8. COUNTER-INSURGENCY AND FAMINE IN TIGRAY AND ITS BORDERLANDS, 1980-84

In October 1984, the world was shocked by a film made by the BBC and Visnews in Meqele (Tigray), and Korem (on the Tigray-Wollo border). The pictures of a mass of destitute people, starving with a quiet dignity, revealed a "Biblical famine" in the late 20th century. The famine had of course been developing for several years with little attention from the outside world -- that was part of the horror of the story, which pricked the conscience of the affluent west. This and the following chapter recount the central story of how those images of mass starvation, and the wider famine which they represented, came about.

Grinding poverty and an unpredictable climate played their part in creating the tragic pictures of October 1984. The social and agricultural policies of the Ethiopian government were also important, and will be analyzed in the next chapter. However, at the center of the famine -- Tigray and north Wollo -- the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian army was the single most important reason why the drought of 1983-4 became not a "normal" period of hardship but a famine of a severity and extent unparalleled for a century.

The counter-insurgency strategy followed in Tigray in the early 1980s was different from that pursued in the southeast and in Eritrea. Starting in August 1980, it involved a greater level of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, and there was no attempt to provide even the most minimal level of compensatory assistance to the stricken population. When the level of brutality and destruction increased in early 1983, famine developed directly.

The Ethiopian famine of 1983-5 was both "wide" -- it affected a very large area -- and "deep" -- there were places of exceptional severity. The famine first hit in southern Tigray and north Wollo, and spread outwards. At the nadir, up to a third of the country was gripped by famine. The original center was the most severely hit, where the greatest depths of famine were plumbed.

Drought and Famine, 1983-85: An Outline

The most remarkable fact about the famine of 1983-5 in Ethiopia was that, by the time the drought struck, the famine was already well under way.

Every year, somewhere in northern Ethiopia, there is a harvest failure due to poor rains and a food shortage, and people go hungry (see chapter 1). If there is a humanitarian agency working in the vicinity, calls for help will be sounded, but this does not amount to widespread or unusual famine. It is important, therefore, to distinguish the "normal" alarms for localized distress from the "abnormal" alarms that accompany the development of a major famine. We contend here that the droughts of 1980-3 were unremarkable; that localized surpluses existed; and that if normal processes of redistribution of food had been allowed to occur, there would have been no famine. 1984 was a drought year of unusual severity, it is true -- but had the famine not already been in train, and had the artificial famine-creating actions not continued, major famine could have been averted.

Starting in 1980, the "normal" alarms began to sound, varying in severity over the following three years. The Relief Society of Tigray (REST, working with the TPLF), the government RRC, and voluntary agencies sounded these alarms. In late 1982, the alarms became more urgent.

In February 1983, however, there was a change from a severe but "normal" cry for help to the warning of a major famine. British relief agencies made a major appeal on February 16. This cry for help arose because relief agencies working in the relief shelters of Korem and Ibnat (central Gonder) were suddenly receiving a large inflow of destitute and malnourished migrants. Attributed at the time to drought, the flow of destitute migrants was in fact a direct result of the war (see below).

There is no evidence for harvest failures in northern Ethiopia over the period from 1980 to early 1983 sufficient to cause severe famine.

No reliable figures are available for rural production in Tigray and the adjoining areas. National figures for Ethiopia are available, however:

Table 1. Food Production in Ethiopia, 1977-84.[1]

	Production: total	per head
1977	99	95
1978	110	104

[1] Source: FAO Production Yearbooks. Also see: Bob Baulch, "Entitlements and the Wollo Famine of 1982-1985," Disasters, 11 3, 1987, p. 196, where a seven per cent higher production figure is given for 1983.

1979	122	113
1980	117	106
1981	115	102
1982	127	110
1983	118	99
1984	110	90

Note: 1974-76 = 100

Not only do these figures fail to indicate any crisis until 1984, but they show that 1982 and 1983 were, nationally, bumper crops -- two of the best on record, and above or equal to the long-term average. There were of course regional shortages, but the simplistic explanation of the famine as a prolonged drought-induced food shortage does not hold up.[2]

The RRC produces estimates of the size of the crop and the availability of food after each harvest. These are always pessimistic, as it is the job of the RRC to identify deficits and appeal for aid. (Surveying the same area, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), with a brief to identify surpluses, usually produces a much more optimistic picture.)

After the 1980 harvest, food availability in Tigray, Wollo and Gonder was "normal."[3] 1981 was better. The main 1981 report identified surpluses in the usual areas: Raya (eastern Tigray), Kobo (north Wollo), Borena (south Wollo), Simien (north Gonder), central Gonder, and Gojjam.[4] No assessment was made for western Tigray, but surpluses existed there too. For 1982, the reports for Wollo were encouraging -- food shortages were localized, and most of the highlands was normal.[5] Eastern Gonder was suffering drought, but the main surplus-producing areas were less affected.[6] In early 1982, Tigray was described as "encouraging," and in late 1982 as "poor," but no surveys were done -- the main measure used was the price of grain in Meqele town.[7] Later in this chapter it will be shown how government policy helped to cause

[2] Attempts to argue the reverse are based on assumptions that the data are faulty. See for example: Gopu Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines 1973-1985: A Case Study," in J. Dreze and A. Sen, The Political Economy of Hunger, Vol. II, Oxford, 1990. Kumar is forced to argue back from "what we know about the progress of the famine" to the "defensible assumption" of a catastrophic fall in food output, which is not shown in the figures (p. 198).

[3] RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region," Addis Ababa, November 1980.

[4] RRC, "Food Supply System: Meher Synoptic Report, 1973/74 EC [Ethiopian Calender] (1981) Crop Season," Addis Ababa, March 1982.

[5] RRC, "Report on a Reconnaissance Trip in Wollo Administrative Region, (August 11-September 4, 1982)," November 1982; RRC, "Meher Synoptic Report 1974/75 EC (1982) Crop Season," March 1983.

[6] RRC, "A Report on a Reconnaissance Trip to Gonder Administrative Region (October 6 - November 6, 1982)" Addis Ababa, November 1982.

[7] RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region", March 1982, and "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 1," December 1982.

the price rise over this period. A survey done among Tigrayan refugees in Sudan in 1985 found that "their highest yields in the last ten years occurred in 1982-83."[8]

In April 1983, the RRC issued a revised report for the 1982 main season. This was much more alarming in tone -- despite the fact that no new information had been collected about the 1982 harvest in the north. Grain prices had shot up, and the RRC inferred that major shortages existed.[9] The real reasons for the change in tone were probably that a famine had started, and the RRC needed to identify a drought to blame it upon.

The main 1983 season provides the first significant evidence for widespread crop failure. But even at this stage, the failure was confined to most of Tigray and some parts of north Wollo. In Gonder, the food supply situation improved in 1983, with substantial surpluses in Gonder Zuria, Chilga, Debre Tabor, and Simien. In most of Wollo the food supply remained normal.[10] The RRC had no data for Tigray, but a relief agency team visiting TPLF areas reported surpluses in Shire and Raya, though all other areas had suffered harvest failures.[11]

Almost universal drought first occurred in the spring of 1984, affecting the belg harvest. Belg crops produce only a small proportion of the food produced in the north -- about one quarter in the areas where the belg rains fall, and none at all in 90% of Tigray. The belg failure was serious, but should not have caused undue problems in the light of the average crop performance over the previous few years, and the bumper national harvest. But the RRC played up the belg failure, telling blatant untruths into the bargain: "The highlands of Wollo, Bale and Shewa are the major belg producing areas. Belg accounts for at least half of the annual production in most parts of these areas. There are also areas in most of the remaining regions which heavily depend on belg, particularly in Tigray ..."[12]

Rainfall data are very scarce -- for years they were concealed by the government. No data are available for places in Tigray, but some are available for Kobo, in north Wollo, which is close to the heart of the famine zone. These data confirm that the drought only began in late 1983. The following table shows the rainfall for the belg (February-May) and meher (July-October) seasons in Kobo.

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[8] Cultural Survival, Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, p. 192.

[9] RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 2 (Oct-Dec [1982])," April 1983.

[10] RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast," March 1984 (based on data from late 1983); RRC, "Meher Synoptic Report 1976/76 EC (1983) Crop Season," January 1984. The surplus in Simien was identified by REST.

[11] John English, Jon Bennett, Bruce Dick and Caroline Fallon, "Tigray 1984: An Investigation," Oxfam, January 1984, p. 62. The team reported that Raya had reaped a surplus of 8-10,000 tonnes despite a one-season drought in the area, implying that the surpluses of previous years were much larger.

[12] RRC, "The Belg Rain Failure and Its Effect on Food Production, Special Report," May 1984.

Table 2. Rainfall in Kobo, North Wollo.[13]

	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	
Belg		268	117	233	118	NA	168	270	19	214	174	331
Meher	460	352	497	499	646	362	150	51	243	450	233	

All amounts in millimeters.

Further south, a similar picture can be seen in the fragmentary climatic data that are available. Some rainfall stations in Wollo recorded a drought in 1983, others recorded a good year. An example of the latter is Bati, where the famine of 1984/5 was very severe -- but where rainfall in 1983 was the highest for more than 15 years.[14]

Satellite imagery of vegetation also indicates that the spring (belg) harvest of 1983 was likely to have been normal. Thus we see that the drought started only after the famine was set in train. The reason why rainfall data have been kept as state secrets now becomes clearer.

Both rainfall data and satellite imagery confirm that the main 1983 season was satisfactory in Gonder, implying the existence of the substantial surpluses normally produced in that province.

1984 was a year of almost complete drought, lasting the whole year and affecting a wide area. Production in Wollo was only 28% of 1983; in Gonder it was 86% (no figures are available for Tigray). It was the results of this drought that observers saw when they visited the region in late 1984 -- dry fields, withered crops, waterless wells. The fact is, however, that a visitor can only see a single year of drought, and that is not enough to cause famine. The drought of 1984 was used as a scapegoat for a famine that had begun much earlier.

In 1982 and 1983, the localized drought in Tigray was most severe on the eastern escarpment. But the population hit hardest by the famine originated in southern Tigray and northern Wollo, and was to be found scattered in places such as Shire, Ibnat and Korem -- another indicator that climate was not the fundamental cause of the disaster.

Another indicator of famine is grain prices. High grain prices indicate a scarcity in the market. The following table shows the approximate average grain prices during the famine period.

[13] Derived from: Alemneh Dejene, Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia: A View from the Village, Boulder, Co., 1990, p. 84.

[14] Alemneh Dejene, 1990, p. 57.

Table 3. Grain Prices in Northern Ethiopia[15]

	East Tigray	North Wollo	North Gonder
Nov/Dec 1981	100	50	40
Nov/Dec 1982	165	65	55
Nov/Dec 1983	225	90	45
Nov/Dec 1984	300	160	70
Jun/Jul 1985	380	235	165

All prices in Birr per quintal (100 kg)

Prices rose to reach famine levels in Tigray in late 1982, but only rose to comparable levels in Wollo between February and August 1984, and in Gonder in mid-1985. Throughout 1983, prices in Wollo were stable -- in some markets they actually fell. These prices are not consistent with the account that stresses repeated and widespread drought. They are consistent with highly localized famine in Tigray, spreading out into neighboring areas in 1984 and 1985.

By 1984 the famine had deepened to such an extent in Tigray and north Wollo that its effects were being felt far away. The high grain prices at the epicenter of the famine were forcing up prices elsewhere, putting food out of the reach of the poor. Increasing animal sales were pushing livestock prices down, and migrants were flooding the labor markets. The famine had acquired a momentum of its own and began to spread, helped by the coercive and restrictive social and agricultural policies of the government.

The drought and accompanying crop failures cannot explain the famine. To understand why it occurred it is necessary to turn to an account of the conduct of the war in Tigray.

The TPLF

The TPLF, from its inception, fought a classic guerrilla insurgency. It refused to defend any territory, and instead relied on being able to move among the population "like a fish through water." Espousing a mix of Tigrayan nationalism -- for instance calling itself the "second Weyane," referring to the rebellion of 1943 -- and radical politics, the TPLF soon came to have the tacit support of most of the rural population. The Red Terror was waged with particular

[15] Derived from data in: Alex de Waal, "Tigray: Grain Markets and Internal Purchase," Oxfam, 1990, p. 44; Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 198; Baulch, 1987, p. 199.

savagery in Tigray and drove much of the urban population to support the rebels. The TPLF took advantage of the government's military preoccupation with the Ogaden and Eritrea to operate throughout rural Tigray during 1978/9. It set up a wide network of councils, instigated land reform, and began some health care and development projects.

In 1976, the TPLF took several European hostages, including a British family of four and a journalist. It demanded a ransom of $1 million for the British family, but eventually released them after eight months captivity after pressure was brought to bear by the Sudan government.

From 1980 onwards, the TPLF claimed to control 85 per cent of Tigray. Because of the TPLF's guerrilla strategy, the government army was able to launch offensives into almost every part of the province, and thus make a counter-claim of having access everywhere. The two claims are both true: TPLF fighters could move almost anywhere at will, with the support of most of the people, and the army could, by force, reach most places, but not hold them.

In 1980, the TPLF began to form militias throughout the countryside. This was partly in response to demands from the villagers to have arms to protect themselves from the casual and repeated violence of army patrols, and partly in order to take the war to the government throughout the province. In 1982, the TPLF launched its "Southern Operation" and opened a new front in southern Tigray and northern Wollo. It followed the formation of the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) a year previously. Tamrat Layne was a prominent leader of the EPDM, which started as a breakaway group of the EPRP. Always a close ally of the TPLF, the EPDM was militarily active in Wollo and Gonder.

In 1982, the TPLF and EPDM started mounting major operations in Wollo. A year later, Africa Confidential noted that "the TPLF and EPDM are able to hit the whole length of the Dessie-Meqele road."[16] In March 1983, a joint TPLF-Afar Liberation Front (ALF) attack overran Bati, on the eastern escarpment of southern Wollo. In April, TPLF-EPDM forces occupied Lalibella, the historic site of rock-hewn churches in central Wollo, and kidnapped relief workers in Korem. Seqota, district headquarters of Wag, was occupied. In September, joint TPLF-EPDM operations extended as far south as Wichale, Jarre and Haik, close to Dessie. Eleven Swiss relief workers were kidnapped in Jarre and later released. In August 1984, TPLF-ALF attacks were mounted near Mille, in eastern Wollo, and in October Lalibella was captured again. On each occasion the army appeared to be taken unawares by the attack, indicating that the rebels were able to move with ease among the local population. In response, many elements of the counter-insurgency strategy were applied throughout northern and central Wollo and Gonder, not merely in Tigray.

[16] Africa Confidential, 24 19, September 21, 1983, p. 4.

Until about 1986, the TPLF had virtually no heavy weapons and no "base area." It had a core army of an estimated 7,000-15,000 men, and a much larger number of militiamen. The EPDM was a smaller force.

Counter-Population Warfare by the Government

The nature of the rebellion in Tigray led to a new variation on the army's counter-insurgency strategies. These strategies were instrumental in setting the famine in train. There were three main aspects:

* Large scale military offensives, aimed at the surplus-producing Shire district. The Sixth Offensive of the Ethiopian army in Tigray was launched in August 1980 and continued until March 1981. The Seventh Offensive was fought from February to April 1983. (An eighth was fought from February to May 1985.)

* Aerial bombardment of markets. This started in 1980 and was intensified in early 1982 to coincide with the Red Star campaign in Eritrea, and remained at a high level thereafter.

* Tight controls on movement of migrants and traders, enforced in all garrison towns, in eastern Tigray and northern Wollo. These controls were introduced in late 1980 and widened over the following two years. In 1983 restrictions were tightened in Wollo. In 1984 they were enforced particularly strictly, with widespread detentions of suspected TPLF sympathizers, and were extended to many parts of Gonder.

The logic behind the government's strategy was "draining the sea to catch the fish." This amounted to counter-population warfare. Because of its actions during 1976-9, the government had alienated all significant sections of the populace, and could locate no secure base from which to start a pacification strategy. As a result, the army engaged in counter-population warfare. The increasing hostility of the population towards the army combined with increasing TPLF military successes, causing the army to become more demoralized and more brutal.

The three elements of the military strategy combined to prevent the normal redistribution of surpluses within northern Ethiopia. The offensives effectively destroyed or made unavailable most of the surpluses in Shire in 1980 and 1983. The bombing and the restrictions on movement prevented the mobilization of the Raya surpluses from 1980 onwards, becoming particularly severe in 1984; in 1983 the restrictions prevented much trade in Wollo and in 1984 in Gonder. The result was that peasants in the deficit areas of eastern Tigray and Tembien-Wag were unable to provision themselves from the adjoining areas, and began to suffer famine.

The following sections will look in detail at each of the three aspects.

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: I. Military Campaigns

In January and February 1980, a punitive expedition by the army burned several villages in north-central Tigray. Credible reports indicate that 130 civilians were killed in Mai Kenetal. The village of Aweger was destroyed, and when villagers from nearby Haile tried to help the inhabitants rebuild, the army killed 51 of them and briefly imprisoned over 800. More than 300 civilians were killed in the entire operation. However, major military action only occurred later in the year.

On August 22, 1980, the army launched its Sixth Offensive in central Tigray. This marked a change in military strategy, and the beginnings of widespread counter-population warfare. In the midst of the offensive, Africa Confidential commented with remarkable prescience: "A consequence of the fighting is likely to be widespread famine."[17] Africa Confidential only got the time frame wrong, and underestimated the resilience of the Tigrayan peasants -- the famine took another two years to develop.

The offensive involved widespread military action over the following seven months. 40,000 troops were involved, together with aircraft and helicopter gunships[18] -- a small force by later standards, but enough to create major disruptions in the rural economy. Tembien, the centre of the famine area in the following years, was worst hit.

During the campaign, the army engaged in a number of activities that directly affected the ability of the population to feed itself. These included:[19]

* the destruction of grain stores: an estimated 6,000 tons of grain was burned by incendiary bombs or destroyed by soldiers;

* the killing of cattle: REST estimated that 950 cattle were killed;

* the burning of crops and pastures: 142,000 hectares of farmland was rendered useless in fighting in February-March 1981 alone by burning or trampling;

* the enforced collection of taxes and contributions, often at a punitive level, ostensibly including "arrears;"

* the forcible displacement of farmers: about 80,000 farmers in central Tigray were forced to leave their homes. 20,000 resettled themselves in western Tigray and 5,000 became refugees in Sudan. Many could not harvest in 1980, or had inadequate time to plough their fields for the 1981 rainy season.

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[17] Africa Confidential, 21 24, November 26, 1980, p. 7.

[18] Mi 24 helicopter gunships were deployed for the first time in Africa in this campaign.

[19] Kirsty Wright, "Famine in Tigray: An Eyewitness Account," London, REST Support Committee, 1983, p. 7.

* destruction of villages: over 2,000 houses and five grinding mills were destroyed.

Abi Adi had been occupied by the TPLF since August 1978; on September 11, 1980, it was attacked by the army using helicopters. Many houses were burned and much of the population was forced to flee; four people were killed. On September 29, a number of towns and villages in central Tigray were attacked by airplanes and helicopters, and, according to one report, 27 people were killed.[20]

After the campaign finished, the government had established a network of garrisons throughout the province, many of them in important towns for local trade. Abi Adi is one such town, critical for the trade between the surplus-producing Simien district of Gonder and the deficit areas of Meqele and Agame. For twelve months after the offensive there was a garrison at Abi Adi, which was able to enforce the restrictions on migration and trade discussed in the next section. Some of these garrisons were withdrawn in 1981 and 1982, under pressure from the TPLF. Regular patrols continued, and civilians were subjected to harassment, robbery and execution.

In a series of attacks in August and September 1981, over 400 people were killed by soldiers and airplanes. For example, on August 26, the village of Mezega was burned. 14 villagers were killed and 400 cattle slaughtered.[21]

The opening of the Red Star offensive in Eritrea in February 1982 saw widespread bombing and an increase in army attacks in Tigray. Patrols in southern Tigray became more frequent in response to the TPLF's "Southern Operation."

In one of many retaliatory attacks, on this occasion following a TPLF ambush, soldiers burned a village near Adi Gudud, killing two women and seven children who remained behind in their huts.[22]

The end of 1982 saw preparations for the Seventh Offensive, which was to be the most brutal to date. A month before the ground attack started, helicopters and MiG fighter bombers started "softening up" the towns and villages to be attacked. In December 1982, helicopter-gunships bombed Abi Adi town for half an hour. According to a member of the baito, eighty houses were burned, "but only one person killed and a couple wounded."[23]

The army offensive began in January, with attacks in central and western Tigray. Work

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[20] Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor, (STORM), 1.2, March 1981, p. 6.

[21] Information compiled by Barbara Hendrie, an independent consultant.

[22] Africa Contemporary Record, 1982-3, p. B149.

[23] Woreda Teka, interviewed by Gerry McCann and Sarah Vaughan, two visitors to Tigray in 1988.

on the harvest stopped at once, as people made preparations for concealing food and other items from the soldiers, and evacuating their villages if need be. Migrant workers moved to other areas. Civilians were killed by army raids near Axum, Enticho and Enda Selassie. On February 16, this escalated to a full-scale assault, involving 70,000 troops and all the familiar abuses against civilians -- summary executions, burning of villages, destruction of grain stores and the killing of cattle. The TPLF attempted to defend its base in Shire using trench warfare, but was forced to abandon the area. More than 100,000 farmers were forced to evacuate their homes, and many of the estimated 375,000 migrants in western Tigray were obliged to move to other areas to seek work.

The devastation was particularly severe in Shire -- a vital surplus producing area -- where on February 21 the army succeeded in capturing the town of Sheraro for the first time since the late 1970s. Before attacking the town, the army indiscriminately shelled it. Having occupied the town, the army systematically looted it, taking over 150 tons of grain, taking oil presses and grinding mills, together with burning other grain stores and fodder grass collected to feed to animals.[24] The health clinic was ransacked. A medical team from Medecins Sans Frontieres saw "thousands of hectares of land systematically burned, for example on the way from Sheraro to Kafta." The team also saw the Tekezze Agricultural Center, where soldiers had cut down the fruit trees and destroyed the irrigation system.

REST had established several centers to give assistance to famine migrants coming from central Tigray. Three of these -- Endabugna, Az Daro and Adi Nebreit -- were attacked.[25]

A woman described the army's arrival in the village of Edaga Habret on March 9 and the preparations the people made for survival:

> We heard that the army was coming at 2 a.m. in the morning from people who had run to our village from neighbouring settlements where the army had already reached. Then around 6 a.m. we heard firing between the kabrits [TPLF scouts]. As soon as we heard the news, we tried to prepare foodstuffs for the future. You can't take injera [Ethiopian pancakes] for a long period of time as it breaks and dries. We roasted chick peas and cereals to make qolo, took the food and ran.... Two of us went up the mountain two hours away and we could look down and see the Dergue [soldiers]. First the troops lit one house using a match, then they took burning grass from house to house. All the houses were burned, houses belonging to 135 heads of families. Nobody stayed behind. We had tried to take important materials to the bushes surrounding the village, but these were discovered by the Dergue -- house materials, plates, jerry cans, soap, salt, sugar, pepper, cloth, sewing machines. Three sewing machines were destroyed and all seven oil presses were burned. My two beds were burned and the small garden destroyed. A lot of grass had been collected for feeding the animals for the summer ... it was all

[24] Wright, 1983, p. 8.

[25] Gayle Smith, "Counting Quintals: A Monitoring Report on Famine Relief in Tigray," The Hague, 1983, p. 19.

> burned. Seven people were killed and 20 wounded in the area. We stayed for three days in the bushes and on the third day the troops left. There were so many of them that there was a two-and-a-half hour line of them marching out of the village. When we went back into our homes we found that all the grain in the village had been burned. I lost three sacks of sorghum and 12 sacks of sesame.[26]

This was the second occasion the village had been destroyed by the army. On July 2 and 3, 1983, the village was bombed again, wounding two people and killing some sheep and camels.

The first major alarms for the famine were raised by relief agencies in February 1983, when large numbers of migrants started turning up in Korem and Ibnat looking for food.

> The farmers I got a chance to talk to in Korem had come from around Seqota ... this stream of people looking for food had to go further afield than usual when the rains failed there and the autumn harvest was small. Some traipsed west all the way over to Gonder, where there was still agricultural work to be found in some places as late as November, before hurrying back to Wollo when distribution started there.[27]

Others had travelled to western Tigray before returning to Korem and Ibnat in February. What is important to note is that the migration to these areas was normal. It was not a preferred strategy -- the migrants would rather have stayed at home, had the food been available -- but the movement west did not itself signal anything unusual. The famine was set in train because the migration failed. It failed because of the havoc caused in Shire and the adjoining areas by the Seventh Offensive.

As before, the offensive resulted in a wider spread of garrisons throughout the province, and a large number of small atrocities followed. For example, there are credible reports of the army killing 20 civilians while burning villages near Hagere Selam, Shire, between June 17-26, 1983, and killing two more at Alage.[28]

During and after 1983, rural people remember the behavior of soldiers as being more brutal than before, and this is confirmed by members of the armed forces. Lieutenant Yamani Hassan, a prisoner of war held by the TPLF, reported:[29]

> Civilians in the war zones have always been badly treated, but the brutality increased after the failure of the Red Star Campaign, in 1983. I can think of four incidents in Tigray I have witnessed. One was in Sinkatta where four men were questioned about the TPLF. They said they did not know anything, and they were then shot. Another time a 13 or 14 year old girl was raped. A third occasion was when soldiers went to a

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[26] Wright, 1983, p. 9.

[27] Judith Appleton, Save the Children Fund (UK) field report, April 1983.

[28] Africa Contemporary Record, 1983-4, p. B136.

[29] Interviewed at Tade Azregar, Tigray, on December 1, 1988, by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.

group of houses near the church in Hausien. Three old people came out, and the soldiers chose one and shot him. There was also a time when we were stationed at a village near Samre, and the villagers came and brought us roasted maize and beer. They treated us very well, probably hoping we would do the same to them. The order to leave came in the middle of the night, and the soldiers burned the whole village asleep in their beds as they left.

It is taken as read that these sorts of atrocities are all "part of the job." Anyone who questions them, or talks about what is done, is picked up by the "welfare" people.[30] The soldiers are trained to act like machines or animals and not have any thoughts of their own. There is no training in torture techniques or anything like that: soldiers are just given boxes of matches and told to get on with it.

In July and August 1983, the army mounted operations in southern Tigray, in response to TPLF offensives. In November, the TPLF was active in northern Gonder, and its central command set up a temporary base in the Simien mountains, where food was more readily available than in central Tigray. The army responded with a series of sweeps through the area. These involved the burning of villages and mounds of harvested grain ready for threshing.[31] There was a larger army assault on Simien in January 1984, followed by four other major attacks over the following eighteen months.

Starting in 1980, the government utilized paid bandits, locally known as banda or shimeq, to engage in sabotage and terrorism. In November 1981, there was a number of sabotage attacks in Sudanese refugee camps. Refugees who had returned briefly to Ethiopia reported being told by soldiers that they would be well-treated if they returned to Sudan to attack refugee camps.[32]

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: II. Bombing

From mid-1980 onwards, chronic day-in-day-out bombing began to occur in Tigray. Most of the large-scale atrocities by the air force were perpetrated by attacks made in conjunction with ground offensives. However, innumerable small attacks were made at all times. Airplanes just needed to "buzz" a village in order to send the people scurrying for shelter, and cease all activities for many hours.

The main target of the bombing in Tigray was the network of rural markets in TPLF-controlled areas. Medebai, a market near Axum which lies on the important Shire-Eritrea trade

[30] The security service within the army.

[31] Africa Contemporary Record, 1983-4, p. B137.

[32] Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan, 1967-1984," DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 193.

route, was bombed more than 100 times during the 1980s. Hausien, the most important market in northeast Tigray, was bombed equally often until it was completely destroyed in 1988. Welel, an important market which links Tembien, Raya and Wag, was also frequently bombed.

The market at Chilla, near Axum, was frequently bombed. The worst attacks occurred on March 3 and 5, 1983: A TPLF fighter described the scene:

> You cannot believe what you saw -- it was not something for anyone to see. The blood was flowing like rivers and sitting in pools, and there were crushed bodies thrown everywhere, the blood of the people was mixed with the blood of the animals that had been hit. You could see a head there but you couldn't find the body, it was thrown some meters away. The children were hysterical and screaming even after some hours -- the helicopters chased them and they couldn't get away. They cry now even if they hear a plane. If they have seen a massacre when they are only four or five years old, they will remember forever when they shut their eyes that they saw their mothers being killed.[33]

A medical team from Medecins Sans Frontieres visited the town shortly afterwards and interviewed survivors:

> Four helicopters blocked the exits from the market and machine-gunned the market place. MiGs then finished this "work." Even two weeks later we could still observe bomb splinters on the rocky ground and the smell was unbearable. The ground was strewn with various broken fragments, spilt cereals and corpses of donkeys. Everywhere there were traces of blood -- on the ground and on rocks where people had tried to escape. Here and there were the unknown graves of more than a hundred local people who had been massacred.

According to REST, 315 people were killed or wounded in this attack. At least nine other markets were bombed during the Seventh Offensive (between February and April 1983), causing at least 179 casualties.[34]

Phosphorous bombs were frequently used in attacks on markets and villages, leaving horrible burns. Incendiary bombs were used to set fire to fields and stores.

A secondary target of the bombing was means of transport. Wheeled transport became too dangerous to use. Caravans of donkeys, mules or camels were frequently attacked. This forced traders to move at night, and to move in small and less visible groups (while the threat of bandits and saboteurs in some areas compelled them to do the opposite, and move in larger groups for self-protection). A peasant in central Tigray commented:

> Of course the government knows that we can't survive from month to month without a market. This is why the planes so often come and circle on market day. We all scatter as soon as they come, but even that causes problems: there are often thieves in the

[33] Quoted in: Smith, 1983, pp. 100-1.

[34] Smith, 1983, p. 100.

market place who steal the goods that people drop when they run away.[35]

The inevitable result of the campaign against the markets and traders was that markets were forced to be held at night -- though the danger of early-morning attacks on market towns where people had gathered remained real. With no light other than candles and small gas lamps, the markets could become chaotic -- people could not see properly what they were buying, and vendors laid their goods out in the danger of them being trampled upon. Social gatherings, an important reason for many people attending market, were held less often. The TPLF regulated that all markets should be held on Saturday nights, so that it was not possible for the air force to bomb the market towns "in rotation," following the different market days. A negative result of this was that traders could not rotate between the markets. Unable to travel by day, larger traders were forced into long periods of idleness during daylight, making slow progress to attend perhaps just one small market per week. They would not store large amounts of goods in any one place, but scatter them in different stores, so as to minimize the danger of losing everything to bombing or a ground attack. Many traders were forced out of business. Markets thus contracted or were closed down altogether. Combined with the restrictions on trade and migration in government-controlled areas, the results were disastrous for trade and exchange.

Bombing was also used against villages, churches, schools, and farmers ploughing their land. Attacks appeared to be virtually random. In areas of greatest TPLF control, such as Shire, the bombing even forced people to cultivate at night.

Counter-Insurgency 1980-84: III. Restrictions on Movement

While the military campaigns of 1980-4 were restricted to Tigray and one small adjoining area of Gonder, the restrictions on movement encompassed a much larger area -- even further afield than the TPLF-EPDM's most southerly military actions. In terms of limiting movement and trade, the restrictions had a similar effect to the bombing campaign in TPLF areas.

Restrictions on the Grain Trade

A particularly important counter-insurgency tactic was restriction on the grain trade. This was implemented from a variety of motivations, including the desire to restrict the movement of potential rebel sympathizers, desire to stem the flow of food to the TPLF,

[35] Interviewed by Sarah Vaughan

suspicion of traders in general (especially a fear that they might be smuggling arms) and a feeling that private grain trade was incompatible with socialism.

Since 1974 there had been legal prohibitions on certain commercial activities (see chapter 6), and local and ancillary legislation meant that local administrators were able to harass petty traders at will and confiscate their goods. From 1980 these restrictions were intensified in central Tigray, and in 1982, they were extended to southern Tigray and northern Wollo. Until then, Meqele obtained most its food from Raya and north Wollo; this helps to explain the price rise in Meqele during that year. It became more difficult for traders to obtain licenses, and they were subjected to an increasing range of taxes. The use of wheeled transport for trade into contested or TPLF-held areas was impossible -- everything had to be "smuggled" by pack animals, at a cost of 3-10 times as much per item carried.

Road blocks were set up at the entrances to all towns, to prevent unauthorized trade. In addition, one of the functions of army checkpoints on roads was to control the trade in grain. The soldiers also took advantage of their position to extract bribes from traders, in effect taxing all movement of grain.

Small traders entering towns were sometimes forced to sell their grain at the government-controlled prices, which were very low, or were required to pay tax arrears before being allowed to enter the market.

When possible, rural people prefer to take grain into towns in order to have it ground into flour by mechanical mills, rather than having to do it by hand. Regulating access to flour mills became one way the government restricted the movement of food. When occupying towns and villages, the army also regularly destroyed flour mills and essential trading equipment such as weighing scales.

The TPLF also tried to restrict the flow of grain to the towns, so as not to deprive the countryside, but it attempted to facilitate the rural-rural trade in grain.

Impact of the Restrictions: The Example of Tembien

These restrictions combined to prevent the movement of grain and were therefore instrumental in creating famine.

In Tigray, these restrictions were invoked most severely in eastern Tigray, especially the surplus-producing area of Raya, for the reason that these were the areas where the government had most control. Proposals by REST to send small traders to the area to buy the available surplus for relief purposes came to nothing. In the adjacent areas of Kobo, Wag, Tembien and Enderta, prices rose to previously-unrecorded highs.

In 1984, there were very tight restrictions on trade in northern Gonder. These were

related to an upsurge in TPLF-EPDM activity north of Gonder and repeated army offensives aimed at dislodging the TPLF positions in the Simien mountains, as well as a number of factors not associated with the insurgency (see the following chapter).

In late 1983, the farmers of Simien had been selling between 300 and 400 tonnes of grain in Tembien every week.[36] Had this trade continued throughout the dry season, at least 10,000 tonnes would have moved into the drought zone by this one route alone. Instead, the trade was completely blocked by the army.

What happened to the 8,000-10,000 tonnes surplus in Raya, or the 10,000-15,000 surplus in Simien, is not known -- much of it probably rotted or was fed to animals. It is known that in 1984 Tembien, which lay right between these two surplus areas, was probably the worst-hit famine zone in the whole country.

The largest surpluses in Tigray were found in Shire. Bombing of markets and army control of the trade routes into central Tigray effectively prevented any of this reaching the drought zone -- which was in turn one reason why people from central Tigray migrated westwards.

General Impact of Restrictions and Bombing of Markets

More generally, the restrictions increased vulnerability to famine throughout northern Ethiopia.

In normal circumstances, the grain market consisted of an integrated network of local markets. When the price rose in one area, traders would buy food in markets where it could be had more cheaply, and move it there -- both supplying food to the area and so bringing the price down, and providing a market for farmers in surplus areas. This was no longer occurring in northern Ethiopia in the 1980s. When the price rose in one locality, there was almost nothing to restrain it. Analyses of the level of integration of the market reveal that there was almost no local trade in north Wollo and Tigray.[37]

The most immediate impact of the government policy of restricting rural access to the towns was to increase grain prices in the towns. In 1982, the price of sorghum in TPLF-held Sheraro was 45 Birr per quintal (100kg); in nearby government-held Enda Selassie the price was 130-160 Birr per quintal.[38] As the policy became entrenched and the bombing campaign

[36] English et al, 1984, p. 72.

[37] de Waal, 1990, pp. 56-7.

[38] James Firebrace and Gayle Smith, "The Hidden Revolution: An Analysis of Social Change in Tigray (Northern Ethiopia) Based on Eyewitness Accounts," London, War on Want, 1982, p. 37, footnote.

became established, rural-rural trade was disrupted too. In Meqele, the price of grain in December 1982 was 181 Birr per quintal; in nearby areas controlled by the TPLF there was either none available or it ranged from 140-200 Birr. In Shire it was 60 Birr and in north Wollo 40-90 Birr. If unrestricted trade had been possible, the surpluses in the latter two areas would have been taken to Meqele, at a transport cost of about 47 Birr and 23 Birr per quintal respectively.[39] The price in Meqele would have fallen to 120 Birr and probably less. (If access from Sudan or Gonder had been possible it would have fallen still further.) Thus the people of Meqele were forced to pay 60 Birr per quintal, or an additional 50 per cent, as a premium on account of this disruption.[40] During 1982, when restrictions were introduced on the trade between Wollo, Raya and Meqele, the price in Meqele rose by 67 per cent.[41]

As a substantial proportion of the adult male population of Tigray was formerly involved in petty trade, including grain, the near-destruction of the grain trade caused much rural unemployment.

Restrictions on Migration

Increasingly tight restrictions on movement were imposed from 1980 onwards. Restrictions started with controlling access to towns. They were tightened in southern Tigray in 1982 and Wollo and Gonder during 1983-4. While migration was never expressly forbidden, the welter of petty legislation that existed acted as a licence to pillage and harass by any local official or soldier.

The most direct manner in which these were implemented was through a pass system -- any individual needed a pass from the chairman of his or her Peasant Association (PA) chairman in order to leave the vicinity of the village. An individual caught without a pass was liable to arbitrary detention or worse. People from TPLF-held areas could not obtain passes. Where they existed, PAs were reluctant to issue passes. If someone was caught in suspicious circumstances with a pass, the PA officials who authorized the pass would be liable to punishment. Given the unpredictability of local officialdom, especially its propensity to refuse to recognize the legitimacy of a document issued elsewhere, this acted as powerful disincentive to issuing passes.

In addition, PA officials would generally refuse to issue a travel pass until the individual

[39] In the 1970s, 70% of the grain supply to Meqele originated from Raya and Kobo, and 10% from Gonder. The Shire grain was exported to Eritrea.

[40] Calculated from: de Waal, 1990, pp. 44-9.

[41] de Waal, 1990, p. 44; RRC, "Food Supply Status and Forecast No. 1," December 1982.

had paid past taxes and "voluntary contributions." Similarly, a person entering a town without evidence of being a dutiful citizen in respect of tax payments was liable to be detained or harassed.

A number of government policies acted as powerful deterrents to rural people visiting towns in Tigray. During 1980-3, rural visitors to towns were subjected to routine harassment and robbery, on minor pretexts such as coming from an area near where the TPLF was reported to be active, failure to have a PA membership card, or lack of proof of tax payments. In January 1984, many routine checks were relaxed -- just as the conscription campaign for the first round of national military service was getting under way. Some visitors to towns were conscripted against their will.

Also starting in January 1984, there was a widespread campaign against suspected TPLF supporters. Army checkpoints were mandated to detain any would-be migrants who were suspected of TPLF sympathies. Several thousand people were detained, and more than 600 were kept in prison or killed. Among those killed were 20 senior administrators in Tigray.[42] Waves of arrests later in the year swelled the number of detainees.

While most of the peasants detained in 1984 were later either forcibly resettled, conscripted to the army, or released, some remained in prison for more than 18 months. Together with many political detainees from urban backgrounds, they were released on February 8, 1986, when the TPLF stormed the central prison in Meqele and freed no fewer than 1,800 political detainees. An international team of human rights workers later interviewed some of them.[43] One 17 year old farmer was detained while visiting the market in Axum; the security officials who were carrying out a check on all marketgoers' identity cards said he "looked the physical type to be a spy." Another case was a child farmer aged 14, who was arrested in August 1984 on the accusation of carrying paraffin to the TPLF -- which the boy denied even having had in his possession.

In mid-1984 there was a similar though smaller crackdown in Gonder. In September 1984, some of the Tigrayan delegates to the Tenth Anniversary celebrations in Addis Ababa were arrested.

Sexual harassment was a strong deterrent to women migrants throughout the period. When questioned by aid workers after the capture of most of the Tigrayan towns by the TPLF in 1988, a number of women mentioned sexual harassment as their greatest worry.

From November 1984 onwards, fear of resettlement added yet another disincentive for

[42] Africa Contemporary Record, 1983-4, pp. B125-6.

[43] Alex Lyon, Michael McColgan, Christian Rostoker and Didier Malapel, "Torture and the Violation of Human Rights in Tigray, Ethiopia," London, 1986.

visiting towns.

A final deterrent on movement was the dissemination of land mines. Though planting land mines became most common only after 1986, from 1980 onwards anti-personnel land mines were planted on paths, and around army garrisons.

The result of these restrictions and deterrents was that normal patterns of movement, trade, migration and exchange were stifled.

The Consequences for the TPLF

The famine profoundly influenced the fortunes of the TPLF. In the short term the famine was a disaster for the front. Between 1980 and 1984, it was unable to tighten its military grip on Tigray. In 1982-3, it expanded into Wollo, but was gradually forced to restrict its operations. 1985 was to be a year in which the army was able to make significant territorial gains. In late 1984, in response to the increasingly desperate situation, the TPLF decided on the mass evacuation of people to refugee camps in Sudan (see chapter 11). The loss of people from central Tigray and the diversion of resources to controlling the mass exodus left the TPLF militarily vulnerable.

In the long term the TPLF was able to turn the Tigray people's experience of famine into an asset -- perhaps its greatest asset. A TPLF leader, referring to the bombing campaign launched in September 1980, said: "This is a new tactic to demoralize the people, but it will only make them hate the government more."[44] By 1985 rural people in Tigray knew that they would never be free from famine while the army remained in the province. The experience of war-induced famine was to be the greatest source of volunteers for the TPLF.

The early 1980s also forced the TPLF to be intensely pragmatic. Initially, it attempted socialist measures such as price control and the creation of cooperatives in the areas of western Tigray which it controlled. These were not a success. In particular, when the price controls were introduced in mid 1983, traders simply boycotted the markets, and after a few weeks the TPLF backed down. A policy of encouraging free enterprise prevailed thereafter. Virtually no new cooperatives were created. No attempts to control credit, or restrain moneylenders from charging extortionate rates of interest, were made. The rationale was that the TPLF had nothing better with which to replace the existing system. Above all, migration and petty trade were encouraged. Migrants to western Tigray were assisted by a network of checkpoints where relief was given, and were helped in the reception areas on the system of "a family for a family."

[44] Dan Connell in The Guardian, London, October 17, 1980.

The Consequences for Government Military Strategy

Did the government know what it was doing between 1980 and 1984? The answer is: to a limited extent only. The government was determined to restrict the food supply to the TPLF and to attack the economic base of the population that supported it, but did not seem to realize the extreme but inevitable consequences of these actions. This is consistent with the over-rigid thinking that informed many of the government's social and agricultural policies, that wholly overlooked the importance of mobility, trade and local knowledge in rural people's subsistence. In the minds of the members of the Dergue, famine was associated with drought, and counter-insurgency with killing rebels.

The lack of realization is illustrated by the government's response to the famine. In the early days, this was a straightforward portrayal of the problem as one of drought, and appeal for international assistance. As late as 1983, Mengistu felt able to draw attention to the famine. In his May Day speech, Mengistu said:

> Compatriots, there is a drought in some regions of our country. This has brought famine among some of our people in the villages. This situation tests our goal. We started off saying that we will at least satisfy our food needs ... it is unacceptable that we cannot at least satisfy our food needs. It is a mystery that we are starving when we have enough land that can even produce surplus for other countries, and sufficient manpower. We need to get out of this shameful situation.

It seems likely that having created one of the most severe and widespread famines in modern times, the Ethiopian government did not fully grasp what it had done.

That state of ignorance was never total, and did not last. By the end of 1984, there can be no doubt that the government was aware that it had been instrumental in creating the famine. It may not have realized the complexities or the depth of its culpability, but senior members of the government knew that the war and the famine were inextricably intertwined. In December 1984, Acting Foreign Minister Tibebu Bekele said to the US Charge d'Affaires, "probably with more candor than he intended," that "food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionisyts."[45]

A belated government awareness of its role in the famine can also been seen in the military strategy adopted from the beginning of 1985 onwards, which aimed at utilizing food supplies as a counter-insurgency tool. This issue will be taken up in chapters 10 and 11.

[45] David A. Korn, Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union, London, 1986, p. 137.