

## ETHIOPIAN REPRESSION IN ERITREA

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From the very beginning of the Federation, the Ethiopians violated the rights of the Eritreans. They banned the freedom of the press, jailed those who opposed the regime, imposed the language and culture of the Amhara ruling classes on the people, installed a large army of occupation in the country and exploited the resources of Eritrea to their own advantage. In 1962, they formally annexed the country.

In 1967, when opposition to their rule was growing, the Ethiopians set about suppressing it by large-scale attacks on the civilian population. Often paratroopers were dropped into an area and hundreds of villages were burnt down, the peasants massacred - often by burning or bayonetting. Their crops were set alight and countless animals, on which they depended, were killed. Thousands of refugees, especially from the Western province, fled into Sudan where, thirteen years later they are still living in refugee settlements. The province of Sahel was also badly hit, with an unknown number of nomads

killed, their goats and camels slaughtered and the entire population decimated.

After the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974 and the emergence of the military regime, the Dergue, in February 1975, there was talk of reaching a settlement with the Eritreans. Instead, there was a build-up of Ethiopian forces within Eritrea.

The Dergue, under the leadership of Colonel Mengistu, has shown itself to be even more ruthless than its predecessors. This has been due to the massive input of arms, first by the U.S. and Israel, and since late 1977, to military aid from the Soviet Union, which has equipped Ethiopia with tanks, personnel carriers, sophisticated weapons and planes.

### I. Examples of the Dergue's early atrocities

a) On the morning of 13th March, 1975, a group of 300 Ethiopian soldiers on their way from Asmara to Keren, passed through the village of Woki (population about 2,500) at 7.00 a.m. They rounded up the villagers on a piece of waste ground and shot 37 dead. After this, most of the people fled into the hills, but the rest, believing there was nowhere safe to go, or that nothing else would happen remained. On their return on 14th March, the Ethiopians stopped again. They then proceeded to slaughter nearly 500 people in the most gruesome way. Many women, children and old men were bayoneted and pregnant women were slit open. The Ethiopians then killed all the livestock and set fire to the houses. The slaughter was arbitrary and had no political connection with opposition forces. There are three mass graves outside the village.

b) Following this incident, further burnings and massacres took place in the same area. They were at Decamare Demebezan (population approximately 2,500), Geshanashem (approximately 1,400) and Adukulum (approximately 3,000). As in Woki, livestock, crops and houses were destroyed.

c) The village of Shimangus, situated near the junction of the road to Zagur in the highlands from Keren and Massawa, was totally destroyed. Now only a heap of stones.

d) In March 1975, 100 patients in Asmara Hospital were killed, their bodies being taken out in trucks to be buried.

e) Also in Summer 1975, 110 people in the village of Wokiduba were herded into an Orthodox church and massacred.

f) In October 1977, Ethiopians from Asmara attempting to recapture Decamare stopped at the village of Adihausha. There are no signs of the village today. The unknown number of inhabitants were killed.

g) Also in October 1977, in another attempt to recapture Decamare, the Ethiopians stopped at Merhano, some fifteen kilometres South of Asmara. The village was totally burnt down. Unknown numbers of civilians were knifed to death; others fled into the hills.

In a report dated 15th December, 1977, Amnesty International stated :

"In Eritrea, the State of Emergency imposed under the former Government has continued in force, with the same kind

of atrocities against civilians, use of torture, and arbitrary killings of alleged supporters of the secessionist movements, as under Emperor Haile Selassie's rule. The two major secessionist movements are the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which during 1977 extended their control to all Eritrea except the major towns, which were also subject to attack. These movements have, according to reliable reports, established new administrative structures in the territory they hold, and treat prisoners humanely. One well-informed writer sums up a widely-accepted analysis of the human rights situation in Eritrea, as follows :

'Reports in Eritrea have been chillingly consistent over the past year, the accounts telling of civilian massacres, martial law, executions without trial, widespread political arrest and torture of suspected dissidents, and random atrocities apparently designed to instill fear in the general populace.'

(D. Connell, *The Nation*,  
New York, Vol.224.11,  
March 1977)"

Evidence of this systematic slaughter can be seen in the civilian and military hospitals run by the Eritreans. Here, there were patients suffering from severe burns (The Ethiopians had been using napalm) and many others severely wounded by blast and shrapnel. There were many civilians amongst the casualties, including an Ethiopian girl who was badly wounded when a bus-load of civilians was bombed on its way to Asmara. During 1978, the civilians ex-

perienced another, fiercer phase of terror - that of aerial bombardment, which killed and wounded thousands of people.

## II. Current repression

The recent history of the Eritrean struggle is well-known. In 1977, the Soviet Union, which had replaced the U.S. as arms-supplier and sponsor of the Ethiopian Government, moved in to help the Dergue suppress the Eritreans, who had, by the end of that year, liberated all the major towns of Eritrea with the exception of Asmara and Massawa, both of which were under siege. In December 1977, four Soviet warships appeared off Massawa and let loose a fearsome bombardment of rockets and bombs on Massawa and the Eritrean forces there. In spite of this and a ten-months campaign of bombing towns and villages, rural areas, schools, hospitals and individual peasants (including farmers working in the fields and nomads with their herds), the Eritreans were able to hold on until November 1978. In that month, the Ethiopians, backed up by Soviet planes, officers and personnel in the field, launched a three-pronged attack on the Eritreans, driving the Eritrean Liberation Front (who were operating mainly in the Western Lowlands) to the Sudanese border and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (who controlled the densely-populated areas of Eastern Eritrea) to make a strategic withdrawal from the towns into the mountainous area of their Northern province of Sahel, mainly to reduce the civilian casualties that would be involved in a conventional battle to hold on to them.

The 'free world' stood by as the Soviet Union moved in. The absence of media personnel

in Eritrea at the time - apart from one freelance U.S. journalist - is partly responsible for this. But it is also true that the Ethiopian propaganda about the secessionist aims of the guerillas, their Arab nationalist character and the Western preoccupation with stability in the Horn of Africa, which they believe would be threatened by any concession to Eritrean independence, also played some part in the total silence with which the Soviet intervention in a land war for the first time since the Second World War was received. The massive casualties inflicted on the Eritrean civilians, including the Soviet bombing of refugee columns travelling to the North and the murder of at least 8,000 women and children in the bush, caused hardly a ripple in the world's press. Appeals from the Eritrean Liberation Movements for humanitarian aid were largely greeted with scepticism or indifference, and the problems confronting the Sudanese, who were faced with a new influx of refugees, were mostly ignored.

The post-1978 situation has taken a new turn. Massive repression of the civilian population by Ethiopian forces and the Dergue's political cadres is now the order of the day.

The political repression inside Eritrean towns has to be seen in the light of the Dergue's own internal and external propaganda. As this is based on the existence of a plot financed and promoted by 'reactionary Arab countries' and aimed either at destroying the revolution or the integrity of Ethiopia (according to the audience to which it is addressed), this is inevitably biased against the Muslims. Evidence of this propaganda can be found best through interviewing the Ethiopian peasant militia who make up the majority of the 10,000

prisoners-of-war in Eritrean hands.

On being asked the question, "Who were you told you would be fighting?", all will reply that they were fighting the Arabs; some will add that the Arabs had invaded Ethiopia. Only a handful said that they had ever heard of Eritrea, and one man captured in 1977 said that he could not understand what all the fuss was about. "If they say Eritrea is so expensive" he said, "why don't they sell it?". Asked whether they had seen any Arabs, all the militia replied in the negative, although some say that their officers showed them ruins in Massawa which, they claimed, had been bombed by the Arabs. In the majority of cases, the propaganda had made little impression on the militia-men, whose main concern was to get back to their land and to whom the Dergue's slogans, such as "Ethiopia First", "Everything to the War Front"; "Ethiopia or Die", were meaningless except in so far as they had disrupted their lives and exposed them to extreme hardship and suffering in the Ethiopian army. The question of the revolution and the supposed counter-revolution being mounted by the Eritreans is equally meaningless for people who just want to be left alone.

Within Eritrea itself, the Dergue realises that it cannot claim that Arabs, and particularly Sudanese, are present there. Thus, the guerrillas are referred to as 'bandits' linked with foreign elements. This enables the Dergue to claim that Eritreans suspected of nationalist sentiments who are arrested and disappear are at best criminals and at worst criminals linked with some international Arab 'mafia'.

### III. Life under Ethiopian occupation

When they first re-occupied the towns in Eritrea, the Ethiopian authorities announced their intention of working through the existing mass organisational framework built up under the E.P.L.F. These organizations covered peasants, middle peasants, workers, young people, women and traders. They had developed as a response to the opportunities provided by the eviction of the Ethiopians for democratic participation in local affairs, although many of them had existed secretly in the years preceding 1977 when the E.P.L.F. started to liberate the towns.

The Ethiopians hoped to control these associations by putting in people on whom they could rely, along the lines of kebele leaders in Ethiopia itself. These newcomers were fiercely resisted by the Eritreans and it soon became obvious that the system could not be made to work in the Ethiopians' interests. They therefore, decided to dismantle the organizational structure and set up smaller units - also like the kebeles in Ethiopia - which were easier to control and which could be run by those whom they could trust. These kebeles are a means of social and political control, which is necessary in a country like Eritrea where the mass of the population is totally opposed to the Dergue's occupation.

The role of the kebeles in Ethiopia is very crucial. They stand between the people and the military government. They have their origins, however, in the past when kebeles were composed of feudal landlords and other interests whose purpose was to impose their will and that of the Ethiopian monarchy on the

people and not to represent the interests of the poor. Literally, kebele means a zone.

The Dergue saw no reason to discontinue the kebele system although it appointed new kebele leaders.

Every kebele is responsible for running a small, clearly-defined area over which it has powers of life and death. At the present time, one of the most important functions of the kebeles is the selection of people for the militia army; they are given a quota and have to meet it. There is no appeal against the kebele's decision. Residents in each kebele have to register with the kebele leaders and failure to do so is classified as counter-revolutionary.

The kebeles are one of the main sources of information for the Dergue. They include agents provocateurs, whose activities often lead to the arrest and disappearance of suspected dissidents. The kebele leaders are armed and do not hesitate to use their arms if they wish to do so. If they kill someone, it is deemed to have been 'in the course of their duties' by the authorities and all they have to do is to submit a report on the circumstances. They do not have to stand trial. Reasons given for what is often private murder vary, but the most common are that the victim failed to stop when challenged or, in Eritrea, was known to be a 'bandit' (i.e. a supporter of one of the liberation movements).

The kebeles run local courts which have sweeping powers of sentencing. There is no appeal against the sentences handed down. During the recent Red Terror in Ethiopia, how-

ever, the kebele leaders did not bother to put those they termed counter-revolutionaries on trial, but shot them on sight.

It is this system of control and repression that now governs the lives of the population in the occupied Eritrean towns. Already, there is mounting evidence of killings, abductions and victimisation. The appalling experiences of the population of Asmara over the past few years are now being repeated throughout the country.

In Asmara, the kebeles have played a leading role for the past four years, especially in relation to the arrest and execution of young people, who are forbidden to leave the city. Many hundreds have literally been picked up in the streets and have disappeared. Relatives dare not ask questions about their whereabouts for fear of being branded as counter-revolutionaries themselves. These activities, coupled with the behaviour of the Ethiopian troops, who assault and rape women, steal property and animals for food, has led to a mass exodus of the young (and especially girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five) from the capital. Although they are technically restricted to the city, most have got out by bribing or deceiving security guards and have slipped out into the countryside. Many have now joined the E.P.L.F.

During the early phases of the Red Terror, most of the young people were killed in the streets or taken to prison and executed there. Now, the majority are arrested and killed secretly. No announcement is made about their execution and friends and relatives only hear of it through other prisoners who are able to

get information out. Many, however, are never heard of again. In May 1979, for instance, fifty young people were arrested in Keren and no-one knows what happened to them.

By early 1980, the Ethiopian authorities had worked out a comprehensive system of terror, covering arbitrary arrests, killings and 'disappearances'. The security services (who receive training from East Germans in Ethiopia) have a regular pattern of operation.

Those who are picked up by landrovers are never seen again; the police in the landrovers are known as the 'killer squad' and drive their victims outside Asmara or Keren, kill them and bury their bodies in mass graves.

A closed beige Volkswagen combi also means certain death. These carry the bodies of those killed inside the vehicle out to unknown graves and are known as "butchers' shops". If a combi parks outside a house and someone is seen to be hustled into it, his neighbours know that he will instantly be killed inside.

The Ethiopian political police drive around the towns in white Renault 14s. They will drive into factory yards or up to private houses at all hours of the day or night and remove people. Their actions are quite arbitrary. If enquiries are made about detainees, relatives are told they are non-existent. If they are eventually traced, food can be delivered. But one day, relatives taking food will be told the detainee has been 'moved'; this means he or she has been killed.

The gaols in Asmara are full. In the stables of the old Imperial Palace, there are

never less than five hundred male detainees, and an annexe house a similar number of women. The prisoners are kept in concrete boxes, without air or lighting, often for as long as a week whilst they are undergoing preliminary interrogation. Later, they are kept in cells which are meant for three or four people only, but which often house as many as thirty. Torture during interrogation is commonplace. This includes :

- electric shocks to testicles;
- breaking of arms and legs;
- beatings;
- trussing and burning;
- repeatedly pushing the detainee's head into a bucket of blood;
- pulling out finger- and toe-nails.

There is no medical treatment, even for those whose bones are broken or who suffer from severe bleeding.

Some prisoners are killed in Asmara gaols. They are shot or bludgeoned to death; others are taken in sealed vans outside the town and buried in mass graves.

The Dergue also has a concentration camp for political detainees at Adi Qualla, near Mendefera. This camp has become notorious for its brutality. Prisoners have been strangled with wire, forced to bludgeon each other to death, and in April 1979, three prisoners were paraded in front of the other inmates and battered to death with shovels.

The Dergue uses many tricks to extort

money from the population. In Keren, for instance, it recently announced that sugar, which is in short supply throughout Eritrea, would be on sale in the market at 6 a.m. on a particular morning. Notwithstanding the fact that there is a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., a large number of peasants crowded into the market-place shortly before six in the morning in order to make sure that they got supplies. All were promptly arrested for being in breach of the curfew and were only released after they had been able to raise money for heavy fines.

Further South, in the highlands above Asmara, lies the small town of Zagur. The peasants here have traditionally farmed on land in the valley of the Filfil River, but are no longer able to do so because their crops have been burned by the Ethiopians and they themselves attacked by Ethiopian bombers in the fields. They are, therefore, short of both food and money. In April 1979, however, the kebele leaders announced that there was to be a compulsory feast at which money would be raised to assist peasants starving in Wollo Province of Ethiopia. At this feast, the kebele leaders put up a number of items for auction; all had to be sold. These items included pieces of cloth stamped with slogans such as "Ethiopia or Death". Anyone who refused to attend the feast was arrested.

Fines have also been introduced for a variety of so-called offences, including failure to attend kebele meetings. In recent months, moreover, the Ethiopians have started a practice of arresting people on the streets at five-thirty in the evening and claiming that they are in breach of the 6 p.m. curfew. They are not

released from custody until they have paid a fine.

The kebele also act as tax-collectors for the Dergue. The authorities in Eritrea have announced that everyone there must pay four years' back taxes and attempts to collect this money are now going on. In many cases, the sums involved are well beyond the peasants capacity to pay. This, however, is no defence and inability to pay up is regarded as counter-revolutionary. Many people borrow from the few who have money. The situation has been aggravated by the raids in the rural areas, which have resulted in the loss of much of the harvest.

Already, the kebele leaders in Eritrea are trying to carry out their function of raising 'heads' for the Ethiopian militia. In January 1979, a group of peasants were grazing their cattle on the outskirts of the village of Merhano when kebele guards surrounded them, and fifteen people were carried away. Other efforts at recruitment have not been so successful. In the same period, a large compulsory meeting was called by the Ethiopians in Asmara. It was held in a big public hall. During the meeting the hall was surrounded by troops and volunteers were called for. This caused panic and a thousand people made for the exits and fought their way out of the hall. Fearing reprisals, many of them later slipped out of the town and either joined the E.P.L.F. in Sahel or made their way as refugees to Sudan.

Since 1st January, 1979, many people in the towns have been arrested for listening to the E.P.L.F. radio station which operates in Sahel - the Voice of the Eritrean Masses. The

radio can be heard all over Eritrea and in adjacent areas of Ethiopia. The Dergue, which has claimed that it has captured the transmitter on a number of occasions, is very angry about the radio, which gives information about attacks on Ethiopian convoys and other real news, and is therefore anxious to prevent people from listening to it. Arrests for listening to the radio are particularly high in Tigray Province, where the Dergue faces organized opposition from the local peasants.

Like the kebeles, the Ethiopian army is feared in Eritrea on account of its violence and unpredictable behaviour. Many townspeople have left for the countryside or gone as refugees to Sudan rather than face the consequences of occupation. The simple nomadic people who graze their flocks in the valleys and mountains of Sahel Province, however, are at particular risk. They have to move around during the day so that their goats and camels can feed. If they are spotted by Ethiopian planes, they are bombed and their animals are killed by rockets. Wherever possible, nomadic families now move around at night. An increasing number of nomads, however, are joining the E.P.L.F. and many caravans now consist of women, the very old and the very young.

On re-occupying the towns, the Ethiopian authorities held a series of meetings which all residents were forced to attend. Those assembled were told that the 'bandits' (the E.P.L.F.) had been defeated and that the Eritrean people were now to be intergrated with the Ethiopians. They went on to say that the E.P.L.F. had deliberately stopped the women from breeding and that the Ethiopian soldiers would 'make children' with them. Many courageous Eritrean women have challenged the Ethiopian

publicly at such meetings and during one which took place in Keren one peasant woman got up and said that she believed that it was the Ethiopians themselves who were bandits and rapists? Many rapes by Ethiopian soldiers do, in fact, take place. One fifteen-year-old Ethiopian girl, who had been living in Asmara, recently escaped from the city and was taken to hospital by a group of Eritrean women fighters. She told how she had been continuously raped by soldiers. She is still receiving treatment for venereal disease in one of the E.P.L.F. hospitals and her situation is pitiful. As over 80 % of the Ethiopian troops are reported by doctors to be suffering from V.D., the activities of the soldiers are a double hazard to Eritrean women.

The cruelties and atrocities of the Ethiopian regime in Eritrea show no sign of abatement. There is no doubt - as the enormous increase in volunteers joining the E.P.L.F. shows - that the brutality of the occupation has only hardened the determination of the Eritrean people to free themselves from Ethiopian domination. In the meantime, they wonder whether voices will ever be raised internationally against the genocide of a small people, once given autonomy by the U.N., but totally forgotten by everyone once the Ethiopian annexation of their country became a fait accompli in 1962.