brutality of armies, in wars of conquest, rebellions and counter-insurgency campaigns. "Whose face have you not disfigured? Whose wife and child have you not captured?" ran a soldier's song from the 14th century.⁴

In the absence of the institutions of civil society, the principal way for the ambitious to advance themselves was through warfare. Banditry was a traditional mode of social mobility: a frustrated local leader would become a bandit (Amharic: *shifta*) for a while, obtaining wealth, a warlike reputation, and a retinue of like-minded followers, until his ruler was compelled to bestow a high office upon him. The most famous example of the successful use of banditry for political advancement was the case of Ras Kassa of Quara, who rose to become the Emperor Teodros, ruling Abyssinia from 1855 to 1868. Some such bandits, such as the Moszagi brothers in Eritrea in the 1940s, have been described as "social bandits,"⁵ but undoubtedly the majority were predators rather than protectors of the poor. The robbery, destruction and general insecurity created by banditry rendered rural people vulnerable to famine.

Counter-insurgency strategies consisted in attempting to buy off the leaders of the

⁴ Quoted in: Richard A. Caulk, "Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia, c. 1850-1935," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11, (1978), p. 460.

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, New York, 1981, p. 14.

rebellion with promises of rank and riches, while wreaking destruction on the rural people in the rebellious area. The inhabitants of an insurgent area within the empire were treated no differently to a newly-conquered "enemy" population. One 19th century European traveller was given an explanation for the scale of destruction: "if an invasion did not completely ruin a country, the inhabitants would sooner or later rebel and it would be necessary to send a great zemetia [military expedition] and start all over again."⁶ Examples of this will be given in following chapters. The notion that wanton brutality towards ordinary civilians might make rebel leaders less willing to accept a political compromise does not seem to have figured in official military thinking. As a result: "a constant enmity exists between the military and the population in general" so that "country people slay remorselessly any fugitives of either side from the field of battle."⁷

Though most of the discussion has referred to the Christian kingdoms, the great Moslem Ethiopian warlord Ahmed al Iman Gran, who led a jihad (Islamic holy war) against the highland states in the 16th century, practiced similar forms of warfare, and was renowned for his lack of mercy.

Slaving and Pacification

One of the most common activities of Abyssinian armies was raiding for slaves. Vast areas of the country were depopulated, and entire peoples decimated by slaving raids. Some of those raided included highland peoples such as the Agau; in the last century, as the highland states expanded, the slaving frontier expanded towards the borders of what are now Kenya and Sudan.

The age-old Abyssinian system of settling soldiers on a rural population, which was then required to support them, was dramatically expanded in the late 19th century. This occurred when the state, centered in the highlands of Shewa, expanded to conquer the area known as southern Ethiopia. The conquest of the southern lands, which are mainly Oromo, was achieved by massive military campaigns using firearms provided by European powers. The pacification was achieved through the so-called neftegna system. Neftegna is Amharic for "rifleman." The Emperor Menelik paid his soldiers with grants of land -- or, more precisely, grants of the services of the indigenous people who were required to till the land. An ordinary soldier was awarded a minimum of two serfs; ranking officers received tens or even hundreds.

⁶ Quoted in Bonnie K. Holcombe and Sisai Ibssa, The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa, Trenton, NJ, 1990, p. 108.

⁷ William Plowden, Travels in Abyssinia, London, 1868.

By these means, Menelik was able to reward his soldiers and also control the newly-conquered southern regions. The serfs, however, were obliged to pay half or more of their produce to their newly-imposed landlords. In times of hardship, this extra burden meant that the serfs descended into famine. The practice of rewarding soldiers and other state servants with grants of occupied land continued until the revolution.

Warfare among Non-Centralized Peoples

Traditional warfare among the Oromo followed a rather different pattern. Traditional Oromo society was organized according to a system of age-grades, known as the gada system. The leadership of the community changed every eight years to a new age-set. Each age set was required to engage in a war, involving important ritual elements, known as a butta war, before assuming leadership. The butta war could be a hunting party directed against wild animals, or a raiding expedition targetted on a community that had not been raided previously. It was preceded by a huge feast, in which many animals were slaughtered; one of the aims of the war was to replenish livestock by raiding.⁸

Such forms of warfare were central to the traditional Oromo religion. All young men of a certain age grade participated, with women, children and men of other age grades remaining at home.

When confronting the armies of Christian Abyssinia, the Oromo employed a version of guerrilla warfare. Relatively small and highly mobile bands would utilize night raids to weaken and demoralize communities. Obtaining booty was also an important component of the attacks. When the raided communities accepted Oromo domination, and became part of the expanding Oromo political confederacy, the area would become the base for guerrilla-style attacks on the adjoining region.⁹

The Oromo rules of warfare required that when Oromo groups fought among themselves, the level of violence was constrained, and captives should be returned after a peace agreement was reached. When the Oromo attacked non-Oromo groups, the level of brutality was certainly much greater. In general, in contrast to the huge and all-consuming Amhara armies, the smaller and faster-moving Oromo bands would leave less destruction in their wake.

In response to counter-attacks by the larger and better-armed "conventional" Abyssinian armies, the Oromo would simply disperse. The Jesuit Manoel de Almeida noted that the Amhara armies were unable to invade Oromo territory because the Oromo pastoralists

⁸ Mohamed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History 1570-1860*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 12.

⁹ Mohamed Hassen, 1990, pp. 22-4.

did not grow food but instead relied on their cattle, which could be evacuated from the path of an advancing army, which could not therefore feed itself.¹⁰

In the 18th and 19th centuries, some Oromo states grew up in the south-west of Ethiopia, and developed patterns of warfare that were more akin to those of the northern highlands. An Italian missionary described the behavior of these Oromo armies when attacking neighboring, stateless peoples: "When 'foreign' soldiers enter a country, nothing is spared, families, villages, agriculture, cattle and everything disappears in a few days."¹¹

Marginalized people in southern Ethiopia traditionally practiced forms of warfare akin to mutual raiding for cattle and captives. While both common and violent, a number of factors necessitated a limit to the level of destruction. One such factor was the low level of military technology; a second was the need for a negotiated peace at the end of the conflict, so that both parties could resume basic economic activities such as cattle herding. A third was the ritual element in warfare. The development of trading relations with more powerful states to the north, which demanded slaves and ivory, and the introduction of firearms, upset this system in historical times, so that the last two centuries have witnessed peripheral warfare that has been just as bloody and destructive as that seen in the central highlands, and has at times verged on the genocidal.

Armies and the Creation of Famine

The chronicles of the history of Ethiopia are filled with stories of famines. Richard Pankhurst, a leading historian of Ethiopia, documents that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries there was on average at least one famine every decade.¹² Prof. Pankhurst joins the majority of scholars who study Ethiopian famine and develops the theme that famine is a natural disaster, caused by drought, pestilence or other kinds of visitation, working upon a society impoverished by thousands of years of isolation and technological stagnation. However, in this history (commissioned by the government of Colonel Mengistu) Prof. Pankhurst makes little mention of the role of warfare, the state's forcible procurement of produce, or the failure of the state to undertake significant actions to prevent or ameliorate famine. This is conveniently close to the official view of the causes of contemporary famines that was propounded by that government.

¹⁰ M. de Almeida, *Historia de Ethiopia a alta on Abassia*, quoted in R. Pankhurst (ed.) *Travellers in Ethiopia*, London, 1965, pp. 42-3.

¹¹ G. Massaja, quoted in Mohamed Hassan, 1990, p. 127.

¹² Richard Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia Prior to the Twentieth Century*, Addis Ababa, RRC, 1985.

The Ethiopian state has always been autocratic and unresponsive to the needs of its people. Many of the sources used by historians derive from documents written by officials at court, and so cannot be expected to give an accurate account of the official response to famine. In fact, like some modern publications on famine, their role is to glorify the ruler and present him as pious, generous and enlightened.

Prof. Pankhurst disparages "the long-established Ethiopian tradition of blaming natural calamities on the wickedness of the people."¹³ Both historical and contemporary evidence suggests that the opposite is more often true: famines brought about by the callous actions of powerful people are commonly blamed on nature -- especially by court chroniclers.

Requisitioning Food

The historical sources, despite their limitations, tell a story of centuries of state-created famine in Ethiopia.¹⁴ The manner in which wars were conducted was instrumental in creating famine. One way in which this occurred was the requisitioning of food by armies, which provisioned themselves from the local inhabitants. The Portuguese Jesuit B. Tellez visited Ethiopia in the 17th century, and wrote that famine was common on account of visitations of locusts and "the marchings of the soldiers ... which is a plague worse than the locusts, because they [the locusts] devour only what they find in the fields, whereas the other [the soldiers] spare not what is laid up in houses."¹⁵ Armies on campaign were described as leaving almost as much ruin and devastation as if the country had been invaded by the enemy. The mass armies raised for discrete campaigns were huge, even by modern standards. Noting that "an Abyssinian army often numbers 80,000 men, accompanied by 30,000 women, slaves and camp followers," the Englishman Colonel Berkeley wrote: "it will be understood that it leaves a desert wherever it goes."¹⁶ He was writing from experience in the 1860s -- even larger armies were fielded in the following decades. Even the staff of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), reviewing the historical evidence for famines, were obliged to conclude that many famines were caused directly by armies' food requirements.¹⁷

¹³ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 46.

¹⁴ Many of these sources were utilized by Prof. Pankhurst in earlier publications written under the auspices of independent academic institutions.

¹⁵ B. Tellez, quoted in Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, London, 1969, p. 163.

¹⁶ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, 4.1, 1981, p. 29.

¹⁷ RRC, "Food Shortage Report on Tigray, Annex: A Historical Perspective on Famine in Tigray," Addis Ababa, 1979, p. 39.

In the 19th century, Emperors Teodros and Menelik both tried to introduce strategic grain stores for the specific purpose of feeding the army, but in neither instance was this consistently implemented and it is also unclear how the grain was obtained. Haile Selassie was the first ruler to introduce a standing army under unified central control, and to undertake systematic measures in order to provide for it.

Access to food supplies was therefore central to military strategy. This has already been noted with regard to Amhara-Oromo warfare. Lack of food to feed armies played a critical role in the Tigray rebellion of 1913/14. Local Tigrayan nobles wrote to Ras Wolde Giorgis, head of the Shewan army, imploring him not to invade Tigray to put down the revolt, because a crop failure meant that the province could not support two armies. When Wolde Giorgis did invade, many of his soldiers deserted on account of lack of food.¹⁸

War against the Economic Base

A second manner in which warfare contributed to famine was the economic nature of many wars. Wars between Abyssinian principalities were in part designed to remove the power of the adversary to raise an army -- with the implication that the destruction of grain stores and other essential items in the economy was a military objective. Thus the Emperor Yohannes deliberately despoiled Gojjam in the 1880s so that King Teklehaimanot could not support his soldiers -- instead the King invaded the independent principality of Keffa and quartered his army there.¹⁹ Wars of conquest, fought mainly against people in southern Ethiopia, were designed to subjugate the people so that they could be brought under Amhara domination. Most of these people were Oromo, and many were pastoralists. The empire required a class of serfs, tied to the land. This was clearly impractical if the subject populations had their own independent source of livelihood. Other reasons for confiscating cattle and crops and destroying villages were desire to break the spirit of resistance, the need to obtain food for the army, and the tradition of wanton brutality. These coincided with a strategic politico-economic imperative of destroying the independent source of sustenance of conquered people.

Another aspect of the relationship between armies and famine is also worthy of note. One is that armies were carriers of disease, and themselves disease-ridden. Many more soldiers died from illnesses contracted on campaign than from the wounds of battle. In Menelik's campaign against Gojjam in 1882, 3,000 soldiers were killed by disease, as against 900 in battle

¹⁸ National Records Office, Khartoum, File Intel 2/19/160.

¹⁹ Perham, 1969, p. 161.

(plus 50 killed by peasants while looting).²⁰ Local populations would flee before approaching armies for fear of contracting diseases. In 1913/14, for example, the Shewan army was responsible for introducing a cholera epidemic to Tigray, at that time on the verge of famine.

The Great Famine of 1888-92

The great famine of 1888-92, popularly known as Kifu Qen, ("Evil Days") was possibly the worst famine in Ethiopia's recorded history, and some estimate that as much as one third of the population died. A rinderpest epidemic decimated cattle herds, while a combination of drought, locusts and army worms damaged crops. The actions of the state, however, were also important in deepening the famine for many sections of Ethiopian society, while helping others to survive and even benefit.

The famine struck at a time when the Emperor Yohannes was fighting the armies of the Sudanese Mahdi, and when King (after 1889, Emperor) Menelik was waging large campaigns of destruction in the south. Menelik was able to procure grain to help feed his new capital at Addis Ababa, so that it was described as a "Noah's Ark" amid general devastation. It appears that much of this was obtained by the confiscation of "concealed" grain in the rural areas.²¹ A common traditional storage method uses underground pits -- the grain stored there is not a hoarded surplus, but the family's diet. Sources do not reveal whether this was the origin of Menelik's famine relief for Addis Ababa, but it is probable that rural people suffered so that townspeople could eat. Magazines were set up to feed the army -- by levying a new tithe on the peasantry, which contemporary chroniclers optimistically recorded as "popular." The Emperor also made some symbolic gestures such as no longer eating meat at his court, and going to a field to dig with a hoe.

However, Menelik's chief response to the famine was to try to export it by invading his southern neighbors. Amhara lords reacted to the famine by plundering the rich Oromo province of Arsi (three different governors participated) and raiding cattle in the Ogaden. Menelik authorized the sending of northern garrisons to southern towns such as Bure and Nekempte to be fed by the local population -- presumably without the latter's consent.²² The Gojjami army occupied Keffa to feed itself there, and thousands of Shewans migrated to the highlands of Harerghe.

²⁰ Caulk, 1978, pp. 476-7.

²¹ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 101.

²² Richard Pankhurst and Douglas Johnson, "The Great Drought and Famine of 1888-92 in Northeast Africa," in D. Johnson and D. Anderson (eds.) The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies From Northeast African History, London, 1988, pp. 56-7.

Yet, if official sources are to be believed, "the reaction of the Emperor Menelik to the emergency was one of the few bright spots in an otherwise gloomy picture."²³ The despot was, we are told, "very distressed to see his army famished"²⁴ and ordered provincial governors to supply famine relief to the troops -- the sources of supply of this generous relief are not mentioned. Parallels with the late twentieth century need not be stressed.

An Outline of Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia

This section consists in a discussion of the socio-economy of rural Ethiopia, with a focus upon Tigray and the adjoining areas. This analysis is important because it provides the framework in which the governmental actions of the 1980s can be appreciated. The government's counter-insurgency methods tore at the very sinews which kept the rural economy together, turning a period of hardship into one of outright famine. Some of those sinews are obvious, such as peasant farming, some of them are less obvious. It is necessary to analyze how they held the economy together in normal times.

The most common view of the socio-economy of Ethiopia centers on the relationship between the soil, the peasant and those who tax the peasant. The focus is upon the agricultural system. In the central and northern highlands, farmers grow a variety of crops in the spring (belg) and summer (meher) growing seasons (Eritrea and much of Tigray receive only the meher rains). Ox-plows are used to prepare the land, using technology that has changed little over millenia. Ethiopia is one of the original loci of cereal cultigens, and there is a huge variety of strains of each of the major crops: teff (the most prestigious staple), wheat, barley, millet, sorghum and maize.

While agriculture is central to the Ethiopian economy, the view that focusses upon it to the exclusion of other aspects of rural life can be misleading. James McCann, a leading authority on the northern highlands, considers that "the image of the insular, long-suffering Ethiopian peasant" and the view that sees "highland farmers and highland agriculture as static and self-contained ... [have] obstructed understanding of the rural economy and social history of northern Ethiopia."²⁵ Ethiopian highland peasants do not survive just by growing things in the fields -- migration, trade and animal rearing are important too.

Rather than conceptualizing rural Ethiopia as an agglomeration of independent peasants

²³ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 98.

²⁴ Pankhurst, 1985, p. 101.

²⁵ James McCann, From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History 1900-1935, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 69.

each provisioning himself or herself from farming, it is more useful to see the region as a pattern of geographically-specialized areas, with a set of links between them. This is particularly the case for the north.

The fundamental dichotomy is between areas which are normally surplus-producing, and areas which are regularly in food deficit. In the north, the surplus areas include: Gojjam province, southwestern Wollo, central Gonder and Simien, Raya district in eastern Tigray and Shire district in western Tigray. These areas are not particularly drought-prone; even when drought hits other parts of the country, they normally continue to produce adequate crops or surpluses. When these areas do suffer a partial crop failure, it is usually localized and may be due to hailstorms, frost, infestations of pests such as locusts or army-worms, or indeed too much rain.

The food deficit areas include most of the rest of northern Ethiopia, especially some parts of eastern Gonder, northern and eastern Wollo, most of Tigray, and almost all of Eritrea. They form an arc along the eastern escarpment of the highlands, with an extension into the Tembien-Wag area, where there is a rain shadow on account of the Simien mountains. Many of these areas have been in chronic deficit for a hundred years (since the great famine of 1888-92). They produce a good harvest perhaps once or twice a decade, and a run of six or seven years of crop failure is not unusual.

While adequate rains and the absence of pests are important to production in all areas, for many farmers the critical factor causing them to fail to grow adequate crops is lack of oxen to plow the land. The more times a field is plowed, the higher the yield. Investigations have shown that in poorer areas of northern Ethiopia, approximately one third of the farmers have one ox, and one third have none -- only one third have two or more. A farmer with one ox is traditionally known as "half a man". He must team up with a neighbor in order to put together a plow team, which then divides its time between the farms. A farmer with no ox must try to hire a plow team, and can usually only afford to make one or two passes with the plow, instead of an optimal higher number. The single most important short-term constraint on higher food production is shortage of plow oxen.

Oxen are expensive. Farmers must save in order to buy one, and the loss of an ox is a devastating blow to a poor household.

Treated as a whole, northern Ethiopia is very rarely in overall food deficit. Conceding that statistics are very unreliable, perhaps the only year in recent times when there was such a deficit was 1984. In all other years between 1975 and 1991 there has been a net surplus, though sometimes a small one. The problem is not food availability, it is food distribution.

This leads to the question: how do the people who live in the deficit areas make good that deficit? The answer is, through four basic means:

*Working for money. Large numbers of rural Ethiopians undertake paid labor, either close to home, or migrating to surplus-producing or coffee-producing areas, cities, or farming schemes. Migrant laborers buy food where it is cheaper and more plentiful than in their home areas, in effect redistributing it from surplus to deficit areas.

*Engaging in petty trade. In the seasons when agriculture is not possible, many men engage in trading, using donkeys and mules. One researcher in the village of Adiet, near Axum in Tigray, found that more than half of the adult men in the village were part-time traders, in salt, grain, animals and consumer goods. Some travelled as far afield as Gojjam to buy grain.²⁶ For the pastoralists of the lowlands, trade is even more important. By these means, food is moved from surplus to deficit areas.

*Selling animals. Not only the specialist pastoralists of the lowlands, but many highland farmers, earn a considerable income from selling animals. Animals are kept for sale and for milk. One of the few investigations of the role of animals in the highlands was done by Noel Cossins and Bekele Yemeron in the 1970s.²⁷ They concluded that in many areas, animals played a role at least as important as farming. One of these areas was the Tembien-Wag area in Tigray-Wollo, which was the epicenter of the famine of 1983-5. In the Eritrean highlands this is also the case, and many farmers are in fact semi-nomadic, migrating with their animals out of the highlands to the eastern and western escarpments.

*Remittances from relatives working in towns and abroad are important, particularly in Eritrea, which has larger cities, more industry, and more ready access to neighboring countries.

Other strategies, such as eating wild foods and borrowing, are also commonly followed. Another strategy followed is going hungry: rural people will reduce consumption in order to preserve essential assets such as seed, farm tools and plough oxen. The meager diet upon which Ethiopian peasants are able to survive appears to contradict the basic tenets of nutritional science, but is remarked upon by all who have studied famine survival strategies.

A Digression into Statistics

There are no reliable statistics for Ethiopia, especially the northern regions. This is for three main reasons: (1) there have been no systematic investigations of most aspects of the rural economy of the north, in part because of prolonged warfare in the area, (2) even the most basic facts are subject to political manipulation, and (3) peasants are reluctant to divulge information to outsiders.

²⁶ Richard Baker, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1990.

²⁷ Noel J. Cossins and Bekele Yemeron, "Still Sleep the Highlands: A Study of Farm and Livestock Systems in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1973.

Information is power. The Imperial government withheld information about famines, and news about the famines in the post-revolutionary period was subject to both censorship and distortion. Similar considerations apply to basic facts about rural production, rainfall, and the human population.

For many years, even rainfall data were regarded as a state secret (the logic behind this will become evident in this report). In addition, due to the war, many rainfall monitoring stations ceased to function.

The size of the human population is not known for sure to within several millions. In part this is due to problems with counting people. Some peasants remain totally unreached, hiding in the mountains: "since the state provides very little that is beneficial to the peasant but siphons off a good deal of the latter's harvest, a large number of these mountain peasants will soon be driven to break their ties with the outside world, and to retreat to their rugged fortresses to live a life of independence in sublime isolation."²⁸ When the first national census was conducted in 1984, the enumerators found 29 per cent more people than expected in the areas in which they were able to survey -- suddenly, an extra eight million Ethiopians were "discovered."

The most contentious population issue in northern Ethiopia is the question of the number of people in Tigray. This was an issue of dispute throughout the 1980s. On one side, the government claimed that Tigray contained between two and 2.8 million people. On the other, the TPLF claimed that figures collected from village committees indicated a population of between 4.5 and 5 million. In 1989/90 the population estimates were 2.73 million (government) and 4.82 million (TPLF) respectively. This issue became important in 1985 when the government claimed that most of the famine victims in Tigray were receiving rations -- a claim that could only be made if the government's 1984 population figure of 2.41 million was accepted.

Demographic data from Ethiopia are extremely poor. Nobody knows how many people there really are in Tigray. However, the evidence that is available does allow a set of preliminary estimates to be made. These show, that while the population may not be as high as claimed by the TPLF, it is undoubtedly much higher than that claimed by the Mengistu government. There are several elements to the revision of the population estimate.

I TPLF-defined Tigray includes parts of Raya Kobo, Tselemti, and Wolkait, which are in government-defined Wollo and Gonder. According to the TPLF in 1989, these extra areas contained 400,000 people. The following discussion will be confined to the smaller government-defined Tigray.

²⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine and Survival Strategies, A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute for Development Research, 1987, p. 51.

II Tigray was not enumerated in the 1984 census, because of the war. The population estimate given by the government was therefore derived from the 1969 National Sample Survey, which estimated a population of 1.56 million, with 2.7 per cent per annum added on for population growth. However, the results of the 1969 survey were suspect. The figure first announced was 1.36 million, down from the estimate based on the 1965 sample survey, of 1.41 million; in January 1970 it was revised upwards. A more detailed survey in the early 1970s estimated the population at 2.04 million, but internal evidence in the survey results indicate that is likely to have been an underestimate.²⁹

A major source of inaccuracy for the figures for Tigray was the large number of temporary outmigrants from the province, probably more than ten per cent of the total population. After the revolution, most of this temporary outmigration ceased, boosting the local population accordingly. Thus it is likely that in 1969 the real population was at least 2.2 million.³⁰ This would imply a 1989 population of 3.65 million.

III In the areas where enumeration was possible, the 1984 census found an additional 29 per cent of people compared to estimates derived from the 1969 survey.³¹ It is safe to assume that, had enumerators actually visited Tigray, they would have found an additional number of people. An additional 29 per cent on the official figure would imply a 1989 population of 3.62 million.

IV The results of the 1969 survey were manipulated for political reasons. The most well-known example of that was the underestimation of the number of Oromo. Though the Oromo actually outnumbered the Amhara, this politically-sensitive fact was suppressed, and the results claimed that 7.8 million Amhara outnumbered 6.8 million Oromo. There were also allegations (never systematically investigated) that the total population of Tigray was also reduced for political reasons, and that the district-by-district totals added up to much more. As this possible distortion cannot be proved or quantified, it will not be considered.

Factors II and III should be combined. Even if the corrected results of the 1969 survey had been known, the 1984 census would still have found more. Combining factors II and III results in a total 1989 population estimate of 4.70 million. A more conservative estimate would assume that factor III operated at "half strength", which would imply a total 1989 population of

²⁹ Hunting Technical Services, "Tigray Rural Development Study, Annex 3: Population," Borchamwood, 1975. The survey found a relative shortage of young girls.

³⁰ It is notable that the 1970 language survey found 3.56 million Tigrinya speakers, about 400,000 more than could be accounted for in the total estimates for the settled Tigrinya-speaking populations of highland Eritrea, Tigray and its borderlands, Addis Ababa and elsewhere.

³¹ The census was conducted shortly after the government began a program of systematic conscription of young males into the army. The data show a relative shortage of young males -- presumably concealed from the census enumerators by themselves and their families.

4.20 million (for government-defined Tigray) and 4.60 million (for "greater" Tigray).

This shows that in 1989/90 the government of Ethiopia underestimated the population of Tigray by at least 1.4 million people (i.e. one third).

Figures for rural production are highly suspect. Most estimates for areas of farmland derive from tax records, which are arrived at by processes of negotiation, influence and bribery. One scholar studying land before the revolution noted that only two per cent of the farmland in Tigray had ever been measured, which was better than Gojjam (0.1 per cent) and Gonder (none at all). He concluded: "on two fronts, ownership and boundaries, these farmers have succeeded in preventing the government from learning the substantive details that would allow any forceful application of the land taxes."³² As a result, accurate knowledge of farmed area was non-existent. After the revolution, as the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) gradually extended its procurement in the late 1970s, sample surveys were begun in selected villages to assess the crops. In Wollo, the assessments of cropped area and harvest, which had been approximately stable up to 1978/9, suddenly more than doubled in 1979/80, remaining at comparable levels thereafter. It is likely that pressure to identify surpluses available for procurement by the AMC influenced the sudden increase in harvest estimate. In 1981, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) gave technical assistance to the Ministry of Agriculture, enabling it to double the number of surveys. The result was a huge increase in the estimated yield. Overruling objections from the statisticians who wanted to double-check the figures, the central government published the unchecked first estimate -- because the high figure could be used to demonstrate the claimed "success" of the government's newly-launched campaign to increase agricultural production.

Figures for amounts of grain in storage or numbers of domestic animals are even more unreliable -- the information must be obtained by asking peasants, who are reluctant to divulge anything to an outsider who is likely to be seen as wanting to assess taxes, recruit soldiers, confiscate land, or otherwise interfere with the peasant's autonomy. Official statistics are thus politically loaded facts based on varying degrees of ignorance about the reality.

Figures for those "in need" on account of famine are similarly suspect. Figures from the government Relief and Rehabilitation Commission were based on village reports (in government-held areas) and gross estimates elsewhere. In 1983, the total for Tigray was exactly one million; for Wollo, it was given down to the last individual. Examples of political manipulation of the figures will occur in this report. Figures produced by the FAO are based upon satellite imagery of vegetative growth and ground surveys. Satellite imagery of vegetation is useful for assessing the extent of drought, but cannot evaluate the impact of war,

³² Peter Schwab, *Decision-Making in Ethiopia: A Study of the Political Process*, London, 1972, pp. 30-1.

trade disruptions, taxation or pests, limiting its value for Ethiopia in the 1980s. In addition, throughout the 1980s, UN teams could not travel to rural areas of Eritrea, Tigray and north Wollo to conduct ground checks.

Ethiopian peasants are notoriously unwilling to divulge even the most basic information to outsiders. This stems from the well-founded fear that information is liable to be used against them. One of the peasants' few weapons against excessive exactions by the government is the latter's ignorance about their real condition, including how many of them there are. Several rural revolts (notably in Gojjam) have been sparked by government attempts to measure farm land. Peasants prefer the "sublime isolation" alluded to above.

The Ethiopian peasantry cannot be counted against its will. Hitherto, that will has almost always been lacking. Only with the advent of famine relief and more democratic forms of government are reliable statistics about the number of Ethiopians and their condition likely to be produced.

One tendency is certain: the closer an investigator probes into the rural economy of northern Ethiopia, the more he or she finds -- whether it be people, farmland, animals, or any other form of resources. One fact is equally certain: any attempt to quantify any aspect of Ethiopian society is a hazardous enterprise; and those who put figures on their claims for things such as rural production, the extent of environmental degradation, or the numbers dead in a famine, are speaking either in ignorance of the truth, or with the intention of concealing it.

2. SCORCHED EARTH IN ERITREA, 1961-77

Background to the Conflict in Eritrea

The political background to the war in Eritrea has been studied many times by scholars of different leanings. Before conquest by Italian forces in the late 1880s, the history of Eritrea is controversial -- scholars dispute whether significant areas of it were tributary to states in Ethiopia proper, or not.

For half a century Eritrea was an Italian colony, until occupation by the British army during the Second World War. There then followed a decade of political turmoil, as the post-war powers dithered about the future of the territory, and the Eritreans organized themselves into a welter of political parties which campaigned for nationalist, sectarian or unionist causes using fair means and foul. For the most part, the highland Christian population was sympathetic to union with Ethiopia, whereas the lowland Moslem population wanted independence. Some of the lowland peoples, notably the Beni Amer tribe which straddles the Sudanese border, were influenced by the growing nationalist movement in British-controlled Sudan. After several false starts in trying to determine Eritrea's future, the Allied powers turned the issue over to the United Nations, which appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the wishes of the Eritrean people.

When the UN Commission of Inquiry made its investigation, there was widespread rural unrest, which made it impossible to visit many lowland areas in western Eritrea. The investigation was also cursory in the extreme, and no referendum was held. Meanwhile, an Eritrean assembly was elected, by indirect voting, and was approximately evenly-divided on the crucial issue of independence or unity with Ethiopia. The Ethiopian "liaison office" headed by Colonel Negga Haile Selassie financed the pro-Ethiopian Unionist Party, mobilized the Orthodox church on his side, and intimidated the opposition. These tactics served to alienate much of Eritrea's elite.

Finally, US strategic interests proved the decisive factor. The US was a close ally of Haile Selassie, and wanted the use of the strategically-sited air force and communications base at Kagnaw, in Asmara. In 1952, Eritrea was given a constitution which included a democratically-elected assembly and the key institutions of civil society, but federated under the Ethiopian crown.

Haile Selassie reportedly neither understood nor approved of the notion of federation,¹ and at once set to work annexing the territory. The Eritrean administration was stripped of its

¹ John D. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years*, Algonai, Mich., 1984.

powers and the Assembly was undermined. The Emperor dismissed and appointed Eritrean ministers. A strike by the Eritrean labor unions in 1958 was met with violence -- over 200 strikers were detained and 60 injured by soldiers. Finally, in 1962, coerced and bribed, and with the building surrounded by soldiers, the Assembly members voted to dissolve the Federation.

Throughout the 1940s there had been widespread shifta activity in the lowlands, with up to 3,000 bandits active. This abated after the British offered an amnesty in 1947, but by the mid 1950s many former shifta returned to violence. When Haile Selassie's intentions were clear but the act of annexation not yet consummated, leading pro-independence Eritreans fled into exile and formed the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1961. They made contact with shifta leaders, and armed revolt began in September of that year. Most of the membership of the ELF was Moslem, from the western lowlands, and in particular from the Beni Amer.

The government deepened Eritrean opposition by continuing to dismantle Eritrean institutions and deprive Eritreans of basic civil and political rights. There were also a number of political detentions and trials, including one of 19 government officials accused of supporting the ELF, which was transferred to Addis Ababa in 1963 because the government believed that no convictions would be obtained in an Eritrean court. Even those Eritreans who had previously been ardent supporters of the Union became disillusioned. For example, Tedla Bairu, the first Eritrean prime minister, defected to the ELF.

Eritrean Resistance 1961-74

The first shots in the Eritrean war were fired on September 1, 1961 in the lowland district of Barka. The leader of the ELF detachment that engaged the Ethiopian soldiers was a well-known ex-shifta called Idris Awate. Most of his band of eleven followers had previous military experience in the Sudan Defence Force.² Over the following few years the political and military leaders operated largely in mutual isolation. Idris Awate was killed in 1962, but the ELF continued to grow on the ground, and in the mid 1960s it had over 2,000 fighters.

Prominent political leaders of the ELF included Woldeab Woldemariam, Osman Saleh Sabbe and Idris Mohamed Adam. In 1963 a ten-member Supreme Council was established in Khartoum. Finance, armaments and training came at different times from most Arab countries, including Syria and Iraq -- under whose Baathist ideology Eritrea was incorporated into the Arab world. In the late 1960s, the ELF received assistance from Cuba and other Marxist states.

Sudanese support was important but not unwavering. While public opinion in Khartoum and Kassala was strongly pro-ELF, successive Sudanese governments followed vacillating

² The British-run colonial army of Sudan.

policies: support during 1961-4; increasing coolness during 1965 (13 ELF fighters were extradited to Ethiopia that year and some were subsequently executed); and coldness from 1967-9, during which time ELF political activity was prohibited. During the early radical phase of Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri's rule (May 1969-July 1971), Sudanese support for the ELF was again strong; it was then cut off in response to an Ethiopian withdrawal of support for the Anyanya rebels in southern Sudan. Relations between Sudan and Ethiopia then deteriorated after the 1974 revolution, reaching a nadir when the Ethiopian government backed an attempted coup in Sudan in July 1976. In response, the Sudanese government followed policies strongly supportive of Eritrean independence -- for two years. The most important role played by the Sudan government was allowing the Eritrean fronts to transit supplies, including military equipment, through Port Sudan.

In 1965, the ELF reorganized itself into five operational zones along the lines of the Algerian Front de Liberation National.

The ELF was an amalgam of different elements -- indeed, the zonal structure of 1965 was adopted partly in order to prevent conflict between different regionally-based elements within the organization. Many substantial conflicts within the organization were left unaddressed. In the early years, the membership was almost entirely Moslem, and the organization had a strong tinge of pan-Arabism. A position often adopted was that the liberation of Eritrea should precede social or economic transformation. In the late 1960s there was a growing radical element within the ELF, leading to the adoption of Marxist ideas.

Much of the insurgent activity in the 1960s and early 1970s involved acts of sabotage against government installations and bridges, and ambushes of convoys and trains. The ELF also regularly engaged army patrols, and attacked small garrisons and police posts. It quickly made most of the lowland countryside impassable to government forces except in military convoys.

The ELF was anxious to avoid the mistakes of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and was reluctant to let people evacuate to Sudan in large numbers. ELF leaders recognized that life in refugee camps would breed a generation of young people bitter and addicted to violence, and argued that this would undercut the revolutionary idealism necessary for their membership.

The first of a series of splits in the ELF occurred in 1968. Osman Saleh Sabbe, a prominent exiled leader, departed and founded his own organization. Ibrahim Tewolde (later poisoned in suspicious circumstances) and Isseyas Afeworki founded the Tripartite Union. This led eventually to the formation of the EPLF in February 1972, led by Isseyas and Ramadan Nur. The ELF, under the military command of Abdalla Idris, denounced the new organization.

There then followed two years of internecine strife between the two movements, which caused an estimated 3,000 casualties among the fighters -- more deaths among the combatants than the entire thirteen years of government military actions to date. Purges within the two fronts

also saw a number of people murdered. A battle between the two fronts at Wolki in October 1974 left 600 fighters dead, and caused a spontaneous demonstration by the citizens of Asmara, who marched to the battlefield and demanded that the fronts settle their differences by negotiation.

Counter-Insurgency 1961-74

Idris Awate's personal history as a shifta leader, the background of the other guerrillas, plus twenty years recent experience of intermittent banditry in western and southern Eritrea, enabled the government to regard the threat as one of straightforward brigandage utilized for personal advancement by Moslem sectarians.

Throughout the 1960s, the counter-insurgency strategy followed consisted of punitive patrols, interspersed with large offensives and a policy of forced relocation in fortified villages. This was a colonial-type technique designed to impress the subjugated population with the firepower and determination of the government. It led directly to large-scale human rights abuses.

The actions of the army also led to the impoverishment of rural people, food shortages, and famine. The soldiers requisitioned food, destroyed crops, killed animals, prevented trade, drove people from their land, and (during 1975) blockaded the entire highlands. From the very start of the war, the Ethiopian army used hunger as a weapon.

Starting in September 1961, the day-to-day brutality of army patrols caused many abuses of human rights. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, later head of the RRC, served as a military officer at the time. While fervently pro-unity (i.e. anti-Eritrean independence), he was critical of the army's operational methods:

The army ... entered Eritrea in the 1960s with the mentality of a conqueror. It belittled the small bands of Moslem separatists operating in the lowland areas and believed it could command respect and loyalty from the people by sheer show of force.... The army made a crucial error in this operation; it did not concentrate on attacking the guerrillas directly; instead it devastated the villages suspected of harboring them.

Another disastrous decision was that the army would carry only two or three days' rations at a time.

After they ran out, they were expected to live off the land, to take what they needed from the people. I remember soldiers slaughtering cattle, eating what they wanted, and then leaving the rest to rot. Sometimes soldiers would kill cattle just to get the livers. It was as if they were in enemy territory.³

Haggai Erlich, an Israeli scholar, commented that "usually in Eritrea a company would leave for a month-long routine counter-insurgency operation carrying almost no supplies, which

³ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia, Trenton, NJ, 1989, p. 82.

almost inevitably turned them into shifta in uniform."⁴

A more effective aspect of the Ethiopian counter-insurgency operation was the training of an elite commando force, with Israeli assistance. Known as Force 101, this unit became operational in 1965.

Scorched Earth: The 1967 Killings

The first large-scale abuses of human rights occurred during three army offensives in 1967. The governor of Eritrea, Ras Asrate Kassa is reported to have boasted that he would leave Eritrea as bare as his bald head. Certainly, throughout the year the army behaved as though the depopulation of the Eritrean countryside was its aim.

The first offensive began at dawn on February 11, when a force of about 5,000 soldiers began burning villages in Barka district. An Israeli advisor wrote in his diary: The Second Division is very efficient in killing innocent people. They are alienating the Eritreans and deepening the hatred that already exists. Their commander took his aides to a spot near the Sudanese border and ordered them: "from here to the north -- clear the area." Many innocent people were massacred and nothing of substance was achieved.⁵

Between February and April the army burned 62 villages, including Mogoraib, Zamla, Ad Ibrahim, Gerset Gurgur, Adi Bera, Asir, Fori and Ad Habab, while villagers were ordered to collect at army posts for screening. The soldiers were assisted by artillery and aerial bombardment using incendiaries. According to reports from local community leaders, 402 civilians were killed, and about 60,000 cattle and camels slaughtered with machine guns and knives and by burning alive.⁶ In addition, 21 detainees, most of them teachers and government employees, were summarily executed in Tessenei prison on February 12. Traders were singled out for detention or killing, because they were believed to be responsible for supplying food to the insurgents.

Between March and May, 25,500 Eritrean refugees were registered in Sudan, and an estimated 5,000 more crossed the border and stayed unregistered in Beni Amer villages. The Ethiopian government objected to humanitarian assistance, calling them "rebels not refugees."⁷ On March 15, the Sudanese village of Guba, close to the border, was attacked by the Ethiopian

⁴ Haggai Erlich, The Struggle over Eritrea 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa, Stanford, 1983, p. 39.

⁵ Quoted in: Erlich, 1983, p. 58.

⁶ Mohamed Hamed, The International Dimension of the Battle for Eritrea, Beirut, 1974, pp. 126-7 (in Arabic).

⁷ Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan 1967-1984," DPhil Thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 57-9.

army on the suspicion that ELF fighters were present. One villager was shot dead and three were kidnapped. A nearby village, Debre Sultan, was also attacked. Immediately before the offensive began, Haile Selassie had visited Sudan to ensure that the Sudanese government would respond appropriately: it duly withdrew the refugees from the border area and prohibited the activities of the ELF, but succeeded in obtaining humanitarian assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and setting up a refugee camp.⁸ This was UNHCR's first involvement in the Horn of Africa, and the first of many refugee flows over the following 25 years.

After these atrocities, a large area of Barka was left uninhabited.

In July 1967, the army turned its attention to the eastern lowlands of Semhar. The villages of Eilet and Gumhot were burned on July 11, and 30 young men were tied up and burned alive inside a house. Five other villages were burned over the following days,⁹ and 51 people killed. 6,000 domestic animals were killed; according to reports, the soldiers singled out camels for slaughter, because they were vital for transport.¹⁰

The third offensive started in November 1967. 7,000 soldiers from the Second Division began to burn villages in the vicinity of Keren. Almost all the villages of Senhit -- 174 in all -- were destroyed. Some reliably reported atrocities included:

*Kuhul and Amadi: the army ordered the people to collect in one place, where they were bombed by air force planes.

*Asmat: the army opened fire on a wedding party, killing an unknown number.

*Melefsa: thirty community leaders who met the soldiers and offered them hospitality were killed.

The army burned crops, killed or confiscated livestock and poisoned wells, with the clear intention of making the area uninhabitable.

After Senhit, the burning of villages spread to the highland districts of Seraye and Akele Guzai, which had been hitherto little affected by the war. 86 villages were burned in these two districts, and at least 159 people killed.

Forced Relocation in Fortified Villages

In December 1966, the army began a policy of forcible relocation into fortified villages

⁸ Karadawi, 1988, pp. 62-4.

⁹ One of those destroyed was Sheib, the scene of massacres in 1988 and 1989 (see chapter 14).

¹⁰ Mohamed, 1974, p. 131.

among the pastoral population of Barka. After each of the three 1967 offensives much of the population was relocated in new villages or forced to live in nearby towns.

In the fortified villages, curfews were imposed, together with restrictions on daytime movements. This had a profound impact on the livelihood of the herders. In normal times, pastoralists leave their village for days or weeks during the dry season in order to search for grazing; if they are confined to a radius of half a day's walk from the village, they can only keep a small number of animals on the limited grass and browse of this area. In addition, because of the daytime heat during certain times of year, herders prefer to graze and water animals at night. This is better for the animals' health and means they drink less water -- water is a scarce and expensive commodity in Eritrea. The policy of curfews made this night-time grazing impossible. On occasions when the strategic hamlets proved too difficult to maintain, the army forcibly relocated the population in nearby urban centers, with even more drastic consequences for their livelihoods. Strict controls on trade were established, with the inspection of all food items brought in and out of villages and towns by vehicle or pack animal.

However, as the ELF regained control of the countryside, the people began to return to their previous homes.

The 1970-1 Massacres

In January 1970, the army re-launched the policy of forcible villagization, coinciding with a large military sweep through Barka and Sahel. Tens of villages were burned. In March, 16,700 refugees fled to Sudan, mostly to the Tokar area along the Red Sea coast. The period from April to July witnessed many atrocities as military activities spread to the eastern lowlands. 32 civilians were shot dead when the army burned Arafali village. 88 people were executed when the people of Atshoma, between Massawa and Ghinda, refused army orders to relocate in a protected village.

Violence against the civilian population increased towards the end of the year. In retaliation for an ambush in which a senior army commander was killed, there was a series of massacres near Keren. One atrocity was the killing of 112 people in a mosque at Basadare in November. The people were collected in the mosque by soldiers who said they would be safe there from a planned air strike; the soldiers then opened fire. Another was the destruction of the village of Ona on December 1, in which an estimated 625 people were killed. This was apparently in retaliation for the villagers betraying the presence of an army patrol to the ELF, which ambushed it and killed several soldiers.¹¹ Acting contrary to official orders, local boy scouts re-entered the village to bury the dead.

¹¹ Godfrey Morrison, Eritrea and the Southern Sudan: Aspects of Some Wider African Problems, London, Minority Rights Group, 1971, p. 29.

In December, the military governor imposed a state of emergency on Eritrea, and assumed powers of arbitrary arrest, and the right to displace the population. Ten-kilometer strips of land along the coast and the Sudan border were declared "prohibited zones," where the army could open fire on any target. On January 27, 1971, about 60 civilians, most of them elderly people, were killed by soldiers in a mosque in the village of Elaborod.

As well as being ruthless and violent, the administration was described -- even by those sympathetic to its cause -- as "inefficient, brutal and corrupt".¹² Senior officers sold the supplies destined for their units, and the governors (the civilian Ras Asrate Kassa and the soldier Lt-Gen Debebe Haile Mariam) and their associates are alleged to have often detained prominent citizens in order to obtain large bribes for their release.

Human Rights Abuses by the Eritrean Fronts

Both the ELF and EPLF committed abuses against human rights during this period. At first, the ELF's Moslem leadership was intolerant of Christians. Some of the first Christians to attempt to join were summarily executed, as were members of a group of university students known as Siriyat Addis. The defection of a large number of Christian fighters in June 1967 presaged the splits that were to destroy the organization in the 1970s. In 1968, the Tripartite Union breakaway group was subject to harassment from partisans of the mainstream ELF based in the western lowlands, and two members were arrested and killed.

After the army atrocities of 1967, there was a widespread demand in the ELF rank and file for retributive attacks on civilian targets. In response, the leadership set up a special unit to engage in hijackings of airplanes. Civilian airplanes were hijacked at Frankfurt in March 1969 and Karachi in June 1969. In neither incident were any passengers injured.

The ELF also set up a special unit known as "Quattro Cento," after the death penalty in force during the Italian occupation. Its task was the assassination of civilians associated with the government. Gwynne Roberts, a journalist who travelled with the ELF in mid-1975, estimated that at that time the ELF were carrying out about 15 assassinations each week. Those accused of collaboration were sent two warnings, and if they ignored both, an assassination squad was dispatched. Roberts also saw numerous civilians who were detained by the ELF for having failed to give them assistance, or on suspicion of collaborating with the government.¹³ The Tripartite Union and the EPLF also carried out assassinations. On April 14, 1970, two judges who had earlier sentenced rebel fighters to death were shot dead in a bar in Asmara together with four other

¹² Erlich, 1983, p. 39.

¹³ The Financial Times, London, October 24, 1975.

people present.

The ELF levied taxes and enacted reprisals against villages and individuals who refused to cooperate. In one of several similar incidents in 1971, 52 Christian villagers were burned to death in their huts in a village named Debre Sila for non-payment of ELF demands.¹⁴ On March 7, 1971, the ELF plundered the village of Halib Menal, stealing many cattle, after the villagers had killed two ELF fighters while resisting an ELF attempt to occupy the village two days before. Individuals who failed to protect ELF property entrusted to them were also summarily executed.

The organization also repeatedly demanded cash payments from Christian missions in its operational areas, and on occasions confiscated medicines from hospitals and pharmacies.

There were several instances in which the fronts took European and American hostages. For example, on May 24, 1974, the ELF attacked the American Mission Hospital at Ghinda, and seized an Eritrean nurse and an American missionary as hostages. The nurse was summarily killed the same day because she could not keep up with her captors' walking pace; the American was released unharmed after three weeks. In 1975 and 1976, both the ELF and EPLF took US servicemen at Kagnaw base as hostages; at one point the ELF threatened to try two servicemen for the damage and deaths caused by US-supplied munitions. The ELF also kidnapped three British tourists, while the EPLF took Mr B. H. Burwood-Taylor, the British honorary consul, from his office in central Asmara and kept him for five months. All were released unharmed, though Mr Burwood-Taylor was kept in solitary confinement for extended periods.

The Eritrean War and the Revolution

The war in Eritrea was a principal cause of the revolution of 1974 which overthrew the Emperor Haile Selassie and brought to power the Provisional Military Administrative Committee, known by the Amharic word for "committee", the Dergue. Senior army officers came to believe that the war could not be won by military means, and that a negotiated settlement was needed.

Ironically, the revolution followed two years in which there were fewer army offensives, and much of the military activity consisted in the war launched by the ELF against the EPLF to enforce unity. The government tried to sow dissension in the Eritrean ranks; attempting to inflame the civil war between ELF and EPLF. Over half of the Ethiopian regular army was stationed in Eritrea, a total of 25,000 men. Regular patrols continued, together with the attempted enforcement of the protected villages strategy, and punitive missions after successful ELF or EPLF guerrilla raids.

After a spate of assassinations by the rebels in June 1974 -- including the killing of an

¹⁴ Africa Contemporary Record, 1971-72, p. B113.

army colonel -- the army burned the village of Om Hager, near the Sudanese border, in July. The villagers were ordered to collect in the local stadium. After waiting for two hours, soldiers opened fire with machine guns. At least 54 civilians were shot dead and a further 73 drowned while trying to swim a flooded river. Some reports indicate that 17 elders were burned to death in a hut. About 4,000 refugees fled to Sudan. The new military head of state, General Aman Andom, himself an Eritrean, apologized for the massacre and promised compensation. This was never paid.

General Aman himself was killed in November in a shoot-out with an army unit sent to arrest him by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was emerging as the strongman of the Dergue. Aman had advocated compromise with the Eritrean fronts; Mengistu wanted to settle the problem by force of arms. Starting in 1974, Mengistu made every effort to increase the size of the armed forces. During the years 1974-6, military assistance from the US was actually increased. However, the amounts provided fell short of Mengistu's ambitions.

The intervention of the citizens of Asmara after the battle of Wolki in October 1974 forced the ELF and the EPLF to try to settle their differences by negotiation. An agreement was reached at Koazien in January 1975 and the two fronts then began a concerted war on the government. In May 1975, at its second congress, the ELF voted out a number of exiled leaders and emphasized unity with the EPLF. Ahmad Nasir became the new chairman. The EPLF broke with Osman Saleh Sabbe (then head of its foreign mission) and adopted a radical socialist program at its first congress in January 1977. Sabbe then founded a third front -- the ELF-Popular Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF) -- and a series of triangular negotiations ensued; unity was not, however, achieved.

Between 1975 and 1977 the fronts succeeded in overrunning almost the entire territory, save Asmara, Massawa and the small town of Barentu in the west. At this time, the fighters of the ELF and EPLF outnumbered the Ethiopian forces, and their victory appeared to be inevitable. This was the first significant military threat faced by the new government of the Dergue.

The Siege of Asmara, 1975

Following Aman's death, the level of violence increased in Eritrea, with the ELF and EPLF closing in on Asmara. Some guerrillas infiltrated the city on December 22. In retaliation, at least 50 Eritrean youths were killed by security forces, 18 of them strangled with piano wire on the night of December 23. ELF and EPLF commando units attacked installations in the city, including civilian targets. On December 22, a grenade attack killed six civilians. In mid-January, the US Information Service building and the main post office were attacked with grenades.

On January 31, 1975, the Eritrean fronts launched an attack on Asmara city. The attack

started with a rocket attack on an army post, and there were a number of battles in nearby villages and on the outskirts of the city. Despite fierce fighting, the city remained under government control.

Over the following four days, government soldiers went on the rampage through the city. Civilians were dragged from their houses and executed. Soldiers opened fire on passing cars -- in one incident, six people were killed in a minibus. Passers by were stopped and shot dead. The soldiers looted and pillaged, in some instances cutting away women's ears to seize their earrings. According to eye-witness reports obtained by journalists who arrived in the city a week later, the soldiers used their bayonets when they ran out of bullets.¹⁵ There are reliable reports that exactly 100 civilians were killed at the village of Woki Debra, just outside the city. About 50 people were killed at Adi Sogdo.

The government claimed that 124 civilians were killed by "stray bullets," during the four days of killing, but in a rare admission of a greater degree of responsibility, executed 13 soldiers for "excesses" and transferred 90 others in mid February. Journalists obtained reliable accounts of 331 civilian deaths, and other sources claimed that up to 3,000 were killed. The number of combatants killed by on all sides was about 3,000.

After the failure of the ELF-EPLF attempt to capture Asmara, the war intensified in the countryside as both sides prepared for a prolonged siege. The EPLF estimated that during 110 villages were partly or wholly destroyed by the army in 1975. During February-April there were a number of massacres in different parts of Eritrea, with tens or hundreds killed on each occasion: Harkiko in the eastern lowlands, Adi Worehi Sub, Waulki and Guilla in the west. In one incident at the village of Woki Debah on March 13, a group of soldiers travelling between Asmara and Keren rounded up a group of villagers early in the morning and shot dead 37. Some of the survivors fled; others remained behind. The following day the soldiers returned and burned the entire village, reportedly killing 500 people by shooting and stabbing with bayonets. Many livestock were also slaughtered.

After a lull, later in the year there were more killings of civilians, usually in reprisals for rebel attacks. Three families were shot dead in Asmara in August. On August 22, at least six boys were killed in Asmara. A number of villages were destroyed in air attacks.

As the ELF and EPLF besieged Asmara, the government used a blockade of food in order to try to sap their strength. Checkpoints around the city prevented food from being smuggled by sympathizers to the guerrillas. The import of food from Tigray was also severely curtailed, and the Ethiopian Red Cross was prevented from bringing in food relief. Brig.-Gen. Getachew Nadew, the military administrator, explained the blockade in these terms, made familiar by Mao

¹⁵ Dial Torgerson, The Guardian, London, February 15, 1975.

Zedong: "if you wish to kill the fish, first you must dry the sea."¹⁶ These measures brought considerable hardship to the rebel fighters, who were compelled to rely on food brought by camel trains from the Sudan border. These supplies were subject to ambush and aerial bombardment, and were inadequate. Journalist Gwynne Roberts described the ELF fighters as running short of food, and surviving on reduced diets.¹⁷ As some of the villages near Asmara ran out of food, ELF units were forced to withdraw. In and around Asmara, the price of food rose more than twenty-fold, to highs surpassing those reached in the 1984/5 famine. Despite the food crisis -- indeed famine -- the government maintained its blockade, and prevented significant food imports until the military situation had improved.

The Peasants' March

1976 and 1977 saw relatively fewer atrocities in Eritrea. This was related to a number of factors, including several rounds of peace negotiations and the government's experience in 1975 that each massacre merely drove people into the arms of the rebel fronts. The most important reason, however, was that the two main offensives planned into Eritrea failed to reach the territory.

In 1976, Mengistu planned to overcome the problem of a relative shortage of armaments by resorting to a traditional Ethiopian tactic -- a mass levy of peasant soldiers, mobilized with the promise of booty and land in the enemy territory. The soldiers were told that they could take any land for themselves, after first driving the Eritreans from it.

The "Peasants March" on Eritrea was planned and implemented starting in March 1976. Major Atnafu Abate, a close friend of Mengistu, was responsible for the march. About 50,000 peasants, most of them from Wollo, were recruited. Some were volunteers, tempted by the government's promises, others were forcibly conscripted. Most were given antiquated surplus rifles from the armory, some were unarmed -- told they would be able to obtain weapons from dead rebels. Without training, the peasants began to march northwards. Meanwhile, in April the government summarily ordered out all foreigners engaged in evangelical or humanitarian work in Eritrea, closed all mission hospitals and confiscated most of the equipment.

Despite intense diplomatic pressure from the US, which objected to this "medieval" manner of conducting warfare, the march went ahead. However, the untrained peasant army was no match for the Eritreans -- or indeed the newly-formed Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). On the night of June 1/2, a surprise attack on the marchers was made at Zalenbessa, in

¹⁶ Quoted in: Sunday Times, London, September 7, 1975.

¹⁷ Financial Times, London, October 22, 1975.

Tigray, before they even entered Eritrea, and over 1,200 were killed and the remainder dispersed. Much light weaponry fell into the hands of the TPLF.

Offensive and Counter-Offensives, 1977

Atnafu and Mengistu then proceeded with a second plan for an offensive in Eritrea. Atnafu planned to create over 55,000 "Defense of the Revolution" squads, containing about 300,000 militiamen with three months' military training. (At different times, government members spoke of a force numbering between 200,000 and 500,000; probably 150,000 were actually recruited by mid-1977.) The militiamen were to march first on rebel forces in Gonder and Tigray, and then on Eritrea.

Implementation of this plan started in December 1976. In February 1977, Mengistu eliminated senior members of the Dergue who advocated negotiation with the Eritrean fronts, including the Dergue chairman, General Teferi Bante. In April 1977, the first contingents were sent to Gonder (see chapter 3). ELF forces crossed into Gonder to engage the militia in June, but the planned offensive into Eritrea was overtaken by events -- Somalia invaded the Ogaden, and the militia were diverted to the southeast.

Regular military units remained active in Eritrea, and there were numerous instances of violence against civilians, though not on the scale of 1975. In early March 1977, a naval unit killed between 100 and 160 civilians at the Red Sea village of Imberemi. On March 31, 1977, army units reportedly killed 42 civilians in reprisal for actions by the fronts.

During 1977, the Eritrean fronts remained on the offensive. They were able to enter Asmara at will -- in June the ELF displayed its confidence by taking a British journalist into the city at night. Starting in March, both fronts began to capture provincial towns -- Nacfa in March, Tessenei and Afabet in April, Keren and Decamhare in July, Mendefera in August. They appeared poised for an assault on Asmara. The main factor deterring the attack was a fear of renewed conflict between the ELF and EPLF -- the "Angola-ization" of Eritrea.

In early 1978, the Ethiopian administration in Eritrea made an estimate for the cost of the war over the previous sixteen and a half years. According to the estimate, 13,000 soldiers and between 30,000 and 50,000 civilians had been killed or wounded. (No figure was given for casualties among the ELF and EPLF.) There were more than 200,000 Eritreans forced into exile over half of them in Sudan. The financial cost in terms of damage to property and the expenses of pursuing the war amounted to US\$1.2 billion.¹⁸

¹⁸ Quoted in UN Commission on Human Rights, "A Study on Human Rights and Mass Exoduses," by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Annex II, 1981, para. 32.

3. REBELLION AND FAMINE IN THE NORTH UNDER HAILE SELASSIE

Northern Marginalization under Shewan Rule

The northern provinces of Gonder, Gojjam, Wollo and Tigray are the heartland of the "core" culture of Ethiopia – the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the Amharic language and script, plow-based agriculture, and many elements of the social system of the country derive from this historic region. Most of the Emperors also came from here.

At the end of the 19th century, the center of power in Ethiopia decisively shifted from the north to Shewa, with the assumption of the title of Emperor by Menelik, King of Shewa. Menelik was an Amhara, from the dynasty that ruled Manz, at the northern tip of the modern province of Shewa. The majority of the inhabitants of the rest of Shewa were Oromo – as is the case today. In terms of descent, the group that became politically dominant in Shewa (and subsequently in Ethiopia) was a mixture of Amhara and Oromo; in terms of language, religion and cultural practices, it was Amhara. The northern Amhara regarded the Shewans as "Galla" (the pejorative term for Oromo),¹ and together with the Tigrayans and some of the Agau and Oromo people in Wollo, resisted the new Shewan domination, which led to their economic and political marginalization.

Revolt in Wollo

Between 1928 and 1930 there was a rebellion -- or a series of rebellions -- in northern Wollo against Shewan domination. The specific political cause was support for Ras Gugsa Wale, a northern Amhara lord with a strong claim on the throne, against the Shewan Ras Teferi (who crowned himself the Emperor Haile Selassie after defeating the revolt). The government suppression of the revolt led to quartering soldiers with local people, interrupting the salt trade, and involved massive looting and confiscation of cattle. Combined with drought and locusts, the result was famine.² Haile Selassie ordered the importation of grain from India to supply Addis Ababa, but there was no relief for north Wollo. Political measures were taken after the revolt, including the replacement of much of the administration, which formerly had local roots, with appointees from Shewa; and the joining of the rebellious districts to the province of southern Wollo, which was ruled with harshness and venality by the crown prince. These helped to

¹ Gerry Salole, "Who are the Shoans?" *Horn of Africa*, 2, (1978), pp. 20-9.

² James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History, 1900-1935*, Philadelphia, 1987.

contribute to the further marginalization of the area, and the series of famines which plagued the area up to the fall of the Emperor.

The cumulative impact of imperial misrule and the petty tyrannies of local landlords created an atmosphere in which development was extremely difficult, as described by two consultants investigating the possibility of starting livestock projects:

Wollo is virtually impossible ... there is such an obscuring weight of disbelief, suspected innuendo and antagonisms; such a mess of mis-government at petty levels, and such a lading of landlords that there is almost nothing to start with and nowhere to start that will not go wrong or sour ... [there is] the smothering welter of the weeds of an entrenched and stagnant society.³

The Weyane in Tigray

Following the restoration of Haile Selassie after the defeat of the Italians in 1941, there was a revolt in Tigray. Known as the Weyane, this was the most serious internal threat that Haile Selassie faced. An alliance of the Oromo semi-pastoralists of Raya Azebo, disgruntled peasants, and some local feudal lords, under the military leadership of a famous shifta, Haile Mariam Redda, the rebels nearly succeeded in overrunning the whole province.⁴ British aircraft had to be called in from Aden in order to bomb the rebels to ensure their defeat. While some of the aristocratic leaders, such as Ras Seyoum Mengesha, were treated gently and ultimately allowed to return and administer the recalcitrant province, there were reprisals against the ordinary people. Most notably, the Raya and Azebo Oromo were subjected to wholesale land alienation, and much of their territory was transferred to the province of Wollo. This area was badly hit in subsequent famines, partly as a consequence.

Tax Revolts in Gojjam

Gojjam treasured its independence for centuries, and did not submit willingly to Shewan rule. The issue around which opposition repeatedly coalesced was any attempt by the central government to measure land and tax it. Taxation was not only resented as the imposition of unjust exactions by government, but was feared as the means whereby the traditional land tenure system would be undermined, and the farmers' independence destroyed.

³ Noel J. Cossins and Bekele Yemerem, "Still Sleep the Highlands: A Study of Farm and Livestock Systems in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, 1973, p. 2.10.

⁴ Gebru Tareke, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia: The Case of Weyane," *Journal of African History*, 25, (1984), pp. 77-92.

In the 1940s and '50s there was a series of attempts to measure land in Gojjam, prior to taxation. In the face of peasant resistance, including violence, all attempts failed. In the early 1960s, only 0.1 per cent of the land had been measured, and Gojjam, one of the richest and most populous provinces, paid less land tax than the poor and thinly populated province of Bale.⁵ In 1950/1 there was armed resistance, including a plot to assassinate Haile Selassie. However the most serious revolt occurred in 1968, in response to the most systematic attempt to levy an agricultural income tax to date.

In February 1968, in reaction to the arrival of parties of government officials accompanied by armed police, the peasants of Mota and Bichena districts resorted to armed resistance. After months of stalemate while much of the province remained out of government control, Haile Selassie sent troops to Gojjam in July and August. The air force bombed several villages; it burned houses but its main task was probably intimidating the resistance. Several hundred people died, according to contemporary accounts, but the Gojjamis remained defiant. Finally, in December, Haile Selassie backed down. He visited Gojjam in 1969, cancelled all tax arrears, and made no serious attempt to collect the new taxes.

Famines in Wollo and Tigray

In 1974, the Emperor Haile Selassie became notorious for his attempts to conceal the existence of the famine of 1972-3 in Wollo. This, however, was only one in a succession of such incidents. Prof. Mesfin Wolde Mariam of Addis Ababa University has documented how the famines of 1958 and 1966 in Tigray and Wollo were treated with official indifference, bordering on hostility towards the peasants who were considered sufficiently ungrateful for the divinely-sanctioned rule of Haile Selassie as to allow themselves to defame his reputation by dying of famine.

There was severe famine in Tigray in 1958 which went without significant government relief. In 1965/6, reports of famine from Were Ilu awraja in Wollo arrived at the Ministry of the Interior in November 1965, one month after the situation became clear to the local police, but no action was taken. The information took a further 302 days to reach the Emperor, who then requested the Ministry of the Interior to act -- which it did by asking officials in Wollo to send a list of the names of the people who had died.⁶ A small relief distribution was then authorized. The only consistent response to famine was to regard it as a security problem -- famine created destitute migrants, who needed to be prevented from entering towns, particularly Addis Ababa.

⁵ Peter Schwab, Decision-Making in Ethiopia: A Study of the Political Process, London, 1972, pp. 4, 159.

⁶ Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia - 1958-1977, London, 1986, p. 106.

Both the 1958 and 1965/6 famines killed tens of thousands of people.

The famine that struck Wollo during 1972-3 played a crucial role in Ethiopian history: the revelation of that famine by the British television journalist Jonathan Dimbleby played a key role in precipitating the downfall of the rule of Haile Selassie. Between 40,000 and 80,000 people died.⁷ The famine also led directly to the creation of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the powerful government department mandated to prevent and ameliorate future famines, and to coordinate international assistance. The 1972-3 famine was the last one in which there were no functioning mechanisms for the delivery of large-scale humanitarian relief.

The Wollo famine was popularly blamed on drought, a backward and impoverished social system, and the cover-up attempted by the imperial government.⁸ These factors were all important -- though it must be remembered that specific actions by the government, especially after the Ras Gugsu and Weyane revolts, were instrumental in creating the absence of development. In addition, forcible alienation of resources and violence also played an important role.

The group that suffered most from the famine were the Afar pastoral nomads of the Danakil desert. Famine had already gripped them in early 1972. The Afar inhabit an arid semi-wilderness, utilizing pastures over a large area to support their herds. In times of drought, they are forced to move to areas which they do not normally exploit. Traditional drought reserves included the Tcheffa Valley, on the rift valley escarpment, and pastures along the inland delta of the Awash river where the waters dissipate into the desert. In the 1960s the Tcheffa Valley became the location of commercial sorghum farms, and small farmers from nearby also began to use much of the land. Meanwhile, large cotton plantations were developed along the Awash. By 1972, 50,000 hectares of irrigated land had displaced 20,000 Afar pastoralists.⁹

During the years of good rainfall, the loss of the drought reserves was not noticed by the Afar, but when repeated drought struck, they found that a necessary resource they had utilized sporadically for generations had been alienated, without compensation. Famine among the Afar was certainly caused by drought -- but by drought acting on a society that had been deprived of the means of responding to that threat.

⁷ John Seaman and Julius Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 34, 1975, p. 114A. The Ethiopian Nutrition Institute calculated a figure of 200,000 deaths but this appears to have been based on over-pessimistic assumptions about the size of the famine-affected population.

⁸ Failure to relieve a famine already under way can scarcely be called a cause of that famine, but popular coverage of "the politics of famine" continues to focus on the politics of famine relief, failing to draw the necessary distinction between the two.

⁹ Maknun Gamaledin, "State policy and famine in the Awash Valley of Ethiopia," in D. Anderson and R. Grove (eds.), *Conservation in Africa*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 335.

Official indifference to the plight of the Afar is illustrated by an incident in 1974, when the flood waters of the Awash river were directed to the Dubti valley in order to irrigate cotton plantations. The resident Afar population was not informed, and 3,000 lost their homes, while 100 were "missing."¹⁰

Mobility is crucial to survival among the Afar. Nomadic in normal times, the ability to move freely over large distances becomes a vital concern when resources are short. In the early 1970s, the Afar's mobility was further restricted by the flow of weaponry to their nomadic neighbors and competitors, the Issa (who are ethnic Somali). The Issa themselves were suffering from the alienation of much of their pasture and restrictions on their movement. The result was an attempt by the Afar to appropriate wells formerly used by the Issa. This led to widespread armed clashes, especially in 1972. One Afar reported "Many people die. Disease is the first cause but the Issa are the second."¹¹ Meanwhile, a survey done among the Issa reported that homicide by the Afar was a major cause of death.¹² The famine also resulted in large-scale armed clashes between the Afar and their Oromo neighbors in Wollo.

The second group which suffered severely from the famine included farmers in a narrow strip of middle-altitude areas of northern and central Wollo. Those who suffered most were tenants. The Raya and Azebo Oromo had been reduced to that state by massive land alienation after they participated in the Weyane revolt against Haile Selassie in 1943. Others were forced to mortgage or sell their land by the stresses of repeated harvest failures in the early 1970s. Landlords took advantage of their tenants' penury by insisting on the payment of large rents, often in kind. This demand could be backed up by force, as most influential landlords had a retinue of armed guards. The enforcement of crippling tenancy contracts in time of shortage had the effect of taking food from the hungry. Thus, during 1973, the famine area exported grain to the provincial capital, Dessie, and to Addis Ababa.

The famine was much less severe in Tigray province, despite the drought affecting both provinces. The difference can be largely accounted for by the different modes of land tenure -- in Tigray, most farmers owned their own land; in middle-land Wollo, most were tenants.¹³

Finally, the Emperor Haile Selassie considered that the peasants and nomads of Wollo

¹⁰ RRC, "Food Shortage Report on Wollo, 1979; Annex: A Profile of Disasters in Wollo," Addis Ababa, 1979, p. 53.

¹¹ Quoted in: Noel J. Cossins, "No Way to Live: A Study of the Afar Clans of the North-East Rangelands," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1972, p. 51.

¹² J. Seaman, J. Holt and J. Rivers, "The Effects of Drought on Human Nutrition in an Ethiopian Province," International Journal of Epidemiology, 7, 1978, p. 37.

¹³ K. J. Lundstrom, North-East Ethiopia: Society in Famine, Uppsala, 1976.

were shaming His reputation by starving, and resolved to ignore them. Reports of famine were consistently ignored or denied. In response to a report by UNICEF documenting famine conditions in July 1973, the Vice-Minister of Planning retorted: "If we have to describe the situation in the way you have in order to generate international assistance, then we don't want that assistance. The embarrassment to the government isn't worth it. Is that perfectly clear?"¹⁴

Though the governor of Wollo, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, was both greedy and incompetent (at the time of the famine he forced the closure of commercial sorghum farms in the Tcheffa Valley by engaging in litigation, claiming their ownership), Haile Selassie was never in ignorance of the conditions in Wollo. A UN official visited him in early 1973 and found him well-informed -- his attitude was that peasants always starve and nothing can be done, and that in any case it was not the Shewan Amhara who were dying.¹⁵ On belatedly visiting the province in November 1973, his one remedial action was to announce that all who had sold or mortgaged their land in the previous year could return and plow it during the coming season, only leaving it to their creditors afterwards.¹⁶ Even this minimal and tardy gesture was not enforced.

The 1975 Northern Rebellions

The Wollo famine contributed to the downfall of Haile Selassie, not because the hungry peasants and nomads revolted and forced him out, but because the issue gained political currency among the students and middle classes of Addis Ababa. However, that is not to say that the famine, and more generally the eight decades of political marginalization and economic stagnation that preceded it, did not have serious consequences at the time of the 1974 revolution and the years following.

In the early 1970s, "peasant risings in various provinces [were] an even more closely guarded secret than the famine".¹⁷ These revolts intensified in during the revolution, with a series of rebellions led by feudal leaders in each of the northern provinces. In Wollo, there was a revolt by a feudal lord, Dejazmatch Berhane Maskal. In March 1975, he destroyed an Ethiopian airlines DC3 at Lalibella. In October, he rallied supporters after a spree of killings of former landlords by peasants and government security officers. Dej. Berhane's ill-armed force of 5,000 was defeated

¹⁴ Quoted in: Paul H. Brietzke, Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution, Lewisburg, 1982, p. 127.

¹⁵ Brietzke, 1982, pp. 126-7.

¹⁶ Lundstrom, 1976, pp. 52-3.

¹⁷ Lionel Cliffe, "Capitalism or Feudalism? The Famine in Ethiopia," Review of African Political Economy, 1, 1974, pp. 34-40.

by government militia and air force attacks near Woldiya in December 1975, but he continued to cause problems for the government for years. Another feudal leader, Gugsu Ambaw, had brief military successes in northern Wollo, before the army foiled an attempt to capture Korem in mid-1976, reportedly causing 1,200 fatalities among Gugsu's peasant army and local villagers.¹⁸ Other smaller revolts occurred in Gojjam and Shewa.

The most significant rebellion started in Tigray. This was an insurrection led by the former governor, Ras Mengesha Seyoum (son of the governor at the time of the 1943 Weyane). Ras Mengesha fled to the hills with about 600 followers in November 1984, when the Dergue executed 60 officials of the previous regime. Ras Mengesha combined with other members of the aristocracy, notably General Negga Tegegne (former governor of Gonder) and formed the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) in 1976. They obtained encouragement from western countries. With Sudanese military assistance, the EDU occupied the towns of Metema, Humera and Dabat (all in Gonder province) between February and April 1977,¹⁹ but was defeated by the militia force sent to the province in June-July.

The EDU remained active in Tigray, where two other rebel groups were also operational. The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was set up in February 1975 by a group of left-wing students and peasants, incorporating the Tigray National Organization, created three years earlier. Prominent among its early leaders was Berihu Aregawi; later the front was headed by Meles Zenawi. In 1978, the TPLF set up the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), headed by Abadi Zemo. It espoused a mix of Tigrayan nationalism and socialist transformation. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), after defeat in the urban Red Terror (see chapter 6), retreated to a base in rural eastern Tigray in mid-1977.

The EDU was rent by divisions between its leaders, and its aristocratic leaders failed to gain popular support among their erstwhile tenants. Crucially, it suffered defeat at the hands of the TPLF.²⁰ The EPRP was also defeated by the TPLF and driven into Gonder, creating lasting bitterness between the two organizations.

After the ill-fated Peasants' March of 1976, the government launched a series of five military offensives in Tigray: November 1976, June 1978, October-November 1978, March-April 1979 and May-June 1979. Small towns such as Abi Adi changed hands several times. By 1979,

¹⁸ Michael Dobbs, "A bloody farewell to feudalism," *The Guardian*, London, November 24, 1976.

¹⁹ Sudanese military support for the EDU was given in retaliation for the Ethiopian government's backing for the Sudanese opposition National Front, headed by Sadiq el Mahdi, which had staged an unsuccessful armed insurrection to overthrow the government of Jaafar Nimeiri in July 1976.

²⁰ The two organizations later fought in the refugee camps in Sudan, for example in May 1979 and July 1982. The latter attack, in which eleven refugees died, was instigated by the EDU. Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 181, 193.

REST estimated that 50,000 people in Tigray were displaced on account of war. Refugees from Tigray and Gonder began to arrive in Sudan in early 1975. By May there were 34,000; by 1978 there were 70,000. In February 1979, the Ethiopian army invaded Sudanese territory at Jebel Ludgi, forcing the evacuation of the nearby refugee camp of Wad el Hileui.²¹

Fighting against the Afar

Another serious though short-lived rebellion occurred among the Afar. The Afar leader and Sultan of Awsa, Ali Mirrah, had been accorded a high degree of autonomy by Haile Selassie, and the well-armed Afar had never come fully under the administrative or military control of the government. Ali Mirrah was also a large landowner and feared the confiscation of his cotton plantations in the land reform. This brought him into conflict with the government, and on June 1, 1975, a military force was dispatched to arrest the Sultan at his headquarters. Ali Mirrah escaped to Djibouti, but his followers launched a coordinated series of attacks on military outposts on June 3, and claimed to have killed several hundred soldiers. Many unarmed Amhara laborers in the Awash cotton plantations were also massacred.

Government reprisals were swift. Starting at Assaita in the Awash valley on June 3, and expanding to an arc stretching from Mille in the west, passing through Awsa to Serdo in the east, the army attacked towns, agricultural schemes, and Afar nomads' encampments.

The cotton plantations had a large labor force, including Moslem Eritreans, local Afars and highland Amharas. The army selectively killed Eritreans and Afars. Refugees in Djibouti reported that 221 Afar workers were killed. Women and children were gunned down as they tried to flee on tractors. In one incident in mid-June, 18 men were shot dead on a bridge. The killing then spread to the towns. An estimated 300 died in Awsa and 100 in Assaita, including the Imam, killed in his mosque. The soldiers also spread out into the countryside and attacked small Afar villages and cattle camps. While many of the casualties were armed Afar men (the distinction between a civilian and combatant is a fine one among the Afar) women and children were also killed when tanks and artillery bombarded cattle camps and troops opened fire. The killing lasted six weeks. Estimates for the total number of civilian casualties amount to more than 1,000; some run as high as 4,000.

One of those killed was a young British social anthropologist, Glynn Flood, who was arrested by the army and detained. According to other people detained in the same prison, after two weeks he was taken out by four soldiers, and then they heard a scream. It is assumed that he was bayoneted to death and his body thrown into the river Awash. Government officials had

²¹ Karadawi, 1988, p. 117.

tried to stop Mr Flood from going to the area a week earlier, and it is probable that he was murdered in order to prevent him from producing evidence of the killings.

In exile, Ali Mirrah founded the Afar Liberation Front (ALF). His son, Hanafari conducted military operations and succeeded in closing the strategic Assab-Addis Ababa highway. The government responded by the twin tactics of another military campaign, and giving some leading Afar positions within the administration and a measure of autonomy. A faction led by Habib Mohamed Yahyo was given a large quantity of arms, and proved to be a loyal supporter of the government.²² These tactics prevented the ALF from posing a major military threat, though it was able to mount occasional attacks throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

²² There is a dispute over the Sultanate of Awsa between the families of Ali Mirrah and Habib Yahyo going back several generations.

4. INSURRECTION AND INVASION IN THE SOUTHEAST, 1962-78

Introduction

Wars have been fought continually in southeast Ethiopia for as long as in Eritrea. The two principal subjugated peoples of the region -- the Oromo and the ethnic Somali inhabitants of the Ogaden -- have been staging insurrections more or less continually since the early 1960s. The first phase of the wars lasted until 1977, with the government utilizing a set of counter-insurgency strategies familiar from Eritrea, though arguably more successfully. The second phase was a large-scale conventional war which began when the Somali army invaded the Ogaden in July 1977, concluding when the Ethiopian army defeated that invasion in March 1978. A protracted third phased began after that victory, with a return to counter-insurgency warfare; that is the subject of the following chapter.

Southeast Ethiopia consists of well-watered highland areas, largely inhabited by Oromo people, who practice a mix of agriculture and livestock raising, and drier lowlands, known as the Ogaden. The Ogaden is inhabited by ethnic Somalis belonging to 12 different clans, among whom the Ogaden clan is numerically dominant. Other important clans include the Issa, to the north of the Harerghe highlands, and the Isaaq, who inhabit the Haud reserve, an area adjacent to northern Somalia.¹ The Somalis are largely pastoral nomads. The population of the Ogaden itself is about one million; the surrounding Oromo areas contain a much larger number of people.

At Independence in 1960, the Somali government laid claim to the Ogaden and adjoining Oromo areas in the Bale and Harerghe highlands.

The Conquest of the Oromo and the Ogaden Somali

Between 1886 and 1889, the Emperor Menelik conquered the independent Oromo states of Arsi and Bale, and occupied the trading city of Harer, which is a holy city for Moslems. Menelik then laid claim to the vast desert area of the Ogaden.² This claim was recognized by the European powers in 1910, though effective occupation of the area was not attempted until after the Second World War.

¹ Until 1960 known as British Somaliland; in 1991 the Somali National Movement, controlling the area, unilaterally declared independence and named it the Republic of Somaliland.

² This claim was made with Italian encouragement, partly in order to prevent the British annexing the area to British-occupied northern Somaliland.

Amhara domination followed. In the context of southern Ethiopia, the term "Amhara" needs to be treated with care. While the Amhara who came to the south as conquerors originated from all parts of the northern highlands, all came as vassals of the specifically Shewan Amhara state. Local people, whatever their origins, were also able to assimilate into the Amhara class, by virtue of marriage, or adopting the religion, language and cultural traits of the Amhara. A social anthropologist working in the neighboring province of Arsi noted that for the indigenous Oromo "'Amhara' and 'self-satisfied dominant elite' have become convergent categories."³

In the highland areas of the southeast, Amhara neftegna were given grants of land, with accompanying rights to extract produce from the local population. The indigenous peoples were unhappy with the loss of their independence and with the new burdens imposed upon them by their Amhara overlords, and armed resistance was frequent. The Italian conquest of 1935 came as a liberation from Amhara rule for many inhabitants of the southeast; and after Haile Selassie was restored there was intermittent armed resistance against the re-imposition of the hated land tenure and taxation systems, notably in Harerghe in 1942, 1947/8 and 1955.

When Somalia gained its independence in 1960, there was agitation in the Ogaden ("western Somalia") for independence, or for separation from Ethiopia to join the Somali state. The Somali government set up the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in that year. There was a revolt in the Ogaden in 1963-4, which was put down with customary brutality (see below).

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the growth of an Oromo nationalist movement. This was first expressed through traditional-style shifita rebellion in Bale and Harerghe, and in the creation of Oromo community associations among groups in Shewa, Wollega and Arsi.

The 1960s Rebellion in Highland Bale

The rebellion in Bale was the outcome of the systematically brutal subjugation of an indigenous population by a ruling class of armed settlers drawn largely from the Shewan Amhara.

John Markakis has written of the conditions preceding the revolt:

The legal exactions of the state and the landlords were compounded by a host of illegal impositions levied by the ruling class on the peasantry, usually associated with matters related to land. Land measurement, classification, registration, inheritance, litigation and so on were matters that could be concluded only through the payment of enforced bribes to a series of officials, and were subject to the risk of fraud in the process. Tax payment itself required the running of a gauntlet manned by officials who had to be bribed to conclude the transaction properly. Venality, the hallmark of Ethiopian officialdom throughout the empire, reached its apogee in the conquered areas of the south, where the hapless peasantry had no recourse against it. Northern officials serving in the south hoped

³ Paul Baxter, "Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo," *African Affairs*, 77, (1978), pp. 283-96.

to amass a small fortune during their tour of duty, and to acquire land through grant, purchase or other means. The scale of their exploits in Bale affronted even some of their colleagues ... There was precious little return for such impositions.⁴

Armed rebellion started in highland Bale in 1962, fanned by both encouragement from the newly-independent Somali government, and the heavy handed response of the governor. The rebels were led by a minor chief named Wako Gutu, and used traditional shifta-style tactics, with no central command. Fighting gradually intensified until late 1966, when it was clear that the provincial police and militia could not contain the revolt, whereupon the government declared a state of emergency and called in the army.⁵ There were ground assaults and aerial bombardments in both highland and lowland Bale in the early months of 1967, involving much indiscriminate violence against civilians. There were also punitive measures such as land confiscation, restrictions on nomads' seasonal migrations and heavy fines levied on uncooperative communities. By 1968 more than a quarter of the land was classified as confiscated.⁶ In order to recover their land, farmers needed to pay their tax arrears -- a daunting prospect in view of the epidemic corruption of the administration. However the rebels could not be dislodged from their mountainous, forested base.

Military tactics then changed to a pacification approach, avoiding direct military confrontation on the ground. Roads were built into the rebel heartland, with the assistance of British military engineers. Combined with restrictions on movement and military surveillance of the lowlands, this helped to cut off assistance from Somalia. Air strikes continued, with US technical assistance, aimed at intimidating the rebels and destroying their food supplies (and therefore also the food supplies of the local population). These strategies were combined with leniency towards the rebel leaders, who were allowed to go free or rewarded with lucrative positions.

The final demise of Wako Gutu's forces came in March 1970, after military assistance was cut off by the Somali government, and the tightening noose of government troops ensured that they ran out of food supplies. The government then granted a general amnesty and made various promises to the general population, which it failed to keep. Conditions in Bale at the time of the revolution were almost exactly as they had been a decade earlier.

The Destruction of Oromo Political Movements

⁴ John Markakis, National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa, Cambridge, 1987, p. 194.

⁵ Patrick Gilkes, The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia, London, 1975, pp. 214-18.

⁶ Markakis, 1987, p. 200.

The 1960s saw a growth in Oromo cultural, social and political movements. In part this was related to the achievement of independence by African peoples which had been colonized by the European powers -- many educated Oromo aspired to a similar "liberation." An article by an Oromo student leader, Walleign Mekonnen, in a 1969 student publication expresses well the feelings of subjugation.⁷

Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian music is? Ask about what Ethiopian religion is? Ask about what the national dress is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!! To be a "genuine" Ethiopian one has to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity, to wear the Amhara-Tigre shamma in international conferences. In some cases, to be an "Ethiopian" you will even have to change your name. In short, to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon's expression).

The Mecha-Tulema Self-Help Association, founded in 1962, was the most prominent attempt by the Oromo to organize legally. The association was only legally registered after overcoming considerable opposition from the government. It sponsored specific self-help projects, but had the broader aim of developing an Oromo "national consciousness." In 1966, using the pretext of a bomb explosion in a cinema in Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie cracked down on the Mecha-Tulema Association. Over 100 leading Oromo community leaders were arrested and brought to court, in a trial that was a parody of due process. Based on confessions obtained under torture and other dubious evidence, the two leading defendants were sentenced to death,⁸ and others to long prison sentences. The organization continued an underground existence for several years thereafter.

Revolt in Highland Harerghe

In the mid 1960s there was also a small insurrection in the highlands of Harerghe. This was led by Sheikh Hussein, a former associate of the Oromo politician Tadesse Birru. The organization was called the Oromo Liberation Front (not to be confused with the second Oromo Liberation Front, founded in 1974), and carried out small-scale guerrilla activities.

In August 1971 Sheikh Hussein changed the name of his organization to the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF), and incorporated some of Wako Gutu's followers, but thereby

⁷ Quoted in: Randi Ronning Balsvik, Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977, E. Lansing, Mich., 1985, p. 277. Walleign was killed by security forces during an attempted hijack of an Ethiopian Airways airplane. The EPRDF offensive of May 1991 which overran the government's northeast front and led directly to the flight of President Mengistu Haile Mariam was named "Operation Walleign" in honor of this student.

⁸ Lt. Mamo Mazamir was executed for treason. Gen. Tadesse Birru was reprieved by Haile Selassie, and released at the time of the revolution. In 1975 he was rearrested by the Dergue and executed along with a colleague.

also split his movement. By 1973 the ENLF controlled significant areas of the highlands of Harerghe and Bale.

The Revolution and the Oromo Movement

The revolution of 1974 split the Oromo movement. Many of the members of the Dergue were themselves Oromo -- including General Teferi Bante, Chairman from November 1974 until his execution by Mengistu in 1977.⁹ Many of the Dergue's initial programs, notably the land reform of 1975, the change in official designation from the derogatory "Galla" to the more acceptable "Oromo," and the legalization of the use of the Oromo language for public speaking, were welcomed. As a result, the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), which was led by several prominent Oromos, allied itself with the Dergue from 1975 until it was purged in 1977 (see chapter 6).

The land reform of 1975 gave the Dergue great political capital in the Oromo areas -- which it promptly began to deplete by heavily taxing the peasants and requisitioning food from them for the army and the towns. The land reform also set up Peasant Associations (PAs), with the initial aim of re-distributing land. PAs were given wider-ranging powers shortly afterwards. In the south, most of the PA leadership originally consisted of local people elected with much popular support. This began to change in 1978. The purge of MEISON coincided with a slightly less violent purge of the leadership of the PAs, and the formation of the All-Ethiopia Peasant Association. From this point onwards, PA leaders were all appointed by the government.

Many Oromo leaders went into armed opposition in 1974. They joined defectors from the ENLF and the first Oromo Liberation Front, and founded the (second) Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). This was initially active in the highlands of Bale and Harerghe, and had its first meeting to publish a political program in October of that year. The initial insurrection was a decentralized revolt which encompassed a number of different groups. The government launched two offensives, the first in 1974, and the second in early 1976, using locally-recruited militia. These succeeded in scattering but not suppressing the nascent OLF resistance. Influenced by MEISON, the Dergue entertained hopes of negotiating a compromise with the OLF, and several meetings were held, but without result. By early 1977, the OLF had set up an administration in parts of the Chercher highlands of Harerghe, and was active in Bale, Arsi and Sidamo.¹⁰

In 1976, the Somali government set up a guerrilla force to fight in Oromo areas, as a

⁹ Gen Teferi's father's name was actually Benti (an Oromo name) but he changed it to Bante (an Amhara name) to be more acceptable to the Amhara elite.

¹⁰ *Africa Confidential*, 19.11, May 26, 1978, p. 6.

counterpart of the WSLF, calling it the Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF).¹¹ Wako Gutu and Sheikh Hussein were among the prominent Oromo nationalists who joined the SALF, which formally superseded the ENLF. The pre-existing split between the ENLF and the OLF, and fears that Somalia harbored irredentist ambitions to annex Oromo areas, using the SALF as a vehicle, led to distrust and at times conflict between the OLF and the SALF.

From 1974 to 1977 insurrection spread through much of the Oromo highlands of southeast Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Rule and Famine in the Ogaden

The inhabitants of the Ogaden received little from the Ethiopian government during the first decades of the occupation except raiding parties. Following independence in 1960, the Somali government set up the WSLF and there was increasing agitation for the Ogaden to secede from Ethiopia. The Ethiopian army immediately moved to set up military bases in the area. Up to 500 civilians were killed when the village of Aisha was destroyed to make way for a military post in August 1960.

In 1963, following the first systematic attempt by the Ethiopian administration to collect taxes, there was widespread insurgency in both lowland Harerghe and Bale. The guerrillas relied heavily on the Somali government for support, and while they grew in numbers to about 3,000, they never posed a serious military threat to the central government. Their guerrilla tactics were unsophisticated and the army was able to engage and disperse them on several occasions. The Ethiopian government also put pressure on Somalia by incursions into Somali territory and threats of a larger-scale invasion. Following government military offensives in late 1963 and an agreement between the Somali and Ethiopian governments in March 1964, the insurrection was largely over.

More serious for the civilian population of the area was the government's policy of mounting punitive expeditions, which killed or confiscated large numbers of animals, depriving the pastoral communities of the basis for their survival.

Military administration remained in the Ogaden after the insurrection. Most major towns had curfews for at least a year. Ogaden clan leaders documented a number of incidents in May 1964, when 75 people were reported killed by the army, together with more than 14,000 domestic animals killed or confiscated, and July 1964, when 22 people were killed and over 8,000 animals killed or confiscated.¹² This "economic war" against the Ogaden was supplemented by a policy

¹¹ "Abo" is a form of greeting common to many peoples in southeastern Ethiopia. The Somali government was eager to avoid use of the name "Oromo."

¹² Ismail Wais, "An Account of the Colonial Experience of the Western Somalis," *Horn of Africa*, 4.4, (1981/2),

of encouraging Amhara farmers to settle in the more fertile areas, especially in the Jijiga area. The process of land registration became a vehicle for settler farmers claiming land rights, depriving pastoralists of use rights.¹³ The lack of access to these pastures became critical when drought struck in 1973-4.

The introduction of administration also led to attempts to regulate the livestock trade. Selling animals is critical to survival for the Ogadeni pastoralists. Hitherto, most Ogadeni animals had been sold to Hargeisa and Berbera in Somalia, along an age-old trade route which was now technically regarded as "smuggling." The new administration confiscated many "smuggled" animals. Together with the harassment of herders attempting to sell animals in Ethiopian towns, this acted as a powerful obstacle to trade, leading directly to the impoverishment of the herders.

A final and key element to the pacification campaign in the Ogaden was the government control of water points. A network of functioning wells is crucial to the mobility which herders need in order to seek out seasonal pastures. There are many reports of the wells dug by the Ogaden people themselves being poisoned. New reservoirs (*birkas*) were built by the government, but primarily to serve the interests of settler farmers and townspeople.

In 1967 there were further military actions, chiefly in lowland Bale, aimed at WSLF groups which were acting in concert with Wako Gutu, and their civilian supporters.

In 1969 Maj.-Gen. Siad Barre seized power in a military coup in Somalia. He acted fast to consolidate his power, and one of his actions was placating the Ethiopian government by formally disbanding the WSLF -- though not renouncing Somalia's longstanding claim to the Ogaden.

During 1971-2 there was another round of atrocities by the army against Issa and Ogadeni pastoralists. The conflict was based upon two factors. One was Issa-Afar competition for political control of Djibouti, which was moving towards independence from France. The Issa, who are the majority in Djibouti, were in favor of immediate independence; the minority Afar, supported by Haile Selassie and favored by France, wanted independence postponed. The second factor was drought. Conflict was sparked by occupation of a series of important wells around Barreti by the neighboring Afar in the late 1960s. When there was poor rainfall in 1971 and 1972, the Issa tried to reoccupy the wells, there were armed clashes between the two groups.

On the pretext of the dispute over the wells, the Ethiopian army intervened against the Issa. According to a letter of complaint written by the chiefs of the region to the Ethiopian parliament,

p. 28.

¹³ Noel J. Cossins, "Pastoralism under Pressure: A Study of the Somali Clans in the Jijiga Area of Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Livestock and Meat Board, 1971, p. 82.

between April 1971 and May 1972, the army killed 794 people, as well as confiscating nearly 200,000 head of livestock.¹⁴

In 1974, drought added to the Ogadenis' problems, and the area was struck by famine. The loss of pastures to immigrant farmers, restrictions on movement, and continued armed clashes with the Afar all contributed to the famine.

According to a survey done in Hararghe in May-June 1974, death rates among the lowland pastoralists were about three times normal.¹⁵ Assuming "normal" to be 20 per thousand, and the affected population to be 700,000, this implies 28,000 famine deaths over the previous year. Another survey done a year later found that death rates had risen slightly, implying a similar number of famine deaths in 1974/5.¹⁶

Responding to the famine became one of the first tasks of the newly constituted Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), which became active in delivering large quantities of food relief and setting up feeding centers.

The RRC's activities during 1974-5 had a large humanitarian component. However, whether through an ethnocentric view of the superiority of a settled over a nomadic lifestyle, or through a deliberate policy of using the drought as an opportunity to extend government control over the recalcitrant population, the famine relief program served to undermine key aspects of the Ogadeni way of life.

By early 1975, more than 80,000 Ogadenis were living in 18 relief shelters. The shelters were run on military lines, with strict curfews enforced at 8.00 p.m. Movement in and out was severely restricted -- making it impossible for each family to keep more than a handful of small animals. Traditional festivities were reportedly banned in some camps. The government had the explicit intention of turning the camp populations into settled farmers, rather than allowing them to return to a pastoral way of life. Another intention was to relocate camps well away from the Somali border.

As a result of these restrictions, the great majority of the Ogadeni men stayed outside the camps, moving with their animals, unwilling to risk approaching their families within the camps. Fear that the Ethiopian government was intent on undermining their traditional way of life was one factor that spurred many Ogadeni men into armed opposition to the government.

¹⁴ Quoted in: Wais, 1981/2, pp. 25-8.

¹⁵ John Seaman, Julius Holt and John Rivers, "Hararghe under Drought: A Survey of the Effects of Drought upon Human Nutrition in Hararghe Province, Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, RRC, 1974, pp. 39-41.

¹⁶ M. Gebre Medhin, R. Hay, Y. Licke and M. Maffi, "Initial Experience of a Consolidated Food and Nutrition System: Analysis of Data from the Ogaden Area," Journal of Tropical Paediatrics and Environmental Child Health, Monograph No. 48, 1977, pp. 33-4.

The Secret Invasion: March 1976-May 1977

After the revolution, Ethiopia was in turmoil, and its army was bogged down in the war in Eritrea and fighting insurgencies in several provinces. The Somali government had meanwhile greatly expanded its armed forces, with Soviet support, so that in certain areas -- such as artillery, tanks and mobile battalions -- they outnumbered the Ethiopian army, and in most other areas they matched them. There was, however, political discontent in Somalia, as President Siad Barre's authoritarian rule was antagonizing certain groups. Although President Siad had pledged to abolish "tribalism", he came to rely more and more on support from certain clans. At the beginning of 1976, President Siad turned to the elders of the Ogaden clan for a political alliance, and concluded a deal whereby the government would provide support for the cause of the "liberation" of the Ogaden from Ethiopia, including military assistance, in return for political loyalty to the regime. It is important to note that the deal was struck with representatives of the Ogaden clan, not representatives of the population of the Ogaden, which includes many clans. The WSLF was re-founded, and members of the Ogaden began to receive preferential treatment in matters such as government and army posts and education.

In the first months of 1976, the WSLF became active once again inside the Ethiopian Ogaden. With a leadership based in Mogadishu and close to President Siad, it drew recruits from the frustrated and alienated pastoralists. Its main base was Hargeisa, infiltrating through the Haud reserve area into Ethiopia to make guerrilla raids. The Somali media trumpeted its successes, but the claims made were out of all proportion to the reality: in fact, the guerrillas were making little real military headway.

Officers in the Somali army became impatient with the slow progress of the WSLF, and argued that if the Somali government's stated intention to annex the Ogaden was genuine, it would be necessary to use the regular army. In early 1977, President Siad responded to these complaints with a compromise: soldiers from the regular army would henceforth fight with the WSLF. About one fifth of the Somali army, numbering about 3,000 men and consisting mainly but not entirely of members of the Ogaden clan, was deputed to become the principal force of the WSLF. The soldiers took off their uniforms and put on the ragged clothes of guerrillas; they abandoned their armor and heavy weapons for light guns and hand grenades.¹⁷

Under the command of senior military officers, the "army" units of the WSLF engaged in attacks on Ethiopian military positions, while the pre-existing "guerrilla" units of the WSLF

¹⁷ The following account of the Somali invasion and abuses associated with it draws heavily on material provided by Abdi Razaq "Aqli" Ahmed, formerly a Major in the Somali army.

undertook activities such as ambushes, sabotage and laying land mines. The plan did not succeed. The soldiers were not trained for guerrilla warfare, and the officers did not like a method of warfare which conflicted with their conventional training. When an attack on an Ethiopian garrison at Gode (southern Ogaden) in May 1977 was repulsed with the loss of over 300 dead, including 14 middle- and high-ranking officers, dissent in the army became vocal. In June the decision was made to commit the Somali army, in uniform and with full armor and support, to the Ogaden.

The Regular Invasion, July 1977-March 1978

On July 23, 1977, the Somali army invaded the Ogaden. The Somali government still refused to declare war and insisted in the media that all military actions were the responsibility of the WSLF, but the truth was evident.

The first assault was made in the central-southern Ogaden, and Gode and Gabridaharey fell to the invaders within a week. Half of the Ethiopian Third Division was put out of action, and the Somali force moved rapidly north. This was followed by an invasion from the vicinity of Hargeisa directed towards Dire Dawa; the attack on the town started on August 10. Three attempts to take the town failed within two weeks, and instead the Somali army turned its attention to Jijiga, which was evacuated by the Ethiopian army on September 10. The Somali army then concentrated on attacking Harer, advancing from Jijiga in October. A brigade that was originally directed to the south of Harer in a diversionary move actually succeeded in occupying a section of the town for several days in November before being pushed back. Harer was besieged for two months.

WSLF units engaged in sabotage action, impairing the mobility of the Ethiopian forces by destroying communications.

The conventional fighting was confined to the north. In the southern Ogaden, the Ethiopian garrison at Dolo (near the Ethiopia-Somalia-Kenya triangle) withdrew to northern Sidamo, and three Somali brigades crossed into Ethiopia, encountering no resistance. The invading force stopped short of Negele (southeast Sidamo) when two of the brigades were re-assigned to the northern front, and this area remained quiet. In Bale, the SALF was active on a small scale, and there was no conventional military action. A single battalion was assigned to El Kere, and then moved to Fiiq in central Harerghe, meeting no resistance on the way.

In late December, the USSR responded to repeated appeals from the Ethiopian government and switched sides. It airlifted several billion dollars worth of military equipment to the embattled Dergue, including over 600 battle tanks and 67 MiG fighter-bomber airplanes.¹⁸

¹⁸ NOVIB, "War and Famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea, An Investigation into the Arms Deliveries to the Struggling

Approximately 16,000 Cuban combat troops were also flown to Ethiopia together with modern armor. The government had earlier launched a program of mass mobilization, and was expanding the army from 60,000 regulars and 75,000 militia to 75,000 regulars and 150,000 militia. This led to a dramatic change in the make-up of the Ethiopian army. Its firepower and mobility became immediately greater than those of the Somali army. It was now advised by the same Soviet strategists who had trained the Somalis.

In late January, the Ethiopian counter-offensive began, directed by Soviet advisors and spearheaded by Cuban troops. The Somali army was pushed back from Dire Dawa and Harer and outflanked by mobile and airborne units. Counter-attacks were repulsed, and dissent within the Somali army escalated. In early March the Somali command gave the order to retreat, and the Ogaden was evacuated and reoccupied by the Ethiopian army without a fight.

Abuses by the Somali Army

The Somali army was regularly violent and abusive to the inhabitants of the areas it occupied. Its treatment of Oromo civilians was markedly worse than ethnic Somalis -- many of the troops came from the same clans as the local Somalis, and therefore treated them with more respect, not least because clan loyalty demands vengeance on those who commit an offense against a clan member.

The pattern of abuses consisted mostly of small groups of soldiers committing the following types of violations:

- *Soldiers destroying or looting property, and on occasion killing the owners who protested.
- *Soldiers raping women, and killing brothers, husbands or fathers who objected.
- *Soldiers taking food or livestock to eat, and sometimes killing the owners who objected.
- *Soldiers opening fire on civilians who returned to investigate the condition of their houses or farms which had been occupied by soldiers.

The extent of these abuses and whether the soldiers responsible were held accountable and punished depended entirely on the local commander.

On several occasions there were larger-scale violations which had been authorized by senior officers. These included the mining of buildings in Jijiga and other towns during the retreat in February-March 1978. In addition, in November 1977, the commander of the force which had occupied part of Harer town was instructed by a senior officer to destroy as much of the town as

Parties in Eritrea and Tigray," Zeist, The Netherlands, 1991.

he could before retreating. Harer is a holy city to Moslems and the local commander, as a devout Moslem, refused to carry out the order.

Attacks by the Somali air force in late July resulted in civilian casualties at Aware and Degahabur. In mid August the Ethiopian government reported that a Somali air attack on the airfield at Jijiga had only narrowly avoided causing a large number of civilian casualties because an airplane on the ground had been evacuated just minutes beforehand.

There were also violations of the rights of combatants by members of the Somali army and WSLF. These included:

- *Summary execution of officers and men in order to maintain discipline. In February 1978, the commander of the Jijiga front requested each battalion commander to send him twelve soldiers, implying that they would be considered for promotion or another form of award or benefit. All of them -- numbering about 80 -- were summarily shot. The commander explained that his junior officers had been insubordinate, and that in future all who disputed his orders would be similarly dealt with. In January, five middle-ranking officers were shot separately in suspicious circumstances.

- *Retreating Ethiopian soldiers were set upon by WSLF fighters and armed WSLF sympathizers and killed.

- *Abuses against prisoners of war (see chapter 17).

Abuses by the Ethiopian Army

The Ethiopian army was also responsible for abuses against the civilian population during the war. Before abandoning the towns of Jijiga, Degahabur, Aware and Gabridaharey the army summarily executed civilians. In the case of Jijiga, nearly 100 were reported killed.

Individual acts of violence by Ethiopian soldiers against civilians have been reported. A serious instance of an abuse used as part of a military tactic occurred just south of Harer in late December, when the Ethiopian troops forced a line of ethnic Somali women to walk in front of their advancing soldiers, using them as a human shield. The Somali soldiers were faced with the alternatives of retreating under fire or opening fire themselves -- they chose the latter, and about 20 women were killed.

The worst and most systematic abuses by the Ethiopian army occurred during the reoccupation of the Ogaden in March 1978. Journalist Norman Kirkham described how the Ethiopian and Cuban troops swept through the Ogaden after the retreating Somali army, virtually unopposed:

I met numbers of the survivors who told me that civilians had been shot in the streets or had been executed summarily in house to house sweeps. Sometimes whole crowds were

machine-gunned; villages were burned to the ground.

Some of the worst incidents followed the fierce battles for the town of Jijiga where thousands of refugees had fled. One of them, Hassan Khaireh Wabari, a 31 year old merchant, told me "Artillery, bombing and tank fire devastated many of the buildings before the Cubans and Ethiopians moved in at daybreak. Sick people and others trying to protect their homes were shot, and later I saw people being rounded up and executed with machine guns. At first the women were saved so that they could be raped. Then they were killed."

Sheikh Ali Nur, a Koranic teacher from Fiiq, near Harer, said that he had walked many miles to tell me of similar attacks in his area. "They shelled and bombed us. Then they shot the men, raped the women, and destroyed the houses. I know that about 130 were exterminated in my village and about 800 more died in the same district. Even the animals were shot."¹⁹

Kirkham reported that neither side in the conflict gave quarter or took prisoners. One of the major abuses he witnessed was indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, which had forced thousands of people to abandon towns and villages and set up temporary grass shelters concealed in the bush.

We travelled for 120 miles to the bombed out areas of Malako, a ghost town deserted after bitter fighting last year, and to Garbo, where the people had scattered into the nearby hills after an air raid had wiped out their village a few weeks earlier. We walked across an acre of charred ruins and ashes and I was shown cannon cartridges and a three-foot rocket container as the villagers described what had happened.

The attack had begun at breakfast time when an American F-5 jet of the Ethiopian air force suddenly swept out of the sky, roaring low over the huts. The pilot climbed again swiftly without firing and the people sighed with relief, but too soon. Slowly, the green-and-brown camouflaged jet turned and began to descend again, this time followed by a MiG-21 loaded with napalm. The F-5 made four runs, spraying American cannon shells and rockets, while the MiG dived on the four corners of the village, dropping its deadly napalm in a neat rectangle.

Within ten minutes, Garbo had been turned into an inferno. The people ran for their lives but in spite of the preliminary warning pass by the F-5, more than 90 died in the flames or were killed by the strafing. Others were hideously burned and are being treated in a hospital across the border in Somalia.²⁰

Following the counter-offensive, 500,000 people were internally displaced within Ethiopia, and refugees streamed into Somalia.

¹⁹ Sunday Telegraph, London, April 8, 1979.

²⁰ Sunday Telegraph, London, April 8, 1979.

5. THE SECRET WARS TO CRUSH THE SOUTHEAST, 1978-84

For most rural people in Harerghe, Bale and parts of Sidamo, the end of the "official" Ogaden war did not represent the end of suffering and human rights abuse -- rather, the end of the beginning.

The Ethiopia-Somalia war had profound consequences. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam was immeasurably strengthened -- he gained both prestige and a vast new armory. He benefited from a surge of nationalist feeling in Ethiopia and also from international condemnation of Somalia's aggression. President Siad Barre was humiliated, and processes of political decay and fragmentation in Somalia were greatly accelerated.

The Somali army was gone, but internal conditions in southeast Ethiopia had not improved, and the Oromo and Ogadeni insurgencies continued. Large-scale human rights abuses by the Ethiopian army against the local population increased. Six years of secret wars, that were both more widespread and more bloody than the official war, were to end in the defeat of the insurgents, and the creation of widespread famine conditions. Many of the inhabitants fled to Somalia, where the refugees became pawns in another political struggle that was slowly degenerating into civil war, and where hunger and human rights abuse were common.

In early 1978 the Ethiopian government had acquired a new arsenal from the USSR and had built a greatly expanded army, spearheaded by Cuban combat troops. Though established to combat a conventional invasion, that force was now to be used for counter-insurgency only. The government could now contemplate crushing an insurgency by brute force alone.

The victory of the Ethiopian government was aided by dissension among its adversaries. The WSLF was very strong in mid-1978. However, it continued to be subject to manipulation by President Siad Barre, who used it to bolster his position in domestic Somali politics, especially after discontented army officers staged an abortive coup in 1978. This led to disillusion among the WSLF's erstwhile supporters, and resistance to it from other Somali groups, notably members of the Isaaq clan.

In Ethiopia, a series of events in 1977-8 conspired to increase popular support for the OLF. These included the purge of MEISON, which brought an end to hopes of a negotiated compromise with the government, the purge of the Peasant Association (PA) leadership, government declarations of intent to collectivize agriculture, the resettlement of Amhara farmers in Oromo areas, the enforced use of the Amharic alphabet in the literacy campaign, and the brutality of the 1978 counter-offensive by the army.¹ Militarily, however, the OLF was in a

¹ Africa Confidential, 25.15, July 18, 1984, p. 1.

weaker position due to the huge build up of the army in Harerghe. The "liberated area" in the Chercher highlands had to be largely abandoned in 1978-9. Tactics changed towards a more classic guerrilla campaign. In 1981, the OLF also started to open a new front in western Ethiopia, in Wollega.

The OLF also gained from the decline of the SALF, which was closely associated with the Somali government. Many Oromos had been antagonized by the evident ambitions of Siad Barre to annex Oromo areas and the abuses committed by the Somali army when occupying these areas. Much of the leadership of the SALF joined the OLF in August 1980, following large-scale rank and file defections. The SALF suffered further defections to the newly-founded Oromo Islamic Front (also Somali-backed), but maintained a small operational presence throughout the 1980s. Another group, the Sidama Liberation Front, was formed in 1978 and was active up until 1984.

The OLF remained suspicious of the Somali government, and hence the WSLF, SALF and Oromo Islamic Front, and there was no cooperation between the different insurgent groups.

Counter-Insurgency after the Somali Defeat

The Ethiopian army occupied the Ogaden for only a brief period after defeating the Somali army. Six months later, rebel attacks were increasing in frequency. Within a year, the WSLF was back in control of most of the countryside, and the army was confined to the towns, the main roads, and the air. According to journalist William Campbell, 90 per cent of the lowlands were in rebel hands.² The OLF was also able to operate freely in much of the highlands, and held its first congress at Bookhee in the Chercher highlands of Harerghe in April 1978.

Conventional battlefield tactics met with limited success against the WSLF and the OLF. Sweeps and patrols throughout 1979 in the lowlands temporarily reduced the insurgent activity, but failed to engage most of the rebel forces, and became instead more akin to punitive expeditions, attacking villages and herds, and forcing another wave of refugees to flee to Somalia.

An Ogadeni woman later recalled some of the violence that occurred when she was driven from her home:

One morning, before sunrise, in July [1979], a woman in my quarters who was on the road, heard over her ears the noisy click-clang of a heavy convoy from a long distance, but marching full-speed towards our home. Running back home, frightened and crying out, she signalled us: "Wake up! Wake up! They are Abyssinian."

Most of us came out of the house. Unfortunately we found ourselves surrounded by armed soldiers who immediately began to shower bullets on us before we had a chance of driving our livestock out of the pens.

² The Guardian, London, March 7, 1979.

Most of us were unable to escape together in family groupings. I remember that my husband and two sons jumped out of the hut together, but immediately rushed in different directions.

After running for a few minutes I saw with my own eyes my nine-years' old son caught by an Abyssinian soldier who mercilessly grasped him by the hair and smashed him to the ground. The young boy was crying out for mercy, saying: "Oh! Mamma! Pappa!" and sometimes calling to the soldier: "Uncle, don't kill me, I am young!" While he was on the ground at the feet of the soldier asking for clemency, a second soldier standing by jumped out and bayoneted the boy with a push-and-twist in the stomach several times so he was dead.³

The village was burned in the attack, and nine people killed: a mother and her newly-delivered baby, four other children, an older girl and an old blind man. As the group fled towards Somalia, they were again intercepted by soldiers and two children were killed. A baby also died of hunger.

In late 1979, the government changed its counter-insurgency strategy. It adopted a four-pronged approach, consisting of:

- (1)The forcible displacement of much of the population into shelters and protected villages;
- (2)Military offensives which attacked all people and economic assets remaining outside the shelters and protected villages;
- (3)Sponsoring insurgent groups against the WSLF and the Somali government; and
- (3)Attempts to promote the repatriation of refugees.

The counter-insurgency campaigns of 1979-84 were largely successful in their aim, though small-scale armed resistance was never entirely eliminated. However, this "success" was gained at the cost of much suffering by non-combatant civilians, and the reduction of much of the population to a state of famine.

Numbers Affected

In mid-1978, when the "official" war was over, there were an estimated 500,000 displaced persons. There were almost 200,000 in RRC shelters in Harerghe, 66,000 in Bale, and 20,000 in Sidamo.⁴ By October, the number "cared for" by the RRC in Bale had risen to 350,000; by 1979 it was 586,000. There were an additional 230,000 in Sidamo. Bale and Sidamo had been scarcely affected by the Somali army. In 1980, the RRC claimed that one million people in Harerghe were affected by drought and war.

³ Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM), 2.3, September 1982, pp. 2-3.

⁴ RRC, The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation, Addis Ababa, 1985, p. 135.

By 1981, the number of "war affected" people who had been relocated in villages amounted to 880,000 in Bale alone, including 750,000 in the northern part of the province, where the Somali army had never reached. A further 1.5 million were living in relief shelters.

Meanwhile, refugees streamed across the international border into Somalia. In mid-1978 there were 80,000-85,000 in camps in Somalia. A year later there were 220,000; by the end of 1979 between 440,000-470,000; and by the end of 1980 about 800,000. By 1983, the Somali government was claiming a total of 1.3 million refugees, though this number was hotly disputed by the aid donors, who argued that the true number was perhaps 700,000-800,000. Many of the refugees were not ethnic Somali but Oromo.

The war had left 600,000 displaced and refugees at the time of its "official" conclusion in March 1978. After three years of "peace," the affected population had risen by more than five times.

The fact is that the great majority of the war affected population of southeast Ethiopia from late 1979 onwards was affected not by the fighting between the Somali and Ethiopian armies in 1977/8, but by the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian government which was implemented from December 1979 onwards. Many of the people were affected by the military operations of the army, others were affected by forced relocations.

Military Action during 1979-84

Starting in December 1979, the government launched a second military offensive. Soviet advisors and Cuban troops participated. This differed from the counter-offensive of 1978 in that:

- (1) It was more specifically directed against the population's means of survival, including poisoning and bombing water holes and machine gunning herds of cattle; and
- (2) It covered Oromo areas as well as the Ogaden.

At the outset of the 1979/80 offensive, the WSLF was estimated to control 60-70 per cent of the Ogaden.⁵ The OLF controlled large areas of the highlands. The first government offensive lasted several months, followed by a counter-attack by WSLF forces based in Somalia in March 1980, and stepped-up guerrilla action by the OLF. Ethiopian forces then mounted five major attacks between May and July, which coincided with counter-attacks by a joint WSLF-Somali army force.⁶

A new wave of refugees fled to Somalia. Some were interviewed by journalist Victoria

⁵ Africa Contemporary Record, 1979-80, p. B199.

⁶ Africa Contemporary Record, 1980-81, p. B177.

Brittain.⁷

I had sixty camels. The Ethiopians waited at the water point and machine-gunned my two eldest sons and all my camels. I brought my six young children out on two donkeys.

The Ethiopians came twice to my farm in Sidamo, once with white men [i.e. Cubans]. They took stores of maize, pulled it from the field, beat everyone in the house. They have taken young men from us to fight in Eritrea. Nobody is left in my area.

In February there was bombing which made fires as far as the eye could see. My camels were burned and many people in our family. With two camels carrying our house I have walked since then

The air force was deployed to attack villages, animal herds and fleeing refugees. Reports indicate that napalm or phosphorous was used frequently. There were also several raids up to 20 miles inside Somalia.

The civilian casualties in the Ogaden alone during the year following the Somali defeat were estimated at 25,000.⁸ Combined with the flight of several hundred thousand refugees to Somalia, this represented an attempt to break the WSLF resistance by brute force. Perhaps half of the Ogadeni population was in Somalia, and half of the remainder in Ethiopian camps and settlements. Diplomats talked of the depopulation of the Ogaden as the "final solution".⁹

The government offensives ranged well beyond the Ogaden, as witnessed by Victoria Brittain's interviewees. There was also much military action in the highlands of Harerghe and in Bale and Sidamo. Many areas which had been affected little or not at all by the war of 1977/8 were devastated by these offensives.

In October 1980, there was fighting in the lowlands of southern Bale. During 1980, the OLF claimed to have engaged the Ethiopian army in 40 major battles, in its operational area of the highlands of Harerghe and Bale.¹⁰ As late as December 1980, journalist Greg Wilesmith was able to travel more than 100 kilometers inside the Ethiopian Ogaden with WSLF forces, and testified that most of the countryside was under rebel administration.¹¹ However, by then the tide had turned; the government counter-insurgency campaign was meeting with success.

In early 1981, fierce fighting continued in Bale and Sidamo, and also in Arba Guuga

⁷ The Guardian, London, May 21, 1980.

⁸ David Lamb, International Herald Tribune, May 14, 1980.

⁹ The Guardian, London, May 20, 1980.

¹⁰ Africa Contemporary Record, 1980-81, p. B178.

¹¹ Greg Wilesmith, The Observer, London, December 7, 1980.

district of Arsi. The south-east was described as "the most active trouble spot in the country."¹² The Sidama Liberation Front (SLF) was becoming more active, largely in response to pre-emptive government counter-insurgency policies.

The war in Sidamo in 1981 was one of the Dergue's best-kept secrets.¹³ In January, 200 people were reported killed by an army patrol at Godaboke Mito and Chire villages in Sidamo. Between March 19-21, helicopter and airplane attacks at Gata Warrancha in Sidamo caused at least 20,000 people in one valley to flee, and over 1,000 (and possibly more than 2,000) were reported killed when a "wall of flames" was ignited by bombing using either phosphorous or ethylene.¹⁴ Ethylene is a heavier-than-air gas which can be sprayed from the air, whereupon it spreads out, hugging the ground, and can be ignited by an incendiary to create instantaneous combustion over a large area. Its use in this attack has not been confirmed by other independent sources.

The government ordered the evacuation of a Norwegian mission station and hospital, leaving the wounded without medical care. In July, 615 were reported killed at a meeting called by local administrators at Alo. A well-documented killing took place on December 1, 1981, when a defense squad killed at least 48 people, including several entire families.

Throughout the southeast, the army took frequent reprisals against civilians in localities close to where guerrilla attacks had occurred. In one credible reported incident between Shilabo and Warder in the Ogaden in August 1981, houses were burned and 12 villagers were taken hostage and subsequently disappeared.

One aspect of the offensives which had far-reaching implications for Ogadeni society was a government policy of poisoning wells, in order to impoverish nomads and restrict their movements.

Large scale war was effectively over in most of the lowland south east by 1982, though sporadic guerrilla activity continued into the following year. The WSLF was able to make dramatic raids such as storming the prison in Jijiga on August 12, 1983. In reprisal for that action, the Ethiopian army destroyed the villages of Birgot, Midha and Burey and killed 300 civilians.¹⁵

In the highlands of Sidamo and Harerghe, widespread violence by government forces continued throughout 1982. Killings by defense squads took place in Sidamo in January; on

¹² Africa Contemporary Record, 1980-81, p. B178.

¹³ Some of the atrocities committed in Sidamo during 1980-2 are documented in STORM, 3.1, March 1983. The principal informant, a refugee named Tadesse Barsamo, was later murdered by Ethiopian security forces.

¹⁴ Reuters, April 27, 1981; St Paul Pioneer Press, April 12, 1981, reprinted in: J. W. Clay, S. Steingraber and P. Niggli, The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, pp. 224-5.

¹⁵ Africa Contemporary Record, 1983-84, p. B139.

several occasions, the victims were decapitated and their severed heads were displayed in prominent places, to warn their fellow villagers. In a military sweep that began on November 26 and lasted into January 1983 (i.e. during harvest time), the army made numerous attacks on villages accompanied by the burning of crops and confiscation of livestock. Villagers who could not escape were killed. The survivors languished in relief shelters, suffering disease, malnutrition and high death rates, or tried to flee to Somalia – though some columns of would-be refugees were reportedly intercepted and the detainees imprisoned or killed.

On April 1, 1983, in a government reprisal for SLF activities during the previous two months, soldiers killed 100 civilians in the village of Halile, Sidamo.¹⁶ In 1984, the government was able to recapture most of the areas previously held by the SLF, and forcibly relocated the population in relief shelters. In Chire camp 3,000 people died, mainly children, before relief agencies were allowed to provide services in 1984.

The war in the highlands of Harerghe continued in 1984, leading to the forcible implementation of a large-scale villagization program (see chapter 13, below).

The war in the southeast was largely a secret war, especially after the WSLF ceased to take journalists into the area after mid-1980, on account of lack of control of rural areas and pressure exerted on Somalia by the Ethiopian government. The incidents referred to above are but a few details from a much larger story of routine brutality and indiscriminate killing of civilians by the army. The figures for the numbers of people displaced by the war also indicate the scale of human suffering inflicted.

Population Displacement in Counter-Insurgency

A major part of the counter-insurgency strategy adopted by the government in the south-east was the forcible relocation of the population into protected villages, where their movements could be controlled, and whereby the guerrillas could be denied access to essential supplies. This program was implemented in Bale between 1979 and 1982, where almost the entire population was villagized during this period. There was also widespread villagization in certain areas of Sidamo. More than two million people were forcibly relocated during the period 1978-82. In Harerghe, universal villagization began in October 1984, coinciding with intensified military activity against the OLF.¹⁷

The security aspect to the villagization program was officially recognized from the start,

¹⁶ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1982-83, p. B152.

¹⁷ At the time, the program was generally called "resettlement," but in this report that term is used exclusively to refer to the movement and settlement of people from the northern regions in the south.

while the OLF opposed villagization because it saw it as an instrument of government control. Teshale Tessema, of Addis Ababa University, basing his information on the guidelines of the Central Villagization Coordinating Committee, wrote:

the villagization is a direct blow at them [the OLF], by depriving them of any base from which they could carry out their banditry and anti-revolutionary activities. Thus the efforts of these groups ranged from counter-agitation to the burning of houses in new villages ... As some bandits who submitted said: "the villagization is the highest artillery blow directed [against the] bandits. With this launching the possibility of obtaining fresh food by bandits is over."¹⁸

The government drew up ambitious plans for villagization in the south east. By 1979, nearly 560,000 people had been villagized in northern Bale. Two years later, this had risen to 750,000 in 280 villages. Villagization proceeded more slowly in southern Bale -- the program to villagize 130,000 semi-nomads got under way only in 1981, and was completed in 1984.¹⁹ (Southern Bale was affected by the war of 1977/8, northern Bale was not -- but the latter was the locus of SALF and OLF activity). In Sidamo, 40,000 were villagized in 1979, and a further 190,000 gathered in shelters.²⁰ Following the fighting in Arba Guuga district of Arsi, villagization was implemented there in 1982. Plans were floated to villagize a further 2.4 million.

Commonly, the government would instruct people to relocate at a certain place within a certain time. If the people remained behind, punitive measures would be used. Sometimes, no warning would be given, and existing villages and homesteads were simply destroyed.

The following testimony of an Oromo refugee who had been subjected to villagization is one of the very few pieces of direct evidence that is available about the human impact of the program:

The army came and started burning everything. We ran into the forest with nothing. Some soldiers came and some men in white trucks, and they told us to go back to our village and get the others. Then they took us to a place far from our homes and told us to make houses.

They gave us food every day, but there was never enough to save some. We worked five kilometers from our homes, but if we complained, they beat us. Also we didn't have any doctors and only dirty water, but we couldn't say anything. They told us the Somalis did it to us, but I knew it was them. They kept saying it though, and they told us they were helping us. Every time we harvested our crops, we had to give them to the government,

¹⁸ Quoted in Survival International, *For their Own Good ... Ethiopia's Villagization Programme*, London, 1988, p. 19.

¹⁹ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, p. 13.

²⁰ RRC, 1985, pp. 136-7.

and they gave us our rations.

I knew it was them who burned us because they screamed at us and called us names. They even said they hated us. They had men with guns around all of the walls -- you couldn't move outside. If your brother died in the next village, you couldn't go to bury him. Just work, they said.²¹

A particularly insidious element in the government's policy of relocation was its repeated attempts to obtain finance from the international community to carry it out. These attempts were partly successful -- had they been more so, doubtless villagization would have proceeded more quickly in Harerghe and Sidamo.

In the aftermath of the official war of 1977/8, it was not difficult for Ethiopia to obtain assistance to assist the local population and repair some of the damaged infrastructure in Harerghe. Somalia had been the aggressor in the war, which had led directly to an estimated \$1 billion in damage. Later on, however, the government was not eager to draw attention to the ongoing war. Displaced people were blamed in vague terms on the war of 1977/8, and on drought.

In June 1980, the Ethiopian government started appealing for relief aid for the "victims of drought." Officials from the RRC claimed that Harerghe, Bale and Sidamo as well as the northern provinces were stricken by an eight-month drought.²² A reconnaissance team from the RRC had visited Harerghe in February-March 1980, but delayed releasing its findings for three months. The published findings indicated an urgent humanitarian disaster -- poor rains had affected one million people out of a population of three million, mostly in lowlands. The report goes on to say that this was made worse by the destruction of water facilities in the war of 1977/8 -- it claims that pumping machines had been taken away by Somalis, and 40 supply points destroyed. Destruction of infrastructure and wells by the Ethiopian army is not mentioned.²³

Several facts about the June 1980 appeal are odd. One is the claim that a drought of eight months had caused a major humanitarian disaster. Such a drought indicates merely the failure of one of the two annual rainy seasons in the area -- a common occurrence and an indicator of hardship, but no cause for serious alarm. Moreover, the RRC team had visited the area before that rainy season was fully under way -- so the distress it found could not be blamed on the alleged drought. The three month delay in releasing the findings is itself suspicious, especially in view of the urgency with which the matter was presented to the western donors. Recalling the timing of

²¹ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, "Refugees in the Horn", 4.1, (1981), p. 39.

²² In the lowlands of south-east Ethiopia there are two dry seasons (December to March and May to September) and two wet seasons (April-May and October-November).

²³ RRC, Early Warning and Planning Service, "Report on a Reconnaissance Trip in Hararghe Administrative Region," June 1980.

the military operations in the area (i.e. the launch of the principal counter-insurgency campaign in December 1979), the findings of the reconnaissance team are less surprising, as is the delay in publication until the security of the area was more assured some time later.

In May/June 1980 a UN team visited Ethiopia and travelled to some accessible areas of the south-east. The team recommended "the government's resettlement [i.e. villagization] should be given all possible support."²⁴ The team recommended that 183,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food plus transport be donated to the RRC. 158,000 MT plus transport were actually pledged, including \$8.1 million from UNHCR.

The rationale for the mission's recommendation was in part that much of the population had lost its economic assets and was collecting in relief shelters. Unable to return to an economically active life without assistance, the population could be better helped by social engineering in government villages.

Following the RRC appeal in June, a second UN mission visited Ethiopia from July 6-15, 1980. After consulting with the government, this mission made the much stronger recommendation that 812,000 MT of food be pledged, and the funds be provided direct to the RRC for "internal handling."

If, as the government claimed, drought was now the main problem, the end of the year saw a return to normal. The main summer rains in 1980 were good. In November 1980, the RRC reported that the food supply situation in Bale, Harerghe and Sidamo was "normal."²⁵ This did not, however, stop an increasing flow of demands for international assistance for victims of drought and war, and for villagization.

In early 1981, a mission from the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) visited the south-east as guests of the RRC. Though not as uncritical as the preceding UN missions, the ICVA team did recommend support for the villagization program. The team noted "tight security dispositions prevailing" in the villages it visited,²⁶ but did not question the official explanation that this was to protect the inhabitants from "bandits." Others believe that the military presence was to keep the population under tight control.²⁷

The Ethiopian government failed to obtain all the assistance it asked for. However, it

²⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, p. 5.

²⁵ RRC, Early Warning and Planning Service, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region," November 1980.

²⁶ ICVA, "ICVA Mission to Assess the Situation with Regard to Displaced Persons and Returnees, January 16-30, 1982," Geneva, 1982, p. 2.

²⁷ *STORM*, 2.3, September 1982, pp. 9-12.

obtained enough to relocate almost the entire population of Bale, plus substantial numbers of people in Sidamo and lowland Harerghe, and some in Arsi. UNHCR assistance rose from \$100,000 in 1979 to \$2.7 million in 1980 and \$7.3 million in 1981; UN Development Program assistance also rose. In early 1981, the Babile shelter was established near Harer for "drought-affected" Hawiye nomads. Later in the year, the Bisidimo scheme, resettling nomads for agricultural work was set up. Voluntary agencies such as Lutheran World Federation supported some projects. The ironies of humanitarian agencies working within a counter-insurgency framework were not evident to the staff: one report noted a large number of widows in the villages, explaining that "the husbands have been killed or got lost during the Somali invasion."²⁸

Despite the emphasis on drought given by the RRC and repeated UN missions, all the refugees interviewed by Victoria Brittain in Somalia in May 1980 -- a month before the RRC's major drought appeal -- denied that drought was the reason for their flight. Instead they mentioned violence and destruction by the Ethiopian army.

A second element in the relocation strategy was a series of attempts to obtain the return of refugees from Somalia. That will be discussed below.

A final element in the population displacement strategy was the introduction of settler populations from the north, in a small-scale forerunner to the resettlement program that was to attract much attention in the later 1980s. The resettlers took land from the locals, who were thereby displaced.

Two settlements were set up in Bale in 1979: Melka Oda and Harawa. Harawa was highly mechanized, and was planned to have a capacity of 7,000 families. "The Amharas have given our land to others" complained refugees in Somalia.²⁹ Many settlers were given military training and arms.

The use of relocation as a counter-insurgency measure is common. Under international humanitarian law it is legitimate only if required by the security needs of those to be relocated or by imperative military necessity, if the government provides the relocated population with sufficient resources to attain a reasonable standard of living, and if the relocation avoids unnecessary suffering. Aside from the violations of international law, the relocation policy followed in south-east Ethiopia was objectionable on several grounds. One is that it was achieved through indiscriminate violence in areas of the countryside not controlled by the government and the threat of such violence. A second is that it was achieved by hunger -- people were obliged to congregate in relief shelters because of the destruction of the basis for their way of life. A third is

²⁸ Quoted in: Jason W. Clay, "The Case of Bale," in Clay *et al.* 1988, p. 148.

²⁹ Victoria Brittain, *The Guardian*, London, May 21, 1980.

that, while assistance was provided to the people in shelters and government villages, this assistance was obtained under false pretenses from the international community. Fortunately the mass human rights abuses that would almost certainly have followed the large-scale refoulement of refugees in Somalia did not occur (see below).

Sponsoring Insurgents against the Somali Government and WSLF

The Ethiopian government brought strong pressure on the Somali government to withdraw assistance to the rebel groups. The pressure included direct attacks into Somalia, usually by aircraft, notably in 1982, and sponsoring rebel Somali groups.

The SSDF

In May 1978, immediately after defeat in the Ogaden, officers of the Somali army staged a bloody but unsuccessful coup attempt. The surviving coup leaders, most of whom were members of the Majerteen clan, fled and founded the Somali Salvation Front. This soon amalgamated with two other organizations to form the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), which gained support from the Ethiopian government. Though the SSDF initially had a large armed force it failed to have a significant military impact. Its major military success was a joint operation with the Ethiopian army to capture the two Somali villages of Balambale and Galgudud in 1983. The leadership was divided and many fighters deserted back to the Somali government. The SSDF came into conflict with the Ethiopian government, reportedly for refusing to mount military operations against the WSLF. In 1982, the Ethiopian government confiscated armored vehicles belonging to the SSDF. In 1985, after a spate of assassinations within the SSDF, Ethiopian security forces detained the SSDF leader Col. Abdullahi Yusuf and 12 others. One of them, Abdullahi Mohamed "Fash" died in custody in 1986.

In Somalia, one of the consequences of the attempted coup was that President Siad Barre purged the army, promoting his kinsmen from the Marehan clan, and also bringing members of the Ogaden clan into more powerful positions. This led to political conflict between the Ogaden clan and other Somali clans and opposition movements.

The SNM

In 1981, the Mengistu government began to support the Somali National Movement (SNM). The resulting war by the SNM against the WSLF was an important element in the Ethiopian strategy, and it was resoundingly successful.

The formation of the SNM was the outcome of systematic discrimination and human rights abuse against members of the Isaaq clan, which predominates in northern Somalia, by the Siad Barre government.³⁰

Many abuses against the civilian population of northern Somalia, especially those living in the border area, were committed by the WSLF. Killing, looting and rape were common from 1978 onwards. In late 1978, Isaaq elders petitioned President Siad to form an Isaaq wing of the WSLF, which would be able to protect local civilians. This organization, known as Afraad, the "fourth unit," became operational in 1979. It immediately came into armed conflict with the main (Ogaden clan) forces of the WSLF. Shortly afterwards, an Isaaq army officer arrested 14 leading WSLF fighters at Gobyar who had been harassing and abusing the local population; they were taken to Gebiley and executed. The army command in Hargeisa was then transferred to General Gani, a Marehan and a clansman of the president; one of the changes that followed was the forcible transfer of the Afraad away from the border zone. However, many members of the Afraad became guerrilla fighters in their own right and continued the inter-clan conflict, which intensified in 1981.

Other grievances felt by the Isaaq included the preferential treatment of Ogadeni refugees compared to the local population, in terms of access to education, health care and services, and discrimination against Isaacs in government and army posts and in business. A dispute over access to the grazing in the Haud reserve was also flaring.

After prolonged talks, leading members of the Isaaq clan met in London in April 1981, to form the Somali National Movement (SNM). In January 1982, they negotiated with the Ethiopian government to obtain a base and arms. The SNM soon became active in the border area, supporting the Isaaq clan in its ongoing conflict with the Ogaden clan. In October 1982, there was fierce fighting in the Gashaamo area.

The war between the Isaaq-SNM and the Ogaden-WSLF involved violence against civilians, by both forces and on both sides of the border. At first, the abuses were almost entirely by the WSLF, because it had a near-monopoly on arms. Lorries were ambushed, traders stopped and robbed, houses looted, animals stolen, women raped and civilians killed. In early 1979,

³⁰ See Africa Watch Report, Somalia: A Government at War with its own People, January 1990.

between Wajale and Alleybadey, two WSLF fighters raped a woman, whose teenage brother then retaliated by shooting the fighters. The commander of the WSLF unit then arrived and summarily executed the boy and two other family members.

One SNM abuse occurred in December 1981 when Isaaq fighters stopped a truck at Dhaberooble, between Warder and Degahabur, and killed six WSLF fighters and 13 civilians, all members of the Ogaden clan.³¹

Clashes between the fronts were intense during late 1982 and 1983. The SNM succeeded in cutting the WSLF off from its rear bases in northern Somalia. Together with the Ethiopian army offensives, this was a fatal blow to the WSLF, which never recovered. There was a final round of fighting in December 1984-January 1985, but by this time the WSLF was effectively finished.

The Refugee Issue

The Ethiopian government engaged in a concerted campaign to make refugees in Somalia return to Ethiopian territory. The refugees' destination was to be government-controlled reception centers. On the whole, Oromo returnees were then villagized, and Ogadenis were given animals.

The returnee issue over this period is complex. Tens of thousands of refugees returned and were assisted. But the Ethiopian government consistently exaggerated the number of returnees, subjected many to abuses, and used the returnee program for counter-insurgency purposes.

The Somali government was also at fault. Throughout the 1980s, an important factor determining what refugees decided to do was the increasingly unpleasant quality life in the Somali refugee camps. This was because of the policies and corruption of the Somali government, which diverted much international aid intended for the refugees, and increasing levels of violence in Somalia, which the refugees were caught up in and contributed to. Most seriously, the Somali government recruited refugees into the WSLF, and after 1983, into the Somali army (see chapter 19). The Somali government also consistently inflated the estimates of refugee numbers, and denied the existence of genuine returnee movements. Civilian refugees were caught between two evils, and their return to Ethiopia often indicated merely that conditions in Somalia had deteriorated; not that those in Ethiopia had improved.

The attempts to obtain the repatriation of the refugees involved the international humanitarian community, especially UNHCR, which often appeared to be ignorant of the realities

³¹ According to one report, a Majerteen woman was also killed, because she was pregnant by her Ogadeni husband and the unborn child was thus an Ogadeni.

of the situation.

The first attempts at repatriation occurred in May 1980 and coincided with a visit by senior UN officials, invited by the government. One official wrote:

The UNHCR representative broadly agrees with the [Ethiopian] government perception of the situation, and feels that on both humanitarian and pragmatic grounds a comprehensive approach is needed; this would include assistance for both the displaced and affected population in Ethiopia thus reducing the incentive to swell the number of refugees in neighbouring countries. ... [The Ethiopian government] feels that the UN system is taking a one-sided view of the situation by launching a large-scale assistance programme in Somalia and doing almost nothing in Ethiopia. They feel that this will only aggravate the situation in attracting a large number of people to cross the border.³²

The UN and ICVA missions referred to above followed from this initiative, as did attempts to initiate a repatriation program. The opinion (never tested) that the presence of international assistance on the far side of a border "pulled" refugees there -- enticing them to abandon their homes and trek through a wilderness to a strange country -- continued to have a substantial and dangerous influence on assistance and protection policies to refugees in the Horn for years afterwards.

In March 1981, a UN mission asked for funds for 300,000 families (1.5 million people) to be villagized over the next 18 months. Many of these were anticipated to be returning refugees. The following month, at the first International Conference for Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA I), held in Geneva, the Ethiopian Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation claimed that "as a result of a general amnesty, more than 151,000 Ethiopian refugees have returned," including 129,000 from Somalia.

However, according to one source, UNHCR officials could provide details of merely "less than three hundred" returnees,³³ and the Somali government denied that any had left. One part explanation for this discrepancy is that the returning refugees did not need to surrender their ration cards from the Somali camps in order to receive assistance (chiefly sheep and goats) from the Ethiopian RRC -- they merely needed to prove that they had been in a refugee camp. It was therefore possible for a refugee to collect the assistance on the Ethiopian side, and then return to Somalia to continue drawing rations.

At ICARA I, on the prompting of the Ethiopian government, the UN submitted projects anticipating the need to assist 268,000 returning refugees from Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia over the next three years -- despite the absence of an agreement with either Sudan or Somalia for the voluntary return of refugees. "It is anticipated that Ethiopians living in Somalia will return as

³² Dr Zaki Hassan, UNICEF Executive Board, "Report on a Visit to Ethiopia, 13-17 May 1980," Addis Ababa.

³³ *STORM*, 1.3, June 1981, pp. 8-9.

security and basic living conditions improve in the south-eastern part of Ethiopia" the proposal asserted.³⁴ The UN document asked for a total of \$27 million plus food aid in international assistance for Ethiopia.

In September the government became more ambitious and asked for aid for an anticipated 542,000 returnees.³⁵ In January 1982, it claimed that 567,000 refugees had returned home.

However, these figures were gross exaggerations. According to UNHCR the following August, "over 10,000" had returned. In 1981, the ICVA team had met individual returnees, and was assured that several thousand were living in the settlements it visited, but made no independent investigation of the total numbers -- all the figures in its report had been provided by the RRC. However, the "returnees" in el Kere (Bale) turned out to "have returned from the bush and from Somalia."³⁶ In 1982 a team from the League of Red Cross societies also visited, spending six days on a guided tour of returnee camps. Team members were told by their RRC hosts that one of the camps, Degahabur (Harerghe), had held 10,000 returnees some time previously, but the inhabitants present at the time had never left Ethiopia.³⁷

Despite the absence of an impartial assessment of the situation, in 1981 the UNHCR initiated a small pilot program for returnees, which was substantially enlarged in 1982, when it anticipated spending \$26 million to feed 200,000 returnees and set up three rehabilitation centers (two of them in Harerghe), 25 reception centers, and various smaller projects for returnees.³⁸ However, the reaction of the international community was mixed. While Australia provided 25,000 MT of food aid, the US refused to participate.

The Ethiopian government failed to obtain all the assistance it wanted for this program. This was related to the lack of a "tripartite agreement" between Ethiopia, Somalia and UNHCR to repatriate the refugees. Despite the optimism expressed in the UN submission to ICARA I, relatively few refugees did return home (in the tens of thousands at the most), and the Somali government resisted pressure from the Ethiopian government and the UNHCR to assent to a program of "voluntary" repatriation.

A major reason why UNHCR promoted the returnee program was impatience with the

³⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, Annex D.

³⁵ RRC, "The Returnee Problem in Ethiopia and Assistance Requirements," Addis Ababa, September 1981.

³⁶ ICVA, 1982, Annex III, p. 3, emphasis added.

³⁷ League of Red Cross Societies, "UNHCR/RRC/League Programme of Assistance to Returnees in Ethiopia," Circular, September 17, 1982.

³⁸ Letter from Poul Hartling, head of UNHCR, to donors, dated April 30, 1982.

Somali government, which was also "playing the numbers game" and trying to retain its refugee population and exaggerate its size in order to obtain international assistance. The refugees were pawns as all sides played politics with humanitarian assistance. However, the exploitation and abuse of the refugees in Somalia did not justify promoting the repatriation program.

Scepticism about how voluntary such a program would have been is warranted, as can be shown by the case of Djibouti. In June 1980, the Ethiopian government declared its intention of receiving the refugees back, and shortly afterwards a tripartite commission of the governments of Ethiopia and Djibouti together with UNHCR was formed to oversee the repatriation.³⁹ In July 1981, reports indicate that 20 refugees were forcibly repatriated, of whom 14 were summarily executed on arrival. The following two years saw numerous incidents of intimidation and harassment of the refugees by the Djibouti authorities, and coercion to repatriate. There were no further reports of executions of returnees, but a number were detained and sentenced to prison terms, despite promises of an amnesty.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian government legislated against refugees. Under Article 12 of the Revised Penal Code of 1981, attempting to leave the country without official permission is a "counter-revolutionary act" equivalent to treason, and punishable by between five and 25 years imprisonment.

By mid-1983, the repatriation campaign from Djibouti had led to the return of 13,500 refugees, about half through the tripartite program, and half independently of it.

The Ethiopian government often used the term "returnees" to refer to both prisoners of war released by the rebel fronts and returning refugees. Returning prisoners of war were placed in "reception centers" in Gonder, Meqele and Harerghe, where there were frequent reports of beating and execution.

During this period the government of Somalia consistently refused to contemplate a tripartite agreement for repatriation. When such an agreement was made in 1986, only a small minority of refugees elected to use it -- about 7,200 over four years. However, during the late 1980s, perhaps 500,000 refugees did return spontaneously, as conditions deteriorated in Somalia and marginally improved in southeast Ethiopia. In 1991, with the outbreak of widespread violence in Somalia, that return flow accelerated.

The Creation of Famine

During 1978-84 the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam responded to the insurgencies

³⁹ Jeff Crisp, "Voluntary Repatriation Programmes for African Refugees, A Critical Examination," British Refugee Council, London, 1984.

in the southeast with brutality, attacks on the economic base of the population, restricting movement, and creating and exploiting divisions within the society. This was the bloodiest period in the modern history of the region. The government's military strategy was instrumental in impoverishing the people, restricting their mobility and economic activities, and creating famine. The activities of the Ethiopian army, the SNM, WSLF and the Somali government combined to prevent the Ogadeni herders from freely migrating, trading or cultivating. Meanwhile, the combination of military offensives and forced relocation left much of the Oromo population destitute.

There was chronic famine in much of the southeast during the whole period 1979-84, and humanitarian assistance was used as an instrument for the further extension of state control. When drought also occurred in 1984, the famine became more widespread and severe.

The true story of these campaigns and the related famine remains largely unresearched and untold. The account given above is merely an outline based on the few available sources -- many of which were produced with the clear intention of concealing what was actually going on.

6. THE RED TERROR

The Red Terror was a campaign of urban counter-insurgency waged in the main cities of Ethiopia, notably Addis Ababa, between 1976 and 1978. The name "Red Terror" was officially used by the government, and it accurately reflects the way in which excessive violence was used to terrify the population and eliminate dissent. It was one of the most systematic uses of mass murder by the state ever witnessed in Africa.

The number who died in the Red Terror is not known -- it is certainly well in excess of 10,000. A full treatment of the Red Terror would require a separate and extremely lengthy report. What follows here is merely a cursory examination, in order to place the episode in the context of the Ethiopian government's counter-insurgency methods.

The Urban Opposition

In the 1960s and 1970s, opposition to the rule of Haile Selassie crystallized among the educated, particularly university students. These students were attracted by left wing political philosophy and nursed grievances over their living and studying conditions, the lack of a student union and student publications, and the shortage of career opportunities for them following graduation. This led directly to support for violent methods to overthrow the government. Student songs praised Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara, and a popular slogan was "Through Bale not Bole," referring to the expectation that revolutionary change would occur through rural insurrection (as in Bale) and not through returning exiles (who arrive in Addis Ababa through Bole International Airport).¹

Reflecting pre-existing divisions in the student movement, after the revolution, splits soon appeared between different radical elements. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was one group, the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (known by its Amharic acronym, MEISON) was another. There were some important tactical differences between EPRP and MEISON, notably over the Eritrean question,² but their political programs both espoused an almost indistinguishable brand of Marxism. By 1976, the chief difference was that MEISON was prepared to cooperate with the military government to achieve communism, whereas the EPRP was not -- indeed it was ready to wage urban guerrilla warfare in order to bring down the Dergue.

¹ Randi Ronning Balsvik, Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977, E. Lansing, Mich., 1985.

² EPRP was prepared to allow the Eritreans to exercise a greater degree of self-determination.

In the popular perception, MEISON also came to be identified as a predominantly Oromo organization, and EPRP as predominantly Amhara -- perceptions that became self-fulfilling.

In mid-1976, responding to a government crackdown on student members of the opposition, the EPRP began to assassinate leading members of the Dergue and its client institutions, notably the urban dwellers' associations (kebeles).³ The EPRP was suspected of complicity in a failed coup attempt in July 1976. 21 coup plotters were executed, and arrests of EPRP members began in August. On September 23, there was the first of nine officially listed assassination attempts on Mengistu. On October 2, the EPRP assassinated Fikre Merid, a leading MEISON and government cadre. Ten senior government officials and 15 members of the secret service were killed in the next two months. The public assassinations continued into 1977; several hundred were probably killed in this way, though some of the murders attributed to EPRP may not in fact have been carried out by that organization, but either by private individuals or by government agents.

The Red Terror: The First Wave

The killing of people suspected to be members of the EPRP began in September 1976. 21 were executed on October 21 and the deaths of a further 17 were announced on November 18. However, it was not until the killing of Gen. Teferi Bante by Mengistu in February 1977, and the latter's assumption of supreme power that the Red Terror was officially declared, and the mass killings began. Mengistu labelled the EPRP's sporadic campaign of assassination the "White Terror" and Lt-Col. Atnafu Abate promised "for every revolutionary killed, a thousand counter-revolutionaries executed."⁴ The promised ratio was not to be much of an exaggeration. Atnafu began organizing "Defense of the Revolution Squads," distributing arms to Addis Ababa kebele members who were considered to be loyal. In a public speech on April 17, Mengistu called upon the people to fight against the "enemies of the revolution" and smashed three bottles filled with blood (or something resembling blood) to signify the impending destruction of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism.

On February 26, 44 prisoners were taken to a place outside Addis Ababa and executed. On March 2, 1977, several people were shot dead by government forces for distributing EPRP literature during a pro-government demonstration.⁵ Over a thousand were detained during

³ The following account relies heavily on: Rene LeFort, Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution? London, 1983.

⁴ LeFort, 1983, p. 199. In November 1977, Atnafu was one of the revolutionaries to be killed -- on the orders of his longstanding friend, Mengistu.

⁵ Amnesty International, Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia, November 1978, p. 14.

searches of the city on March 23-27. May Day had become the occasion for revolutionary groups to demonstrate their popular support, and EPRP planned to stage large rallies. Starting on the night of April 29, rural Defense Squads arrived in the capital, and, together with local kebele officials and soldiers, began a massacre of suspected EPRP supporters. The official government estimate is that 732 were killed over the next few days. Others believe the figure was in fact 2,000 or more.⁶ On May 7-8, a daytime curfew was instituted and house-to-house searches were conducted, with thousands being arbitrarily detained by Defense Squads and soldiers. On May 17, the Secretary-General of Swedish Save the Children Fund stated that "one thousand children have been massacred in Addis Ababa and their bodies, lying in the streets, are ravaged by roving hyenas." He estimated that 100-150 young people -- some as young as 12 -- were being killed every night.⁷ On the night of June 4/5, about 400 students were killed. In total, at least 2,500 were killed in this first phase of the terror.

Bodies were left on the roadside to advertise the killings of the previous night -- those who inspected the piles of bodies to see if their friends or relatives were among the corpses were targetted for execution or imprisonment themselves. Relatives were forbidden to mourn. In other cases, relatives had to pay one Ethiopian dollar for each "wasted bullet" in order to have the body returned.

There were also mass arrests of suspected EPRP supporters. Many of those arrested were subjected to torture, and many "disappeared" after spending some time in detention. Relatives were usually allowed to bring food and clothing to detainees, and learned of the detainees' transfer from one prison to another when the prison guards instructed them to take their food elsewhere. Similarly, they learned of the death or disappearance of their detained relative when the guards told them that it was no longer necessary to bring food. In some instances, the prison authorities deceived the relatives, and continued to accept food for weeks or months after the detainee had died or been executed.

Rene LeFort described the typical profile of the victim: "Simply knowing how to read and write and being aged about 20 or less were enough to define the potential or actual 'counter-revolutionary.' The authorities were even able to institute a law authorizing the arrest of children between eight and twelve years."⁸

The Red Terror: The Second and Third Waves

⁶ Amnesty International, 1978, p. 14; LeFort, 1983, p. 201.

⁷ Amnesty International, 1978, pp. 14-15.

⁸ LeFort, 1983, p. 202.

The EPRP was largely crushed in Addis Ababa by the first wave of the Red Terror, and retreated to a rural base in Tigray. However, the killings and arrests continued. Though the ostensible target remained the EPRP, the Dergue was now turning on kebele members suspected to be more loyal to MEISON than the Dergue, and on MEISON itself. Haile Fida, the leader of MEISON and confidante and ideologue of Mengistu, was detained in August 1977. After spending several months in prison, he disappeared. Many other MEISON cadres were arrested shortly afterwards. In October the second wave of arrests and executions took place, during which time an estimated 3,000-4,000 people were killed.

Much of the killing in October was conducted not by the Defense Squads and army, but in the course of a civil war between MEISON and the remnants of the EPRP. Both organizations had been thoroughly infiltrated by security agents, who were able to assassinate cadres of the opposing organization, while disclaiming government responsibility for the act. The continued killings by ostensible members of EPRP also created a justification for the Dergue's continuing repression.

By the end of 1977, MEISON members had been thoroughly purged from the ranks of government and the higher offices of the kebeles. However, many remained at the lower levels, especially in the provinces.

The third wave of the Red Terror took place between December 1977 and February 1978. 300 were killed on the night of December 16. On December 21, Defense Squad members opened fire with machine guns on people praying in a mosque. One Ethiopian estimated that during this phase 25-30 people were killed in an "ordinary" day.⁹ By the end of the year, Amnesty International estimated that 30,000 political detainees were held in the central prisons and the detention centers of the 291 kebeles of Addis Ababa.¹⁰ This figure must be considered a very cautious estimate because of the large numbers held in provincial towns.

By this time, the killings were less public. Most were executed in prison, and few bodies were left on the streets. However, the killings were at least as frequent as before. Perhaps 5,000 were killed in Addis Ababa in these months, and many more in provincial towns.

Though most of the killings -- at least in Addis Ababa -- were over by March 1978, detentions and executions continued throughout the year.

The Campaign Against the Merchants

⁹ Babile Tola, To Kill a Generation: The Red Terror in Ethiopia, Washington D.C., 1989, p. 144.

¹⁰ Amnesty International, 1978, p. 8.

A significant minority of those killed or detained during the mid 1970s were traders and shopkeepers. This group, and in particular grain traders, were targets of the new government from 1975. While the campaign against the merchants -- like the corresponding campaign against landlords -- was not strictly part of the Red Terror, it deserves discussion, especially in the light of the 1980s famines.

Grain merchants were blamed in part for the famines of 1972-4, and seen as class enemies of the revolution. Many large merchants fled abroad when the radical political leanings of the Dergue became clear, or joined one of the conservative political-military resistance movements, such as the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) which was militarily active in Tigray and Gonder.

In 1973, 90 per cent of all marketed grain was sold through an estimated 20,000-30,000 grain merchants. A small minority of 25 dominated the supply to Addis Ababa, owning a storage capacity of 100,000 tonnes between them.¹¹ This latter group was certainly able to engineer shortages in the city, though in 1973 their chief contribution to famine appears to have been to facilitate the export of grain from famine-stricken Wollo to more prosperous Addis Ababa, where food prices rose a mere 20 per cent during the scarcity. Over 75 per cent of grain traders were rurally based and operated using pack animals. While these traders drove hard bargains and occasionally reaped windfall profits, they operated in a highly uncertain commercial environment, and performed an essential service in the redistribution of food.

The Special Penal Code of November 1974 included an article prohibiting economic actions which might create or aggravate famine, implicitly equating them with an attack on the state itself. Article 27 was drafted in a vague and ambiguous manner, which was open to a variety of interpretations. The Special Court Martial, instituted at the same time, implemented the law in a draconian manner, and on the occasions when a conviction could not be guaranteed, the Dergue was ready to bypass the courts altogether. Article 27 therefore acted as a powerful deterrent to legitimate as well as illegal economic activity. It is worth quoting in full, to illustrate the vague but intensely threatening environment in which traders were compelled to operate.

Article 27: Jeopardising Defensive Power of the State, Distress or Famine.

- (1)Whosoever intentionally by commission or omission directly or indirectly with culpable negligence commits any prejudicial act leading to the consequence of weakening the defensive power of the State or being aware of such a fact fails to do whatever in his capability or creates within the country a grave state of misery, want or famine, epidemic or epizootic disease or distress, especially by improperly hiding or hoarding, destroying or preventing the transport or distribution of grain,

¹¹ J. Holmberg, Grain Marketing and Land Reform in Ethiopia: An Analysis of the Marketing and Pricing of Food Grains in 1976 after the Land Reform, Uppsala, 1977, p. 9.

foodstuffs or provisions, or remedies or products necessary to the life and health of man or domestic animals, or where the occurrence of any imminent danger of distress or famine having shown a sign, fails to do whatever in his power to control it, is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from ten years to life, and where the offence was intentional and where death has occurred or many lives have perished the penalty may be death.

(2) Whosoever, in time of such distress, fails to carry out or carries out improperly, except in the case of force majeure, the obligations or liabilities incumbent upon him, whether as a purveyor, middleman, sub-contractor, carrier or agent, or in any other capacity, in respect to the delivery or handing over of provisions, remedies or any other products to be used to prevent, limit or arrest the distress, is liable to the same punishments.

(3) Where the offender has acted for gain, a fine not exceeding twenty thousand [Ethiopian] dollars shall be imposed in addition to the penalty prescribed in sub-article (2) hereof.

Many grain merchants were detained and their goods and vehicles confiscated. Others withdrew from the grain trade, fearing the same actions. With no state-run alternative distribution in place, the decline in the private grain trade contributed to rapid food price inflation and shortages in Addis Ababa.

The Dergue did not consider these legal prohibitions comprehensive enough. In July 1976, the Special Penal Code was revised and reissued. The same provisions remained, but an additional one was added. Article 17(A) concerned "economic sabotage" and prescribed the death penalty for actions leading to the destruction or withholding of grain, interruption of work or transport, or "any other similar act."

Immediately after the revised Special Penal Code was promulgated, seven Addis Ababa grain merchants were charged under this new article, and sentenced to long prison terms. General Teferi Bante, then head of state, intervened and changed several of the sentences to death. One of those executed for "economic crimes" had been caught with 20 tons of grain in stock – four trucks full, and scarcely enough to influence the price of grain in a city of over one million residents. The others had been found with stores of the spice berbere.

An additional motivation for the increased pressure on private grain merchants in 1976 was that in that year the government set up the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which was to have a monopoly on large-scale grain transactions. Coercion was needed to enforce the monopoly.

In the provinces a large number of merchants were executed in 1976-8. Every small town has stories of traders being killed by firing squads, thrown into trenches, doused with petrol and burned, or disappearing while in detention.

A number of other measures were implemented to humiliate and punish merchants. Many of these consisted of macabre dramas orchestrated by kebele officials, in which the poor exacted revenge on their previous oppressors. Merchants were required to participate in auctions, at which an ordinary object -- an egg, a cup of coffee, or a framed photograph of Mengistu -- would be bid for. Each participant would be obliged to outbid the others, from fear of a severe punishment. The price might reach five thousand Ethiopian dollars (or, after the 1976 currency change, Birr) before the auctioneers were satisfied. In some instances, the object of the auction was the right to administer strokes with a whip on the back of another merchant.

This campaign against traders, which continued well into the 1980s (see subsequent chapters) was to have a profound negative impact on rural people's ability to withstand adversity.

The Red Terror in the Provinces

While the killings and detentions were most numerous and most publicized in Addis Ababa, the campaign was also conducted throughout the country, mostly during 1978. Young people in towns such as Asmara, Gonder, Bahir Dar and Jimma are known to have suffered severely. One document detailing the Red Terror gives information on the following incidents:¹²

- *Debre Markos, Gojjam: massacres in October 1976, February, June and August 1977.

- *Dessie and Kombolcha, Wollo: batches of prisoners executed.

- *Gonder, Harerghe, Sidamo, Bale, May 1-15, 1977: 1,713 executed, according to the government.

- *Gonder, November 1977: 54 killed when security forces opened fire on an EPRP demonstration.

- *Before December 1977: 56 prisoners killed in Tigray, 74 in Wollo, 32 in Chebo and Gurage (Shewa), and 56 in Gonder.

During 1978, the government instituted a purge of the leadership of Peasant Associations, replacing the popularly-elected leaders with government appointees. Though not as bloody as the urban terror, this purge was accompanied by many detentions and some executions.

Next to Addis Ababa, the Red Terror was the worst in Tigray. Three different armed opposition movements were active in Tigray at the time -- the EDU, with support from feudal lords and large traders, the EPRP, and the TPLF, which succeeded in capturing the headquarters of Tembien district, Abi Adi, in early 1977. In Megele, the provincial capital, students, merchants and rural people suspected of supporting the TPLF were all equally targets. The following case is

¹² Babile Tola, 1989, pp. 143-4.

an instance of a student suspected of supporting all three rebel organizations, who was examined by Dr Bent Juel-Jensen, a physician, in Sudan in January 1986:

T.H. was one of 300 plus young men who had been educated by Ras Mengesha,¹³ a Tigrayan from Tembien; he had worked in Addis as an agricultural expert. In 1978 he was imprisoned in the house which the Emperor had given to [a British professor] together with 470 other unfortunates. He was accused of belonging to the EPRP. He was tortured: electrical prods and burns to the soles of his feet and flogging of the back, both of which left terrible scars when I saw him in '86. When they found no evidence, they changed tack and accused him of being a member of the TPLF, because he was from Tigray. More torture. He was released after six months, and after an adventurous flight via Megele, from where he escaped dressed as a poor shepherd, he got to the Sudan. He still has problems walking.

Smaller towns in Tigray suffered too. There, the atrocities of the Red Terror followed on without a break from the violence against civilians that was a normal part of counter-insurgency in the preceding years. The following account of killings was given by Woreda Teka, a farmer and trader and member of Abi Adi baito (council), to visitors in 1988.¹⁴ It is indicative of the many atrocities that occurred in small towns without gaining any publicity.

Well, to go back to the beginning, the first incident was a massacre by government troops. This was in June 1976: 180 people were lined up in the square (it was market day) and machine-gunned.¹⁵ I remember it was about 11 a.m. There had been a battle with the TPLF a few days before this, and the soldiers said they were executing bandits [wunbede]. In fact they just came into the market and rounded up anyone they could find. About a quarter of those shot were women: one had a baby who survived, and we found it alive and still feeding half an hour after she had been killed. There were about 5-600 soldiers in the town that year. They arrived in April and stayed until October when there was another battle. They did have food of their own but kept coming round for extra money.

The soldiers returned in April [1977] and in August they killed four people at the town clinic. They said they were TPLF leaders, and were organizing resistance, but we all knew who they were -- one was a trader and the other three were peasants.

The next year was the time of the Red Terror, and there was a whole brigade [1,000-1,500 soldiers] in the area: there were banda [locally-recruited mercenaries] and militia as well as regular army, and they held the mountains all around here. On 29 January 1978 they killed seven people in their homes with no explanation. They didn't even allow the families to touch the bodies for a whole day -- they were just left outside the houses as a warning. Anyone caught mourning those was put in prison. The victims were:

¹³ Former governor of Tigray and leader of the EDU.

¹⁴ Interview conducted by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, two visitors to Tigray, November 1988.

¹⁵ Other sources give slightly different numbers: 160 total, or 149 peasants and 19 students (total 168).

- *Techane Hagos, 28, who worked in the local government finance office.
- *Lowul Hagos, 25, his brother and a peasant farmer.
- *Azanua, 32, originally from Gonder, working in the sanitation department.
- *Abdel Hakim, 18, a ninth grade student.
- *Three other students from Hagerai Selam whose names I do not know.

The residents of Abi Adi erected a monument to commemorate those killed in the massacre of June 1976. Each time the army occupied the town, the monument was destroyed. Each time the garrison left, the residents rebuilt it.

Impact of the Red Terror

Nobody knows how many people were killed, imprisoned, or forced to flee abroad on account of the Red Terror. A minimum of 10,000 were killed in Addis Ababa alone in 1977, and probably a comparable number in the provinces in 1977 and 1978. A larger number were detained, and subjected to appalling prison conditions and torture. An even larger number became refugees.

The main target of the Red Terror was a generation of urban people with at least minimal education. That generation was lost -- many physically removed, with the remainder so cowed and terrified that any expression of dissent in Addis Ababa was unthinkable for a decade. EPRP members and sympathizers, and others with a similar social or educational profile, were left with a bitter hatred of the Dergue. However, the EPRP and MEISON were essentially crushed. Over the following 13 years the EPRP engaged in armed opposition in rural areas but never regained its preeminence, and MEISON became almost completely defunct.

Rene LeFort commented:

History offers few examples of revolutions that have devoured their own children with such viciousness and so much cruelty. It can be estimated that, of ten civilians who had actively worked for a radical transformation of Ethiopia, only one escaped arrest, imprisonment, torture, execution or assassination. The revolution swallowed the whole of the young generation of Ethiopian intellectuals, that is literates.¹⁶

A class of merchants was also lost in the Red Terror and the year preceding it. Most of those who survived were either forced out of business or withdrew from fear of reprisals. While the numbers of merchants killed or detained does not approach the tens of thousands of young educated victims, this class has a special significance, because its absence contributed to the famines of the 1980s.

In Tigray, the Red Terror encompassed groups not included in these two classes. Peasants and uneducated townspeople suffered too. Like the EPRP sympathizers, almost all Tigrayans

¹⁶ LeFort, 1983, p. 257.

were left with a deep hatred of the government. Unlike the EPRP, however, their resistance was not crushed. The TPLF was battered by the events of 1976-8, but survived and gained popular support. The Dergue was to find that peasant resistance was harder to crush than urban insurrection.

A final consequence of the Red Terror was that it led the Dergue directly to an addiction to rule by terror. In terms of crushing the threat from the EPRP, the Red Terror was a complete success. It was an apparent vindication of the use of indiscriminate and exemplary violence as a counter-insurgency method.

7. TOTAL WAR IN ERITREA, 1978-84

In August 1977, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam called for "total people's war" against the "aggressors and secessionists."¹ His first target was the Somali invasion: his second was the Eritrean fronts, which were in control of 90 per cent of Eritrea.

In December 1977, the EPLF stormed the port of Massawa, but the attack was repulsed with heavy casualties. It was the turning point of the war in the 1970s. Six months later, the Ethiopian government was able to redeploy its forces from the Ogaden, and continue to mobilize its still-expanding army and air force, and counter-attack in Eritrea. Within a year, the ELF was on the verge of collapse and the EPLF had retreated to the remote and mountainous district of Sahel. Confined to a few barren valleys close to the Sudan border, the Eritrean rebels' final defeat seemed only a matter of time.

In fact, the EPLF was able to withstand everything the Ethiopian government could throw at it. The Ethiopian army continued to expand and acquire more sophisticated weaponry, and employ more brutal techniques. Between 1978 and 1984 the war was waged on an unparalleled scale -- the numbers of offensives and bombing attacks equalled and then surpassed the levels of the southeast. The cost in human terms, both to combatants and civilians, was huge.

While the overriding reality of Eritrea in these years was all out warfare, the government also attempted to employ counter-insurgency methods similar to those used in the southeast, including population displacement and control, economic reconstruction in government-controlled areas, and the return of refugees. It tried to obtain humanitarian funds for this, but met with little success. However, the input of economic resources, including food aid was substantial. Thus, while the counter-insurgency strategy directly created famine conditions, there was some compensatory assistance to the population.

¹ Quoted in: Financial Times, London, August 25, 1977.

Army Offensives, 1978-81

In May 1978, using a newly-completed airfield in Meqele in neighboring Tigray, the Ethiopian air force began a campaign of saturation bombing of positions in Eritrea held by the ELF and EPLF. While many of the targets hit were military, the bombers also attacked towns, villages and animal herds. In June, in response to peace offers from the ELF and EPLF and diplomatic pressure from the USSR and Cuba, the government held a political conference on the future of Eritrea, but failed to make any significant concessions to the rebels.

The ground offensive started in July, and in a few weeks captured all the towns that the ELF and EPLF had held in southern and central Eritrea. During the offensive, the army handed out basic commodities that had been in short supply, such as sugar and soap, to the civilian population of the towns. Any benefits this rather obvious attempt to win favor may have had were negated by a policy of mass detention of people who had cooperated with the rebel administration.

The second offensive began in November 1978, aimed at the relief of Massawa and the recapture of Keren. An even larger army was deployed, including large contingents of armor. On November 25-26, there was a huge two-day battle with the EPLF at Elabored, which ended inconclusively. However, the EPLF was badly mauled and decided to abandon Keren and the nearby towns, and withdraw to the mountains of Sahel, where the terrain was appropriate for a last stand. This was called the "strategic withdrawal."

The ELF, which had taken the brunt of the first offensive, was already buckling as a military force. By continuing to engage the Ethiopian army, rather than retreat, it ensured its military defeat.

The Ethiopian attack included a number of incidents of the indiscriminate bombing of refugees. The journalist Dan Connell witnessed people leaving Keren just before its occupation by the army:

Over 20,000 people streamed northward toward the Sudan border. Some carried small bundles in their arms, occasionally a battered leather suitcase on their heads. A flatbed truck cruised back into Keren carrying seven women who had lost their children along the way, their tearstained faces belying their stoical silence ...

On the following day the Ethiopians began an indiscriminate bombardment of the area with long range artillery, Stalin Organ rocket launchers and MiG aircraft. Late in the afternoon, three MiG-23s hit one makeshift refugee camp of 2,000 to 3,000 people some 40 kilometers north of the battle lines. Paramedics carried the 65 wounded to the edge of the road and tended them there while awaiting EPLF trucks to take them out after dark ... Among the injured was one family of five. Berhane Gebreyesus lay on a canvas stretcher while his wife and three children, also wounded, huddled around him. His one-and-a-half-year-old baby shivered with shock from a head wound that was to claim

his young life the next morning. Ten had been killed outright in the raid. Thirty more would not survive the next 24 hours.²

The EPLF's "strategic withdrawal" involved removing anything of use in Keren and the surrounding area. "Not even a nail was left to the enemy. Everything was dismantled and taken away, piece by piece," said one eyewitness.³ In some instances, particularly in the early days of the withdrawal, when Keren was abandoned, this descended into something more akin to panic looting.

The third offensive took place in January-February 1979, and consisted in a three-pronged attack on Nacfa, the headquarters of Sahel district, where the EPLF had set up its "liberated area" and was beginning to construct defensive lines. More areas were evacuated in the face of the assault, and the EPLF was able to dismantle and remove the infrastructure more systematically.

A fourth offensive was launched towards Nacfa in March 1979, a fifth offensive in July. The army Chief of Staff wrote a newspaper article anticipating total victory, entitled: "Days of remnants of secessionist bandits lurking in bushes numbered."⁴ Over 50,000 troops were deployed in the attacks, together with large amounts of armor. Most of the attacks were destroyed well short of their target. Between July 14 and 22, the army lost an estimated 6,000 dead.⁵ Many died of thirst while trying to retreat. The war was in a stalemate.

Indiscriminate bombing continued. Visitors to places behind the EPLF front line told of an average of four or five sorties being flown each day.

Another offensive, launched towards Nacfa in December 1979, ended in a disaster and rout for government forces. The EPLF was able to counter-attack and push the army back as far as its headquarters at Afabet.

Along with massive and sustained bombing, the chief military tactic used by the army was the deployment of massed infantry and armored columns, driving up the narrow rocky valleys towards the emplacements of the EPLF. Tens of thousands of conscript soldiers with minimal training were marched towards death, disablement or capture. Over 20,000 were killed during 1978-9 alone. Many of their skeletons, bleached by the sun, still litter the valleys of northern Eritrea, together with the hulks of tanks. A prisoner of war commented: "Eritrea gobbles up entire divisions."⁶

² Quoted in Horn of Africa, 4.1, (1981) p. 23.

³ Paul Brutsaert, Belgian Committee for Medical Assistance to Eritrea, "Eyewitness Report," 1979.

⁴ Quoted in: Christopher Clapham, Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia, Cambridge, 1988, p. 208.

⁵ Africa Confidential, 20.17, August 22, 1979, p. 7.

⁶ Quoted in: Pietro Petrucci, "The Kremlin's Africa Sickness", reproduced in: Eritrea Information, November

The failure of the massive conventional offensives of 1978-9 led to a change in military tactics in 1980 and 1981. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, who was political commissioner for Eritrea at the time, argues that the policy of "scorched earth" was abandoned in 1980.⁷ Other sources note that from 1980 onwards there were more attacks on non-combatants, including stepped-up aerial bombardment and a greater level of harassment in the towns. What appears to have occurred is that fewer large-scale offensives were launched, with correspondingly less accompanying widespread destruction of everything in the army's path. For two years, while the government prepared its next offensive, the war was fought more as a pacification campaign.

In December 1980 the government launched a relatively small and ineffective attack, which petered out without military gains to either side. 1981 passed without a major military offensive.

The policy of setting up protected garrison-villages along roads, familiar from 1966-71, was revived, albeit initially on a small scale.⁸ Peasant Associations were also set up in south Eritrea, to provide closer control of the population. Curfews and restrictions on movement were reimposed. Most villages had only one or two official entrances, and people attempting to enter or leave through other routes were liable to be detained or shot.

Land mines were planted on military lines, to prevent penetration by the EPLF and defection by soldiers, and around protected villages and other areas used by civilians to constrain their movement.

Soldiers guarding villages and military patrols exacted a continuous toll on civilians. The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) produced figures for the civilian victims of these regular patrols, which roughly correspond to independent estimates made by people in government held areas. ERA claimed that between January and June 1980, the army detained 1,475 rural people and executed 240, and soldiers raped at least 110 women. Nearly 500 cows and 80 tons of grain were confiscated from peasants, and 500,000 people were forcibly displaced by the joint policies of relocation and harassment by patrols and aerial bombardment.

Bombing raids, which in 1978-9 had mostly presaged ground attacks, now became a regular part of the war of intimidation and attrition. In the first half of 1980, ERA estimated that bombing raids had resulted in 390 houses being destroyed and 463 cattle killed.

The first months of 1980 also saw significant developments within the rebel fronts. The EPLF was able to launch a counter-attack on government positions in early 1980. A few months

1979.

⁷ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: Revolution, War and Famine in Ethiopia*, Trenton, N.J., 1989, p. 99.

⁸ *Africa Confidential*, 20.17, August 22, 1979, p. 8.

afterwards, the alliance between the EPLF and the ELF which had held since 1975 began to break, and quickly developed into an irrevocable split. There were some armed clashes between the groups, for instance in August 1980, but large-scale civil war was avoided in part because of military weakness of the ELF. The TPLF assisted the EPLF in its attacks on ELF positions. Most of the ELF fighters retreated into Sudan, where they were detained and disarmed by the Sudan government. The last major group arrived in Karakon, eastern Sudan, in 1982. The ELF, already rent by schism, split still further.

Estimates for the total number of people, both combatants and civilians, killed between 1978 and 1980 agree on a figure of between 70,000-80,000. In 1978 there were 250,000 Eritrean refugees in eastern Sudan (up from 100,000 in 1975); by September 1979 there were 390,000; and by March 1981, 419,000. The worst was yet to come.

The Red Star Campaign

The size of the army continued to rise every year. By 1982, the total manpower stood at an estimated 245,000, and further mobilization was proceeding apace.⁹ Material and logistical help was provided on an ever-increasing scale by the USSR, and extensive Libyan support was also provided.

After the comparative lull of 1980-1, 1982 was to be the worst year of war in Eritrea to date, in which the government made an all-out attempt to crush the EPLF. It was also the year in which the government tried its most systematic attempt to use less destructive counter-insurgency methods, including economic reconstruction.

In January 1982, Mengistu moved the national capital temporarily to Asmara. By this time nearly two thirds of the army was stationed in Eritrea. In a speech on January 25, Mengistu announced the Multifaceted Revolutionary Campaign, and in response to the planned US "Bright Star" exercises in the Middle East, dubbed the forthcoming offensive the "Red Star." He described the EPLF as "anti-freedom, anti-unity, anti-people and anti-peace bandit gangs" and "the pitiful dregs of history" and confidently predicted their imminent demise.¹⁰ This campaign was the end result of two years of planning and preparations.

The offensive started with a campaign of saturation bombing. Nacfa was bombed four or five times a day and -- in a new development -- often at night as well. Phosphorous and cluster bombs were used. The EPLF alleged that chemical weapons were also used, but this allegation has never been proved.

The ground campaign opened with activity on seven different fronts, including Tigray, and a thrust up the Sudanese border. The Sudan government allowed Ethiopian tanks to cross Sudanese territory to attack the EPLF in the rear. There was aerial bombardment on trade routes between Eritrea and Tigray, to disrupt supplies and communications between the EPLF and TPLF.

The Red Star offensive involved the largest number of troops ever deployed in Eritrea -- more than 120,000 were involved in the attacks on the EPLF base areas. The sheer number of soldiers in the territory put unexpected strain on the food resources, and the government was compelled to institute an airlift of food to Asmara for the army.¹¹ The offensive saw a return to

⁹ NOVIB, "War and Famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea: An Investigation into the Arms Deliveries to the Struggling Parties in Eritrea and Tigray," Zeist, the Netherlands, 1991, p. 12.

¹⁰ Clapham, 1988, p. 209.

¹¹ Africa Confidential, 23.5, March 3, 1982, p. 8.

the "scorched earth" policy of 1978-9, though on a larger scale. The enormous level of sustained aerial bombardment and ground attack devastated large areas of northern and western Eritrea.

The conscript soldiers in the Ethiopian ranks were used for massive assaults on the EPLF positions around Nacfa, in the hope that sheer weight of numbers would overrun the rebel lines. It did not. The EPLF were outnumbered by eight to one but had the advantage of an excellent defensive position. The advancing columns were repeatedly ambushed and then machine-gunned as they stormed the EPLF-held mountainsides. There were perhaps 40,000 casualties among the government forces.

The Red Star campaign also involved other counter-insurgency elements, including forced relocation, attempts at economic reconstruction, and attempts to obtain the return of refugees from Sudan. As initially conceived, the campaign was to be "multifaceted," with primacy given to the "hearts and minds" component. As actually implemented, the military aspect dominated.

Just before the military offensive was launched, the EPLF staged a guerrilla raid on the military airport in Asmara, and destroyed a number of airplanes. The TPLF also made attacks near Meqele. These emphasized the government's need for more widespread counter-insurgency measures.

Control of the Population

Throughout the year, tighter control was exerted on all civilians living in government-controlled areas. Curfews were enforced from dusk or slightly afterwards and movement was restricted. Those wishing to travel needed to produce an ID card, an up-to-date rent book, tax clearance, proof of future return, and (in the case of skilled people) a signed statement by a guarantor who provided a bond of 25,000 Birr. Only then could a travel permit be issued, though payment of bribes was also usually necessary. A macabre joke common among Eritreans was that in order to travel to attend a funeral it was necessary to apply for a permit a week before the person died.

A number of means were employed in order to maintain surveillance of the population. Apart from the regular activities of the security services, such as phone-tapping and interception of mail, there were attempts to encourage civilians to spy on each other, and to provoke signs of dissent, so as to identify non-government supporters and enforce conformity. In elections to kebele committees, all the residents of a neighborhood would be called together. The government's list of nominations would be read out, and then the assembled citizens would be asked for additional suggestions. Those with the temerity to make a suggestion would be singled out for surveillance and possible arrest. Individual citizens were asked to help organize frequent

"political" and "fundraising" meetings, with obligatory attendance and "voluntary contributions" by all. Those who participated in the organization would have to report on the enthusiasm shown by the co-organizers. People who failed to attend would be subject to reprisals. Some "contributions," ostensibly for objectives such as reconstruction and the literacy campaign, were deducted from wages at source, others were donated at the supposed "social" functions. Non-payment would lead to reprisals.

One consequence of the tighter restrictions was that rural people on both sides of the battle lines, who had hitherto been able to cross the lines with relative ease to obtain marketed or relief food on the other side, could now do so only with much greater difficulty.

The reconstruction element in the Red Star campaign included plans to rebuild several schools, hospitals and factories. A special levy of ten per cent was introduced on the salaries of all government employees. The government claimed that \$100 million was spent on reconstruction in Eritrea, including \$3 million on the demolition of a public garden and its replacement by a concrete stadium and "revolution square."¹² The true amount spent is not known, but by mid-1982, much of Eritrea's industry, out of action since 1977, was functioning again.¹³

¹² Africa Contemporary Record, 1981-2, p. B159.

¹³ In the late 1980s much of the industrial equipment was dismantled and taken to Addis Ababa.

Refugees

The Red Star campaign coincided with Ethiopia's (successful) attempt to promote the return of refugees from Djibouti and the (unsuccessful) attempt to encourage refugees in Somalia to return. An attempt was also made to ensure the repatriation of the 400,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan.

The roots of the attempts to obtain repatriation of Eritreans went back to 1981. In April of that year, the Ethiopian government, through the UN, presented to the first International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA I) a project for an anticipated 100,000 Eritrean returnees over three years. The UN and the government jointly claimed: "Over the last 18 months, Ethiopia's contacts with the governments of Djibouti and Sudan have provided a favourable context for the repatriation of refugees from these two countries."¹⁴ The government had not, however, made contact with the refugees, who expressed no desire to return under the prevailing circumstances. The government claimed that a pilot scheme catering for 10,000 returnees had already been set up in Keren, Eritrea. Dr Abdel Rahman al Bashir, the Sudanese Commissioner for Refugees, denied that 10,000 refugees had left Sudan for Eritrea -- such an outflow could not have gone unnoticed, and the staff in his offices on the border had not seen any movement of refugees back to Eritrea. The Ethiopian government and UNHCR did not comply with a request by the Sudanese government for an independent mission to evaluate the numbers of returnees and their condition.

In September 1981, the RRC made more substantial requests to UNHCR. Claiming that refugees "had been forced to move [by the Sudan government] with a view to lure international assistance," the RRC appeal document asked for \$116 million. This was based on the claims that 22,000 Eritreans had returned so far, and a further 340,000 would be coming back within four years. (58,000 returnees from Tigray and Gonder were also anticipated.)¹⁵

The 1981 repatriation initiative fell short of the government's hopes. UNHCR donated only \$1.3 million for the supposed 10,000 Eritrean returnees.¹⁶ Attempts to encourage the return of refugees continued over the following years. In April 1982, the UNHCR proposed setting up a sub-office for returnees in Asmara, several reception centers, and a rehabilitation center at Ali

¹⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981.

¹⁵ RRC, "The Returnee Problem in Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, September 1981.

¹⁶ This amounts to \$130 per head. UNHCR gave \$15.9 million to the 441,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan, or \$36 per head.

Gidir, near Tessenei close to the Sudan border. The UNHCR and the Ethiopian Embassy in Khartoum agreed that any refugee in Sudan could register at the embassy and obtain free and safe passage home. In 1982, 424 registered; in 1983, 142 did so.¹⁷ Despite the evident lack of demand for repatriation, UNHCR attempted to set up a tripartite commission between itself and the Sudanese and Ethiopian governments in July 1983. The Sudan government declined, endorsing the view of its major donor, the USA, that repatriation was not feasible until political conditions in Ethiopia had changed. However, UNHCR took unilateral action and sent a mission to eastern Sudan to assess the prospects for repatriation. The mission arrived in Kassala in January 1984 on the same day that 500 Ethiopian soldiers arrived in the town demanding asylum after their garrison at Tessenei had been captured by the EPLF. No more was heard of "voluntary repatriation" after this embarrassing incident.

In 1982, the Ethiopian government stepped up pressure on the Sudan government to cease giving asylum to Eritrean refugees. The Sudan government had abandoned its offensive policy towards Ethiopia in 1978, due to domestic political considerations, recognition of the military ascendancy of the Dergue, and the failure of President Jaafar Nimeiri to obtain support for Eritrean independence from the Organization for African Unity. A period of conciliation with Ethiopia followed. In 1979, Sudan failed to protest an Ethiopian military incursion in pursuit of Ethiopian Democratic Union forces, and during the Red Star offensive, Ethiopian tanks crossed Sudanese territory with the prior agreement of the government. In July 1982, Colonel Mengistu pushed further, threatening the Sudanese Vice-President with unspecified reprisals unless Sudan withdrew support for Eritrean refugees.¹⁸ The Sudanese government refused, pointing out that it gave only access for the EPLF to Port Sudan and humanitarian assistance. However, at that moment the Sudan government was itself changing towards a more assertive policy of supporting the rebel movements in Ethiopia. Though Sudan never provided military supplies, training or bases, free access to Sudanese territory and intelligence sharing was provided, a policy that was to continue until the overthrow of President Nimeiri in April 1985.

The War in 1983-4

The Red Star offensive failed. By May 1982, it had failed to capture Nacfa, and it was unofficially abandoned on June 20. The EPLF was even able to counter-attack and push government lines back. Having been launched with huge publicity, the offensive ended in complete silence from the government media.

¹⁷ Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 331.

¹⁸ David A. Korn, Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union, London, 1986, p. 82.

1983 saw an offensive in March on the Halhal front, north of Keren. Known as the "Stealth Offensive" because of the lack of publicity surrounding it, government forces succeeded in overrunning EPLF lines, but not in inflicting a significant defeat on the insurgents. Attacks continued until August, and severely disrupted the planting of crops in Senhit and Sahel districts.

In early 1983, the administration in Asmara made an estimate for the total number of casualties that had been incurred in the war since 1975. It estimated that 90,000 Ethiopian soldiers had been killed or wounded, together with 9,000 guerrillas. These figures are very credible. The estimated number of civilian casualties was almost unbelievably high: 280,000. In total, over 250,000 deaths were attributed to the war since its outbreak in 1961 (presumably including those due to hunger and displacement).¹⁹

During 1983/4, the Ethiopian army underwent its largest growth to date, surpassing 300,000 men. National military service, was announced in May 1983 and began to be implemented in January 1984, and the 60,000 new servicemen were trained and ready for service six months later. Further supplies of military equipment were provided by the USSR.

In early 1984, the EPLF went on the offensive, making some significant gains (the town of Tessenei was captured in January, causing the embarrassment to the UNHCR mission mentioned above). The government responded by another round of aerial bombardment, and by an offensive launched on 27 October (see chapter 10).

Bombing "Everything that Moves"

Major Bezabih Petros, a pilot who was trained at both Williams Air Force Base, Arizona, and Ligov Air Base in the USSR, was shot down and captured by the EPLF in April 1984. In captivity, he had this to say about the bombing:
We definitely know civilians will get hurt. But, knowing that the people sympathize with the rebels, the order is to bomb everything that moves.

In July 1979, Dan Connell witnessed the bombing of a group of pastoral semi-nomads on migration. Two women and a boy were hurt in the attack, together with five camels hurt, and one killed. Connell commented that the family group could not possibly have been mistaken for a military target.

An important element in the government's bombing strategy was instilling fear in the civilian populations. The bombing, and the measures needed to cope with it, such as living by night, pose enormous practical problems and are demoralizing for the civilian population. An Eritrean refugee woman in Sudan explained why she had left her country: "I was tired. I wanted

¹⁹ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, 1989, p. 113; Africa Contemporary Record, 1983-4, p. B133.

just to walk outside in daylight without needing to look into the sky and fear for my life and my children."²⁰ It was not even necessary for the aircraft to drop bombs in order to inspire fear. They only needed to screech overhead at unpredictable intervals to remind people of their deadly presence, and the need for constant vigilance.

These air raids not only caused direct physical damage to people, animals and material infrastructure, but damaged the very social, economic and even psychological fabric of society. The constant fear of bombing in EPLF-held and contested areas literally drove life underground. Everything, whether civilian or military, had to be camouflaged from air attack. Schools and hospitals were located in caves and under trees. Only essential movements occurred by day -- all wheeled transport and much agricultural activity had to take place at night. Markets had to be held at night. Animal herding, which requires vigilance in order to make sure animals do not stray and must be carried out during daylight became dangerous, and increasingly restricted to forested areas and twilight hours. Herders reported that the Ethiopian warplanes appeared to take particular delight in "hunting" camels.

Even people not physically wounded have been left with permanent psychological scars after bombardment. The survivors of air raids have described being distraught with grief, delirious with fear for days or even weeks, subject to sudden-onset panic attacks which leave them in a state of acute anxiety, or prone to ever-present fears during the daytime and nightmares during the darkness. Some children become frozen with terror at the mere sound of an airplane.

The Creation of Famine

The war in Eritrea was fought on an unprecedented scale between 1978 and 1984, with the 1982 campaign marking the worst point. The destruction and disruption caused by the war was instrumental in creating the famine which developed, though a number of aspects of the situation prevented the famine from becoming as severe as in neighboring Tigray.

Famine occurs when a society no longer becomes socially and economically viable. In Eritrea in the 1980s, this occurred on account of:

- (1) the direct destruction caused by war;
- (2) the restrictions on economic activities caused by war and the other counter-insurgency measures;
- (3) the degradation of the natural environment, which was caused in part by war and counter-insurgency measures; and
- (4) rainfall failure.

²⁰ Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, February 1989.

This section will look at items (2) and (3); item (1) has essentially been covered, and item (4) – the repeated partial or complete failure of the rains, starting with the winter rains of 1980/1 – lies beyond the scope of this report.

The Impact of War and Counter-Insurgency Measures

One of the most disruptive aspects of the war was that it caused much of the population of Eritrea to be displaced. By March 1982, there were 440,000 Eritreans in Sudan alone. In 1983/4, a further 120,000 fled to Sudan, though many later returned. The 1985 offensives caused a further 190,000 to be displaced inside Eritrea, and 30,000 to flee to Sudan.

The policy of relocation in protected villages caused severe disruption to the livelihoods of farmers and herders.

Andu Kifle is a pastoralist-farmer from the small village of Adi-Werhi in Eritrea's Hamassien plateau. Andu and his two adult sons, Mehari and Keleta, used to take advantage of the winter rains (November-February) by moving their livestock to the bahri (green belt [down the escarpment close to the Red Sea]), 140 km east of Adi-Werhi where the rest of the family remained. Farming on the mainly state-owned dominale land in the green belt, Andu and his sons would get a reasonable harvest in February and March and return to Adi-Werhi by April, bringing sacks of grain, butter, ghee [clarified butter] and salt as rewards for their labour ...

At the onset of the May rains, one son would return to the green belt to collect the pair of draught oxen left their with relatives. From May until October the whole family was busy cultivating in their plateau village. After the harvest and a few months' rest, the farming cycle started again.

This was the case until 1985, when Andu Kifle and his family, along with several hundred villagers from surrounding areas, were transferred to a new security hamlet called Inwet, where movement is restricted to a 10 km radius. Their whole agricultural system and pattern of life broke down. Andu sums up the feelings of many peasants: "We are like voiceless prisoners in these security hamlets. We have some oxen but not the land to plough, we have the cattle but we cannot graze freely. What choice do we have other than to starve?"²¹

In western Eritrea, many farmers were similarly forced to abandon seasonal farming on the flood-retreat of the Gash river. Many farmers were thus able to harvest only one crop per year instead of two, and many herders were forced to abandon their established practices of seasonal migration for grazing. In addition, many areas were rendered unusable by trenches, fortifications, free-fire zones, and land mines. A survey in 1987 found that land had been mined in almost ten

²¹ Zeremariam Fre, "The Legacy of War," in PANOS, Greenwar: Environment and Conflict, London, 1991, pp. 140-1.

per cent of the villages covered, and that two huge areas in Sahel and Akele Guzai had been rendered completely off-limits by mining.²²

²² Lionel Cliffe, "The Impact of the War and the Response to it in Different Agricultural Systems in Eritrea," Development and Change, 20, 1989, p. 378.

Overall Impact of the War on Food Availability

In 1987, a team from the University of Leeds visited Eritrea, from both sides, and calculated the food production of the territory, and the constraints upon it.²³ The team found that Eritrea was, even in normal times, a food deficit area. They estimated that in a "normal, non-war" year the production of staple foods would be enough to feed the population for between seven and seven and a half months. In a "normal, war" year that figure fell to 4.6-4.8 months. This implies that the war was costing between 65,000 and 95,000 metric tonnes of lost food production per year -- about half of the normal food deficit.

Impact on the Grain Trade

Normally, Eritrea's food deficit is made good by trade. The grain trade was severely disrupted by the war. Up to 1975, much of highland Eritrea and the towns were fed by grain imports from Sudan and the surplus-producing areas of western Tigray. Over the following decade, there were constant interruptions to one or other trade route.²⁴

In 1975 the war interrupted the supply route from Sudan. In 1977, export from Tigray was stopped by the insecurity there and the flight of large Tigrayan landowners to Sudan. Fortunately, supplies from Sudan re-started shortly afterwards. During 1977/8, the key route to Sudan was almost completely controlled by the ELF,²⁵ which ensured physical security, but the ELF issued very few permits for cross-border trade in grain, restricting the number of merchants who could operate and the amounts they could import.²⁶ In 1978/9, the ease of trade briefly improved with government control of the major routes. While the government never imposed the same level of restrictions on trade as it did further south, it did require all traders to move by escorted convoy. There was also, during 1980-2, increased security in western Tigray and exports to Eritrea resumed. Intermittent attempts by the TPLF to restrict the export of grain to Eritrea were ineffectual, and at most a 10% tax was levied. After the collapse of the ELF in 1980, there was

²³ Lars Bondestam, Lionel Cliffe and Philip White, "Eritrea: Food and Agricultural Production Assessment Study, Final Report," Leeds, 1988.

²⁴ The following information derives largely from interviews with grain traders conducted in Kassala, Sudan, in March and April 1989 by Alex de Waal.

²⁵ Only the town of Barentu remained in government hands.

²⁶ There is speculation that the profits which accrued to a small cartel of traders from this practice were an important source of finance for the ELF.

increased banditry in western Eritrea, which compelled merchants to organize their own armed convoys. From 1981 onwards there was greater harassment of traders suspected of trading with Sudan. Greater restrictions on trade were imposed during the Red Star campaign, and in 1983 the heavy fighting in western Tigray interrupted supplies from there.

Markets in EPLF-held areas and transitional zones were accessible to civilians from government-held areas only at considerable risk. Mohamed Idris, a farmer in western Eritrea, explained:

When we return from here [an EPLF-held area] to our villages, we don't know what will happen to us, because there are spies who will be asking where we have gone. We have taken a risk to come here. In order not to be killed, we will have to lie and say we travelled to Kassala [Sudan] to get food. The enemy looks after us like goats -- our whole living situation depends on tricking the enemy.

When we are away from our homes like this, we fear for our women. The Dergue rapes and harasses our women. But what can we do?²⁷

Women play a key role in the economic life of rural Eritrea. Petty trading, short-distance migrant labor and other activities done by women are key to a household's income in times of stress. As is clear from the quotation above, fear for the safety of women greatly constrained what they were willing or able to do, with resulting loss of income and food to the family.

These disruptions had serious consequences for access to food in many parts of Eritrea. The price of food rose as a result, and the poor suffered.

The Impact on the Natural Environment

Eritrea is a semi-arid area, with a fragile eco-system. The farmers and herders of the territory had evolved a range of strategies to be able to ensure, so far as possible, a sustainable livelihood. The pressures of sustained land use, exacerbated by rainfall failure, was already putting pressure on Eritrea's natural resource base. The war contributed to this process of degradation of the environment in a number of ways:

*Trees were cut to make trenches, gun emplacements and village fortifications. The EPLF enacted a ban on the cutting of live trees, but it is unclear to what extent this was enforced. The loss of trees not only directly created deforestation, but forced pastoralists to browse their animals on other and possibly less suitable trees, causing further loss of tree cover.

*Large areas of forest in the district of Semhar were burned by the army. The rationale for this was that the forests allowed guerrillas to approach the strategic Asmara-Massawa and Afabet-Massawa roads without being seen.

²⁷ Quoted in: Barbara Hendrie, "Field Report -- Eritrea," Emergency Relief Desk, Khartoum, April 1986, Appendix B.

- *Eucalyptus woods at Biet Giorgis around Asmara and some other towns were cut down for the same reason.
- *The interruption of the charcoal and firewood trade from southwestern parts of Eritrea led to people obtaining wood fuel from their own localities.
- *The blocking of migration routes used by animal herders forced the herders to keep their animals in one area throughout the whole year, putting additional stress on the pasture and browse of these areas. The same factor caused herders to switch to farming, which places more stress on the land.
- *Large areas of land were rendered unusable by land mines, forcing farmers to cultivate other areas instead, and forcing herders to move their animals elsewhere. These other areas were usually less suitable and more vulnerable to degradation.
- *The general impoverishment caused by war forced larger numbers of people to engage in marginal economic activities such as selling firewood or the leaves of doum palms (which are used for making mats), which are destructive of the natural environment.

Military engagements themselves also caused havoc to the environment. For example, a fighter's description of the battle of Elabored, south of Keren, in November 1978, indicates the level of destruction wrought in the valley where the battle was fought:

[Elabored] was full of tanks, dead bodies and trucks from edge to edge. All the dry grass was burned totally, and rows of trees were [knocked] down from the tanks. The planes never stopped coming. They were dropping different types of bomb including napalm [or phosphorous], and at times the valley was so filled with smoke you couldn't even see.²⁸

Every traveller to Eritrea has seen trees burned by phosphorous bombs or with limbs blown off by cluster bombs or high explosives.

Humanitarian Assistance

There was relatively little humanitarian assistance to Eritrea during this period. International aid to ERA fell from \$2.9 million in 1978 to \$1.6 million in 1979, and only \$1 million in 1980. Food relief was supplied at a rate of under 6,000 tons per year. These amounts were pitifully small compared to the level of need. Assistance on the government side was scarcely more generous, but Eritrea had the advantages of containing both of Ethiopia's ports, and being a sensitive political area and thus a priority for much government economic aid.

Relief was distributed in such a manner as to ensure greater control over the population.

²⁸ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, 4.1, 1981, p. 22.

From 1982 onwards, it was made increasingly difficult for rural people to cross from government- to EPLF-held areas for relief. In government relief centers, "applicants are accepted only if they come as complete families, and then they receive rations [sufficient] for only such small periods that any hope of returning to their own villages with some food is illusory."²⁹

Factors Ameliorating the Famine

Rural Eritrea suffered from deepening famine during 1982-4. However, according to most indicators, Eritrea did not succumb to famine as severely as Tigray or north Wollo. There was less distress migration and, apart from the refugee camps in Sudan, there were none of the appalling relief shelters that were common further south. A later investigation found little evidence for raised death rates during the famine period, though other demographic signs of famine such as a lower birth rate showed up clearly.³⁰

A number of factors accounted for the lesser severity of the famine. One factor was that although Eritrea is drier than the neighboring provinces to the south, the relative shortfall in rain during 1982-4 was less. The climatic adversity suffered by the rural people was therefore less severe.

A second factor was that the war was fought as a positional war – with well-defined zones held by the contending armies – rather than a classic guerrilla war, so that outside the areas directly affected by fighting, the population was subjected to relatively less harassment. A third factor is that the war actually brought some economic benefits. The reconstruction element of the Red Star campaign significantly boosted urban employment. The army in Eritrea was paid relatively well and regularly, and Eritrean towns received their quotas of consumer goods on schedule. Shopkeepers in garrison towns such as Keren and Anseba reported doing a brisk trade in watches, cassette recorders, coffee and clothes, mainly selling to soldiers.³¹ Army officers benefitted from the flow of contraband goods from Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and the parallel currency market that grew up around the flow of expatriate Eritreans' remittances back home. While growing rich, the officers tolerated this informal market. This relative prosperity for traders trickled down to certain sections of society, including the traders' relatives, domestic servants, house builders and others.

Finally, as the famine deepened in 1985, the amounts of aid provided to Eritrea became

²⁹ Fritz Eisenloeffel, *The Eritrea Durrah Odyssey*, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1983, p. 38.

³⁰ Alex de Waal, "Population and Health of Eritreans in Wad Sherifei," ActionAid, London, 1989.

³¹ Alex de Waal, interviews in Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

very large. The aid on the government side was tied to the continuing counter-insurgency strategy, but it did have the positive benefit of actually feeding some people.

Despite these factors, the famine of 1983-5 in Eritrea must not be minimized. It caused massive and avoidable suffering and impoverishment among most sections of the rural population, and led to many deaths.

8. COUNTER-INSURGENCY AND FAMINE IN TIGRAY AND ITS BORDERLANDS, 1980-84

In October 1984, the world was shocked by a film made by the BBC and Visnews in Megele (Tigray), and Korem (on the Tigray-Wollo border). The pictures of a mass of destitute people, starving with a quiet dignity, revealed a "Biblical famine" in the late 20th century. The famine had of course been developing for several years with little attention from the outside world -- that was part of the horror of the story, which pricked the conscience of the affluent west. This and the following chapter recount the central story of how those images of mass starvation, and the wider famine which they represented, came about.

Grinding poverty and an unpredictable climate played their part in creating the tragic pictures of October 1984. The social and agricultural policies of the Ethiopian government were also important, and will be analyzed in the next chapter. However, at the center of the famine -- Tigray and north Wollo -- the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian army was the single most important reason why the drought of 1983-4 became not a "normal" period of hardship but a famine of a severity and extent unparalleled for a century.

The counter-insurgency strategy followed in Tigray in the early 1980s was different from that pursued in the southeast and in Eritrea. Starting in August 1980, it involved a greater level of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, and there was no attempt to provide even the most minimal level of compensatory assistance to the stricken population. When the level of brutality and destruction increased in early 1983, famine developed directly.

The Ethiopian famine of 1983-5 was both "wide" -- it affected a very large area -- and "deep" -- there were places of exceptional severity. The famine first hit in southern Tigray and north Wollo, and spread outwards. At the nadir, up to a third of the country was gripped by famine. The original center was the most severely hit, where the greatest depths of famine were plumbed.

Drought and Famine, 1983-85: An Outline

The most remarkable fact about the famine of 1983-5 in Ethiopia was that, by the time the drought struck, the famine was already well under way.

Every year, somewhere in northern Ethiopia, there is a harvest failure due to poor rains and a food shortage, and people go hungry (see chapter 1). If there is a humanitarian agency working in the vicinity, calls for help will be sounded, but this does not amount to widespread or unusual famine. It is important, therefore, to distinguish the "normal" alarms for localized distress from the "abnormal" alarms that accompany the development of a major famine. We contend here that the droughts of 1980-3 were unremarkable; that localized surpluses existed; and that if normal processes of redistribution of food had been allowed to occur, there would have been no famine. 1984 was a drought year of unusual severity, it is true -- but had the famine not already been in train, and had the artificial famine-creating actions not continued, major famine could have been averted.

Starting in 1980, the "normal" alarms began to sound, varying in severity over the following three years. The Relief Society of Tigray (REST, working with the TPLF), the government RRC, and voluntary agencies sounded these alarms. In late 1982, the alarms became more urgent.

In February 1983, however, there was a change from a severe but "normal" cry for help to the warning of a major famine. British relief agencies made a major appeal on February 16. This cry for help arose because relief agencies working in the relief shelters of Korem and Ibat (central Gondar) were suddenly receiving a large inflow of destitute and malnourished migrants. Attributed at the time to drought, the flow of destitute migrants was in fact a direct result of the war (see below).

There is no evidence for harvest failures in northern Ethiopia over the period from 1980 to early 1983 sufficient to cause severe famine.

No reliable figures are available for rural production in Tigray and the adjoining areas. National figures for Ethiopia are available, however:
Table 1. Food Production in Ethiopia, 1977-84.¹

	Production: total	per head
1977	99	95
1978	110	104

¹ Source: FAO Production Yearbooks. Also see: Bob Baulch, "Entitlements and the Wollo Famine of 1982-1985," *Disasters*, 11.3, 1987, p. 196, where a seven per cent higher production figure is given for 1983.

1979	122	113
1980	117	106
1981	115	102
1982	127	110
1983	118	99
1984	110	90

Note: 1974-76 = 100

Not only do these figures fail to indicate any crisis until 1984, but they show that 1982 and 1983 were, nationally, bumper crops -- two of the best on record, and above or equal to the long-term average. There were of course regional shortages, but the simplistic explanation of the famine as a prolonged drought-induced food shortage does not hold up.²

The RRC produces estimates of the size of the crop and the availability of food after each harvest. These are always pessimistic, as it is the job of the RRC to identify deficits and appeal for aid. (Surveying the same area, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), with a brief to identify surpluses, usually produces a much more optimistic picture.)

After the 1980 harvest, food availability in Tigray, Wollo and Gonder was "normal."³ 1981 was better. The main 1981 report identified surpluses in the usual areas: Raya (eastern Tigray), Kobo (north Wollo), Borena (south Wollo), Simien (north Gonder), central Gonder, and Gojjam.⁴ No assessment was made for western Tigray, but surpluses existed there too. For 1982, the reports for Wollo were encouraging -- food shortages were localized, and most of the highlands was normal.⁵ Eastern Gonder was suffering drought, but the main surplus-producing areas were less affected.⁶ In early 1982, Tigray was described as "encouraging," and in late 1982 as "poor," but no surveys were done -- the main measure used was the price of grain in Megele town.⁷ Later in this chapter it will be shown how government policy helped to cause the price rise

² Attempts to argue the reverse are based on assumptions that the data are faulty. See for example: Gopu Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines 1973-1985: A Case Study," in J. Dreze and A. Sen, *The Political Economy of Hunger, Vol. II*, Oxford, 1990. Kumar is forced to argue back from "what we know about the progress of the famine" to the "defensible assumption" of a catastrophic fall in food output, which is not shown in the figures (p. 198).

³ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region," Addis Ababa, November 1980.

⁴ RRC, "Food Supply System: Meher Synoptic Report, 1973/74 EC [Ethiopian Calendar] (1981) Crop Season," Addis Ababa, March 1982.

⁵ RRC, "Report on a Reconnaissance Trip in Wollo Administrative Region, (August 11-September 4, 1982)," November 1982; RRC, "Meher Synoptic Report 1974/75 EC (1982) Crop Season," March 1983.

⁶ RRC, "A Report on a Reconnaissance Trip to Gonder Administrative Region (October 6 - November 6, 1982)" Addis Ababa, November 1982.

⁷ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region", March 1982, and "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 1," December 1982.

over this period. A survey done among Tigrayan refugees in Sudan in 1985 found that "their highest yields in the last ten years occurred in 1982-83."⁸

In April 1983, the RRC issued a revised report for the 1982 main season. This was much more alarming in tone -- despite the fact that no new information had been collected about the 1982 harvest in the north. Grain prices had shot up, and the RRC inferred that major shortages existed.⁹ The real reasons for the change in tone were probably that a famine had started, and the RRC needed to identify a drought to blame it upon.

The main 1983 season provides the first significant evidence for widespread crop failure. But even at this stage, the failure was confined to most of Tigray and some parts of north Wollo. In Gonder, the food supply situation improved in 1983, with substantial surpluses in Gonder Zuria, Chilga, Debre Tabor, and Simien. In most of Wollo the food supply remained normal.¹⁰ The RRC had no data for Tigray, but a relief agency team visiting TPLF areas reported surpluses in Shire and Raya, though all other areas had suffered harvest failures.¹¹

Almost universal drought first occurred in the spring of 1984, affecting the belg harvest. Belg crops produce only a small proportion of the food produced in the north -- about one quarter in the areas where the belg rains fall, and none at all in 90% of Tigray. The belg failure was serious, but should not have caused undue problems in the light of the average crop performance over the previous few years, and the bumper national harvest. But the RRC played up the belg failure, telling blatant untruths into the bargain: "The highlands of Wollo, Bale and Shewa are the major belg producing areas. Belg accounts for at least half of the annual production in most parts of these areas. There are also areas in most of the remaining regions which heavily depend on belg, particularly in Tigray ..."¹²

Rainfall data are very scarce -- for years they were concealed by the government. No data are available for places in Tigray, but some are available for Kobo, in north Wollo, which is close to the heart of the famine zone. These data confirm that the drought only began in late 1983. The following table shows the rainfall for the belg (February-May) and meher (July-October) seasons in Kobo.

⁸ Cultural Survival, Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, p. 192.

⁹ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 2 (Oct-Dec [1982])," April 1983.

¹⁰ RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast," March 1984 (based on data from late 1983); RRC, "Meher Synoptic Report 1976/76 EC (1983) Crop Season," January 1984. The surplus in Simien was identified by REST.

¹¹ John English, Jon Bennett, Bruce Dick and Caroline Fallon, "Tigray 1984: An Investigation," Oxfam, January 1984, p. 62. The team reported that Raya had reaped a surplus of 8-10,000 tonnes despite a one-season drought in the area, implying that the surpluses of previous years were much larger.

¹² RRC, "The Belg Rain Failure and Its Effect on Food Production, Special Report," May 1984.

Table 2. Rainfall in Kobo, North Wollo.¹³

	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	
<u>Belg</u>		268	117	233	118	NA	168	270	19	214	174	331
<u>Meher</u>	460	352	497	499	646	362	150	51	243	450	233	

All amounts in millimeters.

Further south, a similar picture can be seen in the fragmentary climatic data that are available. Some rainfall stations in Wollo recorded a drought in 1983, others recorded a good year. An example of the latter is Bati, where the famine of 1984/5 was very severe -- but where rainfall in 1983 was the highest for more than 15 years.¹⁴

Satellite imagery of vegetation also indicates that the spring (belg) harvest of 1983 was likely to have been normal. Thus we see that the drought started only after the famine was set in train. The reason why rainfall data have been kept as state secrets now becomes clearer.

Both rainfall data and satellite imagery confirm that the main 1983 season was satisfactory in Gonder, implying the existence of the substantial surpluses normally produced in that province.

1984 was a year of almost complete drought, lasting the whole year and affecting a wide area. Production in Wollo was only 28% of 1983; in Gonder it was 86% (no figures are available for Tigray). It was the results of this drought that observers saw when they visited the region in late 1984 -- dry fields, withered crops, waterless wells. The fact is, however, that a visitor can only see a single year of drought, and that is not enough to cause famine. The drought of 1984 was used as a scapegoat for a famine that had begun much earlier.

In 1982 and 1983, the localized drought in Tigray was most severe on the eastern escarpment. But the population hit hardest by the famine originated in southern Tigray and northern Wollo, and was to be found scattered in places such as Shire, Ibnat and Korem -- another indicator that climate was not the fundamental cause of the disaster.

Another indicator of famine is grain prices. High grain prices indicate a scarcity in the market. The following table shows the approximate average grain prices during the famine period.

Table 3. Grain Prices in Northern Ethiopia¹⁵

¹³ Derived from: Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia: A View from the Village*, Boulder, Co., 1990, p. 84.

¹⁴ Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 57.

¹⁵ Derived from data in: Alex de Waal, "Tigray: Grain Markets and Internal Purchase," Oxfam, 1990, p. 44; Peter

	East Tigray	North Wollo	North Gonder
Nov/Dec 1981	100	50	40
Nov/Dec 1982	165	65	55
Nov/Dec 1983	225	90	45
Nov/Dec 1984	300	160	70
Jun/Jul 1985	380	235	165

All prices in Birr per quintal (100 kg)

Prices rose to reach famine levels in Tigray in late 1982, but only rose to comparable levels in Wollo between February and August 1984, and in Gonder in mid-1985. Throughout 1983, prices in Wollo were stable -- in some markets they actually fell. These prices are not consistent with the account that stresses repeated and widespread drought. They are consistent with highly localized famine in Tigray, spreading out into neighboring areas in 1984 and 1985.

By 1984 the famine had deepened to such an extent in Tigray and north Wollo that its effects were being felt far away. The high grain prices at the epicenter of the famine were forcing up prices elsewhere, putting food out of the reach of the poor. Increasing animal sales were pushing livestock prices down, and migrants were flooding the labor markets. The famine had acquired a momentum of its own and began to spread, helped by the coercive and restrictive social and agricultural policies of the government.

The drought and accompanying crop failures cannot explain the famine. To understand why it occurred it is necessary to turn to an account of the conduct of the war in Tigray.

The TPLF

The TPLF, from its inception, fought a classic guerrilla insurgency. It refused to defend any territory, and instead relied on being able to move among the population "like a fish through water." Espousing a mix of Tigrayan nationalism -- for instance calling itself the "second Weyane," referring to the rebellion of 1943 -- and radical politics, the TPLF soon came to have the tacit support of most of the rural population. The Red Terror was waged with particular savagery in Tigray and drove much of the urban population to support the rebels. The TPLF took

Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 198; Baulch, 1987, p. 199.

advantage of the government's military preoccupation with the Ogaden and Eritrea to operate throughout rural Tigray during 1978/9. It set up a wide network of councils, instigated land reform, and began some health care and development projects.

In 1976, the TPLF took several European hostages, including a British family of four and a journalist. It demanded a ransom of \$1 million for the British family, but eventually released them after eight months captivity after pressure was brought to bear by the Sudan government.

From 1980 onwards, the TPLF claimed to control 85 per cent of Tigray. Because of the TPLF's guerrilla strategy, the government army was able to launch offensives into almost every part of the province, and thus make a counter-claim of having access everywhere. The two claims are both true: TPLF fighters could move almost anywhere at will, with the support of most of the people, and the army could, by force, reach most places, but not hold them.

In 1980, the TPLF began to form militias throughout the countryside. This was partly in response to demands from the villagers to have arms to protect themselves from the casual and repeated violence of army patrols, and partly in order to take the war to the government throughout the province. In 1982, the TPLF launched its "Southern Operation" and opened a new front in southern Tigray and northern Wollo. It followed the formation of the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) a year previously. Tamrat Layne was a prominent leader of the EPDM, which started as a breakaway group of the EPRP. Always a close ally of the TPLF, the EPDM was militarily active in Wollo and Gonder.

In 1982, the TPLF and EPDM started mounting major operations in Wollo. A year later, Africa Confidential noted that "the TPLF and EPDM are able to hit the whole length of the Dessie-Megele road."¹⁶ In March 1983, a joint TPLF-Afar Liberation Front (ALF) attack overran Bati, on the eastern escarpment of southern Wollo. In April, TPLF-EPDM forces occupied Lalibella, the historic site of rock-hewn churches in central Wollo, and kidnapped relief workers in Korem. Seqota, district headquarters of Wag, was occupied. In September, joint TPLF-EPDM operations extended as far south as Wichale, Jarre and Haik, close to Dessie. Eleven Swiss relief workers were kidnapped in Jarre and later released. In August 1984, TPLF-ALF attacks were mounted near Mille, in eastern Wollo, and in October Lalibella was captured again. On each occasion the army appeared to be taken unawares by the attack, indicating that the rebels were able to move with ease among the local population. In response, many elements of the counter-insurgency strategy were applied throughout northern and central Wollo and Gonder, not merely in Tigray.

Until about 1986, the TPLF had virtually no heavy weapons and no "base area." It had a core army of an estimated 7,000-15,000 men, and a much larger number of militiamen. The

¹⁶ Africa Confidential, 24.12, September 21, 1983, p. 4.

EPDM was a smaller force.

Counter-Population Warfare by the Government

The nature of the rebellion in Tigray led to a new variation on the army's counter-insurgency strategies. These strategies were instrumental in setting the famine in train.

There were three main aspects:

- *Large scale military offensives, aimed at the surplus-producing Shire district. The Sixth Offensive of the Ethiopian army in Tigray was launched in August 1980 and continued until March 1981. The Seventh Offensive was fought from February to April 1983. (An eighth was fought from February to May 1985.)

- *Aerial bombardment of markets. This started in 1980 and was intensified in early 1982 to coincide with the Red Star campaign in Eritrea, and remained at a high level thereafter.

- *Tight controls on movement of migrants and traders, enforced in all garrison towns, in eastern Tigray and northern Wollo. These controls were introduced in late 1980 and widened over the following two years. In 1983 restrictions were tightened in Wollo. In 1984 they were enforced particularly strictly, with widespread detentions of suspected TPLF sympathizers, and were extended to many parts of Gonder.

The logic behind the government's strategy was "draining the sea to catch the fish." This amounted to counter-population warfare. Because of its actions during 1976-9, the government had alienated all significant sections of the populace, and could locate no secure base from which to start a pacification strategy. As a result, the army engaged in counter-population warfare. The increasing hostility of the population towards the army combined with increasing TPLF military successes, causing the army to become more demoralized and more brutal.

The three elements of the military strategy combined to prevent the normal redistribution of surpluses within northern Ethiopia. The offensives effectively destroyed or made unavailable most of the surpluses in Shire in 1980 and 1983. The bombing and the restrictions on movement prevented the mobilization of the Raya surpluses from 1980 onwards, becoming particularly severe in 1984; in 1983 the restrictions prevented much trade in Wollo and in 1984 in Gonder. The result was that peasants in the deficit areas of eastern Tigray and Tembien-Wag were unable to provision themselves from the adjoining areas, and began to suffer famine.

The following sections will look in detail at each of the three aspects.

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: I. Military Campaigns

In January and February 1980, a punitive expedition by the army burned several villages in north-central Tigray. Credible reports indicate that 130 civilians were killed in Mai Kenetal.

The village of Aweger was destroyed, and when villagers from nearby Haile tried to help the inhabitants rebuild, the army killed 51 of them and briefly imprisoned over 800. More than 300 civilians were killed in the entire operation. However, major military action only occurred later in the year.

On August 22, 1980, the army launched its Sixth Offensive in central Tigray. This marked a change in military strategy, and the beginnings of widespread counter-population warfare. In the midst of the offensive, Africa Confidential commented with remarkable prescience: "A consequence of the fighting is likely to be widespread famine."¹⁷ Africa Confidential only got the time frame wrong, and underestimated the resilience of the Tigrayan peasants -- the famine took another two years to develop.

The offensive involved widespread military action over the following seven months. 40,000 troops were involved, together with aircraft and helicopter gunships¹⁸ -- a small force by later standards, but enough to create major disruptions in the rural economy. Tembien, the centre of the famine area in the following years, was worst hit.

During the campaign, the army engaged in a number of activities that directly affected the ability of the population to feed itself. These included:¹⁹

- *the destruction of grain stores: an estimated 6,000 tons of grain was burned by incendiary bombs or destroyed by soldiers;
- *the killing of cattle: REST estimated that 950 cattle were killed;
- *the burning of crops and pastures: 142,000 hectares of farmland was rendered useless in fighting in February-March 1981 alone by burning or trampling;
- *the enforced collection of taxes and contributions, often at a punitive level, ostensibly including "arrears;"
- *the forcible displacement of farmers: about 80,000 farmers in central Tigray were forced to leave their homes. 20,000 resettled themselves in western Tigray and 5,000 became refugees in Sudan. Many could not harvest in 1980, or had inadequate time to plough their fields for the 1981 rainy season.
- *destruction of villages: over 2,000 houses and five grinding mills were destroyed.

Abi Adi had been occupied by the TPLF since August 1978; on September 11, 1980, it was attacked by the army using helicopters. Many houses were burned and much of the

¹⁷ Africa Confidential, 21.24, November 26, 1980, p. 7.

¹⁸ Mi 24 helicopter gunships were deployed for the first time in Africa in this campaign.

¹⁹ Kirsty Wright, "Famine in Tigray: An Eyewitness Account," London, REST Support Committee, 1983, p. 7.

population was forced to flee; four people were killed. On September 29, a number of towns and villages in central Tigray were attacked by airplanes and helicopters, and, according to one report, 27 people were killed.²⁰

After the campaign finished, the government had established a network of garrisons throughout the province, many of them in important towns for local trade. Abi Adi is one such town, critical for the trade between the surplus-producing Simien district of Gonder and the deficit areas of Meqele and Agame. For twelve months after the offensive there was a garrison at Abi Adi, which was able to enforce the restrictions on migration and trade discussed in the next section. Some of these garrisons were withdrawn in 1981 and 1982, under pressure from the TPLF. Regular patrols continued, and civilians were subjected to harassment, robbery and execution.

In a series of attacks in August and September 1981, over 400 people were killed by soldiers and airplanes. For example, on August 26, the village of Mezega was burned. 14 villagers were killed and 400 cattle slaughtered.²¹

The opening of the Red Star offensive in Eritrea in February 1982 saw widespread bombing and an increase in army attacks in Tigray. Patrols in southern Tigray became more frequent in response to the TPLF's "Southern Operation."

In one of many retaliatory attacks, on this occasion following a TPLF ambush, soldiers burned a village near Adi Gudud, killing two women and seven children who remained behind in their huts.²²

The end of 1982 saw preparations for the Seventh Offensive, which was to be the most brutal to date. A month before the ground attack started, helicopters and MiG fighter bombers started "softening up" the towns and villages to be attacked. In December 1982, helicopter-gunships bombed Abi Adi town for half an hour. According to a member of the baito, eighty houses were burned, "but only one person killed and a couple wounded."²³

The army offensive began in January, with attacks in central and western Tigray. Work on the harvest stopped at once, as people made preparations for concealing food and other items from the soldiers, and evacuating their villages if need be. Migrant workers moved to other areas. Civilians were killed by army raids near Axum, Enticho and Enda Selassie. On February 16, this escalated to a full-scale assault, involving 70,000 troops and all the familiar abuses against

²⁰ Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor, (STORM), 1.2, March 1981, p. 6.

²¹ Information compiled by Barbara Hendrie, an independent consultant.

²² Africa Contemporary Record, 1982-3, p. B149.

²³ Woreda Teka, interviewed by Gerry McCann and Sarah Vaughan, two visitors to Tigray in 1988.

civilians – summary executions, burning of villages, destruction of grain stores and the killing of cattle. The TPLF attempted to defend its base in Shire using trench warfare, but was forced to abandon the area. More than 100,000 farmers were forced to evacuate their homes, and many of the estimated 375,000 migrants in western Tigray were obliged to move to other areas to seek work.

The devastation was particularly severe in Shire – a vital surplus producing area -- where on February 21 the army succeeded in capturing the town of Sheraro for the first time since the late 1970s. Before attacking the town, the army indiscriminately shelled it. Having occupied the town, the army systematically looted it, taking over 150 tons of grain, taking oil presses and grinding mills, together with burning other grain stores and fodder grass collected to feed to animals.²⁴ The health clinic was ransacked. A medical team from Medecins Sans Frontieres saw "thousands of hectares of land systematically burned, for example on the way from Sheraro to Kafta." The team also saw the Tekezze Agricultural Center, where soldiers had cut down the fruit trees and destroyed the irrigation system.

REST had established several centers to give assistance to famine migrants coming from central Tigray. Three of these -- Endabugna, Az Daro and Adi Nebreit -- were attacked.²⁵

A woman described the army's arrival in the village of Edaga Habret on March 9 and the preparations the people made for survival:

We heard that the army was coming at 2 a.m. in the morning from people who had run to our village from neighbouring settlements where the army had already reached. Then around 6 a.m. we heard firing between the kabrits [TPLF scouts]. As soon as we heard the news, we tried to prepare foodstuffs for the future. You can't take injera [Ethiopian pancakes] for a long period of time as it breaks and dries. We roasted chick peas and cereals to make golo, took the food and ran.... Two of us went up the mountain two hours away and we could look down and see the Dergue [soldiers]. First the troops lit one house using a match, then they took burning grass from house to house. All the houses were burned, houses belonging to 135 heads of families. Nobody stayed behind. We had tried to take important materials to the bushes surrounding the village, but these were discovered by the Dergue – house materials, plates, jerry cans, soap, salt, sugar, pepper, cloth, sewing machines. Three sewing machines were destroyed and all seven oil presses were burned. My two beds were burned and the small garden destroyed. A lot of grass had been collected for feeding the animals for the summer ... it was all burned. Seven people were killed and 20 wounded in the area. We stayed for three days in the bushes and on the third day the troops left. There were so many of them that there was a two-and-a-half hour line of them marching out of the village. When we went back into our homes we found that all the grain in the village had been burned. I lost three sacks of sorghum and 12 sacks of

²⁴ Wright, 1983, p. 8.

²⁵ Gayle Smith, "Counting Quintals: A Monitoring Report on Famine Relief in Tigray," The Hague, 1983, p. 19.

sesame.²⁶

This was the second occasion the village had been destroyed by the army. On July 2 and 3, 1983, the village was bombed again, wounding two people and killing some sheep and camels.

The first major alarms for the famine were raised by relief agencies in February 1983, when large numbers of migrants started turning up in Korem and Ibnat looking for food. The farmers I got a chance to talk to in Korem had come from around Seqota ... this stream of people looking for food had to go further afield than usual when the rains failed there and the autumn harvest was small. Some traipsed west all the way over to Gonder, where there was still agricultural work to be found in some places as late as November, before hurrying back to Wollo when distribution started there.²⁷

Others had travelled to western Tigray before returning to Korem and Ibnat in February. What is important to note is that the migration to these areas was normal. It was not a preferred strategy -- the migrants would rather have stayed at home, had the food been available -- but the movement west did not itself signal anything unusual. The famine was set in train because the migration failed. It failed because of the havoc caused in Shire and the adjoining areas by the Seventh Offensive.

As before, the offensive resulted in a wider spread of garrisons throughout the province, and a large number of small atrocities followed. For example, there are credible reports of the army killing 20 civilians while burning villages near Hagere Selam, Shire, between June 17-26, 1983, and killing two more at Alage.²⁸

During and after 1983, rural people remember the behavior of soldiers as being more brutal than before, and this is confirmed by members of the armed forces. Lieutenant Yamani Hassan, a prisoner of war held by the TPLF, reported:²⁹

Civilians in the war zones have always been badly treated, but the brutality increased after the failure of the Red Star Campaign, in 1983. I can think of four incidents in Tigray I have witnessed. One was in Sinkatta where four men were questioned about the TPLF. They said they did not know anything, and they were then shot. Another time a 13 or 14 year old girl was raped. A third occasion was when soldiers went to a group of houses near the church in Hausien. Three old people came out, and the soldiers chose one and shot him.

There was also a time when we were stationed at a village near Samre, and the villagers came and brought us roasted maize and beer. They treated us very well, probably hoping we would do the same to them. The order to leave came in the middle of the night, and the soldiers burned the whole village asleep in their beds as they left.

²⁶ Wright, 1983, p. 9.

²⁷ Judith Appleton, Save the Children Fund (UK) field report, April 1983.

²⁸ Africa Contemporary Record, 1983-4, p. B136.

²⁹ Interviewed at Tade Azregar, Tigray, on December 1, 1988, by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.

It is taken as read that these sorts of atrocities are all "part of the job." Anyone who questions them, or talks about what is done, is picked up by the "welfare" people.³⁰ The soldiers are trained to act like machines or animals and not have any thoughts of their own. There is no training in torture techniques or anything like that: soldiers are just given boxes of matches and told to get on with it.

In July and August 1983, the army mounted operations in southern Tigray, in response to TPLF offensives. In November, the TPLF was active in northern Gonder, and its central command set up a temporary base in the Simien mountains, where food was more readily available than in central Tigray. The army responded with a series of sweeps through the area. These involved the burning of villages and mounds of harvested grain ready for threshing.³¹ There was a larger army assault on Simien in January 1984, followed by four other major attacks over the following eighteen months.

Starting in 1980, the government utilized paid bandits, locally known as banda or shimeq, to engage in sabotage and terrorism. In November 1981, there was a number of sabotage attacks in Sudanese refugee camps. Refugees who had returned briefly to Ethiopia reported being told by soldiers that they would be well-treated if they returned to Sudan to attack refugee camps.³²

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: II. Bombing

From mid-1980 onwards, chronic day-in-day-out bombing began to occur in Tigray. Most of the large-scale atrocities by the air force were perpetrated by attacks made in conjunction with ground offensives. However, innumerable small attacks were made at all times. Airplanes just needed to "buzz" a village in order to send the people scurrying for shelter, and cease all activities for many hours.

The main target of the bombing in Tigray was the network of rural markets in TPLF-controlled areas. Medebai, a market near Axum which lies on the important Shire-Eritrea trade route, was bombed more than 100 times during the 1980s. Hausien, the most important market in northeast Tigray, was bombed equally often until it was completely destroyed in 1988. Welel, an important market which links Tembien, Raya and Wag, was also frequently bombed.

The market at Chilla, near Axum, was frequently bombed. The worst attacks occurred on March 3 and 5, 1983: A TPLF fighter described the scene:
You cannot believe what you saw -- it was not something for anyone to see. The blood was

³⁰ The security service within the army.

³¹ Africa Contemporary Record, 1983-4, p. B137.

³² Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 193.

flowing like rivers and sitting in pools, and there were crushed bodies thrown everywhere, the blood of the people was mixed with the blood of the animals that had been hit. You could see a head there but you couldn't find the body, it was thrown some meters away. The children were hysterical and screaming even after some hours -- the helicopters chased them and they couldn't get away. They cry now even if they hear a plane. If they have seen a massacre when they are only four or five years old, they will remember forever when they shut their eyes that they saw their mothers being killed.³³

A medical team from Medecins Sans Frontieres visited the town shortly afterwards and interviewed survivors:

Four helicopters blocked the exits from the market and machine-gunned the market place. MiGs then finished this "work." Even two weeks later we could still observe bomb splinters on the rocky ground and the smell was unbearable. The ground was strewn with various broken fragments, spilt cereals and corpses of donkeys. Everywhere there were traces of blood -- on the ground and on rocks where people had tried to escape. Here and there were the unknown graves of more than a hundred local people who had been massacred.

According to REST, 315 people were killed or wounded in this attack. At least nine other markets were bombed during the Seventh Offensive (between February and April 1983), causing at least 179 casualties.³⁴

Phosphorous bombs were frequently used in attacks on markets and villages, leaving horrible burns. Incendiary bombs were used to set fire to fields and stores.

A secondary target of the bombing was means of transport. Wheeled transport became too dangerous to use. Caravans of donkeys, mules or camels were frequently attacked. This forced traders to move at night, and to move in small and less visible groups (while the threat of bandits and saboteurs in some areas compelled them to do the opposite, and move in larger groups for self-protection). A peasant in central Tigray commented:

Of course the government knows that we can't survive from month to month without a market.

This is why the planes so often come and circle on market day. We all scatter as soon as they come, but even that causes problems: there are often thieves in the market place who steal the goods that people drop when they run away.³⁵

The inevitable result of the campaign against the markets and traders was that markets were forced to be held at night -- though the danger of early-morning attacks on market towns where people had gathered remained real. With no light other than candles and small gas lamps, the markets could become chaotic -- people could not see properly what they were buying, and vendors laid their goods out in the danger of them being trampled upon. Social gatherings, an

³³ Quoted in: Smith, 1983, pp. 100-1.

³⁴ Smith, 1983, p. 100.

³⁵ Interviewed by Sarah Vaughan

important reason for many people attending market, were held less often. The TPLF regulated that all markets should be held on Saturday nights, so that it was not possible for the air force to bomb the market towns "in rotation," following the different market days. A negative result of this was that traders could not rotate between the markets. Unable to travel by day, larger traders were forced into long periods of idleness during daylight, making slow progress to attend perhaps just one small market per week. They would not store large amounts of goods in any one place, but scatter them in different stores, so as to minimize the danger of losing everything to bombing or a ground attack. Many traders were forced out of business. Markets thus contracted or were closed down altogether. Combined with the restrictions on trade and migration in government-controlled areas, the results were disastrous for trade and exchange.

Bombing was also used against villages, churches, schools, and farmers ploughing their land. Attacks appeared to be virtually random. In areas of greatest TPLF control, such as Shire, the bombing even forced people to cultivate at night.

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: III. Restrictions on Movement

While the military campaigns of 1980-4 were restricted to Tigray and one small adjoining area of Gonder, the restrictions on movement encompassed a much larger area -- even further afield than the TPLF-EPDM's most southerly military actions. In terms of limiting movement and trade, the restrictions had a similar effect to the bombing campaign in TPLF areas.

Restrictions on the Grain Trade

A particularly important counter-insurgency tactic was restriction on the grain trade. This was implemented from a variety of motivations, including the desire to restrict the movement of potential rebel sympathizers, desire to stem the flow of food to the TPLF, suspicion of traders in general (especially a fear that they might be smuggling arms) and a feeling that private grain trade was incompatible with socialism.

Since 1974 there had been legal prohibitions on certain commercial activities (see chapter 6), and local and ancillary legislation meant that local administrators were able to harass petty traders at will and confiscate their goods. From 1980 these restrictions were intensified in central Tigray, and in 1982, they were extended to southern Tigray and northern Wollo. Until then, Meqele obtained most its food from Raya and north Wollo; this helps to explain the price rise in Meqele during that year. It became more difficult for traders to obtain licenses, and they were subjected to an increasing range of taxes. The use of wheeled transport for trade into contested or TPLF-held areas was impossible -- everything had to be "smuggled" by pack animals, at a cost

of 3-10 times as much per item carried.

Road blocks were set up at the entrances to all towns, to prevent unauthorized trade. In addition, one of the functions of army checkpoints on roads was to control the trade in grain. The soldiers also took advantage of their position to extract bribes from traders, in effect taxing all movement of grain.

Small traders entering towns were sometimes forced to sell their grain at the government-controlled prices, which were very low, or were required to pay tax arrears before being allowed to enter the market.

When possible, rural people prefer to take grain into towns in order to have it ground into flour by mechanical mills, rather than having to do it by hand. Regulating access to flour mills became one way the government restricted the movement of food. When occupying towns and villages, the army also regularly destroyed flour mills and essential trading equipment such as weighing scales.

The TPLF also tried to restrict the flow of grain to the towns, so as not to deprive the countryside, but it attempted to facilitate the rural-rural trade in grain.

Impact of the Restrictions: The Example of Tembien

These restrictions combined to prevent the movement of grain and were therefore instrumental in creating famine.

In Tigray, these restrictions were invoked most severely in eastern Tigray, especially the surplus-producing area of Raya, for the reason that these were the areas where the government had most control. Proposals by REST to send small traders to the area to buy the available surplus for relief purposes came to nothing. In the adjacent areas of Kobo, Wag, Tembien and Enderta, prices rose to previously-unrecorded highs.

In 1984, there were very tight restrictions on trade in northern Gonder. These were related to an upsurge in TPLF-EPDM activity north of Gonder and repeated army offensives aimed at dislodging the TPLF positions in the Simien mountains, as well as a number of factors not associated with the insurgency (see the following chapter).

In late 1983, the farmers of Simien had been selling between 300 and 400 tonnes of grain in Tembien every week.³⁶ Had this trade continued throughout the dry season, at least 10,000 tonnes would have moved into the drought zone by this one route alone. Instead, the trade was completely blocked by the army.

What happened to the 8,000-10,000 tonnes surplus in Raya, or the 10,000-15,000 surplus

³⁶ English *et al.*, 1984, p. 72.

in Simien, is not known -- much of it probably rotted or was fed to animals. It is known that in 1984 Tembien, which lay right between these two surplus areas, was probably the worst-hit famine zone in the whole country.

The largest surpluses in Tigray were found in Shire. Bombing of markets and army control of the trade routes into central Tigray effectively prevented any of this reaching the drought zone -- which was in turn one reason why people from central Tigray migrated westwards.

General Impact of Restrictions and Bombing of Markets

More generally, the restrictions increased vulnerability to famine throughout northern Ethiopia.

In normal circumstances, the grain market consisted of an integrated network of local markets. When the price rose in one area, traders would buy food in markets where it could be had more cheaply, and move it there -- both supplying food to the area and so bringing the price down, and providing a market for farmers in surplus areas. This was no longer occurring in northern Ethiopia in the 1980s. When the price rose in one locality, there was almost nothing to restrain it. Analyses of the level of integration of the market reveal that there was almost no local trade in north Wollo and Tigray.³⁷

The most immediate impact of the government policy of restricting rural access to the towns was to increase grain prices in the towns. In 1982, the price of sorghum in TPLF-held Sheraro was 45 Birr per quintal (100kg); in nearby government-held Enda Selassie the price was 130-160 Birr per quintal.³⁸ As the policy became entrenched and the bombing campaign became established, rural-rural trade was disrupted too. In Meqele, the price of grain in December 1982 was 181 Birr per quintal; in nearby areas controlled by the TPLF there was either none available or it ranged from 140-200 Birr. In Shire it was 60 Birr and in north Wollo 40-90 Birr. If unrestricted trade had been possible, the surpluses in the latter two areas would have been taken to Meqele, at a transport cost of about 47 Birr and 23 Birr per quintal respectively.³⁹ The price in Meqele would have fallen to 120 Birr and probably less. (If access from Sudan or Gonder had been possible it would have fallen still further.) Thus the people of Meqele were forced to pay 60

³⁷ de Waal, 1990, pp. 56-7.

³⁸ James Firebrace and Gayle Smith, "The Hidden Revolution: An Analysis of Social Change in Tigray (Northern Ethiopia) Based on Eyewitness Accounts," London, War on Want, 1982, p. 37, footnote.

³⁹ In the 1970s, 70% of the grain supply to Meqele originated from Raya and Kobo, and 10% from Gonder. The Shire grain was exported to Eritrea.

Birr per quintal, or an additional 50 per cent, as a premium on account of this disruption.⁴⁰ During 1982, when restrictions were introduced on the trade between Wollo, Raya and Meqele, the price in Meqele rose by 67 per cent.⁴¹

As a substantial proportion of the adult male population of Tigray was formerly involved in petty trade, including grain, the near-destruction of the grain trade caused much rural unemployment.

Restrictions on Migration

Increasingly tight restrictions on movement were imposed from 1980 onwards. Restrictions started with controlling access to towns. They were tightened in southern Tigray in 1982 and Wollo and Gonder during 1983-4. While migration was never expressly forbidden, the welter of petty legislation that existed acted as a licence to pillage and harass by any local official or soldier.

The most direct manner in which these were implemented was through a pass system -- any individual needed a pass from the chairman of his or her Peasant Association (PA) chairman in order to leave the vicinity of the village. An individual caught without a pass was liable to arbitrary detention or worse. People from TPLF-held areas could not obtain passes. Where they existed, PAs were reluctant to issue passes. If someone was caught in suspicious circumstances with a pass, the PA officials who authorized the pass would be liable to punishment. Given the unpredictability of local officialdom, especially its propensity to refuse to recognize the legitimacy of a document issued elsewhere, this acted as powerful disincentive to issuing passes.

In addition, PA officials would generally refuse to issue a travel pass until the individual had paid past taxes and "voluntary contributions." Similarly, a person entering a town without evidence of being a dutiful citizen in respect of tax payments was liable to be detained or harassed.

A number of government policies acted as powerful deterrents to rural people visiting towns in Tigray. During 1980-3, rural visitors to towns were subjected to routine harassment and robbery, on minor pretexts such as coming from an area near where the TPLF was reported to be active, failure to have a PA membership card, or lack of proof of tax payments. In January 1984, many routine checks were relaxed -- just as the conscription campaign for the first round of national military service was getting under way. Some visitors to towns were conscripted against their will.

Also starting in January 1984, there was a widespread campaign against suspected TPLF

⁴⁰ Calculated from: de Waal, 1990, pp. 44-9.

⁴¹ de Waal, 1990, p. 44; RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 1," December 1982.

supporters. Army checkpoints were mandated to detain any would-be migrants who were suspected of TPLF sympathies. Several thousand people were detained, and more than 600 were kept in prison or killed. Among those killed were 20 senior administrators in Tigray.⁴² Waves of arrests later in the year swelled the number of detainees.

While most of the peasants detained in 1984 were later either forcibly resettled, conscripted to the army, or released, some remained in prison for more than 18 months. Together with many political detainees from urban backgrounds, they were released on February 8, 1986, when the TPLF stormed the central prison in Meqele and freed no fewer than 1,800 political detainees. An international team of human rights workers later interviewed some of them.⁴³ One 17 year old farmer was detained while visiting the market in Axum; the security officials who were carrying out a check on all marketgoers' identity cards said he "looked the physical type to be a spy." Another case was a child farmer aged 14, who was arrested in August 1984 on the accusation of carrying paraffin to the TPLF -- which the boy denied even having had in his possession.

In mid-1984 there was a similar though smaller crackdown in Gonder. In September 1984, some of the Tigrayan delegates to the Tenth Anniversary celebrations in Addis Ababa were arrested.

Sexual harassment was a strong deterrent to women migrants throughout the period. When questioned by aid workers after the capture of most of the Tigrayan towns by the TPLF in 1988, a number of women mentioned sexual harassment as their greatest worry.

From November 1984 onwards, fear of resettlement added yet another disincentive for visiting towns.

A final deterrent on movement was the dissemination of land mines. Though planting land mines became most common only after 1986, from 1980 onwards anti-personnel land mines were planted on paths, and around army garrisons.

The result of these restrictions and deterrents was that normal patterns of movement, trade, migration and exchange were stifled.

The Consequences for the TPLF

The famine profoundly influenced the fortunes of the TPLF. In the short term the famine was a disaster for the front. Between 1980 and 1984, it was unable to tighten its military grip on

⁴² *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1983-4, pp. B125-6.

⁴³ Alex Lyon, Michael McColgan, Christian Rostoker and Didier Malapel, "Torture and the Violation of Human Rights in Tigray, Ethiopia," London, 1986.

Tigray. In 1982-3, it expanded into Wollo, but was gradually forced to restrict its operations. 1985 was to be a year in which the army was able to make significant territorial gains. In late 1984, in response to the increasingly desperate situation, the TPLF decided on the mass evacuation of people to refugee camps in Sudan (see chapter 11). The loss of people from central Tigray and the diversion of resources to controlling the mass exodus left the TPLF militarily vulnerable.

In the long term the TPLF was able to turn the Tigray people's experience of famine into an asset -- perhaps its greatest asset. A TPLF leader, referring to the bombing campaign launched in September 1980, said: "This is a new tactic to demoralize the people, but it will only make them hate the government more."⁴⁴ By 1985 rural people in Tigray knew that they would never be free from famine while the army remained in the province. The experience of war-induced famine was to be the greatest source of volunteers for the TPLF.

The early 1980s also forced the TPLF to be intensely pragmatic. Initially, it attempted socialist measures such as price control and the creation of cooperatives in the areas of western Tigray which it controlled. These were not a success. In particular, when the price controls were introduced in mid 1983, traders simply boycotted the markets, and after a few weeks the TPLF backed down. A policy of encouraging free enterprise prevailed thereafter. Virtually no new cooperatives were created. No attempts to control credit, or restrain moneylenders from charging extortionate rates of interest, were made. The rationale was that the TPLF had nothing better with which to replace the existing system. Above all, migration and petty trade were encouraged. Migrants to western Tigray were assisted by a network of checkpoints where relief was given, and were helped in the reception areas on the system of "a family for a family."

The Consequences for Government Military Strategy

Did the government know what it was doing between 1980 and 1984? The answer is: to a limited extent only. The government was determined to restrict the food supply to the TPLF and to attack the economic base of the population that supported it, but did not seem to realize the extreme but inevitable consequences of these actions. This is consistent with the over-rigid thinking that informed many of the government's social and agricultural policies, that wholly overlooked the importance of mobility, trade and local knowledge in rural people's subsistence. In the minds of the members of the Dergue, famine was associated with drought, and counter-insurgency with killing rebels.

The lack of realization is illustrated by the government's response to the famine. In the early days, this was a straightforward portrayal of the problem as one of drought, and appeal for

⁴⁴ Dan Connell in The Guardian, London, October 17, 1980.

international assistance. As late as 1983, Mengistu felt able to draw attention to the famine. In his May Day speech, Mengistu said:

Compatriots, there is a drought in some regions of our country. This has brought famine among some of our people in the villages. This situation tests our goal. We started off saying that we will at least satisfy our food needs ... it is unacceptable that we cannot at least satisfy our food needs. It is a mystery that we are starving when we have enough land that can even produce surplus for other countries, and sufficient manpower. We need to get out of this shameful situation.

It seems likely that having created one of the most severe and widespread famines in modern times, the Ethiopian government did not fully grasp what it had done.

That state of ignorance was never total, and did not last. By the end of 1984, there can be no doubt that the government was aware that it had been instrumental in creating the famine. It may not have realized the complexities or the depth of its culpability, but senior members of the government knew that the war and the famine were inextricably intertwined. In December 1984, Acting Foreign Minister Tibebe Bekele said to the US Charge d'Affaires, "probably with more candor than he intended," that "food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists."⁴⁵

A belated government awareness of its role in the famine can also be seen in the military strategy adopted from the beginning of 1985 onwards, which aimed at utilizing food supplies as a counter-insurgency tool. This issue will be taken up in chapters 10 and 11.

⁴⁵ David A. Korn, *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union*, London, 1986, p. 137.

9. "ECONOMIC WAR" ON THE PEASANTS AND FAMINE

It is widely recognized that the agricultural and economic policies of the Ethiopian government contributed to the creation of the famine. An assessment of the merits and demerits of such policies mostly lies outside the mandate of a human rights organization, with a few significant exceptions such as the brutal manner in which many of the policies were implemented, and the lack of any channel for debating issues of national importance and thereby changing policy.

This chapter will cover some of these areas of human rights abuse, and also the broader issues of agricultural and economic policy. The latter is important for two reasons. One is that it is necessary to assess the entire range of the man-made factors that created famine, so that the role of human rights abuse can be placed properly in context. The second is that the demonstration of the disastrous consequences of these policies should mean that on any future occasions when they are knowingly followed, and duly create famine, it will not be possible for their proponents to defend themselves with the claim that they acted in good faith, but in ignorance of the consequences of their actions.

The Logic of Food Supplies

The Dergue seized power in 1974 during a wave of popular revulsion at the corruption of the rule of Haile Selassie. Some aspects of the revolutionary government were radically new, but in certain respects it faced similar problems to its predecessor and responded in similar ways.

One important stimulus to the revulsion against the ancien regime was the discovery of the famine in Wollo by the British television journalist Jonathan Dimbleby, whose film "The Unknown Famine" shocked the western world into acting, and the Ethiopian government into admitting the problem for the first time. Dimbleby's pictures of destitution and extreme hunger are difficult to watch even today, for those who have become accustomed to pictures of the 1980s famines. On September 11, 1974, the day before the Emperor was deposed, excerpts from the film were shown interspersed with footage from the wedding of the daughter of a prominent government minister, for which the cake had been specially flown from Italy. The following day, as the Emperor was driven from his palace in the back seat of a Volkswagen beetle, the crowds shouted lieba! -- "thief!"

Haile Selassie's symbols of Imperial authority were shattered for ever. The Dergue at first tried to claim legitimacy through slogans referring to "Ethiopia first" and "Ethiopian socialism." If these were not to be wholly empty, radical measures were needed. One such measure that was

adopted was the creation of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), a well-funded government department, assisted by expatriate advisors as well as Ethiopian experts, to prevent future famines, distribute relief to the victims of natural adversity, and rehabilitate those left destitute by the famines of 1972-4.¹ Another slogan was "Land to the tiller," which led to the land reform proclamation of March 1975, in which private ownership of land was abolished, and with it all the feudal exactions that had so oppressed the peasantry. It was optimistically hoped that the creation of the RRC, together with other radical measures, would banish famine from Ethiopia altogether.

While the ideology of the new government was radically different from its predecessor, and some of its actions were truly revolutionary, the economic constraints it faced were similar. It needed to feed the cities, especially Addis Ababa, and the army.

Before the land reform of 1975, most farmers in the south paid a large proportion of their crop to landlords in the form of rent. This payment then constituted the bulk of the food that was marketed in the main towns. After the land reform act was promulgated, this was no longer the case -- much of the food was kept by the farmers for their own consumption. Meanwhile, in the urban areas, wages stagnated and the price of food rose fast. Standards of living for industrial workers dropped by between one third and one half between 1974 and 1979. Economists argued that this warranted drastic interventions by the government to purchase staple grains. Placating the urban population was also an important political priority for the government.

After 1977, the rapidly-growing army also needed to be supplied with food. An army of 300,000 people consumes a minimum of 60,000 tons of grain per year.

The government adopted an array of strategies to deal with its food problem. Its ultimate aim was the complete transformation of the Ethiopian peasant farmers into workers on state-run cooperatives. This was never achieved, though two ambitious attempts were made in the later 1980s to move rapidly in that direction -- resettlement and villagization -- which are the subject of later chapters.

During the period 1978-84, the main government strategies included:

*The Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which was set up in 1976, had its powers dramatically expanded.

* Heavy and even punitive taxes were levied.

*Strict controls on the private grain trade were enforced.

*Restrictions on peasants' movement and laboring were enforced.

¹ The RRC was in fact created by Haile Selassie, already bowing to the revolutionary tide, as almost his last act as emperor.

* State farms were developed, using forced labor.

*The RRC was mandated to transform destitute populations into a potential collectivized workforce, and to obtain food from the international community.

These policies, which amounted to an economic war on the independent peasantry waged by the state, were instrumental in creating vulnerability to famine well beyond the area of counter-insurgency operations.

The Agricultural Marketing Corporation

The activities of the AMC were described by a peasant in Wollo as "robbing the poor to feed the rich."²

The government set up the AMC in 1976 and gave it increasing powers over the following years. AMC operations were gradually extended to all the major crop-producing regions. By 1980, it was purchasing over 400,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food per annum, two thirds of it from Peasant Associations (PAs). In 1982/3, 573,000 MT was procured. Each PA was given a quota of grain which it had to supply -- but was not informed how large its quota would be until after the planting season.³ From the 1980/1 season onwards, the price for each type of grain was fixed centrally and was the same in all parts of the country. In 1980, the prices decided upon by the government were about 20-25% lower than those advised by economists,⁴ and stayed at the same level for eight years, despite fast inflation in the prices on the open market. In 1984, the fixed price was only about 20% of the free market price in Addis Ababa. The quotas were also centrally determined, and often bore little relation to the size of the harvest. In Wollo, the quota remained unchanged at 23,000 MT in 1982 and 1983. Local officials in the Ministry of Agriculture objected to the quota and the AMC's inflexible demands for prompt delivery to collection points, but the AMC was unmoved, arguing that there had been an adequate harvest. (The harvest was of course adequate, but the AMC quota was set at a level above the disposable surplus, and other government policies were endangering the survival of the people.) In the drought year of 1984 the

² Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine and Survival Strategies: A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute of Development Research (IDR), 1987, p. 109.

³ S. Franzel, Legesse Dachi, F. Colburn and Getahun Degu, "Grain Marketing and Peasant Production in Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, IDR, 1989, pp. 2-3.

⁴ Alemayehu Lirensu, "Grain Marketing and Pricing in Ethiopia: A Study of the Impact of Grain Quota and Fixed Grain Prices on Grain Producers," Addis Ababa, IDR, 1987, p. 38.

quota fell to 6,000 MT (the government was still taking food out of famine-stricken Wollo) but was reinstated at a high level in 1985/6.

In theory, market mechanisms could have provided the food that the government needed. In practice, the government was not prepared to wait for the time such measures would have needed to work, and its Marxist ideology was also hostile to the free market.

Delivery quotas to the AMC were set for each PA. All farmers, regardless of the size of their harvest, had to meet their quota. "Even the poorest of the poor had to sell" complained one Wollo farmer bitterly.⁵ If they failed, the punishment could be confiscation of assets or imprisonment. One study estimated that as a result, half of the grain taken by the AMC was not "surplus," but was taken from basic household reserves.⁶ The same study found that as many as a quarter of the peasants were forced to buy grain in order to meet their quotas. They had to buy on the open market, often selling essential assets in order to raise the money, and then sell at a considerable loss to the AMC -- which often only made its payments many months later. Many other peasants had to buy grain later in order to have grain to eat later in the season. Some young farmers even abandoned their land and went to look for work on state farms, because the burden of delivering their quotas was so heavy that they could not afford to save to set themselves up with an ox and a plow.

Dr Dessalegn Rahmato calculated that a typical peasant in Ambassel, Wollo, harvested 14.7 quintals⁷ of grain per year, of which 5.8 quintals were paid to the AMC, leaving 8.9 quintals -- about the bare minimum for a family of five to survive on. Of the harvest of 6 quintals of pulses, 2.15 were taken by the AMC.⁸ If the harvest were below average, the family would suffer a shortfall -- on the basis of this exaction alone.

The grain procured by the AMC was supposed to be resold throughout the country. In Harerghe, the distribution quotas were 30% to the towns, 30% to PAs, 29% to pastoralists, 10% to government institutions, and one per cent to private agencies.⁹ In fact, it was destined solely for the larger towns -- in Harerghe, 100 per cent went to Dire Dawa and Harer towns -- and the army. In 1984, the AMC's only and belated response to the food shortage in Wollo was to allocate 6,000

⁵ Peter Cutler and John Mitchell, "An Evaluation of BandAid Funded Agricultural Inputs Distribution Programmes in Wollo Administrative Region, Ethiopia," London, 1987, pp. 43-4.

⁶ Alemayehu Lirensa, 1987, p. 106.

⁷ One quintal is 100 kilograms.

⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 101.

⁹ Ashenafi Moges, "Food Shortages in Harerghe Region of Ethiopia," DPhil Thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 276.

MT for distribution in the towns.¹⁰ In the later 1980s, the army took an ever larger share and by 1989, even Addis Ababa was not receiving its AMC quota, which was entirely destined for the military.

A coercive government policy, implemented systematically and often brutally, had the effect of impoverishing many thousands of peasant farmers. Some were reduced to famine conditions, and others to a state in which they could no longer sell food to poorer neighbours or migrants, or offer them employment or other forms of assistance.

Taxes and Levies

The peasants of Ethiopia were subjected to a wide range of taxes and levies. These steadily increased during the late 1970s and 1980s. All farmers were required to pay agricultural income tax (20 Birr), a PA membership fee (minimum 5 Birr), surtax (usually 25 Birr), plus levies for road-building, school-building, literacy and other campaigns. Members of the Women's Association paid a 3 Birr annual membership fee, and all households contributed at least 3 Birr to the Youth Association. School fees ranged from 2 Birr to 15 Birr. Starting in 1984, all were required to pay a levy for the work of the RRC, usually 20-25 Birr. Famine-stricken peasants in Wollo could not fail to see the irony of the enforced payment of this "famine tax" to the government.¹¹ From 1988 a contribution "for the territorial integrity of the Motherland" was also levied. In addition there were frequent demands for corvee labor (for instance for state farms) and campaign labor (for road-building, reforestation, etc), always levied without regard to the agricultural cycle. These labor demands often averaged one day per week, with fines for non-attendance or ill-discipline. Some taxes were levied by allocating quotas to districts, which decided on the level of individual payments.

Jason Clay of Cultural Survival made an estimate of the total tax burden on farmers in Harerghe, based on interviews with refugees, and produced the extraordinarily high figure of 546.92 Birr per annum -- more than twice the per capita gross national product of Ethiopia.¹² This figure is so high that it needs to be treated with caution, but it is worth noting that about 40 per cent of the total consisted of irregular payments to the PA chairman, cadres and local militia.

In areas of western Wollega recently occupied by the OLF, Dr Trevor Trueman estimated

¹⁰ Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 1988, p. 109.

¹¹ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 101.

¹² Jason Clay, "The Case of Harerghe: The Testimony of Refugees in Somalia," in J. Clay, S. Steingrabber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, p. 188.

that the tax burden had ranged from 70 Birr to 150 Birr yearly, plus charges for schooling and unofficial payments of health services and other necessities.

Taxation was certainly punitive. Many investigators in rural Ethiopia report peasants being forced to sell crops or animals or go into debt to meet tax payments. In Wollo, after a small remission of taxes in 1984/5 due to the famine, tax payments increased in 1986. Agricultural income tax was levied at a rate of 45 Birr, leading to suspicions that "arrears" were being collected. "Arrears" of taxes were also collected by army patrols in Tigray and north Wollo.

Impact of the Policies: Grain Storage

Traditionally, Ethiopian farmers try to keep a large amount of grain in storage, and will only empty their stores when they are certain of the next harvest. This meant that the complete failure of one year's harvest would not lead to famine. The government policies described above made this impossible by the 1980s. As a result, the harvest failure of 1984 led directly to famine in many parts of the country which were unaffected by war.

Restrictions on Trade

A number of the policies adopted in Tigray and its borderlands for counter-insurgency were later expanded to areas under government control, for reasons of social control and socio-economic transformation. One of these was restrictions on petty trade, especially in grain. Outside insurgent areas, the intention of the policy was to direct as much as possible of the marketed grain to the AMC.

The chapter on the Red Terror has documented the attack on large merchants in the years 1975-8, and the accompanying legislation in the Special Penal Code which acted as a deterrent to legitimate commerce. A welter of petty legislation further restricting the grain trade, much of it at the provincial level, followed after 1978. All trading licenses were issued by the Grain Purchasing Task Force (an affiliate of the AMC). Grain wholesaling became illegal in much of the country, for instance Gojjam after 1982. The number of grain traders declined each year after 1980 -- 1,100 had their licenses revoked in Gojjam in 1982/3,¹³ and 342 in Arsi in 1986.¹⁴ Only in 1988 was the trade re-legalized; it was deregulated in March 1990, although transport remained strictly regulated until the fall of the government.

No specific directives were issued relating to traders using pack animals, but the complexities of licensing and the vague definitions of "hoarding" and "profiteering" were sufficient to endorse any local official's attempt to confiscate the goods of a petty trader. One Ethiopian economist noted "it is unclear whether small scale grain trade is illegal or not".¹⁵

Road blocks were set up on all major and minor routes, in order to check that no unauthorized trade was occurring. In some instances, the "concession" was sold or granted to

¹³ Alemayehu Lirenso, 1987, p. 73.

¹⁴ Franzel *et al.*, 1989, p. 12.

¹⁵ Alemayehu Lirenso, 1987, p. 52.

avored individuals within the local PA, who would use the income from bribes, fines, confiscations and levies for himself -- providing a clear incentive to obstruct the trade as much as possible. The tariff for a ten-ton truck at a single road block could be as high as 5,000 Birr. Commonly, an individual was restricted to a limited quantity of grain, such as one quintal. The restrictions were also extended to people bearing gifts of grain. In 1984, some residents of Addis Ababa tried to send food to their relatives in the famine zone, only to have the food confiscated at checkpoints.

Starting with the land reform proclamation of 1975, government regulations required "specialization." Each petty-trader was required to make a choice between being a full-time farmer and a full-time trader, and in the event of choosing the latter, to live in a town. As most petty-traders engaged in trade during the dry season when they could not work on their farms, this was a direct attack on their means of survival. This restriction was never fully enforced, but provided another excuse for local officials to exact bribes from traders, or to confiscate mules and grain at will. On the occasions when it was enforced (such as Wollo, starting in 1984) the consequences were even worse.

The government regarded time spent at market as "wasted" or "unproductive," and measures to restrict markets were introduced depending on the zeal and ideological correctness of local administrators and cadres. Some of the cadre's attempts to control trade and marketing in a resettlement site in Wollega included:¹⁶

- *Restricting the time people were allowed to spend at a market.

- *Imposing a synchronization of markets.

- *Closing small roadside markets.

- *Defining market days as "work days," so that those who attended markets lost work points in the collective work system of the settlement.

- *Banning men from attending markets at certain times of year, so that only women could attend.

- *Banning all attendance at markets during the harvest season, for 2-3 weeks.

Such stringent measures were rare. More commonly, small markets were closed, as being "unnecessary," or changed from twice weekly to weekly. Most markets were synchronized, being held on Saturdays, which prevented traders and peasants attending more than one each week. In some areas, a ban was introduced on peasants attending more than one market in their locality.

Restrictions were particularly tight in Gonder during 1984. This was related to factors

¹⁶ Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD Thesis, Manchester, 1990, p. 332.

including counter-insurgency operations against TPLF-EPDM, the hard-line administrators in the province and their hostility to private trade, and several scandals involving local officials profiteering in the grain trade. These restrictions were particularly damaging because the 1983 harvest in Gonder was good, and unrestricted trade would have allowed much of the surplus to be redistributed commercially to the famine areas of Tigray and north Wollo.

Before the revolution, there were an estimated 20,000-30,000 grain dealers in the country. In 1984, the Ministry of Domestic Trade had issued licenses to just 4,942, and by law they were required to sell a minimum of half of their purchases to the AMC. Whereas over half the farmers in the TPLF-controlled village of Adiet engaged in trade,¹⁷ only two out of 150 in one study in Harerghe did so,¹⁸ and a similarly small number did so in Wollo.¹⁹

Markets are critical to peasants' economic activity in normal times, and are absolutely essential to "survival strategies" during famine. By these measures, the rural marketing system was seriously crippled, and the flow of grain from surplus to deficit areas was effectively stemmed. The consequences of this for Tigray (where the restrictions were combined with the bombing of marketplaces) have been mentioned -- comparable, though less severe, damage was done to rural people's survival chances throughout the country.

Restrictions on Moneylending

A consequence of the restriction on trade was a sharp decline in moneylending in many parts of the country. There was also a deliberate assault on the practices of rural credit.

Debt is an essential part of rural life -- farmers rely on taking out debts in order to obtain seed, food or money to hire a plough team. Before the revolution, rural moneylending had been common throughout the country. In TPLF-held areas of Tigray, the majority of farmers took out loans from traders during the famine.²⁰ While high rates of interest were charged, these loans were important in enabling them to survive.

However, in government-held areas, established sources of loans dried up. Traders were driven from the market, either killed or driven abroad in the early days of the revolution, or later forced out of business. Local courts and administrators refused to recognize the validity of credit

¹⁷ Richard Baker, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1990.

¹⁸ Ashenafi Moges, 1988, p. 244.

¹⁹ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 98.

²⁰ 62 per cent of the sample interviewed by Gerezgerhe Bezabeh and Alex de Waal, "Evaluation of the Impact of the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme, Tigray," London, ACORD, 1988, p. 19.

agreements. The most important study of the famine in rural Wollo noted "Far more peasants would have taken out loans than actually had ... if they had more and better access to credit services."²¹ A similar huge post-revolutionary contraction in credit was noted in Harerghe,²² though in some other (non-famine stricken) parts of the country, the supply of credit was partly made up by other peasants.²³

State Farms

After the revolution, the government nationalized all the commercial farms in the country, and ran them as state farms. A fixed wage rate of 93 cents per day (equivalent to US\$0.44 or less) was paid -- well below the market rate. Unable to recruit sufficient labor at this rate, the government took to conscripting laborers either by force or with empty promises. The results were not only abuses against the human rights of the workers, but a dramatic drop in the availability of work.

The Setit-Humera mechanized farms close to the Sudan border employed between 100,000 and 300,000 seasonal laborers annually in the early 1970s, providing an essential source of income for those whose crops had failed. 16,000 laborers on the schemes fled to Sudan when the government began forcible conscription into the army from among them. Rather than hiring laborers, the government then began a program of forced labor, which was documented by the Anti-Slavery Society.²⁴

In July 1980, the government began to recruit laborers in the towns with promises of payment of 49.50 Birr per month, plus food, medical services and accommodation. When insufficient volunteers were found, soldiers and kebele guards simply rounded up people from the street. 14,140 "volunteers" were taken in Addis Ababa and about 30,000 in other towns. Their belongings (even their shoes) were confiscated and they were crammed into trucks, without even the most basic facilities or stops for rest or sleeping; the trucks were so overcrowded that they had to squat for the journey of over three days. On arrival at the army camp close to Humera, the soldiers rushed onto the trucks and dragged away many women, who were raped that night, and many of whom were never seen again by their relatives or friends.

²¹ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 251.

²² Ashenafi Moges, 1988, p. 322.

²³ Dessalegn Rahmato, Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia, Trenton, NJ, 1985, p. 65.

²⁴ Anti-Slavery Society, "Forced Labour in Humera: Intervention on Behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society," presented to the UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Working Group on Slavery, Geneva, August 1981.

At the Humera state farm itself, no facilities or accommodation were available. Food for the workers was inadequate, and twelve hours of work was enforced each day. No wages were paid. Minor disciplinary offenses were dealt with by detention or beating; offenders were called "counter-revolutionaries." The whole camp was guarded by armed members of the "Production Task Force" who detained or shot dead those trying to escape. In prison, the cells were grossly overcrowded and torture was routine. According to the farm supervisors, 1,626 people died from starvation, disease, beatings and torture, or were shot trying to escape. Several hundred disappeared, including women abducted for sexual abuse by soldiers and officials. Many others fled to Sudan.

This program not only involved gross abuses of the rights of the forcibly recruited laborers, but removed an important source of income from poor people in Tigray, rendering them more vulnerable to famine.

Similar practices, albeit on a smaller scale, were employed to raise labor for the farms in the Awash valley. These farms had employed over 30,000 laborers, mostly from Wollo and Tigray, in the early 1970s. By the 1980s, laborers were recruited for two to three weeks unpaid labor from central Wollo, and hence no paid employment was available. Other state farms recruited labor in similar ways, with similar results.

Other Restrictions on Wage Labor

Closely related to the restriction of movement and the recruitment of labor for state farms was the restriction of wage labor on smallholdings.

Since the land reform of 1975, wage labor was technically illegal. While rarely implemented in the north, this ban provided yet another reason for officials to harass and punish individuals. In southern Ethiopia, the ban was enforced more consistently, particularly in the case of migrant labourers. In the early 1970s, more than 50,000 migrants came to Keffa every year to pick coffee. Many came from eastern Gonder (an area which suffered famine in 1984/5); some came from Wollo and Tigray. By the early 1980s, the migration had come to a complete halt.²⁵ A similar seasonal migration of laborers from Tigray to Illubabor also ceased.

Peasants were also required to do unpaid labor on the fields of PA officials and militiamen.

Impact of the Policies: Employment

²⁵ Adrian P. Wood, "The Decline of Seasonal Labour Migration to the Coffee Forests of South-West Ethiopia," *Geography*, 68, 1983, pp. 53-6.

It can safely be assumed that in a normal year, at least one million people in Tigray and north Wollo are reliant on off-farm sources of income, primarily wage labor and petty trade. A conservative estimate of the impact of the government restrictions is that the available employment was gradually cut by half between 1980 and late 1983. The result of 500,000 people -- perhaps one in twelve of the population -- being rendered unemployed in a time of poor food availability was disastrous. These people formed a large proportion of the total number of destitute migrants seeking help from REST, the RRC or voluntary agencies.

Impact of the Policies: The Livestock Economy

The restrictions on trade and migration, together with the contraction of credit, meant that most rural people had essentially only one option left to obtain money for food: selling animals.

The famine of 1983-5 is remarkable in that it is the only recorded famine in north-east Africa in which animal sales outnumbered animal deaths. In all other famines, most animal owners have preferred to keep most animals in the anticipation of future recovery, obtaining their food through means other than selling them. Some animals die on account of hunger, thirst or disease, but that is a risk the owners are prepared to take -- they only sell when they are truly desperate. In 1983-5 in Tigray and Wollo the reverse was true. Almost all the animals lost were sold in order to buy food -- 79% of oxen according to one survey.²⁶ Losses due to drought alone might have amounted to 50% at most -- the much larger number sold out of desperation represents another premium paid by the poor for the military strategy of the government.

An important consequence is the enduring impoverishment of northern Ethiopia as a result of the famine.

Animals -- particularly plow oxen -- are essential to economic survival in the Ethiopian highlands. The extraordinarily high levels of animal loss in the famine -- far in excess of the losses that would have been caused by drought alone -- represent a hard blow at the very basis of the peasant economy. Six years later, animal numbers are still well below what they were before the famine, and the lack of plow oxen represents the single most severe constraint on rural production. The effects of the famine persist in increased vulnerability to famine up to today.

The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission

The RRC was a paradoxical institution. On the one hand, for the decade after its creation

²⁶ Cutler, 1988, p. 313.

in 1974 it enjoyed considerable institutional strength and legitimacy, and a high degree of autonomy from other government departments. The RRC was relatively efficient at collecting, analyzing and disseminating information, and in coordinating relief programs. It compared well to similar institutions in neighboring countries. The Commissioner was able to travel abroad and meet senior diplomats and politicians from foreign countries and the UN and appeal for aid on his own behalf. At a time when all news of the famine was suppressed in the domestic Ethiopian media (June-September 1984) the RRC was still able to publish its bulletins on the developing famine.

The behavior of the RRC is a warning to those who would wish to see the Ethiopian government as wholly monolithic and dedicated solely to the single-minded destruction of internal opposition. During the years 1980-4 there was a real paradox that while several arms of the Ethiopian government were doing a great deal to create and perpetuate famine, one arm was busy trying to relieve it -- with a certain degree of success.

However, the RRC fulfilled three vital functions which fitted in extremely well with the twin government aims of suppressing insurgencies and maintaining a food supply sufficient to ensure its independence from the demands of the ordinary rural people.

One of these roles was using the destitute population of Ethiopia as the raw material for the creation of new villages, settlement schemes, state farms and collectives. The villagization carried out in Bale and Sidamo from 1979-84 is a case in point; resettlement will be considered later.

The RRC's second role was propaganda. The RRC portrayed the famine as a problem of drought and over-population, played down the existence of the war, and consistently claimed that all famine victims were being reached by it and the voluntary agencies working alongside it. This meant that the question of access to the millions of people in EPLF- and TPLF-controlled areas was never given the publicity that it warranted. The extremely needy populations in the war zones thus received far less than they required, while generous relief could be distributed in less needy government controlled areas in the center and south.

The third role played by the RRC was as a procurement agent for foreign assistance. It had only limited success up to 1984, but after 1985 it was exceptionally successful, and was repeatedly accused of underestimating needs by the donors. While much of the aid given to the RRC undoubtedly went to genuine victims of famine, much went to less worthy recipients. The militias in Eritrea and Tigray are one example (see next chapter). Another example is the manner in which relief agencies were directed to set up distribution programs in areas of the country which were poor but by no means suffering from famine -- in some instances these were areas in which large-scale procurement by the AMC was occurring. Finally, diversion of food aid to the military and the marketplace certainly took place (see chapter 10).

TPLF and EPLF Social and Economic Policies

The TPLF and EPLF both avowed radical socialist economic doctrines, but in fact followed far more pragmatic policies.

Both fronts bought grain on the open market. An attempt by the TPLF in mid 1983 to enforce controlled grain prices in Sheraro market failed when the local traders boycotted the market, and the policy was abandoned. Ironically, the TPLF came under criticism from conservative governments in Britain and the US for paying high prices for grain for relief distributions.²⁷

TPLF taxation policy consisted of levying a "voluntary contribution" of 5 Birr.²⁸ While there are no reports of coercion, a strong element of social pressure was certainly present. Other taxes were levied on the export of grain and animals, and the import of luxury goods. The EPLF had similar policies, in addition to its more significant funds from expatriate Eritreans' donations and fundraising, and a charge on their remittances to relatives living in EPLF-controlled areas.

Both fronts moved from opposing private enterprise to promoting it. In the late 1970s, the TPLF fought against conservative political forces, including the EDU, and thus contributed to the exodus of traders from Tigray. It also set up cooperatives to compete with traders, and attempted to restrict traders' activities. These measures failed. From 1983-4 onwards, despite its increasingly hard-line Marxist ideology, the TPLF imposed no hindrances on trade and regarded merchants as "strategic allies" in the struggle. Petty trade was recognized as essential to peasant survival, and encouraged, especially after 1987. There was, however, an assumption that economic development would mean that it would ultimately cease to be profitable, so that peasants would abandon it.²⁹ In the late 1980s the EPLF revoked its earlier intentions to nationalize most of the Eritrean economy, which had the immediate impact of leading to measures facilitating private trade and enterprise.

Early TPLF measures also served to restrict migrant labor. Though the front never imposed any formal ban on wage labor, a number of policies discouraged it. These included the attacks on the merchant-landowner class of western Tigray, whose farms were a major source of

²⁷ In a letter to the head of an aid agency, dated July 11, 1989, the British Minister for Overseas Development, Chris Patten, stated his opposition to "a system which we believe is at the least giving merchants excessive profits and may well be helping to finance the TPLF."

²⁸ Gebru Tareke, "Preliminary History of Peasant Resistance in Tigray (Ethiopia)," *Africa* (Roma), 39, (1984) pp. 213-14.

²⁹ Meles Zenawi, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

employment, surveillance of the population to prevent infiltration of government agents and saboteurs (particularly in 1980), and the TPLF's own land reform program, which made membership in a baito (equivalent to a PA) a precondition for having land rights. The first two of these policies changed from 1983 onwards, so that between 1983 and 1985 the TPLF was actually assisting migration, and itself providing wage laboring opportunities in western Tigray, for example weaving baskets and tapping gum trees. Large landholdings in thinly-populated areas were also permitted.

The Consequences for the People

The ultimate human cost of the famine is the number of people who suffered a premature death. Most of those who died were children under the age of five.

Those with animals had to sell; those without had two options -- to stay and starve, or move to relief shelters. The phenomenally large population living in the relief shelters in 1984/5 -- over 500,000 in Wollo alone -- was the result of this.

Relief shelters and refugee camps are notoriously unhealthy places -- one epidemiologist has written that they "constitute one of the most pathogenic environments imaginable."³⁰ Epidemics of measles, typhus, relapsing fever, dysentery and cholera swept through and decimated the camp populations. Though debilitation due to undernourishment undoubtedly played a part in the high levels of mortality that resulted, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions were at least as important. It is a rule of thumb that the death rates in a camp or shelter are about five times those prevailing in the community at large.³¹ Some of this is due to the fact that the camp inmates are already weaker than those who remain behind in the villages, but much of it is caused directly by the degraded public health environment. There were estimated to be up to 150,000 deaths in camps during the famine³² -- half or more of these deaths could have been averted had there been no need for relief camps.

The pictures of Korem and Megele filmed by Mohamed Amin of Visnews in October 1984 were thus the direct result of the counter-insurgency strategy of the government.

In the years 1980-3, restricted access to the Tigrayan towns meant that rural people had

³⁰ Bruce Dick, "Diseases of Refugees -- Causes, Effects and Control," Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, 78, (1984) p. 736.

³¹ Journalists commonly speak of the inhabitants of relief camps as "the lucky ones" on account of the small amounts of relief they receive. This is of course not so.

³² John Seaman, "Famine Mortality in Ethiopia and Sudan," Liege, International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, 1987.

restricted access to health services. In 1981 there was an epidemic of malaria, in 1982 there was an outbreak of meningitis, and in 1984 there were serious epidemics of measles and other diseases. These undoubtedly caused more deaths than they would have done had free access to health facilities been available. In response to this problem, REST began setting up health clinics, especially in 1981/2, but it was unable to cope with the magnitude of the health problems.

How Many Died?

The total number of people killed by the famine is not known. The UN has gone on record saying that one million died, but this is no more than a guess. No systematic studies of mortality among the population in general were conducted, and the government discouraged any attempts to carry them out.³³ The mortality data for the 1970s famines are better than those for the 1980s. The RRC never published its own figures for deaths.

The death totals in camps can be estimated with some accuracy. 40,000 died in camps in Wollo between August 1984 and August 1985,³⁴ 15,000 in refugee camps in Sudan, and a total of between 100,000-150,000 for the whole famine zone for the whole period. (Deaths in the resettlement program will be considered in chapter 12.)

Deaths among the general population are open to greater problems of estimation -- we know neither the size of the population, the number affected by famine, the death rate in normal years, the length during which the death rate was raised on account of famine, nor the death rate during the famine. Nevertheless, some approximations can be made.

The total country-wide affected population during 1984/5, according to the RRC, was 6,098,000. In the north, there were 872,000 in Eritrea, 1,790,900 in Wollo,³⁵ 376,500 in Gonder and 200,000 in northern Shewa. The real figure for Tigray was at least one million more than the official estimate of 1,331,900; including these would give a total affected in the north of about 3.3 million. It can be assumed that death rates rose among the affected populations of Tigray and north Wollo a year before they began to rise elsewhere. In 1983/4, 1.1 million were affected in north Wollo and about two million in Tigray. This gives a total of about 6.4 million "affected person years."

The death rate in normal times in the north of Ethiopia is approximately 20 per thousand

³³ A study by the Ethiopian statistician Asmerom Kidane was subject to censorship (see chapter 12) and independent attempts to do demographic surveys met with official obstruction.

³⁴ John Mitchell, "Review of the Famine Relief Operation in Wollo Administrative Region, Ethiopia," mimeo, 1986, p. 20.

³⁵ Later the figure for Wollo was revised upwards to over 2.5 million.

per year.

For death rates during the famine, the following fragments of data are available:

- *An independent survey in 1987, which found that 30 per cent of sampled households had lost an average of 1.6 family members during 1984 and 1985.³⁶ Assuming an average household of five members, this implies a death rate of about 96 per thousand for the two years. This is consistent with one year of normal mortality and one year of a raised rate of 76 per thousand.
- *An ad hoc Red Cross survey result, which indicates that 51 per cent of households in central Wollo lost one or more family members during the famine.³⁷ On varying assumptions, this implies a death rate of 102 or 163 per thousand for the whole famine.
- *A survey among refugees arriving in Sudan, which indicated a death rate of 70 per thousand in the preceding year (up to and including migration).³⁸
- *A large-scale survey in northern Shewa in late 1985, which found death rates of 96-108 per thousand over a short period for a large population.³⁹
- *A compilation of data by REST in early 1985 which indicated that 1,500 people in Tigray were dying each day, implying a death rate equivalent to 110 per thousand.⁴⁰
- *A survey in resettlement sites done by a professional demographer (the only such professional survey) which found a peak death rate of about 115-123 per thousand.⁴¹

Famine mortality usually shows a seasonal variation, with the peak generally about one and a half times higher than the average for the year. The peak of about 100 per thousand implies a yearly rate of about 70 per thousand, which is consonant with the findings of surveys covering a longer period. The excess above normal which can be attributed to famine is therefore about 50 per thousand. With 6.4 million person years "affected", this implies 320,000 deaths attributable to famine during 1983-5. Deaths in camps over and above the general famine death rate need to be added. 100,000 people died in camps, about five times the number if the people had remained in the countryside. Adding this extra 80,000, the total is 400,000.

More pessimistic estimates would expand the affected population and raise the average

³⁶ Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, pp. 3, 131.

³⁷ Cited in Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 131.

³⁸ Cutler, 1988, p. 348.

³⁹ Dr Mack Otten of Save the Children Federation (US), quoted by Seaman, 1987.

⁴⁰ REST were assuming a population of Tigray and its borderlands amounting to five million.

⁴¹ Asmerom Kidane, "Demographic Consequences of the Ethiopian Famine," *Demography*, 26, (1989) pp. 515-22.

famine death rate, each by 25 per cent, and give the higher estimate for deaths in camps, resulting in an estimate of 590,000 famine deaths. These figures concur with the best-informed contemporary estimates, which argue for a total of about 500,000 famine deaths for the period 1982-6.⁴²

How many of the deaths can be attributed to the counter-insurgency methods of the Ethiopian government and other punitive measures implemented to the cost of rural people? This question cannot be answered in anything but the crudest terms. The counter-insurgency strategy caused the famine to strike one year earlier than would otherwise have been the case, and forced people to migrate to relief shelters and refugee camps. The economic war against the peasants caused the famine to spread to other areas of the country. If the famine had struck only in 1984/5, and only affected the "core" areas of Tigray and north Wollo (3.1 million affected people), and caused only one quarter of the number to migrate to camps, the death toll would have been 175,000 (on the optimistic assumptions) and 273,000 (on the pessimistic assumptions). Thus between 225,000 and 317,000 deaths -- rather more than half of those caused by the famine -- can be blamed on the government's human rights violations.

In addition, deaths from famine occurred in the south -- in Harerghe, Bale, Sidamo and in Wollaita district of Shewa. These deaths almost certainly numbered in the tens of thousands. Government counter-insurgency strategies including military offensives and forced relocation⁴³ were instrumental in creating the famine in the three southern provinces, and its agricultural policy was crucial in Wollaita.

⁴² Cutler, 1988, p. 437.

⁴³ Described in chapter 5.

10. WAR AND THE USE OF RELIEF AS A WEAPON IN ERITREA, 1984-88

In October 1984, the famine and war in Ethiopia took a dramatic turn, with four simultaneous developments. On October 23, the BBC screened a film of the starvation in Korem, unleashing a juggernaut of international aid that completely transformed the famine, which had up to that point been developing without large amounts of external relief aid. Secondly, on October 27, the army in Eritrea launched its largest offensive for two-and-a-half years, which was to be followed up by an even larger series of offensives during 1985. Thirdly, the Ethiopian government launched its principal response to the famine, the resettlement program. Finally, an ambitious villagization program was launched in Harerghe, as a counter-insurgency measure against the OLF, which presaged the program in other parts of the country. These four developments are the subject of this and the following three chapters.

The huge relief operation that swung into action meant that after October 1984, control of relief was a major component of the military strategy of both the government and the rebel fronts. The systematic use (and denial) of food relief for military ends was the most notable aspect of government military strategy that also included extraordinarily sustained and widespread brutality against civilians.

In the southeast in 1979-82, and Eritrea in 1982, the government had tried with mixed success to obtain humanitarian assistance from the international community to use for the pacification element of its counter-insurgency strategy. Between 1982 and 1984, these aid flows were drying up, and the repatriation initiative was not meeting with much success. After October 1984, the massive inflow of relief allowed the government to return, when it wished to do so, to its preferred counter-insurgency strategy.

This chapter focuses on the continued war in Eritrea, and the role of aid in the government's counter-insurgency strategy. As elements of that strategy were common to both Eritrea and Tigray, some details concerning the aid programs in Tigray will also be included. It ends with the EPLF victory at Afabet in March 1988. Building on less spectacular military gains over the previous six months, this battle marked a turning point in the war -- from then onwards, both EPLF and TPLF had gained military supremacy.

The Aid Response

The publicity suddenly given to the famine represented an earthquake in the relief world. From donating only \$11 million to Ethiopia in Financial Year (FY) 1983 and \$23 million in FY 1984, USAID increased its donations to \$350 million in FY 1985. The members of the European

Community increased their donations from \$111 million in (calendar) 1983 to \$213 million in 1984 and \$325 million in 1985. Overall assistance rose from \$361 million in 1983 to \$417 million in 1984 and \$784 million in 1985.¹ 975,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food was delivered to the government side between November 1984 and October 1985. About 80,000 MT went to EPLF- and TPLF-held areas.

Dilemmas in Feeding the North

In October 1984 the aid donors faced an acute dilemma: whether to channel relief through the government or rebel side.

In December, diplomats and relief agency staff in Addis Ababa estimated that the government had access to only 22 per cent of the famine-stricken population.² The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) had access to most of the remainder, using "cross-border" routes from Sudan, and travelling only at night to avoid aerial bombardment. The Emergency Relief Desk, a consortium of humanitarian agencies set up in 1981, acted as an intermediary between the donors and ERA and REST, avoiding many of the problems that those donors would have encountered had they implemented the programs themselves.³ Nevertheless, the great majority of the assistance was channelled through the RRC and voluntary agencies working alongside it: according to most estimates, they received over 90 per cent of the money and food.

The US shared with other donors a preference for working on the government side; it was quicker, cheaper, and more public. However, unlike every other major aid donor (save the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC]), USAID was the only donor to contemplate giving substantial support to the cross-border operation. Because of the politics of the relief program, USAID did not in the end give the support that it promised, and the cross-border operation remained grossly under-supplied during 1984 and 1985.

The US donated 5,000 MT to ERA and REST in April 1984 for the cross-border operation, a further 23,000 MT in November, and another "substantial" donation in December. In September, USAID initiated discussions to launch a much larger cross-border program, possibly

¹ Figures from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries," 1984-1986.

² Paul Valley, "Famine: Russia and US on Collusion Course," *The Times*, London, June 4, 1985.

³ Barbara Hendrie, "Cross-Border Relief Operations in Eritrea and Tigray," *Disasters*, 13, (1990), p. 355.

of a size to eclipse the program run from the government side. According to documents obtained by the journalist Paul Vallely, several plans were mooted; the most ambitious involved spending over \$100 million and building a road from Sudan into central Tigray; the least ambitious involved donating 240 trucks to ERA and REST.⁴ Only in late 1985 did assistance in the form of 150 trucks finally materialize. Throughout most of 1985, REST was still operating a battered fleet of 55 aging Fiat trucks, assisted by a smaller fleet of ICRC vehicles.

Repeated demands by diplomats, humanitarian agencies and the rebel fronts for a "food truce" to allow non-governmental agencies to supply relief to the hungry in all parts of the country were consistently rejected by the government. In December 1984, Acting Foreign Minister Tibebe Bekele rejected an approach from the US Charge d'Affaires, saying that it amounted to a proposal "to make an arrangement with criminals."⁵ Government officials consistently rejected the suggestion that there were areas of the country which could not be reached by the RRC.

In these circumstances USAID used the cross-border operation as a bargaining tool with the government: unless greater access was provided from the government side, the US would throw major resources into the cross-border operation. However, this strategy was undermined by various factors, including:

- *The lack of a suitable private relief organization to take on the role of implementing partner for USAID's relief food (CARE was approached but refused in March);

- *The unilateral donation of resources to the government side by all other major donors, notably the UN;

- *The April 7 popular uprising in Sudan, which overthrew President Jaafar Nimeiri (a close ally of the US and at the time very hostile to Mengistu) and brought to power the Transitional Military Council, which hoped for improved relations with the Ethiopian government;⁶

- *The need for the relief program to be public, so that the television viewers in the US could see that their government was acting. The Ethiopian government was totally intransigent and refused to concede any legitimacy at all to the cross-border program, so that it had to be clandestine. It therefore could not be open to the televised visits of US politicians, journalists and media personalities.

⁴ Vallely, The Times, London, June 4, 1985.

⁵ Quoted in: David A. Korn, Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union, London, 1986, p. 135.

⁶ Sudanese-Ethiopian relations dramatically improved during the rest of 1985, but deteriorated during 1986 and 1987 as the Sudanese civil war escalated and the Ethiopian government continued to provide military support to the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army. Sudanese relations with the fronts improved as those with the government soured.

Two other factors helped to swing the debate in favor of the government side. One was that the army's military successes in the Eighth Offensive in Tigray between February and April meant that many more areas became accessible from the government side (see next chapter). The second was that the US State Department realised that neither EPLF nor TPLF were ideologically suited to playing the role of "contras" against the Communist government in Addis Ababa. In favor of the cross-border operation was the fear that a large refugee influx into Sudan would destabilize that country, which remained a western ally.⁷

Thus, due to essentially political considerations, the cross-border operation fell out of favor with USAID – though a reduced level of support for it continued. Instead, the "Food for the North" initiative was proposed in March, whereby US voluntary agencies would work on the government side. World Vision was selected for Tigray and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) for Eritrea. The proposal and the decision to support it were made before the full cooperation of the Ethiopian government was obtained; this meant that throughout 1985 and afterwards the government consistently had the upper hand in determining the conditions under which aid was provided in Eritrea and Tigray. Therefore, not only did the cross-border operation fail to receive adequate support, but its value as a bargaining counter with the government was never properly realized.

Food Relief and Survival Strategies

The politics of food assistance to Ethiopia over this period have received much attention from journalists, relief workers and scholars.⁸ This chapter is concerned with the problem of famine more generally. Even in the worst famines in Africa, food relief provided by humanitarian agencies or governments plays a relatively minor role in the survival of the people. For example, the enormous relief effort to the famine-stricken Sudanese region of Darfur in 1984/5 succeeded in providing no more than about twelve per cent of the total food consumed by the people of that region during the famine, and had little appreciable effect on their survival chances.⁹ Similarly in Ethiopia, famine relief was at best the last ten per cent which assisted rural people in surviving. Moreover, in contrast to other survival strategies such as gathering wild foods, trading, or taking

⁷ Until January 1985 the Sudan government officially blamed food shortages on the refugee influx, denying the existence of a domestic food problem.

⁸ The best such book remains: Peter Gill, A Year in the Death of Africa, London, 1986.

⁹ Alex de Waal, "Is Famine Relief Irrelevant to Rural People?" IDS Bulletin, 20.2, Sussex, April 1988, pp. 63-9.

paid labor, the provision of relief food was unreliable and was often accompanied by unpleasant side-effects such as the need to walk long distances, absent oneself from the farm at critical stages in the agricultural cycle, or live in a disease-ridden relief shelter. Thus, while the provision or interruption of relief supplies was vitally important for the people of northern Ethiopia after October 1984, other aspects of the counter-insurgency strategy which adversely affected the survival strategies of the affected population were, as during the previous years, even more important.

The fact that relief assistance is much less important than "normal" economic activities is significant. While it does not make the disruption of relief supplies any less morally reprehensible, it draws attention to the fact that other actions which create famine are even more deserving of moral outrage.

The October 1984 Offensive

Within the same week that the BBC film of Korem was broadcast, the Ethiopian government launched a major offensive in Eritrea. The following year was to equal 1982 in terms of the suffering of civilian Eritreans on account of the war; it was to surpass the horrors of that year because rural people had to contend with the problems of famine as well.

By October 1984, the 60,000 new conscripts drafted earlier that year had finished their military training and were ready for battle. The total size of the regular army was 210,000, with 170,000 militia. Meanwhile there had been a build up of armor -- the army now had 750 main battle tanks and 130 combat aircraft. These new forces were soon to be deployed: for eleven of the next thirteen months, the army was actively engaged in major offensives, its most sustained military action since 1978.

On October 27, 1984, the Ethiopian army launched a large offensive which lasted until January. This included the familiar elements of indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian targets as a prelude to ground attack. The market at Molki, Seraye district, was bombed on October 2, killing 42 marketgoers and wounding 90. In the EPLF base area of Orola, a school was bombed. Villages close to the EPLF front lines were subjected to indiscriminate shelling during a period of two weeks, and there was further aerial bombardment towards the end of the offensive in January.

After the fighting stopped there was little quiet in Eritrea. In April the army attacked Nacfa, and there were numerous small engagements.

The Food for the North Initiative, 1985

The large inflow of aid in general, and the Food for the North Initiative in particular, gave the Ethiopian government a new resource which it began to use in the middle of 1985. The government preferred to have the aid consigned to its own RRC, which could then utilize the aid as it pleased. However, when some of the main aid donors, particularly the US, insisted on using voluntary agencies, the government saw that it had advantages in this arrangement too. The government knew that few relief agencies would have the courage to speak out about human rights abuses or the role of relief in the war, particularly if it threatened to shut down their programs in reprisal. The publicity which the agencies would draw could thus be used in the government's favor, and to the disadvantage of the rebel fronts.

Paul Valley noted some of the ironies of the Food for the North Initiative: The relief agencies were pleased. So was the Dergue, because the deal would provide a

programme of pacification in the rebel areas newly under its control. Food could be distributed without the risk that it might fall into the hands of the rebel army. Moreover, the presence of western aid workers in the area would constrain the vigour of any [rebel] counter-offensive. Having got the Soviet Union to finance the operation, Colonel Mengistu had now got the US to finance its consolidation with food handouts.¹⁰

After an initial reluctance to let the Food for the North program go ahead, the government allowed CRS into Areza and Barentu. The CRS target was to open two more centers in Keren and Agordat and distribute food to 200,000 people. Over the following months, government enthusiasm for the program grew.

The 1985 Offensives

In July 1985, the EPLF took the important garrison town of Barentu. The CRS feeding program, which had opened a few months beforehand, was stopped. The government now had no presence in western Eritrea, where the only functioning relief programs were those organized by ERA, bringing in food cross-border from Sudan.

In August the government launched a huge offensive -- equalling the Red Star campaign of 1982 in terms of numbers of troops deployed. In two phases, it lasted until late October. In terms of losses by the EPLF, it was probably the costliest campaign -- estimates for casualties among the EPLF range from 2,000 to 4,000 and higher.¹¹ One aim of the campaign was to disrupt the supply routes from Sudan used by ERA.

While the offensive was waged, the army commandeered all transport in Eritrea. RRC distributions in Eritrea and Tigray came almost to a halt -- falling from 14,122 MT in July to 2,069 MT in August.

Within the space of a few weeks, Barentu was recaptured by the army, which went on to retake Tessenei, held by the EPLF for 18 months, and a key town for access to Sudan. The whole cross-border route through Kassala was closed on August 25, leaving ERA only the longer and more difficult route from Port Sudan. A large irrigated farm nearby at Ali Ghidir was also captured. ERA estimated that 20,000 MT of food aid was lost to the army. 30,000 refugees fled across the border to Sudan, and 190,000 people were internally displaced in Eritrea. 22 villages were destroyed or abandoned because of aerial bombardment or artillery shelling. There were credible reports of reprisals taken against civilian residents of Barentu and the surrounding

¹⁰ The Times, London, June 4, 1985.

¹¹ Roy Pateman, Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning, Trenton, NJ, 1990, p. 140; Africa Confidential, 26.30, October 30, 1985.

villages, in which 37 people were killed.

Aerial bombardment continued throughout this period. On September 20 and 22, the ERA camp for displaced people at Solomuna in Sahel was bombed and 20 adults and nine children were killed. The village of Badme was also bombed, killing nine.

EPLF Strategy

The 1985 offensives were a major but temporary setback for the EPLF. As in Tigray, the experience of the government war strategy and its role in creating famine hardened popular support for the front. Between 1984 and 1987, EPLF strength rose from 12,000 to about 30,000, and the numbers of militia were increased.¹²

The EPLF responded to the government advance of 1985 by consolidating its control in north-west Eritrea, expanding its forces, and protecting its relief routes. In late 1987, it began to go on the offensive, disrupting government supply lines, and attacking convoys. In December the EPLF overran the army's main defensive positions at Nacfa, a prelude to the devastating attack on Afabet in March.

Pacification in Eritrea 1986-7 I: The Army

The military strategy adopted in 1986-7 was a familiar one: constant military patrols and small-scale offensives, bombing "everything that moves" in the EPLF-controlled areas, and a continued program of villagization and pacification elsewhere.

The army in Eritrea exacted many bloody reprisals against the civilian population. The following are some reported incidents:

*March 1986: Senafe, Akele Guzai: two killed when a soldier threw a grenade into a crowd;

*June 1986: lower Anseba and Dembezan areas, Hamassien: several villages looted by soldiers;

*August 6, 1986: Hamazu, Southern Eritrea: 140 killed, 100 injured by soldiers;

*September 1986: Adibara, Barka: five peasants killed in retaliation for a land mine explosion which destroyed an army truck;

*September 23-4, 1986: Akele Guzai: 24 peasants executed, 20 arrested;

*June 24, 1987: Adi Hadid, Akele Guzai: six killed;

¹² NOVIB, "War and Famine in Eritrea and Tigray: An Investigation into the Arms Deliveries to the Struggling Parties in Eritrea and Tigray," Zeist, the Netherlands, 1991, p. 12.

*June 26, 1987: Haikota and Adi Shimel, Barka: 29 farmers were ploughing their land when troops came and took to them to Adi Shimel, where 16 were killed and Haikota, where ten were killed;

*July 1987: Anseba, Senhit: 16 people killed and 106 cattle burned by soldiers.

Other forms of harassment continued. In one reported incident, a man in Adikuta, Akele Guzai, was ordered to pay a 3,000 Birr fine after seven of his goats stepped on land mines, which detonated. A court ordered that the fine be paid to compensate the army for "wasted mines."

The University of Leeds assessment team which visited Eritrea in late 1987 obtained figures for losses and destruction due to the war.¹³ The figures indicate that since the beginning of 1986:

*22,500 hectares of land had been destroyed by military action or rendered unusable by land mines.

*3,500 tons of food had been confiscated by the army.

*43,900 domestic animals had been stolen by the army (mostly sheep and goats, but including substantial numbers of pack animals, cattle and camels).

*1,500 civilians had been killed, 3,600 imprisoned, and 200 raped by soldiers.

*1.3 million Birr of money and property had been looted by the army.

*2,500 homes had been destroyed.¹⁴

Pacifying Eritrea II: The Air Force

Bombing in Eritrea continued constantly. Some attacks included:

*August 4, 1986: Dekidashin: three civilians killed, two wounded.

*September 15, 1986: Egela Hatsin, Akele Guzai: five killed, 20 wounded.

*September 20, 1986: Ela Tsaeda, Sahel: one killed.

*January 31, 1987: Hawasheit relief center: four civilians killed, including a four year old girl.

¹³ The figures came from ERA and were not therefore independent; some incidents contained in them have been cross-checked, but no full independent check has been possible.

¹⁴ Figures reproduced in: Lionel Cliffe, "The Impact of War and the Response to it in Different Agrarian Systems in Eritrea," Development and Change, 20, (1989) p. 377.

On at least one occasion, the MiGs crossed the Sudan border on their bombing missions. In August 1987, an agricultural camp was attacked and one woman was killed and five wounded.¹⁵

Pacifying Eritrea III: Relief

Relief food was a major strategic element in Eritrea from 1985 onwards. The traditional relationship of regular and guerrilla armies to the population -- that they rely on the people to give them food -- was reversed. Both the government and the EPLF had more food resources at their disposal, and used it to obtain the support of and control over the population. That, however, is where the symmetry ended. The logic of the government's position, as an unpopular presence trying to subdue an unwilling populace, meant that food relief was used to restrict people, as the more acceptable side of a violent and impoverishing counter-insurgency strategy. The logic of the EPLF's position was that it already enjoyed widespread popular support, and it wanted to feed the people in the areas it controlled in order to prevent them migrating to government-held areas or to Sudan to look for food.

After the success of the August 1985 offensive in Eritrea, the government's attitude to the Food for the North Initiative warmed. "They have done a complete volte face and are encouraging PVOs [private voluntary agencies] to expand it still further" said Richard Eney of USAID.¹⁶ CRS moved back into Barentu. The number of distribution points was increased, including Keren. Critics of the program argued that "when Ethiopian troops advance on a place like Barentu, and then a few days later an American voluntary agency comes in to distribute US food and medical supplies, you become hard-pressed not to see this as an odd kind of coordination."¹⁷ CRS and USAID argued that the humanitarian necessity of providing food overrode any political-military considerations, that the EPLF was happy to see Eritrean people fed, no matter who by, and that a few months of emergency feeding would not win hearts and minds after 25 years of bloody warfare.¹⁸

The relief given in Eritrea was generous, in contrast to the years 1983-4. However, outside the towns, it was tied to the continuing program of the creation of protected villages. In

¹⁵ Sudan News Agency, August 12, 1987.

¹⁶ Quoted in: Jonathan B. Tucker, "The Politics of Famine: US Foreign Policy in Ethiopia, 1982-1985," mimeo, 1985, p. 55.

¹⁷ Tucker, 1985, p. 49.

¹⁸ Tucker, 1985, pp. 49-50.

order to receive food, rural people had to bring their whole families, and register, often paying a fee of 5 Birr in order to do so. The food was then given in frequent small amounts, making it impossible for the family to return home with food.

Other means were used to control the population in distribution centers: most were protected villages, with curfews enforced and movement restricted, with only one or two permitted entrances, and ringed by anti-personnel land mines.

One way in which the aid was used to draw people into protected villages was by threatening and harassing those who tried to obtain aid from ERA distribution centers. Said Ali Mohamed was interviewed by Barbara Hendrie at an ERA center in March 1986:¹⁹

In my village we are completely encircled by the enemy. The Dergue is in all directions; we drink from the same well, you can say. We are afraid. All of the time they take our camels, our goats, our animals.

The food I get here, I will not take it home to my village, because if I do, and the Dergue finds out, they will kill us. So I will hide my food in valleys or in the hills and will travel to the hiding place from my village to take some food at a time, daily or weekly.

The enemy has prevented us from getting food before, so this is the first time I have come here.

Securing Garrisons and Roads

A supplementary function of the program, for the army, was to keep roads open and give protection to military convoys. On roads where the EPLF was known to be active, the army would often send civilian buses or relief convoys, and only if they got through without trouble, would they send military vehicles. Some convoys were mixed relief and military, and often the identity of different vehicles was unclear.

This policy inevitably led to tragedy. On July 13, 1988, a civilian bus travelling between Asmara and Tigray struck a land mine and caught fire. According to the government, 25 civilian passengers were killed immediately and nine died later. Relief vehicles also suffered.

EPLF Attacks on Relief Vehicles

In August-September 1987, two simultaneous developments meant that relief vehicles became targets for attack by EPLF ambushes. One was the expansion of EPLF military activity further southwards and eastwards, so that it threatened major roads. The second was the drought

¹⁹ Barbara Hendrie, "Field Report -- Eritrea," Emergency Relief Desk, Khartoum, April 1986, Appendix B.

of the summer of 1987, which meant that relief activities needed to be greatly stepped up.

On October 23, 1987, the EPLF attacked a convoy of 34 trucks south of Asmara. EPLF fighters drained the fuel tanks, poured the fuel over the vehicles, and set them alight. One driver was also killed. 23 of the trucks carried relief food, much of it supplied by BandAid, and the incident attracted worldwide condemnation. The EPLF claimed that three trucks carried arms. This claim has never been substantiated. However, the relief vehicles were travelling in a mixed convoy, which included commercial and government vehicles. The only marking identifying the relief trucks were small stickers on the doors, which were invisible from a distance.

The attack on the convoy caused a flurry of activity in the humanitarian community aimed to ensure that it did not happen again. Over the following week, there was an attempt to negotiate a "safe passage" agreement with the government. This was immediately rejected by the government, whereupon the EPLF said it would continue to attack convoys to which it had not given prior clearance.

Less ambitiously, there were consultations between EPLF, Emergency Relief Desk and BandAid in Khartoum.²⁰ A proposal was worked out whereby relief trucks would be much more clearly marked (with large flags indicating the beginning and end of the relief "bloc" in a convoy) and the EPLF would be warned in advance of the movements of such convoys. The EPLF for its part promised to give "instructions to the army units to separate military from relief and to take all possible precautions to ensure that relief materials and relief transportation are not harmed."²¹ The details of this proposal were passed via the British Embassy in Addis Ababa to Mr Michael Priestley, then head of the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE), who summarily rejected the plan.

Thereafter, the safety of the relief vehicles depended on the efficiency of an informal process of communication between the humanitarian agencies in Asmara and Addis Ababa, Penny Jenden, director of BandAid in London, Emergency Relief Desk in Khartoum, and the EPLF.

Over the following months there were more attacks on relief vehicles, but none on convoys of marked relief vehicles unaccompanied by military vehicles. In November, there were two attacks on convoys, which later transpired to have not been carrying relief. In December, a convoy of 13 vehicles was destroyed, and on January 15, 1988, another convoy, including relief vehicles, was burned near Massawa. While the relief trucks were unmarked and were accompanied by military vehicles, there is no evidence that the attacking EPLF force tried to

²⁰ ICRC also participated but withdrew pending its "Open Roads for Survival" initiative (see chapter 11).

²¹ EPLF press release, December 2, 1987.

separate out the military and relief vehicles as they had earlier promised.

The attacks attracted international publicity. Both the EPLF and the government confined the argument to the issue of famine relief, which ensured that the government would be the winner, at least in terms of international public opinion: the EPLF undoubtedly carried the responsibility for destroying the relief supplies. A more rounded assessment of the ethics of the EPLF attacks on relief demands attention to the government's whole pacification strategy. The relief operations were but a small part of an overall government strategy. The ten per cent contribution to survival provided by relief was more than offset by the government attack on the other 90 per cent of the existing economy, and the relief was itself an integral part of the pacification program that was undermining rural people's ability to provision themselves. Ensuring the "neutrality" of relief deliveries would have helped only a little while such an overall military strategy persisted. The EPLF attacks caused people to go hungry, but they helped make the pacification strategy less viable.

In March 1988, the EPLF won its greatest ever military victory at Afabet after a huge three-day battle in which it defeated a force of 15,000 men and over 50 tanks. It was the turning point in the war, and has been compared to the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu. However, such was the international preoccupation with food relief -- a preoccupation partly orchestrated by the government -- that a headline in The Times of London of March 31 ran: "Stepped up guerrilla raids threaten food deliveries."

Diversion of Aid to the Military

Frequent allegations were made during the early 1980s of large-scale diversion of food to the military in Ethiopia. The evidence was largely the testimony of refugees in Sudan, and visitors to EPLF- and TPLF- controlled areas who saw relief food stockpiled in the stores of captured garrisons. In March 1983, these allegations reached a new level with a report in the Sunday Times of London under the classic headline: "Starving babies' food sold to buy Soviet arms." Repeated visits by high-level representatives of donor countries, including Canada, the UK the European Community and (a year later) the US, failed to find any substance to these allegations, besides odd occasions of "loans" of food to the army. In late 1985, the UN estimated the rate of diversion at about five per cent, which is considered low under the circumstances. However, the diversion of this amount of food would, from 1985 onwards, have been sufficient to feed 300,000-400,000 men -- the entire armed forces.

Government officials were frank about the practice of feeding soldiers. In both Eritrea and Tigray (though apparently less so elsewhere) large amounts of relief food were used to feed the locally-conscripted militia. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, head of the RRC, reports a "request" from

Mengistu to divert food to the army in June 1984:

I understood the problem of the military. The common soldier was the victim of government policies just as much as the peasant. Soldiers were dying by the hundreds every week in the various civil wars. I didn't want them to suffer more due to food shortages. I now suggested that it would be easier for the RRC to divert food to the peasant militias rather than to the military establishment on the government payroll. These militias recruited from the peasantry were not paid; they were simply trained and ordered out to fight. I felt that feeding them was like feeding peasants.²²

Relief allocations in Eritrea and Tigray were made by a Drought Emergency Committee, composed of a range of government officials, only one of whom represented the RRC. Reportedly, allocations to the militia were made against the wishes of the RRC representative in Eritrea.

Later, government Deputy Administrator for Eritrea, Yishak Tsegai, told a reporter that the militia are "given priority because there is no fixed salary or privileges.... 20,000 peasants are armed on the side of the government."²³ These militia came to be known as milisha simai or "wheat militia" because of their method of payment.

In addition, about 15,000 militia in Tigray were fed. A visitor to Tigray discovered evidence of this in Meqele in March 1989, after its capture by the TPLF: Everyone I spoke to said that the RRC only gave food to their own militias and their families, not to the poor. We found indications of this in the looted RRC offices where file after file was titled "militia of ... receiving assistance" with lists of beneficiaries.²⁴

Extensive evidence of the use of food aid by army garrisons was discovered by journalist Peter Worthington, who visited the garrison of Afabet shortly after its capture by the EPLF. I went to the Ethiopian army kitchen and store depots to see what had been left in the hasty departure -- and found, stacked against a wall, a number of 50 kilogram sacks of flour, marked "C.I.D.A. [Canadian International Development Agency] Gift of Canada." Serving as curtains to the shelves were other sacks that had once contained Canadian wheat.

... I visited a dozen hole-in-wall shops, run mostly by Moslems and stocked with items such as Kiwi shoe polish, soap, toilet paper, colored hair oil, sardines, banana chewing gum from Saudi Arabia -- and bags of Canadian wheat flour.

²² Dawit Wolde Giorgis, Red Tears: War, Revolution and Famine in Ethiopia, Trenton, NJ, 1989, pp. 157-8.

²³ Jane Perlez, New York Times, February 15, 1990. The real figure was closer to 50,000.

²⁴ Jennie Street, "Report of Field Trip to Non-Government Held Areas of Tigray, Ethiopia, March 1989," Khartoum, Emergency Relief Desk, 1989, p. 34.

Every store, literally, had stacks of flour, marked C.I.D.A. Questions were answered evasively. They were keeping it for someone else ... Yes, it was for sale in the markets of Asmara ... no, it wasn't for sale -- unless someone wanted to buy it ... the army helped them to get it, sold to shopkeepers on the sly, everyone making a small profit.²⁵

Worthington also discovered cooking oil and other foodstuffs donated as aid in the garrison. In 1989, the sale of relief food by the army and militia in Eritrea had reached such a scale that a brisk trade was being conducted across the battle lines into Tigray, where it was contributing a significant amount to the diet of people and keeping food prices low.

Despite its claims to the contrary, the UN in Ethiopia was in fact well-informed about the large scale diversion of relief to the militia. In June 1985, the UN food monitor in Eritrea documented that militiamen were regularly receiving 90 kilograms of wheat per month. Of this, they kept about half for consumption, and sold the other half for money. The diversion was concealed by entering six names on the ration list for every militiaman. Often the family of the militiamen received regular rations as well. Ordinary civilians on the ration list received between 10 and 20 kilograms, and when food was short, they received nothing: the militia received priority in the allocation of supplies. The food monitor estimated that approximately one third of the relief in Eritrea was actually being directed to the militia. Mr Kurt Jansson, the UN coordinator for the emergency in Addis Ababa, chose not to publicize this well-documented report, and denied press reports that referred to the diversion of food. Later, Mr Jansson admitted that it had occurred but said that feeding militiamen "could not be considered wrong" as the militiamen would have received food anyway, had they remained as ordinary farmers.²⁶

It is quite possible that the total diversion of food aid to the army and militia did not amount to more than five to ten per cent of the total.²⁷ This however obscures the fact that the percentages were much higher in the critically-affected areas of the north; that even when the food reached the hungry it played a strategic military role; and the assistance program as a whole gave much needed foreign currency to the government.

Perhaps the most important way in which the relief effort contributed to the government's war effort and indeed survival was through the exchange rate. All foreign assistance was exchanged into Ethiopian Birr at the rate of 2.07 to the dollar, despite the fact that the real market

²⁵ Peter Worthington, The Sunday Sun, Toronto, April 24, 1988. There are numerous other similar accounts dating back to the 1970s.

²⁶ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, The Ethiopian Famine, London, 1987, p. 56.

²⁷ In 1985 the US General Accounting Office estimated the rate of diversion at 4.3 per cent, but did not take into account the feeding of the militia.

rate was two to three times higher. The government thereby taxed all currency transactions for relief by 100-150 per cent, in addition to port charges, import duties and license fees. This came to be the major source of foreign exchange for the government.

The relief effort also supported the fronts. This took several forms. One was the feeding of militiamen, who were in other respects poor farmers, and who received rations from their local *baitos* which distributed to the poor on behalf of ERA and REST. Another was beneficiaries contributing some relief supplies to fighters, without direct coercion, but undoubtedly with some social pressure. The main strategic benefit the fronts obtained from relief food was that the people were able to stay in their villages and were not obliged to migrate to Sudan.

Allegations of the straightforward re-consignment of relief to the fronts -- including fighters, support personnel, field hospitals, and prisoner of war camps -- have been made by the Ethiopian government, defectors from the fronts, and Mr Jansson of UNEOE.²⁸ They have never been confirmed. The diversion of five per cent of the cross-border food would have been sufficient to supply food to about half the EPLF's and TPLF's fighters. With the exception of ICRC programs, internationally-donated food travelled only in ERA and REST vehicles, and was distributed by locally-appointed distribution committees. While international agencies frequently sent food monitors to observe the transport and distribution of certain consignments of food (indeed the programs in rebel-held areas were more intensively monitored than those on the government side), independent comprehensive accounting of donations was never requested by the donors.²⁹

ERA and REST exchanged foreign currency in Saudi Arabia at rates close to the free market rate, though there was one incident in late 1989 and early 1990 in which a significant divergence occurred, in the order of 40 per cent. When the discrepancy was discovered by an American monitor, ERA apologized and returned the additional funds to the donors. International aid to the rebel side was much less than to the government, and proportionately certainly contributed much less to the fronts' war effort.

Famine Continues

Almost all the factors that led to the creation of famine in Eritrea in 1984 remained in place after 1985. The only exceptions were two years of better rainfall and a much larger supply

²⁸ Jansson, 1987, p. 52.

²⁹ The exception was the internal purchase of surplus foodgrains in Tigray, which was funded by USAID in 1984, 1989 and 1990, and on all occasions the purchases were actually made by US monitors.

of food aid. However, the pacification program and the war continued, and these continued to have the effects described in chapter 7. The underlying causes of the famine were not addressed, and when there was drought combined with a smaller relief program in 1989/90, severe famine returned.

A remarkable incident occurred in 1987 which illustrated the Ethiopian government's priorities. In the early 1980s, the Eritrean Public Health Program (EPHP), a civil branch of the EPLF, developed a small, low-cost field microscope. In 1984, production of the microscope began under license in London. At a cost of about one tenth of the existing commercially-available microscopes, and with a light-weight fold-away design, it had potential for use throughout the developing world. The World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored a series of tests, which the microscope passed, whereupon distribution began in several countries such as Brazil, Nicaragua and Indonesia. However in 1986 the Ethiopian government began to object to the microscope, which bore the initials of the EPHP, claiming that it was no more than part of a propaganda campaign launched by the "secessionist elements engaged in the rabid dismemberment of Ethiopia."³⁰ WHO and UNICEF were obliged to withdraw their endorsement of the microscope.

³⁰ Letter from H.E. Teferra Haile Selassie, Ethiopian Ambassador in London, to Dr Neil Anderson, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, September 1, 1986.

11. STARVING TIGRAY, 1984-88

Tigray during the last months of 1984 and the first half of 1985 represented the very nadir of the famine -- the most intense and widespread suffering in the entire country.

As before, a primary reason for the severity of the famine was the government's counter-insurgency strategy, including an extremely destructive army offensive. Unlike in other provinces, however, there was no significant relief program which could have offset this deliberately-induced suffering. The government deliberately withheld aid from the province which it held, and tried to prevent aid from reaching TPLF-held areas.

The Evacuation to Sudan

After the failure of the main 1984 harvest and the strangling effect of the government's intensified counter-insurgency strategies, Tigray faced unprecedented disaster. One way in which the TPLF responded to this was a mass evacuation of people to Sudan.

From 1980, the TPLF had an established policy of assisting impoverished migrants in western Tigray, through REST. In 1983, about 75,000 crossed the border to Sudan. In mid-1984, the food situation became so dire that the TPLF warned the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that a much larger number of refugees would be soon arriving in Sudan. The predicted 300,000 did not in the event arrive, but about 189,000 did. UNHCR however had made contingency plans for only 50,000 new refugees (including Eritreans), and delayed implementing a program on the grounds that the refugees were drought victims and therefore had no "well-founded fear of persecution," that no appeal for assistance had been received by the Sudan government, and that it could not deal with the TPLF as a "non-recognized entity." Only when the Sudan government made belated requests for aid, having futilely tried to close the border in November 1984, and the aid bandwagon was already rolling, did UNHCR decide to treat the inflow as a "special case"; it then provided generous assistance.

TPLF and REST assisted the westward migration, which took 4-5 weeks on foot. Feeding centers were set up at key points along the route, and food was brought across the border from Sudan. From 5,000 new refugees in September 1984, the inflow increased to 25,000 in October and 87,000 in December, tailing off during 1985. A disagreement between EPLF and TPLF in March 1985 led to the former closing the key road from Tigray to Sudan, which runs through Eritrea, forcing the refugees to use the longer and more dangerous route through Gonder. Conditions in the camps in Sudan were appalling, with some of the worst death rates ever recorded. An estimated 10,000-15,000 Tigrayan refugees died in camps in Sudan in 1984/5.

About 150,000 internally-displaced Tigrayans were assisted by REST in villages and shelters in western Tigray, and a further 500,000 migrated in search of employment in western

Tigray and Gonder.

In March-April 1985, with assistance from TPLF and REST, the refugees began to return to prepare their fields for ploughing. The return was resisted by most humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR (which until a year previously had been anxious to promote repatriation together with the Ethiopian government), which argued that the returnees faced certain death from starvation. But the refugees knew that unless they cultivated, they would remain perpetual paupers, and determined to return. At one point they staged a hunger strike in support of their right to go back. 70,000 left by the end of June, and almost all of the remainder over the following two years.

REST launched an ambitious (though underfunded) relief program to assist the returnees, and to provide relief to the hungry inside Tigray. Protecting the migration and relief routes became a major concern to the TPLF, which consequently had to alter its mode of warfare from pure guerrilla tactics to the consolidation of a "base area" in the west.

In retrospect, it is probably the case that the evacuation cost lives. The very high death rate while on the road and in Sudan caused by epidemic disease and exposure probably surpassed that which would have occurred had the migrants remained at home in their villages.

Some observers have compared the evacuation to Sudan with the resettlement program implemented by the government, equating it with a crime against humanity. This is inappropriate, for several reasons:

- *there is not a single piece of evidence to suggest that the evacuation was anything but voluntary; in fact there were more volunteers to migrate than the REST "pipeline" could handle;
- *it was temporary and was followed by a program of assisted return;
- *in late 1984 the TPLF was led to believe that generous humanitarian aid from the west would be forthcoming in the Sudanese refugee camps, and counted on that -- the appalling conditions in the camps were thus to a large extent the fault of the western donors and UNHCR;
- *the TPLF never tried to implement such a program again.

The TPLF learned several lessons from the evacuation. One was the military lesson that a guerrilla movement could not survive in an area which was depopulated or disrupted by mass population movements, as the military setbacks of 1985 demonstrated. For this and for sound humanitarian reasons, TPLF-REST policy after 1985 was geared to maintaining the population in its home area. The second lesson was that the international community was an unreliable ally. Large-scale international aid to the cross-border operation and the refugee camps, on which so much had depended, never materialized. The TPLF turned inwards; there was a prolonged internal debate on the respective virtues of "pragmatism" and textbook Leninism. The Leninists,

who maintained that the TPLF should rely principally on mobilizing the local population, won, and the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, the vanguard party of the TPLF, was formed.

The Eighth Offensive in Tigray

The Eighth Offensive opened on February 17, 1985, and was waged for three months. The campaign was fought on two fronts: in Tembien in central Tigray, the heart of the famine zone, and in western Tigray, where harvest surpluses and employment were available, and where REST was bringing in food across the border from Sudan, and evacuating refugees to Sudan. While cutting off access to relief from REST was one of the main objectives of the offensive, it also had the familiar effects of cutting employment levels and trade flows, and disrupting agricultural activity. The offensive also delayed the implementation of the Food for the North Initiative.

The opening of the offensive coincided with the day before the tenth anniversary of the founding of the TPLF, and large crowds had gathered in various TPLF-held towns to celebrate. In an uncharacteristic lapse of security and/or intelligence, the TPLF allowed the crowds to congregate in daylight in Abi Adi. A doctor working for a foreign relief agency witnessed what happened next:

The celebrations were just getting under way in the marketplace when, at 16:55 hours, there was a sudden roar and two MiGs flew low over the square where we stood. People screamed and ran in all directions, their faces frozen in terror. The MiGs circled and returned three times to strafe the marketplace with machine guns and shells. The pilots then spotted large numbers of people running away across open ground down by the Tankwa River towards a eucalyptus grove, so the planes turned their attention to this area, strafing it repeatedly. We crouched next to a wall not far from the market square as the MiGs roared in to attack again and again. A little girl ran screaming down the centre of the road nearby. After 15 minutes the planes left, leaving behind them a scene of appalling carnage. Initial estimates put the casualties at 25 dead and more than 100 wounded, 36 seriously. The number dead would have been far higher if not for the impressive efforts of first aid workers whose prompt treatment saved many lives.

There was a second attack the following day, in which the MiGs used high explosives to destroy the buildings of the town, which had now been almost completely evacuated, so casualties were much lighter: seven killed and 30 wounded. Several other Tigrayan towns were bombed during the same day. For the next two weeks, regular bombing raids continued. Abi Adi was bombed on two more occasions, as was the small town of Sambela, and 20 people were killed.

Then, on March 1, the ground offensive began, with troops moving out from Meqele and Korem. The Meqele column captured Abi Adi.¹ Many villages north of Abi Adi were attacked.

¹ Many of the following details of the offensive are based on information compiled by Barbara Hendrie.

In April, a survey of refugees in Sudan found that the majority came from this area, where destruction had been widespread.

Refugees, REST aid convoys and feeding centers were all targets of the bombing. In December, a column of refugees walking to Sudan was attacked near Shilalo in Shire, and 18 people were killed and 56 wounded. Between March 27-30, nine transit and feeding centers used by REST for giving assistance to migrants were bombed. 6,000 people had to be evacuated from the center at Zelazelay, which involved moving ill people and pregnant women from the clinic. The pharmacy and drug store was later destroyed in the attacks.

Meanwhile, the ground forces moved into western Tigray to cut the relief routes used by REST from Sudan -- also cutting the roads used by refugees. The Hermi Gorge link between central and western Tigray was cut. On April 23, the migrants' transit camp at Edaga Habrit was attacked and destroyed by ground forces; six days later Sheraro (an important relief center as well as a TPLF stronghold) was captured, though held only for ten days. REST was compelled to evacuate its field office nearby, which was occupied by the army a week later. Cross-border relief operations were suspended: a food convoy from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to return to Sudan. A TPLF counter-offensive in May recaptured these towns and villages, forcing the army to withdraw to Enda Selassie, but the relief effort had been plunged into chaos for a critical month.

There were further attacks on REST's supply routes in June and September, mounted from the garrison at Enda Selassie.

The offensive included maintaining the existing severe restrictions on movement and trade in eastern Tigray and northern Wollo and Gonder. The government also decided to cut off any access to food that the TPLF and its sympathizers might have through feeding programs. Therefore, rations at the camp at Ibnat (Gonder) were cut in March, and the camp itself was brutally closed on April 29. Over 50,000 destitute people were violently forced out by the army, which burned the makeshift houses, forced patients out of hospital beds, and left the expellees with no food, water or shelter. The incident created a diplomatic scandal, with the US charge d'affaires in particular speaking out in strong terms.

In southern Tigray and north Wollo, the army was moving through the heart of the famine zone. Its military progress was made easier by the depopulation of much of the area: there were few villagers to feed, house and provide intelligence for the TPLF fighters. Pushing west from Korem in mid-April, an army column captured Seqota, which had been held by the TPLF-EPDM since February 1982. This column then joined with the force in Abi Adi to cut off Simien, for another military assault from the western side (this attack was another reason for the burning of Ibnat). Simien is a major area of surplus grain and employment opportunities, and the military activities severely disrupted labor migration and the grain trade. In August, another offensive was

launched on Simien, the fifth in 18 months.

One of the aims of the Eighth Offensive was to abort USAID plans to donate substantial amounts of relief to REST, by showing that REST could not safely deliver the food to Tigray. In this, as in its other short-term objectives, the offensive succeeded. In early March, USAID abandoned its ambitious plans for cross-border relief, and instead opted for utilizing private US humanitarian agencies working alongside the RRC -- the Food for the North Initiative. The private agency World Vision was to open three feeding centers in government-held towns in Tigray. The government was initially uncooperative, but by April belatedly agreed to let World Vision open one feeding center, in Maichew.

Starving Tigray, 1985

In Eritrea, the Food for the North Initiative enabled the government to undertake a pacification program, using relief as part of its military strategy. In Tigray, the strategy was different. For the most part, the government showed no interest in pacification -- the program for population relocation was the resettlement program, which removed people from the province altogether. Instead, it was interested in maintaining strategic garrisons and withholding food from the population which it correctly saw as sympathetic to the TPLF.

The relief agencies in Tigray had an important military role. This was not to pacify the countryside, but to protect military garrisons -- especially those most vulnerable to TPLF attack -- and their overland supply routes.

Thus in April, when the army captured Sheraro the government asked World Vision to come and set up a feeding center there. The TPLF recaptured the town before World Vision could respond to the request. Similarly, when Seqota was captured the same month, the government proposed moving some of the people in the camp at Korem to Seqota and inviting in foreign relief agencies. The agencies objected to the population relocation but agreed to start programs in Seqota.

The presence of the agencies did not stop the government withholding food from Tigray. This can be seen by comparing the relief deliveries to the various RRC centers in Ethiopia with the number of famine-affected people in the area served by each center, as shown in table 1. Table 1. Deliveries by the RRC, April-August 1985

	% of affected people		% of grain delivered
Wollo	29	(25)	24.4
Nazareth	27	(23)	36.5
Eritrea	14	(12)	21.5
Tigray	21	(33)	5.6

The figures err on the side of caution. First, they refer to the period between April and August 1985, when the government had greatest access to the different parts of Tigray, and before the disruption to supplies caused by the August offensive in Eritrea fed through to the distribution centers. Second, many of those in central and southern Ethiopia were in much less need than those in Tigray and north Wollo. Third, RRC figures for "affected people" are used. The RRC assumed that the total population of Tigray was 2.41 million, with 1.33 million "affected"; the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) produced a slightly higher figure of 1.58 million "affected." REST argued that the population was almost five million, with 3.8 million in need.

Mr Kurt Jansson, head of the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE), endorsed the government-FAO figures saying that "the scientific evidence is indisputable."² At best, Mr Jansson was misinformed. As shown in chapter one, the scientific evidence about the population in Tigray is highly disputable, and the REST figure is almost certainly closer to the truth. The RRC figure for those in "need" was a work of imagination. The FAO crop assessment was based upon satellite imagery only; no ground visits to rural Tigray were undertaken. While the satellite imagery may have given a reliable indication of the geographical extent of the drought, the famine of course affected a much wider area. The FAO's inference to numbers of people affected was based upon the government's population figures.

It can safely be assumed that the RRC omitted a minimum of one million needy people in Tigray from its figures. This makes the neglect of Tigray is even more striking -- these revised figures are shown in brackets in table 1.

The figures show only RRC consignments; during this period distributions by voluntary agencies accounted for over half the relief. This was delivered in approximately the same proportions, thus not affecting the percentages in the table above.³

For reasons discussed in the preceding chapter, the cross-border relief effort was also starved of resources at this time. REST and ICRC transported 32,000 and 8,400 metric tonnes (MT) respectively into Tigray during all of 1985.

Thus Tigray, with one third of the total famine-stricken population, received only about one twentieth of the food relief. Needy Eritreans, per head, received about ten times as much.

In addition, official antipathy to large-scale aid to Wollo was evident to many relief

² Kurt Jansson, letter to Ms Gayle Smith, REST Support Committee, Washington DC, August 29, 1985.

³ With the exception of Eritrea, which received a smaller proportion from private agencies.

workers, who reported on "a systematic attempt to deprive [Wollo] of food."⁴ Mr Kurt Jansson of UNEOE replied to the allegation that Wollo was being deprived, arguing that a low level of donations to the RRC and a relative shortage of voluntary agencies in the province accounted for the relief shortfall.⁵ He failed to explain why the RRC did not allow more voluntary agencies to work there, and did not increase its own consignments to Wollo, taking food away from other provinces with lesser need but larger programs.

In January 1985, the RRC was reaching 885,000 people in Wollo, and the voluntary agencies about 400,000. Over the course of the year, the voluntary agencies increased their programs so that by December they were reaching just over one million people. However, the people of Wollo gained little -- the RRC took the opportunity to reduce its programs, so that it was reaching only 153,000 by the year end -- making a gross total lower than that reached twelve months earlier. The expanding voluntary agency program was no excuse for the RRC cutbacks, as the distributions never reached as many as half of the estimated 2.58 million people in Wollo "in need."⁶

Sometimes the diversions were very crude. For instance, 7,500 MT of grain earmarked by the donors for Wollo and consigned to the RRC was sent "by mistake" to Nazareth in October 1985. It took four months of lobbying from the western aid donors before it reached its correct destination.⁷ Comparing Wollo unfavorably with other parts of the country, one investigator noted that rations there "rarely exceeded 10 kilograms [per person per month]."⁸

Yet, as the table shows, famine victims in Wollo received on average six times as much as those in Tigray. The UN claimed in August 1985 that 75 per cent of the (government-defined) needy people in Tigray were being reached, a total of 1,126,468 people, with rations of between five and 15 kilograms per month.⁹ This was blatantly untrue. The RRC distributed a mere 569 MT that month, and World Vision (the principal agency in the Food for the North program) was well short of its target figure of 180,000 recipients.

⁴ Paul Vallety, "Starving Wollo: An Empty Excuse," *The Times*, London, August 14, 1985.

⁵ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987, pp. 70-3.

⁶ Mitchell, 1986, pp. 26-7. If the earlier "in need" total of 1.79 million had been used, the performance would have been worse, not better. Many of the 1.79 million were extremely needy people in the war-affected northern parts of Wollo, who were not reached by the distributions. Most of the 790,000 people later added to the figure were less needy but more accessible, and received rations. Similar "needy" populations were "discovered" in government-held areas in 1985 and afterwards as large quantities of western relief became available.

⁷ Mitchell, 1986.

⁸ Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 1988, p. 414.

⁹ Jansson, Harris and Penrose, 1987, p. 51.

The UN claim was based on a four-day visit to army garrisons in Tigray made in the company of senior government officials in July, which was the month in which the largest government distributions to date had occurred, by far. Allocations to Tigray and Eritrea then dropped by 85% in August, while those to southern and central provinces rose by 76%. Even the briefly-expanded distributions of July, however, reached far fewer people than the UN claimed -- that would have required a program equalling that in Wollo. Most of the recipients were the 116,000 Tigrayans in and around relief shelters in the government-held towns of the province, resettlers, and the militia. In the spring and summer of 1985, it is unlikely that as much as fifteen per cent of the needy in Tigray received relief from the government side.

Controlling Tigray 1985-7: I The Army

Following the Eighth Offensive, the Ethiopian army had a greater degree of control in Tigray than at any time since 1977. The counter-insurgency strategy already developed continued to be implemented with great ruthlessness. This included military patrols, the activities of army irregulars, repeated attempts to block REST's relief operation, the bombing of markets, forced resettlement, and the supply of only small amounts of food to the general population.

Significant army attacks concentrated on attempts to control the roads from Sudan, such as assaults made in April and July 1986.

Most of the military activity consisted of army patrols, which harassed, detained and executed peasants. Some soldiers captured by the TPLF told visitors of their actions.¹⁰ Mohamed, a former goldsmith ... admitted that his patrol had looted a farm at Mai Kenetel [central Tigray] and then set fire to the building. When the inhabitants tried to flee they were mown down by soldiers who are trained to do the actual killing. Another wounded soldier, Thomas, had experience of these killers. He said: "We were ordered to see everyone as the enemy. I killed through my eyes [i.e. I was ready to kill] many times. Two peasants once strayed into my patrol -- they tried to run but were caught. The CO [commanding officer] interrogated them and then made us tie their hands. Another soldier shot them both between the eyes.

Many minor atrocities in Tigray were committed by government-recruited banda, which translates as mercenaries, saboteurs, and terrorists. A visitor to Tigray made the following notes after interviewing a peasant farmer in Medebai sub-district (near Axum):

There were security problems in his Tabia [cluster of villages], he said, which borders Eritrea.

Government recruited armed personnel from the locality who, since they are knowledgeable of the surroundings, guide government soldiers who are occasionally sent across the Mereb River from Eritrea, especially to a district called Qohaine to disrupt life.

They are paid in food grain by the government. People refer to them as "bandas." In

¹⁰ Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell", Observer Scotland, April 16, 1989.

September 1987 they killed some peasants.

We were informed that on 31 October 1987, the day of our arrival at the Chilla Wereda [sub-district], they murdered a young peasant at his home near the main town of Axum and peeled his skin off. It was further explained that similar atrocities were perpetrated by the bandas from time to time in "semi-liberated" areas, i.e. areas adjacent to government garrison towns.

One of the most common activities undertaken by banda was the planting of land mines on routes from Sudan used by TPLF and REST.

In March 1988, the government launched its Ninth Offensive in Tigray, with the intention of recapturing the garrisons that had been taken over the previous five months by the TPLF. In moving out of the garrisons, the army was militarily exposed and the TPLF was able to launch a counter-offensive and inflict a series of defeats. After the battle of Afabet, the defeats quickly turned into a rout, and in late March and early April, the TPLF captured most of the towns in Tigray.

Controlling Tigray II: The Air Force

The main targets of continued aerial bombing were markets, REST convoys, and anything else that the pilots happened to notice. Three trucks belonging to the ICRC were destroyed by bombing on February 3, 1986, and one driver was killed. Adi Nebried market was bombed and strafed in February 1987; 17 were killed and 55 wounded.¹¹ Sheraro market was bombed in December 1987, killing ten. Phosphorous was often used, for instance as described by Tabey Kidane, aged 19: "I was guarding my cattle near Edaga Habreit, when burning material came from the sky, burning the trees and the grass and killing one of my cows." When examined ten months later by Dr Eric Charles, his wounds were still suppurating: "the burns were deep and were a chemical type of burn ... they kept erupting and wouldn't heal."

The Ninth Offensive in March 1988 was brief, but witnessed a number of atrocities by the air force. These included:

*Abi Adi: "Within a few days of [the army's] departure, two helicopters came and bombed the market square, killing and wounding 48 people. Many of the people who died on that occasion were women, and it was terrible to see their bodies lying in the square."¹²

*March 23: Nebelet village bombed, at least one old woman killed. This was the 11th occasion that this village had been bombed, killing 17 people in total.

¹¹ Sunday Times, London, March 4, 1987.

¹² Interview with Woreda Teka of Abi Adi Baito conducted by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.

Controlling Tigray III: Relief Agencies

The amounts of relief given on the government side in Tigray were small, and often given largely as an inducement for resettlement. RRC relief was distributed exclusively in the towns, and the continued existence of the garrison towns came to depend on regular supplies from the RRC.

The main function of the aid agencies' operations in Tigray, as far as the government was concerned, was to protect vulnerable garrisons from attack by the TPLF -- the front would lose more in adverse international publicity by attacking a garrison with a foreign relief agency present than it could hope to gain militarily. In mid-1985 it began to allow more international relief operations in and around Tigray, notably in Axum, Adigrat, Abi Adi, Seqota and -- abortively -- Sheraro.

In December 1986, a TPLF-EPDM force (re)captured Seqota, closing an ICRC feeding program, and causing an outcry among relief workers and diplomats. In March 1988, an EPDM unit destroyed three relief trucks with their grain, in eastern Gonder, causing another round of condemnations. Because the trucks were painted green and unmarked, the EPDM claimed that the fighters believed them to be army vehicles. (Four white UN trucks accompanying them were allowed to proceed.) In the same month the TPLF (re)captured Abi Adi. A western diplomat was outraged: "essentially what this means is that there is going to be mass starvation almost immediately," and the director of USAID added: "It's going to hurt us hard."¹³ Two days later, Abi Adi was bombed by the air force.

The most striking instance of the government's complete disregard for the welfare of the hungry people of Tigray, and its sole concern with military objectives, comes from Wukro, which was captured by the TPLF shortly after taking Abi Adi. The TPLF's attack drew condemnation from diplomats and relief personnel. Under an ad hoc agreement, the TPLF allowed the ICRC staff who remained in Wukro to distribute the remaining food. An international food monitor described what happened next:

On April 8, 25-30,000 people gathered in Wukro in order to collect food aid ... The ICRC distribution site, with a huge, clearly marked red cross tent, is just on the edge of the town.

The ICRC representative of Adigrat, who had taken over responsibility for Wukro after it was controlled by TPLF, arrived in the late morning ... with his mobile radio he sent an open message to the ICRC headquarters in Addis Ababa,¹⁴ giving details on the upcoming distribution ... At 2 p.m., MiGs appeared and started bombing, very close to the

¹³ International Herald Tribune, March 10, 1988.

¹⁴ This was despite strong objections by the local TPLF commander.

orphan-center. The building caught fire immediately, and the roof collapsed ... in this building, 52 dead bodies were counted, which were buried in two bomb craters. While people from the distribution site and orphan center were fleeing, the MiGs returned and bombed with cluster shells. In only one street, I counted five big bomb craters.¹⁵

A total of about 100 people were killed in this bombing raid, and 14,000 people fled the town. Wukro was bombed again on April 13, and 31 people were killed.

In northern Wollo, relief was more generous than in Tigray. However it was closely tied to the implementation of government policies, such as resettlement, road-building, and the control of movement. On many occasions, rural people would gather for a distribution, only to find that they did not meet the criteria for receiving relief -- for what reasons, they did not know. A poem about restrictions on relief has been recorded:

What kind of grain was it which deceived us?

What kind of wheat was it which deceived us?

It returned to its country, and sent us to the forest.¹⁶

During this period, the government also continued to oppose the cross-border operation from Sudan. Relief vehicles were bombed, and agencies involved in the program were subject to hostile propaganda. Unfortunately, the UN continued to decline to recognize the cross-border program, even though in 1988 it transported over 150,000 MT of relief supplies.

Government hostility did not even spare the ICRC, which was forced to take unusual measures and operate clandestinely, with unmarked vehicles travelling at night. Following the summer drought of 1987, the ICRC began to promote a proposal for safe passage, whereby relief could be transported across the battle lines from government-held towns to rebel-held villages. This "Open Roads for Survival" initiative was launched on November 12, 1987. Unfortunately, the ICRC was either over-optimistic about the prospects for success of the initiative, or it believed that sufficient political pressure from the donors to make the proposal work would only be forthcoming if the cross-border operation were seen to be unable to reach the needy in central Tigray. The result was that the ICRC withdrew from the cross-border operation, and declined to donate its fleet of 81 trucks in Sudan to other agencies working cross-border. It also publicly disputed the claim made by REST and the Emergency Relief Desk¹⁷ that cross-border supplies could reach the highlands on a road newly-constructed by the TPLF.

The EPLF and TPLF both agreed to the "open roads" proposal, though they publicly accused the ICRC of being politically partisan to the government. However, the government

¹⁵ Maria Altsidl, "Report on a Visit to Tigray," German Emergency Doctors, April 1988.

¹⁶ Quoted in: Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD thesis, Manchester, 1990, p. 121.

¹⁷ A consortium of voluntary agencies consigning food to ERA and REST.

failed to agree to the ICRC's "open roads" plan -- and indeed on April 6, 1988, it expelled the ICRC from Eritrea and Tigray. The head of the RRC, Berhanu Jambere, justified this, saying that the problem was "terrorist action supported by external forces, and not an all-out external war. Therefore the organization's neutral status does not apply here."¹⁸ Another broadcast shed further light on this decision: Addis Ababa radio accused the ICRC of having an "arrogant and anti-people stand" and "directly and indirectly supporting the bandits."¹⁹ Two days later, the air force bombed an ICRC distribution at Wukro (see above). Instead of its announced plan to feed one million people in Tigray by April, ICRC was feeding none.

A final ironic aspect of the relationship between suffering in Tigray and the central government is the role that the drought of 1987 played in the government's strategy. The drought affected Tigray and its borderlands; central Wollo and other government-controlled areas were scarcely affected. On the basis of the drought in Tigray and the accompanying international publicity, the government appealed for 1.3 million MT of relief grain. This was almost three times the request made in March 1984, when the situation was immeasurably more serious -- but this time the western donors accused the RRC of underestimating the size of the problem. By this time, famine in Ethiopia was such a sensitive issue in the domestic politics of western countries that the response was immediate and generous. Within seven months, the target had been met -- a rate of donation 14 times as high as in the seven months after the March 1984 appeal. The total amount donated was well in excess of what the RRC estimated was needed, and even more in excess of real needs. Most of the grain, of course, never went to Tigray, but in effect served as an enormous subsidy for the programs of titanic social engineering that the government was implementing in the southern and central parts of the country.

Insurgency Strategy of the TPLF

Following the famine and the 1985 offensives, both EPLF and TPLF were in temporary military disarray. But by mid-1988 they were enjoying great military success, and had begun their march to victory. The fundamental reason for this is that the government strategy of using famine as an element of war so deeply alienated the peasantry that they turned in increasing numbers to the rebel fronts.

Introducing his authoritative discussion of peasant survival during the famine in Wollo, DR Dessalegn Rahmato of Addis Ababa University writes: "for obvious reasons, I shall leave out

¹⁸ Quoted in: BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), ME 0124, April 13, 1988.

¹⁹ Radio Addis Ababa, April 13, 1988, quoted in; BBC, SWB, ME 0126, April 15, 1988. This accusation was made ironically on the basis of the ICRC's former cross-border relief operation into rebel-held areas.

of our account resistance and rebellion as a form of survival strategy."²⁰ However, armed resistance was an essential element to survival strategies.

Between 1984 and 1987, the number of TPLF fighters rose nearly three-fold, and the front was turning away volunteers. When engaged in military action, the TPLF could count on active support from the local population.

Even when attacking relief distribution centers, the rebels had local support. Local peasants argued that the damage done by having an army garrison in the vicinity frightening people and disrupting movement outweighed any benefit from the food provided. "The food of the Dergue is a poison" remarked one woman farmer.²¹

The TPLF military strategy was dramatically changed by the famine and the evacuation to Sudan. Over the years 1985-7, it concentrated on consolidating a "base area" in western Tigray, and controlling the access routes from Sudan. In this respect, its strategy was more like that of the EPLF.

Outside the base area, the main TPLF strategy was to attack isolated garrisons at unpredictable times. As these garrisons were the key to the government-sponsored relief effort in Tigray and its borderlands, the supply of relief suffered too. In 1983, the TPLF had captured relief workers at Jarre and Korem; in November 1984, it attacked Korem again. In 1985, it staged raids on the Korem-Seqota road, though a relief monitor noted "casualties from TPLF land mines or TPLF attacks were infrequent and greater damage was caused by reckless driving."²² On March 8, 1986, the TPLF and EPDM attacked Alamata (north Wollo), and two World Vision employees were killed and four wounded. According to witnesses, the killings were not the "mistake" claimed by the TPLF, but were deliberate.²³ The following month, the TPLF destroyed two bridges over the Tekezzé river, disrupting transport in western Tigray. In December 1986, the TPLF-EPDM (re)captured Seqota, closing an ICRC feeding program.

In late 1987, the TPLF began to go on the offensive, snuffing out the army's network of small garrisons. On October 2, it captured the strategic garrison of Rama, on the border with Eritrea, and a number of smaller army outposts followed. On February 22, 1988, it captured three relief workers, who were later released. In March it captured Abi Adi. The government launched a counter-offensive, which ended in military disaster.

²⁰ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine Survival Strategies: A Case Study of Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute of Development Research, 1987, p. 7.

²¹ Interviewed in Abi Adi by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

²² Mitchell, 1986, p. 38.

²³ International Herald Tribune, May 13, 1986.