

11. STARVING TIGRAY, 1984-88

Tigray during the last months of 1984 and the first half of 1985 represented the very nadir of the famine -- the most intense and widespread suffering in the entire country.

As before, a primary reason for the severity of the famine was the government's counter-insurgency strategy, including an extremely destructive army offensive. Unlike in other provinces, however, there was no significant relief program which could have offset this deliberately-induced suffering. The government deliberately withheld aid from the province which it held, and tried to prevent aid from reaching TPLF-held areas.

The Evacuation to Sudan

After the failure of the main 1984 harvest and the strangling effect of the government's intensified counter-insurgency strategies, Tigray faced unprecedented disaster. One way in which the TPLF responded to this was a mass evacuation of people to Sudan.

From 1980, the TPLF had an established policy of assisting impoverished migrants in western Tigray, through REST. In 1983, about 75,000 crossed the border to Sudan. In mid-1984, the food situation became so dire that the TPLF warned the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that a much larger number of refugees would be soon arriving in Sudan. The predicted 300,000 did not in the event arrive, but about 189,000 did. UNHCR however had made contingency plans for only 50,000 new refugees (including Eritreans), and delayed implementing a program on the grounds that the refugees were drought victims and therefore had no "well-founded fear of persecution," that no appeal for assistance had been received by the Sudan government, and that it could not deal with the TPLF as a "non-recognized entity." Only when the Sudan government made belated requests for aid, having futilely tried to close the border in November 1984, and the aid bandwagon was already rolling, did UNHCR decide to treat the inflow as a "special case"; it then provided generous assistance.

TPLF and REST assisted the westward migration, which took 4-5 weeks on foot. Feeding centers were set up at key points along the route, and food was brought across the border from Sudan. From 5,000 new refugees in September 1984, the inflow increased to 25,000 in October and 87,000 in December, tailing off during 1985. A disagreement between EPLF and TPLF in March 1985 led to the former closing the key road from Tigray to Sudan, which runs through Eritrea, forcing the refugees to use the longer and more dangerous route through Gonder. Conditions in the camps in Sudan were appalling, with some of the worst death rates ever recorded. An estimated 10,000-15,000 Tigrayan refugees died in camps in Sudan in 1984/5.

About 150,000 internally-displaced Tigrayans were assisted by REST in villages and

shelters in western Tigray, and a further 500,000 migrated in search of employment in western Tigray and Gonder.

In March-April 1985, with assistance from TPLF and REST, the refugees began to return to prepare their fields for ploughing. The return was resisted by most humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR (which until a year previously had been anxious to promote repatriation together with the Ethiopian government), which argued that the returnees faced certain death from starvation. But the refugees knew that unless they cultivated, they would remain perpetual paupers, and determined to return. At one point they staged a hunger strike in support of their right to go back. 70,000 left by the end of June, and almost all of the remainder over the following two years.

REST launched an ambitious (though underfunded) relief program to assist the returnees, and to provide relief to the hungry inside Tigray. Protecting the migration and relief routes became a major concern to the TPLF, which consequently had to alter its mode of warfare from pure guerrilla tactics to the consolidation of a "base area" in the west.

In retrospect, it is probably the case that the evacuation cost lives. The very high death rate while on the road and in Sudan caused by epidemic disease and exposure probably surpassed that which would have occurred had the migrants remained at home in their villages.

Some observers have compared the evacuation to Sudan with the resettlement program implemented by the government, equating it with a crime against humanity. This is inappropriate, for several reasons:

- * there is not a single piece of evidence to suggest that the evacuation was anything but voluntary; in fact there were more volunteers to migrate than the REST "pipeline" could handle;
- * it was temporary and was followed by a program of assisted return;
- * in late 1984 the TPLF was led to believe that generous humanitarian aid from the west would be forthcoming in the Sudanese refugee camps, and counted on that -- the appalling conditions in the camps were thus to a large extent the fault of the western donors and UNHCR;
- * the TPLF never tried to implement such a program again.

The TPLF learned several lessons from the evacuation. One was the military lesson that a guerrilla movement could not survive in an area which was depopulated or disrupted by mass population movements, as the military setbacks of 1985 demonstrated. For this and for sound humanitarian reasons, TPLF-REST policy after 1985 was geared to maintaining the population in its home area. The second lesson was that the international community was an unreliable ally. Large-scale international aid to the cross-border operation and the refugee camps, on

which so much had depended, never materialized. The TPLF turned inwards; there was a prolonged internal debate on the respective virtues of "pragmatism" and textbook Leninism. The Leninists, who maintained that the TPLF should rely principally on mobilizing the local population, won, and the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, the vanguard party of the TPLF, was formed.

The Eighth Offensive in Tigray

The Eighth Offensive opened on February 17, 1985, and was waged for three months. The campaign was fought on two fronts: in Tembien in central Tigray, the heart of the famine zone, and in western Tigray, where harvest surpluses and employment were available, and where REST was bringing in food across the border from Sudan, and evacuating refugees to Sudan. While cutting off access to relief from REST was one of the main objectives of the offensive, it also had the familiar effects of cutting employment levels and trade flows, and disrupting agricultural activity. The offensive also delayed the implementation of the Food for the North Initiative.

The opening of the offensive coincided with the day before the tenth anniversary of the founding of the TPLF, and large crowds had gathered in various TPLF-held towns to celebrate. In an uncharacteristic lapse of security and/or intelligence, the TPLF allowed the crowds to congregate in daylight in Abi Adi. A doctor working for a foreign relief agency witnessed what happened next:

The celebrations were just getting under way in the marketplace when, at 16:55 hours, there was a sudden roar and two MiGs flew low over the square where we stood. People screamed and ran in all directions, their faces frozen in terror. The MiGs circled and returned three times to strafe the marketplace with machine guns and shells. The pilots then spotted large numbers of people running away across open ground down by the Tankwa River towards a eucalyptus grove, so the planes turned their attention to this area, strafing it repeatedly. We crouched next to a wall not far from the market square as the MiGs roared in to attack again and again. A little girl ran screaming down the centre of the road nearby. After 15 minutes the planes left, leaving behind them a scene of appalling carnage. Initial estimates put the casualties at 25 dead and more than 100 wounded, 36 seriously. The number dead would have been far higher if not for the impressive efforts of first aid workers whose prompt treatment saved many lives.

There was a second attack the following day, in which the MiGs used high explosives to destroy the buildings of the town, which had now been almost completely evacuated, so casualties were much lighter: seven killed and 30 wounded. Several other Tigrayan towns were bombed during the same day. For the next two weeks, regular bombing raids continued. Abi Adi was bombed on two more occasions, as was the small town of Sambela, and 20 people

were killed.

Then, on March 1, the ground offensive began, with troops moving out from Meqele and Korem. The Meqele column captured Abi Adi.¹ Many villages north of Abi Adi were attacked. In April, a survey of refugees in Sudan found that the majority came from this area, where destruction had been widespread.

Refugees, REST aid convoys and feeding centers were all targets of the bombing. In December, a column of refugees walking to Sudan was attacked near Shilalo in Shire, and 18 people were killed and 56 wounded. Between March 27-30, nine transit and feeding centers used by REST for giving assistance to migrants were bombed. 6,000 people had to be evacuated from the center at Zelazelay, which involved moving ill people and pregnant women from the clinic. The pharmacy and drug store was later destroyed in the attacks.

Meanwhile, the ground forces moved into western Tigray to cut the relief routes used by REST from Sudan -- also cutting the roads used by refugees. The Hermi Gorge link between central and western Tigray was cut. On April 23, the migrants' transit camp at Edaga Habrit was attacked and destroyed by ground forces; six days later Sheraro (an important relief center as well as a TPLF stronghold) was captured, though held only for ten days. REST was compelled to evacuate its field office nearby, which was occupied by the army a week later. Cross-border relief operations were suspended: a food convoy from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to return to Sudan. A TPLF counter-offensive in May recaptured these towns and villages, forcing the army to withdraw to Enda Selassie, but the relief effort had been plunged into chaos for a critical month.

There were further attacks on REST's supply routes in June and September, mounted from the garrison at Enda Selassie.

The offensive included maintaining the existing severe restrictions on movement and trade in eastern Tigray and northern Wollo and Gonder. The government also decided to cut off any access to food that the TPLF and its sympathizers might have through feeding programs. Therefore, rations at the camp at Ibnat (Gonder) were cut in March, and the camp itself was brutally closed on April 29. Over 50,000 destitute people were violently forced out by the army, which burned the makeshift houses, forced patients out of hospital beds, and left the expelled with no food, water or shelter. The incident created a diplomatic scandal, with the US charge d'affaires in particular speaking out in strong terms.

In southern Tigray and north Wollo, the army was moving through the heart of the famine zone. Its military progress was made easier by the depopulation of much of the area: there were few villagers to feed, house and provide intelligence for the TPLF fighters. Pushing

¹ Many of the following details of the offensive are based on information compiled by Barbara Hendrie.

west from Korem in mid-April, an army column captured Seqota, which had been held by the TPLF-EPDM since February 1982. This column then joined with the force in Abi Adi to cut off Simien, for another military assault from the western side (this attack was another reason for the burning of Ibbat). Simien is a major area of surplus grain and employment opportunities, and the military activities severely disrupted labor migration and the grain trade. In August, another offensive was launched on Simien, the fifth in 18 months.

One of the aims of the Eighth Offensive was to abort USAID plans to donate substantial amounts of relief to REST, by showing that REST could not safely deliver the food to Tigray. In this, as in its other short-term objectives, the offensive succeeded. In early March, USAID abandoned its ambitious plans for cross-border relief, and instead opted for utilizing private US humanitarian agencies working alongside the RRC -- the Food for the North Initiative. The private agency World Vision was to open three feeding centers in government-held towns in Tigray. The government was initially uncooperative, but by April belatedly agreed to let World Vision open one feeding center, in Maichew.

Starving Tigray, 1985

In Eritrea, the Food for the North Initiative enabled the government to undertake a pacification program, using relief as part of its military strategy. In Tigray, the strategy was different. For the most part, the government showed no interest in pacification -- the program for population relocation was the resettlement program, which removed people from the province altogether. Instead, it was interested in maintaining strategic garrisons and withholding food from the population which it correctly saw as sympathetic to the TPLF.

The relief agencies in Tigray had an important military role. This was not to pacify the countryside, but to protect military garrisons -- especially those most vulnerable to TPLF attack -- and their overland supply routes.

Thus in April, when the army captured Sheraro the government asked World Vision to come and set up a feeding center there. The TPLF recaptured the town before World Vision could respond to the request. Similarly, when Seqota was captured the same month, the government proposed moving some of the people in the camp at Korem to Seqota and inviting in foreign relief agencies. The agencies objected to the population relocation but agreed to start programs in Seqota.

The presence of the agencies did not stop the government withholding food from Tigray. This can be seen by comparing the relief deliveries to the various RRC centers in Ethiopia with the number of famine-affected people in the area served by each center, as shown in table 1. Table 1. Deliveries by the RRC, April-August 1985

	% of affected people		% of grain delivered
Wollo	29	(25)	24.4
Nazareth	27	(23)	36.5
Eritrea	14	(12)	21.5
Tigray	21	(33)	5.6
Elsewhere	9	(8)	11.9

The figures err on the side of caution. First, they refer to the period between April and August 1985, when the government had greatest access to the different parts of Tigray, and before the disruption to supplies caused by the August offensive in Eritrea fed through to the distribution centers. Second, many of those in central and southern Ethiopia were in much less need than those in Tigray and north Wollo. Third, RRC figures for "affected people" are used. The RRC assumed that the total population of Tigray was 2.41 million, with 1.33 million "affected"; the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) produced a slightly higher figure of 1.58 million "affected." REST argued that the population was almost five million, with 3.8 million in need.

Mr Kurt Jansson, head of the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE), endorsed the government-FAO figures saying that "the scientific evidence is indisputable."² At best, Mr Jansson was misinformed. As shown in chapter one, the scientific evidence about the population in Tigray is highly disputable, and the REST figure is almost certainly closer to the truth. The RRC figure for those in "need" was a work of imagination. The FAO crop assessment was based upon satellite imagery only; no ground visits to rural Tigray were undertaken. While the satellite imagery may have given a reliable indication of the geographical extent of the drought, the famine of course affected a much wider area. The FAO's inference to numbers of people affected was based upon the government's population figures.

It can safely be assumed that the RRC omitted a minimum of one million needy people in Tigray from its figures. This makes the neglect of Tigray is even more striking -- these revised figures are shown in brackets in table 1.

The figures show only RRC consignments; during this period distributions by voluntary agencies accounted for over half the relief. This was delivered in approximately the same proportions, thus not affecting the percentages in the table above.³

For reasons discussed in the preceding chapter, the cross-border relief effort was also

² Kurt Jansson, letter to Ms Gayle Smith, REST Support Committee, Washington DC, August 29, 1985.

³ With the exception of Eritrea, which received a smaller proportion from private agencies.

starved of resources at this time. REST and ICRC transported 32,000 and 8,400 metric tonnes (MT) respectively into Tigray during all of 1985.

Thus Tigray, with one third of the total famine-stricken population, received only about one twentieth of the food relief. Needy Eritreans, per head, received about ten times as much.

In addition, official antipathy to large-scale aid to Wollo was evident to many relief workers, who reported on "a systematic attempt to deprive [Wollo] of food."⁴ Mr Kurt Jansson of UNEOE replied to the allegation that Wollo was being deprived, arguing that a low level of donations to the RRC and a relative shortage of voluntary agencies in the province accounted for the relief shortfall.⁵ He failed to explain why the RRC did not allow more voluntary agencies to work there, and did not increase its own consignments to Wollo, taking food away from other provinces with lesser need but larger programs.

In January 1985, the RRC was reaching 885,000 people in Wollo, and the voluntary agencies about 400,000. Over the course of the year, the voluntary agencies increased their programs so that by December they were reaching just over one million people. However, the people of Wollo gained little -- the RRC took the opportunity to reduce its programs, so that it was reaching only 153,000 by the year end -- making a gross total lower than that reached twelve months earlier. The expanding voluntary agency program was no excuse for the RRC cutbacks, as the distributions never reached as many as half of the estimated 2.58 million people in Wollo "in need."⁶

Sometimes the diversions were very crude. For instance, 7,500 MT of grain earmarked by the donors for Wollo and consigned to the RRC was sent "by mistake" to Nazareth in October 1985. It took four months of lobbying from the western aid donors before it reached its correct destination.⁷ Comparing Wollo unfavorably with other parts of the country, one investigator noted that rations there "rarely exceeded 10 kilograms [per person per month]."⁸

Yet, as the table shows, famine victims in Wollo received on average six times as much

⁴ Paul Vallely, "Starving Wollo: An Empty Excuse," *The Times*, London, August 14, 1985.

⁵ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987, pp. 70-3.

⁶ Mitchell, 1986, pp. 26-7. If the earlier "in need" total of 1.79 million had been used, the performance would have been worse, not better. Many of the 1.79 million were extremely needy people in the war-affected northern parts of Wollo, who were not reached by the distributions. Most of the 790,000 people later added to the figure were less needy but more accessible, and received rations. Similar "needy" populations were "discovered" in government-held areas in 1985 and afterwards as large quantities of western relief became available.

⁷ Mitchell, 1986.

⁸ Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 1988, p. 414.

as those in Tigray. The UN claimed in August 1985 that 75 per cent of the (government-defined) needy people in Tigray were being reached, a total of 1,126,468 people, with rations of between five and 15 kilograms per month.⁹ This was blatantly untrue. The RRC distributed a mere 569 MT that month, and World Vision (the principal agency in the Food for the North program) was well short of its target figure of 180,000 recipients.

The UN claim was based on a four-day visit to army garrisons in Tigray made in the company of senior government officials in July, which was the month in which the largest government distributions to date had occurred, by far. Allocations to Tigray and Eritrea then dropped by 85% in August, while those to southern and central provinces rose by 76%. Even the briefly-expanded distributions of July, however, reached far fewer people than the UN claimed -- that would have required a program equalling that in Wollo. Most of the recipients were the 116,000 Tigrayans in and around relief shelters in the government-held towns of the province, resettlers, and the militia. In the spring and summer of 1985, it is unlikely that as much as fifteen per cent of the needy in Tigray received relief from the government side.

Controlling Tigray 1985-7: I The Army

Following the Eighth Offensive, the Ethiopian army had a greater degree of control in Tigray than at any time since 1977. The counter-insurgency strategy already developed continued to be implemented with great ruthlessness. This included military patrols, the activities of army irregulars, repeated attempts to block REST's relief operation, the bombing of markets, forced resettlement, and the supply of only small amounts of food to the general population.

Significant army attacks concentrated on attempts to control the roads from Sudan, such as assaults made in April and July 1986.

Most of the military activity consisted of army patrols, which harassed, detained and executed peasants. Some soldiers captured by the TPLF told visitors of their actions.¹⁰

Mohamed, a former goldsmith ... admitted that his patrol had looted a farm at Mai Kenetel [central Tigray] and then set fire to the building. When the inhabitants tried to flee they were mown down by soldiers who are trained to do the actual killing. Another wounded soldier, Thomas, had experience of these killers. He said: "We were ordered to see everyone as the enemy. I killed through my eyes [i.e. I was ready to kill] many times. Two peasants once strayed into my patrol -- they tried to run but were caught. The CO [commanding officer] interrogated them and then made us tie their hands.

⁹ Jansson, Harris and Penrose, 1987, p. 51.

¹⁰ Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell", *Observer Scotland*, April 16, 1989.

Another soldier shot them both between the eyes.

Many minor atrocities in Tigray were committed by government-recruited banda, which translates as mercenaries, saboteurs, and terrorists. A visitor to Tigray made the following notes after interviewing a peasant farmer in Medebai sub-district (near Axum):

There were security problems in his Tabia [cluster of villages], he said, which borders Eritrea. Government recruited armed personnel from the locality who, since they are knowledgeable of the surroundings, guide government soldiers who are occasionally sent across the Mereb River from Eritrea, especially to a district called Qohaine to disrupt life. They are paid in food grain by the government. People refer to them as "bandas." In September 1987 they killed some peasants.

We were informed that on 31 October 1987, the day of our arrival at the Chilla Wereda [sub-district], they murdered a young peasant at his home near the main town of Axum and peeled his skin off. It was further explained that similar atrocities were perpetrated by the bandas from time to time in "semi-liberated" areas, i.e. areas adjacent to government garrison towns.

One of the most common activities undertaken by banda was the planting of land mines on routes from Sudan used by TPLF and REST.

In March 1988, the government launched its Ninth Offensive in Tigray, with the intention of recapturing the garrisons that had been taken over the previous five months by the TPLF. In moving out of the garrisons, the army was militarily exposed and the TPLF was able to launch a counter-offensive and inflict a series of defeats. After the battle of Afabet, the defeats quickly turned into a rout, and in late March and early April, the TPLF captured most of the towns in Tigray.

Controlling Tigray II: The Air Force

The main targets of continued aerial bombing were markets, REST convoys, and anything else that the pilots happened to notice. Three trucks belonging to the ICRC were destroyed by bombing on February 3, 1986, and one driver was killed. Adi Nebried market was bombed and strafed in February 1987; 17 were killed and 55 wounded.¹¹ Sheraro market was bombed in December 1987, killing ten. Phosphorous was often used, for instance as described by Tabey Kidane, aged 19: "I was guarding my cattle near Edaga Habreit, when burning material came from the sky, burning the trees and the grass and killing one of my cows." When examined ten months later by Dr Eric Charles, his wounds were still suppurating: "the burns were deep and were a chemical type of burn ... they kept erupting and wouldn't heal."

¹¹ Sunday Times, London, March 4, 1987.

The Ninth Offensive in March 1988 was brief, but witnessed a number of atrocities by the air force. These included:

- * Abi Adi: "Within a few days of [the army's] departure, two helicopters came and bombed the market square, killing and wounding 48 people. Many of the people who died on that occasion were women, and it was terrible to see their bodies lying in the square."¹²

- * March 23: Nebelet village bombed, at least one old woman killed. This was the 11th occasion that this village had been bombed, killing 17 people in total.

Controlling Tigray III: Relief Agencies

The amounts of relief given on the government side in Tigray were small, and often given largely as an inducement for resettlement. RRC relief was distributed exclusively in the towns, and the continued existence of the garrison towns came to depend on regular supplies from the RRC.

The main function of the aid agencies' operations in Tigray, as far as the government was concerned, was to protect vulnerable garrisons from attack by the TPLF -- the front would lose more in adverse international publicity by attacking a garrison with a foreign relief agency present than it could hope to gain militarily. In mid-1985 it began to allow more international relief operations in and around Tigray, notably in Axum, Adigrat, Abi Adi, Seqota and -- abortively -- Sheraro.

In December 1986, a TPLF-EPDM force (re)captured Seqota, closing an ICRC feeding program, and causing an outcry among relief workers and diplomats. In March 1988, an EPDM unit destroyed three relief trucks with their grain, in eastern Gonder, causing another round of condemnations. Because the trucks were painted green and unmarked, the EPDM claimed that the fighters believed them to be army vehicles. (Four white UN trucks accompanying them were allowed to proceed.) In the same month the TPLF (re)captured Abi Adi. A western diplomat was outraged: "essentially what this means is that there is going to be mass starvation almost immediately," and the director of USAID added: "It's going to hurt us hard."¹³ Two days later, Abi Adi was bombed by the air force.

The most striking instance of the government's complete disregard for the welfare of the hungry people of Tigray, and its sole concern with military objectives, comes from Wukro, which was captured by the TPLF shortly after taking Abi Adi. The TPLF's attack drew

¹² Interview with Woreda Teka of Abi Adi Baito conducted by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.

¹³ International Herald Tribune, March 10, 1988.

condemnation from diplomats and relief personnel. Under an ad hoc agreement, the TPLF allowed the ICRC staff who remained in Wukro to distribute the remaining food. An international food monitor described what happened next:

On April 8, 25-30,000 people gathered in Wukro in order to collect food aid ... The ICRC distribution site, with a huge, clearly marked red cross tent, is just on the edge of the town. The ICRC representative of Adigrat, who had taken over responsibility for Wukro after it was controlled by TPLF, arrived in the late morning ... with his mobile radio he sent an open message to the ICRC headquarters in Addis Ababa,¹⁴ giving details on the upcoming distribution ... At 2 p.m., MiGs appeared and started bombing, very close to the orphan-center. The building caught fire immediately, and the roof collapsed ... in this building, 52 dead bodies were counted, which were buried in two bomb craters. While people from the distribution site and orphan center were fleeing, the MiGs returned and bombed with cluster shells. In only one street, I counted five big bomb craters.¹⁵

A total of about 100 people were killed in this bombing raid, and 14,000 people fled the town. Wukro was bombed again on April 13, and 31 people were killed.

In northern Wollo, relief was more generous than in Tigray. However it was closely tied to the implementation of government policies, such as resettlement, road-building, and the control of movement. On many occasions, rural people would gather for a distribution, only to find that they did not meet the criteria for receiving relief -- for what reasons, they did not know.

A poem about restrictions on relief has been recorded:

What kind of grain was it which deceived us?
What kind of wheat was it which deceived us?
It returned to its country, and sent us to the forest.¹⁶

During this period, the government also continued to oppose the cross-border operation from Sudan. Relief vehicles were bombed, and agencies involved in the program were subject to hostile propaganda. Unfortunately, the UN continued to decline to recognize the cross-border program, even though in 1988 it transported over 150,000 MT of relief supplies.

Government hostility did not even spare the ICRC, which was forced to take unusual measures and operate clandestinely, with unmarked vehicles travelling at night. Following the summer drought of 1987, the ICRC began to promote a proposal for safe passage, whereby relief could be transported across the battle lines from government-held towns to rebel-held villages. This "Open Roads for Survival" initiative was launched on November 12, 1987.

¹⁴ This was despite strong objections by the local TPLF commander.

¹⁵ Maria Altstidl, "Report on a Visit to Tigray," German Emergency Doctors, April 1988.

¹⁶ Quoted in: Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD thesis, Manchester, 1990, p. 121.

Unfortunately, the ICRC was either over-optimistic about the prospects for success of the initiative, or it believed that sufficient political pressure from the donors to make the proposal work would only be forthcoming if the cross-border operation were seen to be unable to reach the needy in central Tigray. The result was that the ICRC withdrew from the cross-border operation, and declined to donate its fleet of 81 trucks in Sudan to other agencies working cross-border. It also publicly disputed the claim made by REST and the Emergency Relief Desk¹⁷ that cross-border supplies could reach the highlands on a road newly-constructed by the TPLF.

The EPLF and TPLF both agreed to the "open roads" proposal, though they publicly accused the ICRC of being politically partisan to the government. However, the government failed to agree to the ICRC's "open roads" plan -- and indeed on April 6, 1988, it expelled the ICRC from Eritrea and Tigray. The head of the RRC, Berhanu Jambere, justified this, saying that the problem was "terrorist action supported by external forces, and not an all-out external war. Therefore the organization's neutral status does not apply here."¹⁸ Another broadcast shed further light on this decision: Addis Ababa radio accused the ICRC of having an "arrogant and anti-people stand" and "directly and indirectly supporting the bandits."¹⁹ Two days later, the air force bombed an ICRC distribution at Wukro (see above). Instead of its announced plan to feed one million people in Tigray by April, ICRC was feeding none.

A final ironic aspect of the relationship between suffering in Tigray and the central government is the role that the drought of 1987 played in the government's strategy. The drought affected Tigray and its borderlands; central Wollo and other government-controlled areas were scarcely affected. On the basis of the drought in Tigray and the accompanying international publicity, the government appealed for 1.3 million MT of relief grain. This was almost three times the request made in March 1984, when the situation was immeasurably more serious -- but this time the western donors accused the RRC of underestimating the size of the problem. By this time, famine in Ethiopia was such a sensitive issue in the domestic politics of western countries that the response was immediate and generous. Within seven months, the target had been met -- a rate of donation 14 times as high as in the seven months after the March 1984 appeal. The total amount donated was well in excess of what the RRC estimated was needed, and even more in excess of real needs. Most of the grain, of course, never went to Tigray, but in effect served as an enormous subsidy for the programs of titanic social engineering that the government was implementing in the southern and central parts of the

¹⁷ A consortium of voluntary agencies consigning food to ERA and REST.

¹⁸ Quoted in: BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB)*, ME 0124, April 13, 1988.

¹⁹ Radio Addis Ababa, April 13, 1988, quoted in; BBC, *SWB*, ME 0126, April 15, 1988. This accusation was made ironically on the basis of the ICRC's former cross-border relief operation into rebel-held areas.

country.

Insurgency Strategy of the TPLF

Following the famine and the 1985 offensives, both EPLF and TPLF were in temporary military disarray. But by mid-1988 they were enjoying great military success, and had begun their march to victory. The fundamental reason for this is that the government strategy of using famine as an element of war so deeply alienated the peasantry that they turned in increasing numbers to the rebel fronts.

Introducing his authoritative discussion of peasant survival during the famine in Wollo, DR Dessalegn Rahmato of Addis Ababa University writes: "for obvious reasons, I shall leave out of our account resistance and rebellion as a form of survival strategy."²⁰ However, armed resistance was an essential element to survival strategies.

Between 1984 and 1987, the number of TPLF fighters rose nearly three-fold, and the front was turning away volunteers. When engaged in military action, the TPLF could count on active support from the local population.

Even when attacking relief distribution centers, the rebels had local support. Local peasants argued that the damage done by having an army garrison in the vicinity frightening people and disrupting movement outweighed any benefit from the food provided. "The food of the Dergue is a poison" remarked one woman farmer.²¹

The TPLF military strategy was dramatically changed by the famine and the evacuation to Sudan. Over the years 1985-7, it concentrated on consolidating a "base area" in western Tigray, and controlling the access routes from Sudan. In this respect, its strategy was more like that of the EPLF.

Outside the base area, the main TPLF strategy was to attack isolated garrisons at unpredictable times. As these garrisons were the key to the government-sponsored relief effort in Tigray and its borderlands, the supply of relief suffered too. In 1983, the TPLF had captured relief workers at Jarre and Korem; in November 1984, it attacked Korem again. In 1985, it staged raids on the Korem-Seqota road, though a relief monitor noted "casualties from TPLF land mines or TPLF attacks were infrequent and greater damage was caused by reckless driving."²² On March 8, 1986, the TPLF and EPDM attacked Alamata (north Wollo), and two

²⁰ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine Survival Strategies: A Case Study of Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute of Development Research, 1987, p. 7.

²¹ Interviewed in Abi Adi by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

²² Mitchell, 1986, p. 38.

World Vision employees were killed and four wounded. According to witnesses, the killings were not the "mistake" claimed by the TPLF, but were deliberate.²³ The following month, the TPLF destroyed two bridges over the Tekezze river, disrupting transport in western Tigray. In December 1986, the TPLF-EPDM (re)captured Seqota, closing an ICRC feeding program.

In late 1987, the TPLF began to go on the offensive, snuffing out the army's network of small garrisons. On October 2, it captured the strategic garrison of Rama, on the border with Eritrea, and a number of smaller army outposts followed. On February 22, 1988, it captured three relief workers, who were later released. In March it captured Abi Adi. The government launched a counter-offensive, which ended in military disaster.

²³ International Herald Tribune, May 13, 1986.