17. THE RAGE OF NUMBERS: MENGISTU'S SOLDIERS

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

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

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

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

Conscription, 1976-82

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

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

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

Ethiopia. Others were picked up in one and twos, mostly in Tigray and north Wollo, usually when they were away from home.

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

> One middle-aged farmer from Tigray's Enderta district said that a representative of the Derg had demanded five "volunteers" from each village in his region. The appointed head of his Peasant Association had selected him to go. Several others said they had been told they were going to a political rally and would be brought home afterward. One said that peasants who had been resisting the Derg's heavy taxation were told that they would be pardoned if they turned themselves in. Those who did were put in trucks and sent north. A 42-year old peasant from Woldiya in Wollo said that he was walking towards a coffee house in town when he was forced into a police wagon and later transferred to a truck which carried him to the front. Another explained that he had been having his pants mended by a local tailor when he was shanghaied by an army patrol, and stood up to show that all he had to wear was a burlap sack around his waist, because he had not been allowed to wait for his pants.[2]

National Service

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

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

Regular rounds of conscription occurred after 1983. Official figures for the numbers of

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[2] Dan Connell, "Repression as a Way of Life," Horn of Africa, 3.2, (1980) p. 15.

[3] Mengistu Haile Mariam, May Day address, May 1, 1981.

[4] Decree no. 236 of 1983, May 4, 1983.

[5] The pre-induction training appears never to have been implemented.

conscripts were never published, but reliable estimates have been made. The first campaign was carried out between January and April 1984. Its target was 60,000 men but it is likely that only 50,000 were actually conscripted. After these recruits completed their six months' training, a second batch of the same size was recruited in January 1985. The third batch, starting in December 1985, had a target of 120,000. Subsequent campaigns usually had targets of 60,000-80,000 recruits. The fourth campaign was recruited between November 1986 and January 1987; the fifth between November 1987 and January 1988.

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

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

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

Following the TPLF advance in Wollo province in September 1989, another round of conscription -- at least the eighth since 1983 -- was begun. This was intensified in November following further military disasters. In a speech on October 31, President Mengistu said:

> The main strategy for defending our country is the proper strengthening of our revolutionary army with manpower and material so that it can meet its obligations. There should be a vast popular participation which must be well-coordinated and mobilized for the decisive victory ... In defending ourselves against the danger foisted on

[6] BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), ME 0420, March 29, 1989.

us and overcoming it, manpower is the decisive factor.[7]

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

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

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

[7] BBC, SWB, ME 0602, November 1, 1989.

[8] BBC, SWB, ME 0754, May 3, 1990.

conditions and dangers they would face at the front, and under pressure from parents and friends, mostly went into hiding. Outside Addis Ababa, most students were simply rounded up and taken off to training camps.

Addressing the nation on April 19, 1991, President Mengistu called for an even greater mobilization to defeat the insurgents, and called for an army equal to that of Iraq -- i.e. one million men. Subsequently, the Shengo called for "mobilization more than ever before" and authorized the recruitment of all able-bodied adult males, using all means available. Fortunately, the government had neither the time nor means to implement this ambition, and within six weeks the army had disintegrated.

Conscription of Under-age Children

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

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

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

Methods of Conscription

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

One of the commonest methods of conscription was through the PAs and the urban kebeles. Each PA and kebele was set a quota of people, which they were to fill by whatever means they chose. This system was notoriously open to abuse by individuals. PA or kebele officials rarely conscripted their relatives or friends, and used the conscript quota as a way of settling grudges, obtaining sexual favours from the wives and sisters of those they chose to detain, or -- most commonly -- soliciting bribes from conscripts' families. Paying these bribes was a heavy burden on the poor. As well as PA and kebele officials, others could demand

[9] The Observer, London, June 5, 1988.

payment.

> At the time of conscription, people sold as much as they could -- food and animals; they did not have much, as it was a famine-prone, food-deficit area.... The people used the money to pay for bribes to get their sons released. When men and boys were taken as conscripts, they were first of all put in camps, in the area where they were taken, before being given medical examinations. there were two opportunities for families to get their sons released. The first was to pay officials so that the son failed the medical examination. The other way was to bribe the military guards who were on at night, to let their sons out.[10]

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

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

The conscription of schoolboys followed a similar pattern: policemen loitered near school entrances and detained pupils entering or leaving. Two ninth-grade pupils at the Menelik II Senior Secondary School in Addis Ababa disappeared in these circumstances in September 1989, without the knowledge of their families and friends. They are believed to have been forcibly conscripted. During the following months many pupils only went to school when they

[10] Refugee from Wollaita, Shewa, interviewed in Sudan, October 1989.

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

could be accompanied there and back by their parents. Others simply stayed away, but any pupil who was absent for 21 consecutive days without a doctor's note was automatically expelled. Instances of forcible conscription also occurred at Addis Ababa university. A foreign medical team visiting TPLF-controlled Tigray in 1988 spoke to two university students who had been conscripted and subsequently captured by the TPLF, and conscription on the campus occurred in late 1989, prior to the main attempt to mobilize students in 1991.

Prisoners

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

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

Press Ganging

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

[12] Gerry McCann, The Guardian, London, February 20, 1989.

lottery tickets were a particular target. Many of these boys were under age.

Press ganging mostly occurred in rural areas, but was common in Addis Ababa during November and December 1989, April 1990, and from July 1990 until the fall of the government. The following incident of afesa, which occurred on April 11, 1990, was described by Giorgis, a businessman:

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

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

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

Food Aid as an Enticement to Enlist

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

One of numerous examples of this occurred in Senafe, Eritrea, in January 1990. Senafe was then the most southerly government-controlled outpost in Eritrea, and was surrounded by rural villages controlled by the EPLF. Following the failure of the rains in this area in 1989,

international aid donors provided relief food to the RRC, to distribute to people in the drought-affected areas. In early January the RRC began such a distribution at Senafe. On the first day, only women, children and old people came forward from the villages to collect the rations. They were given their food and allowed to return to the villages in safety. Assuming that it was safe, young men came for their rations on the following day. At least 600 were promptly seized by the army for the local people's militia. "A United Nations monitor stood by helplessly ... as soldiers rounded up teenage boys for military service" according to Jane Perlez, correspondent for the New York Times.[13] There are reports that some of those seized were transported to Asmara and released, but visitors to Senafe reported seeing a large new contingent of militiamen drilling just outside the town. Africa Watch believes that many of the men seized on this occasion were forced into the people's militia.

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

Conscription of Women

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

However, there was de facto conscription of women. Women who lived in a town with a large army garrison were at risk from the attentions of the soldiers. Frequently they were harassed and raped. Many women in garrison towns had no means of livelihood other than becoming the concubines of army officers or prostitutes for the common soldiers.[14] Yomar, a woman from the Tigrayan town of Enda Selassie reported

> [the soldiers] did what they liked. They took the girls by force, even married women. If you refused they would take out their pistol. They would arrest your brother, and when you went to visit him in prison they would ask you to sleep with them. In order to get your brother released or to stop his murder you had to choose whether or not to give your body.[15]

The repeated rape and other abuse of women is a serious violation of human rights.

[13] New York Times, February 15, 1990.

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

[15] Quoted in: Jenny Hammond, Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrayan Women. Oxford, 1989, p. 150.

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

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

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

Sufferings of Conscripts' Families

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

The psychological effects of this prolonged separation could be devastating for the

families. A researcher studying women in Addis Ababa in 1988 found that 94 out of a sample of 113 women were suffering from what they described as "oppression of the soul" -- in English, something equivalent to chronic depression -- and that 90 of these attributed the cause to the fact that their husbands, brothers or sons were serving in the army, often forcibly conscripted, and usually they had heard no news from them.[16] This depressed psychological state in turn led to neglect of their young children, who as a consequence suffered more from illnesses such as diarrhoea.

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

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

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

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

Another song is an ironic comment on government propaganda:

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

Treatment of Soldiers

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

> We arrived at the training camp in Debre Zeit on March 22. There they shaved our heads were shaved and burned our clothes. There was a medical examination, and two

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

[17] Women bind their stomachs after childbirth to help lose the extra weight.

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

failed. They gave us a green [army] uniform, a blanket, a bedsheet, a plate and a drinking cup. We were sent to sleep in a large store belonging to the Defense Construction Authority which had been turned into a sleeping place for the camp. We slept on plastic grain bags filled with the leaves of eucalyptus trees and Christmas trees. About 2,000 slept in our store, anmd there were three other stores used for sleeping, which were much bigger. An officer told us that there were 20,000 in the camp. During the first week, thousands arrived every day; then they stopped arriving.

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

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

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

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

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

When the battle began, we didn't know what to do. We asked the officer. He said: "you

have a gun, shoot. Do like those in front of you."[19]

A 15-year old boy was conscripted by soldiers from his village in August 1989, while herding sheep. After four weeks "training" he was sent to the front at Woldiya (Wollo), where he was captured by the EPRDF in his first engagement. In November, he was interviewed by a visiting relief worker:

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

Enforcement of Discipline

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

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

> As the troops retreated to their base areas the army authorities decided to make an example of those who were to be blamed for the failure of the offensive. Thirty two people were picked out from the 23rd Division and shot. The authorities also declared that it was an offence for anyone to mention the strength of the EPLF at any time or to criticize the army in any way.
>
> The Dergue's cadres at the base camps also made examples of a number of other individuals who were publicly executed for "crimes against the army." Those executed included:
>
> * Sergeant Tesfaye Ayena who was shot because he was accused of leaving the battlefront because he was sick.

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

[20] Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell", Observer Scotland, April 16, 1989.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Within the army there was a tight security network:

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

[21] Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM), 3.2, June 1983.

machine guns behind them.[22]

During the 1980s there were numerous stories, mostly unsubstantiated, of firefights between army units and of special units deployed to gun down soldiers who tried to retreat. Flight-Lt Habte Luel, a helicopter pilot who defected to Sudan in August 1987, claimed that he had done so after disobeying an order to fire on retreating troops. One substantiated incident occurred at Bahir Dar, Gojjam in March 1990. The army garrison blew up one span of the bridge across the Blue Nile, in order to prevent EPRDF forces crossing it. The bridge was blown up while retreating government soldiers were still on it, killing an unknown number.

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

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

The Attempted Coup of April 1989

On May 16, 1989 a group of senior officers attempted to stage a coup d'etat in Addis Ababa, while President Mengistu was out of the country on a visit to East Germany. The stated aims of the plotters included a negotiated end to the wars and political and economic liberalization. President Mengistu's intelligence had learned in advance of the planned coup, and his security forces struck first, precipitating an attempt by the plotters to seize power before

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

they were fully prepared.[23] Two generals were killed in a shoot out with security forces sent to arrest them by the loyal Minister for Internal Affairs, Tesfaye Wolde Selassie. The mutineers took control of the army and air force headquarters and the defense ministry; all were besieged by loyalist troops. There was fighting at all three locations before the coup plotters surrendered. The Minister of Defense, Maj-Gen Haile Giorgis Habte Mariam, was killed by the plotters, reportedly for telling them to surrender. The security forces also made a sweep through the city, arresting several hundred suspected sympathizers with the coup. In total 44 officers were reported killed.

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

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

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

Prisoners of War

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

At different times in the war, the EPLF and TPLF-EPRDF held thousands or tens of thousands of prisoners. In late 1989, the EPRDF claimed to have 37,000. Their living condi-

[23] Africa Confidential, 30 11, May 26, 1989.

tions were basic, with meager but adequate food and accommodation -- but in this respect they lived little differently from the local population or indeed the members of the rebel fronts. Blankets, clothes, soap and cigarettes were supplied when available, but rarely footwear. Medical care was provided: in late 1988, there were 4,000 wounded prisoners receiving some treatment by the TPLF, including 1,200 cared for in field hospitals.[24] There are no reports of physical abuse or execution. The prisoners were sometimes able to correspond with their families. Prisoners were used for manual labor on road construction and other infrastructural projects, but the work was not excessive and discipline was not enforced in a humiliating manner. Some were given training in literacy and nursing. Other social and recreational activities -- notably soccer matches -- were organized by the prisoners of war themselves.

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

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

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

The EPLF released prisoners of war on the occasions when it was unable to provide for

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

[25] The Geneva Conventions apply to international armed conflicts, but also set forth the humanitarian principles that are relevant to internal conflicts.

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

The Somali army captured about 10,000 prisoners of war between July and October 1977. There were no central directives concerning their treatment, which depended entirely on the inclination of the commanding officer who captured them: some were well-treated and sent to prisoner of war camps, others were abused and even executed. In October 1977, the Somali Ministry of Defense reportedly issued an instruction to all commanders that there were to be no more prisoners. Thereafter, many were routinely shot on capture, while officers who refused to do this passed their prisoners to senior officers who would deal with them according to their preference. Thousands were certainly summarily executed; fortunately the order was given after the Somali army had made its main military gains. The WSLF treated prisoners of war in the same manner.

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

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

The Forces of the EPLF

The size of the army of the EPLF remained a closely-guarded secret throughout the war. During the early 1970s, the manpower of the ELF and EPLF certainly outnumbered the Ethiopian army in Eritrea, but after 1978 the position was reversed, with the build-up of the

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

army and the collapse of the ELF. Common estimates of the size of the EPLF were 12,000-18,000 in 1982, rising by 1989 to 40,000-50,000, plus 30,000 militia.[27] Both the EPLF and the Ethiopian government however had reasons to underestimate the numerical strength of the front's forces, so the real figures are likely to be somewhat higher.

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

Throughout the 1980s, the EPLF operated a draft to fill the remainder of its ranks. The principle and the implementation varied from place to place, but essentially it consisted of a quota of conscripts levied on all Eritrean communities inside Eritrea, and occasionally was extended to refugee camps in Sudan. According to the testimony of refugees in Sudan, each community was left to decide how to fill its quota, but on occasions the EPLF would itself choose whom to take if no conscripts were delivered. The draft was imposed together with the provision of services such as education. Women were encouraged to join the front as well. There are no confirmed reports of the conscription of under-age children.

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

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

[27] 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.

[28] As reported in Africa Confidential, August 25, 1989.

exceeded 250 dead and wounded. Further clashes occurred in February and May 1989.

The Forces of the TPLF-EPRDF

The fighting strength of the TPLF and latterly the EPRDF was an even more closely-guarded secret than that of the EPLF. The most common estimates put their strength at 5,000-7,500 between 1980 and 1985, rising to 30,000 by 1989 and 70,000 by 1991.[29] No estimate for militiamen has been made. However, these figures are likely to be underestimates. In 1980, the TPLF began to arm village militias throughout Tigray. Noting that by the mid-1980s every village had a part-time militia which included a substantial number of the adult men, and recognizing that the population of Tigray is closer to four million than two million, this implies a very considerable reserve strength of well over 100,000.

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

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

The TPLF-EPRDF official requirements for fighters include a lower age limit of 18 years. Some fighters interviewed by journalists in Addis Ababa in May-June 1991 certainly

[29] NOVIB, 1991, p. 12.

looked younger than that age, and some admitted to being in their mid-teens.

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

More generally, the TPLF-EPRDF has further entrenched a popular culture that centers on firearms and fighters. The TPLF-EPRDF ideology stresses that a health worker, relief worker or local administrator is also a "fighter" in the "people's struggle." It also stresses that war in general is an evil, but that the war against the Dergue was a necessary evil and therefore good. It is questionable, however, the extent to which these higher principles have been understood by the population at large, or even whether, outside the TPLF heartlands, a serious attempt was made to inculcate them. A fundamental principle of the TPLF is that "the people, organized, politicized and armed, cannot be ruled against their will."[30] The widespread ownership of firearms, many of which are modern automatic weapons, does facilitate popular resistance to central government, but it also creates potential problems for the enforcement of law and order and the implementation of democratically-arrived at decisions.

[30] Meles Zenawi, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

Other Forces

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