10. WAR AND THE USE OF RELIEF AS A WEAPON IN ERITREA, 1984-88

In October 1984, the famine and war in Ethiopia took a dramatic turn, with four simultaneous developments. On October 23, the BBC screened a film of the starvation in Korem, unleashing a juggernaut of international aid that completely transformed the famine, which had up to that point been developing without large amounts of external relief aid. Secondly, on October 27, the army in Eritrea launched its largest offensive for two-and-a-half years, which was to be followed up by an even larger series of offensives during 1985. Thirdly, the Ethiopian government launched its principal response to the famine, the resettlement program. Finally, an ambitious villagization program was launched in Harerghe, as a counter-insurgency measure against the OLF, which presaged the program in other parts of the country. These four developments are the subject of this and the following three chapters.

The huge relief operation that swung into action meant that after October 1984, control of relief was a major component of the military strategy of both the government and the rebel fronts. The systematic use (and denial) of food relief for military ends was the most notable aspect of government military strategy that also included extraordinarily sustained and widespread brutality against civilians.

In the southeast in 1979-82, and Eritrea in 1982, the government had tried with mixed success to obtain humanitarian assistance from the international community to use for the pacification element of its counter-insurgency strategy. Between 1982 and 1984, these aid flows were drying up, and the repatriation initiative was not meeting with much success. After October 1984, the massive inflow of relief allowed the government to return, when it wished to do so, to its preferred counter-insurgency strategy.

This chapter focuses on the continued war in Eritrea, and the role of aid in the government's counter-insurgency strategy. As elements of that strategy were common to both Eritrea and Tigray, some details concerning the aid programs in Tigray will also be included. It ends with the EPLF victory at Afabet in March 1988. Building on less spectacular military gains over the previous six months, this battle marked a turning point in the war -- from then onwards, both EPLF and TPLF had gained military supremacy.

The Aid Response

The publicity suddenly given to the famine represented an earthquake in the relief world. From donating only $11 million to Ethiopia in Financial Year (FY) 1983 and $23 million in FY 1984, USAID increased its donations to $350 million in FY 1985. The members of the

European Community increased their donations from $111 million in (calendar) 1983 to $213 million in 1984 and $325 million in 1985. Overall assistance rose from $361 million in 1983 to $417 million in 1984 and $784 million in 1985.[1] 975,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food was delivered to the government side between November 1984 and October 1985. About 80,000 MT went to EPLF- and TPLF-held areas.

Dilemmas in Feeding the North

In October 1984 the aid donors faced an acute dilemma: whether to channel relief through the government or rebel side.

In December, diplomats and relief agency staff in Addis Ababa estimated that the government had access to only 22 per cent of the famine-stricken population.[2] The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) had access to most of the remainder, using "cross-border" routes from Sudan, and travelling only at night to avoid aerial bombardment. The Emergency Relief Desk, a consortium of humanitarian agencies set up in 1981, acted as an intermediary between the donors and ERA and REST, avoiding many of the problems that those donors would have encountered had they implemented the programs themselves.[3] Nevertheless, the great majority of the assistance was channelled through the RRC and voluntary agencies working alongside it: according to most estimates, they received over 90 per cent of the money and food.

The US shared with other donors a preference for working on the government side; it was quicker, cheaper, and more public. However, unlike every other major aid donor (save the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC]), USAID was the only donor to contemplate giving substantial support to the cross-border operation. Because of the politics of the relief program, USAID did not in the end give the support that it promised, and the cross-border operation remained grossly under-supplied during 1984 and 1985.

The US donated 5,000 MT to ERA and REST in April 1984 for the cross-border operation, a further 23,000 MT in November, and another "substantial" donation in December. In September, USAID initiated discussions to launch a much larger cross-border program,

[1] Figures from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries," 1984-1986.

[2] Paul Vallely, "Famine: Russia and US on Collusion Course," The Times, London, June 4, 1985.

[3] Barbara Hendrie, "Cross-Border Relief Operations in Eritrea and Tigray," Disasters, 13, (1990), p. 355.

possibly of a size to eclipse the program run from the government side. According to documents obtained by the journalist Paul Vallely, several plans were mooted; the most ambitious involved spending over $100 million and building a road from Sudan into central Tigray; the least ambitious involved donating 240 trucks to ERA and REST.[4] Only in late 1985 did assistance in the form of 150 trucks finally materialize. Throughout most of 1985, REST was still operating a battered fleet of 55 aging Fiat trucks, assisted by a smaller fleet of ICRC vehicles.

Repeated demands by diplomats, humanitarian agencies and the rebel fronts for a "food truce" to allow non-governmental agencies to supply relief to the hungry in all parts of the country were consistently rejected by the government. In December 1984, Acting Foreign Minister Tibebu Bekele rejected an approach from the US Charge d'Affaires, saying that it amounted to a proposal "to make an arrangement with criminals."[5] Government officials consistently rejected the suggestion that there were areas of the country which could not be reached by the RRC.

In these circumstances USAID used the cross-border operation as a bargaining tool with the government: unless greater access was provided from the government side, the US would throw major resources into the cross-border operation. However, this strategy was undermined by various factors, including:

* The lack of a suitable private relief organization to take on the role of implementing partner for USAID's relief food (CARE was approached but refused in March);

* The unilateral donation of resources to the government side by all other major donors, notably the UN;

* The April 7 popular uprising in Sudan, which overthrew President Jaafar Nimeiri (a close ally of the US and at the time very hostile to Mengistu) and brought to power the Transitional Military Council, which hoped for improved relations with the Ethiopian government;[6]

* The need for the relief program to be public, so that the television viewers in the US could see that their government was acting. The Ethiopian government was totally

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[4] Vallely, The Times, London, June 4, 1985.

[5] Quoted in: David A. Korn, Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union, London, 1986, p. 135.

[6] Sudanese-Ethiopian relations dramatically improved during the rest of 1985, but deteriorated during 1986 and 1987 as the Sudanese civil war escalated and the Ethiopian government continued to provide military support to the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army. Sudanese relations with the fronts improved as those with the government soured.

intransigent and refused to conceded any legitimacy at all to the cross-border program, so that it had to be clandestine. It therefore could not be open to the televized visits of US politicians, journalists and media personalities.

Two other factors helped to swing the debate in favor of the government side. One was that the army's military successes in the Eighth Offensive in Tigray between February and April meant that many more areas became accessible from the government side (see next chapter). The second was that the US State Department realised that neither EPLF nor TPLF were ideologically suited to playing the role of "contras" against the Communist government in Addis Ababa. In favor of the cross-border operation was the fear that a large refugee influx into Sudan would destabilize that country, which remained a western ally.[7]

Thus, due to essentially political considerations, the cross-border operation fell out of favor with USAID -- though a reduced level of support for it continued. Instead, the "Food for the North" initiative was proposed in March, whereby US voluntary agencies would work on the government side. World Vision was selected for Tigray and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) for Eritrea. The proposal and the decision to support it were made before the full cooperation of the Ethiopian government was obtained; this meant that throughout 1985 and afterwards the government consistently had the upper hand in determining the conditions under which aid was provided in Eritrea and Tigray. Therefore, not only did the cross-border operation fail to receive adequate support, but its value as a bargaining counter with the government was never properly realized.

Food Relief and Survival Strategies

The politics of food assistance to Ethiopia over this period have received much attention from journalists, relief workers and scholars.[8] This chapter is concerned with the problem of famine more generally. Even in the worst famines in Africa, food relief provided by humanitarian agencies or governments plays a relatively minor role in the survival of the people. For example, the enormous relief effort to the famine-stricken Sudanese region of Darfur in 1984/5 succeeded in providing no more than about twelve per cent of the total food consumed by the people of that region during the famine, and had little appreciable effect on their survival chances.[9] Similarly in Ethiopia, famine relief was at best the last ten per cent which assisted

[7] Until January 1985 the Sudan government officially blamed food shortages on the refugee influx, denying the existence of a domestic food problem.

[8] The best such book remains: Peter Gill, A Year in the Death of Africa, London, 1986.

[9] Alex de Waal, "Is Famine Relief Irrelevant to Rural People?" IDS Bulletin, 20.2, Sussex,

rural people in surviving. Moreover, in contrast to other survival strategies such as gathering wild foods, trading, or taking paid labor, the provision of relief food was unreliable and was often accompanied by unpleasant side-effects such as the need to walk long distances, absent oneself from the farm at critical stages in the agricultural cycle, or live in a disease-ridden relief shelter. Thus, while the provision or interruption of relief supplies was vitally important for the people of northern Ethiopia after October 1984, other aspects of the counter-insurgency strategy which adversely affected the survival strategies of the affected population were, as during the previous years, even more important.

The fact that relief assistance is much less important than "normal" economic activities is significant. While it does not make the disruption of relief supplies any less morally reprehensible, it draws attention to the fact that other actions which create famine are even more deserving of moral outrage.

April 1988, pp. 63-9.

The October 1984 Offensive

Within the same week that the BBC film of Korem was broadcast, the Ethiopian government launched a major offensive in Eritrea. The following year was to equal 1982 in terms of the suffering of civilian Eritreans on account of the war; it was to surpass the horrors of that year because rural people had to contend with the problems of famine as well.

By October 1984, the 60,000 new conscripts drafted earlier that year had finished their military training and were ready for battle. The total size of the regular army was 210,000, with 170,000 militia. Meanwhile there had been a build up of armor -- the army now had 750 main battle tanks and 130 combat aircraft. These new forces were soon to be deployed: for eleven of the next thirteen months, the army was actively engaged in major offensives, its most sustained military action since 1978.

On October 27, 1984, the Ethiopian army launched a large offensive which lasted until January. This included the familiar elements of indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian targets as a prelude to ground attack. The market at Molki, Seraye district, was bombed on October 2, killing 42 marketgoers and wounding 90. In the EPLF base area of Orota, a school was bombed. Villages close to the EPLF front lines were subjected to indiscriminate shelling during a period of two weeks, and there was further aerial bombardment towards the end of the offensive in January.

After the fighting stopped there was little quiet in Eritrea. In April the army attacked Nacfa, and there were numerous small engagements.

The Food for the North Initiative, 1985

The large inflow of aid in general, and the Food for the North Initiative in particular, gave the Ethiopian government a new resource which it began to use in the middle of 1985. The government preferred to have the aid consigned to its own RRC, which could then utilize the aid as it pleased. However, when some of the main aid donors, particularly the US, insisted on using voluntary agencies, the government saw that it had advantages in this arrangement too. The government knew that few relief agencies would have the courage to speak out about human rights abuses or the role of relief in the war, particularly if it threatened to shut down their programs in reprisal. The publicity which the agencies would draw could thus be used in the government's favor, and to the disadvantage of the rebel fronts.

Paul Vallely noted some of the ironies of the Food for the North Initiative:

The relief agencies were pleased. So was the Dergue, because the deal would provide a

> programme of pacification in the rebel areas newly under its control. Food could be distributed without the risk that it might fall into the hands of the rebel army. Moreover, the presence of western aid workers in the area would constrain the vigour of any [rebel] counter-offensive. Having got the Soviet Union to finance the operation, Colonel Mengistu had now got the US to finance its consolidation with food handouts.[10]

After an initial reluctance to let the Food for the North program go ahead, the government allowed CRS into Areza and Barentu. The CRS target was to open two more centers in Keren and Agordat and distribute food to 200,000 people. Over the following months, government enthusiasm for the program grew.

The 1985 Offensives

In July 1985, the EPLF took the important garrison town of Barentu. The CRS feeding program, which had opened a few months beforehand, was stopped. The government now had no presence in western Eritrea, where the only functioning relief programs were those organized by ERA, bringing in food cross-border from Sudan.

In August the government launched a huge offensive -- equalling the Red Star campaign of 1982 in terms of numbers of troops deployed. In two phases, it lasted until late October. In terms of losses by the EPLF, it was probably the costliest campaign -- estimates for casualties among the EPLF range from 2,000 to 4,000 and higher.[11] One aim of the campaign was to disrupt the supply routes from Sudan used by ERA.

While the offensive was waged, the army commandeered all transport in Eritrea. RRC distributions in Eritrea and Tigray came almost to a halt -- falling from 14,122 MT in July to 2,069 MT in August.

Within the space of a few weeks, Barentu was recaptured by the army, which went on to retake Tessenei, held by the EPLF for 18 months, and a key town for access to Sudan. The whole cross-border route through Kassala was closed on August 25, leaving ERA only the longer and more difficult route from Port Sudan. A large irrigated farm nearby at Ali Ghidir was also captured. ERA estimated that 20,000 MT of food aid was lost to the army. 30,000 refugees fled across the border to Sudan, and 190,000 people were internally displaced in Eritrea. 22 villages were destroyed or abandoned because of aerial bombardment or artillery shelling. There were credible reports of reprisals taken against civilian residents of Barentu and

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[10] The Times, London, June 4, 1985.

[11] Roy Pateman, Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning, Trenton, NJ, 1990, p. 140; Africa Confidential, 26.30, October 30, 1985.

the surrounding villages, in which 37 people were killed.

Aerial bombardment continued throughout this period. On September 20 and 22, the ERA camp for displaced people at Solomuna in Sahel was bombed and 20 adults and nine children were killed. The village of Badme was also bombed, killing nine.

EPLF Strategy

The 1985 offensives were a major but temporary setback for the EPLF. As in Tigray, the experience of the government war strategy and its role in creating famine hardened popular support for the front. Between 1984 and 1987, EPLF strength rose from 12,000 to about 30,000, and the numbers of militia were increased.[12]

The EPLF responded to the government advance of 1985 by consolidating its control in north-west Eritrea, expanding its forces, and protecting its relief routes. In late 1987, it began to go on the offensive, disrupting government supply lines, and attacking convoys. In December the EPLF overran the army's main defensive positions at Nacfa, a prelude to the devastating attack on Afabet in March.

Pacification in Eritrea 1986-7 I: The Army

The military strategy adopted in 1986-7 was a familiar one: constant military patrols and small-scale offensives, bombing "everything that moves" in the EPLF-controlled areas, and a continued program of villagization and pacification elsewhere.

The army in Eritrea exacted many bloody reprisals against the civilian population. The following are some reported incidents:

* March 1986: Senafe, Akele Guzai: two killed when a soldier threw a grenade into a crowd;

* June 1986: lower Anseba and Dembezan areas, Hamassien: several villages looted by soldiers;

* August 6, 1986: Hamazu, Southern Eritrea: 140 killed, 100 injured by soldiers;

* September 1986: Adibara, Barka: five peasants killed in retaliation for a land mine explosion which destroyed an army truck;

* September 23-4, 1986: Akele Guzai: 24 peasants executed, 20 arrested;

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

* June 24, 1987: Adi Hadid, Akele Guzai: six killed;

* June 26, 1987: Haikota and Adi Shimel, Barka: 29 farmers were ploughing their land when troops came and took to them to Adi Shimel, where 16 were killed and Haikota, where ten were killed;

* July 1987: Anseba, Senhit: 16 people killed and 106 cattle burned by soldiers.

Other forms of harassment continued. In one reported incident, a man in Adikuta, Akele Guzai, was ordered to pay a 3,000 Birr fine after seven of his goats stepped on land mines, which detonated. A court ordered that the fine be paid to compensate the army for "wasted mines."

The University of Leeds assessment team which visited Eritrea in late 1987 obtained figures for losses and destruction due to the war.[13] The figures indicate that since the beginning of 1986:

* 22,500 hectares of land had been destroyed by military action or rendered unusable by land mines.

* 3,500 tons of food had been confiscated by the army.

* 43,900 domestic animals had been stolen by the army (mostly sheep and goats, but including substantial numbers of pack animals, cattle and camels).

* 1,500 civilians had been killed, 3,600 imprisoned, and 200 raped by soldiers.

* 1.3 million Birr of money and property had been looted by the army.

* 2,500 homes had been destroyed.[14]

Pacifying Eritrea II: The Air Force

Bombing in Eritrea continued constantly. Some attacks included:

* August 4, 1986: Dekidashin: three civilians killed, two wounded.

* September 15, 1986: Egela Hatsin, Akele Guzai: five killed, 20 wounded.

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[13] The figures came from ERA and were not therefore independent; some incidents contained in them have been cross-checked, but no full independent check has been possible.

[14] Figures reproduced in: Lionel Cliffe, "The Impact of War and the Response to it in Different Agrarian Systems in Eritrea," Development and Change, 20, (1989) p. 377.

* September 20, 1986: Ela Tsaeda, Sahel: one killed.

* January 31, 1987: Hawasheit relief center: four civilians killed, including a four year old girl.

On at least one occasion, the MiGs crossed the Sudan border on their bombing missions. In August 1987, an agricultural camp was attacked and one woman was killed and five wounded.[15]

Pacifying Eritrea III: Relief

Relief food was a major strategic element in Eritrea from 1985 onwards. The traditional relationship of regular and guerrilla armies to the population -- that they rely on the people to give them food -- was reversed. Both the government and the EPLF had more food resources at their disposal, and used it to obtain the support of and control over the population. That, however, is where the symmetry ended. The logic of the government's position, as an unpopular presence trying to subdue an unwilling populace, meant that food relief was used to restrict people, as the more acceptable side of a violent and impoverishing counter-insurgency strategy. The logic of the EPLF's position was that it already enjoyed widespread popular support, and it wanted to feed the people in the areas it controlled in order to prevent them migrating to government-held areas or to Sudan to look for food.

After the success of the August 1985 offensive in Eritrea, the government's attitude to the Food for the North Initiative warmed. "They have done a complete volte face and are encouraging PVOs [private voluntary agencies] to expand it still further" said Richard Eney of USAID.[16] CRS moved back into Barentu. The number of distribution points was increased, including Keren. Critics of the program argued that "when Ethiopian troops advance on a place like Barentu, and then a few days later an American voluntary agency comes in to distribute US food and medical supplies, you become hard-pressed not to see this as an odd kind of coordination."[17] CRS and USAID argued that the humanitarian necessity of providing food overrode any political-military considerations, that the EPLF was happy to see Eritrean people fed, no matter who by, and that a few months of emergency feeding would not win hearts and

[15] Sudan News Agency, August 12, 1987.

[16] Quoted in: Jonathan B. Tucker, "The Politics of Famine: US Foreign Policy in Ethiopia, 1982-1985," mimeo, 1985, p. 55.

[17] Tucker, 1985, p. 49.

minds after 25 years of bloody warfare.[18]

The relief given in Eritrea was generous, in contrast to the years 1983-4. However, outside the towns, it was tied to the continuing program of the creation of protected villages. In order to receive food, rural people had to bring their whole families, and register, often paying a fee of 5 Birr in order to do so. The food was then given in frequent small amounts, making it impossible for the family to return home with food.

Other means were used to control the population in distribution centers: most were protected villages, with curfews enforced and movement restricted, with only one or two permitted entrances, and ringed by anti-personnel land mines.

One way in which the aid was used to draw people into protected villages was by threatening and harassing those who tried to obtain aid from ERA distribution centers. Said Ali Mohamed was interviewed by Barbara Hendrie at an ERA center in March 1986:[19]

> In my village we are completely encircled by the enemy. The Dergue is in all directions; we drink from the same well, you can say. We are afraid. All of the time they take our camels, our goats, our animals.
>
> The food I get here, I will not take it home to my village, because if I do, and the Dergue finds out, they will kill us. So I will hide my food in valleys or in the hills and will travel to the hiding place from my village to take some food at a time, daily or weekly.
>
> The enemy has prevented us from getting food before, so this is the first time I have come here.

Securing Garrisons and Roads

A supplementary function of the program, for the army, was to keep roads open and give protection to military convoys. On roads where the EPLF was known to be active, the army would often send civilian buses or relief convoys, and only if they got through without trouble, would they send military vehicles. Some convoys were mixed relief and military, and often the identity of different vehicles was unclear.

This policy inevitably led to tragedy. On July 13, 1988, a civilian bus travelling between Asmara and Tigray struck a land mine and caught fire. According to the government, 25 civilian passengers were killed immediately and nine died later. Relief vehicles also suffered.

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[18] Tucker, 1985, pp. 49-50.

[19] Barbara Hendrie, "Field Report -- Eritrea," Emergency Relief Desk, Khartoum, April 1986, Appendix B.

EPLF Attacks on Relief Vehicles

In August-September 1987, two simultaneous developments meant that relief vehicles became targets for attack by EPLF ambushes. One was the expansion of EPLF military activity further southwards and eastwards, so that it threatened major roads. The second was the drought of the summer of 1987, which meant that relief activities needed to be greatly stepped up.

On October 23, 1987, the EPLF attacked a convoy of 34 trucks south of Asmara. EPLF fighters drained the fuel tanks, poured the fuel over the vehicles, and set them alight. One driver was also killed. 23 of the trucks carried relief food, much of it supplied by BandAid, and the incident attracted worldwide condemnation. The EPLF claimed that three trucks carried arms. This claim has never been substantiated. However, the relief vehicles were travelling in a mixed convoy, which included commercial and government vehicles. The only marking identifying the relief trucks were small stickers on the doors, which were invisible from a distance.

The attack on the convoy caused a flurry of activity in the humanitarian community aimed to ensure that it did not happen again. Over the following week, there was an attempt to negotiate a "safe passage" agreement with the government. This was immediately rejected by the government, whereupon the EPLF said it would continue to attack convoys to which it had not given prior clearance.

Less ambitiously, there were consultations between EPLF, Emergency Relief Desk and BandAid in Khartoum.[20] A proposal was worked out whereby relief trucks would be much more clearly marked (with large flags indicating the beginning and end of the relief "bloc" in a convoy) and the EPLF would be warned in advance of the movements of such convoys. The EPLF for its part promised to give "instructions to the army units to separate military from relief and to take all possible precautions to ensure that relief materials and relief transportation are not harmed."[21] The details of this proposal were passed via the British Embassy in Addis Ababa to Mr Michael Priestley, then head of the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE), who summarily rejected the plan.

Thereafter, the safety of the relief vehicles depended on the efficiency of an informal process of communication between the humanitarian agencies in Asmara and Addis Ababa, Penny Jenden, director of BandAid in London, Emergency Relief Desk in Khartoum, and the

[20] ICRC also participated but withdrew pending its "Open Roads for Survival" initiative (see chapter 11).

[21] EPLF press release, December 2, 1987.

EPLF.

Over the following months there were more attacks on relief vehicles, but none on convoys of marked relief vehicles unaccompanied by military vehicles. In November, there were two attacks on convoys, which later transpired to have not been carrying relief. In December, a convoy of 13 vehicles was destroyed, and on January 15, 1988, another convoy, including relief vehicles, was burned near Massawa. While the relief trucks were unmarked and were accompanied by military vehicles, there is no evidence that the attacking EPLF force tried to separate out the military and relief vehicles as they had earlier promised.

The attacks attracted international publicity. Both the EPLF and the government confined the argument to the issue of famine relief, which ensured that the government would be the winner, at least in terms of international public opinion: the EPLF undoubtedly carried the responsibility for destroying the relief supplies. A more rounded assessment of the ethics of the EPLF attacks on relief demands attention to the government's whole pacification strategy. The relief operations were but a small part of an overall government strategy. The ten per cent contribution to survival provided by relief was more than offset by the government attack on the other 90 per cent of the existing economy, and the relief was itself an integral part of the pacification program that was undermining rural people's ability to provision themselves. Ensuring the "neutrality" of relief deliveries would have helped only a little while such an overall military strategy persisted. The EPLF attacks caused people to go hungry, but they helped make the pacification strategy less viable.

In March 1988, the EPLF won its greatest ever military victory at Afabet after a huge three-day battle in which it defeated a force of 15,000 men and over 50 tanks. It was the turning point in the war, and has been compared to the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu. However, such was the international preoccupation with food relief -- a preoccupation partly orchestrated by the government -- that a headline in The Times of London of March 31 ran: "Stepped up guerrilla raids threaten food deliveries."

Diversion of Aid to the Military

Frequent allegations were made during the early 1980s of large-scale diversion of food to the military in Ethiopia. The evidence was largely the testimony of refugees in Sudan, and visitors to EPLF- and TPLF- controlled areas who saw relief food stockpiled in the stores of captured garrisons. In March 1983, these allegations reached a new level with a report in the Sunday Times of London under the classic headline: "Starving babies' food sold to buy Soviet arms." Repeated visits by high-level representatives of donor countries, including Canada, the UK the European Community and (a year later) the US, failed to find any substance to these

allegations, besides odd occasions of "loans" of food to the army. In late 1985, the UN estimated the rate of diversion at about five per cent, which is considered low under the circumstances. However, the diversion of this amount of food would, from 1985 onwards, have been sufficient to feed 300,000-400,000 men -- the entire armed forces.

Government officials were frank about the practice of feeding soldiers. In both Eritrea and Tigray (though apparently less so elsewhere) large amounts of relief food were used to feed the locally-conscripted militia. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, head of the RRC, reports a "request" from Mengistu to divert food to the army in June 1984:

> I understood the problem of the military. The common soldier was the victim of government policies just as much as the peasant. Soldiers were dying by the hundreds every week in the various civil wars. I didn't want them to suffer more due to food shortages. I now suggested that it would be easier for the RRC to divert food to the peasant militias rather than to the military establishment on the government payroll. These militias recruited from the peasantry were not paid; they were simply trained and ordered out to fight. I felt that feeding them was like feeding peasants.[22]

Relief allocations in Eritrea and Tigray were made by a Drought Emergency Committee, composed of a range of government officials, only one of whom represented the RRC. Reportedly, allocations to the militia were made against the wishes of the RRC representative in Eritrea.

Later, government Deputy Administrator for Eritrea, Yishak Tsegai, told a reporter that the militia are "given priority because there is no fixed salary or privileges.... 20,000 peasants are armed on the side of the government."[23] These militia came to be known as milisha sirnai or "wheat militia" because of their method of payment.

In addition, about 15,000 militia in Tigray were fed. A visitor to Tigray discovered evidence of this in Meqele in March 1989, after its capture by the TPLF:

> Everyone I spoke to said that the RRC only gave food to their own militias and their families, not to the poor. We found indications of this in the looted RRC offices where file after file was titled "militia of ... receiving assistance" with lists of beneficiaries.[24]

Extensive evidence of the use of food aid by army garrisons was discovered by journalist Peter Worthington, who visited the garrison of Afabet shortly after its capture by the EPLF.

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[22] Dawit Wolde Giorgis, Red Tears: War, Revolution and Famine in Ethiopia, Trenton, NJ, 1989, pp. 157-8.

[23] Jane Perlez, New York Times, February 15, 1990. The real figure was closer to 50,000.

[24] Jennie Street, "Report of Field Trip to Non-Government Held Areas of Tigray, Ethiopia, March 1989," Khartoum, Emergency Relief Desk, 1989, p. 34.

> I went to the Ethiopian army kitchen and store depots to see what had been left in the hasty departure -- and found, stacked against a wall, a number of 50 kilogram sacks of flour, marked "C.I.D.A. [Canadian International Development Agency] Gift of Canada." Serving as curtains to the shelves were other sacks that had once contained Canadian wheat.
>
> ... I visited a dozen hole-in-wall shops, run mostly by Moslems and stocked with items such as Kiwi shoe polish, soap, toilet paper, colored hair oil, sardines, banana chewing gum from Saudi Arabia -- and bags of Canadian wheat flour.
>
> Every store, literally, had stacks of flour, marked C.I.D.A. Questions were answered evasively. They were keeping it for someone else ... Yes, it was for sale in the markets of Asmara ... no, it wasn't for sale -- unless someone wanted to buy it ... the army helped them to get it, sold to shopkeepers on the sly, everyone making a small profit.[25]

Worthington also discovered cooking oil and other foodstuffs donated as aid in the garrison. In 1989, the sale of relief food by the army and militia in Eritrea had reached such a scale that a brisk trade was being conducted across the battle lines into Tigray, where it was contributing a significant amount to the diet of people and keeping food prices low.

Despite its claims to the contrary, the UN in Ethiopia was in fact well-informed about the large scale diversion of relief to the militia. In June 1985, the UN food monitor in Eritrea documented that militiamen were regularly receiving 90 kilograms of wheat per month. Of this, they kept about half for consumption, and sold the other half for money. The diversion was concealed by entering six names on the ration list for every militiaman. Often the family of the militiamen received regular rations as well. Ordinary civilians on the ration list received between 10 and 20 kilograms, and when food was short, they received nothing: the militia received priority in the allocation of supplies. The food monitor estimated that approximately one third of the relief in Eritrea was actually being directed to the militia. Mr Kurt Jansson, the UN coordinator for the emergency in Addis Ababa, chose not to publicize this well-documented report, and denied press reports that referred to the diversion of food. Later, Mr Jansson admitted that it had occurred but said that feeding militiamen "could not be considered wrong" as the militiamen would have received food anyway, had they remained as ordinary farmers.[26]

It is quite possible that the total diversion of food aid to the army and militia did not amount to more than five to ten per cent of the total.[27] This however obscures the fact that the

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[25] Peter Worthington, The Sunday Sun, Toronto, April 24, 1988. There are numerous other similar accounts dating back to the 1970s.

[26] Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, The Ethiopian Famine, London, 1987, p. 56.

[27] In 1985 the US General Accounting Office estimated the rate of diversion at 4.3 per cent,

percentages were much higher in the critically-affected areas of the north; that even when the food reached the hungry it played a strategic military role; and the assistance program as a whole gave much needed foreign currency to the government.

Perhaps the most important way in which the relief effort contributed to the government's war effort and indeed survival was through the exchange rate. All foreign assistance was exchanged into Ethiopian Birr at the rate of 2.07 to the dollar, despite the fact that the real market rate was two to three times higher. The government thereby taxed all currency transactions for relief by 100-150 per cent, in addition to port charges, import duties and license fees. This came to be the major source of foreign exchange for the government.

The relief effort also supported the fronts. This took several forms. One was the feeding of militiamen, who were in other respects poor farmers, and who received rations from their local baitos which distributed to the poor on behalf of ERA and REST. Another was beneficiaries contributing some relief supplies to fighters, without direct coercion, but undoubtedly with some social pressure. The main strategic benefit the fronts obtained from relief food was that the people were able to stay in their villages and were not obliged to migrate to Sudan.

Allegations of the straightforward re-consignment of relief to the fronts -- including fighters, support personnel, field hospitals, and prisoner of war camps -- have been made by the Ethiopian government, defectors from the fronts, and Mr Jansson of UNEOE.[28] They have never been confirmed. The diversion of five per cent of the cross-border food would have been sufficient to supply food to about half the EPLF's and TPLF's fighters. With the exception of ICRC programs, internationally-donated food travelled only in ERA and REST vehicles, and was distributed by locally-appointed distribution committees. While international agencies frequently sent food monitors to observe the transport and distribution of certain consignments of food (indeed the programs in rebel-held areas were more intensively monitored than those on the government side), independent comprehensive accounting of donations was never requested by the donors.[29]

ERA and REST exchanged foreign currency in Saudi Arabia at rates close to the free market rate, though there was one incident in late 1989 and early 1990 in which a significant

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but did not take into account the feeding of the militia.

[28] Jansson, 1987, p. 52.

[29] The exception was the internal purchase of surplus foodgrains in Tigray, which was funded by USAID in 1984, 1989 and 1990, and on all occasions the purchases were actually made by US monitors.

divergence occurred, in the order of 40 per cent. When the discrepancy was discovered by an American monitor, ERA apologized and returned the additional funds to the donors. International aid to the rebel side was much less than to the government, and proportionately certainly contributed much less to the fronts' war effort.

Famine Continues

Almost all the factors that led to the creation of famine in Eritrea in 1984 remained in place after 1985. The only exceptions were two years of better rainfall and a much larger supply of food aid. However, the pacification program and the war continued, and these continued to have the effects described in chapter 7. The underlying causes of the famine were not addressed, and when there was drought combined with a smaller relief program in 1989/90, severe famine returned.

A remarkable incident occurred in 1987 which illustrated the Ethiopian government's priorities. In the early 1980s, the Eritrean Public Health Program (EPHP), a civil branch of the EPLF, developed a small, low-cost field microscope. In 1984, production of the microscope began under license in London. At a cost of about one tenth of the existing commercially-available microscopes, and with a light-weight fold-away design, it had potential for use throughout the developing world. The World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored a series of tests, which the microscope passed, whereupon distribution began in several countries such as Brazil, Nicaragua and Indonesia. However in 1986 the Ethiopian government began to object to the microscope, which bore the initials of the EPHP, claiming that it was no more than part of a propaganda campaign launched by the "secessionist elements engaged in the rabid dismemberment of Ethiopia."[30] WHO and UNICEF were obliged to withdraw their endorsement of the microscope.

[30] Letter from H.E. Teferra Haile Selassie, Ethiopian Ambassador in London, to Dr Neil Anderson, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, September 1, 1986.