7. TOTAL WAR IN ERITREA, 1978-84

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

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

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

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

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

Army Offensives, 1978-81

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

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

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

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

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

> Over 20,000 people streamed northward toward the Sudan border. Some carried small bundles in their arms, occasionally a battered leather suitcase on their heads. A flatbed truck cruised back into Keren carrying seven women who had lost their children along the way, their tearstained faces belying their stoical silence ...
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> On the following day the Ethiopians began an indiscriminate bombardment of the area with long range artillery, Stalin Organ rocket launchers and MiG aircraft. Late in the afternoon, three MiG-23s hit one makeshift refugee camp of 2,000 to 3,000 people some 40 kilometers north of the battle lines. Paramedics carried the 65 wounded to the edge of the road and tended them there while awaiting EPLF trucks to take them out after dark ... Among the injured was one family of five. Berhane Gebreyesus lay on a canvas stretcher while his wife and three children, also wounded, huddled around him. His

one-and-a-half-year-old baby shivered with shock from a head wound that was to claim his young life the next morning. Ten had been killed outright in the raid. Thirty more would not survive the next 24 hours.[2]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

gobbles up entire divisions."[6]

The failure of the massive conventional offensives of 1978-9 led to a change in military tactics in 1980 and 1981. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, who was political commissioner for Eritrea at the time, argues that the policy of "scorched earth" was abandoned in 1980.[7] Other sources note that from 1980 onwards there were more attacks on non-combatants, including stepped-up aerial bombardment and a greater level of harassment in the towns. What appears to have occurred is that fewer large-scale offensives were launched, with correspondingly less accompanying widespread destruction of everything in the army's path. For two years, while the government prepared its next offensive, the war was fought more as a pacification campaign.

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

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

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

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

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

The first months of 1980 also saw significant developments within the rebel fronts. The

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[6] Quoted in: Pietro Petrucci, "The Kremlin's Africa Sickness", reproduced in: Eritrea Information, November 1979.

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

[8] Africa Confidential, 20 17, August 22, 1979, p. 8.

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

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

The Red Star Campaign

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[10] Clapham, 1988, p. 209.

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

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

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

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

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

Control of the Population

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Refugees

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The War in 1983-4

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

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

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

complete silence from the government media.

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

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

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

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

Bombing "Everything that Moves"

Major Bezabih Petros, a pilot who was trained at both Williams Air Force Base, Arizona, and Ligov Air Base in the USSR, was shot down and captured by the EPLF in April 1984. In captivity, he had this to say about the bombing:

> We definitely know civilians will get hurt. But, knowing that the people sympathize with the rebels, the order is to bomb everything that moves.

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

An important element in the government's bombing strategy was instilling fear in the civilian populations. The bombing, and the measures needed to cope with it, such as living by

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

night, pose enormous practical problems and are demoralizing for the civilian population. An Eritrean refugee woman in Sudan explained why she had left her country: "I was tired. I wanted just to walk outside in daylight without needing to look into the sky and fear for my life and my children."[20] It was not even necessary for the aircraft to drop bombs in order to inspire fear. They only needed to screech overhead at unpredictable intervals to remind people of their deadly presence, and the need for constant vigilance.

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

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

The Creation of Famine

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

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

(1) the direct destruction caused by war;

(2) the restrictions on economic activities caused by war and the other counter-insurgency measures;

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

(3) the degradation of the natural environment, which was caused in part by war and counter-insurgency measures; and

(4) rainfall failure.

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

The Impact of War and Counter-Insurgency Measures

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

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

> Andu Kifle is a pastoralist-farmer from the small village of Adi-Werhi in Eritrea's Hamassien plateau. Andu and his two adult sons, Mehari and Keleta, used to take advantage of the winter rains (November-February) by moving their livestock to the bahri (green belt [down the escarpment close to the Red Sea]), 140 km east of Adi-Werhi where the rest of the family remained. Farming on the mainly state-owned dominale land in the green belt, Andu and his sons would get a reasonable harvest in February and March and return to Adi-Werhi by April, bringing sacks of grain, butter, ghee [clarified butter] and salt as rewards for their labour ...
>
> At the onset of the May rains, one son would return to the green belt to collect the pair of draught oxen left their with relatives. From May until October the whole family was busy cultivating in their plateau village. After the harvest and a few months' rest, the farming cycle started again.
>
> This was the case until 1985, when Andu Kifle and his family, along with several hundred villagers from surrounding areas, were transferred to a new security hamlet called Inwet, where movement is restricted to a 10 km radius. Their whole agricultural system and pattern of life broke down. Andu sums up the feelings of many peasants: "We are like voiceless prisoners in these security hamlets. We have some oxen but not the land to plough, we have the cattle but we cannot graze freely. What choice do we have other than to starve?"[21]

In western Eritrea, many farmers were similarly forced to abandon seasonal farming on the flood-retreat of the Gash river. Many farmers were thus able to harvest only one crop per

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

year instead of two, and many herders were forced to abandon their established practices of seasonal migration for grazing. In addition, many areas were rendered unusable by trenches, fortifications, free-fire zones, and land mines. A survey in 1987 found that land had been mined in almost ten per cent of the villages covered, and that two huge areas in Sahel and Akele Guzai had been rendered completely off-limits by mining.[22]

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

Overall Impact of the War on Food Availability

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

Impact on the Grain Trade

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

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

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

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

[25] Only the town of Barentu remained in government hands.

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

1980, there was increased banditry in western Eritrea, which compelled merchants to organize their own armed convoys. From 1981 onwards there was greater harassment of traders suspected of trading with Sudan. Greater restrictions on trade were imposed during the Red Star campaign, and in 1983 the heavy fighting in western Tigray interrupted supplies from there.

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

> When we return from here [an EPLF-held area] to our villages, we don't know what will happen to us, because there are spies who will be asking where we have gone. We have taken a risk to come here. In order not to be killed, we will have to lie and say we travelled to Kassala [Sudan] to get food. The enemy looks after us like goats -- our whole living situation depends on tricking the enemy.
>
> When we are away from our homes like this, we fear for our women. The Dergue rapes and harasses our women. But what can we do?[27]

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

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

The Impact on the Natural Environment

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

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

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

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

* Eucalyptus woods at Biet Giorgis around Asmara and some other towns were cut down for the same reason.

* The interruption of the charcoal and firewood trade from southwestern parts of Eritrea led to people obtaining wood fuel from their own localities.

* The blocking of migration routes used by animal herders forced the herders to keep their animals in one area throughout the whole year, putting additional stress on the pasture and browse of these areas. The same factor caused herders to switch to farming, which places more stress on the land.

* Large areas of land were rendered unusable by land mines, forcing farmers to cultivate other areas instead, and forcing herders to move their animals elsewhere. These other areas were usually less suitable and more vulnerable to degradation.

* The general impoverishment caused by war forced larger numbers of people to engage in marginal economic activities such as selling firewood or the leaves of doum palms (which are used for making mats), which are destructive of the natural environment.

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

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

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

Humanitarian Assistance

There was relatively little humanitarian assistance to Eritrea during this period. International aid to ERA fell from $2.9 million in 1978 to $1.6 million in 1979, and only $1 million in 1980. Food relief was supplied at a rate of under 6,000 tons per year. These amounts were pitifully small compared to the level of need. Assistance on the government side was

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

scarcely more generous, but Eritrea had the advantages of containing both of Ethiopia's ports, and being a sensitive political area and thus a priority for much government economic aid.

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

Factors Ameliorating the Famine

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

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

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

[29] Fritz Eisenloeffel, The Eritrea Durrah Odyssey, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1983, p. 38.

[30] Alex de Waal, "Population and Health of Eritreans in Wad Sherifei," ActionAid, London, 1989.

[31] Alex de Waal, interviews in Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

home. While growing rich, the officers tolerated this informal market. This relative prosperity for traders trickled down to certain sections of society, including the traders' relatives, domestic servants, house builders and others.

Finally, as the famine deepened in 1985, the amounts of aid provided to Eritrea became very large. The aid on the government side was tied to the continuing counter-insurgency strategy, but it did have the positive benefit of actually feeding some people.

Despite these factors, the famine of 1983-5 in Eritrea must not be minimized. It caused massive and avoidable suffering and impoverishment among most sections of the rural population, and led to many deaths.