

## 12. RESETTLEMENT

Three weeks after the media attention to the famine in October 1984, the Ethiopian government officially launched what was to be the most controversial aspect of its whole famine policy: resettlement. The plan was to move a large section of the population from the north to the south. The target was 1.5 million people. In fact, about 600,000 people were moved in three phases: November 1984-May 1985, October 1985-January 1986, and November 1987-March 1988. The justification presented to the west and to the people of Ethiopia was that it was a famine relief measure -- the north of the country was stricken by drought and environmental collapse, and the only alternative was to move most of the people elsewhere. Official justifications were embellished with such manifest untruths as: "the fact is that much of Ethiopia, particularly the northern provinces of Tigray and Wollo, are today an uninhabitable wasteland" and "there have scarcely been any real rains in the drought-prone areas since the 1972-4 catastrophe."<sup>1</sup> In the domestic Ethiopian media, the resettlement program was presented as the relief program -- the two were synonymous.

As well as drought relief, the program was described in glowing terms as an opportunity to use the "virgin lands" of the south and west, as an opportunity for socialist transformation and mechanization of agriculture in the resettlement sites, and as the first challenge to the cadres of the newly-set up Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE).

The TPLF and independent observers were quick to infer another motive: counter-insurgency. Population relocation had been a central part of counter-insurgency strategy in the southeast and in Eritrea, but had not yet been tried in Tigray and north Wollo. A policy of trying to remove by force a large section of the population was consonant with both long-standing military strategy in the country and the existing policy of "draining the sea to catch the fish." A Tigrayan resettler, Hailu Kelela, was told by his guards "Your whole woreda [sub-district] supports the TPLF, so we will break anyone who lives here and we will not stop with the people, but we will destroy the whole land unto the last tree."<sup>2</sup> In addition, the settler population provided a government stronghold in the resettlement regions in the southwest, where the OLF insurgency was gaining ground.

Many Ethiopian government policies, including villagization and the control of trade and

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<sup>1</sup> RRC, The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation, Addis Ababa, 1985, pp. 180 and 231.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Peter Niggli, "Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps," Berlin, Berliner Missionwerk, 1986, p. 9.

migration, functioned both as counter-insurgency strategies and as mechanisms for social and economic control of the peasantry. Resettlement was the same. The details of the implementation of the program varied from place to place; at its worst, it was a brutal form of counter-insurgency, at its best, a fierce attack on the independence of the peasantry.

### **Background to Resettlement**

Before the revolution there was a steady spontaneous outmigration from the northern highlands to the south and west. Adrian Wood, an authority on migration in Ethiopia identified 17 locations where resettlement was occurring between 1950 and 1974, partly encouraged by the government, and partly assisted by measures such as the eradication of malaria from many lowland areas.<sup>3</sup> Up to one million people are estimated to have moved. International agencies such as the World Bank agreed that the northern highlands were "overpopulated" and encouraged the government to start programs for controlled resettlement.

The land reform of 1975 and accompanying policy changes stemmed much of the movement, by making migration and the acquisition of land more difficult. Rather than granting people freedom of movement, the government sought to control the process of resettlement. In the ten years between 1974 and 1984, 187,000 people were resettled under the auspices of the Settlement Authority and RRC. They included the urban unemployed, pastoralists and returning refugees as well as northern peasants. The process was not a success. Although the settlements were planned to achieve self-reliance within three years, by 1984 there were still 70,000 resettlers needing food assistance.<sup>4</sup> The program was also very expensive. Consequently, in 1983 the RRC stopped resettlement and started an internal review of what had gone wrong. The review concluded in September 1984 with the recommendation that a small-scale and slowed-down approach be tried, using oxen and not tractors for cultivation.<sup>5</sup>

In the event, two months later, the exact opposite approach to resettlement was implemented.

### **Recruitment of settlers: Non-Insurgent Areas**

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<sup>3</sup> Adrian Wood, "Spontaneous Agricultural Resettlement in Ethiopia, 1950-74," in J. I. Clarke and L. A. Kosinski (eds.) Redistribution of Population in Africa, London, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD Thesis, Manchester, 1990, pp. 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> Pankhurst, 1990, p. 40.

The Ethiopian government insisted to the western world that the resettlement program was voluntary. This was a lie. In fact, each district in the north had its own quota of resettlers, which it had to fill. If volunteers could be had, that was good; if not, other means would be found to recruit settlers. The existence of the quota system was itself fundamentally incompatible with the notion that the recruitment was voluntary.

In non-insurgent areas, various means were used to recruit settlers. At the beginning, some famine victims were so desperate that they volunteered. Resettlement camps and villages which had filled their quotas for resettlement were given priority in terms of aid from the RRC, and there were many instances of the withholding of aid in order to encourage resettlement from certain areas. Yimam, a settler explained:

It was a short term problem; how to "cross over" from March to April. We could not last out till the main rains crop. If we could somehow have survived through that period, we wouldn't have resettled.<sup>6</sup>

The food available in the resettlement transit camps enticed many. One settler reported: "If we could have slipped out after eating our fill we would have done so" and another likened the camp to a rat trap set to ensnare people.<sup>7</sup> All transit camps were heavily guarded to prevent people from escaping.

Propaganda was also used to obtain volunteers, describing the easy and comfortable life that settlers could expect in their new homes. For example, a video film of green pastures and forests was shown to the inmates of Korem feeding shelter on December 31, 1984. A similar film later shown on Ethiopian television had shot the Wollo landscape through a filter that made it appear red and barren, while the colors of the southern landscape were distorted so as to appear blue-green.

However, an analysis of the origins of settlers clearly shows that accessibility for government cadres and soldiers was the overriding factor in determining whether people were resettled. 56 per cent of the resettlers in Wollo in 1984/5 came from the easily-reached districts of Dessie Zuria and Kalu, despite the short-term nature of the drought there. By contrast Wag and Lasta, much worse-affected by famine but also more remote, provided only 13 per cent.<sup>8</sup> At an individual level, coercion was used. Those in dispute with their Peasant Association (PA) chairman, or in arrears on PA dues or tax payments, were likely to be detained and resettled. Some traders were stopped at checkpoints and resettled, others were picked off the streets. A

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<sup>6</sup> Pankurst, 1990, pp. 95-6. March is the hungry month before April when the harvest from the short rains is gathered in.

<sup>7</sup> Pankurst, 1990, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> John Mitchell, "Review of the Famine Relief Operation in Wollo Administrative Region," 1986, mimeo, p. 53.

woman from near Kombolcha reported how she and eleven other families were taken: "We were called to a meeting and told 'your land is on the mountain slope which is to be used for the forestry; you have to go for resettlement!' We didn't even eat the maize we had grown on our irrigated land."<sup>9</sup>

An agriculturalist studying conditions in Wollo delicately captured the official approach: Perhaps the fine line between voluntary and coerced resettlement is captured by the notion of "bego teseno", to which party officials and political cadres carefully and skilfully reverted when voluntariness failed. "Bego" means goodness or kindness, and "teseno" means coercion. Hence, "bego teseno" literally means coercion for someone's own good. That is to say, for those who do not know their own interest, coercion is a legitimate means of helping them realize it.<sup>10</sup>

The government guidelines for selecting settlers clearly state that a willingness to go is only one of the criteria to be used. The other criteria include being a member of the "urban unemployed," living in an area designated for conservation or development, being in arrears on tax payments, living in a densely-populated area, being destitute and having eaten reserves of seed, and being a pastoralist. A government survey found that 38% of settlers belonged to these "non-voluntary" categories.<sup>11</sup>

### **Recruitment of Settlers: Insurgent Areas**

In Tigray and northern Wollo, the means of recruiting settlers was much more straightforward: force was used.

Reliable reports of resettlement at gunpoint were available from early 1985. In the first week of February, 17 truck-loads of settlers were forced from Meqele camp, and taken to the airport. On February 10, over 200 men were separated from their families and taken from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) feeding center of Wahreb Sharti near Meqele;<sup>12</sup> in the same week Afar herdsmen were rounded up by soldiers in Adigrat.<sup>13</sup> On March 10, over 100 were taken at gunpoint at Korem.

The issue came to a head at the end of 1985. In October, a UN food monitor was

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<sup>9</sup> Pankurst, 1990, p. 164.

<sup>10</sup> Alemneh Dejene, Environment, Famine and Politics in Ethiopia: A View from the Village, Boulder, Co., 1990, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Pankurst, 1990, p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> The Guardian, London, February 11, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> The Times, London, February 9, 1985.

travelling together with two nurses from the French relief agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) to Kelala in north Wollo. They encountered a group of about 100 people being escorted to a resettlement transit camp by two soldiers, who freely admitted that they were under instructions to shoot any who ran away. A few weeks later, the food monitor reported to the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE) in Addis Ababa on this and four other similar incidents. The head of UNEOE forwarded the report to President Mengistu, and an official "investigation" was mounted, which consisted of a guided tour of transit camps in the environs of Dessie, the regional capital of Wollo. The guides were provided by the RRC, and at least one Amharic-speaking foreign member of the team was intimidated by his guide, being threatened with expulsion from the country if he conducted his own investigations or publicized his findings. Not surprisingly, the investigative mission reported that nothing was amiss.

MSF, however, were less content, and in December went public with an account of the forcible resettlement of 600 people in Korem on one of three such occasions in October and November. The agency also claimed that the program was causing the deaths of 100,000 people. MSF were immediately expelled, and no more dissenting voices were heard among the relief agencies in Ethiopia. Shortly after MSF made their allegations, an Oxfam nurse, Carol Ashwood, confirmed that food had been withheld from famine victims with the aim of forcing them to resettle.<sup>14</sup> The Oxfam press officer responded to the implicit slur on the organization:

We continue to make representations to the Ethiopian authorities if we have evidence that the scale or speed of resettlement or the methods employed involve coercion or are disruptive of harvesting or feeding programmes. Based on our experiences last year, we have so far found this approach more effective than high-profile public denunciations.<sup>15</sup>

In late 1985, trucks belonging to the Save the Children Fund (SCF-UK) were forcibly commandeered to transport resettlers. SCF protested privately to the RRC, but made no public statement, even when the trucks were taken on a second occasion. Both agencies were anxious not to endanger their ongoing relief programs.

At the end of 1985 the US-based human rights group Cultural Survival released a report on the resettlement program, based on interviews with refugees in Sudan who had escaped from the resettlement camps.<sup>16</sup> This report, based on 250 interviews with refugees who had escaped the resettlement camps, repeated the allegations and provided many additional details of human rights violations.

The US government was outspokenly critical of the resettlement program, and repeatedly

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<sup>14</sup> "Oxfam Nurse says Ethiopia 'Blackmails' Refugees," *African Business*, January 1986.

<sup>15</sup> "Oxfam Outlines its Approach in Ethiopia," *African Business*, February 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Cultural Survival, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge, Mass., December 1985.

criticized it for being forcible -- notably in a Presidential Determination of September 1985. No US assistance was ever given to the program. Apologists for the government accused the refusal of the US and UK governments to support the program of being "a spiteful and misdirected error."<sup>17</sup>

However, the UN consistently played down the controversy. Over the previous eight months the head of UNEOE, Mr Kurt Jansson, had repeatedly asked the government for explanations of reports of forcible resettlement. He later reported that "I never received a satisfactory explanation,"<sup>18</sup> but neither did he publicly speak of any doubts he may have had. This silent endorsement edged towards an open advocacy when the controversy re-emerged. Mr Jansson related the problem specifically to the single incident of 600 people being forced onto trucks at Korem. Speaking to journalists, he "stressed that it was not certain that all 600 were moved against their will," and on the basis of this and other similar arguments urged relief agencies to support the resettlement program to avert widespread suffering.<sup>19</sup>

In January 1986, the program was suspended for nearly two years, though it is widely agreed that the main reasons for this were the huge expense and low returns, not international pressure. When resettlement was restarted, similar instances of coercion recurred almost at once.

On January 3, 1988, seven people were killed while "resisting" resettlement at Korem -- by trying to run away. On February 8, 20 were shot dead, while 3,000 were forcibly resettled. The information reached the BBC, based on eyewitness accounts provided by medical and nutritional staff belonging to foreign voluntary agencies. The government instructed the agencies to deny the existence of the incident, and a representative of SCF was clearly discomfited when questioned about it by the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee:

I think we will never know. I think it would be hard to find out what really happened in Korem. ...

The Ethiopian government has officially denied that the resettlement is forceable. I think their official explanation, concerning the claims made by the BBC about Korem, is to refer to it as a problem of disinformation brought about by foreign agencies acting in concert with the BBC. It obviously puts us into a very difficult position ...<sup>20</sup>

In fact, there is a considerable amount of independent evidence that corroborates the account originally given by the relief workers in Korem. This incident will be examined in some detail because the evidence has not been published before, and because it illustrates that nearly

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<sup>17</sup> Graham Hancock, *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger*, London, 1985, p. 110. Mr Hancock has since revised his position.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> *The Guardian*, London, November 7, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Minutes of Evidence taken before Foreign Affairs Committee, February 17, 1988.

three years after the initial accounts of forced resettlement, pressure brought to bear on the government through "private representations" had absolutely no effect.

The personal diary of Eyob Goitam Naizghi, a visitor to Seqota in June 1988, gives an independent account of the background to those events:

By the "tella house" (local bar), one man is attempting to explain his experience of family separation with indignation and regret. It was some time in December of 1987, when people in his village started a rumour about food distribution in Korem by the "Commission". After a few days of deep thinking, he said, a group of them decided to pack and walk it to Korem with their families. After two days, approaching Korem, they decided to leave their families behind, and the men went to Korem to investigate if what they heard was real or a trap. After having met the authorities of the "Commission", they were told to register with their families and were given food-grain that will last them for about two days. Thinking of it all, they were not able to sense any trap for resettlement. Thus, they decided to bring their families inside Korem.

After two days, someone was moving quietly and telling people to sell their pack animals. They cannot tell who he belongs to, and they thought it was all a mad joke. Two days later, early morning, they were rounded up by the army and loaded into brand new "Red Cross"<sup>21</sup> donated trucks, on their way to the unknown places. It was only then they recognized it was a trap. Down-playing whatever-guilt feelings he may have felt deep inside, he told us, the uninvited audience, boastfully how he snicked out of the truck and managed to escape to his village, leaving his wife with three children and a donkey behind. What a loss, he says to the donkey, because that was the only tangible property he ever owned. As to his family, he only hopes that they are doing fine, for he has heard nothing since they separated.

In the middle of all this sadness, two Russian-made MiG fighter planes unexpectedly roar the skies of Sekota town. Every single of us in the town are in panic. Even those with shaky legs are attempting to run away to the unknown ...

In January 1989, a visitor to TPLF-controlled Tigray interviewed several groups of escapees from the resettlement site of Pawe in Gojjam who were returning home. These are some extracts from the testimonies:

1. We are returning to our homes in Wollo at a place called Sekota. We escaped in the moonlight. We were taken last year during February -- about 11 months ago. There was an announcement from the government that everyone from Sekota should come to get cards to receive food rations. ... When we arrived there we were encircled by armed forces who beat and killed. Everyone, big and small, with or without families, were being forced into the truck. Those who refused were immediately shot. A lot of people died.
2. The government informed us that, because of the drought, they wanted us to come to a center to receive food rations and supplies. As we gathered at the place to receive the rations, we were surrounded by soldiers on all sides. The military forced us to be loaded on a truck

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<sup>21</sup> Rural Ethiopians commonly call any non-governmental relief agency the "Red Cross."

which took us to the resettlement sites. Those who tried to claim property or family members left behind were beaten and shot dead. We were loaded on to 40 trucks altogether the first day, 30 trucks the second, and 60 trucks the third day. ... We were taken last year [1988] in February. After this month it will be one year ago.

3. When they took us from Korem, a lot of people died, shot dead. Five people were shot dead beside me by Kalashnikovs from the armed forces who forced us to be loaded onto the truck. Some lost their legs. There were tremendous beatings. We were surrounded in Korem as we went to the marketplace. Most of us left our families and properties and wives at home. We even left the donkey we had brought to market for loading what we could purchase. Two people jumped off the truck and died immediately.

4. We come from Gojjam Metekel resettlement area. We were forced by the Dergue from Korem to go there last year. When we went to collect ration cards off the Red Cross we were forced into armed trucks by the military and sent to Metekel... Many people were killed by gun shots when we were forced away. Ten people died by jumping off the truck. 30 more people were wounded. I personally saw 20 people die.

Six months later, another foreign visitor to Tigray met a group of 34 escapees from Village Settlement Area No. 102 of Metekel, Gojjam. Their original home was Andork near Seqota, and he recounted their story:

They were starving due to drought, and in January 1988 were called by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission to go to the feeding centre at Korem where they would be fed.

They were part of a group of 1200 people from their village area who went into Korem on 8th February '88, they were not issued with food but ordered instead to get into lorries for a journey to resettlement. They refused, and in consequence some 20 people were shot dead and some 30 wounded, after which they were herded into the lorries. In this process families were separated; in this group a man and wife are still with one son, but their two other sons have never been seen since they left Korem.

The policy of forcibly taking people for resettlement was not only a violation of their basic human rights, but also acted as a powerful deterrent to rural people visiting towns, thus disrupting trade, migration and the collection of relief.

### **Conditions in Transit and on Arrival**

Despite the preferential targeting of relief food to transit camps, they remained places where many died, especially in Tigray. Figures for Ambassel in Wollo indicate that 140 per thousand of those selected for resettlement died in transit camps alone<sup>22</sup> -- fortunately, a figure that is unlikely to be representative. The use of unpressurized airplanes to fly settlers south, at least during the first year, also led to many deaths.

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<sup>22</sup> Cultural Survival, *Ethiopia: More Light on Resettlement*, London, 1991, p. 6.

Most of the resettlement sites were hastily chosen. The site of Metekel in Gojjam was picked by President Mengistu during a helicopter tour, and proved to be highly unsuitable.<sup>23</sup> Most sites were chosen within three weeks of the launch of the program, without the benefit of prior agronomic or hydrological surveys. The settlers were unused to local conditions and fell prey to unfamiliar diseases; they were also unfamiliar with the local farming conditions. Most of the "conventional" resettlement sites were run as cooperative farms, using mechanized plowing, and with settlers earning work points for their activities. Cadres of the WPE were able to implement their dreams of socialist collectivization. By 1988, many sites, instead of producing the expected surpluses to support the government, were still far from self-sufficient, and became recipients of famine relief. The government was forced to introduce major policy changes, such as a return to the use of oxen on individual smallholdings. In "integrated" settlements, local people were compelled to integrate the settlers into their existing villages, apportioning them land, and in these cases the settlers farmed as smallholders using traditional technology.

The appalling conditions endured by the settlers have been well-documented elsewhere, and will not be further detailed here.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Counter-Insurgency Function of Resettlement Sites**

The resettlement sites of Hareya and Melka Oda in Bale have already been mentioned as part of the counter-insurgency strategy adopted in that area (chapter 5). Resettlement sites in Wollega from 1979 onwards were also used in a similar way. In 1983, a development expert noted:

Settlement schemes and state farms as centres of government presence in areas may also have a role to play in controlling the rural population. These may be used as listening posts and military bases should the need arise. Where the settlers and farm workers are not locals, as is often the case, they may help break up the ethnic homogeneity of an area and provide a force loyal to the government. From this point of view, these projects can be seen as modern day *katamas* [*neftenya* garrisons] to watch over the local populations, while a military significance may be assigned to the roads built.<sup>25</sup>

The concentration of resettlement sites in western Gojjam (where the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was active) and western Wollega and Illubabor (where the OLF was

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<sup>23</sup> This settlement project, perhaps the most disastrous in the country in terms of loss of human life, was generously supported by the Italian government aid program.

<sup>24</sup> Survival International, *Ethiopia's Bitter Medicine: Settling for Disaster*, London, 1986; Survival International, 1991; Cultural Survival, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, Peter Niggli, *Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps*, Berlin, 1986.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Wood, "Rural Development and National Integration in Ethiopia," *African Affairs*, 82, (1983) p. 532.

active) is no coincidence. Not only were large "conventional" settlements established, but "integrated" settlements were also set up, in which the settler population was mixed in with the locals. The counter-insurgency components of this policy will be further examined in chapter 18.

Though counter-insurgency considerations were certainly important in the planning and implementation of the program, once the government had decided to proceed, the program generated a momentum of its own. It has already been shown how the need to fill quotas resulted in more resettlers being taken from the accessible areas of central and southern Wollo, and fewer from the insurgent areas of north Wollo and Tigray. Similarly, when resettlement sites were chosen, the initial selection was done extremely rapidly, and many of the sites decided upon turned out to be unsuitable for habitation. For the same reasons, the sites chosen -- at least during 1984/5 -- were probably less than ideal for counter-insurgency purposes. The implementation of the program -- later officially described as "hasty" -- also led to local support for the OLF and EPRP.

## Escape

Large numbers of settlers escaped or tried to escape. Even official figures give estimates for population loss that range above 20%.<sup>26</sup> One estimate of the returnees to Wollo alone is 75,000;<sup>27</sup> settlers from Tigray were reported to have a much higher propensity to escape. Those who returned home often represented just a fraction of the attempted escapers: the dangers of the trip included punishment (including summary execution) by cadres, interception by the army, harassment and enslavement by members of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and other Sudanese militias, banditry, the attentions of wild animals, flooded rivers, and disease and hunger. In one reported incident in December 1984, 330 escaping settlers were burned to death when government soldiers set brush fires around their camp.<sup>28</sup>

A significant abuse against escapees was enslavement by soldiers of SPLA. The SPLA, which has been fighting against the government of Sudan since 1983, enjoyed close links with the Mengistu government (see chapter 18).

SPLA soldiers frequently captured escapees, and subjected them to forced labor or concubinage. This amounts to enslavement. Most of the victims were Tigrayan resettlers escaping from the resettlement sites and heading for the refugee camp at ed Damazin in Sudan.

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<sup>26</sup> G. Sivini, "Famine and the Resettlement Program in Ethiopia," *Africa* (Roma), 41, (1986) p. 231.

<sup>27</sup> Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 98.

<sup>28</sup> Gayle Smith, "Report on New Refugee Arrivals to Blue Nile Province, Sudan, January 13-14, 1985," Damazin, Sudan.

In February 1986, Sandra Steingraber found 52 Tigrayan resettlers who had just arrived in ed Damazin, after being held by the SPLA. 30 were adult women.<sup>29</sup> Tigrayans in the camp knew of almost 1,000 others still held by the SPLA. The TPLF was unable to negotiate their release until over one year later, and there were a number of subsequent stories of small numbers of escapees being captured and held for varying lengths of time.

There was a remarkable absence of women among the southern Sudanese refugee population: it appears that the SPLA soldiers decided to obtain replacement women by force. One woman who spent two months in captivity recounted her ordeal:

In October [1985] my husband and I escaped from that place [Gambela resettlement camp] with a large group -- over 1,000 people -- and we fled into the forest.

When we reached Sudan, we met people who at first gave us food. Then they gave us money and led us to the next village. That is when they took the children away. After that they took us, the women. I don't know why they took the children -- for workers maybe, for slaves. These men had uniforms. The people who gave us food did not wear uniforms.

When they tried to take us, there was a battle. Our husbands tried to fight with them, but it was sticks against guns. Some husbands were killed, some wounded. The army was victorious. The remaining husbands fled into the forest. The army took us to their camp by a roundabout direction. We stayed there six nights, then the fighters divided us among themselves, choosing the most beautiful there were. We were sent to the huts of each fighter and always guarded, even when we went to the toilet. This is because they wanted to mate with us, they wanted children by us. Other than this, we did not understand them because we did not speak their language.

During the day we pounded maize for them. There were other wives, women previously captured.... When we protested, they beat us. I lived in a hut with three fighters. At night they exchanged me among themselves. This went on for two months.<sup>30</sup>

Like many others, this woman was pregnant with a child whose father was a member of the SPLA. She was eventually released, though she could not relocate her husband, and intended to return to the remainder of her family who had been left behind when she was forcibly resettled from her home in Tigray.

The Anyanya 2 para-military force, which was supported by the Sudan government and the Gaajak Nuer militia, which was armed by the Ethiopian government, were responsible for similar abuses.

### How many Died?

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<sup>29</sup> Sandra Steingraber, in Clay *et al.*, 1988, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Sandra Steingraber in Clay *et al.*, 1988, p. 97.

Resettlement certainly killed people at a faster rate than the famine. The mortality rate was particularly high in the early days of arrival at resettlement sites. Settlers in Keto, Wollega, refused to talk about death:

We did not talk about it. Even the word was avoided. We used to go round asking, "is there anyone who has 'slipped away'?" Corpses were carried off like sacks of maize; they were piled on a trailer and taken to mass graves, Christians alongside Muslims. Children were placed between the feet of adults. Grave diggers received extra rations of food.<sup>31</sup>

People apparently became numb to death. They no longer mourned. They slept, ate and drank coffee next to corpses. They no longer had the strength to dig proper graves. There were even occasions when the graves were so shallow that toes of corpses stuck out ...<sup>32</sup>

In July 1985, Cultural Survival estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 people may already have been dead on account of the resettlement program.<sup>33</sup> This figure is open to much dispute, but the researchers laid out their evidence for scrutiny. The UNEOE, anxious to give grand figures for the deaths attributable to the famine, never produced an estimate for the human cost of resettlement. The government-employed academic, Prof. Richard Pankhurst, wrote of Cultural Survival's mortality estimate: "the allegations made in such an unscholarly publication are so one-sided and so extreme that they can only be accounted for in terms of the selective use of data to support a preconceived political standpoint."<sup>34</sup> Prof. Pankhurst cited not one single piece of independent evidence in his rebuttal, but Mr Kurt Jansson of UNEOE was convinced: "this [Cultural Survival] survey has been convincingly debunked by the eminent Ethiopian scholar, Dr Richard Pankhurst ..."<sup>35</sup>

Several investigations have been done into overall levels of mortality. These can be used to obtain an estimate for the total number killed by the program. In the following calculations, minimum estimates are consistently used for deaths. If medium estimates were used, the figures might rise by over 50 per cent; if maximum estimates were used, they would more than double. These calculations suggest that the Cultural Survival estimate was approximately accurate.

It is important to note that the population of resettlers was an abnormal population -- it

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<sup>31</sup> Pankurst, 1990, p. 235.

<sup>32</sup> Pankurst, 1990, p. 248.

<sup>33</sup> Cultural Survival, 1985, p. 99. The estimate was for total deaths; the estimate worked out below is for deaths in excess of those that would have been expected to occur in the famine zone.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Famine: Cultural Survival's Report Assessed," Anthropology Today, 2.3, (June 1986) p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Jansson, 1987, p. 26.

contained very few children and old people, and was mostly adults in their prime of life (these people were deliberately chosen). As a result, the death rate would have been expected to be lower than the 20 per thousand per year that is the "normal" figure; it would probably have been a maximum of about 17.5 per thousand.<sup>36</sup>

RRC figures for recorded deaths during the first year of resettlement indicate heightened death rates: 110 per thousand in Gojjam, 68 in Illubabor, 42 in Keffa, 38 in Wollega and 34 in Gonder.<sup>37</sup> In Jarso and Keto, Wollega, the rates were 93 and 51 respectively.<sup>38</sup> These figures do not include deaths in transit camps, on the journey, or on arrival before the settlements were fully established and registration of deaths began. Neither do they include those who died while escaping.

The same RRC data indicate that in Pawe settlement, Gojjam, death rates in the first four weeks of registration were equivalent to 332 per thousand per year -- almost 20 times normal, falling away over the following weeks. In Keto, the recorded death rate over the first three months was equivalent to 122 per thousand.

An investigation was also done into death rates of newly arriving resettlers and those who had already spent several months in the resettlement sites -- thereby including deaths in transit. The sample included people from both famine-stricken areas (Tigray and north Wollo) and areas which had escaped the famine (parts of Shewa).<sup>39</sup> Only the results relating to the newly-arriving settlers from Tigray and Wollo were published, due to political pressure. These indicated a life-expectancy of around six years, compared to the normal of over 40 for the area. This level was possibly the lowest ever recorded in a scientific demographic survey, and for comparison was seven times worse than the mortality due to the 1972-3 famine in Bangladesh. The crude death rate was 123 per thousand, which, allowing for the over-representation of young adults in the population, is probably equivalent to a level of 150-175 in a normal population.<sup>40</sup>

The author was obliged to blame the mortality rate on the famine. However, closer

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<sup>36</sup> Derived from data in: Asmerom Kidane, "Demographic Consequences of the 1984-1985 Ethiopian Famine," *Demography*, 26, (1989) p. 518; and Central Statistical Office, Ethiopia, "Report on the Results of the 1981 Demographic Survey," Addis Ababa, 1985, data from Wollo.

<sup>37</sup> Sivini, 1986, p. 232.

<sup>38</sup> Calculated from: Alula Pankhurst and Ezekiel Gebissa, "Report on a Study Tour of Settlement Schemes in Wollega," Addis Ababa, 1987, pp. 34, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Asmerom Kidane, 1989, pp. 515-22.

<sup>40</sup> The figure is also an underestimate, because the settlers were asked about deaths of family members. As many families were split up, many deaths would have occurred without the knowledge of other members of the family. Also, whole families could have died, leaving no-one to report on the deaths.

examination of the data indicates that the death rate recorded among the settlers already resident in the resettlement sites was almost equal (115) and that the rates were similar for those from both famine-zones and non-famine zones. The implication is that, instead of blaming the death rates on the famine, it is more logical to blame them on the resettlement program.

These findings indicate that death rates during the resettlement program were – at a minimum estimate -- in the order of 100-115 per thousand, which is about six times normal for that population. In the famine-stricken areas, death rates were raised by about three-and-a-half times. About half the 1984-5 settlers came from such areas: this implies about 14,000 deaths over those attributable to the famine. One defender of the concept of resettlement drily noted that the program was "involving human costs higher than those caused by the famine."<sup>41</sup>

The other half of the resettled population was not suffering raised death rates before resettlement: about 31,000 excess deaths occurred among this group.

Deaths during escape must also be included. At least 100,000 settlers from Tigray and Wollo returned home. Interviews among refugees in Sudan indicate a death rate of at least 20% among escapees.<sup>42</sup> This figure may be too high: assuming that only a minority escaped through Sudan, and that the death rates among those travelling inside Ethiopia were much lower, a minimum figure of 5,000 deaths during escape can be guessed at.

Thus, very roughly, a minimum of about 50,000 people were killed by the resettlement program.

### **Resettlement and Famine Relief**

In addition to the direct human cost of the resettlement program, it involved enormous indirect human costs, by the diversion of resources. Resettlement sites and transit camps received priority allocations of relief food from the RRC. A food monitor commented: "Because supplies of RRC grain were insufficient, those beneficiaries registered for RRC distribution who had decided to stay in Wollo received no ration."<sup>43</sup> Voluntary agencies opposed this policy, at least implicitly, which led to a climate of suspicion between them and the RRC.

Between the conclusion of the first round of resettlement in May 1985, and the resumption of the program in October, huge stocks of undistributed grain built up around the temporarily unused transit centers, while people went hungry nearby. One agency report read:

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<sup>41</sup> Sivini, 1986, p. 235.

<sup>42</sup> Sandra Steingraber, "Resettlement in 1985-1986: Ecological Excuses and Environmental Consequences," in Clay *et al.*, 1988, p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell, 1986, p. 48.

There is a strong feeling of a serious scandal. The huge stocks are unjustifiable ... The pattern that emerges is quite clear. Huge quantities of grain have gone to the resettlement sites or are being held in stock. Wollo continues to suffer ... The general view is that the government is not interested in Wollo. It is either appalling neglect or deliberate mistreatment.<sup>44</sup>

Between June and September 1985, the RRC consigned an average of 8,630 metric tonnes (MT) of grain to Wollo (population: three million) each month. The estimated need was 35,000 MT per month. Addis Ababa (population 1.4 million) received 12,000 MT per month over the same period. As though this were generous, however, the amount allocated in the following four months -- when stage two of the resettlement program was under way -- was a mere 1,535 MT per month.<sup>45</sup>

The suspicion that relief programs were hindered in Wollo in order to facilitate resettlement is confirmed by a number of incidents in which the RRC intervened to prevent voluntary agencies from distributing food while recruitment of resettlers was proceeding nearby. "For example, party officials forbade two EECMY [Ethiopian Evangelical Church-Mekane Yesus] centres to distribute general rations when resettlement was carried out.... Similarly, the Philadelphia Mission at Kundi was ordered to postpone distribution until resettlement in their woreda [sub-district] had finished."<sup>46</sup>

The fear of resettlement prevented many rural people from coming to towns and relief centers for food or other activities such as trade. When 600 people were forcibly resettled in Korem in October 1985, 12,000-14,000 others in Korem abandoned the relief shelter and fled to the nearby hills. Fear of resettlement was a major reason for Tigrayans failing to come forward for relief.

The resettlement sites themselves were favored in relief distributions. "A sixty-year old settler from Kelala Woreda in Wollo pointed out, 'I have received more relief food here in the last three years than I had for so many years in Wollo.'<sup>47</sup> Ironically, the settlements needed to receive relief food every year from 1985 to 1991, even in years when the settlers' home areas in the north were self-sufficient. The government spent at least \$120 million overall on the program in its first four years.

Without the resettlement program, the relief program in Wollo, Tigray and north Shewa could have been implemented much more effectively, and an important hindrance to normal and essential activities such as migration and trade would have been removed. An unknown and

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in: Paul Vallely, "Starving Wollo: An Empty Excuse," *The Times*, London, August 14, 1985.

<sup>45</sup> Mitchell, 1986, p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> Mitchell, 1986, p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in: Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 102.

unknowable number of people died unnecessarily as a result.

### **Resettlement and the Environment**

The environmental justification for the resettlement program was perhaps the most persuasive -- the land of the north was so degraded that it was necessary to remove a significant proportion of the population in order for forestry projects and other programs of land reclamation to be implemented. However, there is good evidence that the program had the reverse effect.

The environmental impact of the program in the resettlement areas had been disastrous. Large areas of forest have been cleared, often in an indiscriminate fashion. Indigenous people have been displaced, and forced to settle elsewhere. A committee appointed by the Council of Ministers reported in 1988 that:

Unless concerted efforts were taken to arrest the accelerating rate of deforestation and soil erosion [in the resettlement areas], there would be a major imbalance in the ecosystem within eight years. The magnitude of this imbalance and degradation would be similar to that of the famine-affected areas of the northern highlands of Ethiopia.<sup>48</sup>

The resettlement program has also contributed to degradation in Wollo. This is because the fear of resettlement is one factor that has contributed to many farmers being forced to behave in a purely short-term manner. More generally, a farmer who invests labor and resources on his land, for instance by building terraces or planting trees, may not remain to see the fruits of his investment because he is arbitrarily plucked from his village and sent hundreds of miles away. Worse, his activities may even make resettlement more likely, because they may arouse the envy or dislike of the PA committee members, so that they select him for resettlement. Five per cent of Alemneh Dejene's sample of farmers in Wollo cited fear of resettlement as a reason why they failed to plant trees.<sup>49</sup>

More generally, while all land and natural resources remain state-owned and subject to arbitrary disposal by an unchallengeable local authority, conservation initiatives will be discouraged. This is illustrated by the case of Abaselama in Wollo:

The landmark of this peasant association is a gully (caused by severe downhill flooding), which begins at the top of the hill and extends for several kilometers along the road until it reaches the plain... In its twisted journey downward, this gully came within 20 meters of the house of one of the farmers interviewed for this study. The farmer took up the formidable task of planting eucalyptus seedlings in 1979, adding manure, building fences around the seedlings, and watering during the dry season. The fruits of his labor became evident as the seedlings stood taller than most of the huts around the area. His success

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in: Alemneh Dejene, 1990, pp. 105-7.

<sup>49</sup> Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 40.

became a subject of conversation in the village. Either out of envy or a plot organized by members or leaders of the peasant association, he was accused in July 1987 of planting trees on pathways belonging to the peasant association. The judiciary committee of the peasant association revoked his ownership of the trees, instructing him not to plant other seedlings around the gully.<sup>50</sup>

This story ended happily with the researcher intervening with the regional Ministry of Agriculture to restore the enterprising farmer's right to his trees. But there are innumerable examples of peasants being discouraged from conservation initiatives for similar reasons. One of the most ironic is that those who are farming an area designated as a conservation area are liable to arbitrary resettlement, and the self-organized planting of trees and protection of soil by farmers is one factor which makes it more likely that the government will designate a place as a conservation area.

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<sup>50</sup> Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 43.

### 13. VILLAGIZATION, 1984-90

In late 1984, the Ethiopian government began a program of villagization, which was intended to regroup the scattered homesteads, small hamlets and traditional villages of the entire countryside into a completely new pattern of grid-plan villages, laid out in accordance with central directives. The aim was ostensibly to promote social and economic development and facilitate the delivery of services such as education and water supplies. According to President Mengistu:

Collecting the farmers into villages will enable them to promote social production in a short time.

It will also change a farmer's life, his thinking, and will therefore open a new chapter in the establishment of a modern society in the rural areas and help bring about socialism.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, like so many government policies, it had important counter-insurgency elements too. The experience of villagization in Eritrea since 1966 and Bale during 1979-84 suggests that social transformation may only have been a secondary objective. This is borne out by the fact that the nationwide campaign of villagization was started in Harerghe in October 1984 primarily in order to combat the activities of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). More generally, the program was conceived and executed in a military manner. When a delegation from Ethiopia visited Tanzania in 1978 to assess the results of that country's experiment with villagization, the members concluded that Tanzania's failure could be attributed to a lack of resolve -- i.e. force.

Many of the aspects of the villagization program have been dealt with elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> hence this chapter will give no more than a summary of its impact. The policy was abandoned in March 1990.

#### Counter-Insurgency and Villagization in Harerghe

The government counter-insurgency measures of 1979-83 succeeded in restricting OLF activities in much of the south-east. In 1984, the Sidama Liberation Front was beaten decisively.

In the highlands of Harerghe, the OLF continued to be active in 1984. The government response included heavy bombing of areas such as Maya Qolo and Maya Guella, close to Harer town, and a large campaign launched in June, which lasted until August. The worst atrocity reported was destruction of much of the district of Daro Billiqa in July, where 1,000 houses were

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<sup>1</sup> President Mengistu Haile Mariam, Report to the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, April 14, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Survival International, For their Own Good ... Ethiopia's Villagization Programme, London, 1988; Jason Clay, Sandra Steingraber and Peter Niggli, The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture, Cambridge, Mass., 1988; John M. Cohen and Nils-Ivar Isaksson, "Villagization in Ethiopia's Arsi Region," Journal of Modern African Studies, 25, (1987) pp. 435-64.

reported burned and 6,000 cattle confiscated.<sup>3</sup> According to the OLF, 102 peasants were killed, usually in front of the assembled villagers, for resisting forced relocation. The offensive coincided with the main planting season and directly contributed to harvest failure. Between May and October over 50,000 Oromo refugees fled to Somalia, and by December there were 30,000 displaced people in Dire Dawa. Immediately after the offensive ended, the government started a large-scale villagization program.<sup>4</sup>

The villagization in Harerghe was accomplished by force. Village leaders and Moslem religious teachers were detained (and sometimes executed) while army units instructed the villagers to relocate to a new site. Exemplary punishments were meted out to objectors, including mass public executions. Existing villages were burned, crops were often burned too, and cattle were stolen or killed. People were buried alive, and survivors raped, beaten or mutilated.<sup>5</sup>

In late November and December 1984, the air force bombarded several areas of the Gobelle valley, south-west of Harer town. In January 1985 there was a military offensive through the same area, in which there were several reported instances of killings of civilians. An unknown number of men were shot and killed on January 29, at Gonda Abbadh, while working as manual laborers on a government project. There was a second influx of refugees into Somalia.

In the new villages, the government (represented by cadres and militiamen) enforced a strict work routine. In some places, such as Habro district, several days' unpaid work per week on state coffee farms was also enforced.

The program included strict control of food supplies. This met two government aims simultaneously: it could obtain higher quotas of crops from the farmers, and it could deprive the insurgents of access to food. It was combined with fiercely-imposed restrictions on trade. A particularly irksome part of the whole process is the central control over food supplies. Locals cannot eat what they want, and have reportedly been told not to give their children milk: cows are state property. Officials announced that the government would distribute 500 grams of rations daily to everybody. For farming families which have traditionally produced huge food surpluses and maintained a very varied diet, such control is anathema, especially since local people feared, justifiably, that the army and urbanites would cream off the highest quality food, leaving the villagers with a meagre diet of sub-standard grains...

Freedom of movement is greatly restricted in the villagized areas. People are forbidden to travel through the countryside. They could be shot if they do. The new villages are connected to each other and to cities by a network of usually new roads, built with forced labour.

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<sup>3</sup> *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1984-5, p. B244.

<sup>4</sup> Jason W. Clay, "The Case of Hararghe: Testimonies of Refugees in Somalia," in Clay *et al.*, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Numerous instances are reported in Clay, 1988 and Survival International, 1988.

Troops can thus be deployed rapidly. The militia organizes security locally, making sure its members are recruited from another area -- in contrast to the past, when the militia was locally-recruited. The absence of social ties between the new militia and the locals probably accounts for what some refugees have described as the systematic rape of women.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the villagization disrupted food production in the year of its implementation.

Village sites were selected with a view to defense, rather than access to water, fuelwood, pastures, or fields. Many farmers had to walk much greater distances to get to their fields, and some crops which require special conditions and attention had to be abandoned. This was particularly the case for villages which were relocated from highland to lowland areas. Villagers who previously followed a mix of farming and herding, moving each year from the village to dry season pastures, were forced to become wholly sedentary, and give up many of their animals. The combination of impoverished agriculture, greater extraction of food by the government and army, and the effective ban on local trade and migration, was instrumental in turning the drought of 1984 in the highlands of Harerghe into a famine.

The down-hill relocation of villages also led to the alienation of grazing land from pastoralists, including valleys used as drought-retreats. This was one factor in the creation of famine in the lowlands in 1984/5 and again in 1987/8, and a cause of inter-communal violence.

By mid-1985, over half of the highlands of Harerghe had been villagized. The remainder was relocated in a four month campaign between November 1985 and March 1986. In total, 2,115 new villages were constructed, and more than two million people relocated.

The second phase of villagization in Harerghe appears to have been conducted with less violence and more attention to local agricultural needs. Some "model villages" were constructed at this stage, with facilities such as an electricity supply provided. These were used as showcases.

The villagization program was effective, however, in restricting the military activities of the OLF. The existing splits in the OLF also deepened, with the Oromo Islamic Front gaining ground (see chapter 19).

### **Social Transformation and Villagization**

Following the successful conclusion of the first stage of villagization program in Harerghe in June 1985, national villagization was declared as a program the next month. By August 1988, the government reported that over 12 million people -- about half of the rural population in the areas the government then controlled -- had been villagized. While the collectivization of

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<sup>6</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 27.12, June 4, 1986, p. 7. The systematic rape of women by PA officials, cadres and others was also reported in non-insurgent areas.

agriculture was probably one of the ultimate goals of the program, fewer than four per cent of the farmers in the country were members of producers cooperatives by the time the policy was abandoned.

Cultural Survival draws a distinction between villagization implemented as a counter-insurgency strategy in war areas, and as a program for social transformation in non-war areas. This distinction is important, but the difference is one of degree. There has been insurgency in all the southern provinces. The government was also waging a form of economic warfare against the peasantry, partly in order to exact higher levels of payment, and partly because it feared the sort of spontaneous rural uprising that occurred in 1974/5, when there was no effective government control over the rural areas at all.

The villagization program in most of the south was implemented with relatively little violence. But there is no doubt that it was involuntary. Cohen and Isaksson, who recount the implementation of the program in Arsi in a manner sympathetic to the government, note: Indirectly there was psychological force. The experience of Arsi's inhabitants since Menelik's conquest [in the 1880s] has been that unless the writ of central government is followed, then the army and/or the police will enforce it. Knowing this, Arsi's peasants dismantled their houses, moved them to new sites, and reconstructed them on assigned compounds with few overt signs of resistance.<sup>7</sup>

The Arsi peasants' proximity to Bale and Harerghe, and their knowledge of the villagization program there, undoubtedly reinforced this preparedness to comply with official commands. The government's preparedness to withhold food aid from non-villagized areas also put pressure on villagers to comply with the program.

The implementation plan for each province was devised locally. While this decentralization could have avoided many of the errors associated with central planning, it also created a climate of competition for correctness and zeal between the cadres of different provinces; in 1986 the most successful officials were rewarded with prizes and promotions.

The creation of new villages involved a number of measures which led to unnecessary hardship and hunger. Government officials and cadres surveyed sites and insisted on house construction in the middle of growing crops. Labor was diverted from essential household and agricultural tasks. Houses of reluctant farmers were arbitrarily demolished. Levies were exacted from the peasants in order to finance the program. The villagers were moved before essential ancillary buildings had been constructed, such as latrines, kitchens and stables. Inadequate space for housing animals and long distances to pastures led to enforced sale of livestock.

In some areas of south-central Ethiopia, the staple crop is the root of the ensete (false banana) plant. This is a perennial plant which is traditionally grown around the homestead.

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen and Isaksson, 1987, p. 452.

Several agricultural experts recommended that villagization be deferred or cancelled in ensete-growing areas, because the forced relocation would require the abandonment of existing ensete trees and it would be several years before new trees would achieve maturity. This advice was ignored, and villagization proceeded apace (though in some parts of southern Shewa, a compromise was reached whereby the existing dense pattern of settlement was merely rearranged). Some of the hunger that afflicts these fertile areas in 1991 can be ascribed to this policy. Similar problems affected villagization in coffee-growing areas and places where the mild narcotic leaf chat is grown.

A number of villages had to be relocated after their sites were selected by urban cadres in places without water, or where there was no drainage so that flooding was prevalent.

### Resistance

The villagization program was deeply unpopular throughout Ethiopia.

Most rural resistance to villagization and its accompanying programs took the form of unobtrusive sabotage. Peasants would do the minimum possible amount of corvee labor<sup>8</sup> on roads, schools and forestry schemes, and produce shoddy work. There are accounts of villagers planting saplings upside-down, certainly not from ignorance.

In some areas there was violent resistance. A notable example is Gojjam, where there is a long history of resisting central attempts to meddle in affairs connected with land (see chapter 3). Villagization in Mota district was achieved in 1986 only with the assistance of helicopter gunships sent from Addis Ababa. There are other reports of villagers killing or mutilating cadres sent to enforce villagization, for example, 25 people killed near Shashamane in Shewa, one in Gojjam, two in Sidamo, and an unknown number in Gamu Gofa.<sup>9</sup>

In March 1990, President Mengistu unexpectedly announced the abandonment of the villagization program. Almost overnight, the existing cooperative farms were physically stripped of their assets. Villagers -- for so long sullen and cowed -- suddenly displayed great energy and initiative in redividing their farmland and returning to their original homesteads, or at least laying claim to them in anticipation of a future move. In some areas, cadres were expelled from the villages, or fled anticipating retribution. In Mota, Gojjam, some cadres who tried to resist the dismantling of the village were killed by the peasants.

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<sup>8</sup> Forced labor exacted as a tax demand.

<sup>9</sup> Survival International, 1988, p. 26.

## 14. THE ROAD TO ASMARA: ERITREA, 1988-91

On March 17-19, 1988, the EPLF overwhelmed the Ethiopian army's northern command at Afabet. Over 15,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, captured or dispersed, together with a vast quantity of arms and ammunition, including 50 tanks. Three Soviet officers were captured and another only narrowly escaped. Building on the significant if less spectacular advances by EPLF and TPLF over the previous six months, this marked a turning point of the war. Three years and two months later, the EPLF occupied Asmara and the EPRDF occupied Addis Ababa, bringing an end to their respective wars with the central government. These last three years of the war in Eritrea saw no respite from mass abuses of human rights by the Ethiopian army.

### Afabet and Aftermath

The EPLF capture of Afabet left the Ethiopian army in disarray. Within a week, the garrison at Tessenei was evacuated so as to bolster the defenses of Keren. This evacuation was carried out in good order. Barentu was also evacuated, on March 31, and the retreating units burned several parts of the town and looted many citizens of their possessions. The same day the garrison at Anseba, north of Keren, retreated under EPLF fire, and on the night of April 1-2, the EPLF overran the army trenches at Halhal. In order to save Keren from apparent imminent capture, Agordat was evacuated. The following six weeks saw fierce fighting around Keren, in which the army managed to recover its positions at Halhal; otherwise the new front lines did not change significantly.

The fighting saw many atrocities against civilians. One was witnessed by Zahra Ibrahim, an Almeda woman from Halhal.

In April the Dergue attacked Halhal and we were forced to run away. We ran to Wadaq Sabra where there are some caves. There were many people hiding in the caves. The soldiers came to us to kill us. I begged one of them not to kill me and my children -- I offered him sugar -- and he left me and they killed only the others. They killed so many, I couldn't count. It took one month to find the bodies and bury them. For three days I was wandering in the hills and my little boy died from hunger and thirst. There was a gas from the shells which made us cry and made the children very upset -- they cried all the time and became very thirsty.

[In May] we were [still] in Wadaq Sabra. The EPLF overran the area and killed many Ethiopian soldiers, and then left. We left with the EPLF -- there were so many dead soldiers that we had to step on them, and the streams were flowing with blood. The EPLF took us to the

river Matafa.<sup>1</sup>

Other credible reports of killings in April-May 1988 include:

\*April 5, Godeiti: 12 civilians shot dead and two wounded by soldiers (ten of the victims were aged 60 years or older).

\* April 15, Qazien: six civilians shot dead by soldiers.

\* April 20, Shebah: 18 civilians shot dead by soldiers.

On May 12, in Sheib in Semhar district, a large scale and well-documented massacre of civilians was perpetrated by the Ethiopian army. Idris Osman Enkersa was a survivor:

It was morning around 8 o'clock ... The enemy armored vehicles, 15 tanks, appeared on the Massawa side. They headed towards Sheib from the coast side. The tanks led [the soldiers] to Sheib and surrounded the village. The soldiers came into every house and collected the people by saying that "you have a meeting today." They gathered children, old women and men under a big tree.<sup>2</sup>

Amina Mohamed recounted what happened next:

We tried to run away but we were surrounded. The tanks moved in on us, crushing people in their way. My entire family was killed, except for my baby. For three days I lay in the midst of the bodies, pretending to be dead. At one point my baby started to cry. A soldier aimed his gun. I heard his companion say "don't waste a bullet. The baby will die of hunger anyway." The soldiers killed our animals and threw the carcasses in the wells. They searched women's corpses for gold nose rings and earrings. After three days they left the village and I walked up here. That's all.<sup>3</sup>

About 80 people were crushed to death by the tanks. A further 320 were killed by gunfire, from both the tanks and the foot soldiers. All were civilians. Idris knew many of the dead:

Mohamed Shibeley Dery's wife with her son, his sister in law with her two sons; Ali Gira Wad Hamid's wife and his son, his son's wife with her three children, his daughter with her children; Hamid Wadi Hishay; Ibrahim Hamid Shibeley; Osman Hamid; Hamid Mohamed Cheiway and his mother; Hamid Kurub with his wife and his daughter; Hamid Ahmed's wife with her two daughters; Suleiman Ali Gidir with his sister and his sons; Hawa Osman Musa with her two sons....

On the same day and immediately following days, there were other killings of civilians at 30 other villages in the vicinity, in which at least 100 others died. For example, three were shot dead by soldiers at Beet Abreha the same day, and four at Fatna Arre at the end of the same week.

The air force also carried out a number of attacks on villages and other civilian targets.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Interviewed by Jennie Street.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in a film by Alter-Cine inc. (Daniele LaCourse and Yvan Patry) The Forbidden Land, September 1989.

These included:

- \* March 31: Melebso: 15 killed, 25 wounded.
- \* April 2: Mensae Beit Shchaqu: five killed.
- \* April: repeated attacks on Afabet, casualties not known.
- \* April: Agordat: at least three civilians killed.
- \* April: Anseba: two civilians killed.
- \* May 7 and 8: Mensura: five civilians killed.
- \* May 3 and 13: Halhal: at least three civilians killed in this and two other attacks.
- \* May 19: Afabet: ten civilians killed.

These killings of civilians served no military purpose. They were intended merely to terrorize and punish the population.

The fighting and government reprisals displaced about 110,000 civilians, including over 70,000 from the Sheib area. About 40,000 fled to Sudan. These refugees described how they hid to escape the Ethiopian army and how it was not safe to inhabit a village during daylight hours. Instead, people spent the day hiding in the hills, returning home only at dusk. They could not wear bright clothing for fear of attracting the planes, and had to hang their washing to dry in the shade of trees. They could not light a fire to cook, because the smoke would give away their presence. Travel to Sudan was possible only at night.

One woman gave birth under a tree; the next night she had to continue her journey. She said: "I was lucky, we had a camel. I know of women who had to start walking the same day that they had given birth."<sup>4</sup>

The forced displacement of the population led to increased deaths, from thirst, exposure and disease. There was a severe malaria epidemic in the fall of 1988, and many of the victims were displaced people who had moved from the highlands, where there is no malaria and so they had no acquired immunity. A study of mortality among a population of refugees who arrived in Sudan during 1988 found that death rates approximately doubled during the period when the refugees were "on the road," and remained considerably higher than normal in the refugee camp, chiefly on account of diarrhoeal diseases and malaria. Most of those who died were young children. If the survey is assumed also to be representative for those who were displaced inside

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

Eritrea, it would imply that about 1,430 people died on account of the displacement.<sup>5</sup>

### **The State of Emergency**

The defeat at Afabet led President Mengistu to make his first public admission of the existence of the war for ten years. In a televised speech on March 31, Mengistu said that the money spent on the war each year could have built four major universities or ten large hospitals. He declared that extra effort was needed to meet the threat: "from now on, everything to the battlefield." A week later, after meeting with President Siad Barre of Somalia, Mengistu made the surprise announcement of a peace agreement with Somalia (none had been signed after the 1977/8 war), allowing the redeployment of troops from the Ogaden to Eritrea.

On April 6, the government expelled foreign aid agencies from Eritrea and Tigray. This included the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Only UNICEF was exempted.

This ban drew much adverse publicity from the international media, which appeared to assume that the absence of foreign personnel was equivalent to the complete cessation of the relief program. In fact, as the Ethiopian government was quick to point out, more than 80 per cent of the relief in government areas was distributed by Ethiopian organizations employing Ethiopian staff (chiefly the RRC and the churches). The intention of the ban was different: it was to remove witnesses for what was going to happen next.

On May 14, the government declared a State of Emergency in Eritrea and Tigray. As there was no pretence of civil administration in Tigray, and in less than a year no government presence in the province at all save a single garrison, it had little impact in that province. It is also questionable whether the State of Emergency had any significant impact in Eritrea, as the government already possessed an almost unlimited range of powers, and the legal system was already subject to continuous and authorized interference by the executive -- the country was under a permanent virtual state of emergency already.

The State of Emergency proclamation gave an "Overall Administrator" of Eritrea wide-ranging powers, accountable only to the President and the State Council. The security forces (including army, police, People's Guards and militia) were empowered to inspect any person or property and to detain anyone. Ten kilometer strips along the Sudan border and the coast were designated "prohibited areas," from which all people were required to move -- in effect making these "free fire zones." The Overall Administrator was empowered to convene military tribunals and to appoint their officers. These tribunals had jurisdiction over a range of crimes. The full list, as enumerated in Section V, 19 (i) and (ii) is reproduced here, in order to give a flavor

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<sup>5</sup> Alex de Waal, "Population and Health of Eritreans in Wad Sherifei," London, ActionAid, 1989, pp. 77-87.

of the military administration that followed.

(i) Military tribunals ... have jurisdiction over crimes committed during the State of Emergency in accordance with the updated Special Penal Code Proclamation No. 214/1974 [Ethiopian calendar, i.e. 1981]:

(a) Crimes committed against the freedom of the country.

(b) Crimes committed against the constitutional order or against organs of that order.

(c) Crimes committed against Ethiopia's unity and the unity of the people.

(d) Anti-revolutionary crimes.

(e) Crimes of armed terrorism and the waging of civil war.

(f) The crime of agitating and organizing.

(g) Crimes affecting the country's defense forces.

(h) Crimes against public property and wealth.

(ii) In addition to the powers stipulated in sub-article (i) of this article, the military tribunals have the right to judge:

(a) Crimes committed in violation of this special proclamation.

(b) Any crimes which the Overall Administrator of the area decides should be transferred to military tribunals from the ordinary courts.

Death penalties required the personal approval of the Overall Administrator.

Under the State of Emergency, the army continued to act with wanton brutality towards the civilian population. Over the following twelve months, some of the incidents in which civilians were killed included:

\*June 2, 1988, Godeiti: nine shot dead.

\*June 25, Mensae: four shot dead (including a six month-old baby), and three wounded.

\*September 16, Geleb: four killed by shellfire.

\*October 22, Mai Harasat: eight shot dead, including three old people and a five-year old girl, and eleven wounded.

\*October 31, Degera: three shot dead.

\*December 26, Tewro: eight shot dead.

\*February 1989, Semhar district: between 600 and 1,000 killed in Sheib and surrounding villages.

\*April 15, Sefca and nearby: 19 men thrown to their deaths over a cliff.

\*April 17, Logo: 19 men stoned to death.

\*June 3, Una Andom: seven shot dead (21 others were killed in nearby villages on the same day).

Some of the air raids that took place included an attack on Lego on June 10 (no fatalities reported), and a series of raids in Barka in September and October. The border area was a particular target, and at on least three occasions the MiGs crossed into Sudanese air space and attacked civilian targets inside Sudan. In October, two Sudanese locust-spraying planes were attacked, and in November there were two raids on Sudanese border villages in Red Sea Province, in which a school was damaged.

The policy of forced relocations into protected villages continued. In October 1988, about 5,000 people in four villages were forced to move to the protected village of Elabored near Keren. They were given one day's notice of the move, and the soldiers took the opportunity to loot much property.

During the 18 months after July 1988, there was little large-scale military activity in Eritrea. In early 1990, that was to change.

### **Massawa, 1990**

On February 8, 1990, the EPLF launched a surprise attack on Ethiopia's second port, Massawa, which it captured after a three-day battle. During the battle, the government forces retreated to an island some distance from the main town, taking a number of civilians as hostages. After repeatedly demanding that this force surrender, the EPLF attacked and defeated it. About 200 civilians were estimated to have been killed in the fighting, including some of the civilian hostages.

After the battle the port remained essentially intact, and required few repairs before it could function again. Starting shortly afterwards, the Ethiopian government pursued a policy intended to reduce Massawa to rubble.

The first air raids occurred on February 16. For eight days there were repeated attacks. The initial targets appeared to be the food stores, which contained about 50,000 tonnes of US-donated wheat, for famine relief. Incendiaries and napalm or phosphorous bombs were used, and about half of this food relief was burned. Susan Watkins, an official of Oxfam Canada, who visited Massawa at the time, saw two warehouses and three stockpiles of grain burning, and

commented "it was clear that food aid was the target of the bombardment."<sup>6</sup> The grain was burned so systematically that piles were still smouldering one month later.

After the initial round of bombing, March was much quieter. The key issue in Massawa was whether the EPLF would be able to reopen the port. Yemane Yohannes, a senior technician in the port, told a visiting journalist "if a ship arrives tomorrow, we can handle it."<sup>7</sup> He said that four diesel-powered cranes, three berths, four warehouses, and three tugs were still functional, so that relief shipments could be unloaded. Responding to an EPLF appeal for relief shipments, the German-based relief organization Cap Anamur sent a ship loaded with relief towards Massawa.

On April 4, the Ethiopian air force began another series of sustained attacks on Massawa. 30 people were killed and 54 seriously wounded. In three raids over the following four days, another 41 people died.

The inhabitants of Massawa were compelled to spend the daylight hours in air raid shelters -- in storm drains, under bridges, and in the cellars of houses -- or to evacuate the town altogether at daybreak, and spread themselves over large areas under trees, in order not to provide a target for the bombings.

On April 13, one of the encampments of evacuees, at Foro just outside the town was bombed. At least 25 civilians who were sheltering there were burned. One victim of these raids described what occurred:

When we got out from Massawa we were under the trees. We are just civil peoples. The aeroplanes have seen us [that] we are civil peoples. They came at nine o'clock ... They bombed bombs and napalm bombs. They have bombarded us for two hours.<sup>8</sup>

These attacks also used cluster bombs. Cluster bombs are a particularly deadly munition, as they explode before striking the ground and shower a large number of smaller bombs, each one lethal, over a large area. They are designed to kill large numbers of people. Their military use is against columns of infantry, but at this time Massawa was well behind the front line, and empty of military personnel. A foreign visitor to Massawa wrote:

ERA officials familiar with GoE [government] military tactics are shocked by a new kind of bomb which has only been used since the Massawa takeover. Everyone in the town is talking about this new kind of bomb, which destroys everything within a 100 metre radius, and which is particularly effective in shanty areas with flimsy housing structures.

These cluster bombs were almost certainly supplied by the Israeli government.

On the evening of Sunday, April 22, a particularly devastating air raid occurred. At 10:30

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in: The Times, London, March 3, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in: The Guardian, London, March 16, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in: Alter-Cine inc (Danielle Lacourse and Yvan Patry) A Fight to the Death, April 1990.

that morning, a raid had taken place. This attack produced no casualties, because the population was either sheltering or evacuated. The second attack occurred at 6:15 p.m., at dusk. This was after the last hour when attacks normally occurred, as the bomber pilots left themselves enough time to return to base before nightfall. The residents of Massawa had therefore left their shelters, and were in the streets on their way to church, market, or work place. One woman described how she was making *kicha* (unleavened bread) for the feast of Medhanie Alem (The Savior's Day, a monthly Christian religious feast), with her family when the bombs exploded. Another man was sitting with his family at home; only he and his sister in law survived. One woman, sheltering with her family in a drain under a road, described her situation:

The plane bombed us. The people are suffering ... entire families were wiped out -- not a single person left alive in the family. We did not come here [to the drain] to have a good time. We didn't come here for fun. We're having a bad time. Mengistu has decided to burn us like wood.<sup>9</sup>

Two cluster bombs exploded over a crowded street in the center of the town. About 50 people were killed and 110 wounded, many of them very severely.

Video recordings taken immediately after the bombing confirm that the casualties were civilians. One video, shot after the raid, contains pictures considered too horrific to be shown on public television: one shows the body of a woman with her face entirely burned away, another shows a dead child with a hole in his face. Other pictures, marginally less horrific, include a close-up shot of a pile of bodies lying in the street, their flesh punctured with fragments from cluster bombs, and pictures of survivors with large areas of skin burned away; in some cases the raw flesh covering the entire back.

Massawa is a town with clearly separated docks, commercial and residential quarters, and the town itself lies some distance away from the military installations. The bombers flew low, at a height of a few hundred feet. They deliberately targeted the residential areas of the town, and attacked at an hour calculated to cause the maximum number of casualties among civilians.

This series of raids also used demolition bombs, and did severe damage to warehouses and other port installations, as well as destroying more than 100 houses. Parachutes were used to slow down the bombs' descent to ensure that they detonated at the correct moment. By this time, several offensives by the Ethiopian army aimed at retaking Massawa had failed, and it is probable that the bombing raids were now intended to destroy the port entirely. A woman resident of Massawa, Fatna Ari, commented "whenever Mengistu realizes that he is defeated he kills people with aeroplanes."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in: A Fight to the Death.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in: A Fight to the Death.

On May 1, the Ethiopian government threatened to bomb any ship that docked in the port, forcing the ship chartered by Cap Anamur with its relief cargo to be diverted to Port Sudan.

On June 3, the question of famine in Ethiopia was raised at the Washington summit. Under pressure from the super-powers, the Ethiopian government conceded that Massawa could be used for relief deliveries. However, before this was officially announced on June 5, another air raid took place. Raids in the Massawa area continued until June 10. An EPLF spokesman responded: "the port facilities have been virtually destroyed by air raids ... I don't think Massawa could operate as a port for many months."<sup>11</sup> After early June, there were few air attacks on Massawa: one occurred on September 4 and another on October 24, in which one child was killed.

These raids were probably carried out in order to demonstrate to the aid donors that any relief would be delivered to Massawa on the government's terms, or not at all.

The capture of Massawa by the EPLF also led to the government unleashing air attacks on other towns and villages in Eritrea. Some of the attacks included:

- \* April 3: Afabet: 16 killed, 24 wounded.
- \* April 4: Afabet: 51 killed, 125 seriously wounded.
- \* April 17: Afabet: no fatalities.
- \* May 21: Afabet: two killed.
- \* September 13: Gedged: two wounded.
- \* September 17 and 21: Matalili: no casualties, but several fishing boats destroyed.
- \* September 22: Haicota: no casualties.
- \* October 3: Koatit: no casualties.
- \* October 11: Adi Ma'alim: three wounded.
- \* October 14: Tikombia: three wounded.
- \* October 14; Mai Shiro: three killed, one wounded.
- \* October 16: Godeiti: two children killed.

### **The Siege of Asmara**

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in: The Guardian, London, June 7, 1990.

The fall of Massawa led to the government being confined to Asmara and the surrounding area. The state of siege lasted until the defeat and surrender of the garrison on May 25, 1991. The siege witnessed the development of famine conditions in the enclave, which will be discussed in chapter 16. It also saw many abuses against civilians committed by the army and administration.

### *Placing Civilians in Danger*

One abuse against civilians was a systematic attempt to retain them in and around the battle zones. This first occurred shortly after the fall of Massawa, when the army made a series of attempts to recapture the port by attacking from Ghinda, which lies half way between Asmara and Massawa. All the attempts failed. On March 11-13, the army prevented the civilian inhabitants from evacuating Ghinda, so that their continued presence would provide a human shield for the army and deter EPLF artillery barrages. When it became impossible to live in Ghinda, many residents had to move to caves and other makeshift shelters nearby. Elsewhere in the enclave, the army also prevented civilians from leaving villages near the front line to go to Asmara, or removed them only a short distance. For instance, the people displaced from Massawa who tried to travel to Asmara were confined to Nefasit, just behind the front line at Ghinda.

### *Killings*

The army continued to kill civilians on frequent occasions, though no massacres on the scale of Sheib occurred -- almost certainly because the army was no longer able to penetrate into EPLF-controlled territory.

The worst single incident occurred on June 9, 1990. A group of soldiers left their military base and entered the city. They shot dead 31 youths and injured at least 15 more. The killings took place in several parts of the city as the youths were returning home from watching a televised World Cup soccer match at Kidane Mehret in the city center. They were shot in the street and in the doorways of houses, just before the curfew hour. Other incidents include:

\*August 9: Hagaz, near Keren: two mothers killed.

\*Late August: Decamhare: about 20 peasant farmers were summarily shot by the army during a military engagement with the EPLF.

\*September 12: Asmara: soldiers shot dead 16 civilians.

\*September 27: Keren: two civilians were killed when soldiers opened fire (they claimed they were shooting in the air, celebrating the Ethiopian New Year).

- \*January 1991: Tsazega: a girl of 12 was shot by soldiers while they were allegedly training.
- \*January 18: Anseba: a girl of 16 was killed by soldiers with a knife while resisting attempts to rape her.
- \*February 7: Adi Garma: two killed by soldiers.
- \*February: Girgir, near Keren: two elderly women were killed by soldiers, one shot and one strangled.
- \*March 28: Adi Quala: one man was killed by soldiers while returning from market.
- \*April 3: Sheikha Wadi Bisserat: one was killed by soldiers.

### *Detentions and Restrictions*

Another abuse against civilians was detention under the emergency powers given to the overall administrator. Civilians were arrested and detained on the slightest suspicion of sympathizing with the EPLF. Some were detained simply so that officials could obtain bribes for their release.<sup>12</sup> Some detainees were killed in prison. For example, on April 9, ten were executed in Mariam Ghimbi prison in retaliation for the EPLF assassination of the prison governor. One of those killed was Tsehay Gebremedhin, an employee of SEDAO Electric company.

Numerous restrictions were placed on civilians in Asmara and the other towns of the enclave. A curfew was imposed from 9 p.m. until dawn -- later it was brought forward to sundown. During the hours of the curfew, people were liable to be shot on sight. On several occasions, citywide searches were made, as on December 21, 1990, and again on February 21, 1991. All people were stopped in the street and required to produce their identity cards. Numerous people were detained on both occasions, especially women who were not carrying their cards, and people who originated from Tigray.

The army prevented people from leaving Asmara. People who tried to leave on foot were subject to summary arrest and detention. If they could, people tried to leave by air. Ethiopian Airlines flights came irregularly, and stopped altogether after an airplane was hit by a shell while standing on the tarmac on April 26, 1991. The cost of a ticket plus all the requisite payments and bribes to obtain travel documents was prohibitively expensive for most.

The administration began to organize the civilian population into civil patrols. In rural

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<sup>12</sup> For more details see: "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," News from Africa Watch, April 30, 1991.

areas, villagers were required to take on security functions, protecting roads, bridges and hillsides by mounting round-the-clock guards. They were required to report suspicious activity. Those who objected were detained and physically abused. In Asmara city, civil patrols were organized in February 1991. Each *kebele* was required to provide a guard for its neighborhood for four-and-a-half hours each night, and was held responsible for any suspicious activity during those hours. Civil patrollers were given no weapons, torches nor uniforms.

### *Shelling*

The residents of the town were also at risk from shelling by the EPLF. Starting in March 1990, the EPLF began regular shelling aimed at the airport. The artillery was located at Bizen and Ala, some 30 kilometers away to the northeast.

The target of the shelling was the airport, and the apparent intention was to damage the military installations and aircraft there, and put the runway out of action. The shells damaged military transport planes, MiG fighter-bombers, a plane belonging to the RRC, airport installations, and an ammunition dump. Numerous soldiers were killed while leaving through the airport in April and May 1991. The airport was forced to close on several occasions on account of the shelling.

The shelling caused civilian casualties at the airport. In early January, 1991, three women were killed while waiting for an Ethiopian Airlines plane to Addis Ababa. On March 1, an airplane used for the relief airlift was hit while on the ground and one civilian was killed. An Ethiopian Airlines fuel tanker airplane was hit by a shell on March 22. On April 26, an Ethiopian Airlines passenger plane was hit by a shell and three passengers were killed.

The shelling also caused some civilian deaths in the town. In the first few days of the attacks, shells landed over a wide area, causing a number of civilian casualties, both from the blast directly and from fragments hurled over a large distance. After that, all the shells landed in the airport and the neighboring two quarters of the town, Godaif and Sembel. The EPLF warned the residents of these areas to evacuate their homes, but not all did so, in part because of the fear that their houses would be requisitioned by the army. Between March and June 1990 about 60 civilians were killed in the town by the shelling and 100 houses were badly damaged.

In late August, the shelling caused its highest number of civilian casualties. On August 20, one child was killed in a tank and artillery bombardment of Akria, Arbate Asmara, Inderase and Gabriel Church quarters of the city. On August 25, 17 civilians were killed. In the two incidents, 20 were also injured. The government reported the incidents, acknowledging for the first time that the city was besieged by the EPLF.<sup>13</sup> The EPLF, however, blamed the incidents on

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<sup>13</sup> AFP August 29, 1990.

the government.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the government was indeed likely to be responsible -- certainly, residents of Asmara believed so. This was based on several considerations. One is that the source of the shelling was Balazar, to the north of the city; EPLF shelling came from the northeast. Second, the shells from the EPLF artillery took precisely sixteen seconds from firing to landing; these shells took less. Thirdly, the shells were of a different kind, and made a different sound.

### *Assassinations by the EPLF*

Throughout the last years of the war, up until the weeks before the fall of Asmara, the EPLF continued to assassinate civilians accused of collaborating with the security forces. On average, the EPLF announced approximately one such assassination every two weeks in the last months of 1990 and the start of 1991. Victims included members of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, informers for the security forces, and the governor of the Mariam Ghimbi prison, who was accused of torturing detainees. According to the EPLF, the offenders were tried in absentia, and were warned twice to desist from their activities. If they refused to heed the warnings, an assassination squad was dispatched. This practice was criticized by Africa Watch.<sup>14</sup>

### **Eritrean Opposition to the EPLF**

Throughout the 1980s the EPLF was the militarily dominant Eritrean military front. However, it faced competition from no fewer than nine rival fronts or political organizations. The Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF), headed by the veteran nationalist Osman Saleh Sabbe, split from the EPLF in 1975, and itself split in 1979, with the formation of the ELF-PLF-Revolutionary Council, headed by Osman Ajib. After Ajib's assassination, leadership was taken over by Abdel Gadir Jeilani, who is a Baathist who enjoyed patronage from Iraq. The ELF also split in 1977, with the formation of the Eritrean Democratic Movement (EDM) headed by Hiruy Tedla Bairu. In 1981 the ELF split into three factions, led by Abdalla Idris, Habte Tesfamariam and Giorgis Teklemichael. Personal rivalries were at least as important as ideological disputes in creating the factionalism. By 1991 the ELF organizations consisted of:

\*ELF-United Organization: headed by Omer Buraj, Islamic in orientation.

\*ELF: headed by Abdalla Idris, Islamic in orientation, with close ties to Sudanese security (commonly known as the "ELF-Abdalla").

\*ELF-PLF: headed by Abdel Gadir Jeilani, Baathist.

\*Eritrean Islamic Liberation Front ("Mujahideen"), headed by Ibrahim Ali, Islamic fundamentalist in orientation, and supported by the international Moslem Brothers and the Sudanese National Islamic Front.

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<sup>14</sup> News from Africa Watch, "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," April 30, 1991.

From late 1986 until about 1989, the ELF-Abdalla was involved in negotiations with the Mengistu government. According to the EPLF and rival ELF groups, the government provided military supplies. The ELF groups received support and sanctuary from the Sudan government, which also continued to support the EPLF.

In addition, there are Afar groups in favor of a united Afar territory and two non-combatant Eritrean organizations, both secular in orientation and headed by Christians:

\*Sagim ("Return"): headed by Tewelde Gebre Sellassie.

\*Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrea: headed by Gebre Berhan Zere.

Militarily, the most important of these organizations has been the ELF-Abdalla. Operating from bases around Kassala in Sudan, the ELF-Abdalla was involved in guerrilla attacks on the EPLF in southern Barka. The main activity was the planting of land mines (both anti-vehicle and anti-personnel) on roads and tracks used by the EPLF and ERA. Some of these mines were even planted inside Sudan, and in December 1989, Dr Lars Bondestam, a Swedish academic who had long experience of studying famine issues in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, was killed when his car struck a land mine inside Sudanese territory. In August 1989, there was a battle between the Mujahideen group and the EPLF close to the Sudan border, which involved an intervention by the Sudanese army to support the Mujahideen. Some military engagements have also occurred since the EPLF victory in May 1991.

### **The Fall of Asmara**

In February 1991, the temporary lull in the war was broken with simultaneous offensives by the EPRDF into Gonder and Gojjam, and the EPLF into the Danakil towards Assab. In mid-May the EPLF also launched an assault on Decamhare, and captured the town on May 24. Army reinforcements sent from Asmara were surrounded and captured, leaving the road open towards Asmara. The garrison at Asmara surrendered the following day.

Throughout the siege of Asmara the residents of the town had feared a repeat of the massive bloodshed that had accompanied the ELF-EPLF attack on the city in January 1975. Ethiopian military commanders had also warned that Asmara would only be captured as a ruin. The air force had shown its willingness to bomb major towns such as Massawa and Meqele. These fears deterred an EPLF assault until the air force bases at Bahir Dar and Debre Zeit had been captured -- the latter on May 24. By this time, fear of EPLF reprisals deterred army atrocities. To the great relief of all Eritreans, the city was captured intact, without either widespread destruction or loss of civilian life.

Most of the other garrisons in Eritrea followed immediately, with a significant exception.

A large contingent of the Keren and Asmara garrisons decided to fight its way out to Sudan. This included about 75,000 soldiers, some family members, and some high-ranking members of the administration and security forces. They left Keren on the Agordat road, and fought with EPLF units at Barentu and on the road to Sudan. There are no accounts of them attacking civilians. More than one thousand soldiers died; mostly in action, but some on account of thirst. About 14,000 soldiers arrived in Sudan seeking asylum over the following few days. In total, the EPLF captured 82,000 prisoners of war and 44,000 dependents.

## **15. ARMED DECISION: THE NORTH, 1988-91**

In Tigray, the year 1988 was the most savage in the entire history of the war. Atrocities were committed on an unprecedented scale by both army and air force. Many of the government actions were designed to reduce the population to a state of famine, such as the deliberate killing of oxen, burning of grain stores, and bombing of REST food convoys. This came on the heels of a drought in the summer of 1987. However, the number of war- and drought-displaced people never approached the scale of 1983-5. The reason for the failure of drought and war to result in famine was largely because the government was restricted to the towns and main roads in a way that had not been the case previously, and military action in the countryside was shortlived. The restrictions on movement and trade that had been so devastating four years earlier were no longer so effectively enforced because of the reduced government presence.

After three years of cool relations, the TPLF and EPLF began to coordinate their military activities again in April 1988.

In January 1989, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was formed by the TPLF and EPDM. Two new organizations were added: the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM), which consisted largely of captured officers from the Ethiopian army, and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), which was formed from among the Oromo of the Wollo escarpment and Oromo prisoners of war. The formation of the OPDO reflected and deepened a split between the TPLF-EPRDF and the OLF.

In February 1989, the TPLF-EPRDF occupied all of Tigray save one small garrison. Six months later it struck southwards, right into Shewa. During 1990, the EPRDF concentrated on consolidating its gains, and in early 1991 launched three offensives in quick succession which finally destroyed the army and government of President Mengistu.

### **May 1988: The Army in Disarray**

Following the EPLF victory at the battle of Afabet, the TPLF quickly succeeded in overrunning many garrisons in Tigray, including Enda Selassie, Axum, Adwa, Adigrat, Wukro, and Maichew. Government troops also withdrew from other areas.

In Enda Selassie, the retreating troops destroyed the town's electricity generator, which had been built by public subscription of 500,000 Birr in 1985. At the town's health center, the staff were ordered to load all the equipment and medicines on to trucks, which were then set on fire.

Retreating government troops committed a number of atrocities against the civilian population, including the forcible evacuation and burning of Farda village, in Raya district, on May 14.

The TPLF advance was followed by a number of punitive air raids. The raid on Wukro which coincided with food distribution by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been described in chapter 11. Wukro was bombed on two other occasions. Other raids were carried out on Axum, Hausien, and other towns and villages. Korem was bombed on May 26, when people had gathered for a food distribution; there were 24 casualties reported.

### **The Bombing Campaign of June 1988**

On June 1, the government counter-offensive was launched. The first stage was a bombing campaign of unprecedented severity. Some of the bombing raids included:

- \*June 8 and 10: Seqota: four people killed or wounded, 71 houses destroyed, and the church of Endagabriel badly damaged.
- \*June 10: Amdo: five people killed, including a mother and child.
- \*June 12: Dejena: REST food convoy bombed twice.
- \*June 14 and 15: Samre: in two raids, 17 people killed and one third of the town destroyed.
- \*June 16: Ruba Kaza, Tsegede: no human casualties, but 24 domestic animals killed.
- \* June 18: Samre: casualties not reported.
- \*June 19: Enda Selassie: casualties not reported.
- \*June 19: Dande, Raya district: 29 killed, 74 houses destroyed.
- \*June 20: Abi Adi: four killed.
- \*June 20: Sheraro: two attacks, casualties not known.
- \*June 21: Enda Selassie and surrounding areas: casualties not known.
- \*June 22: Hausien was destroyed; an estimated 1,800 marketgoers were killed (see below).
- \*June 22: Samre and seven surrounding villages were badly damaged.
- \*June 22: Abi Adi attacked:  
"Two MiGs circled over the town and killed a pair of oxen that were ploughing a field just outside the town. The farmer escaped, but one woman was killed and four others

wounded."<sup>1</sup>

\*June 25: Enticho: 21 killed, seven buildings destroyed.

\*June 25: Mai Kenetal: three killed or wounded.

\*June 27: Atsbi: four killed, eight wounded, 109 houses burned, some animals also killed.

\*July 1: Adi Ramaz: casualties not known.

\*July 2: Mai Humer: casualties not known.

\* July 3: Adi Daro: casualties not known.

\*July 3: Sheraro: casualties not known.

\* July 3: Edaga Habriet: casualties not known.

\* July 8: Sheshebite: casualties not known.

Bombing attacks continued, albeit less regularly, in the following months. No air raids causing more than ten fatalities have been confirmed for the months July-December 1988, but many caused smaller numbers of deaths. An unknown number were killed when 98 houses were destroyed in Adi Hageray on August 19; eight were killed in Sheraro on December 12.

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<sup>1</sup> Woreda Tekla, farmer, trader and member of Abi Adi baito, interviewed by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, November 16, 1988.

## The Destruction of Hausien

The air raid on Hausien on Wednesday, June 22, 1988, was the most savage on record in Ethiopia during the three decades covered by this report. Hausien was a market town in north-eastern Tigray. The market attracted people from all parts of the province, and from as far away as Eritrea and Gondar. On a normal market day the town was packed with several thousand people, coming to trade in animals, grain, salt, coffee, and other commodities. Though Hausien was attacked eight times in mid-1988, the residents did not consider themselves to be at serious risk from air attack, because the area was not controlled by the TPLF, and most of the market-goers came from areas controlled by the government.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the practice in TPLF-controlled areas, the weekly Wednesday market therefore continued to be held during daylight hours.

The following account is reconstructed from the interviews conducted by two visitors to Tigray, Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.<sup>3</sup> Though the interviews were conducted in November 1988, the memory of the atrocity remained fresh in people's minds.

The bombing started in the late morning and continued until nightfall, following a carefully coordinated plan.

Blata Aragabi, a 57-year old farmer recounted the day:

It was Wednesday, and I was in the market square. At about 10 o'clock in the morning two helicopters came low overhead and circled for about an hour. An hour later they came back with two MiGs. They circled for a while and then bombed the market area, which was packed with people, and animals waiting to be sold. Apart from the market square itself, there was also a big animal market in the old school compound. The MiGs concentrated on the markets: no-one could have stayed alive in those areas. Meanwhile the two helicopters circled round trapping people as they tried to escape, cutting them down like leaves.<sup>4</sup>

[The bombing] started at 11 in the morning and went on until about 4 p.m. [at this point another man said it was later -- 5.30 p.m. -- and Blata agreed]<sup>5</sup>; almost until it got dark. Each time the MiGs and the helicopters had finished bombing they went away, and more kept

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that eight attacks warranted consideration as below average risk indicates the intensity of the bombing campaign. Only a small minority of the attacks are mentioned in this report.

<sup>3</sup> They are reproduced in Sarah Vaughan, "Extracts from a Report on a Visit to Tigray, October 18 - December 13, 1988," London, War on Want, and Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell," Observer Scotland, April 16, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Hausien is in a valley and there are only two roads out of the town, so it is easy to seal off with just two helicopters.

<sup>5</sup> Other informants said that the bombing finished at 6 p.m.

coming, two by two. I don't know how many times new planes came; because of all the dust it was dark and people were crying all around me. It seemed to be about every half hour or so that they would leave, and there would be a few minutes interval. People would come out of where they were trying to shelter and pick up the bodies thinking it was all over. Then the planes would return.

The bombers used high explosives and cluster bombs; the helicopters used machine guns and rockets. Survivors were particularly disturbed by the "burning liquid" which fell from the airplanes, presumably napalm or phosphorous. "A," a priest, aged 41, described the scene: It was so dark, the smoke hung over the town as if it were night. People were crying, confused, and hysterical. There was something that fell from the sky, like rubber, but it burned your flesh.... There was a lot of blood in the market place. So many animals were killed by being burned or poisoned. I don't know what the poison was but it was something that burned them. Those of us who were left wouldn't even eat the carcasses, or have them near our houses.

Blata again:

[In the market] most of the people and cattle were being burned by something that seemed like rubber. It burned as it dropped off the sky, and didn't cut like metal does.

A cluster bomb remained unexploded in the schoolyard after the raid and was photographed by Gerry McCann. It was unfortunately impossible to ascertain its origin.

Most people sheltered in houses, but the bombers turned on these too, using high explosives. When the day finished, there was scarcely a building left standing.

Iqar Gebre Giorgis, a woman beer-seller:

I was selling *sewa* (local beer) in my house. Market day is always a good day for selling beer, and there were about 20-30 people in the house. I had my 13 year old daughter Negisti with me. When the bombing started we thought the safest thing would be to stay inside. They only seemed to be bombing the immediate area of the market. Soon, though, they started on the houses, and mine was hit. The roof on my house was not the usual tin, but wooden with heavy beams. The whole roof caved in, and the walls came down too. There was one woman who escaped being buried. She was crying and digging at the rubble, and she managed to dig out a man who had been buried up to his neck. Eventually the two of them dug me out, though I was buried from noon until 3 o'clock. We were the only three who survived from my house. Negisti died along with everyone else. Some of them we managed to dig out that evening were still conscious, but they died soon after. They were all farmers or traders, some from Hausien, some from the villages around. I knew most of them quite well; I can remember about half of them by name.

Haile Geresadie, a poor farmer aged 18:

[The bombing] started in the morning, and I was at the animal market with my parents and grandparents. The animal market was full of people and donkeys, but we ran as quickly as we could into the nearest house. The house was bombed, and out of about 20 people there were only three of us [who] survived. We were on the side furthest from where the bomb landed. My parents and grandparents were all killed. [The others] were just farmers and traders who ran in from the animal market. Some of them are still buried

there.

I am always thinking about my parents, and often I just can't stop. Sometimes it is very difficult to get to sleep because it is always in my mind.

Zimam Hamenur, a woman spice trader:

All six of my family were in our house when it started, and we stayed there all day. After several hours a bomb came through the window and hit my daughter Fatima. Everyone else was unhurt but her right hand was cut off. Even then we stayed in the house -- we were too frightened to go out, and we just sat and cried round my daughter.

After nightfall when the bombers had left, people contemplated the aftermath. The true number killed in the bombing will never be known. At first the TPLF claimed that 360 were killed, and 500 buildings destroyed, including nine stores, 15 shops, and a mosque. Later estimates by the TPLF were higher: 600 fatalities, then 750, finally an "official" figure of 1,300. Africa Watch believes that these figures are all underestimates. Most of the people attending the market in Hausien came from other places, so there was no list of the people present on June 22, and many of the dead and injured were quickly removed to their home villages. Some bodies remained buried in the rubble of buildings months later. According to the testimonies of the people of Hausien, the number of fatalities was as high as 1,800 or even 2,000.

Blata again, in response to the question of how many were killed:

You can't count grains of sand. Even now, six months later,<sup>6</sup> we are still finding bodies. The last one was on Friday week: we found the head of a man and buried it. I heard from the [TPLF] fighters that thousands were killed, and a Dergue radio broadcast said that they had killed 3,000 bandits at Hausien.<sup>7</sup> We buried between 100 and 200 in the churchyard, but there were also lots of bits of bodies -- heads and limbs -- and people took many of the corpses back to be buried in their own villages. ... People came here from different parts of the country, from Eritrea, from Wollo, for the market day.

Priests are responsible for burying the Christian dead, and so have a better idea than most people about the extent of the carnage. From priests "A" and "B":

As soon as the MiGs went away everybody started to work together to dig the bodies out of the rubble and bury the dead. We buried as many as we could immediately that night. The task of digging through the stones went on for over a month... [Asked: how many bodies do you think are still buried?] We could estimate the number that were found, but have no idea about those who were not. They came from Sheraro and from all over the region. In every tabia [village cluster] or village you go to in this area you will hear that 40, 60 or 80 people were killed. Those from farther afield are harder to count.

An elderly man estimated that in the ruins of a hotel and a row of shops on one side of the

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<sup>6</sup> The interview was conducted on November 20, which was in fact just under five months after the bombing.

<sup>7</sup> No government broadcast concerning Hausien was published by the BBC Monitoring Service, so Africa Watch has been unable to check this.

market place, there were 250 bodies still remaining. Priest A gave his estimate: I think about 1,800 were killed in total, when you include those who were taken back to their villages. There were probably another 1,000 wounded, and some of them may have died later. We buried 150 just in this churchyard, but many were too badly cut up for burial, or are buried just where they died. There were many priests killed, from Eritrea, Tembien, Adwa, even from Wollo. Sometimes as many as 10,000 people gather here for market day. No one can count the destruction of cattle and grain and money and all the property that was buried.

Not all bodies could be buried, or even identified. Haile again: I couldn't bury [my family members] because they were burned away to ash. There was only one body that could be brought out [of the bombed house, in which about 17 people died], and even that woman was very badly burned.

Kesi Gebre Hiwet, a farmer and priest aged 54, came to Hausien the night after the attack. He spent the night digging people out of the ruins, and estimated the casualties at 2,000 dead and 800 wounded. We found so many corpses, we went on digging until morning. Whilst we were digging we found dismembered hands and feet, but couldn't find the bodies they came from. In the morning we started to bury the dead and brought the wounded away. Four of those whom we brought back to this tabia died after two days.

Medical facilities are poor and many of the wounded died later. Coping with the injuries was a major problem. Zimam Hamenur needed to find treatment for her 15 year old daughter Fatima, whose hand had been cut off:

The next morning we and some neighbors carried Fatima to Nebelet; I had heard previously from some fighters that there was a clinic there. The TPLF gave her infusions and bandaged her, and kept her there for a month. They wanted to take her to Tsai where there was better treatment, but on the way we heard that the enemy was coming so we decided to go to Wukro instead. We were quite frightened of going to a government town but to help my daughter's hand we had to take the risk.

I had to come back to Hausien to look after everyone else, and Fatima stayed in Wukro. We have a message to say she is better now, and we are expecting her back at any time. A while ago someone took my youngest daughter Neehma to see her sister in Wukro. She was very upset and cried whenever she thought about her sister. She used to wake up in the night crying.

There are reports that some injured victims were denied admission to government hospitals.

Many of the survivors were deeply traumatized by the bombing and will probably suffer from psychiatric disturbances such as post-traumatic stress disorder for the remainder of their lives. Tsehai Geredche, a woman aged about 30, lost her husband in the attack and spent many hours partly buried in the rubble. She was six months pregnant at the time. After I was dug out I was delirious for some time -- I have been told it was for about three weeks.

All I can remember is that I had a pain in my legs and that I was very frightened I had lost the baby. I think I was feverish. It wasn't for quite a few weeks I could take in what had happened, and think about what to do. The six other children were all safe, and also the baby; as you see, I gave birth two months ago. My husband was buried at the church.

The evidence of eye witnesses suggests that about 1,800 innocent men, women and children were deliberately killed in Hausien by aerial bombardment. Many others were severely injured and maimed, or psychologically traumatized. Apart from the scale of the carnage, what makes Hausien a particularly brutal atrocity is the systematic nature of the attack. It required careful planning to arrange for a succession of MiGs and helicopters to be present at Hausien, far away from the nearest airfield, in coordinated shifts throughout an entire day.

The motive for bombing Hausien can only have been terrorism against the people of Tigray, in part revenge for the military successes of the TPLF over the previous months, and in part "softening them up" for the government offensive. Hausien was probably selected as a target because, not being in a rebel-controlled area, the market still met during daylight, and there were no TPLF fighters in the area with anti-aircraft artillery to make an attack dangerous. It had no military significance.

### **The Summer 1988 Counter-Offensive**

The ground offensive started simultaneously with the bombing campaign, with the troops moving in to towns and villages a few days after air strikes. After some fierce fighting in north Wollo on the opening days of the attack, the TPLF stuck to its strategy of not holding territory, and allowed the government troops to reoccupy most of the towns on the main roads, and to pass through others. The army quickly moved from Woldiya to Korem through the Amba Alage pass.

On June 4, soldiers attacked Harako village nearby: five civilians were killed and three wounded, 77 houses were burned.<sup>8</sup> Another force moved south from Meqele to retake Maichew. On June 4-5, the soldiers burned six villages near Meqele (Adi Gera, Gobozena, Grarot, Rabea, Issala and Bahri), and on June 7, a further two villages were destroyed (Mai Wewe and Adi Gugwad). Casualties in these atrocities are not known. After re-occupying the main towns of southern Tigray and northern Wollo, the army then moved into central Tigray, occupying Abi Adi.

On June 24, a large number of infantry -- three brigades -- came through the town. There was a large battle at Hagerai Selam, and Dergi<sup>9</sup> was going to Adwa retaking the towns. No-one was killed, but they stole or destroyed a lot of property. A lot of goats were taken, and when they found oxen they would just cut off one leg, or cut out the liver without even

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<sup>8</sup> The following account owes much to information compiled by Barbara Hendrie.

<sup>9</sup> Tigrayans often refer to the Dergue in the first person singular.

killing the animals. They collected people's [farm] tools together and destroyed them. I lost 400 Birr and some of my furniture. From Abi Adi Dergi went on to Mai Kenetal.<sup>10</sup>

Government forces pushed north, taking Wukro, Adigrat, Adwa and Axum and then attacked western Tigray, taking Selekleka and Enda Selassie in early July. Another army column moved north from Gonder. However, the TPLF regrouped and finally engaged the army in Shire and north Gonder in July, and defeated it.

On a number of occasions, government troops killed civilians. The following incidents have been reliably reported:

\*June 28 and 29: Adwa: 50 people killed, including 19 bayoneted and thrown over a cliff.

\*June 29: Hagerai Selam and surrounding villages: 341 peasants killed.

\*July 5: Netsege: 30 farmers burned in their houses by soldiers, 60 houses destroyed.

\* July 5: Hagerai Selam: an unknown number killed.

\*July 6: Mai Mekden: ten killed, three wounded, 25 houses burned.

\*July 20: near Maichew: a young girl thrown to her death over a cliff.

\*July 31: Adi Nebriid: 15 people killed, one wounded.

\*August 2: Kelish Emni: 13 people killed, two wounded, three houses burned, seven tonnes of grain destroyed.

\*August 9: Bahra and Senkata: many people beaten, two recently married couples taken away, four women raped.

\*August 9: Adigrat: seven women raped.

\*August 16: Mai Mado: five people killed, one wounded, 22 houses burned, grain stores emptied and the grain mixed with soil, many animals killed.

\*August 29: Adi Hagerai: 23 killed, 193 injured; the dead included five children deliberately burned, and many of the injured were cut and mutilated with knives.

By the end of August, large-scale military action had ceased, but army patrols continued to be routinely brutal. In October, at Tselessi Bit and Selekleka, 20 people were killed in five separate incidents, including people locked in their houses and then burned alive.

The bombing and ground offensive caused an estimated 60,000 people to be displaced

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<sup>10</sup> Woreda Teka, farmer, trader and member of Abi Adi baito, interviewed by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, November 16, 1988.

from their homes by the end of July.

In the ground offensive, the army used mass columns of conscripts to attack TPLF positions. On at least one occasion, this amounted to mass slaughter. On July 7, an army column advanced north from its base at Dansha in north Gonder, straight into an ambush laid by the TPLF. The conscripts were in the vanguard: they were caught in a heavily-mined valley with TPLF fighters in the hills on both sides. Which ever way they turned they were cut down by gunfire or blown up by land mines. The TPLF claimed that nearly 3,000 were killed, wounded or captured. TPLF fighters later spoke of their distaste at the carnage. They said that in later engagements TPLF tactics changed, and concentrated on destroying the command unit in a military force.

The months from September to December 1988 were relatively quiet in Tigray, north Gonder and north Wollo, though intermittent bombing continued. For example, on September 8, Nebelet was bombed and several houses burned.

### **The Government Evacuation of Tigray, February-March 1989**

In January 1989, the TPLF began to take the offensive, at first in north Gonder, and then in western Tigray. In a series of battles between February 15 and 20, a joint TPLF-EPLF force captured Selekleka and then Enda Selassie. The fronts claimed that 26,000 soldiers were put out of action, and it was certainly the government's worst defeat since Afabet. The army evacuated Humera (on the Sudan border) and Adigrat, and on February 27-28, the provincial capital, Meqele, was abandoned, leaving the government with only an outpost at Maichew. In effect, all of Tigray was under TPLF control.

The TPLF was stunned by the unexpected evacuation of Meqele and waited for three days before entering the town.

In each of the three towns of Enda Selassie, Adigrat and Meqele, the army and government officials caused widespread destruction before they left. In Meqele, on February 26, two army tanks shelled the electricity generating station, destroying completely five huge generators, each capable of producing one megawatt of power. Bedding and instruments from the hospitals were systematically looted by soldiers. Residents of the town looted many furnishings.

At 11 a.m. on March 21, airplanes bombed the generator at Enda Selassie, inflicting some damage. One woman was killed. Other raids included:

\* March 26: Humera: casualties not known.

\* March 26: Adwa: casualties not known.

\*March 27: Adwa: casualties not known; a rare example of a night attack.

\* March 30: Axum: three killed.

## **Punitive Patrols in the Tcheffa Valley**

The success of the TPLF (now part of the newly-formed EPRDF) in taking control of all of Tigray was matched by less spectacular but equally significant progress in its penetration into more southerly areas of Wollo. This began to ignite disputes that had lain dormant, because until it became clear that the government was losing control, subjugated people had not dared to challenge the government's authority. The army responded to these local disputes and threats in a punitive manner. An example of this comes from the Tcheffa Valley in southern Wollo and northern Shewa.

The Tcheffa valley is a grazing area for Oromo and Afar pastoralists and drought refuge for all groups, including Amhara farmers from the highlands. In 1986, during villagization, Amhara highlanders were settled in the valley and piedmont. The new villagers complained of mosquitoes and that they were being settled in a grazing area, that was not appropriate for farming, and that this would upset the pastoralists. The government paid no attention.

During 1987/88 there was drought in the lowlands, and the Afars penetrated to the valley, leading to some armed clashes. The situation deteriorated during 1989, due to continued drought in the eastern lowlands and the presence of the EPRDF around Dessie and the perception that the government was losing control.

The Amhara farmers wanted to return to the highlands, the Oromo natives became increasingly militant, but a series of negotiations came to nothing. In March 1989, a party of armed Oromo horsemen came to Fursi sub-district. They clashed with the Amhara farmers (who had a militia), and eight were killed (on both sides). A rumor spread throughout northern Shewa that "the Oromo are rising in rebellion." The army was sent to pacify the area, arriving a few days later. The army mission became a punitive expedition. The soldiers went and hunted and killed as many Oromo as they could find. Only Oromo were killed.

Under the guise of preventing EPRDF activity and keeping the peace, the army occupied Oromo villages. They controlled all Oromo movements and demanded food from the villagers. There were numerous small incidents of killings and woundings of Oromo civilians in marketplaces, at wells and on roads. This continued until October 1989. Over 200 Oromo are estimated to have been killed.

## **The EPRDF Southern Offensive, Late 1989**

In late August 1989, as the government prepared an offensive into southern Tigray, the EPRDF struck first. By September 8, EPRDF forces had captured Maichew and Korem and were advancing along the main highway in Wollo. In October, Woldiya was captured and Dessie was almost taken, and in November, the advance guard of the EPRDF penetrated into northern Shewa. In late December, EPRDF forces captured the town of Debre Tabor in southern Gonder, to be driven out by the army a month later.

There were, as always, numerous bombing attacks on sites throughout northern Wollo and Tigray. The following have been reliably reported:

- \*September 9: Chercher, Tigray: the marketplace was bombed and strafed; 148 people were killed and about 100 wounded.
- \*September 9: Goby, Wollo: one killed.
- \*September 10: Goby, Wollo: 21 killed, 100 wounded (market day).
- \*September 12: Gerarsa, Tigray: four wounded.
- \*September 19: Raya, Wollo: no fatalities reported.
- \*September 20: Kulmelsk, Tigray: three killed.
- \*September 22: Axum, Tigray: two killed, eight wounded.
- \*September 25: Tekezze Bridge, Tigray: three killed.
- \*October 15-November 2: Kobo, Wollo: four attacks. Casualties not known, but the clinic was strafed by helicopter gunships.
- \*October 27 and 29: Meqele, Tigray: 31 killed in the first attack.
- \*November 5: Adwa, Tigray: no fatalities reported, two trucks destroyed.
- \*November 15: Zalembsa, Tigray: 14 wounded.
- \*November 21: Sheraro, Tigray: 31 killed, 60 wounded.
- \*December 27: Adwa, Tigray: four wounded.
- \*January 1, 1990: Adi Nebried, Tigray: two wounded in a church.

The attacks on Meqele town deserve special mention. They were significant because they

showed that the government was prepared to attack a major Ethiopian city, a provincial headquarters and former imperial capital (1871-89). The city was more than a hundred miles behind the front line and had no military importance. It was also an unusual attack because news of it filtered back to Addis Ababa and caused widespread, though muted, public outrage.

The Meqele attack caused many residents to leave the town. The hospital was evacuated during daylight hours, with all patients returning at nightfall for medical attention. Even at night, no electric light was used for fear of attracting the attention of overflying high-altitude Antonov planes, which were occasionally used for bombing at night.

For the first time, there was also widespread bombing in Gonder and central Wollo. Some of the raids included:

\*November 13: Kara Mishig, Shewa: one killed, 25 houses destroyed.

\*November 15: Tenta, Wollo: no fatalities reported.

\*November 16: Degollo, Wollo-Shewa border: no fatalities reported.

\*November 16 and 17: Woldiya, Wollo: no fatalities reported.

\*January 4, 1990: Tenta, Wollo: two killed.

\*January 10: Wurgessa, Wollo: one woman killed, five houses destroyed.

\*January 13: Nefas Maucha, Gonder: 23 killed.

\*January 23: Deha, Wollo: seven killed.

\*January 25: near Debre Tabor, Gonder: 15 killed while sheltering in a storm drain under a road.

\*January 28: Isitayoh, Wollo: 40 killed (most of them in the church of Kidane Mehrat).

\*January 29: Wegel Tena, Wollo: two killed.

The army was mostly in retreat during these months. There was widespread looting in several towns, including Kobo and Dessie, but fewer reported incidents of attacks on civilians. One incident occurred on September 17, at Gobyeh in north Wollo, when at least one civilian was killed in an army rocket attack, which destroyed four houses. The same day at Zaremna, nearby, two civilians were killed by soldiers.

The EPRDF treatment of the civilian population during this offensive appears to have been remarkably good. EPRDF fighters and cadres were reported as entering villages and telling the inhabitants that they would not be harmed and their possessions would be respected. They took inventories of commercial and private stores in the towns they occupied to prevent looting.

No incidents of violence against civilians have been reliably reported.

### **Relative Quiet: February 1990-February 1991**

In the twelve months from February 1990, there were no major offensives by the EPRDF. There was more-or-less continual skirmishing in north Shewa and southern Gonder, but the only major battle was a failed assault by the army at Alem Ketena in June. It was, overall, a remarkably quiet year in terms of abuses against civilians by the army. This is probably because the army was now fighting in mainly Amhara areas, and the officer class of the army, which is dominated by the Amhara, was less willing to sanction abuses against other Amhara than against Tigrayans, Oromos, Somalis and others. The pattern of abuses is more akin the result of a breakdown in morale and discipline than to deliberately-planned mass killings. However, a number of incidents warrant mention.

In March 1990, the army first evacuated and then re-entered Bahir Dar after a battle with the EPRDF. On re-entering the town, soldiers killed an estimated 50 civilians. According to some accounts, the soldiers were drunk and ill-disciplined.

Between March 15 and April 7, in Dessie town, soldiers killed 16 civilians, including two children. On at least some of the occasions, the soldiers were off-duty and had been drinking.

Another incident occurred in June. Members of the army garrison at Melkawarer in the Awash valley of northern Shewa became involved in a dispute with the local Afar inhabitants. The origin of the dispute is unknown but is rumored to be related to chat<sup>11</sup> chewing. Over 20 Afar civilians were killed in the fight that resulted.

If these and other similar incidents could be described as occurring without official sanction, the same cannot be said of the continuing air raids against civilian targets. Some of the raids included:

\*March 28, 1990: Wire Ilu, Wollo: grain stockpile burned.

\*May 2: Rama, Wollo-Shewa border: two killed.

\*May 2: Alem Ketena, Shewa: four killed.

\*May: Merhabete, Shewa: casualties not known.

\*May 5 and 9: Kolesh and Ambat, Shewa: six killed.

\*May 11: Kinche, Shewa: 21 killed.

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<sup>11</sup> Chat is a mildly narcotic leaf widely grown and chewed in Ethiopia.

- \*June 10: Ticha, Shewa: 23 killed.
- \*June 23: Adi Abun, near Adwa, Tigray: one wounded.
- \*August 1: Zinjero, Wollo: no casualties reported.
- \*October 5 and 14: Meki, Wollo: five killed, six wounded.
- \*October 19: Mehal Meda, Shewa: four killed, five wounded.
- \*October 22: Temsa, Wollo: a family of eight killed, ten others wounded.
- \*November 7: Woldiya, Wollo: one killed, one wounded, and relief offices burned.
- \*November 7: Kul Mesk, Wollo: seven killed, eight wounded.
- \*November 27 and 29: REST stores near Sudan border bombed and strafed: 3,000-4,000 metric tonnes of grain burned.
- \*December 27: Woldiya, Wollo: nine killed, close to a relief store.
- \*February 13, 1991: Debre Tabor, Gonder: two killed, ten wounded.

### **Operation Teodros**

On February 23, 1991, the year of relative quiet came to an end, when the EPRDF announced "Operation Teodros," aimed at destroying the army in Gonder and Gojjam. The announcement of the launch of the offensive, its aims and timetable, showed an increased confidence by the EPRDF. The EPRDF clandestine radio also instructed the citizens of the towns in Gonder and Gojjam to guard the civilian infrastructure of their towns to prevent looting, such as had occurred in Meqele before its capture.

One factor that assisted the EPRDF offensive was the growing alienation of the local people from the government. This was related to the heavy conscription campaigns of the previous year, and the disarming of the local militia in western Gojjam following a revolt in March-April 1990, coinciding with the abandonment of the villagization program.

Within a fortnight Operation Teodros achieved its aims. The offensive was so swift that there was little chance for the army to undertake reprisals against civilians, though two incidents deserve mention.

One incident was the systematic execution of prisoners in Gonder town during the three days before its capture. Most of those killed were Tigrayans detained in the town's prison for suspected sympathies with the EPRDF, and the executions appear to be an act of pre-emptive

vengeance. Jenny Hammond, a British writer who visited the town the day after its capture by the EPRDF, spoke to townspeople who reported that about 120 detainees had been killed, and the executions of 100 or so more had been scheduled for the day of the EPRDF takeover. Later, Ms Hammond met Dawit Berhane, a Tigrayan merchant who had spent three years in prison on charges relating to alleged irregularities in obtaining a truck license. Dawit related how 19 of his cellmates (17 of them Tigrayans) were taken out and executed the day before the town fell. Dawit himself was scheduled for execution, but the official authorization mistakenly had his father's name made out as "Berhe", so he was sent back to his cell for another day while this administrative error was rectified. Due to be executed at 6:00 p.m., he was released by the EPRDF at 4:00 p.m. Dawit believed that 300 detainees had been executed in the final days, and said that during the previous three years over 3,400 people had been executed in the prison, 90 per cent of them Tigrayans.

A second incident was the long-distance shelling of Dejen town in Gojjam on April 16, after its capture, in which six people were killed.

The EPRDF advance brought it into conflict with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which had an armed presence in western Gojjam (see chapter 18).

In the aftermath of the offensive, the EPRP and the government made a number of allegations about killings, detentions and looting by EPRDF forces. One incident was the killing of three senior government officials, including a security chief and a military commander, by peasants.<sup>12</sup> Reports indicate that the officials and their armed escort opened fire on the peasants, and were killed in the ensuing battle. Other alleged incidents include the use of lethal force against anti-EPRDF demonstrators and the detention of many political opponents. The facts surrounding these cases have not yet come to light.

Following the capture of the towns in Gonder and Gojjam, traders from Tigray and Eritrea immediately entered them to buy grain for transport north -- grain was cheap in these areas and expensive in Tigray and Eritrea. According to one visitor, "deals were struck before the corpses were buried." The EPRDF forces also sealed government grain stores. These actions caused panic among some local people, who feared that their grain was being confiscated.

In late March, as the government attempted to counter-attack into Gojjam, the EPRDF launched Operation Dula Billisuma Welkita (Oromo for "Equality and Freedom Campaign") into Wollega. This captured Nekempte, headquarters of Wollega, on April 1, and then advanced southwards and eastwards, towards Addis Ababa. Following the battle for Nekempte, retreating government troops looted several parts of the town. By this time, the army was on the verge of complete rout, and was unable to regroup for any significant counter-offensive. By the same

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<sup>12</sup> See: "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," *News from Africa Watch*, April 30, 1991.

token, it was unable to engage in systematic violence against civilians.

Shortly afterwards, the EPRDF occupied Fincha'a, which is the site of the hydro-electric power station which serves Addis Ababa. The power was not cut off, though the EPRDF contacted the Addis Ababa municipality by telephone to ask for senior engineers to come to carry out urgent maintenance tasks.

On April 28-30, the air force bombarded Fincha'a town and hydro-electric station, and one civilian was killed in the town and one worker wounded at the power station.

### **The Final Days of the Mengistu Regime**

In what can only have been an act of deliberate spite against the Tigrayan people, on May 8, the air force carried out a raid on Sheraro in Tigray. Sheraro had had no military significance for more than four years, but retained its symbolic significance as the first town occupied by the TPLF, and its "home". According to reports, 15 civilians were killed and 90 wounded.

One week later, the EPRDF launched "Operation Walleign"<sup>13</sup> on the Wollo front. Dessie and Kombolcha were captured the following day. In the battle for Kombolcha, an ammunition dump was blown up, causing extensive damage to the town and an unknown number of civilian casualties. The EPRDF claims that the dump was deliberately ignited by retreating soldiers, but this has not been confirmed. By May 20, the government lines throughout southern Wollo and into northern Shewa had been overrun. This coincided with a government defeat at Ambo, west of Addis Ababa, and the city was effectively undefended on two sides. President Mengistu fled the country the next morning.

President Mengistu had always boasted that he would fight to the last. Publicly, he compared himself to the Emperor Teodros, who committed suicide rather than surrender to his enemies. Mengistu's reputation for intransigence and courage was the last asset the government had; loyal soldiers respected him and were prepared to continue fighting. When Mengistu fled, the keystone that had held together the remaining elements of the government and army was gone. The army -- 450,000 strong just months before -- disintegrated. Tens of thousands of soldiers abandoned their posts and flocked into Addis Ababa, selling their weapons or using them to intimidate people into giving them food and drink. Looting became common. Other soldiers took off their uniforms and went home. Some senior officers in the army and air force fled abroad, mostly to Djibouti. Only a few elite units inside Addis Ababa maintained loyalty to the acting head of state, General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan, but a mutiny broke out on May 27 and there was fighting around the Presidential Palace.

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<sup>13</sup> It was named after the Oromo student leader mentioned in chapter 4.

The final week of the war consisted in a slow EPRDF advance on Addis Ababa itself. EPRDF forces surrounded the city, capturing the crucial air force base at Debre Zeit after a small battle.

During May, western diplomats and the UN repeatedly urged the EPRDF to refrain from attacking Addis Ababa before the US-convened peace talks opened in London. They expressed fears for the safety of the civilian population should there be fighting in the city itself.

The final assault on Addis Ababa took place on the morning of May 28. Almost all of the army had melted away, and resistance to the EPRDF advance was light. There were pockets of street fighting throughout the city, but the only sustained exchange of fire occurred at the Presidential Palace, where an ammunition dump also exploded. According to the ICRC, there were about 200 deaths, both combatants and civilians. Those who died were either caught in the crossfire or killed by the explosion; there is no indication that either side targeted civilians.

It later transpired that a second explosion had also occurred at an ammunition dump at Shogole the same morning. Eye witnesses said that local residents began looting the arms depot, whereupon a fighter from the EPRDF fired a rocket-propelled grenade, which caused a huge explosion. An estimated 500 people died. When a German pastor spoke to a camera crew from a news network, claiming that the explosion had been caused deliberately, his words were cut by an EPRDF censor. However, as one journalist commented, "even if a rocket was fired, no one could have imagined the appalling consequences."<sup>14</sup>

Before dawn on June 4, another explosion occurred at an ammunition dump in the Nefas Silk area of the city. Approximately one hundred people were killed and 130 wounded, including several firefighters and members of the EPRDF who were trying to assist victims. There was extensive damage to property. The EPRDF claimed that it was the work of saboteurs loyal to the previous government, and said that they had detained several suspects, one of whom was a former army officer caught while trying to launch a rocket-propelled grenade at a fuel truck. This account was confirmed by at least one western diplomat.<sup>15</sup>

On entering Addis Ababa, the EPRDF prohibited all forms of public demonstration. However, protests against the EPRDF occupation soon took place. EPRDF fighters responded by firing, at first over the heads of the demonstrators, and then into the crowds. Eight were killed on May 29 and two more on May 30, and a total of 388 were injured, according to Red Cross estimates. The EPRDF claimed that members of the crowds were armed, and pointed to an

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Dowden, *The Independent*, London, June 2, 1991. At previous explosions at ammunition dumps, such as Asmara airport in January and Kombolcha in May 1991, there had been a series of smaller explosions and fires, allowing most people to escape.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Parmelee, *Washington Post*, June 6, 1991.

incident in which two EPRDF fighters were killed by an assassin at the university campus. Some protestors were armed with weapons, including hand grenades, and the crowds had pelted the fighters (who had neither riot shields nor training in crowd control) with stones, and on at least one occasion opened fire. One journalist commented: "Even street kids have automatic weapons ... It's as if the millions of dollars of Soviet military aid have all arrived in the capital at once."<sup>16</sup> After these killings, and after the explosion of June 4 had shown that members of the previous regime were still active in armed opposition, the protests disappeared.

Journalists also reported the summary execution of two members of the security service of the former government by members of an EPLF unit which had participated in the assault on the city.

The occupation of Addis Ababa cost between 600 and 800 civilian lives, most of them in the explosions at the ammunition dumps. Much of the violence was the work of retreating government soldiers, and it is likely that the EPRDF occupation of the city prevented further lawlessness and loss of life.

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<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Parmelee, Washington Post, May 31, 1991.

## **16. THE POLITICS OF RELIEF 1989-91**

In the summer of 1989, there was widespread drought in Eritrea, Tigray and parts of Wollo, leading to fears of a repeat of the famine of 1983-5. Those fears were intensified when the summer rains of 1990 were also poor, and there was a near-complete harvest failure throughout Eritrea. Fortunately, to date, these fears have not been realized. There has been considerable hardship throughout Eritrea, Tigray and northern Wollo, and pockets of suffering amounting to severe famine in one or two places in Eritrea. But there has been neither the mass migration to relief shelters and refugee camps that were characteristic of the 1983-5 famine, nor mass starvation.

This chapter looks at the causes of the famines in Tigray/north Wollo and Eritrea respectively, and also at food shortages elsewhere in the country.

### **Scarcity in Tigray and North Wollo**

In both 1989 and 1990, the harvests in Tigray and north Wollo were very poor. Rainfall was as low as in 1984, and production was further hampered by lack of oxen -- a legacy from the 1983-5 famine, the presence of land mines, and the inadequate marketing system, with many rural markets still held at night for fear of bombing. Nevertheless, according to an independent crop assessment mission, in both years there were surpluses in Shire and Raya, of about 50,000 metric tonnes (MT) and 100,000 MT respectively. Surpluses in north Gonder were not assessed, but were certainly substantial.

Throughout the period 1989-91, all of Tigray and north Wollo was controlled by the EPRDF, which meant that the famine relief could not be distributed by the government RRC or voluntary agencies working alongside it. Food relief could only be brought in with the consent of the government, or by working cross-border from Sudan.

Because the war had a direct impact on all famine relief operations for the first time, the link between war and famine began to be identified by the western media. In the case of Tigray and north Wollo, this is ironic: from 1989 onwards, this area was very largely at peace. The specific effects of the war were confined to sporadic air raids, shortages of consumer goods, and obstacles to the delivery of relief. These burdens were much less onerous to rural people than the military offensives and government restrictions and exactions of the early 1980s.

In the areas where fighting occurred, it now consisted largely of conventional battles between the opposing armies of the government and EPRDF. Several factors exacerbated food shortages:

\*In the immediate vicinity of the front line there was disruption to villagers' lives by the fighting itself.

\*The army garrisons imposed a considerable burden on local resources, usually requisitioning food, and often demanding that local women come and prepare it for them (see chapter 17 for examples from northern Shewa).

\*In the Oromo areas of the Wollo-Shewa escarpment and Tcheffa Valley, army patrols and checkpoints imposed tight restrictions on movement and trade.

\*Surveillance of migrants and trades was generally stepped up, and more local militia were mobilized to perform these routine functions.

However, with a few isolated exceptions, the level of harassment and restriction never approached that imposed in Tigray and its borderlands in the early and mid-1980s. This was probably because the army was operating in mainly Amhara areas, and persisted in seeing the conflict in ethnic terms -- as against Tigrayans. The army was also unable to penetrate into EPRDF-controlled areas to inflict damage, and from February 1990 onwards, there was little fighting on the central Wollo front on account of the international relief operation being mounted there. The constant skirmishing occurred in southern Gonder and northern Shewa, both areas in which food supplies were better. Consequently, irrespective of levels of relief assistance, the famine of 1989-91 was always going to be much less severe than that of 1983-5.

#### *EPRDF Policies*

From 1989, the EPRDF consistently implemented a policy of trade liberalization, and the intra-regional movement of grain was not hindered. Migrant labor was also possible, though in Tigray the TPLF tended to discourage it and preferred people to remain in their villages to engage in programs of environmental protection such as afforestation and terracing.

The high degree of internal security and ease of mobility within Tigray and the adjoining areas led to the functioning of the economy in a way that approximated "normal" for the first time for 15 years. Together with the absence of the government counter-insurgency strategies, this was undoubtedly the main factor in preventing the severe droughts leading to severe famine.

#### *Relief Programs*

A relatively efficient relief program also contributed to the lack of famine. The program consisted of three elements: "internal purchase," cross-border food deliveries, and the Joint Relief Program (JRP) of the Ethiopian churches. The government tried to obstruct all three, but had

neither the determination nor means to succeed.

Internal peace made possible the large scale purchase of local surpluses for redistribution as famine relief. This program, known as "internal purchase," proved to be the quickest and cheapest way of providing relief. Although the actual prices paid for the grain were relatively high, this was offset by cheaper transport costs.

Throughout 1989 and most of 1990, the cross-border relief program from Sudan was the single largest contributor of relief food to Tigray. The transport was slow and expensive, because of the long distances, the rough roads, and the fact that convoys could move only at night because of aerial bombardment. There were numerous attacks on relief trucks.

The JRP arose out of the recognition in late 1989 that the heavily drought-stricken areas of the country were under the control of the EPRDF. The plan was for the Ethiopian churches to organize transport and distribution of relief to Tigray. Initially, the relief was to be provided through government-held areas of Eritrea, but after the capture of Massawa this changed to the "southern line" through Wollo.

Initially, there was much scepticism about whether the JRP would actually work. Those doubts seemed to be confirmed when the program became mired in a set of disputes:

\*The government and churches claimed that the roads needed repair; REST and the EPRDF said that their vehicles had no difficulty passing them.

\*The government insisted that the JRP vehicles should not leave the main north-south road; REST argued that the most needy areas were away from the road, and that it would be unnecessarily disruptive for people to migrate to the roadside to receive relief.

\*The government and churches insisted on doing their own registration of beneficiaries, and required all family members to be present at the registration; REST replied that it already had lists of needy people, and requiring all family members to come for registration required a three to four day walk for many, and would create chaos. (After such chaos did indeed ensue, and several people were injured, the requirement that all family members be present was dropped.)

\*The JRP wanted to start distributions in north Wollo first, arguing that this was the area hardest to reach by the cross-border route; REST wanted distributions to start simultaneously in Tigray.

The first trucks moved north from Dessie and crossed into EPRDF-held territory on March 20, 1990, only one week behind schedule. However, during the following six weeks, progress was slow -- only four per cent of the target amount was distributed, all in Wollo. In May, one third of the target was met, including distributions in Tigray, and from then until the following March, distributions averaged over 80% of target. The program became a success, and matched the cross-border operation.

Despite the government's recognition that rebel-held areas actually existed and needed relief, and the fact that the size of the JRP operation was calculated on the assumption that REST would provide cross-border relief to much of the population, the government continued to bomb cross-border relief routes. On January 29, 1990, a REST food convoy was bombed in western Tigray; three trucks were burned, one local herder killed, and two REST employees wounded. On November 27 and 29, 1990, REST food stores near the Sudan border were bombed and more than 3,000 tons of relief food destroyed.

A food monitor noted the resulting ironies:

It was interesting to compare this [the JRP's] very impressive fleet of white Mercedes trucks with the REST fleet of trucks. The REST fleet is also made up mainly of Mercedes trucks, but due to the Ethiopian government's propensity for bombing relief convoys coming across the Sudanese border, these have all been painted a camouflage green colour. In Tigray the JRP fleet is only allowed to travel during the day. The REST trucks, on the other hand, can only move during the hours of darkness ... during the daytime they have to remain hidden under trees or buried in trenches and covered with canvases.

The success of the JRP owed little to the government, which continued to harass the program at frequent intervals. It did not allow food monitors to travel with the JRP convoys -- all the monitoring was done by aid agency staff who had come in on the cross-border route. The requirement that all beneficiaries travel to the roadside was feared by many people as the prelude to a government offensive up the main road. The government even bombed some of the towns where JRP distributions were taking place. On November 7, Woldiya in north Wollo was attacked. One woman was killed and one girl injured, and the offices of the Ethiopian Relief Organization (the counterpart to REST working alongside the EPRDF in Wollo and Gonder) were burned. On December 27, Woldiya was bombed again. Both these attacks disrupted relief distributions.

However, on the whole the JRP had the additional benefit of bringing tranquillity to the people in its vicinity. Neither side launched significant military action on the Dessie front for almost one year after the program started. The bombing attacks along the JRP route, though prominent because well-documented, were much less frequent than elsewhere. This allowed people to travel and work in the day-time and markets to meet during the daylight. A semblance of normality returned to the towns along the main road.

Problems with the JRP intensified in February 1991, when the EPRDF launched Operation Teodros. Though the fighting was confined to Gonder and Gojjam, and so did not affect the environs of the JRP route, government interference intensified. On March 12/13, the government launched an attack on the EPRDF-held town of Wichale, the first rebel garrison on the JRP route. This held up a food convoy. On March 18/19, the EPRDF counter-attacked on the west side of Dessie. Though this did not endanger the JRP route, the government decided to halt

the JRP at once. (In fact, the timing of the decision suggests that it was made before the EPRDF attack was launched.) On March 20, the EPRDF issued an ultimatum that the program should restart within one week. Three days later the government complied.

In early April, the government detained seven drivers working for the JRP. This may have been related to an attempt to requisition their vehicles for military use. This immediately led to other drivers, who were in EPRDF-held areas, refusing to return to Dessie for fear of arrest. Fearing the halting of the program, the EPRDF also made the "release" of trucks conditional on the arrival of new relief convoys -- it was attempting to hold some vehicles as "collateral" to ensure the continuation of the program, but this served to slow down the rate of delivery.

These disruptions meant that by May the JRP was delivering relief to only one quarter of its intended beneficiaries.

On May 16, it was the turn of the EPRDF to halt the program, as it launched its Operation Walleign to capture Dessie and Kombolcha. The EPRDF claimed that the government had already halted the deliveries before the attack was launched, but the sequence of events is not clear. The final days of Mengistu and the following week of General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan's rule saw no further deliveries.

Though it takes up most of this account, the story of the relief programs of 1989-91 is in fact relatively marginal to the story of how rural people succeeded in surviving the drought of 1989-91. The main components of that survival were the absence of ground war and the absence of restrictions on trade and movement, which enabled the economy to function in an integrated manner. The absence of outright famine, despite more severe drought than in 1983-5, serves as witness to the fact that drought need not create famine, and that the reason why the appalling famine developed in 1983-5 was not because of the weather.

### **Famine in Eritrea**

In 1989, most of Eritrea was controlled by the EPLF, including, from February 1990 onwards, the port of Massawa. This created a mirror-image of the situation in Tigray: relief for the government-held enclave around Asmara could only be brought in either with the agreement of the EPLF, or by using an expensive airlift.

Famine in Eritrea during 1989-91 contrasted with Tigray. The siege of Asmara led to famine conditions developing in the city of Asmara and the surrounding enclave. Throughout the 1980s, Eritrea had always been more dependent on food aid than Tigray and north Wollo. The substantial cutback in relief aid that coincided with the siege was therefore more serious. In addition, restrictions on the commercial movement of food and requisitioning by the army garrison played an important role in creating famine in the enclave. Government tactics of

enforcing a food blockade are familiar from the first siege of Asmara, in 1975. Finally, western Eritrea is economically integrated into eastern Sudan, and the unprecedented shortages and famine in eastern Sudan from mid-1990 onwards aggravated the problems caused by drought and war. Therefore the famine in Eritrea during 1989-91 has proved to be more severe than during 1983-5.

### *Famine in the Asmara Enclave*

Eritrea is, even in normal times, a food deficit area. For the city of Asmara and the surrounding area, there is an even greater relative food deficit. The 1.1 million civilians in Asmara and the surrounding area which was the government-controlled enclave would normally consume about 15,000 tons of food per month. Usually, the great majority of that is imported, either by traders operating in western Tigray and Gonder, or by government marketing organizations. Since the mid-1980s, regular delivery of food relief has also been important.

The disruption of all the supplies of food simultaneously in February 1990 brought Asmara very quickly to the brink of famine.

Before the fall of Massawa, grain was cheap in Asmara. Shortly after the siege began, the price of grain in Asmara rose more than ten times to over 700 Birr per quintal. This was far more than the great majority of the residents could afford, and made famine inevitable. Normally, the lure of profits would have brought grain traders to Asmara, paying bribes to cross the battle lines. In the first eight months of the siege, this hardly happened. The army prevented large quantities of commercial grain reaching the city. There were instances in which grain was confiscated by soldiers when people tried to bring it in. Residents who were caught with grain traded from EPLF-controlled areas were regularly detained and punished. There were even instances in which people travelling by air from Addis Ababa to Asmara, and bringing food with them for their relatives, had this food unloaded from the airplane at Addis airport.

The policy was partly dictated by the increased bribes that soldiers could charge because of the grain scarcity, and partly by a deliberate plan to make the civilian population of the town suffer.

From February until October, the army's ban on free movement of commercial food into the enclave, together with a ban on free movement of people out of the enclave, was the single most important reason for the hunger affecting the civilian population.

In October, in recognition of the severity of the food situation, the administration lifted the ban on free movement of food. The normal checks on traders continued, and bribery remained rife, but punishments were no longer meted out to those found in possession of food from outside the enclave. General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan, the Overall Administrator, justified this change in policy. He told a meeting of Asmara residents that government relief supplies had in the past ended up feeding the rebels; now it was the turn of the rebels to feed the government. This pragmatic policy did not end the hunger, and nor did it reduce the price of grain by very much, but it prevented the famine in the city from developing into mass starvation, as had appeared inevitable.

One factor that contributed to the famine in Asmara was increasing unemployment. The siege led to many enterprises being cut off from their suppliers or their markets, so they were forced to lay off workers. Some government-owned industries were also closed down, dismantled and relocated in Addis Ababa.

### *Requisitioning by the Army*

The army in Asmara and the surrounding areas often requisitioned food from the residents. This was probably the second most important cause of the scarcity. While some of the requisitioning was looting by undisciplined soldiers, much of it was certainly based on directives from the military command. The wheat militias ceased to be paid their ration and instead turned to looting.

The requisitioning of food and other commodities and removal of people was based on powers given to the military authorities under the State of Emergency legislation.

The impact of the army's requisitioning is conveyed in a letter from a civilian in Asmara:  
March 15th 1991

Dear [brother],

Asmara has become a living hell and I can't see how we are going to survive for long.

The food consignment from Massawa is unreliable and inadequate.<sup>1</sup> Worse still is what little we get from the UN and the churches is stolen by the town boys [i.e. government soldiers] at night. In the Edaga Hamus area many families including mine have been broken into by hungry soldiers. This happened to us twice during February when three armed soldiers broke into our house and took away our two week ration of flour, sugar and oil. Five of my friends in other parts of Asmara told me of similar incidents. This is happening all the time.

My brother, we are facing a slow, terrible, undignified death! Asmara is now dying ... Sadly, Ker [Keren] is also in a state worse than Asmara ...

Apart from the instances mentioned in this letter, some incidents of requisitioning included:

\*The confiscation of half of the food stocks of an orphanage in Decamhare;

\*The confiscation of large numbers of cattle and other livestock in at least four villages in Akele Guzai district and the area surrounding Decamhare;

\*The people of Senhit were required to feed the garrison there;

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<sup>1</sup> The shipments were in fact arriving regularly but the government did not inform the citizens of Asmara of that fact.

\*In the area of Chendek (near Keren) there was an order prohibiting people from picking beles, a cactus fruit eaten as a famine food in times of shortage, so that it was reserved for the soldiers;

\*In the Adi Teclezan area, north of Asmara, the residents of ten villages were moved by military order and all their property and food stocks were then requisitioned. A similar instance occurred at Adi Beyane.

Fortunately, the supply of food and money to the garrison (which numbered about 120,000 men) never broke down entirely, so that the army did not have to depend completely on requisitioned food.

The military also requisitioned other scarce items, such as fuel and medicine. There were three military hospitals in the city, with 6,000 beds. Because these were too overcrowded, the army also requisitioned half of the 820 beds in the civilian general hospital, and with them, half of the time and equipment of the hospital staff. Two civilian doctors and several nurses and auxiliaries were also required to serve in the military hospitals. Much of the supply of drugs to the hospital was often bought by the military; it was paid for, but the hospital could not obtain replacement supplies.

#### *Food Relief through Massawa*

When the EPLF captured Massawa on 8-11 February, 1990, the port was closed to relief shipments. A month later, the EPLF announced that the port had been repaired and appealed to the UN to supply relief. The Ethiopian government shunned this offer and repeatedly bombed the town, killing over 100 people, destroying many buildings, and burning about 25,000 tons of food aid. A ship chartered by the German relief organization Cap Anamur was sent towards Massawa loaded with food, but on May 1 the government threatened to destroy it with aerial bombardment. Despite diplomatic pressure from the western aid donors, the government did not yield and the ship was diverted to Port Sudan, from where its cargo was transported across the border by ERA.

At the Washington Summit in early June 1990, Presidents Bush and Gorbachev discussed the issue of Massawa and called upon Ethiopia to allow the port to reopen. The Ethiopian government complied and ceased the bombing raids two days later.

This was followed, in July, by an attempt to open Massawa. A ship chartered by the World Food Programme (WFP) with four port technicians sailed from Djibouti towards Massawa on July 14. Their mission was to assess and repair the port facilities so that large shipments could be handled. Several days of negotiation followed, concerning the conditions under which the technicians would enter the port. No agreement was reached. On July 21, the ship abandoned its

mission and returned to Djibouti.

The failure of the WFP mission appears to have been the result of too many actors playing different roles in the whole process, each with a different agenda, and inadequate communication between them. The Ethiopian government allowed the mission to go ahead at a moment when it suited its diplomatic and military needs. Thus it coincided with a visit to Washington by Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka, with the intention of obtaining US blessing for Israeli arms deliveries to Ethiopia (the resumption of the emigration of the Ethiopian Jews was announced at the same time). The Ethiopian government also tried to impose conditions on the mission which it knew the EPLF was unwilling to accept, such as the ship remaining in radio communication with Addis Ababa. The WFP was anxious to send its technicians to the port as quickly as possible. The EPLF was communicating at different times with the WFP in Rome and USAID in Washington; the latter not only wanted the technicians to land in the port, but the ship to dock there as well, in order to make the political point that this was possible. The EPLF also demanded full information on the consignees of any relief grain that arrived in the port after it was opened -- it did not want to lose total control of the operation to the UN, nor see the grain consigned to the RRC in Asmara. The mission was aborted when an EPLF demand that the WFP technicians be allowed to land in a small EPLF boat was not passed on to WFP, but was rejected by USAID. WFP -- which might well have accepted this demand -- believed that the mission had been rejected outright, and turned the ship round.

Claims made in the press at the time, for instance that the EPLF had turned back two ships carrying grain, were unfounded -- the additional ships did not exist.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the agreement in principle to open the port, the government bombed it again on two occasions in September and October, to demonstrate that it still reserved the final decision.

After prolonged negotiation, and the near-complete absence of further media attention, on January 18, 1991, Massawa finally opened for relief shipments. Over the following four months a ship chartered by WFP, the Far Suez, made six round trips from Djibouti and brought over 60,000 MT of grain. This was divided into halves, with one half allocated to ERA for distribution in EPLF-held areas, and the other half to the RRC and the churches in the government-held enclave.

Despite skirmishing on the Asmara-Massawa road (initiated by the government), there were no interruptions to the supply to Asmara.

The difficulties started when the grain arrived in Asmara. 6,000 MT of the first shipment was distributed by churches, but the larger quantity consigned to the RRC, over 20,000 MT, remained in stock for several months. The excuse given by the administration for the lack of

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<sup>2</sup> New York Times, July 22 and 25, 1990.

distribution was lack of fuel, but this was extremely lame because fuel supplies continued to arrive regularly until March 22, and much of the food was due to be distributed in Asmara city anyway, where the horse had become the preferred mode of transport. The distribution only started belatedly in May. It is likely that the administration was keeping the food as a reserve to distribute to the military in case the siege was tightened further.

### *Airlift of Relief*

From May until January, the only relief supplies that arrived in Asmara came by air. Like the supply through Massawa, the airlift was subject to political controversy and manipulation.

The Ethiopian government proposed a relief airlift to Asmara in February 1990. In March, the UN came up with a plan acceptable to the Ethiopian government for an airlift from Assab and Djibouti. The donors, however, were unhappy with the proposal that the food should be distributed by the RRC, fearing diversion to the military. Instead, they insisted that the food be consigned to the Ethiopian Catholic Secretariat (ECS). The airlift began on May 3, using two chartered Hercules planes flying from Assab and making four trips each per day. This allowed the delivery of a maximum of 4,800 MT per month, considerably less than the 8,000 MT that ECS estimated that it needed to provide half rations for the 1.1 million people in need. In addition, due to shelling of the airport, bad weather, and the need for maintenance work, the UN airlift was able to deliver less than the maximum figure: by the end of February it had delivered 36,000 tons, or 75% of maximum capacity. A plan to airlift food using Soviet transport planes was proposed in June but never materialized.

The Ethiopian government had 26 civil and 16 military aircraft available for transporting food. Not one of these aircraft was ever employed for this task.

The EPLF warned against the airlift, and later renewed its "warning to those quarters which are still involved in military intervention by transporting military materiel to the Dergue government pretending it is relief and humanitarian aid."<sup>3</sup> It warned that the airlift would continue at its own risk. This referred primarily to the delivery of supplies by Ethiopian Airlines planes and the proposed airlift using Soviet aircraft. (Soviet-supplied Antonov transports were also airlifting military equipment to Asmara.) The EPLF also said that an airlift was unnecessary because food could be delivered to Asmara through Massawa or overland from Sudan, using the routes used by ERA.

The suggestion that the UN relief airlift was transporting military supplies was untrue. However, the civilian and military airports in Asmara are not wholly separate, but share the same

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<sup>3</sup> Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), ME 0806, July 3, 1990.

runway and other facilities. The airport was also used for the airlift of military supplies (usually ten flights each day) and was the base for bombing missions by MiG fighter-bombers. It could thus be considered a legitimate military target.

In the event, an implicit understanding was reached whereby the EPLF did not shell the airport while the relief flights were arriving or on the ground. The EPLF was always aware of the timing of the arrival of the relief flights. This inevitably gave immunity to attack to any military aircraft that happened to land at the same time. However, the EPLF did continue to shell the airport at other times, with the intention of putting it out of action.

On March 1, an airplane used by the UN-ECS airlift was struck by a shell and one employee of ECS was killed. This brought the airlift to an end. It is not clear whether this incident was an accidental violation of the tacit agreement, or whether, after the reopening of Massawa, any such agreement had lapsed. The EPLF certainly argued that the airlift was no longer necessary after January because of the opening of Massawa. However, the food supplied through Massawa remained inadequate for the needs of the Asmara enclave, just as it was not enough to feed the needy people in EPLF-controlled areas.

The shelling of the relief airplane and the halting of the airlift again demonstrates the complexity of the ethical issues involved in determining when starvation is being used as a weapon. If the actual incident of shelling was an accident, it was part of a more general attempt by the EPLF to close the airport, which would have stopped the airlift anyway. If any tacit agreement not to fire when relief airplanes were in the vicinity had lapsed, it had done so in the context of two developments: the supply of food from Massawa (which was not for the most part being distributed) and the imminent military collapse of the government, which was hastened by the intensified bombardment of the airport.

### *Relief in EPLF-Held Eritrea*

Both 1989 and 1990 were years of severe drought in EPLF-held areas of Eritrea. Combined with the economic decline of the two main sources of employment and marketed goods -- Asmara and eastern Sudan -- this spelled famine.

ERA continued its own distributions in the areas of Eritrea controlled by the EPLF. In 1990, over 100,000 MT of grain was transported across the border from Sudan and donated to people affected by drought and war: a far larger amount than that distributed in the enclave. This relief was allocated to needy people according to lists drawn up by village committees. A spokesman for ERA commented that some of this food later found its way into Asmara, as recipients gave help to their needy relatives: "this food is always transferred from one hand to another at the end of the day." ERA offered to set up distribution centers in EPLF areas, to which

the residents of Asmara could come and collect a ration. Implementing this proposal would have required a massive extra donation of resources to ERA, but in any case the government did not respond.

The Ethiopian government remained resolutely opposed to the humanitarian activities of ERA: "any attempt to supply food aid across the border is contrary to the sovereignty of the country ... and has absolutely no acceptance by the Ethiopian government."<sup>4</sup> ERA food convoys were still subject to aerial bombardment. On January 5, 1990, at Tserona, an ERA food convoy was bombed. On September 3, near Tessenei, one truck carrying relief was burned in an air attack. On May 10, 1991, at Tekombia, Barka, two trucks carrying relief were damaged in an air raid.

### **Shortages in the South**

In 1990/91, there were also shortages in a number of parts of southern Ethiopia, such as Harerghe, Gamu Gofa and parts of southern Shewa. These occurred despite the fact that the abandonment of Marxist economic policies in March 1990 and relatively good rainfall had contributed to a national bumper crop. These localized shortages can be attributed to a number of factors.

The most important factor is the legacy of the previous decade of unremitting attacks on the economic base of the peasantry. The legacy of villagization and other disastrous policies left many rural people extremely vulnerable.

A second factor is that when the "change in direction" was announced in March 1990, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation's procurement for 1989/90 was already half complete, so that many areas were damaged by the old policies. A related factor is the incomplete liberalization; for example there was no deregulation of wheeled transport, which meant that farmers who lived more than a day or two's walk from the nearest urban market did not benefit from the regulated market in grain and other foodstuffs. In addition, the "change in direction" meant that provincial and district administrators had more local autonomy in decision making, and some enforced hard-line restrictions on trade and other activities.

The area in which human rights abuse most directly impinged upon food production was conscription. The conscription campaigns of 1989-91 were unprecedented in their size and scope (see chapter 17). Not only were large numbers of young men taken from their homes and farms to serve in the army, but the fear of conscription forced them to be in a state of readiness to flee to the hills at any sign of soldiers or government officials. Though it has not been investigated fully, it seems likely that some of the areas of greatest shortage in 1990/91 were areas in which the

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<sup>4</sup> Voice of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa; see BBC SWB, ME 0704, March 5, 1990.

conscription campaign was conducted most extensively.

A final factor contributing to food shortages was the temporary breakdown in law and order in some parts of the country following the collapse of the Mengistu government. Retreating soldiers sold or abandoned their guns. In areas such as Wollaita (southern Shewa) and Harerghe, the opportunity was taken for looting, which contributed to an interruption of relief programs. For example, about 800 MT of relief food was looted from a relief agency store in Shashamane, southern Shewa, in the days after the government fell. The food crises affecting Sudanese refugees in Gambela and refugees and returnees in Harerghe will be examined in chapters 18 and 19.

## 17. THE RAGE OF NUMBERS: MENGISTU'S SOLDIERS

Outside the areas of armed conflict, the main way in which the wars had a direct impact on the lives of ordinary Ethiopians was through conscription to the army. Throughout the 1980s, in the towns and villages of Ethiopia, the talk was not of defending the nation, but of who had been taken for the army.

After the revolution, the main strategy of the Ethiopian army was sheer force of numbers, in both men and material. Mengistu was obsessed with what the 19th century military strategist von Clausewitz called "the rage of numbers." He built the largest military machine in sub-Saharan Africa.

Numbering about 50,000 at the time of the revolution, the army included about 450,000 regular soldiers and militiamen in early 1991. The majority of these soldiers were conscripts. Many of the methods of conscription violated the basic human rights of the conscripts,<sup>1</sup> and their treatment while in the army also involved many abuses.

Violations included the conscription of boys under the age of 18, in contravention of Ethiopian law, and under 15, in contravention of the internationally-recognized rights of the child. Conscripts were also commonly taken in an arbitrary and violent manner, without warning or the chance of communicating with their families. Once conscripted, the recruits were then subject to ill-treatment.

### Conscription, 1976-82

Mass conscription to the Ethiopian armed forces began in 1976, for the "Peasants' March" on Eritrea. In April 1977, the "Call of the Motherland" was issued to raise recruits for the "peasants' militia," to march on the north and Eritrea. In August this militia was diverted to face the Somali army in the Ogaden. In what was to become the normal procedure, each Peasants' Association (PA) or Urban Dwellers' Association (kebele) was given a quota of recruits which it had to provide. After the offensives against Somalia and the Eritrean fronts, most of this peasants' militia force was not demobilized, and became in effect part of the regular army.

Over the following years, a variety of measures were used to obtain conscripts. Most of these measures were never formalized, but were implemented by administrative fiat. Possibly the most common was the rounding up of young men in villages and marketplaces in the south, usually during military operations or forced relocations. Conscription to the army was often cited as a reason for flight by refugees from Oromo areas in both southeast and southwest Ethiopia. Others were picked up in one and twos, mostly in Tigray and north Wollo, usually when they were

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis of human rights abuses during conscription, see News from Africa Watch, June 1, 1990, "Ethiopia: Conscription, Abuses of Human Rights During Recruitment to the Armed Forces."

away from home.

Journalist Dan Connell spoke to some conscript soldiers who had been captured by the EPLF:

One middle-aged farmer from Tigray's Endera district said that a representative of the Derg had demanded five "volunteers" from each village in his region. The appointed head of his Peasant Association had selected him to go. Several others said they had been told they were going to a political rally and would be brought home afterward. One said that peasants who had been resisting the Derg's heavy taxation were told that they would be pardoned if they turned themselves in. Those who did were put in trucks and sent north.

A 42-year old peasant from Woldiya in Wollo said that he was walking towards a coffee house in town when he was forced into a police wagon and later transferred to a truck which carried him to the front. Another explained that he had been having his pants mended by a local tailor when he was shanghaied by an army patrol, and stood up to show that all he had to wear was a burlap sack around his waist; because he had not been allowed to wait for his pants.<sup>2</sup>

### National Service

In 1981, the government announced plans for the organization of the "entire working people into a national military service and civil defense."<sup>3</sup> This was formalized by the National Military Service Proclamation of May 1983,<sup>4</sup> which provided for the conscription of all men aged between 18 and 30. On reaching the age of 16, all young men were to register with their PA or *kebele* for "pre-induction training" prior to national service at age 18.<sup>5</sup> Then they were to undertake six months' military training followed by two years' service in the armed forces, remaining on reserve until age 50. The Proclamation also specified the duty to remain in service, even after the end of the normal period, in times of mobilization and war.

The conscripts served either in the regular army or in the civil defense units, generally known as "people's militia." The people's militia were enlisted to serve in their home areas and did not generally have combat duties, except for those in Eritrea. Eight new training camps were built for the national servicemen, with Soviet and Libyan help.

Regular rounds of conscription occurred after 1983. Official figures for the numbers of conscripts were never published, but reliable estimates have been made. The first campaign was

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Connell, "Repression as a Way of Life," *Horn of Africa*, 3.2, (1980) p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Mengistu Haile Mariam, May Day address, May 1, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Decree no. 236 of 1983, May 4, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> The pre-induction training appears never to have been implemented.

carried out between January and April 1984. Its target was 60,000 men but it is likely that only 50,000 were actually conscripted. After these recruits completed their six months' training, a second batch of the same size was recruited in January 1985. The third batch, starting in December 1985, had a target of 120,000. Subsequent campaigns usually had targets of 60,000-80,000 recruits. The fourth campaign was recruited between November 1986 and January 1987; the fifth between November 1987 and January 1988.

Following the EPLF victory at Afabet in March 1988 and later rebel successes, conscription intensified. A sixth round was implemented immediately, under the slogan "everything to the warfront." A large part of this campaign was the re-mobilization of men who had served in the first and second national military service intakes of 1984-5, and who remained on reserve. In practice the re-conscription net was thrown wider, and ex-servicemen from other intakes were also taken. Servicemen due for demobilization also had their length of service extended indefinitely. Financial contributions for the war were also solicited from the general public -- one month's pay was deducted from the salaries of public sector employees, and new levies were raised from the peasants.

Following the TPLF capture of Tigray in February 1989, there was yet another round. In the by-now familiar code for the launching of a conscription campaign, Ethiopian radio announced that on March 26 each of the 284 kebeles in Addis Ababa held a meeting "on the possibility of translating into deeds the slogan 'Let Everyone be Vigilant to Safeguard the Homeland'... [and] the residents reiterated that they would contribute their share - from preparing provisions to strengthening the revolutionary army, falling at the front and other spheres."<sup>6</sup>

The first batch of national servicemen was demobilized on schedule in November 1986. The second batch was also demobilized. Both these intakes were called upon to remobilize in April 1988. The third batch, due for demobilization in July 1988, was never demobilized, which was also the fate of subsequent intakes.

Following the TPLF advance in Wollo province in September 1989, another round of conscription -- at least the eighth since 1983 -- was begun. This was intensified in November following further military disasters. In a speech on October 31, President Mengistu said: The main strategy for defending our country is the proper strengthening of our revolutionary army with manpower and material so that it can meet its obligations. There should be a vast popular participation which must be well-coordinated and mobilized for the decisive victory ... In defending ourselves against the danger foisted on us and overcoming it, manpower is the decisive factor.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), ME 0420, March 29, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> BBC, SWB, ME 0602, November 1, 1989.

This speech heralded one of the largest and most brutal rounds of conscription. A national campaign center was set up on November 10, headed by Vice-President Fisaha Desta. Two days later each of the kebeles in Addis Ababa held a meeting to nominate a committee of people who would be mandated to find the required quota of conscripts. Conscription carried on through November and December. Ethiopian radio carried regular reports of "many thousands of volunteers" arriving at training camps, singing patriotic songs and expressing their eagerness to go to the front for the "decisive victory" against the "anti-unity, anti-revolutionary, anti-people bandit gangs." There was a lull in the New Year, but after the EPLF capture of the port of Massawa in February 1990, conscription restarted, especially in the rural areas. All other social and economic programs were made to take second priority to the strengthening of the armed forces. Over 100,000 conscripts were taken in the year to June 1990.

Worse was to come. In his 1990 May Day address, President Mengistu called upon the people to make sacrifices for the government, saying "I do not think the people should expect miracles from the limited number of patriots, revolutionary army, and few militias in the vanguard."<sup>8</sup> In June, the National Shengo (assembly) called for "non-stop recruitment" to the armed forces to be undertaken urgently. This included the mobilization of retired army and police personnel to serve in the armed forces, and the encouragement of civilians in the war zones to engage in guerrilla warfare against the insurgents. In addition, all citizens were urged to make financial contributions to the war effort. Above all, it meant the constant threat of press-ganging, with no "safe" periods between discrete campaigns.

The stepped-up mobilization included veterans, taken to mean anyone who had prior experience in the army or other uniformed services. In 1991 it was expanded to include secondary school and university students. All Ethiopia's institutions of higher education were closed and the students were made subject to conscription. Students at Addis Ababa university were required to register for military service, under the implicit threat of having their education terminated if they refused. With the university closed, many students (particularly those without relatives in Addis Ababa) were also left without means of support, and had little alternative but to join the army. Apparently no other punitive measures were used, and some students were sufficiently fired by the patriotic call to arms made by the government to have readily volunteered to fight. The great majority -- over 80 per cent -- are estimated to have registered. Of these, about one quarter actually went for military training. The others, realizing the harsh conditions and dangers they would face at the front, and under pressure from parents and friends, mostly went into hiding. Outside Addis Ababa, most students were simply rounded up and taken off to training camps.

Addressing the nation on April 19, 1991, President Mengistu called for an even greater

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<sup>8</sup> BBC, SWB, ME 0754, May 3, 1990.

mobilization to defeat the insurgents, and called for an army equal to that of Iraq -- i.e. one million men. Subsequently, the Shengo called for "mobilization more than ever before" and authorized the recruitment of all able-bodied adult males, using all means available. Fortunately, the government had neither the time nor means to implement this ambition, and within six weeks the army had disintegrated.

## Conscription of Under-age Children

There were many instances in which children younger even than the de facto minimum age of 15 years were conscripted into the army. Journalist Tom Lansner visited EPLF-controlled Eritrea in May-June 1988, and found 50 boys aged under 16 in a prisoner-of-war camp of 1,500 total. One 14-year old, Thebether Sawra, described how he had been taken by three militiamen while playing football in a neighborhood alley the previous January. "I told them I was 14 but they didn't say anything," he said. Another 14-year old had also been snatched at a football game, and a third had been taken while attending a village meeting in Bale province.<sup>9</sup>

The government consistently denied that it was conscripting under-age children, and failed to respond to protests made by Save the Children.

The army commonly defended the conscription of under-age children on the grounds that these boys served as "aides" in the military camps, as messengers and the like, and did not have combat duties. Even if true -- and there is plenty of evidence that they did indeed engage in combat -- this would have been no justification. Such so-called "aides" had been abducted and lost their liberty, and were subject to many of the same rigors and dangers of life at the warfront as combat soldiers.

## Methods of Conscription

National service was compulsory in principle, but the government lacked the means to implement this. The comprehensive conscription of all young men aged 18 would imply about 350,000 recruits annually; which was beyond the capacity of even the Ethiopian army to absorb. Instead, conscription was selective, using a variety of methods to obtain the required number of young men and boys.

One of the commonest methods of conscription was through the PAs and the urban kebeles. Each PA and kebele was set a quota of people, which they were to fill by whatever means they chose. This system was notoriously open to abuse by individuals. PA or kebele officials rarely conscripted their relatives or friends, and used the conscript quota as a way of settling grudges, obtaining sexual favours from the wives and sisters of those they chose to detain, or -- most commonly -- soliciting bribes from conscripts' families. Paying these bribes was a heavy burden on the poor. As well as PA and kebele officials, others could demand payment. At the time of conscription, people sold as much as they could -- food and animals; they did not

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<sup>9</sup> The Observer, London, June 5, 1988.

have much, as it was a famine-prone, food-deficit area.... The people used the money to pay for bribes to get their sons released. When men and boys were taken as conscripts, they were first of all put in camps, in the area where they were taken, before being given medical examinations. There were two opportunities for families to get their sons released. The first was to pay officials so that the son failed the medical examination. The other way was to bribe the military guards who were on at night, to let their sons out.<sup>10</sup>

The PA or kebele could also nominate other government servants, such as health workers or agricultural extension workers, to be responsible for collecting the quota. The nominated individuals had no choice but to take on this unpopular job. The people's militia were commonly given the task of recruiting, and militiamen themselves were likely to be conscripted if they fail to fill the quota. PAs and kebeles also resorted to picking up strangers and vagrants from the streets in order to fill their quotas. On one occasion they conscripted a Nigerian visitor to Ethiopia named Ibrahim Garba.<sup>11</sup>

The quota system became deeply unpopular with kebele officials and party cadres. As a result, other methods of acquiring recruits became common. One such method was based upon workplaces and schools. At its simplest, factories and offices were allocated quotas in a similar manner to kebeles. This was common in 1988. During 1989-91, methods became progressively more arbitrary. Many workers in the public sector were simply detained and thereby conscripted. One example was workers in the construction and road-building industries: in November and December 1989, almost all male workers in these industries were either taken for military service by military police who stationed themselves at their workplaces, or hid themselves and did not turn up for work. For a time it was common to see only women workers on building sites. Workers in the private sector were more secure; Ethiopian law requires that the government compensate private-sector employers when their employees are taken for military service.

The conscription of schoolboys followed a similar pattern: policemen loitered near school entrances and detained pupils entering or leaving. Two ninth-grade pupils at the Menelik II Senior Secondary School in Addis Ababa disappeared in these circumstances in September 1989, without the knowledge of their families and friends. They are believed to have been forcibly conscripted. During the following months many pupils only went to school when they could be accompanied there and back by their parents. Others simply stayed away, but any pupil who was absent for 21 consecutive days without a doctor's note was automatically expelled. Instances of forcible conscription also occurred at Addis Ababa university. A foreign medical team visiting

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<sup>10</sup> Refugee from Wollaita, Shewa, interviewed in Sudan, October 1989.

<sup>11</sup> He spoke no Ethiopian languages and could communicate with nobody. He was later captured by the EPLF, who tried to negotiate his release through the Nigerian Embassy in Khartoum. "Shocker from Ethiopia," Eritrea Information, 2.10, November 1980.

TPLF-controlled Tigray in 1988 spoke to two university students who had been conscripted and subsequently captured by the TPLF, and conscription on the campus occurred in late 1989, prior to the main attempt to mobilize students in 1991.

## **Prisoners**

Prisoners were very vulnerable to conscription. Africa Watch has interviewed Getachew, who was conscripted in March 1990 after being detained while trying to flee the country. Tedgai, a conscript from south Gonder captured by the TPLF, told a visitor to Tigray in late 1988 that "some soldiers put me in prison for ten days. They told me I could get out if I joined the army, so I agreed."<sup>12</sup> Soldiers, cadres, and kebele officials were notorious for detaining people without charge or on trumped-up charges, so that many of those conscripted in this manner had not committed any offense.

Anybody suspected of an offense, however minor, was at risk from conscription. This was especially true if he were caught outside his home area, so that his relatives and friends were not there to petition on his behalf. A visitor to EPLF-controlled Eritrea in 1984 met a prisoner of war who originated from Tigray. He had gone to visit his grandmother in a neighboring village, but had no travel permit from his PA. In his grandmother's village he was detained and conscripted. At the time he was eleven years old.

## **Press Ganging**

An extreme version of forcible conscription is the press gang. This is often known in Amharic as afesa, which translated as "sweeping up", and might be termed the "vacuum cleaner" approach to recruitment. A group of armed policemen or party cadres would roam the streets and marketplaces, picking up any individuals or rounding up any groups they come across. Alternatively they would surround an area and force every man and boy to sit down or stand against a wall, using the threat of opening fire; all those considered eligible would then be forced on to a truck and driven away. Young men and boys were conscripted while playing football in alleyways, going to school or market, or attending religious festivals or football matches. Teenage boys who worked in the informal sector selling cigarettes, matches, and lottery tickets were a particular target. Many of these boys were under age.

Press ganging mostly occurred in rural areas, but was common in Addis Ababa during November and December 1989, April 1990, and from July 1990 until the fall of the government.

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<sup>12</sup> Gerry McCann, The Guardian, London, February 20, 1989.

The following incident of afesa, which occurred on April 11, 1990, was described by Giorgis, a businessman:

I left my office at 4.30 in the afternoon, just as the [Mercato] market was beginning to close. There was a commotion in the second-hand clothes section [of the market]. Some civilians were pushing the boys who sell clothes from Dire Dawa, forcing them into one place. There were also five or six policemen there. Suddenly these policemen got out their guns and shouted at the boys to stop [stand still]. Then about ten of the civilians - probably they were security men or [party] cadres - got out guns too. They formed a circle about 20 meters across, enclosing these boys, and shouted at them to sit down. There was a lorry to take the boys away. I couldn't see how many were taken: I had a boy of 14 from the office with me and I was frightened for him - I was even frightened for myself too - so we disappeared from there as soon as we saw the guns.

People were forced to resort to different ruses to escape afesa. As people riding in cars were usually safe, employers, friends and relatives with cars would pick up men and boys from school, university or place of work when they heard that there was a danger of afesa. If there was an afesa in a neighborhood, local women would patrol near the area and warn men and boys to stay away, or give them gabis (shawls) to hide under to disguise themselves as women. If all failed, people would search for a hiding place in a nearby house. One student escaped a press gang by hiding in the back room of a local bar; asked why he did not use the adjacent phone booths to telephone for his father to pick him up, the student replied that "I would have been conscripted while standing in the phone booth."

There were numerous instances in which people trying to resist or escape press-ganging were summarily killed by the conscriptors.

### **Food Aid as an Enticement to Enlist**

A variant method of conscription used in drought-stricken rural areas involved the use of food aid. Since the large-scale provision of relief food to Ethiopia in 1984, it was common for the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) to withhold relief food from villages which failed to meet their quotas for conscription. A more dramatic abuse involved enticing rural people to come to towns to receive a distribution of relief food -- and then conscripting the young men.

One of numerous examples of this occurred in Senafe, Eritrea, in January 1990. Senafe was then the most southerly government-controlled outpost in Eritrea, and was surrounded by rural villages controlled by the EPLF. Following the failure of the rains in this area in 1989, international aid donors provided relief food to the RRC, to distribute to people in the drought-affected areas. In early January the RRC began such a distribution at Senafe. On the first day, only women, children and old people came forward from the villages to collect the rations. They were given their food and allowed to return to the villages in safety. Assuming that it was

safe, young men came for their rations on the following day. At least 600 were promptly seized by the army for the local people's militia. "A United Nations monitor stood by helplessly ... as soldiers rounded up teenage boys for military service" according to Jane Perlez, correspondent for the New York Times.<sup>13</sup> There are reports that some of those seized were transported to Asmara and released, but visitors to Senafe reported seeing a large new contingent of militiamen drilling just outside the town. Africa Watch believes that many of the men seized on this occasion were forced into the people's militia.

Similarly, punitive measures were often taken against villages which failed to provide conscripts, or against the families of conscripts who had escaped. These included detention, beating, and the confiscation of assets such as livestock.

### **Conscription of Women**

There was no systematic attempt to conscript women into the armed forces, though members of the government referred with admiration to historical military campaigns in which women participated. PAs, kebeles, and press gangs did not usually take any women conscripts.

However, there was de facto conscription of women. Women who lived in a town with a large army garrison were at risk from the attentions of the soldiers. Frequently they were harassed and raped. Many women in garrison towns had no means of livelihood other than becoming the concubines of army officers or prostitutes for the common soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Yomar, a woman from the Tigrayan town of Enda Selassie reported [the soldiers] did what they liked. They took the girls by force, even married women. If you refused they would take out their pistol. They would arrest your brother, and when you went to visit him in prison they would ask you to sleep with them. In order to get your brother released or to stop his murder you had to choose whether or not to give your body.<sup>15</sup>

The repeated rape and other abuse of women is a serious violation of human rights. What made these abuses into a form of conscription is that, when the soldiers in question were transferred, they sometimes insisted on taking "their" women with them. These women were not only denied their liberty, and exploited sexually and economically, but were subject to many of the same dangers as the soldiers, including shelling, bombardment, and capture.

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<sup>13</sup> New York Times, February 15, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Large numbers of single women in the towns of Tigray and north Wollo needed relief aid following their capture by TPLF-EPRDF.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in: Jenny Hammond, Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrayan Women. Oxford, 1989, p. 150.

In 1983, there were several hundred women attached to the army garrison at Tessenei, Eritrea. These women had been recruited from 1978 onwards, ostensibly as "aides" to the soldiers, to cook, sweep, and wash clothes for them. In fact their main purpose was as sexual servants. They were not volunteers. While some had come with army units as they were posted to the town, others had been specially flown in by military airplanes. Most came from Tigray and Shewa. When the garrison was captured by the EPLF in January 1984, the women and their growing band of children were left behind, and their quarter of the town was bombed by government airplanes. In 1984, at the small front-line army outpost of Mersa Teklai on the Red Sea coast, there were five involuntary female "aides" serving the soldiers. In 1989, Jennie Street, a relief monitor visiting Meqele, the capital of Tigray which had been recently abandoned by the government, reported: "A man told me that the army had forced both his daughters to marry cadres, against their and his will, and that they had been taken to Addis Ababa when the Dergue pulled out. He said many girls had been forcibly taken in this way."

These abuses continued until the fall of the Mengistu government. One example comes from Senbete, in northern Shewa. When an army battalion (of 600-800 men) was stationed at Senbete, in early 1990, the local people were forced to provide food for it. Protests that the local villages themselves were short of food, on account of drought, went unheeded. When the battalion left the area, the soldiers rounded up women and forced them to accompany them -- ostensibly as cooks and cleaners. Elsewhere in northern Shewa, local women were forced to come and live at army camps to cook food and serve the soldiers, abandoning their families for long periods.

### **Sufferings of Conscripts' Families**

On occasion, conscripts were not allowed to communicate with their families, who therefore had no way of learning of their fate. The scale of conscription was such that more than one in four eligible young men and boys were conscripted into the army and people's militia. Almost every family was affected. Hundreds of thousands of families in Ethiopia had sons who simply disappeared into the armed forces, and they had no way of knowing if they were still serving, killed, captured, or maimed. The Ethiopian government refused to recognize the existence of the tens of thousands of prisoners captured by the rebel fronts.

The psychological effects of this prolonged separation could be devastating for the families. A researcher studying women in Addis Ababa in 1988 found that 94 out of a sample of 113 women were suffering from what they described as "oppression of the soul" -- in English, something equivalent to chronic depression -- and that 90 of these attributed the cause to the fact that their husbands, brothers or sons were serving in the army, often forcibly conscripted, and

usually they had heard no news from them.<sup>16</sup> This depressed psychological state in turn led to neglect of their young children, who as a consequence suffered more from illnesses such as diarrhoea.

Fears of conscription plagued those not directly affected. One Ethiopian woman refugee illustrated some of these worries:

A friend of mine ... delivered a baby boy at that time [1989]. When she was congratulated she said "but I'll only have him for about 12 or 13 years, and then he'll go to Mengistu; if I had a girl, I would have her a bit longer."

A sociologist working in Manz, northern Shewa, recorded a song which expressed the same sadness:

The mother of a boy,  
Tie your stomach with rope,<sup>17</sup>  
It will be a vulture  
And not a relative, who will bury him.

Another song is an ironic comment on government propaganda:

As the ants swarm  
The birds fly,  
Woe is the child of Manz  
He fought for his country.<sup>18</sup>

### **Treatment of Soldiers**

Soldiers were provided with poor housing, food, and medical care, and they were subject to arbitrary and often brutal treatment. Training of conscripts was increasingly basic. Africa Watch obtained the following testimony from Getachew, a schoolboy who was forcibly conscripted in March 1990:

We arrived at the training camp in Debre Zeit on March 22. There they shaved our heads were shaved and burned our clothes. There was a medical examination, and two failed. They gave us a green [army] uniform, a blanket, a bedsheet, a plate and a drinking cup. We were sent to sleep in a large store belonging to the Defense Construction Authority which had been turned into a sleeping place for the camp. We slept on plastic grain bags filled with the leaves of eucalyptus trees and Christmas trees. About 2,000 slept in our store, and there were three other stores used for sleeping, which were much bigger. An officer

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<sup>16</sup> Astier M. Almedom, "Aspects of the Health and Growth of the Suckling and Weanling Child in Ethiopia," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1991, pp. 175-6.

<sup>17</sup> Women bind their stomachs after childbirth to help lose the extra weight.

<sup>18</sup> Helen Pankhurst, "Women, the Peasantry and the State in Ethiopia: A Study from Menz," PhD Thesis, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 77.

told us that there were 20,000 in the camp. During the first week, thousands arrived every day; then they stopped arriving.

There were people from all over the country; all the same, all conscripted. We were divided into units of 48. Each group was to be commanded by a lieutenant, but we hardly saw any officers in the camp, only trainers. Our group contained boys from Moyale [a district on the Kenyan border]. Many did not speak Amharic and they needed a translator. The youngest was 14. We drilled every morning from 7 to 12, and then in the afternoon from 2 to 5. We did not use guns or sticks, we just drilled. If you were ill they gave you medicine, but if you lagged they would beat you with sticks. We ate injera [Ethiopian bread] made from maize and beans: nothing else, the food was bad.

They told us that we were going to be transferred to a second camp where we would learn how to use a gun, but there was a shortage of transport so we were staying for now in the first training camp in Debre Zeit. They said that the previous batch had been 43,000, and that they had stayed 15 days and sent straight to the north [the war front].

The camp was not a proper military camp: it was a place belonging to industry. There was no wall or fence around it, only guards. After one week there I tried to escape with four others, but we were seen and captured. We were lucky; others were shot dead when trying to run away. They beat us with sticks. There was one officer who beat especially hard. I had wounds here [on the left forearm] and here [below the left eye]. But they were not serious in beating us: they beat us near to death but none of us is dead. We were put in a cell made from corrugated iron. It measured 3X4 [meters] and there were 60 people in there: we could not lie down to sleep, we could only sit. Some of the people there had tried to escape -- one had a wound where he had been shot -- and others had done other things wrong. They gave us no [medical] treatment there, but they did later. We were kept there 24 hours, and then sent back to training.

The next Saturday night [April 7/8] I decided to escape -- this time on my own. At midnight it started to rain hard, and the guards went back under their shelters. I crept out on my stomach. This time I got away -- as you see.

After a few weeks of such training, massed columns of conscripted men and boys were thrown against the guns of some of the most hardened guerrilla fighters in the world. Each month, hundreds or thousands were killed, wounded, or captured, often without even firing a shot or seeing their supposed enemy. Many did not even know how to fight. Three teenage boys conscripted into the army and captured by the EPLF at Afabet said:

When the battle began, we didn't know what to do. We asked the officer. He said: "you have a gun, shoot. Do like those in front of you."<sup>19</sup>

A 15-year old boy was conscripted by soldiers from his village in August 1989, while

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in a film made by Alter-cine Inc. (Daniele LaCourse and Yvan Patry) The Forbidden Land, September 1989.

herding sheep. After four weeks "training" he was sent to the front at Woldiya (Wollo), where he was captured by the EPRDF in his first engagement. In November, he was interviewed by a visiting relief worker:

One day in the morning I was ordered to quickly jump on a truck and we left the town. We drove for a short time and stopped in an area where there was a lot of shooting going on. Together with the other soldiers from my truck I walked a short distance and then we arrived in a place where I saw lots of troops fighting, running around and laying on the ground. I did not know what to do and asked one of the people who came with me. He told me to go ahead and shoot at people who were wearing a different uniform from mine.

### **Enforcement of Discipline**

Conditions within the Ethiopian army were at best poor and at worst a living nightmare. Mohamed, a former goldsmith, was conscripted 14 months ago and received four months' training during a lull in the war. He was already a veteran of four battles before his capture. "But it's not the fighting I remember," he said, "just the fear. A man in my old unit tried to desert but he was caught and the officer told one of my comrades to shoot him. He had to -- we all would. Otherwise, we would have been killed."<sup>20</sup>

Sergeant Bocreption Kidan Mariam Fecadu, a deserter in Eritrea, gave the following account of how the Ethiopian army treated ordinary soldiers following the failure of the Red Star offensive:

As the troops retreated to their base areas the army authorities decided to make an example of those who were to be blamed for the failure of the offensive. Thirty two people were picked out from the 23rd Division and shot. The authorities also declared that it was an offence for anyone to mention the strength of the EPLF at any time or to criticize the army in any way.

The Dergue's cadres at the base camps also made examples of a number of other individuals who were publicly executed for "crimes against the army." Those executed included:

\*Sergeant Tesfaye Ayena who was shot because he was accused of leaving the battlefield because he was sick.

\*Captain Hailu, who was accused of giving up a water-well to the enemy and leaving his rifle behind when he retreated.

\*Militiaman Eshetu Kebede, accused of running away from the front near Alghena.

\*Tesfaye, who was accused of discussing the EPLF with other soldiers and speaking favourably about them.

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<sup>20</sup> Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell", Observer Scotland, April 16, 1989.

\*Kemal Abdu, a private, accused of retreating from the battlefield.

Soldiers were regularly shot, accused of wounding themselves in order to be hospitalized, retreating in the face of the enemy, or simply "gossiping".

The general conditions in the army were also bad. Soldiers' pay was regularly withheld and they were told it was sent to their parents or wives, when in fact, those people never received a birr from the authorities. Those who reported sick were often refused treatment on the grounds that they were already suffering from heart troubles, eye defects and other illnesses before they joined the army and it was not, therefore, the army's responsibility to give them medical treatment. Even letters from soldiers' families were either held back or were opened and kept from the intended recipients for long periods of time, leaving the families without a reply and uncertain as to whether their sons or husbands were still alive.

All these problems, together with the constant fear of being shot for some real or imagined offence, created a very insecure atmosphere in the army and many people became so desperate that they decided to desert at the first opportunity. A number of people even committed suicide rather than face the continuous strain of fighting and reprisals from the army.<sup>21</sup>

Sgt. Bocretision himself saw three men -- Corporal Teshome, Private Misgame Fantaw and a militiaman whose name he did not know -- shoot themselves.

Senior officers were regularly executed after the failure of offensives or for expressing the opinion that the war was unwinnable. There were executions in Eritrea in June 1982 and February 1988, and in Addis Ababa in May 1990 (see below).

Within the army there was a tight security network:

There are officers throughout the army who are called "welfare officers", but who are in fact secret service personnel. These ones are relatively safe because you know who they are, but there are other secret service people who operate clandestinely, and their presence creates a lack of trust amongst soldiers. These people are extremely powerful and they set up a sort of information network. Any punishment or action that is taken doesn't just arise by itself, but is the result of this spy network. On the field discipline is sometimes brutally enforced. There are stories of infantry going into battle with lines of machine guns behind them.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1980s there were numerous stories, mostly unsubstantiated, of firefights between army units and of special units deployed to gun down soldiers who tried to retreat. Flight-Lt Habte Luel, a helicopter pilot who defected to Sudan in August 1987, claimed that he had done so after disobeying an order to fire on retreating troops. One substantiated incident

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<sup>21</sup> Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM), 3.2, June 1983.

<sup>22</sup> Lieutenant Yamani Hassan, a prisoner of war held by the TPLF, interviewed by Gerry McCann and Sarah Vaughan at Tade Azregar, Tigray, December 1, 1988.

occurred at Bahir Dar, Gojjam in March 1990. The army garrison blew up one span of the bridge across the Blue Nile, in order to prevent EPRDF forces crossing it. The bridge was blown up while retreating government soldiers were still on it, killing an unknown number.

Another incident occurred in early 1991, when the army in Eritrea tried to deploy militia forces as front line troops at Ghinda, north of Asmara. This led to friction, as the militiamen felt that the contract governing their deployment had been violated. The results were a spate of desertions from the militia in Eritrea and the refusal of some battalions to be transferred from their home areas. The army responded by confiscating all the property of deserting militiamen and burning their houses, detaining others, and threatening summary execution for any caught while attempting to desert. The families of militiamen who deserted were subject to reprisals, including detention. While looting, burning and detention certainly took place, Africa Watch is unable to confirm any incidents of summary execution.

A serious incident occurred in early February 1991, when a militia unit that originated from Qohayn in Seraye withdrew from the Ghinda front towards Asmara. The unit was met by a force from the regular army at a place between Mai Haber and Adi Hawesha, and a firefight ensued. According to reports, casualties ran into the hundreds. The divisional officer of Seraye, Ghezay Sebhatu, was killed in the fighting. The militia were defeated, and over 300 were detained in a railway tunnel, without even the most basic facilities, and lacking fresh air. They were later transferred to the military training camp at Adi Nefas, near Asmara, where an unknown number remained in detention until the fall of Asmara in May.

### **The Attempted Coup of April 1989**

On May 16, 1989 a group of senior officers attempted to stage a coup d'etat in Addis Ababa, while President Mengistu was out of the country on a visit to East Germany. The stated aims of the plotters included a negotiated end to the wars and political and economic liberalization. President Mengistu's intelligence had learned in advance of the planned coup, and his security forces struck first, precipitating an attempt by the plotters to seize power before they were fully prepared.<sup>23</sup> Two generals were killed in a shoot out with security forces sent to arrest them by the loyal Minister for Internal Affairs, Tesfaye Wolde Selassie. The mutineers took control of the army and air force headquarters and the defense ministry; all were besieged by loyalist troops. There was fighting at all three locations before the coup plotters surrendered. The Minister of Defense, Maj-Gen Haile Giorgis Habte Mariam, was killed by the plotters, reportedly for telling them to surrender. The security forces also made a sweep through the city, arresting several hundred suspected sympathizers with the coup. In total 44 officers were reported killed.

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<sup>23</sup> Africa Confidential, 30.11, May 26, 1989.

The commanders of the garrison in Asmara mutinied simultaneously but were also overpowered.

After the coup had been crushed on May 18, 176 army officers were detained. The former Commander in Chief of the Air Force, Maj-Gen Fanta Belay, disappeared and is believed to have been executed. In December, 13 generals and one navy commander were brought to trial before the military division of the Supreme Court. The fact that they were tried rather than summarily executed appeared to indicate that Mengistu was prepared to grant them clemency, which would have been well-received in the army, the general population and the international community. However, in a surprise announcement on May 21, 1990, the government radio stated that 12 of the defendants had been found guilty and executed the previous Saturday night in the basement of the Presidential Palace. The generals were given no chance to appeal against the sentences, which were carried out immediately.

The news of the executions and the speed of their implementation came as a shock to many Ethiopians, and contributed to student unrest at the university of Addis Ababa over the following week. In the longer term, the executions also contributed to the demoralization of the armed forces.

### **Prisoners of War**

Many soldiers were captured by the rebel fronts and (in 1977/8) the Somali army. There are reliable reports that the WSLF and Somali army regularly killed prisoners of war. Treatment of prisoners by the OLF has not been properly documented. The largest number of prisoners was taken by the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF, and these were well treated. Captured soldiers had their weapons and their boots confiscated and were then taken to prisoner-of-war camps.

At different times in the war, the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF held thousands or tens of thousands of prisoners. In late 1989, the EPRDF claimed to have 37,000. Their living conditions were basic, with meager but adequate food and accommodation -- but in this respect they lived little differently from the local population or indeed the members of the rebel fronts. Blankets, clothes, soap and cigarettes were supplied when available, but rarely footwear. Medical care was provided: in late 1988, there were 4,000 wounded prisoners receiving some treatment by the TPLF, including 1,200 cared for in field hospitals.<sup>24</sup> There are no reports of physical abuse or execution. The prisoners were sometimes able to correspond with their families. Prisoners were used for manual labor on road construction and other infrastructural projects, but the work was

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<sup>24</sup> Health Action Group, "Report on a Recent Visit by Medical Team to Western Tigray," London, 1988; Health Action Group and REST UK Support Committee, "Report on the Emergency Health Care Project, July 1988-January 1989," London, 1989.

not excessive and discipline was not enforced in a humiliating manner. Some were given training in literacy and nursing. Other social and recreational activities -- notably soccer matches -- were organized by the prisoners of war themselves.

In its first congress in January 1977, the EPLF committed itself to respecting the Geneva Conventions with respect to the rights of prisoners of war.<sup>25</sup> The TPLF made a similar promise. However, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was unable properly to fulfill its mandate with regard to the prisoners. Details about the disagreements between the fronts and the ICRC are not public. However, it appears that the EPLF and ICRC were unable to agree on the circumstances in which the ICRC could interview prisoners. Relations between the TPLF and the ICRC were warmer, and some discreet assistance was reportedly provided to prisoners in Tigray, but soured in late 1987 when the ICRC withdrew from the cross-border relief operation.

Prisoner of war camps were attacked by air force bombers on several occasions. As the locations of the main camps were well-known to the government, this must have been deliberate. Orotta camp in Eritrea was attacked several times. In Tigray, ten prisoners of war were killed and 20 injured in an air raid on June 28, 1989, and in November 1989 air force planes bombed a wood outside Adwa the morning after a contingent of 3,000 prisoners of war had left it.

The Ethiopian government consistently refused to recognize the existence of prisoners of war held by the EPLF and TPLF. This led to dangers when prisoners tried to communicate with their families and when they tried to return home after having been released. This was an important factor impeding ICRC efforts to carry out its mandate; it could not assist prisoners to correspond with their families, nor initiate or monitor prisoner releases and exchanges.

The EPLF released prisoners of war on the occasions when it was unable to provide for their sustenance or safety, or as goodwill gestures. Releases occurred at regular intervals from the late 1970s onwards. Many prisoners were however kept for extended periods. The TPLF did not keep rank-and-file prisoners for longer than a year at most. After a six month period in which the prisoners were introduced to the aims of the TPLF, prisoners of war were given the choice of trying to return home, remaining in the TPLF-held area, going to Sudan as a refugee, or joining the TPLF (or, after 1989, the EPRDF). There are no documented cases of significant variations in this practice.

The Somali army captured about 10,000 prisoners of war between July and October 1977. There were no central directives concerning their treatment, which depended entirely on the inclination of the commanding officer who captured them: some were well-treated and sent to prisoner of war camps, others were abused and even executed. In October 1977, the Somali

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<sup>25</sup> The Geneva Conventions apply to international armed conflicts, but also set forth the humanitarian principles that are relevant to internal conflicts.

Ministry of Defense reportedly issued an instruction to all commanders that there were to be no more prisoners. Thereafter, many were routinely shot on capture, while officers who refused to do this passed their prisoners to senior officers who would deal with them according to their preference. Thousands were certainly summarily executed; fortunately the order was given after the Somali army had made its main military gains. The WSLF treated prisoners of war in the same manner.

The government regarded all ex-prisoners of war as deserters, who were liable to be imprisoned, executed, or re-conscripted. There were "re-education" schools for released prisoners of war in Gonder and Meqele, in which they were detained for varying periods of time, and subjected to physical abuse and torture. Some were killed.<sup>26</sup> Many were re-conscripted into the army. In later battles some of these ex-prisoners were recaptured. Some soldiers captured by the fronts had been conscripted, captured, and released as many as three times.

The government treatment of captured rebel fighters and Somali soldiers was poor. Many were subjected to torture and prolonged imprisonment, and some were killed. They were denied the amenities and rights granted to prisoners of war held by the fronts.

### **The Forces of the EPLF**

The size of the army of the EPLF remained a closely-guarded secret throughout the war. During the early 1970s, the manpower of the ELF and EPLF certainly outnumbered the Ethiopian army in Eritrea, but after 1978 the position was reversed, with the build-up of the army and the collapse of the ELF. Common estimates of the size of the EPLF were 12,000-18,000 in 1982, rising by 1989 to 40,000-50,000, plus 30,000 militia.<sup>27</sup> Both the EPLF and the Ethiopian government however had reasons to underestimate the numerical strength of the front's forces, so the real figures are likely to be somewhat higher.

The majority of the fighters in the EPLF were undoubtedly volunteers. Many young men fled from the conscription operated by the Ethiopian government and instead joined the EPLF.

Throughout the 1980s, the EPLF operated a draft to fill the remainder of its ranks. The principle and the implementation varied from place to place, but essentially it consisted of a quota of conscripts levied on all Eritrean communities inside Eritrea, and occasionally was extended to refugee camps in Sudan. According to the testimony of refugees in Sudan, each community was

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<sup>26</sup> An unconfirmed claim by the EPLF is that 75 prisoners of war who had been militiamen were killed while passing through towns after their release in early 1979. Another claim is that five were killed in Maichew, Tigray on December 13, 1988, after having been released by the TPLF.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

left to decide how to fill its quota, but on occasions the EPLF would itself choose whom to take if no conscripts were delivered. The draft was imposed together with the provision of services such as education. Women were encouraged to join the front as well. There are no confirmed reports of the conscription of under-age children.

A number of refugees fled to Sudan to avoid being conscripted, or having their sons or daughters conscripted. Many Eritreans from the western district of Barka are conservative Moslems, and often a family's reason for flight was not opposition to the draft itself, but fear of the secularizing and modernizing influence that membership in the EPLF would exert on the conscripted son or (especially) daughter. (Conversely, escaping from such a family environment was one reason why some young women volunteered to join the EPLF.)

One significant incident of local resistance to EPLF conscription occurred at Asela in the Danakil district of eastern Eritrea. The people of this area are Afar, and all are Moslems. The EPLF had occupied the area more-or-less continually since 1978, and had supported a militia drawn from the local Afar. In September 1988, the EPLF tried to conscript a contingent of the people to its regular forces. The people of Asela objected to the requirement that the conscripts move to Sahel district for training, rather than remaining in the Danakil. This followed some earlier incidents in which the local people had objected to the EPLF requiring women to attend political education classes. The conscription dispute led to an armed clash between the Afar militia and the EPLF. According to reports, an EPLF unit opened fire and caused about 20 casualties among the Afar men resisting conscription. The Afar themselves had ready access to arms, and a battle ensued. Afar community leaders "officially" claimed that there were 300 Afar fatalities,<sup>28</sup> but in fact the total number of casualties is unlikely to have exceeded 250 dead and wounded. Further clashes occurred in February and May 1989.

### **The Forces of the TPLF-EPRDF**

The fighting strength of the TPLF and latterly the EPRDF was an even more closely-guarded secret than that of the EPLF. The most common estimates put their strength at 5,000-7,500 between 1980 and 1985, rising to 30,000 by 1989 and 70,000 by 1991.<sup>29</sup> No estimate for militiamen has been made. However, these figures are likely to be underestimates. In 1980, the TPLF began to arm village militias throughout Tigray. Noting that by the mid-1980s every village had a part-time militia which included a substantial number of the adult men, and recognizing that the population of Tigray is closer to four million than two million, this implies

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<sup>28</sup> As reported in *Africa Confidential*, August 25, 1989.

<sup>29</sup> NOVIB, 1991, p. 12.

a very considerable reserve strength of well over 100,000.

The TPLF-EPRDF never had a problem with recruits. If anything, the problem was the reverse -- there was too much popular demand to join its ranks, or at least receive arms from it to form a militia. There is a deep attachment to armaments in the Ethiopian highlands, which has long been heavily militarized. One of the reprisals that was most resented by the population of eastern Tigray after the suppression of the Weyane revolt of 1943 was the confiscation of firearms from the people. Traditional culture extols warlike values, and the possession of a rifle is seen as a mark of prestige. The TPLF built upon this entrenched tradition, composing and popularizing its own songs which vaunted the importance of joining the armed struggle. To be a TPLF fighter was to achieve a heightened social status. Young men were thus under considerable social and psychological pressure to join. Many volunteered, and the TPLF was therefore able to screen would-be recruits and select only the most suitable.

Similar attitudes greeted the EPRDF during its advance southwards. On occupying southern Wollo in late 1989, the EPRDF was confronted with large demonstrations of peasant farmers demanding to be armed. On moving in to Gojjam in February-March 1991, the EPRDF was immediately met with a demand that the local militia (which had been partly disarmed by the government in mid-1990 on account of participation in local revolts in April 1990) be given back their weapons -- the EPRDF complied. Many government soldiers and militiamen who were captured by the EPRDF either immediately volunteered to fight against their erstwhile colleagues, or decided to do so after a brief spell of captivity. There is no evidence that coercion was used to make prisoners of war join the front.

The TPLF-EPRDF official requirements for fighters include a lower age limit of 18 years. Some fighters interviewed by journalists in Addis Ababa in May-June 1991 certainly looked younger than that age, and some admitted to being in their mid-teens.

Once a fighter was in the TPLF-EPRDF, discipline was strictly enforced, and there was no method of leaving except through injury. There are reliable accounts of members of the TPLF wanting either to leave active service, or to leave the organization altogether, and being prevented. The EPRDF has indicated that this policy will change now that the war has been won.

More generally, the TPLF-EPRDF has further entrenched a popular culture that centers on firearms and fighters. The TPLF-EPRDF ideology stresses that a health worker, relief worker or local administrator is also a "fighter" in the "people's struggle." It also stresses that war in general is an evil, but that the war against the Dergue was a necessary evil and therefore good. It is questionable, however, the extent to which these higher principles have been understood by the population at large, or even whether, outside the TPLF heartlands, a serious attempt was made to inculcate them. A fundamental principle of the TPLF is that "the people, organized, politicized

and armed, cannot be ruled against their will."<sup>30</sup> The widespread ownership of firearms, many of which are modern automatic weapons, does facilitate popular resistance to central government, but it also creates potential problems for the enforcement of law and order and the implementation of democratically-arrived at decisions.

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<sup>30</sup> Meles Zenawi, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

## **Other Forces**

The forces of the OLF and most other rebel fronts were relatively small in comparison to the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF. There is little information available about their practices of recruitment or their treatment of fighters. The fact that most of the WSLF fighters in early 1977 were in fact members of the Somali army has been mentioned in chapter 4; the forcible recruitment of Ethiopian refugees to the WSLF, Somali army and possibly the Somali-backed Oromo front will be discussed in chapter 19.

## 18. WARS WITHIN WARS: THE WESTERN AND SOUTHWESTERN LOWLANDS

Ethiopian provinces spread out from the central highlands like spokes of a wheel. Most provinces consist of a highland area, usually inhabited by Amhara or Oromo, and a lowland hinterland, inhabited by marginalized people who are often semi-nomadic pastoralists. This is particularly the case for the west and the southwest.

West and southwest Ethiopia is the most economically productive and ethnically complex part of the country. Gojjam province is one of the Amhara heartlands, but contains a large peripheral area to the west, inhabited mainly by Agau and Gumuz people. Ethiopia's main export, coffee, is indigenous to the southwest,<sup>1</sup> which is mostly fertile and well-watered. In the nineteenth century, the Oromo states of the Gibe region (straddling modern day Keffa, Wollega, western Shewa and eastern Illubabor) were the most prosperous part of the country, and were the center of the regional trade in coffee, slaves, gold and ivory. Apart from coffee, these commodities originated in the surrounding lowlands, which are inhabited by a variety of people, including Gumuz, Berta, Koma, Mao, Ganza, Anuak, Nuer, Nyangatom, Chai, Dassenatch, Kwegu, Mursi, Ari, Hamar, and others. Many of these ethnic terms overlap, or are used in different ways by different groups, and many ethnic groups have two or more names. In the west of Wollega and Gojjam, these peoples are referred to as "Shankilla" by the highlanders, a derogatory term that they themselves reject. These groups are incorporated into the state to varying degrees -- some may be considered to be subjugated, others are marginal but have maintained a high degree of independence.

The existence of the international frontiers with Sudan and Kenya is a central fact of this area. Many ethnic groups straddle the border. The civil war in southern Sudan and the repression in northern Kenya have often meant that life on the Ethiopian side of the border, where the government has at times shown flexibility in local administrative arrangements, has been preferable to life in the neighboring country.

This chapter will outline the wars and famines that have affected the lowlands of the west and southwest, province by province, from north to south.

### **Western Gojjam: The EPRP Revisited**

The western region of Gojjam is one of the Amhara heartlands, with a traditional independence from Shewa (see chapter 3). The western lowlands of the province, however, are

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<sup>1</sup> The word "coffee" is even said to derive from the name of Keffa province, where the trees grow wild.

inhabited mainly by peoples who have more in common with their neighbors in lowland Wollega than the highland Amhara. These people include Gumuz, Agau, Shinasha and others. The Gumuz (also known as Begga), who numbered about 53,000 in 1970 will figure most prominently in this account.

Western Gojjam has long been incorporated into the extended domains of the highland states, which have raided for slaves in the area. In the 19th century, Ras Kassa of Quara became a renowned shifita leader in the area, rising to become the Emperor Teodros.

Following its first defeat in Addis Ababa during the Red Terror, and its second defeat in Tigray at the hands of the TPLF in 1978, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) set up a base for guerrilla operations in western Gonder. In 1983, it expanded its operations into northwest Gojjam. The leaders of the EPRP forces were mostly educated Amhara, but the rank and file were drawn from the local people of the area. Growth was slow but steady. In 1984, the EPRP held its second congress in Quara.

From 1985 onwards, the EPRP became more active, particularly in northwest Gojjam. This was partly in response to the resettlement program, which created deep resentment among the local people.

The establishment of the large Metekel settlement complex in late 1984 led to the displacement of the local Gumuz. The Gumuz of this area rely on shifting cultivation and gathering wild foods from the forest. The government declared that any arable land currently uncultivated and forests were "unused," and designated them resettlement areas. According to Dessalegn Rahmato, the established land use system was thereby disrupted: new land could not be cleared for shifting cultivation, and as "the main difference between hunger and a full stomach may depend on forest resources," local famine followed.<sup>2</sup> Some Gumuz turned to armed resistance; in 1985 and 1986 there were incidents in which settlers were fired on, and some joined the EPRP.

According to the testimonies of resettlers who escaped from Metekel and returned to Tigray, the EPRP harassed the settlements and stole food and other commodities, but gave food assistance to escapees and helped them return home.

As elsewhere, the government recruited a militia force from among the resettlers and used it not only to police the resettlement camps, but the local people as well.

In December 1985, the government launched its sixth attack on EPRP positions in western Gojjam and south-west Gonder, deploying about 4,500 troops. By mid-January, the attack had been repulsed, but retreating soldiers burned several villages, including Birawe

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<sup>2</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, "Settlement and Resettlement in Metekel, Western Ethiopia," *Africa* (Roma), 43, (1988) pp. 14-34.

(December 21) and Arema (January 8, 1986), and summarily executed at least 20 civilians. Two further attacks were launched in each of the following two dry seasons. In 1988-9, activity intensified.

On June 21, 1989, the EPRP attacked a construction project within the Metekel area and kidnapped three Italian workers. Several vehicles and a water point were destroyed in the attack, and (according to escapees) food from a store was taken. The kidnapping incident gained much international publicity and government reprisals were quick to follow.

There is a credible account that on December 20, 1989, government troops entered Ambela market, Ankasha Banja sub-district, and opened fire, killing 14 and wounding 20 marketgoers. In August 1990, the EPRP made military gains, leading to another round of reprisals. These included:

\*August 28: two villages in Ankasha sub-district were shelled, and three civilians killed.

\*October 1 and 2: villages near Dangila were shelled and ten civilians were killed.

\*December: soldiers killed a number of peasants in Laye Zigem, and reportedly then cut the genitals off the male corpses and displayed the mutilated bodies as a deterrent to support for the insurgents.

#### *Conflict between EPRP and EPRDF*

During 1990, the military advance of the EPRDF brought it into contact with the EPRP. The wounds from the battles of 1978 had not been healed -- if anything, they had intensified due to the fact that the EPDM, a constituent of EPRDF, was originally a breakaway group from EPRP. There were a number of mutual accusations of aggression. When the EPRDF occupied highland Gojjam in February-March 1991, these intensified. The EPRP accused the EPRDF of "declaring war" against it, of detaining EPRP supporters in the towns it occupied, of shooting unarmed demonstrators, and of taking away infrastructure from the resettlement sites. The EPRDF on its side accused the EPRP of aggression, of ambushes and of mining roads. On April 18, 1991, there was a battle between EPRP and EPRDF following the latter's occupation of Dangila.

Following the fall of the Mengistu government in May, fighting between the EPRP and EPRDF continued in western Gojjam. The Sudan government, which had hitherto given support to the EPRP, withdrew that assistance and closed the border. Four EPRP leaders in Sudan were arrested and handed over to the EPRDF. Intense fighting continued into July, with the EPRP admitting serious losses.

The conflict with the EPRP presented the EPRDF with its first challenge concerning its conduct of warfare in a situation in which it possessed overwhelming superiority in manpower

and materiel. At the time of writing it is too early to tell how the EPRDF forces have acquitted themselves in terms of treatment of the civilian population believed to be sympathetic to EPRP, and treatment of EPRP combatants taken prisoner. There have, however, been no reports of such abuses.

### **Highland Wollega: Lutherans and Oromo Nationalists**

In the 1880s, the western Oromo states and Keffa were incorporated into the Shewan empire of the Emperor Menelik. Some were conquered by Menelik's armies, under the command of an Oromo general, Ras Gobana Dacche, and were subjected to the alienation of land and the imposition of neftegna Amhara settlers. Others, notably Leka-Nekempte (eastern Wollega) submitted voluntarily, and retained a degree of internal autonomy. The peripheral areas, most of them already subject to Oromo domination, were conquered in the 1890s.

The ethnic heterogeneity of the area and the variety of manners in which the peoples submitted to Abyssinian rule meant that local administration was uniquely intricate and frequently anomalous. As elsewhere in the empire, many conquered people did not submit readily to their new overlords. There were frequent if localized rebellions. The Gibe states had themselves subjugated neighboring peoples, and there were occasional violent clashes between the Oromo and the peripheral groups.

During the Italian occupation, the Oromo leaders of Wollega and Illubabor initiated a movement for independence from Ethiopia, based on the premise that they had voluntarily joined in the 1880s and had not thereby forfeited any sovereign rights, and in 1936 petitioned the British government to secede and become a British protectorate. The attempt was unsuccessful, but Oromo nationalism remained at least as potent in this area as in eastern Ethiopia. Many Oromo from Wollega were active in the Mecha-Tulema Association of the 1960s.

An important element in the growth of Oromo dissidence in the southwest was the Evangelical Church of Ethiopia, known as the Mekane Yesus. This was founded by Lutheran missionaries from Sweden, who were also active in Eritrea. The Imperial government forbade the missionaries to operate in the Amhara highlands, but permitted them to evangelize among the Moslems and followers of traditional religions in the south. Wollega province was where the Mekane Yesus concentrated, and by the 1970s it had a large number of followers and, equally importantly, had provided educational facilities on a scale that outstripped all other provinces save Shewa and Eritrea.

An indigenous protestant church, the Bethel Evangelical Church, was also influential in the growth of Oromo political consciousness. This gained a strong following in the Dembi Dolo area.

### *Repression and Insurrection 1975-85*

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was slow to begin military operations in western Ethiopia; it only began small-scale activities in 1981. The conditions were right, however, for resistance to grow. The government had already instigated a series of crackdowns in the area, mainly aimed at the influence of the educated elite associated with the protestant churches.

The military commander of Wollega from 1976 onwards was Sergeant Negussie Fanta, who soon acquired a reputation for ruthlessness. In early 1977, 15 Oromo students were executed for campaigning for the right to an education in Oromo (ironically, the government-sponsored literacy campaign was soon to cede them that right). The period of the Red Terror saw a crackdown on educated Oromo, especially members of the Mekane Yesus. A prominent pastor in the Mekane Yesus, Gudina Tumsa, was imprisoned in June 1979, and later "disappeared." His wife, Tsehai Tolessa, was imprisoned with over 400 other Oromo women in February 1980, and later released. Between May and December 1981, 300 Mekane Yesus churches were closed, and 600 pastors and other church workers arrested and church property confiscated.

In an apparent attempt to enforce a cultural change and a break from the church, people were forced at gunpoint to attend literacy classes and public meetings.<sup>3</sup> The government sent students to Wollega with instructions "to make 80 farmers literate;" instruction in the ideals of the revolution was also given.

#### **Lowland Wollega: Multiple Marginalization**

The OLF had its natural constituency in the Oromo-inhabited highlands of Wollega. However, when it started military operations, it did so from a base in Sudan, and therefore operated in the lowlands. Most of the lowland people are not Oromo, but Berta, Komo, Gumuz, and others. These peoples were already suffering at the hands of government military and resettlement policies, following a history of destruction at the hands of raiders and conquerors from all directions.

Life on the border consisted of shrewd calculations as to where short-term security could best be had. For example, a substantial part of the Komo crossed the border several times. They originated on the Ethiopian side of the border, but crossed into Sudan earlier this century to escape Oromo raids, when Sudan became safe from Arab slavers.<sup>4</sup> In the 1960s, many Komo crossed

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<sup>3</sup> Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM), 1.4, October 1981.

<sup>4</sup> This section is derived from: Wendy James, "From Aboriginal to Frontier Society in Western Ethiopia," in D. Donham and W. James (eds.) "Working Papers on Society and History in Imperial Ethiopia: The Southern Periphery

back into Ethiopia in order to escape the forced labor demands of Sudanese military outposts. In 1966, a Sudanese army unit, annoyed at the departure of its servile labor force, crossed the border, burned several of the villages newly built by the Komo, killed animals and took several hundred people back to Sudan. The villages were also raided by Nuer groups associated with the Anyanya insurrection in southern Sudan. The Komo who remained protested to the Ethiopian authorities, who gave them arms and set up a police post, together with flag poles and flags so that they could advertise whose protection they came under.

The Ethiopian government also brought in highland settlers to secure the border. Started under Haile Selassie, this was intensified under the Dergue.

In 1979, resettlement camps were created at Asosa, close to the Sudan border, with about 25,000 resettlers. These involved alienation of land from local residents, and many of the settlers were armed. Locals were also forced to work without pay on the resettlement projects. This was also one of the few areas in which agricultural collectivization was enforced. Forcible conscription to the army was implemented on a large scale. In early 1981, nearly 10,000 refugees, mainly Oromo, fled to Sudan to escape these abuses. This coincided with famine in western Wollega. Despite good climatic conditions, government policies had induced a severe localized food shortage, affecting an estimated 30,000-40,000 people in western Wollega. The OLF estimates that one thousand died.

In the late 1970s, the Beni Shangul Liberation Front was active in the lowlands, engaging in guerrilla activity on a small scale. During the 1980s it had no effective presence in the field.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Early OLF Activity and Army Reprisals*

The first OLF cadres arrived in Wollega in 1981 from eastern Ethiopia, and began to recruit.

Military activity by the Ethiopian army on the "western front" began with an offensive in January-February 1982. Counter-insurgency activities quickly intensified, and a year later a major military camp was constructed in the Didessa valley. Both routine patrols and larger campaigns were conducted with the indiscriminate violence against civilians that is so familiar from elsewhere in the country. During 1983-5, the OLF benefited from the offensive stance towards Ethiopia taken by the Sudan government.

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from the 1880s to 1974," Cambridge, African Studies Centre, 1980, pp. 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> In 1989 the EPRDF trained some Beni Shangul Liberation Front fighters, who re-entered the area in early 1991. They clashed with the OLF and were defeated near Shirkkle, northwest Wollega, in early March, whereafter they came to an agreement with the OLF.

In August 1984, according to credible reports, army reprisals in Begi area killed over 200 civilians and destroyed numerous homes.<sup>6</sup> Another army campaign in western Wollega during November-December 1984 led to the burning of villages and the killing of civilians. The largest offensive took place in June 1985 and was centered on Asosa. This followed an intensification of OLF activity, and a joint statement by the OLF and TPLF that they planned to coordinate their attacks and ultimately open a joint military front. Reports indicate that the army used scorched earth policies. The OLF accused it of burning villages and other revenge atrocities.<sup>7</sup> This offensive coincided with the planting season and contributed to local famine conditions.

In the period 1985-8, the counter-insurgency operations in Wollega were closely related to the implementation of the resettlement and villagization programs, to which attention must now turn.

### *Impact of Resettlement*

The first major resettlement program in the west was implemented in Asosa, starting in the late 1970s. The settlers were brought from Wollo and Gojjam; many were given military training. The local people were compelled to give land to the settlers, and to supply free labor for the construction of the resettlement sites. The settler militia were reportedly used to exact taxes from the locals and obtain conscripts for the army.

The much larger resettlement program of 1984-8 had comparable consequences for the local population, on a larger scale. In "integrated settlements," the settlers were mixed in with local people, who were obliged to share their land and other resources with the newcomers. The larger "conventional" settlements involved the displacement of indigenous people and the disruption of existing systems for land use, reducing many to a state of hunger and destitution.

Investigations by Cultural Survival indicate that the impact of the resettlement program of 1984-6 on the indigenous population of western Wollega was disastrous.<sup>8</sup> According to the testimony of refugees in Sudan, local people lost land to the settlers, and were forced to undertake large amounts of unpaid and coerced work constructing the resettlement sites and accompanying infrastructure. The loss of forests and forest resources to the settlements was also disliked. These reports have to be set against more positive descriptions from central and southern Wollega,

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<sup>6</sup> *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1984-5, p. B244.

<sup>7</sup> *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1985-6, p. B296.

<sup>8</sup> Cultural Survival, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge, Mass., 1985; Sandra Steingraber, "Resettlement in 1986-1987", in J. W. Clay, S. Steingraber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988.

which report much less tension between settlers and locals.<sup>9</sup>

Based upon the existence of the settlement militia and other considerations, the OLF declared that "the settlement program is a legitimate military target."<sup>10</sup> It attacked settlements on several occasions, for example the settlement of Jarso on April 28, 1988, when two Irish relief workers were captured.<sup>11</sup>

### *Villagization*

Villagization began in Wollega in late 1985, and was implemented in the adjoining provinces starting the following year. The program was linked to the construction of roads, and relocation near army garrisons. The program in western Wollega was implemented with thoroughness and coercion, though the level of violence did not match that of Harerghe.<sup>12</sup> All the villagers' possessions were registered, and many were confiscated, including plow oxen. People were detained, tortured, raped and executed; houses and grain stores were burned.

Western Wollega was unusual in that villagization was also accompanied by enforced collectivization; on the collective farms the produce was entirely taken by government officials, and the villagers were instead given a ration.

Outside the insurgent zones of western Wollega and Ilubabor (see below), the villagization campaign in southwest Ethiopia was more akin to that in Arsi -- implemented with an implicit threat of violence, but with little actual force used.

### **The Role of the SPLA**

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was set up in 1983 following a mutiny by southern Sudanese soldiers in the town of Bor. From the beginning it was led by Colonel John Garang. Political marginalization and economic exploitation of the south and increasing human rights abuses by the Sudan government were all factors contributing to the mutiny and the subsequent rapid spread of the revolt throughout much of southern Sudan. The SPLA turned to the Ethiopian government as a natural ally in its struggle, and Col. Mengistu for his part saw Col.

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<sup>9</sup> Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD thesis, Manchester, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> OLF, "Statement to Agencies Working in Oromo Land," May 4, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> The two were released unharmed in Sudan a month later.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Steingraber, "Villagization in a War Zone: Refugee Reports from Western Wollega," in Clay *et al.*, 1988, pp. 200-213.

Garang's movement as a useful counterweight to Khartoum's continuing support for the EPLF, TPLF, OLF and other smaller fronts.<sup>13</sup> Close links were quickly established between the SPLA and the Ethiopian government at the highest level. The Ethiopian government provided the SPLA with military equipment, bases and a radio station.

Until the fall of the Mengistu government in May 1991, there was close military and security coordination between the SPLA and the Ethiopian army. The Ethiopian army assisted the SPLA in attacks on Kurmuk in Blue Nile Province (across the border from Asosa) in November 1987 and November 1989, and in Eastern Equatoria Province in early 1988. The Ethiopian army also allowed the SPLA freedom to operate in several areas of western Wollega and Illubabor. From 1986-90, the SPLA had a military base at Duul, just inside Ethiopia opposite the Sudanese army garrison at Kurmuk. Local administrators and senior civilian politicians reportedly objected to the SPLA presence, but were overruled by the military command. For its part, the SPLA fought against the OLF. This occurred right up until May 1991, when SPLA contingents fought alongside the Ethiopian army at Dembi Dolo, near Gambela.<sup>14</sup>

The SPLA presence in Wollega Ethiopia led to a number of abuses. The enslavement of escaping resettlers has been discussed in chapter 12. Cattle raiding in Keffa and Garu Gofa will be discussed below.<sup>15</sup> It attacked Oromo refugees and displaced people in August 1987 and November 1988, killing several civilians on each occasion.<sup>16</sup>

On November 9, 1989, the SPLA attacked a refugee camp at Yabus in Blue Nile Province, Sudan, and burned it to the ground. Fortunately, the 10,000 refugees had evacuated the camp when they learned of the likelihood of the attack, but were forced to spend many days in the wild without supplies. Yabus camp lay in an area contested between the SPLA and the Sudanese army, and relief items had been regularly brought to the camp with OLF and Sudanese army military escorts. It is therefore understandable that the SPLA might have suspected that it also performed a military or intelligence function.

Perhaps the most common abuse was the requisitioning of supplies and stealing of cattle from the local populations, with accompanying violence against civilians. Simon Mollison, a

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<sup>13</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, mutineers in southern Sudan had sought and obtained refuge and sometimes support from the Ethiopian government.

<sup>14</sup> There are two examples of the Sudanese army giving comparable military assistance to rebels in Ethiopia. One was support for the Ethiopian Democratic Union offensive in Gonder in 1977, and the other was the OLF offensive in 1990, described below.

<sup>15</sup> Such raiding was also undertaken by local pastoral groups armed by the Sudan government to fight against the SPLA.

<sup>16</sup> Unconfirmed claims by the OLF are that 37 were killed in the first attack and 19 in the second.

visitor to Berta areas of western Wollega, controlled by the OLF, in March 1990, described some of the damage caused by SPLA units:

The damage caused by the SPLA was greatest near the Sudanese border and here the ruins of many villages are the only signs of the area having been inhabited. Some of these are now being rebuilt but others are only shown to have existed by the often-singed groups of mango trees in the bush. In villages destroyed more recently, ruined houses still have the charred remnants of human habitation - broken pots, lamps, etc.

Deeper inside [Ethiopia] (50-60km) villages were not destroyed but had been regularly looted by the SPLA. In one village people told how over 1,000 SPLA troops had regularly set up a camp in the village. They would demand food and money from the villagers and strike them. Twelve people had been shot. Even the clothes they were wearing would be taken. Eventually this treatment had impoverished them to the extent that many of them fled to the bush, where they were mainly living on wild foods.... In another village I was told how the SPLA had stolen many of their animals and had burned their grain stores. They had been scared to cultivate in the immediate vicinity of the village.

The OLF offensives of 1990 and 1991 effectively drove the SPLA from the northern and southern parts of western Wollega respectively.

### **Groups armed by the Sudan Government**

The Sudan government employed a very different strategy to its Ethiopian counterpart when faced with insurrection. Instead of using a large and well-equipped conventional army, the Sudan government chose to give arms, support and training to locally-based militia groups, which would then attack the forces of the SPLA with a greater or lesser degree of coordination with the army. This policy started in 1983 and persists up to the present. Some of these militias, such as the Murahaliin of southern Darfur and Kordofan regions, have been responsible for some of the grossest abuses of human rights witnessed in modern Africa, including large-scale massacres of civilians, slavery, destruction of villages, and deliberate starvation.<sup>17</sup>

Close to the border with Ethiopia, the Sudan government armed several "friendly" groups. These included the Anyanya 2 paramilitary force, mainly drawn from members of the Nuer ethnic group, and Toposa and Murle militias. These groups raided into Ethiopia as well as attacking the SPLA and its sympathisers. One cattle-herding people, the Chai, who live close to the Sudan border, lost almost all their cattle by 1988. Many people were killed, and the remnants of the group was forced to retreat from their existing grazing land to the Maji mountains.

### **Military Activity in Wollega 1989-91**

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<sup>17</sup> See: Africa Watch report, Denying "The Honor of Living:" Sudan: A Human Rights Disaster, March 1990.

In November 1989, an SPLA attack across the border from Ethiopia succeeded in capturing the town of Kurnuk. This was the second time that Kurnuk had been taken, and as on the previous occasion two years before, the Sudan government launched a major campaign to recapture it. In the face of superior forces, the SPLA withdrew. There then followed a period of close military cooperation between the Sudanese army and the OLF. In the first days of the new year, the OLF launched a major offensive in western Wollega, with assistance from the EPLF and possibly the Sudanese army, which certainly launched a simultaneous attack on SPLA positions inside Sudan. Within a few weeks, the Ethiopian army and the SPLA had been driven out of their major positions in northwest Wollega, including the strategic town of Asosa. Though a fierce counter-attack followed, and Asosa was recaptured, the OLF gained the ascendancy in the area.

### *The OLF Capture of Asosa*

The OLF capture of Asosa on January 5-10 witnessed a number of abuses against civilians. The first incidents were against the refugees in Tsore camp.

Tsore camp contained about 42,000 Sudanese refugees. The majority had been displaced by fighting in the area in 1987-8, though some were very recent arrivals. About 60 per cent were speakers of the Uduk language.

According to reports, a warning was delivered to the SPLA (by either the OLF or EPLF) that an attack was imminent and that the refugees should be removed from the area for their safety. However, the SPLA failed to effectively pass such a warning on to the residents of Tsore, who learned of the impending attack only when the gunfire came within earshot. Most then collected their possessions, abandoned the camp, and headed southwest towards Yabus Kubri, just across the border in Sudan. According to testimonies later obtained from the refugees, they passed safely among people they identified as "Eritreans," but while travelling through a mountain ravine they were shot at by the Duwalla people, who were armed and instructed by the OLF. An old man and several young girls, some of them carrying babies on their backs, were killed by being shot and falling into a ravine.

About 120 refugees who did not evacuate the camp were killed in the OLF attack, some of them deliberately.

At Yabus Kubri, the displaced refugees and a contingent of SPLA fighters were bombed by the Sudanese air force. They fled to nearby hill villages. There was then a ground attack on Yabus Kubri by the Sudanese army, which used artillery to shell the hill villages where people were hiding. The people were forced to run southwards again, leaving sick people behind on the road. The refugees moved through a succession of places. On the way, they suffered hunger and

further aerial bombardment, and heard of threats of more ground attacks by the Sudanese army. Finally the refugees were directed by the SPLA to cross back into Ethiopia, at Pagak, where they arrived in batches between March and June. A representative from UNHCR visited the refugees in their makeshift camp in Pagak and provided some food rations. The camp at Pagak (which is inside Ethiopia) was then bombed, presumably by the Sudan air force. For reasons of cost, UNHCR decided against a new camp at Pagak and instead transferred the refugees to Itang camp between April and July.

The OLF denied that the attack on Tsore camp took place. It did not attempt to justify the attack on the grounds that the camp was also used as a military base, though there is strong evidence that the SPLA utilized all the refugee camps in Ethiopia for military purposes, and the camp occupies a strategic location close to the Kurmuk-Asosa road, where the OLF could not have safely allowed the SPLA to remain. There is also a striking similarity between the attack on Tsore and the destruction of Yabus camp by the SPLA just two months earlier, so a motive of simple reprisal cannot be ruled out.

The OLF also attacked trucks bringing supplies to refugee camps on at least one occasion.

The OLF overran Asosa town and the resettlement camps in the area. Both of these may be counted as military targets -- the town had an army garrison and the resettlement camps (collectively known as Gojjam Sefer) contained about 6,000 militiamen who had been used to secure the area and extract taxes, forced labor and conscripts. Both also included substantial civilian and non-combatant populations. In the attacks, there were civilian casualties, and there was at least one incident in which Amharic-speaking civilians were deliberately killed; according to different versions, shot or burned to death.

The Ethiopian government made great propaganda out of the atrocity. Supposed eye-witnesses to the incident were interviewed, who claimed that non-Oromo people were rounded up and instructed to go for a meeting in a school, where they were machine-gunned. One man claiming to be an eyewitness said that the attackers spoke Tigrinya (the main language of Eritrea and Tigray). Full details of the incidents have never fully come to light.<sup>18</sup>

While evacuating, the Ethiopian army burned and looted at least three villages: Shigogoo, near Asosa; Shanto, near Bambesi; and Kongiloo, near Kobar.

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<sup>18</sup> In one respect at least, this propaganda backfired: the OLF reported a new influx of recruits from government-controlled areas, who volunteered in order to "kill Amharas."

### *The Army and Air Force Counter-Attack*

The army responded with a bombing campaign. According to OLF claims, mostly substantiated by independent sources, the following air raids occurred:

\*January 7 and 8: Asosa: nine killed, 15 wounded, including women and children.

\* January 10: Asosa: ten killed, five wounded.

\*January 15: Bambasi, east of Asosa. (For this and the following raids, no casualty figures are available).

\* January 23: Mandi, east of Asosa.

\* January 23: Dalatti, east of Asosa.

\* January 26: Bambasi.

\* January 27: Hopha, north of Asosa.

\* February 7: Hurungu: many houses burned.

\* February 8: Arge: many cattle killed.

\*February 8: Buldugilin, north of Asosa: many houses burned.

This was followed by a ground assault, which took the form of a military action to recover the (now-deserted) town of Asosa, and a series of punitive expeditions in the rural areas. Simon Mollison, visiting western Wollega in March 1990 reported some of the actions of the army and their effects:

Closer to Mandi ... some raids on Berta villages had been carried out by government forces. Such raids appear to have been a recent phenomenon. They have commonly taken the form of government troops entering a village and stealing animals, food, money and possessions from the houses of the people, who had fled at the first sight of the armed force. Those late to leave had been shot at and some had been killed. This happened at the village of Ferdos, for example, a little more than a month ago [mid-February]... They say that at least one man was killed. Houses were broken into and looted but no burning took place.

The village of Sirba, inhabited by the Sese people, was attacked by a government force in January.

At least two of the local people were killed and their bodies were tied to trees, but others had time to escape because the attackers were seen while still some distance off. The village was looted and much of it was destroyed. The people have not returned to rebuild the village as they feel it would remain a target. Sirba was the centre of some missionary project and had an airstrip. It can thus be seen as having been quite an important centre for the area. Because of the burning and the method of dealing with the corpses, this raid

seems to have been motivated by a desire to punish the villagers.

Harangama is a small village in the hills by the Blue Nile about six hours' walk from Oda. It is a Gumuz village and was attacked by government forces in September 1989. Six people, who were slow escaping, are said to have been killed. The village was burned and most people lost most of their possessions.

I talked with some Oromo people in the lowland bamboo forest about two hours from Ferdos. They told me something of the reason that they had fled their homes to this previously unsettled area.

Government forces had regularly and systematically "raided" their villages. They would take the villagers' money and cattle and also their children (who would be taken to fight in the army). One old man I talked with told me his story. He had arrived to settle in this lowland area two months before [i.e. in January] having finally decided to leave the collective farm, Baamichee, where he had lived for the last eight years. Previously he had lived in a village called Gumbi where he had been "a rich man". He had owned many cattle and a lot of coffee bushes, he said. His farm in Gumbi was "given to others" (possibly Tigrayans [i.e. resettlers]). Life had got worse and worse in Baamichee. At first it had not been bad but now the government had taken nearly all he produced (maize, luba, peppers, tef). They had taken some of his children and some of his cattle. In the end he was so anxious to escape get away that he left 20 cows behind, taking only two and a little money. He escaped with nine other families and he was the only one who managed to get away with anything. He is now living in this lowland area (they seem to call it Buche) where people would never have dreamed of living once. It is okay in the dry season but not in the rains. The malaria will be terrible and the soil is a heavy black clay.

Other Oromos I talked to in Buche had similar stories to tell. Oromo refugees from Asosa town who I had talked to in Bikorri in Sudan also told stories of terrible taxation, straight theft and always of their children being stolen and sent to the war. The number of Oromos who have "voluntarily displaced" themselves to the Buche area where they live in great poverty and in an area that will obviously be a swamp in the wet season is further testimony to the conditions they decided to leave.

In the first three months of 1991, about 4,000 refugees from this area crossed the border into Sudan. They included a disproportionate number of young men and teenage boys, fearing conscription.

### *Burning Villages*

Throughout 1990 and into early 1991, the army was active in destroying villages, spreading southwards and eastwards out of the border area as the OLF gradually gained ground. The testimony of an army deserter obtained by Dr Trevor Trueman, a physician working with a humanitarian agency, and circumstantial evidence suggests that the army utilized special "burning squads". Members of the squads would enter a village after warning shots had scared the inhabitants away, collect farm tools and other implements and place them inside the houses, and then systematically burn all the houses. Crops were also burned.

The following incidents have been confirmed:

- \*September 1990: Al Amir area, several villages: 600 houses burned.
- \*September: Bela Bangaa village, Tuulu district, burned and attacked from the air, about 700 houses burned.
- \*October: Gibao, near Kobar: about 300 houses burned and looted by soldiers.
- \*November 8: Shirkale village, near Asosa, burned in an attack by helicopter gunships, killing one civilian and wounding five others.
- \*November 21: Fongo, near Kobar: over 90 houses burned by soldiers.
- \*November 26: Ego Kurmuk village attacked by helicopter gunships.
- \*November 28: Ego Gomono village attacked by helicopter gunships.

### *The Creation of Famine*

It will be clear from the details given above that the government military activity from 1989 onwards was causing great impoverishment. Certainly, visitors to the area report that local people said that they had become much poorer. Dr Trueman estimated that in Al Amir the average area farmed by one family had fallen from 1-2 hectares before the military actions to about half a hectare afterwards. The cumulative effect of enforced villagization, collectivization, destruction of houses and farms by the army, and forcible displacement were added to by the prevention of trade. Donkey trade almost came to a halt in the late 1980s on account of the brutality and demands for money of army patrols and checkpoints. It only restarted after the OLF occupation, but the retreating government forces took with them all cars and trucks, severely

disrupting bulk trading. Food prices were climbing fast in early 1991.

There can be no doubt that if the government's counter-insurgency policies had continued for another year or so, and spread to a larger area, famine would have ensued in western Wollega, despite the fact that it is an exceptionally fertile and well-watered area.

### *Conclusion*

Most of the population of the lowlands of Wollega has gone through, in an accelerated form, a version of the destruction, impoverishment and displacement that occurred in Tigray and Eritrea over a longer period. There were certain added complications such as resettlement, and the manner in which the Sudanese civil war directly spilled over into Ethiopia. While the OLF is in control of the great majority of the area at the time of writing, certain lowland areas adjacent to the Sudan border remain beyond any form of civil authority. Whether peace and stability are established in these parts depends crucially on developments in the Sudanese civil war. Re-establishing civil administration and the rule of law, and resolving the many local ethnic disputes that are certain to arise in this area, will demand considerable skill and patience from the incoming administration.

### **The Anuak of Illubabor**

One group of peripheral people who suffered particularly from the government's policies were the Anuak, who are a Nilotic people who inhabit an area straddling the Sudan border. Many Anuak bore the brunt of violently-enforced resettlement and villagization, and then were overwhelmed by an inflow of Sudanese refugees, accompanied by the SPLA. However, as in the case of most peripheral people, the government followed a strategy of "divide and rule." Certain groups of Anuak certainly benefited from government patronage and policies. The government armed an Anuak militia, which however had uncertain loyalties. The Anuak in Sudan also suffered from the neglect of their area by successive Sudanese governments, and the outbreak of the Sudanese civil war in 1983, and thus were more sympathetic to the Ethiopian government.

The Ethiopian Anuak numbered an estimated 56,000 in 1970. Historically and culturally they have greater ties with their neighbors in Sudan than they do with the Ethiopian highlands. Their well-watered area has, however, been coveted by successive Ethiopian governments. In 1979, many Anuak were evicted en masse when the government set up irrigation schemes on the Baro river. Amhara settlers were brought from the north to farm the schemes. This coincided with an intense conscription campaign for the army.<sup>19</sup> Several hundred Anuak were killed by the

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<sup>19</sup> Survival International, 1991, pp. 3-4.

army, and in response the Gambela Liberation Front (GLF)<sup>20</sup> was set up in 1980. It had links with the OLF and operated through Sudan. There were clashes between the army and the GLF in 1982, with government reprisals against the civilian population.

In 1979, 4,000 Anuak and Nuer fled to Sudan, claiming their land had been confiscated by the government. Shortly afterwards, 3,000 of their southern neighbors, the Begol, also fled to Sudan. Without any investigation of conditions on the Ethiopian side of the border, the UNHCR floated a proposal to repatriate these refugees in 1983.<sup>21</sup>

The resettlement program in Gambela in 1984-6 involved another round of land confiscation. It also meant that the Anuak population was matched by 70,000 new settlers.

In June 1986, villagization began among the Anuak population of Illubabor. The program was implemented in a particularly severe manner. The Anuak population was compelled to relocate in villages integrated with the recently-set up resettlement sites. The new villages have been described as more akin to forced labor camps.<sup>22</sup>

In April-May 1987, the re-named GLF staged several attacks on the resettlement sites that were now "integrated" with the new Anuak villages. A clinic in Abol settlement was attacked, apparently with the intention of killing government cadres. Government reprisals included the killing of a number of Anuak, and the enforcement of a strict curfew and related restrictions in Gambela town and nearby areas, by a militia drawn from among the resettlers.

The Anuak were also victims of attacks by the SPLA, with numerous credible but unconfirmed reports of killings of civilians. After 1988 the SPLA gained full control of the Sudan border, and GLF military activity ceased.

In May-June 1991, when the OLF and EPRDF occupied Gambela, the GLF was given a large role in the administration of the area. The Anuak militia was partially disarmed. The GLF is reported to have engaged in attacks on resettlement sites, looting villages and killing tens of civilians.

### **The SPLA and Sudanese Refugees**

Starting in 1983, Sudanese refugees began to flee the war in southern Sudan. Many headed for Ethiopia, where the SPLA and Ethiopian government gave them protection, and international agencies provided assistance.

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<sup>20</sup> Renamed the Gambela People's Liberation Movement in 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-84," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 112, 332.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra Steingraber, "Integrated Settlement in Gambella: Armed Uprisings and Government Reprisals," in Clay *et al.*, 1988, pp. 236-7.

Two camps were set up in western Illubabor and one in the adjoining area of Keffa. By 1990, Itang camp had 270,000 registered refugees, though in reality it probably held about 150,000, due to some having double-registered and others having left the camp but remained on the register. Fugnido had 85,000 registered, though actually probably 50,000-60,000. Dima, in Keffa, had 35,000. The population of these camps was about 75% young men and boys. This reached an extreme at Dima camp in 1988, where the population was 97.8%, 86% of them aged between 15 and 45.<sup>23</sup> Part of the explanation for this is that the women and young children had fled the war and famine in a different direction (to northern Sudan), and part is that the refugee camps also operated as military bases for the SPLA.

Security was always tight at the refugee camps. Foreign visitors were given only guided tours, and usually not allowed to stay overnight. The SPLA presence was strong, and uniformed SPLA members were often present. According to a former Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation, internationally-donated food aid was diverted to the soldiers of the SPLA.<sup>24</sup> In 1991, it was commonly estimated that 20 per cent of the food destined for the camps was diverted to the SPLA, but visitors to the neighboring areas of Sudan report that much of this "diverted" food was in fact being eaten by civilian relatives of the refugees inside Sudan. However, the diversion of ten per cent of the food would have been sufficient to feed half of the combatant members of the SPLA.

According to an arrangement reached with the Ethiopian government, the SPLA was given a free hand in much of Illubabor province, in return for keeping the GLF in check.

In the lowlands of Keffa province, cattle raiding by SPLA units was common. SPLA soldiers would demand cattle from the local population.

#### *The Refugees Return to Sudan, May 1991*

In a few days in May and June 1991, almost the entire population of Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia returned to Sudan, precipitating a humanitarian crisis and a major relief operation led by the UN. Allegations were made -- some by the SPLA -- that the refugees had been forcibly driven out by the EPRDF and/or OLF, or that a Sudanese army attack on the camps was planned. None of these claims were true. The SPLA later said that they had led the refugees out, fearing for the safety of the refugees during a breakdown of law and order.

In late March 1991, EPRDF forces crossed from Gojjam into Wollega. In the first ten

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<sup>23</sup> UNHCR Technical Support Service, "Ethiopia: Health and Nutrition Assessment of Southern Sudanese Refugee Camps in Kefa, Illubabor and Wolega Awrajas, 8-22 March 1988," Geneva, 1988, Annexe F.

<sup>24</sup> Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ, 1989, p. 158.

days of April they captured the provincial capital, Nekempte, and other key garrisons. Defeated government soldiers looted several parts of Nekempte town, including stealing property and vehicles belonging to the UN relief operation for Sudanese refugees.

In occupying Wollega, the EPRDF cut the route between Addis Ababa and the Sudanese refugee camps. On April 5, an EPRDF representative assured the UNHCR in Geneva that the Front was willing to cooperate with continued relief programs to the camps, allowing free passage of relief commodities. The UNHCR never took up the offer, presumably because the negotiations necessary to obtain an agreement from both sides would have taken too long, the situation was too unstable, the position of the OLF was unclear, and the UN was fearful for its staff following the looting incidents in Nekempte and the OLF attack on Tsore in 1990. This meant that there were no more food deliveries to the camps. However, grain remained in store, and some distributions occurred.

More generally, the EPRDF said it was willing to see the refugees remain in Ethiopia, but it would not accept the armed presence of the SPLA. In April and May, four separate attempts were made by mediators to bring representatives of the SPLA and EPRDF together to discuss the plight of the refugees. On each occasion the suggestion to meet was rejected by the SPLA -- "why should we talk to them?" was the SPLA attitude.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile there was a series of meetings between the EPRDF and the OLF, and the two organizations agreed to coordinate their military strategy in the southwest. This led to a coordinated advance southwards towards Illubabor.

When President Mengistu fled the country on May 22, the imminent collapse of the government was clearly evident. The refugees in the camps were tense, apprehensive of a repeat of the Asosa incident. The relief agencies feared for the safety of their staff, and began to withdraw from Itang, the most northerly camp, on May 24-25. UNHCR evacuated its staff at the same time, taking the keys of the food stores and other vital equipment. The hospital at Itang was left without doctors or administrators. The last staff members left on the morning of May 26.

On the evening of May 26, OLF forces approached the Ethiopian army garrison north of Itang, and EPRDF forces approached Gambela town. The advancing forces shelled both garrisons, and the garrisons replied. However, the government soldiers quickly left, setting fire to their houses and an ammunition dump, which caused a series of explosions. Several bridges across the Baro river were destroyed, almost certainly by government soldiers. Shells fired by the advancing forces landed close to the camps. The shelling and explosions alarmed the refugees -- especially those who had previously fled from Tsore.

Earlier in the year, the SPLA had laid contingency plans for an evacuation of the refugee

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<sup>25</sup> "Sudan and Ethiopia; No Rebel Unity," *Middle East International*, June 14, 1991.

population.<sup>26</sup> The refugees had been warned beforehand that they might have to leave, river transport was arranged for community leaders and administrators, and the migration to Sudan was conducted in a remarkably orderly manner.

Throughout the day of May 26 and the following night, the camp of Itang was evacuated. Most people headed for Nasir; smaller numbers went to Akobo and to the other refugee camps, from where they returned to Sudan. Some people went back to Itang the following day to collect possessions, but members of the government Anuak militia were present, engaging in looting, and this deterred them. There is some evidence that this looting had been planned in advance, for example Anuak militiamen had prevented the camp administrators opening the food stores the day before. The Anuak militia and unaffiliated bandits also preyed on small groups of refugees as they trekked towards Sudan. A Gaajak Nuer militia (also armed by the Ethiopian government) crossed into Sudanese territory (partly because of a conflict with the Anuak militia) and preyed upon the refugees there. Dead bodies of those killed by these militias and bandits floated down the Sobat River the following week.

The camps at Fugnido and Dima were evacuated over the following weeks. The refugees from these camps neither saw nor heard any sign of the OLF or EPRDF forces. In Fugnido they were reportedly warned to leave by armed local people, and migrated to Pochala in Sudan in accordance with SPLA instructions. In Dima, the SPLA closed the camp, looting and destroying vehicles and other property, and ordered the refugees to leave to Pakok in Sudan. The SPLA forces then made a stand inside Ethiopia against the EPRDF forces until they were forced to leave in early July.

The Sudan government was aware in advance of the likely return of the refugees, and closely monitored the return movements, by listening in to radio traffic and sending airplanes to overfly the area. The Sudanese air force bombed Nasir on May 14 (killing 49 people and wounding 50, and forcing the evacuation of the town) and on May 22, killing one. Columns of returning refugees were also bombed, at Jokau (on the way to Nasir) on May 30 and Akobo on May 31. The bombing was carried out from a great height and was highly inaccurate and caused at most one fatality.

A UN-led relief program, including an airdrop of food to Nasir, was implemented almost immediately. Like other such programs in southern Sudan, it has been subject to delays and restrictions by the Sudan government. To date, while a large relief-dependent population exists in Nasir, Pochalla, Akobo, Pakok and in the surrounding areas, the previous good nutritional state of the refugees, the local resources of the area, and the relief program has prevented the extremes

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<sup>26</sup> Proposals had been circulating for some time for a gradual return of the refugees to their homes. Western donors had disagreed over whether it would be better for the refugees to remain or return. Some refugees had also made independent plans to return after the harvest of late 1991.

of famine.

### *Conclusion*

The continued support of the SPLA for the Mengistu government until its final days was a debacle for the organization, and particularly for its leader Col. John Garang who was personally identified with the policy. The SPLA lost military supplies and bases, its radio station, and a haven for its civilian sympathisers. These factors contributed to an attempted coup by the SPLA military commanders in Upper Nile province in August 1991. The outcome of the split in the SPLA remains uncertain at the time of writing. Relations between the EPRDF, OLF and the two wings of the SPLA will be an important determinant of the peace and stability of the border region in the foreseeable future.

### **Lowland Gamu Gofa: Carriers of New Guns**

The lowlands of Gamu Gofa, adjacent to the frontiers of Sudan and Kenya, is the remotest periphery of Ethiopia. The peoples of this area have never been fully controlled by the highland states -- they are peripheral but not subjugated. They are mostly cattle-herders, and have a history of inter-communal violence. However, in the 1980s, this violence changed markedly, with the supply of modern automatic weapons to some groups. This weaponry upset the previously existing state of approximate balance between different groups, and led to unprecedented numbers of civilian deaths. The increased level of violence was also caused by, and in turn caused, direct military intervention by the Kenyan army, and may yet provoke a similar response from the Ethiopian government.

### *Conflicts up to the 1980s*

The river Omo drains into Lake Turkana in Kenya. In its lower reaches, it passes through territory inhabited by pastoral groups, such as the Dassenatch (also known as Marele), Nyangatom (also known as Dongiro and Bume),<sup>27</sup> Mursi, and Hamar. Their immediate neighbors in Sudan are the Toposa and in Kenya are the Turkana.

These peoples have traditionally conducted armed conflict between themselves. Some of this conflict consisted of cattle raiding, and some of disputes over territory. Social anthropologists have observed the rules followed in this local warfare, which include attempting to maintain reciprocity in attacks, and formalizing relations and boundaries after periods of hostility.

Dr David Turton, who has been studying the Mursi for over two decades, describes a typical raid carried out by the Hamar, which occurred on December 25, 1969, in the Elma Valley:

In the early hours of the morning a rifle shot was heard by people living nearby but it was assumed that the stock of this [cattle] camp were being worried by hyenas. Later it was discovered that the camp had been raided and three people killed -- the herd owner, who had been shot, and his two sons, aged about seven and thirteen, who were lying where they had been sleeping with their throats cut. All the cattle had been taken and their tracks led in the direction of the Mago Valley. The tracks of the raiders indicated that there were no more than four of them.<sup>28</sup>

It can be seen that the fighting involved "civilian" loss of life. The hostilities also contributed to recurrent food shortages, not just because loss of cattle or farmland meant loss of food, but because fear of raids led herders to take measures such as keeping their animals in large, well-protected groups, thus not utilizing grazing resources fully, and caused farmers not to cultivate outlying fields.

David Turton also describes a series of wars between the Mursi and their immediate neighbors in the highlands, the Bodi, over territory. Wars occurred in the early 1950s and between 1971 and 1975, and consisted in occasional raids and ambushes, with long quiet periods in between, until a formal peace agreement concluded the conflict and re-drew the territorial boundary.

These conflicts and the measures taken to preserve security directly contributed to famine

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<sup>27</sup> "Before the introduction of firearms, this particular group called themselves Nyam-Etom ('Elephant-Eaters'), which stressed their hunting abilities, but after the acquisition of guns, they rephrased this slightly to Nyang-Atom ([carriers of] 'new guns') which stresses their bellicose qualities instead." Jan-Ake Alvarsson, Starvation and Peace or Food and War: Aspects of Armed Conflict in the Lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia, Uppsala, 1989, p.87 (quoting Serge Tomay).

<sup>28</sup> David Turton, "Warfare, Vulnerability and Survival: a Case from Southwestern Ethiopia," Cambridge Anthropology, 13.2, (1988-9) p. 71.

in the area in 1971-3, when they coincided with drought. The drought and famine itself led to increased pressure on natural resources and led to more conflict with the Bodi. Disease, hunger and homicide all accounted for high levels of mortality during those years.<sup>29</sup>

Between 1968 and 1971, a war was also fought between the Bodi and their eastern neighbors, the Dime. The Bodi enjoyed the advantage of superior access to firearms, and were able to undertake raids with relative impunity. About 700 Dime men, women and children were killed and a further 1,000 forced to leave the area, a considerable loss to a population totalling no more than 11,000. The war was brought to an end by Mursi attacks on the Bodi and a government punitive expedition which confiscated cattle and firearms.<sup>30</sup>

Another local war was fought between the Dassenatch and the Nyangatom.<sup>31</sup> In the late 1960s, the Dassenatch, under pressure from the rising waters of Lake Turkana, which was flooding their farmland, began to press on Nyangatom territory. The Kenyan police enforced a peace in 1966 between Dassenatch, Nyangatom and Toposa, which involved burning several villages and trying to make the Ilemi Triangle a "no-man's land."<sup>32</sup> This peace began to break down in 1968-71, with killings by all groups, including three Kenyan policemen killed by Dassenatch in July 1970.

In 1972, this developed into a serious Dassenatch-Nyangatom conflict, with each side raiding the other and killing between six and ten people in four separate incidents between March and early June, followed by a major Dassenatch attack on three settlements south of Kibish on June 20, in which at least 204 Nyangatom men, women and children were killed as they slept or awoke. The Nyangatom were driven from their fields before they could harvest, and lost many cattle; famine resulted.

In January 1973, a joint Hamar-Kara war party attacked the Nyangatom, killing between 80 and 100. After the Ethiopian police failed to respond to Nyangatom appeals to intervene, the Nyangatom retaliated and killed 104 Kara at the village of Kurdam the following month. On June 21, the Hamar-Kara alliance attacked the Nyangatom at Aepa on the Omo River, killing about 60. The Nyangatom did not retaliate, as they were preparing (jointly with the Toposa) a raid against

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<sup>29</sup> David Turton, "Response to Drought: The Mursi of Ethiopia," in J. P. Garlick and R. W. J. Keays (eds.) *Human Ecology in the Tropics*, London, 1977, p. 180.

<sup>30</sup> Dave Todd, "War and Peace between the Bodi and Dime of Southwestern Ethiopia," in Katsuyoshi Fukui and David Turton (eds.) *Warfare among East African Herders*, Osaka, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> The following is based upon a detailed account of this conflict, in: Serge Tornay, "Armed Conflicts in the Lower Omo Valley, 1970-1976: An Analysis from within Nyangatom Society," in Fukui and Turton (eds.), 1979.

<sup>32</sup> The Ilemi triangle is an area of Sudanese territory, adjacent to Ethiopia, that has been administered by Kenya, under agreement, since colonial days. The international frontiers in this area have been drawn without reference to the boundaries and migration patterns local ethnic groups.

the Dassenatch. The raid was only a partial success: the intended victims managed to escape and only five were killed, 3,000 animals were taken, but 20 of the raiders died of thirst on the way home. The Dassenatch counter-attack in December at Kibish left 20 dead.

Further clashes continued into 1974, with at least 41 fatalities. The Nyangatom were in the ascendant: thereafter the Kara were obliged to become the lesser partners in an alliance with their erstwhile opponents.

During this period there were sporadic attempts by the Ethiopian and Kenyan governments to control the local warfare. This included paying compensation for cross-border raids, negotiating settlements, undertaking punitive patrols (four against the Dassenatch), and on one occasion, aerial bombardment of villages (the Ethiopian government against the Hamar).

Between the mid-1970s and 1986, the level of violence was much lower, with only 28 confirmed inter-tribal homicides.<sup>33</sup>

These conflicts remained under the control of the leaders of the respective ethnic groups. While involving regular violence and homicide, the problems remained within well-defined limits, and the level of military technology was low. In the 1980s, with the intervention of regular armed groups, notably the SPLA and the Kenyan army, and supplies of modern weaponry from these sources and from the Sudan government, conditions began to change, and bloodshed on a larger scale began to occur.

#### *The Nyangatom Massacre of the Mursi*

In the mid-1980s, both the SPLA and the Sudan government began to distribute automatic weapons to a number of cattle-herding people close to the Sudan-Ethiopia border. These groups then participated in cattle raiding inside Ethiopia. One group that was heavily armed was the Toposa, who were supported by the Khartoum government as an anti-SPLA militia. The Toposa in turn distributed arms to local allies inside Ethiopia, prominent among whom were the Nyangatom.

The Nyangatom were one group which benefited from the Sudanese supply of weapons. The Chai, as noted above, lost out heavily. The Mursi were next in line. Mursi-Nyangatom conflict has been longstanding, interspersed with periods of friendly relations and indeed interdependence with mutual trade. A typical incident of homicide occurred in April 1985, when two Mursi boys were shot dead by Nyangatom. Cases such as this were not considered exceptional; a cause for retribution but not for upsetting a fundamentally equitable relationship. In 1987, however, events occurred out of all proportion to what had gone before.

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<sup>33</sup> Alvarsson, 1989, p. 77.

In January or early February 1987, six Nyangatom who were visiting a Mursi village to buy grain were killed by their hosts, using guns and bush-knives. This was considered an outrageous violation of local norms of hospitality. In retaliation, the Nyangatom launched a massive raid on February 21. Equipped with automatic weapons, the destruction was unprecedented. A man who lost three family members in the attack recounted what happened. The Nyangatom crossed the Omo at the Kara village of Dus, south of the Omo-Mago junction and, guided by Kara, moved northwards up the east bank of the Omo, crossed the Mago and attacked the southern Mursi, who were now sitting targets, from the east. Thus, when the attack began at first light, the Mursi assumed that their attackers were Hamar.<sup>34</sup> It was only when they heard the sound of automatic rifles that they realised they were Nyangatom.

The slaughter was indiscriminate, most of those killed being women and children. This was, firstly, because a good proportion of the men were with the cattle, north of the Dara range and, secondly, because it was easier for men and boys, unencumbered with young children, to scatter and hide in the bush. The majority of people were killed with spears, having been wounded in the rifle fire. One particularly respected elder, who was well-known to the Nyangatom, was deliberately sought out and speared to death. The hands of women and girls were chopped off with bush knives so that their metal bracelets could be more easily removed ...<sup>35</sup>

Another visitor to the area met a girl who survived despite having both wrists severed with almost surgical neatness. Another Mursi described the aftermath of the massacre: The vultures could not eat all the corpses. Crocodiles pulled the bodies into the water. The grass down there died because of all the fat from the bodies.<sup>36</sup>

Between 600 and 800 were killed – over ten per cent of the entire Mursi population. Almost the entire southernmost section of the Mursi was annihilated.

The anthropologist Jan-Ake Alvarsson spoke with Nyangatom who had participated in the massacre and recounted how it had come about.

The attack in question had been well planned in advance. The force was supposed to charge at dawn, the vanguard consisting of four people, armed with one heavy and three light machine guns. They were also to carry four hand grenades. The second line was supposed to give the first one cover. They were equipped with sixteen carbines. The third line carried the ordinary (Austrian) rifles,<sup>37</sup> and the rest were intended to follow suit, equipped with spears or bush knives and to finish off those shot down by the front lines.

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<sup>34</sup> The significance of this is that the Hamar were not in conflict with the Mursi, so that the worst that could be expected was a small-scale cattle raid.

<sup>35</sup> Paraphrase based on an eyewitness account, in: Turton, 1988-89, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> In: "The Land is Bad," a film by Leslie Woodhead, shown on Independent Television, UK, July 17, 1991.

<sup>37</sup> These weapons were widely available during and after the second world war, most brought by the Italians.

In reality, things turned out differently.... It is unclear whether the target [i.e. which Mursi section] or the day of the battle were the ones planned. Furthermore, the army crossed the Omo around 8 a.m., much later than planned, and the attack was not as surprising as intended as people were awake. The military order was soon transformed into an unordered and undisciplined row. At least eight Nyangatom warriors were killed from behind by their own forces during the phase of wild shooting.<sup>38</sup>

The Mursi reprisal was taken against the Kara, the weaker part of the attacking alliance. On March 28, six Kara (including two children) were killed by Mursi, who retaliated by killing seven Mursi. In November, two Nyangatom were killed while working on a dug-out canoe. These were however only short term responses. The Mursi were emphatic that a counter-raid on a comparable scale was needed before an equitable peace could be concluded with the Nyangatom.

Mursi plans for counter-attack verged on the suicidal -- they were heavily outnumbered and possessed no automatic weapons. A much greater danger was further Nyangatom raids, which if carried out on a comparable scale, could have meant the end of the Mursi as a group.

#### *The Kenyan Massacre of the Nyangatom*

These plans and fears were overtaken by events. The Nyangatom were also engaged in raiding some of their other neighbors, such as the Dassenatch. In July 1988, in alliance with the Toposa, they carried out one such raid in the Ilemi Triangle. About 60 people were killed in the attack. Earlier in the year the Kenyan government had decided to annex the Triangle, and was fast developing a military presence in the area. The Sudan government was able to lodge only diplomatic protests, as all the surrounding countryside was controlled by the SPLA, which enjoys close relations with Kenya.

The Kenyan government has a long-standing hostility to the pastoralists who live on its borders, who cross the international frontiers as if they did not exist, and who engage in livestock raiding. The administration of these nomads has long consisted of punitive expeditions interspersed with attempts to persuade them to live a settled life, wear clothes and send their children to school.

On July 28, the Kenyan police clashed with a group of Toposa or Nyangatom raiders who had previously attacked the Dassenatch, and came off worst. Fifteen policemen were killed, and some taken hostage. The Kenyan government responded the following day with an attack using helicopter gunships and paramilitary forces on the Nyangatom area of Kibish, which straddles

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<sup>38</sup> Alvarsson, 1989, p. 68.

Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan. About 200 Nyangatom raiders and a minimum of 500 civilians were killed by the Kenyan forces over the following 18 days. In the attack, at least five villages inside Ethiopia were partly destroyed, and the Swedish Philadelphia Mission at Kibish was burned. The Kenyan army also undertook a retaliatory massacre against the Toposa in Sudan.<sup>39</sup>

Recent reports indicate that another round of killings may have started, with a reliable account that Mursi raiders killed tens of Ari in May 1991 in retaliation for the killing of one Mursi.

### *Conclusion*

Successive Ethiopian governments centered in the highlands have shared a similar attitude to pastoral nomads to that of the Kenyan government. The power base of the EPRDF is, like its predecessors, located in the highlands. The EPRDF avows an ideology which gives equality to all and the right of self-determination to peripheral people. However, the First National Congress of the EPRDF, held in February 1991, adopted a political program that included an item resolving "to settle nomads in settled agriculture."<sup>40</sup> This implies that if nomadic pastoralists do not agree to settle, the state is entitled to settle them by force. The history of such attempts indicates that the nomads will resist. Democratic rights and the enforced settlement of nomads are incompatible.

The Lower Omo valley presents a more general challenge to the government of Ethiopia (and indeed those of Kenya and Sudan). It is an area where their writ scarcely runs, and where central control can only be enforced by extraordinarily high levels of violence. Government-mediated settlements of local conflicts, the so-called "stranger's peace", can be successful only when both sides to the conflict share an interest in a settlement, and the terms of the settlement can be enforced. At least one such negotiated "stranger's peace" broke down in the 1970s for these reasons. A lasting peace and respect for human rights in this troubled area can only be achieved through long and patient interaction with the indigenous people, undertaken by all the governments concerned.

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<sup>39</sup> See: Africa Watch report, *Kenya: Taking Liberties*, July 1991, pp. 334-6.

<sup>40</sup> Revolutionary Democratic Program of the EPRDF adopted at the First National Congress, Political Program, Article 8(d).

## **19. DIVIDE AND MISRULE: THE EAST, 1984-91**

In 1983-4, the Ethiopian government completed a bloody victory over the insurgencies in the southeast. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), Somali-Abo Liberation Front (SALF) and Sidama Liberation Front were all defeated and the OLF was severely weakened and would no longer pose a significant military threat. A key element in this success was the Ethiopian government's strategy of fostering divisions in the ranks of the insurgents: its support for the Somali National Movement (SNM) against the WSLF was the clearest example. In this strategy of "divide and rule," the Ethiopian government was, ironically, assisted by the Somali government, which was following exactly the same strategy.

As a result, the lines of conflict became more fragmented and complex. As well as attacks on civilians by the Somali and Ethiopian armies, there was an increasing level of inter-communal violence which extended throughout eastern Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. This chapter documents some of the abuses of human rights that resulted from this fragmentation, for which the Siad Barre and Mengistu governments share ultimate responsibility.

### **Unrest in the Ogaden**

The Ogaden did not return to peace after the defeat of the WSLF; but neither was there widespread rebellion. Instead there was a low level of violence between the well-armed but impoverished, restricted and frustrated herders, and the Ethiopian army, police and members of other communities. A breakaway group from the WSLF, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) was formed in 1984, but failed to make a military impact.<sup>1</sup>

The drought of 1984 together with government policies led to a number of violent incidents in the Ogaden. The villagization of the highland Oromo involved the relocation of many communities in areas which had previously been used as pasture by the herders. Other areas were allocated to resettlers from Wollo. There were a number of violent disputes between the pastoralists and farmers.

In September or October 1987, in relation for an ambush on a military lorry at Dhakato, for which the ONLF claimed credit, army units moved to Fiiq, south of Harer, confiscated animals and killed three people.

A series of incidents occurred in August 1988. Ogadeni herders had delivered their animals to the government Livestock Exporting Company agents in Gode and Degahabur, and were awaiting payment. The payment did not come; and in reprisal some herders attacked a

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<sup>1</sup> The words "Western Somali" in "WSLF" indicate an attachment to the ideal of a greater Somalia; the "Ogaden National" title of the ONLF indicates the belief that the Ogaden are a nationality, not merely a clan, and indicates no relationship with the Somali state.

government geological team in the area, killing one Soviet and three Ethiopian technicians. An army force responded by surrounding the livestock herds which had congregated at a well at Bulale and holding the animals until the killers were handed over. The herders denied knowing who was responsible for the killing, and the animals were confiscated.

This event led to increased tension between the army -- still behaving like an occupying force -- and the local people. Shortly beforehand, the army had refused to let the herders use a valley between Degahabur and Aware for grazing. It had been a traditional pasture area used especially during times of drought, but had been occupied by the army as a training area. Use of the valley had become more important since 1984 when another valley at Tur, near Gode, had been allocated to a resettlement scheme for farmers from Wollo. The members of a delegation sent by local people to protest their exclusion were detained. Some young Ogadeni herders (armed, as is usual) wandered into the restricted area, whereupon an army unit opened fire on them. The herders fired back. According to reports, 21 of the herders and three soldiers were killed. In another incident at Dhanaan, soldiers killed 17 herders in a punitive expedition mounted in reprisal for the killing of a government officer, before senior army officers intervened and ordered them to halt.

While most of the violence was between Ogadeni clansmen and the army, there were also clashes with member of other clans. One incident occurred in 1985, following a fight between herders belonging to the Isaaq and Abasguul clans. The governor of Jijiga ordered the army into the area and 125 Isaaq herders were reported killed.

## Arming Refugees in Somalia, 1984-87

The refugee population in northern Somalia played a central role in the conflicts that developed after the demise of the WSLF in 1983. This occurred because the Somali government used them for military purposes against the SNM. At first, only members of the Ogaden clan were conscripted or armed; later this included members of all Somali clans and also Oromo refugees. The arming of refugees was well under way before the outbreak of full-scale war in northern Somalia in May 1988.

Immediately after its military defeat in March 1978, the Somali government began recruiting Ogadeni refugees into the WSLF. In 1983, this was changed, and refugees were instead conscripted directly into the army. A special Division (the 12th) was formed, initially comprising 5,000 refugee conscripts, the great majority of whom were from the Ogaden clan. The conscription of refugees to the military is contrary to international law, under the 4th Geneva Convention of 1949.

From early 1984, the 12th Division was used against the local Isaaq population. Some of the abuses it committed include:

\*December 6, 1984: Sheikh area: in retaliation for an ambush by the SNM in which the commander of the 12th Division was killed, soldiers rounded up teachers, merchants and others and transferred them to Burao, where they were later shot. A total of 43 were executed in this incident.<sup>2</sup>

\*January 1988: Alleybadey: about 20 civilians executed.

\*March 14, 1988: Gebiley and Tug Wajale: 25 community leaders executed in reprisal for an SNM attack.<sup>3</sup>

In 1985, as unrest intensified in northern Somalia and more Isaaq soldiers and officers defected from the army to the SNM, the Somali government increasingly used force to obtain conscripts to fill the gaps in the ranks of other divisions. Between 1985 and 1987, refugee health workers were taken more than ten times, and high level intervention was needed by the refugee administration to obtain their release. At one point in 1987, 140 community health workers were press-ganged; 50 were taken in 1986, together with a number of hospital outpatients.<sup>4</sup> In May

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<sup>2</sup> See Africa Watch report, A Government at War with its Own People: Somalia: Testimonies about the Killings and the Conflict in the North, January 1990, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Africa Watch report, 1990, p. 65 and appendix 5.

<sup>4</sup> Africa Watch interview with Mohamed Dahir Khair, Refugee Health Unit, September 1991.

1987, the Somali army raided the refugee camp at Bihin near Berbera and took 200-300 refugees for military service, and also took conscripts from the nearby Biyoley camp. During September and October 1987, 5,000-7,000 refugees were forcibly conscripted in the camps.<sup>5</sup>

The recruitment operations often included violence against refugees, including some killings. UNHCR protests to the government met with no response. However, these were not backed up with effective sanctions. The US and other western donors continued to support the Somali government with generous and unconditional aid, seeing it as a strategic cold-war ally.

Starting in November 1984, the government also created camp militia. The rationale for this was that refugee camps were often located in remote places, far from army and police posts, and increasing SNM incursions meant that a self-defense capacity was required. Members of the Ogaden clan received arms preferentially.

During 1984-6, there was a new influx of Oromo refugees, fleeing villagization and related atrocities. Some of the new refugee camps (for example Bihin and Biolley) were sited in remote areas, unsuitable on account of poor access and health hazards. The rationale behind their location was that they would provide a military presence in these areas, where the SNM was active.

In 1985, the Somali government began to arm some of the Oromo refugees. An organization was created headed by Sheikh Ibrahim Belissa, a religious leader who was formerly a member of the Somali-Abo Liberation Front, who was living in exile in Hargeisa. Sheikh Belissa's Oromo front was assisted with arms and internationally-donated food aid, with the intention that it would infiltrate into northern Harerghe province of Ethiopia to engage the Ethiopian army and the SNM. Before 1988, it did not engage in military actions or commit significant atrocities inside Somalia.

There was also a small group of Amhara refugees in Somalia, some of whom were pressured into joining the Somali army -- the alternative was indefinite restriction to a refugee camp or detention.<sup>6</sup>

The refugee camps thus became military targets. One of the first SNM actions against the camps was the kidnapping of a French medical team in Tug Wajale camp on January 24, 1987. The eleven members of the team were released unharmed after ten days.

#### *Other Somali-backed Fronts*

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<sup>5</sup> *Agence France Presse*, October 27, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Hiram Ruiz, "Detained in Exile: Ethiopians in Somalia's Shelembod Camp," United States Committee for Refugees, Washington D.C., 1987.

The Somali government also fostered two other small armed fronts from among refugees, residents on northern Somalia, and former fighters of the WSLF.

After the demise of the WSLF, one of its divisions, known as Iil Tire, remained active among members of the Issa clan in northern Harerghe. This was later renamed the Issa and Gurgura Liberation Front (IGLF), and joined the EPRDF. It enjoyed the support of the Somali government, and clashed with the SNM on the Somali border. It is unclear whether clashes between the Issa and Oromo communities near Dire Dawa and the Issa and Afar in the late 1980s were related to the ILF, or were due instead to armed members of the clan unaffiliated to it.

In the late 1980s, the Somali government also assisted a Gadabursi Front (also known as the Somali Democratic Alliance). The Gadabursi Front was hostile to the SNM and is reported to have killed a mentally-handicapped Isaaq civilian in a reprisal attack in 1989.<sup>7</sup>

The conscription and arming of refugees in southern Somalia also took place, though there was no outright warfare in the region at the time.

### **Peace and War in Northern Somalia, April-May 1988**

On April 1-2, 1988, just two weeks after the EPLF victory at Afabet, President Mengistu hurriedly negotiated a formal peace with Somalia. His aim was the transfer of troops from the Ogaden to Eritrea. The belated peace agreement also allowed for the exchange of prisoners of war captured in the war a decade before, and for the repatriation of refugees to be put on a more formal basis. Finally, an essential part of the agreement was a commitment by each country to end assistance to insurgent groups operating out of each others' territory. While neither side followed this policy fully, the promised expulsion of the SNM from Ethiopia had immediate consequences.

In late May, the SNM launched surprise attacks on the major towns of northern Somalia, and succeeded in occupying Burao and most of Hargeisa.

The delivery of relief supplies to the Ethiopian refugees was cut off, and the fighting also included several SNM attacks on refugee camps. According to testimonies obtained by Robert Gersony of the US State Department, the SNM attacked nine refugee camps in the region and killed at least 240 civilians.<sup>8</sup> While the killing of civilians is a grave abuse, the camps themselves also constituted genuine military targets.

Further abuses against refugees occurred in early 1989. The SNM executed ten prisoners

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Gersony, "Why Somalis Flee: Synthesis of Accounts of Conflict Experiences in Northern Somalia by Somali Refugees, Displaced Persons and Others," Bureau for Refugee Programs, Department of State, Washington D.C., 1989, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Gersony, 1989, pp. 50-2, 63. Contrary to Gersony's claims, there was widespread distribution of arms to the refugees during the preceding years.

of war whom it described as "Ethiopian refugees who had received weapons from the Somali Armed Forces in order to combat the SNM."<sup>9</sup> Another reported incident took place in March when eleven Ogadeni refugees (including three children) were killed and 16 wounded in an SNM attack on a truck.

The Somali army responded with land and air attacks against the SNM and the towns of northern Somalia causing an extremely high level of devastation.<sup>10</sup>

Refugee soldiers and militia were prominent during the army counter-offensive. This included Ogaden refugee units in the regular army (notably the 12th Division), members of the camp militias, and -- for the first time -- Sheikh Belissa's Oromo front, which fought alongside the army. These attacks witnessed an extraordinarily high level of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, including routine summary executions, looting and rape as well as some large-scale massacres.

As a result of the war, about 20,000 refugees returned to Ethiopia and about 400,000 northern Somalis also fled across the border to take refuge in camps near Jijiga.

### **Uphcaval in Southern Somalia, January 1991**

In 1989, the Ethiopian government also began to provide arms and support to the United Somali Congress (USC), a recently-formed opposition group active in central/southern Somalia.

In January 1991, the government of Siad Barre was finally overthrown after a prolonged battle in Mogadishu. The USC was the immediate victor: although a relative newcomer to the opposition, it drew its support from the vicinity of the capital and so was able to occupy the seat of power -- or what was left of it. The fall of the Siad Barre government did not, however, mean peace or stability. Fighting and insecurity continues in Mogadishu and the countryside.

The breakdown in security and the resulting cut-off in supplies to the refugee camps made life extremely difficult for the refugees in southern Somalia. There were also a number of attacks on refugees. On January 21-25, over 100 refugees were reported killed at Baladweyne by USC forces. Other attacks on refugees occurred in the Hiran region.<sup>11</sup>

These factors cumulatively led to a massive return of refugees from Somalia, plus an inflow of refugees. About 140,000 refugees and returnees crossed the border in a matter of two

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<sup>9</sup> Gersony, 1989, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> See Africa Watch report, Somalia, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> A report by the OLF on February 11, 1991, that over 600 Oromo refugees were killed by Ethiopian forces at Luuq, has not been confirmed and was almost certainly inaccurate (BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts, ME/0995, February 13, 1991).

months, and numbers continued to increase. 90,000 crossed into northern Harerghe, about 100,000 into the southern Ogaden, and 50,000 into the lowlands of Sidamo. This created a humanitarian crisis, especially in the remote southern Ogaden camps.

### **The Oromo Fronts in Ethiopia**

By 1984, Ethiopian military strategy was effective in counter-acting the threat posed by the OLF and the Oromo Islamic Fronts (OIF)<sup>12</sup> in Harerghe. The combination of villagization, continued military operations and cutting off any possible support from Somalia proved successful. The Somali government's strategy of using the Oromo population and fronts for its own purposes contributed to this military eclipse.

The OIF, headed by Sheikh Jarer, emerged as a significant force in northeast Harerghe in the mid-1980s. Sheikh Jarer was a military commander in the OLF until he split from them in 1978 to form his own movement, which in about 1985 acquired the label "Islamic."<sup>13</sup> It acquired support from the Somali government and a link with Sheikh Belissa's front inside northern Somalia, though the extent to which the two fronts cooperated in military terms is unclear. The Somali government closed the OLF office in Mogadishu in 1982 and prevented the organization operating from Somalia. There was also lack of unity between the OLF and OIF and both failed to cooperate with the WSLF. These factors combined with the success of the SNM in controlling the northern Ogaden border to create a great hindrance on the successful maintenance of an Oromo insurrection in the southeast.

Throughout the period 1985-91, atrocities by the Ethiopian army accompanied routine actions against suspected OLF sympathizers, and reprisals after OLF actions. For example, in February 1987, there are credible reports that the army killed up to 270 people at Qadriyah and Dibley, in reprisal for an attack by the OLF.<sup>14</sup> The following month, the army sealed off wells at Bullale, causing many animals to die of thirst, and in July, the army rounded up an estimated 8,000 villagers and kept them for a while in four military camps. While most were later released, seven were reported shot dead, 41 remained in detention, and 23 young women were kept for the soldiers' sexual gratification.

Some instances of OLF killings of civilians have also been reported, including the selective killing of Amhara settlers in eastern Harerghe in March 1990.

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<sup>12</sup> This front has used a variety of names during its existence; OIF is used here for convenience.

<sup>13</sup> The front has no significant links with Islamic fundamentalist organizations in Sudan or the Middle East. "Sheikh Jarer" is a nom de guerre; he is not a religious leader.

<sup>14</sup> Africa Contemporary Record, 1987-8, p. B288.

The Ethiopian government launched a number of military actions against the OIF. It also engaged in a systematic attempt to destroy centers of Moslem learning in Harerghe, which it saw as the source of anti-government mobilization. During 1985 and 1986, mosques, Islamic schools, tombs of local Moslem holy men and pilgrimage sites were destroyed. These included Fayaanbiro mosque and Sufi lodge (near Babile), the Sheikh Sayed Ahmed lodge at Babile, and the tomb of Abdel Rahman Zeilahi, between Degahabur and Qabridaharre.

The OIF clashed with the SNM on several occasions, particularly after 1988. In January 1991, an SNM unit kidnapped Sheikh Belissa and handed him over to the Ethiopian government; he was detained until the fall of the government in May. This incident reportedly led to violence between the Oromo and Isaaq communities inside Ethiopia.

Instances in which OIF units engaged in ethnically-based violence against Amhara settlers have also been reported.

On one or two occasions, the OIF also came into conflict with the OLF. Some of the OIF leaders were defectors from the OLF, and there was deep resentment between the two organizations. There were armed clashes between the two fronts on several occasions, and OIF units ambushed and killed some members of the OLF.

### **The EPRDF Takeover, May-June 1991**

Until 1991, all the armed Oromo and Somali groups in eastern Ethiopia had one thing in common: the knowledge that if their military activities became too successful, the army would engage in large-scale reprisals. The sudden collapse of the Ethiopian army in May 1991 removed this fear. The divisions that had deepened over the previous years were the cause of an increase in inter-communal violence. Neither the OLF nor the OIF had sufficient military strength or political mobilization to fill the power vacuum that suddenly appeared.

In the days after the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa, the Third Army in Harerghe was deeply split. Some officers proposed surrendering to the EPRDF; others proposed resistance, and still others tried to flee the country. In Dire Dawa the small garrison put up no resistance and the town was occupied on the evening of May 29. In the brief interregnum there was a looting spree, especially of the airport, and about six people were killed. There were also ominous signs of inter-ethnic violence between the Issa Somali and the Oromo communities. On May 30, there were anti-EPRDF demonstrations in the town, which were dispersed when EPRDF fighters fired over the heads of the crowd. No casualties were reported.

Two senior army officers who attempted to flee the country by helicopter were apprehended by army units close to the border and later handed over to the EPRDF.

The only significant resistance occurred around Harer, where a garrison of about 10,000

troops was stationed. On May 28, the commanding officer of the Harer garrison announced a surrender. Two days later, middle-ranking officers, encouraged by a spate of anti-EPRDF demonstrations by students, mutinied and killed their superiors, and vowed to fight against the EPRDF. The mutiny led to widespread violence in Harer, including looting and killing. One employee of a UN relief program was killed outside the Ras Hotel in the town center on May 31. By June 1, the mutineers had gained control, and prepared defensive lines close to a military base outside the town on the Dire Dawa road and distributed arms to the civilian population with instructions to defend the town itself.

On June 2, the EPRDF force attacked the army positions. About 600-800 combatants were killed in the engagement, probably including some former civilians armed and mobilized by the mutineers. The EPRDF forces won the battle. Most of the armed civilians refused the order to defend Harer and instead let the EPRDF peacefully occupy the town the following day. The occupation was disciplined and there are no reports of fighters committing abuses against civilians.

The disintegration of the army and police led to a sudden upsurge in banditry, including some robbery by deserting soldiers. A relief convoy was attacked at Kebri Dehar on May 30, and two trucks were stolen. Eight other relief vehicles were stolen in other incidents, and many rural roads became impassable.

### **Continuing Violence Since the EPRDF Takeover**

In the rural areas around Harer, there are numerous reports of violence against Amhara civilians, including employees of the government and the United Nations agencies, mainly by Oromo residents. Some of the violence can be traced to members of the OIF. A number of Amhara civilians fled from the towns of Harerghe to Addis Ababa, fearing for their lives. Some reported that they had been ordered to leave the region within 24 hours.

There was a serious incident of inter-communal violence in Dire Dawa on July 7. A large section of the Oromo community held a political rally in the soccer stadium, sponsored by the OLF. After the rally a number of armed Oromo gathered and attacked Issa civilians in the town, killing eight. EPRDF forces intervened to stop the fighting and disarm the two groups; about 12-15 people were killed during this operation. In reprisal for the deaths of the Issa civilians, between July 8 and 15, Issas in Djibouti attacked Oromo refugees. Between ten and 15 were confirmed killed, though some Oromo sources claimed that the number was as high as 200. About 500 refugees fled to seek sanctuary in the compound of the UNHCR, and several thousand sought refuge among Afar groups in Djibouti, particularly in Arbeha. There is fear that this inter-communal violence may intensify and bring about a civil war in Djibouti and neighboring

areas of Ethiopia.

In the highlands of Harerghe and Bale, many rural communities also resisted the re-introduction of central authority in the form of the EPRDF. Community leaders argued that there was no need for an EPRDF military presence, because the areas were "liberated" already. Incidents of violence have occurred between residents and EPRDF forces, and a number of people have been killed. The fighting has been sufficiently serious to close main roads in Harerghe for weeks. It has caused friction between the EPRDF and the OLF; the EPRDF demanded that the OLF demobilize its fighters so as to restore law and order, or close its offices. However it is highly questionable whether the armed units are under the command of the OLF. An agreement was reached on August 27 which established zones of control for both organizations, but did not address the fundamental problems the mutual suspicions between local Oromo villagers and the EPRDF units controlling the towns and main roads.

The Oromo highlands of the southeast present a major challenge to the new government. The EPRDF needs to maintain law and order and to allow the expression of popular aspirations without resorting to indiscriminate violence. The OLF and OIF, for their part, needs to ensure that the legitimate demands of the population are not channelled into violent resistance while the options of democratic participation are open.

## 20. WESTERN POLICY TOWARDS ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia has had close relations with a number of western countries throughout the 20th century, including Belgium, France, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Sweden, and the United States. Successive governments have turned selectively to different western countries for economic, military and diplomatic support. During and immediately after the Second World War, the Ethiopian government was dominated by Britain. The British army had been instrumental in liberating the country from Italian fascist rule in 1941, and British military administration continued in Eritrea until 1952. Thereafter, Haile Selassie began to cultivate closer ties with the United States.

### US Policy and Haile Selassie

Ethiopia under the Emperor Haile Selassie was the United States' closest ally in Africa. This was due to several factors. One was that after the Second World War the US was promoting a policy of decolonization in Africa and Asia. Ethiopia, as the only indigenous independent state in Africa, was symbolically central to this policy, which was duly encouraged by Haile Selassie. The Emperor was instrumental in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its adoption of a pro-western stance and conservative position on inherited boundaries. A second reason was Ethiopia's strategic position adjacent to the Red Sea, and its possession of the communications center at Kagnaw, near Asmara. For more than a decade after the US signed a 25 year lease on Kagnaw base in 1953, it was the most important "listening post" in the Middle East.

The strategic value of Ethiopia's Red Sea coastline, all of which fell in the territory of Eritrea, and of Kagnaw station, meant that the US was an enthusiastic supporter of the unity of Eritrea and Ethiopia. In a now famous statement, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said to the UN Security Council in 1952:

From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration.

Nevertheless, the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked to our ally, Ethiopia.

As a consequence, from 1953-76, Ethiopia was the largest recipient of US aid in Africa. This included generous military assistance, based on the 1953 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement. Ethiopia received more than half of the US's entire military assistance to Africa during this period. Between 1953-76 the US trained and equipped an army of about 40,000 men

and an air force of 2,000, at a cost of \$280 million.<sup>1</sup> The annual subsidy to the army was about \$12 million. About 4,000 officers and air force personnel were trained in the US. However, when Haile Selassie made repeated requests for increased arms deliveries to offset the threat of Soviet-armed Somalia after 1960, the US was unwilling to supply all the armaments and finance he requested. Such requests were made in 1967 and 1973, and turned down because the US considered them excessive.

Earlier, in recognition of US support, Haile Selassie had sent a battalion to fight in Korea. However, he was no simple vassal of the US; for example he visited the Soviet Union and to discuss economic and military assistance, and publicly supported the Arab states over against Israel in 1973.

The United States was not the only western supporter of Haile Selassie. In the 1940s and '50s, and to a lesser extent afterwards, the Swedish government had supplied training and material for the Imperial bodyguard and the air force. The British trained the army until 1949, and provided limited technical assistance thereafter. Ethiopia and Israel signed a military pact in 1958, whereby Israel provided training at the Holeta military academy and (from 1964) counter-insurgency advisors in Eritrea. This continued until Haile Selassie broke diplomatic relations with Israel in October 1973, in deference to the OAU's support for the Arab states in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Ethiopian-Israeli relations remained warm, however, and Israeli military advisors returned during 1975-7.

### **The West and the Revolution**

In the early days of the revolution, the United States continued to be the major foreign power with an interest in Ethiopia. For three years from the outbreak of popular unrest in February 1974, the US attitude can be described as conciliatory but concerned. Other western governments followed comparable policies, while internal conditions led to scaled down assistance to development programs. Italy -- worried about the welfare of the large numbers of Italian citizens, especially in besieged Asmara -- remained close to the government diplomatically, but net flows of economic aid completely dried up by 1977. Thereafter there was a dramatic break in US-Ethiopian relations, which cooled to the point of becoming frozen in cold-war hostility.

For its part, the Dergue both demanded armaments from the US, and attacked "US Imperialism" in official pronouncements, before instigating the rupture itself.

During 1974-6, the US policy of supplying generous military aid to Ethiopia continued.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lemmu Baissa, "Militarization and Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa," in Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on the Horn of Africa, CUNY, New York, May 26-28, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> The following discussion owes much to: David A. Korn, Ethiopia, The United States and the Soviet Union,

In fact, in 1975 and 1976, arms shipments increased substantially. However, the amounts delivered were not enough to satisfy the Dergue, which sent missions to a variety of countries asking for military assistance. The US expressed dismay at certain Ethiopian military policies, notably the 1976 Peasants' March on Eritrea, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger went so far as to say that if the march went ahead, continued US military assistance would be jeopardized. On the whole, however, the US sought to influence events by maintaining warm relations with the government, including considering increased arms requests. This was not to last.

The inauguration of President Jimmy Carter in January 1977 was followed within a month by the seizure of absolute power by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu was not only the most determined, ruthless and militaristic of the Dergue members, but he was the USSR's closest ally in the government. Pro-Soviet and anti-American statements became more frequent and vitriolic, and arms shipments from the USSR started immediately. The Red Terror officially began. On February 23, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Talcott Seelye visited Addis Ababa and told the government that it could expect a termination of military assistance, on human rights grounds.

Since 1977, when they were first issued, the Department of State's annual human rights reports on Ethiopia have, with few exceptions, been thorough and objective.

In April 1977, the US notified the Ethiopian government of the imminent closure of Kagnew station the following September when the 25-year lease expired. The decision had in fact been made in 1973, on purely technical grounds (the base had been superseded by the use of aerial and satellite reconnaissance). On April 30, Colonel Mengistu responded by unilaterally terminating the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, and ordering all US military personnel to leave immediately. Shortly afterwards, he ordered a cut in US Embassy staff of 50%.

The US-Ethiopia breach was confirmed by the massive airlift of Soviet arms to Ethiopia during the Ethiopia-Somalia war. In November 1977, the US embargoed all arms deliveries to both Ethiopia and Somalia. Shortly thereafter, the US made a military pact with Somalia, which had just expelled the Soviets, accusing them of perfidy. (The naval base at Berbera was the strategic prize that changed hands.) Ethiopia's other longtime regional adversary, Sudan, also moved closer to the US at this time. Meanwhile, between 1975 and 1980, Ethiopia's arms budget jumped tenfold. More than \$1 billion in military assistance was provided by the USSR, and 13,000 Cuban combat troops were stationed in the country. East German security advisors were to follow.

Despite Mengistu's evident preference for closer ties with the Soviet Union, the US continued to make efforts to ensure that relations were not broken off altogether. In 1978, the

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London, 1986.

incoming US Ambassador, Frederick Chapin, recommended a small program of economic assistance, and a small amount of non-lethal military assistance was provided to the army. However, any further attempts to upgrade economic ties were prevented by the Hickenlooper Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act, which stipulates that all US development assistance must be cut off to a country which nationalizes US-owned assets without providing compensation. Some 25 US companies claimed compensation amounting to \$30 million following the Ethiopian government's nationalizations of 1975, and the Ethiopian government refused to pay this relatively insignificant sum.

The failure to reach agreement on the compensation issue, together with increasing cold-war tension, led to further mutual US-Ethiopian hostility. In 1979, the USAID program was officially terminated, and in 1980, the US Ambassador was asked to leave; since then, the US has been represented by a charge d'affaires. In 1981, Ethiopia signed more far-reaching agreements with the USSR, allowing it use of military bases in the Red Sea islands, and signed the Tripartite Agreement with South Yemen and Libya. In 1982, the Reagan Administration's policy review for the Horn of Africa determined to isolate Ethiopia, supporting its pro-western neighbors, but stopped short of supporting the rebel fronts.<sup>3</sup> In 1984, when BandAid leader Bob Geldof visited Ethiopia and suggested that private agencies pay the \$30 million compensation due under the Hickenlooper amendment, thereby removing the formal obstacles to the far larger amounts of official development assistance, the idea was given a cold reception.

Other western countries' relations with Ethiopia cooled over the same period, though none went so far as withdrawing full diplomatic accreditation and suspending all development assistance.

### **Western Humanitarian Assistance 1980-84**

Throughout the 1980s, all US assistance to Ethiopia was humanitarian aid.

Between 1977 and 1980, the US provided on average \$15 million official assistance to Ethiopia each year, substantially down on previous years. In 1981, that fell to \$2 million and in 1982, to less than \$1 million. It was planned to phase out bilateral assistance altogether in 1983, but in fact USAID responded to requests from humanitarian agencies, and assistance rose to \$6 million in 1983 and \$18 million in 1984.<sup>4</sup> Other western donors such as Great Britain cut their

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<sup>3</sup> The conservative Ethiopian Democratic Union was the United States' favorite rebel front, but after 1977 it was not an effective military force. In 1984-5 the State Department considered supporting the TPLF, but rejected it as too left-wing. Support for the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance, a conservative organization of exiles, was entertained but rejected because of its lack of a military presence in Ethiopia.

<sup>4</sup> Figures from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

programs in similar proportion in 1980/1, though were quicker to increase them afterwards. By contrast, in 1985, the US gave \$142 million and in 1990, \$177 million.

The United Nations was, comparatively speaking, much more generous. While overall assistance stagnated between 1979 and 1982, the major UN agencies (World Food Program, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Development Program and UNICEF) all increased their assistance substantially. From \$13.1 million in 1977 and \$22.6 million in 1979, their donations had trebled to \$67.0 million by 1981. As shown in chapter 5, some of this assistance was aimed at the "rehabilitation" of the war-affected southeastern regions and the return of refugees. This assistance can be criticized for assisting the government's war aims.

While assistance from western Europe stagnated, aid from the European Commission increased over the same period. The EC aid program to Ethiopia was described by an ex-US Charge d'Affaires in these terms:

[It] seemed less a product of thought than of bureaucratic momentum and badly oversimplified logic: the EEC had a fund to aid needy Third World countries, Ethiopia was a large and exceptionally needy Third World country, ergo the EEC program for Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

EC assistance to Ethiopia grew steadily from \$4.2 million in 1977 to \$41.5 million in 1981. (It reached \$153.4 million in 1988.) Like the UN assistance, the program was little influenced by the human rights considerations that affected US policy at its best. The only EC country to increase its aid substantially over the period was Italy, which donated an average of over \$30 million each year during 1980-2.

In 1983, all western donors increased their bilateral aid programs to Ethiopia, and overall assistance rose from \$221 million to \$361 million. An appeal by British voluntary agencies for famine relief donations in March 1983 was considered a success, though the amounts given were small compared to what was to come later. In 1984 overall aid levels topped \$400 million and in 1985 reached nearly \$800 million.

When the Ethiopian famine became a matter of domestic political interest in the West, one of the questions which was repeatedly asked was: why had not the western countries responded sooner? The above account makes it clear that there had been a response, albeit a selective one. For a famine of 1970s proportions, the assistance would have been adequate. As it was to turn out, the amounts given were far less than needed. The US government was notably ungenerous.

Some donors claimed that their tardy response was due to the Ethiopian government concealing the famine. But, while it was certainly the case that between April and September 1984 the Ethiopian government had been preoccupied with the preparations for the tenth

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<sup>5</sup> Korn, 1986, p. 58.

anniversary celebrations for the revolution, and had been anxious to conceal the famine from its own people and from visiting journalists, this period was the exception rather than the rule.<sup>6</sup> Until March 1984 the government was quite frank about the existence of a famine -- Colonel Mengistu even mentioned it in his 1983 May Day speech -- and at all times the RRC was publishing figures of people in need and amounts of food required. There were no fewer than 21 warnings of impending famine from March 1981 to October 1984 by RRC and relief agencies.<sup>7</sup> Western governments were well-provided with official information about the developing famine.

Why was the response small relative to the real need? There are three reasons, which range from a genuine attempt to grapple with an insoluble moral dilemma, to behaving in a frankly cynical and unethical manner.

At the cynical end of the spectrum, Ethiopia was seen as a cold-war enemy that was engaging in gratuitous abuse of the west, and thus deserved to be shut off from any assistance. The attitude was that if Ethiopia needed assistance, it should turn to its patron the USSR. Thus in early 1984, when the US Congress drafted a bill mandating aid to Ethiopia, President Reagan attached to it an amendment requesting military assistance to El Salvador and the Nicaraguan contras.

This policy subsequently came in for much criticism by the media and humanitarian agencies, and was at times even equated with having caused the famine. It did not of course cause the famine, though generous assistance provided earlier would certainly have prevented much suffering.

A second reason for the lack of response was a degree of scepticism about the figures produced by the RRC. The figures for people in need were produced with an exactness that appeared spurious (with hindsight, correctly so), and no opportunity for cross-checking. They were widely held to have been inflated in order to attract western aid. As has been shown, at times they were certainly mendacious. While the specifics of the distortions of the figures were not always known, the general fact of their manipulation was understood.

This justifiable scepticism combined with a lack of understanding of the dynamics of famine (specifically, few appreciated the fact that starvation is the end result of a very long process of destitution) and with a general cynicism to produce a climate of indifference in the upper echelons of the aid community. At different times in the development of the famine, relief officials were heard to say:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See: Article 19, Starving in Silence: A Report on Famine and Censorship, London, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD Thesis, London, 1988, pp. 365-7.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in: Cutler, 1988, pp. 362-3, and Peter Gill, A Year in the Death of Africa: Politics, Bureaucracy and the Famine, London, 1986, p. 32.

Every year I have been here for the last four to five years they have said that several million people were facing food shortages. If this was true, at least a million would have died by now. (World Food Program [WFP] official)

If we see the figures we tend to divide by ten -- maybe that is a very cynical attitude. If there is a very bad year, we might add ten per cent. (European Community official)

The RRC says it will put on a show and it puts on a flop. (Canadian official, after being given a guided tour of a famine-stricken region)

This attitude even continued into 1985:

How many do you think died in 1984? I would fervently hope that it was less than one million. But, frankly, to have believed those March figures from the RRC, there should have been three million dead. (WFP official)

Time and again, the RRC was accused of "crying wolf." This turned out not to be the case. However, as this report has demonstrated, the major reason why the famine developed into the cataclysm that it did was not that western aid was tardy or inadequate, but that the Ethiopian government insisted on pursuing a set of military and economic policies that seriously aggravated the problem. The aid agency officials were, for the most part, not well-informed about these policies, and were thus unaware of their likely consequences. This ignorance both led to an underestimation of the severity of the impending famine (in 1983-4) and a failure to appreciate what kind of response was really required (in 1985).

The third reason for withholding aid is the most legitimate. It assumes that western governments were aware of the government's policies which were creating famine, and were not prepared to underwrite them with funds. The refusal of the US to support UN initiatives to repatriate and "rehabilitate" refugees in southeast Ethiopia during 1979-82 lends credence to this view. The argument would be that the donors were presented with a difficult moral dilemma: were they to provide assistance to mitigate human suffering, knowing that the underlying causes of that suffering would not be affected, and might even be strengthened or legitimized by their assistance? Or should they refuse to intervene until basic conditions for the neutrality and accountability of relief were met, and the policies creating the suffering were changed? This is a genuine dilemma and one with no easy solution.

There were undoubtedly some individuals in the major western donor agencies who were aware of this dilemma. However, they were not the ones who were dictating policy. As a result, the central issues of Ethiopian government culpability in the famine were never addressed.

In the first instance, the allegations of the abuse of humanitarian aid did not consist in documenting its use as a counter-insurgency tool, but instead consisted of claiming that it was being diverted to the military. Aid was, of course, being diverted to the military (see chapter 10),

but it was relatively easy for RRC officials to impress any visiting officials and diplomats and "prove" that the allegations were unfounded.

In March 1983, the Canadian Ambassador to Ethiopia stated that there was no evidence of any diversion of food. Britain's Overseas Development Administration endorsed this view in April. In May-June there was a visit from a delegation from the European Parliament, which failed to uncover any diversion. In March 1984, a bipartisan committee of the US Congress also failed to find evidence of misallocation, and shortly afterwards a mission from the US General Accounting Office pronounced the rate of diversion to be within acceptable limits. None of these investigations visited rebel-held areas or was able to travel independently of official guides. Several were primarily concerned with the issue of whether relief food had been re-exported to the USSR.

The sustained ability to pursue the marginal issue of food diversion, and still not get to the bottom of it, continued into 1985/6. The western donors would have been better advised to investigate whether the government was pursuing a set of policies that created famine conditions. The US was the only government to do so, and then only in 1985, which was too late.

#### **Human Rights and Famine, 1985: UN and US Approaches**

The sudden media interest in the Ethiopian famine in October 1984 and afterwards radically changed the West's relations with Ethiopia.

In 1985, all western donors increased their assistance to Ethiopia substantially. Assistance to Ethiopia was extremely generous. The US became the country's largest donor. US assistance was all -- with a small exception -- directed through non-governmental organizations. The details of the programs can be criticized, but not the fact of the generosity and the willingness to support a people whose government was engaged in persistent hostility to the US. Other western donors were, however, prepared to give support directly to the government RRC.

The US was the only donor government to undertake an investigation into the human rights aspects of the famine. This investigation, mounted between July and September 1985, has to be seen in the light of the UN role in the famine.

In late 1984, the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE) was set up, ostensibly to coordinate relief efforts, which were becoming extremely complex as a result of proliferation of donors and agencies. It was frequently turned to as an authoritative voice on issues to do with the diversion of food, forcible resettlement, and other abuses. Rather than investigating the abuses, UNEOE consistently concealed disturbing evidence produced by its own monitors. Its role has been described thus:

UNEOE's main function was to act as a "screening device", giving the appearance of competent

action in response to famine but not compromising its actual position in Addis Ababa by unduly antagonizing the host government ... it would have been as embarrassing for the donors who had entrusted resources to the Ethiopian government as it was for the government itself to have aid misallocation exposed.<sup>9</sup>

Mr Kurt Jansson, head of UNEOE during 1984/5, continued to play this role even after leaving his position, as will be evident from reading his account of the famine.<sup>10</sup>

Some members of the US Congress were unhappy with the UN whitewashing of the Ethiopian government's culpability. In late July 1985, Representative Toby Roth (R., Wisconsin) introduced an amendment to the foreign aid bill, the International Security and Cooperation Act of 1985.<sup>11</sup> President Reagan had to determine within 30 days of signing the bill whether the Ethiopian government was (1) conducting "a deliberate policy of starvation of its people" and (2) failing to grant its citizens "fundamental human rights." If the President found the Ethiopian government guilty on both counts, the US would be obliged to impose a trade embargo that would cover all exports save emergency humanitarian aid. The bill was signed on August 8. It was to raise an insoluble moral dilemma, and be the most severe test of the US policy towards Ethiopia.

In early August, UNEOE released a report authored by Kurt Jansson, consisting of a "comprehensive review" of the relief operations in Eritrea and Tigray. Jansson and other leading aid officials, including a US diplomat and RRC director Dawit Wolde Giorgis had spent four days in their inquiry, which was confined to a few garrisons in government held areas -- no contact was made with ERA and REST. (During its entire lifespan, UNEOE made no effort to direct any assistance to ERA and REST at all.) The report concluded that 75 per cent of the affected people in Eritrea and Tigray were being reached from the government side. This was manifestly untrue (see chapter 11).

Rebuttals of the report by ERA and REST were forthcoming in the following days. As has been shown, it was produced at a time when the government was directing only one twentieth of the relief to Tigray, which had one third of the affected population. It had just completed a bloody offensive in Tigray and was preparing a massive offensive in Eritrea. Nevertheless, UNEOE rejected these dissenting voices.

UNEOE had not addressed the dilemma of whether to channel assistance, no questions asked, into the government side of the war zone. It was prepared to endorse the ten per cent contribution to survival represented by aid, without questioning the role of the government in

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<sup>9</sup> Cutler, 1988, p. 408.

<sup>10</sup> Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> This account owes much to: Jonathan B. Tucker, "The Politics of Famine: US Foreign Policy in Ethiopia, 1982-1985," mimeo, 1985.

attacking the other 90 per cent.

USAID administrator Peter McPherson was asked to prepare the US report for the President. For the most part he accepted the UNEOE report's conclusions, but with significant reservations. On August 24 he visited Addis Ababa for three days, and then went on to Khartoum. He announced that most of the needy were being reached from the government side. He did not mention (and perhaps did not know -- the subsequent report only gives distribution figures up to July) that RRC deliveries to Eritrea and Tigray had fallen 85 per cent since the UNEOE mission. McPherson also mentioned that the US was supporting cross-border relief operations too. The US support for the cross-border operation was indeed more generous than any other donor, but it fell short of both promises made and real need.

The report was released on September 7.<sup>12</sup> It accused the government of deliberate policies that "have no doubt caused vast and unnecessary suffering, including starvation," and documented a number of these policies. But it also said that the evidence did not show that the government was "at this time conducting a deliberate policy of starvation." The carefully-chosen inclusion of the words "at this time" indicated that the investigator was prepared to believe that the government had been pursuing such a policy until recently -- and implicitly trusted that the government's policy had now changed for good. As chapter 10 has shown, the Ethiopian government was at this very moment beginning to realize the asset that it now had in the form of relief food, and was changing its counter-insurgency strategy in Eritrea accordingly -- though scarcely so in Tigray.

The essential problem with the inquiry was not that it was cursory, but that it was essentially asking the wrong question. The aim of the military policy was not to create starvation *per se*, but to create a population without any independent means of livelihood -- i.e. to create a choice between starvation and submission for the civilian population living in areas controlled by the rebel fronts. Without international aid, the policy would be tantamount to starvation, but with that aid, it need not be, while still meeting the same military and political goals. The deeper issue was: Was the Ethiopian government engaged in a war against the economic, social and political fabric of Eritrea and Tigray, and on what terms was it prepared to provide assistance to the people? The Ethiopian government could -- barely -- escape the charge of using starvation as a weapon in August 1985, but it could not escape these other charges. The Presidential Determination implicitly recognized this, concluding:

[The amendment] does not call for any determination concerning the past conduct and policies of the Ethiopian Government concerning starvation of its people. Nor does it call for an evaluation of policies that may have had political or military purposes, but which nevertheless caused increased starvation. The Government's past conduct, and the effects

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<sup>12</sup> Presidential Determination No. 85-20, "Determination with Respect to Ethiopia," September 7, 1985.

of its policies, are matters of grave concern, even though the evidence on these subjects cannot justify a determination under this statute.

The US administration could justifiably have returned a verdict of "guilty" and imposed an embargo on Ethiopia -- and indeed gone further and cut humanitarian assistance programs on the government side. This would have also provided a post hoc justification for the earlier scaling down of aid. However, the administration chose not to do so, and also not to defend its earlier policy on those grounds.

The pragmatic humanitarian rationale behind the US decision to reject the charge that the Ethiopian government was using starvation was that at this point it was necessary to deliver aid to the hungry, no matter what. The US was also providing cross-border assistance to ERA and REST, and as the rebel-held areas expanded, USAID support to these organizations grew to eclipse assistance given through the government side. (The same was never true of other major donors such as the European Community, let alone the UN.) The political rationale was a domestic one: since BandAid and Live Aid, it was necessary in terms of domestic politics to be seen to be giving generously. As television cameras and politicians could not visit rebel-held areas (though they did go to refugee camps in Sudan), it was necessary for US assistance to have a high media profile in government-held areas.

Although it is possible to criticize the details of the assistance program to Ethiopia after 1985, the essential fact was that the US gave assistance generously, where it was needed, and limited that assistance to humanitarian aid. By 1990, Ethiopia was receiving the largest amount of US assistance of any country in Africa -- without even full diplomatic representation or a USAID mission.

The involvement of the OAU also deserves mention. The Chairman of the OAU, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, was pressured to take an initiative to negotiate a safe passage agreement for relief aid in the war zone. President Nyerere declined, fearing that the precedent of giving even a small degree of de facto recognition to insurgent groups (and in the case of the EPLF, secessionists) would be contrary to the common interest of African governments. The OAU, which has its headquarters at Addis Ababa, took no further part in initiatives to relieve the famine, curtail human rights abuses, or promote peace.

### **Western Assistance after 1985**

During the 14 years of Mengistu's rule, western assistance to the country grew from \$105 million to over \$1 billion. Most of this aid was disbursed without the same scruples that informed the US assistance program at its best. Because of the artificially low official exchange rate, an equivalent or larger amount was contributed direct to the Ethiopian treasury.

In 1986 and 1987, western assistance to Ethiopia dropped slightly, but by 1988 it surpassed 1985 levels, and in 1989 topped \$1 billion. The main stimulus to the increased levels of assistance was continued appeals for humanitarian relief by the Ethiopian government on account of drought. The appeal for 1987/8 was the most successful -- more than one million tons of grain was donated, enough to feed the entire "at risk" population with extra to spare. As only a dwindling proportion of the needy were in government-held areas, especially after April 1988, the pattern continued to be that the less-needy in government-held areas received priority over the more needy in EPLF- and TPLF-held areas.

US assistance was consistently over \$150 million per annum after 1987. US relief aid was sent through both voluntary agencies working on the government side and through ERA and REST. The US also assisted in negotiating the Joint Relief Program for aid to TPLF-held Tigray in 1989/90, and for aid through EPLF-held Massawa to Asmara in 1990/91.

After Massawa was reopened in January 1991, the US stopped committing further food to the cross-border operation, ostensibly on the grounds that such food was no longer necessary because of the opening of the port. This was not the case, because the Massawa operation was not able to provide all the necessary assistance. Suspicions were voiced that USAID acted in this way to bring pressure to bear on the EPLF and EPRDF to negotiate a ceasefire. After aid agencies publicly criticized the decision in early May, it was reversed.

The ban on US development assistance to Ethiopia on account of the Hickenlooper Amendment remained in force. No further investigations into human rights abuses and their relationship to famine were undertaken, but the US continued to be highly critical of the Ethiopian government's human rights record. In particular, the US government opposed giving assistance to the resettlement program.

European countries provided assistance to an even greater extent: in 1988, the EC and its member countries donated over \$500 million, over half of the entire assistance program to Ethiopia and twenty times the level of 1977. Italian assistance alone was \$246 million in 1988, including generous aid to the "development" project of Tana-Beles, which was coextensive with the Metekel resettlement project.<sup>13</sup> European countries and the EC were much more reluctant to support the relief effort in rebel-held areas than the US, and the great majority of the assistance was provided to the government side.<sup>14</sup> In 1991, several European donors followed the US in cutting cross-border assistance to ERA and REST. This was not criticized in the same way by voluntary agencies because agency staff recognized that these donors were unlikely to respond to

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<sup>13</sup> As detailed in chapter 12, in 1985, the Metekel project was killing ordinary people faster than the greatest assaults of the famine.

<sup>14</sup> EC assistance was legally constrained by the provisions of the Lome Convention, to which Ethiopia is a signatory.

such criticism, and certainly would not respond rapidly -- unlike USAID, which was much more sensitive to pressure.

European assistance included direct aid to the government, notably to the RRC during 1985 and afterwards. There is no evidence for a significant withholding of aid on human rights grounds. The only issue of internal policy which was raised was economic liberalization in the years after 1988.

Assistance from the principal UN agencies to Ethiopia grew from \$107.6 million in 1985 to \$155.8 million in 1988. Only in 1991 did UN assistance first flow to rebel-held areas, when the opening of the EPLF-held port of Massawa was accompanied by an agreement to allow half of the food to be distributed by ERA. As in the case of European assistance, human rights considerations do not appear to have influenced aid levels. On several occasions, the UN appealed for assistance to be given to the resettlement program, on the grounds of preventing suffering among the resettled population.

From late 1988 onwards, the Ethiopian government engaged in a concerted campaign to woo the West, in order to obtain increased economic assistance. This led to changes among many Western governments in return. The US, however, only hinted at an improved relationship -- nothing of substance changed.

The corollary of generous western assistance to Ethiopia was that aid was given to neighboring countries such as Sudan and Somalia in a similarly uncritical manner. In the case of Somalia, much of the assistance destined for refugees was used to feed soldiers and militiamen loyal to the Somali government.

### **Ethiopia under Perestroika**

Despite the ambitions of Soviet cold-war strategists, President Mengistu refused to be a simple vassal of the USSR. Certain policies, such as the delayed formation of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, were opposed by his Soviet advisors. In the late 1980s, Mengistu was also impervious to the changes taking place in the USSR under President Gorbachev. He is reported to have prohibited talk of both *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and certainly he ignored advice from Soviet economists about the need for economic reform in 1987. The USSR showed increasing impatience with President Mengistu's unreconstructed Stalinism, insatiable appetite for military hardware, repeated military disasters, and embarrassing famines, and announced that arms deliveries would be cut off when existing contracts expired in March 1991. Arms deliveries continued up until that date, so that the warning never actually impeded Mengistu's military strength; he was no straightforward "victim of *perestroika*."

However, the Soviet declaration that the line of credit was finite struck a psychological

blow. Together with the military debacles in Eritrea and Tigray, this encouraged the opposition and contributed to the attempted coup in April 1989 and the "change in direction" whereby Marxism was formally abandoned in March 1990. It also forced Mengistu to look elsewhere for military and economic assistance.

### **Israel and the Falasha Issue**

Under Haile Selassie, Ethiopia had close relations with Israel. Israel's primary interest at that time was a strategic one -- it was concerned about the growth of militant Arab states in Sudan and on the shores of the Red Sea. Israel was supporting the Anyanya insurgents in southern Sudan through Ethiopia. A secondary concern was the population of Ethiopian Jews, the Falasha.

The Falasha are a small group who numbered about 50,000 in 1980. They lived in northern Gonder and adjoining areas. They refer to themselves as Beita Israel ("House of Israel") or Kayla, an Agau word of uncertain interpretation. Their origins are uncertain and controversial; most scholars regard them as belonging to the Agau ethnic group, who inhabited northern Ethiopia before the arrival of the Tigrayans and Amhara. Their Judaism incorporates the Pentateuch but neither the Mishnah nor Talmud; their religious language is Ge'ez (ancient Ethiopic). The Israeli Rabbinate was, until 1973, unsure of the legitimacy of their claim to Judaism. The Falasha traditionally aspired to migrate to the Holy Land.

Until the revolution the Falasha were not allowed to own land, and made their living primarily from occupations such as pottery and craftwork; they were also subjected to various forms of discrimination. In other respects they were relatively fortunate; for instance their area of northern Gonder was little-affected by the droughts of 1983-4 and continued to produce food surpluses.

In the 1970s, the plight of the Falashas aroused concern among Israelis and Jewish Americans, who lobbied for them to be allowed to migrate to Israel.

After the revolution, the Dergue aligned itself with left-wing states in the Middle East and north Africa, and became publicly hostile to Israel -- though a low level of contacts between the two governments always continued. From 1978 to 1988, Ethiopia's closest African ally was Libya, which provided military and technical assistance, and the Palestine Liberation Organization was given the use of an "embassy" in central Addis Ababa. Israel, which had expressed repeated concern over the plight of the Falashas was rebuffed several times.

In 1984/5, Israel sponsored "Operation Moses" whereby Falasha were encouraged to leave Ethiopia and migrate to Sudan as refugees, from where they were airlifted to Israel. This clandestine operation was terminated in early 1985 when it became public in Sudan, which is a member of the Arab League and officially a supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

After the exodus was made public, it was condemned by the Ethiopian government.

By November 1989, Ethiopia had reversed its position: an Israeli Ambassador was accredited, and the Libyans were close to being expelled.<sup>15</sup>

The emigration of Falasha direct from Ethiopia to Israel started in 1989. In return for allowing the Falasha to emigrate, Ethiopia received weapons and military instructors. Israeli officials at different times admitted to having supplied small arms, non-lethal military technology, and training in counter-insurgency,<sup>16</sup> and at other times denied giving any assistance. However, a confidential congressional staff memo leaked to Washington Jewish Week<sup>17</sup> confirmed that in late 1989 about 100 cluster bombs were supplied, which the Ethiopian air force was particularly eager to have. President Jimmy Carter said to Israeli Knesset member Dedi Zucker: "You don't need to sell Mengistu fragmentation bombs in order to persuade him to let your people go."<sup>18</sup> Cluster bombs were used in the bombing of civilian targets in Eritrea including Massawa, causing large numbers of civilian casualties.

Between 1989 and May 1991, the Ethiopian government repeatedly used the Falasha population as pawns to obtain arms. The US government consistently opposed the delivery of arms to Ethiopia, and was particularly hostile to the Israeli sale of cluster bombs, because these had been developed with US technology. This opposition appears to have prevented the further delivery of cluster bombs by the Israeli government from early 1990 onwards.

Almost the entire Falasha population was drawn from Gonder to Addis Ababa in 1990 in the expectation of resettlement in Israel. They abandoned their farms and livelihoods. Because the Ethiopian government allowed only a very slow rate of exodus, many were forced to remain in Addis Ababa for a long period, without adequate shelter or food.

The US expressed particular concern for the Falasha population, and repeatedly raised the question of their freedom to emigrate to Israel with the Ethiopian authorities. The underlying reason for this concern was pressure brought by the pro-Israel lobby on congress and the administration, and accompanying media attention.

In the dying days of the Mengistu regime, the Israeli government mounted a dramatic airlift known as "Operation Solomon" to bring the remaining Falasha from Addis Ababa to Israel. This was successfully completed before the EPRDF occupation of the city, which, it was feared,

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<sup>15</sup> A bomb explosion in Addis Ababa was blamed on the Libyans. Later, the Ethiopian government was to accuse the Libyans of supporting the EPRDF.

<sup>16</sup> For example: Israeli ambassador to Ethiopia, Mr Meir Joffe, interviewed by Richard Dowden on British TV, Channel 4, The World this Week, June 2, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> July 12, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in: Return, April/May 1990.

would lead to disorder, reprisals against the Falasha, and restrictions on their emigration by the new government. In the event, the EPRDF occupation led to none of these things for the small number of Falasha remaining behind.

### **Peace Negotiations**

In 1990 and 1991, along with other intermediaries, the US was active in convening a succession of negotiations between the government and the rebel fronts. Given continued though declining Soviet patronage of Ethiopia, and very limited US economic or strategic interest in the country, this involvement was remarkable. The US agenda appeared to reflect its concern with the Falashas, the provision of relief, and a commitment to the resolution of conflict by negotiation. With the ending of the cold war, strategic interests were fast waning; the only remaining political commitment of significance was the maintenance of Ethiopia's territorial integrity -- i.e., opposition to the independence of Eritrea.

During the first months of the Gulf crisis of August 1990-February 1991, Ethiopia held a seat on the UN Security Council. In order to ensure the votes were carried in its favor, the US cut deals with several other members of the Security Council, notably China. Ethiopia was however in a weak position to exact terms from the US: it declared its opposition to Saddam Hussein in the very first days of the crisis (and attempted to brand the EPLF as an Iraqi pawn), and was begging for US and Israeli assistance already. The Ethiopian government had some successes: a meeting took place between Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka and US Secretary of State James Baker, the highest level meeting between officials of the two countries since Mengistu seized power, and the US softened its opposition to some World Bank loans to Ethiopia. However, apart from these developments and some reassuring diplomatic platitudes, US-Ethiopia relations remained cool.

The US administration does, however, deserve criticism for a rather clumsy attempt to portray the government and rebel fronts as equally responsible for human rights abuses. Presumably this distortion of the facts was made in order to further the peace negotiations.

According to the Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1990: Both government and the various insurgent movements, notably the EPLF and TPLF, have practiced forced conscription, imprisonment without recourse, violence against civilian populations, torture, and extrajudicial killing. Women have fallen victim to rape and abuse by government and rebel soldiers, as both sides loot and pillage.<sup>19</sup>

While the rebel fronts have certainly been guilty of abuses, the failure to distinguish between their record and that of the government is a significant shortcoming. Ironically, in May 1991, the US government praised the EPRDF for its treatment of civilians.

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<sup>19</sup> Department of State, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1990," p. 118.

The US came to play a crucial role in the final days of the Mengistu government. Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen was due to convene a meeting between representatives of the government, the EPLF, EPRDF and OLF in London in mid-May, in order to negotiate a ceasefire. If this were successful, a second round of negotiations was envisaged, which would establish the terms of a transitional government. The meeting was postponed to May 27 at the instigation of the rebel fronts, almost certainly because they recognized their military supremacy (which the US and Ethiopian government had consistently underestimated) and wanted to press home their advantage before the talks began. Their victories caused Mengistu to flee on May 21, and the army to disintegrate over the following week. In the final days, the US publicly appealed to the EPRDF not to advance on Addis Ababa before the talks were concluded in an effort to forestall the massive bloodletting that it was feared might occur if the EPRDF encountered strong resistance.

As it happened, the peace talks convened in the Berkshire Hotel in London on a morning when Acting-President Tesfaye Gebre Kidan had lost effective control of the remnants of the army, and Addis Ababa was almost completely undefended. The EPLF had taken Asmara and Assab in the previous three days. After consulting with the four parties, the US asked the EPRDF to take control of Addis Ababa, to prevent a breakdown in law and order. The government delegation then withdrew in protest. The US was later accused by some opposition groups which had been left out of the ceasefire talks of having "given the keys" of Addis Ababa to the EPRDF; the EPRDF replied that "the door was already open" -- i.e. that there were no military obstacles remaining to its victory. Simultaneously, the US also dropped its longstanding demand for the maintenance of Ethiopia's "territorial integrity," and accepted the EPLF demand for a referendum on the issue of Eritrean independence.

The US made clear its conditional support for the transitional government of the EPRDF and EPLF. The conditions were that a political conference should be held by July 1 in which non-combatant political forces should also be represented, and that multi-party elections be held within one year (this was later extended to two years). Herman Cohen described the conditions as "no democracy, no cooperation." This principle can only be applauded, though it remains to be seen if the US consistently applies it in future dealings with Ethiopia and other African countries. If it had been applied by the US, the European Community and the United Nations over the previous thirty years many of the tragedies which fell Ethiopia would have been avoided.

## **AFRICA WATCH'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **I. To the Ethiopian Government and Eritrean Administration:**

#### **1. Ratify international instruments safeguarding the rights of civilians in armed conflict**

Ethiopia is a party to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Common Article 3 of these four Conventions addresses conflicts that are not of an international character and hence governs the relations between a government and insurgent forces.<sup>1</sup> This requires non-combatants to be treated humanely by all sides in an internal conflict, and prohibits under any circumstances:

- \* Violence to life and person, in particular murder of any kind, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;
- \* Taking of hostages;
- \* Outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment;
- \* The passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgement pronounced by a regularly-constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable according to international standards.

The Additional Protocol on the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), adopted in 1977, codifies in greater explicit detail the internationally-acceptable standards for the conduct of civil wars. Though Ethiopia is not a party to this protocol, the standards which it lays down are generally applicable to the conflicts in that country under customary international law. Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government to sign and ratify this protocol and abide by all its terms.

Customary international law prohibits attacks against the civilian population in internal conflicts. This principle was adopted by unanimous vote at the UN, in General Assembly Resolution 2444, December 1969. Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government to affirm its determination to abide by this principle.

Africa Watch calls upon any future government of Eritrea to sign and ratify the Geneva Conventions, the Additional Protocols, and affirm its determination to abide by the principle of Resolution 2444.

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<sup>1</sup> The other articles in the Convention apply expressly only to international conflicts.

## **2. Call to account those principally responsible for human rights abuses in war**

The transitional government headed by the EPRDF has indicated that it intends to try members of the former regime for the human rights violations they have committed, in accordance with international standards. Africa Watch welcomes this commitment. The EPLF administration of Eritrea has indicated that it has similar intentions, but has not made a public commitment. Africa Watch urges it to do so.

In all cases, we call for great care to see to it that the manner in which such prosecutions and conducted embodies the rule of law.

It is a right of victims of human rights abuse that those responsible for committing the abuses be brought to justice. Only the victims of abuses have the right to forgive the abuser; it is not for a government to do so.

It is essential that prosecutions for human rights abuses should be conducted in a manner that respects both the substance and the appearance of justice and therefore is likely to strengthen the rule of law and the legal process itself.

Those principally responsible for gross human rights abuses should be prosecuted for the crimes they have committed according to the relevant domestic law. The trial may take place either in the ordinary courts or before a tribunal specially convened for the purpose. In either case, it is essential that international standards of due process of law be adhered to. The defendant should be allowed a defense counsel of his or her own choice, should have free access to that counsel, should be allowed sufficient time to prepare a defense, and should be allowed to summon and cross-examine witnesses.

It is important that the desire to bring as many as possible of those principally responsible for gross abuses to court should not lead to the adoption of a lower standard of proof, or the abrogation of due process. A few prosecutions of those with the highest level of responsibility for the most grave abuses, conducted according to internationally-recognized standards, are more important than many conducted against lesser offenders according to lower standards.

## **3. Award compensation to the victims of human rights abuses and their families**

Those who have been subject to human rights abuse, or their families in the case of the victim having been killed, should be entitled to compensation. The payment of compensation should be conditional only on the proof that an abuse has been committed, it should not be necessary to identify the individual responsible or obtain a criminal conviction of that individual.

#### **4. Set up a Human Rights Commission**

Africa Watch urges both the transitional government headed by the EPRDF and the EPLF administration of Eritrea to set up Human Rights Commissions. While the precise structure and mandate of these commissions is a subject open to discussion, Africa Watch believes that the following conditions should be met:

- (1)The Commission should take as its first task the investigation of past human rights abuses. The purpose of this is two-fold. One is to obtain evidence that can help to obtain criminal convictions against those who have committed such abuses. The second is to investigate the general background to the abuses, so that recommendations can be made to the government for institutional and legal safeguards for the future protection of human rights.
- (2)The Commission should be an independent body, composed of citizens who are widely respected for their integrity and their commitment to human rights, with wide powers to decide what issues and incidents to investigate, to launch and carry through investigations of its own, to send investigative missions to different parts of the country and abroad, to summon witnesses and to take necessary precautions to ensure the protection and/or anonymity of witnesses. It should have the staff and budget to carry out these tasks. It should be able to recommend the criminal prosecution of any individual it finds to be responsible for abuses.
- (3)The proceedings of the Commission should be public, so far as is possible and is consistent with the security of witnesses and the need to ensure that the rights of the accused are protected. The findings of the Commission and the reasons for its decisions should be regularly aired on television and radio and in the print media.
- (4)A permanent Commission should operate as a standing body to investigate human rights abuses. It should be composed and empowered according to the same criteria as the Commission to investigate past abuses.

#### **5. Guarantee and safeguard freedom of movement and prohibit non-voluntary relocation**

The transitional government headed by the EPRDF has lifted restrictions on internal travel. Those restrictions must not be re-imposed. The EPLF should lift any such restrictions. Programs of non-voluntary relocation should not be implemented, and people must be allowed to leave resettlement sites and government villages where they have previously been relocated without hindrance or threat of reprisal.

In the exceptional situations when overriding considerations of physical security warrant

the relocation of a population, this must be done only under the following conditions:

- (1) Compensatory economic and health assistance is provided to mitigate the adverse effects of the relocation and prevent unnecessary suffering.
- (2) The relocation is strictly temporary and is followed by a program of assisted voluntary return to the previous habitations as soon as possible. The decision to return and its timing should be made in consultation with representatives of the relocated population, and in accordance with their wishes as far as possible.

#### **6. Affirm the principle of free access to humanitarian assistance for all people**

The new government in Ethiopia and the administration in Eritrea should affirm the principle that all civilians should have free access to humanitarian relief.

#### **7. Adopt and enforce guidelines on recruitment to the Armed Forces**

Africa Watch takes no stand on conscription per se and has no objection in principle to the National Military Service Proclamation of 1983. However, the implementation of that proclamation fell far short of the principles of the Proclamation, and involved widespread abuses of human rights. Africa Watch urges the establishment of an independent body (perhaps part of the Human Rights Commission) to monitor the practices of recruitment to the armed forces. This body should have the power to intervene when violations of the conscription guidelines occur, in order to release under-age boys or those who have been conscripted in an arbitrary and violent manner. If necessary, such a body should have the power to recommend publicly that conscription be suspended until it can be carried out in accordance with the law.

#### **8. Set up mediation and dispute-settlement commissions to negotiate peaceful solutions to local conflicts in the southwest.**

Many of the conflicts in southwest Ethiopia did not consist in the previous government fighting against local resistance, and therefore are not likely to be resolved by the fall of that government. External forces and the ready though selective availability of firearms are in many cases more responsible for the violence. However, the new government has a responsibility to all Ethiopian citizens to ensure that local conflicts are settled in a peaceful manner. Government intervention is warranted. Military intervention to make the warring parties submit by force of arms is not only likely to fail but will, as in the past, involve human rights abuses. Africa Watch therefore calls upon the new government to set up conciliation committees, which will facilitate

a peaceful resolution of these conflicts, and will make recommendations for the maintenance of law and order and the continued respect for basic rights.

Africa Watch also calls upon the new government not to undertake programs of forcible settlement of nomads. Any such programs must be strictly voluntary.

### **9. Set up a Commission of Inquiry into the causes of famine**

Famine has clearly been shown to be closely associated with abuses of human rights. Understanding famine is essential to preventing it. This requires an investigation that encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including *inter alia* meteorology, environmental science, agriculture, economics, social anthropology, medicine, demography, political science, military strategy and human rights. Such an inquiry should include an investigation of the manner in which inappropriate assistance, or assistance in the wrong context, can contribute to famine.

This Commission of Inquiry should be empowered to hear evidence from expert witnesses in the disciplines mentioned above, those with a professional involvement in relief and development, employees of international organizations, ordinary Ethiopian citizens, and anybody else it deems appropriate. It should be empowered to launch investigations of its own into neglected aspects of the problem.

This Commission may produce evidence of a type which would warrant a criminal prosecution against certain individuals or institutions for deliberately pursuing a policy intended to cause starvation or other forms of suffering amounting to famine. It is likely to produce evidence which shows that certain institutions acted in an irresponsible and counter-productive manner. This should not however be its main purpose, which should be to produce recommendations about the future strategy for preventing famine, and for combatting it should it occur.

## **II. To the Aid Donors and Aid Agencies**

The following recommendations apply to United Nations organizations, the European Community and bilateral donors such as USAID and Britain's Overseas Development Administration, and to private voluntary agencies.

### **10. Cooperate with the inquiry into the causes of famine**

International aid institutions should cooperate with the Commission of Inquiry into famine. They should be prepared to reveal previously-confidential information about their

conduct towards the Ethiopian government and insurgent movements, and, where appropriate, neighboring countries with refugee populations and the former rebel fronts.

Voluntary organizations should also be prepared to cooperate with the inquiry in a similar manner. The International Committee of the Red Cross is the only organization that should be exempt from the responsibility to testify, because fulfillment of its humanitarian mission is closely linked to adherence to standards of confidentiality and impartiality in its statutes.

#### **11. Accept culpability for complicity in human rights abuses where appropriate**

If a United Nations agency, or other aid donor or agency is found by the Human Rights Commission to have acted knowingly in a way likely to contribute to the continuation or extension of human rights abuses, it should be prepared to pay compensation in accordance with the principles determined by the Commission. A plea of "acting in good faith" may be taken into consideration in mitigating penalties, but should not be sufficient to indicate lack of guilt.

#### **12. Draw up principles for the conduct of relief operations in situations of human rights abuse and armed conflict**

The experience of Ethiopia in the 1980s has clearly shown that the ethic of humanitarian intervention to relieve suffering under any conditions and without preconditions is deeply problematical, and may lead to more suffering in the long run. Africa Watch has no easy answers to the dilemmas raised. However, many of the difficulties can be resolved if humanitarian agencies agree on the human rights preconditions for their work. Such preconditions should include:

- (1) A duty to make public information concerning gross human rights abuses.
- (2) A duty to examine the strategic context of any humanitarian intervention that is taking place in or near to armed conflict or government or insurgent policies of forced relocation or restriction on free movement. The examination should cover such issues as whether the humanitarian assistance is allowing the combatants to consolidate or improve their military or political position. The findings of any such examination should be made public promptly and regularly.
- (3) A public commitment to assist the civilian population of an area, provided there is reasonable security, whatever armed force is in de facto control of the area. Thus, if a humanitarian organization has a program in an area which changes from government to insurgent control, the program should continue, subject to the cooperation of the insurgent group (and vice versa). It is not necessary for an organization always to work on both sides of

a conflict, merely to accept the principle that under these circumstances it will do so, and to ensure that its aid to one side does not become the basis for denying aid to the other side.

Africa Watch also urges humanitarian organizations and their donors to impose humanitarian conditions on humanitarian aid. A principal condition is that no assistance will be given by the international community to facilitate the displacement of civilians, as displacement itself is an abuse of human rights and a cause of unnecessary suffering, and it should not be aided and abetted.