

14. THE ROAD TO ASMARA: ERITREA, 1988-91

On March 17-19, 1988, the EPLF overwhelmed the Ethiopian army's northern command at Afabet. Over 15,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, captured or dispersed, together with a vast quantity of arms and ammunition, including 50 tanks. Three Soviet officers were captured and another only narrowly escaped. Building on the significant if less spectacular advances by EPLF and TPLF over the previous six months, this marked a turning point of the war. Three years and two months later, the EPLF occupied Asmara and the EPRDF occupied Addis Ababa, bringing an end to their respective wars with the central government. These last three years of the war in Eritrea saw no respite from mass abuses of human rights by the Ethiopian army.

Afabet and Aftermath

The EPLF capture of Afabet left the Ethiopian army in disarray. Within a week, the garrison at Tessenei was evacuated so as to bolster the defenses of Keren. This evacuation was carried out in good order. Barentu was also evacuated, on March 31, and the retreating units burned several parts of the town and looted many citizens of their possessions. The same day the garrison at Anseba, north of Keren, retreated under EPLF fire, and on the night of April 1-2, the EPLF overran the army trenches at Halhal. In order to save Keren from apparent imminent capture, Agordat was evacuated. The following six weeks saw fierce fighting around Keren, in which the army managed to recover its positions at Halhal; otherwise the new front lines did not change significantly.

The fighting saw many atrocities against civilians. One was witnessed by Zahra Ibrahim, an Almeda woman from Halhal.

In April the Dergue attacked Halhal and we were forced to run away. We ran to Wadaq Sabra where there are some caves. There were many people hiding in the caves. The soldiers came to us to kill us. I begged one of them not to kill me and my children -- I offered him sugar -- and he left me and they killed only the others. They killed so many, I couldn't count. It took one month to find the bodies and bury them. For three days I was wandering in the hills and my little boy died from hunger and thirst. There was a gas from the shells which made us cry and made the children very upset -- they cried all the time and became very thirsty.

[In May] we were [still] in Wadaq Sabra. The EPLF overran the area and killed many Ethiopian soldiers, and then left. We left with the EPLF -- there were so many dead soldiers that we had to step on them, and the streams were flowing with blood. The

EPLF took us to the river Matafa.¹

Other credible reports of killings in April-May 1988 include:

- * April 5, Godeiti: 12 civilians shot dead and two wounded by soldiers (ten of the victims were aged 60 years or older).
- * April 15, Qazien: six civilians shot dead by soldiers.
- * April 20, Shebah: 18 civilians shot dead by soldiers.

On May 12, in Sheib in Semhar district, a large scale and well-documented massacre of civilians was perpetrated by the Ethiopian army. Idris Osman Enkersa was a survivor:

It was morning around 8 o'clock ... The enemy armored vehicles, 15 tanks, appeared on the Massawa side. They headed towards Sheib from the coast side. The tanks led [the soldiers] to Sheib and surrounded the village. The soldiers came into every house and collected the people by saying that "you have a meeting today." They gathered children, old women and men under a big tree.²

Amina Mohamed recounted what happened next:

We tried to run away but we were surrounded. The tanks moved in on us, crushing people in their way. My entire family was killed, except for my baby. For three days I lay in the midst of the bodies, pretending to be dead. At one point my baby started to cry. A soldier aimed his gun. I heard his companion say "don't waste a bullet. The baby will die of hunger anyway." The soldiers killed our animals and threw the carcasses in the wells. They searched women's corpses for gold nose rings and earrings. After three days they left the village and I walked up here. That's all.³

About 80 people were crushed to death by the tanks. A further 320 were killed by gunfire, from both the tanks and the foot soldiers. All were civilians. Idris knew many of the dead:

Mohamed Shibeley Dery's wife with her son, his sister in law with her two sons; Ali Gira Wad Hamid's wife and his son, his son's wife with her three children, his daughter with her children; Hamid Wadi Hishay; Ibrahim Hamid Shibeley; Osman Hamid; Hamid Mohamed Cheiway and his mother; Hamid Kurub with his wife and his daughter; Hamid Ahmed's wife with her two daughters; Suleiman Ali Gidir with his sister and his sons; Hawa Osman Musa with her two sons....

On the same day and immediately following days, there were other killings of civilians at 30 other villages in the vicinity, in which at least 100 others died. For example, three were shot dead by soldiers at Beet Abreha the same day, and four at Fatna Arre at the end of the same

¹ Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

² Interviewed by Jennie Street.

³ Quoted in a film by Alter-Cine inc. (Daniele LaCourse and Yvan Patry) The Forbidden Land, September 1989.

week.

The air force also carried out a number of attacks on villages and other civilian targets. These included:

- * March 31: Melebso: 15 killed, 25 wounded.
- * April 2: Mensae Beit Shehaqu: five killed.
- * April: repeated attacks on Afabet, casualties not known.
- * April: Agordat: at least three civilians killed.
- * April: Anseba: two civilians killed.
- * May 7 and 8: Mensura: five civilians killed.
- * May 3 and 13: Halhal: at least three civilians killed in this and two other attacks.
- * May 19: Afabet: ten civilians killed.

These killings of civilians served no military purpose. They were intended merely to terrorize and punish the population.

The fighting and government reprisals displaced about 110,000 civilians, including over 70,000 from the Sheib area. About 40,000 fled to Sudan. These refugees described how they hid to escape the Ethiopian army and how it was not safe to inhabit a village during daylight hours. Instead, people spent the day hiding in the hills, returning home only at dusk. They could not wear bright clothing for fear of attracting the planes, and had to hang their washing to dry in the shade of trees. They could not light a fire to cook, because the smoke would give away their presence. Travel to Sudan was possible only at night.

One woman gave birth under a tree; the next night she had to continue her journey. She said: "I was lucky, we had a camel. I know of women who had to start walking the same day that they had given birth."⁴

The forced displacement of the population led to increased deaths, from thirst, exposure and disease. There was a severe malaria epidemic in the fall of 1988, and many of the victims were displaced people who had moved from the highlands, where there is no malaria and so they had no acquired immunity. A study of mortality among a population of refugees who arrived in Sudan during 1988 found that death rates approximately doubled during the period when the refugees were "on the road," and remained considerably higher than normal in the refugee camp, chiefly on account of diarrhoeal diseases and malaria. Most of those who died

⁴ Interviewed by Alex de Waal, Wad Sherifei, Sudan, March 1989.

were young children. If the survey is assumed also to be representative for those who were displaced inside Eritrea, it would imply that about 1,430 people died on account of the displacement.⁵

The State of Emergency

The defeat at Afabet led President Mengistu to make his first public admission of the existence of the war for ten years. In a televised speech on March 31, Mengistu said that the money spent on the war each year could have built four major universities or ten large hospitals. He declared that extra effort was needed to meet the threat: "from now on, everything to the battlefield." A week later, after meeting with President Siad Barre of Somalia, Mengistu made the surprise announcement of a peace agreement with Somalia (none had been signed after the 1977/8 war), allowing the redeployment of troops from the Ogaden to Eritrea.

On April 6, the government expelled foreign aid agencies from Eritrea and Tigray. This included the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Only UNICEF was exempted.

This ban drew much adverse publicity from the international media, which appeared to assume that the absence of foreign personnel was equivalent to the complete cessation of the relief program. In fact, as the Ethiopian government was quick to point out, more than 80 per cent of the relief in government areas was distributed by Ethiopian organizations employing Ethiopian staff (chiefly the RRC and the churches). The intention of the ban was different: it was to remove witnesses for what was going to happen next.

On May 14, the government declared a State of Emergency in Eritrea and Tigray. As there was no pretence of civil administration in Tigray, and in less than a year no government presence in the province at all save a single garrison, it had little impact in that province. It is also questionable whether the State of Emergency had any significant impact in Eritrea, as the government already possessed an almost unlimited range of powers, and the legal system was already subject to continuous and authorized interference by the executive -- the country was under a permanent virtual state of emergency already.

The State of Emergency proclamation gave an "Overall Administrator" of Eritrea wide-ranging powers, accountable only to the President and the State Council. The security forces (including army, police, People's Guards and militia) were empowered to inspect any person or property and to detain anyone. Ten kilometer strips along the Sudan border and the coast were designated "prohibited areas," from which all people were required to move -- in effect making these "free fire zones." The Overall Administrator was empowered to convene military

⁵ Alex de Waal, "Population and Health of Eritreans in Wad Sherifei," London, ActionAid, 1989, pp. 77-87.

tribunals and to appoint their officers. These tribunals had jurisdiction over a range of crimes. The full list, as enumerated in Section V, 19 (i) and (ii) is reproduced here, in order to give a flavor of the military administration that followed.

- (i) Military tribunals ... have jurisdiction over crimes committed during the State of Emergency in accordance with the updated Special Penal Code Proclamation No. 214/1974 [Ethiopian calendar, i.e. 1981]:
 - (a) Crimes committed against the freedom of the country.
 - (b) Crimes committed against the constitutional order or against organs of that order.
 - (c) Crimes committed against Ethiopia's unity and the unity of the people.
 - (d) Anti-revolutionary crimes.
 - (e) Crimes of armed terrorism and the waging of civil war.
 - (f) The crime of agitating and organizing.
 - (g) Crimes affecting the country's defense forces.
 - (h) Crimes against public property and wealth.
- (ii) In addition to the powers stipulated in sub-article (i) of this article, the military tribunals have the right to judge:
 - (a) Crimes committed in violation of this special proclamation.
 - (b) Any crimes which the Overall Administrator of the area decides should be transferred to military tribunals from the ordinary courts.

Death penalties required the personal approval of the Overall Administrator.

Under the State of Emergency, the army continued to act with wanton brutality towards the civilian population. Over the following twelve months, some of the incidents in which civilians were killed included:

- * June 2, 1988, Godeiti: nine shot dead.
- * June 25, Mensae: four shot dead (including a six month-old baby), and three wounded.
- * September 16, Geleb: four killed by shellfire.
- * October 22, Mai Harasat: eight shot dead, including three old people and a five-year old girl, and eleven wounded.
- * October 31, Degera: three shot dead.

- * December 26, Tewro: eight shot dead.
- * February 1989, Semhar district: between 600 and 1,000 killed in Sheib and surrounding villages.
- * April 15, Sefea and nearby: 19 men thrown to their deaths over a cliff.
- * April 17, Logo: 19 men stoned to death.
- * June 3, Una Andom: seven shot dead (21 others were killed in nearby villages on the same day).

Some of the air raids that took place included an attack on Lego on June 10 (no fatalities reported), and a series of raids in Barka in September and October. The border area was a particular target, and at on least three occasions the MiGs crossed into Sudanese air space and attacked civilian targets inside Sudan. In October, two Sudanese locust-spraying planes were attacked, and in November there were two raids on Sudanese border villages in Red Sea Province, in which a school was damaged.

The policy of forced relocations into protected villages continued. In October 1988, about 5,000 people in four villages were forced to move to the protected village of Elabored near Keren. They were given one day's notice of the move, and the soldiers took the opportunity to loot much property.

During the 18 months after July 1988, there was little large-scale military activity in Eritrea. In early 1990, that was to change.

Massawa, 1990

On February 8, 1990, the EPLF launched a surprise attack on Ethiopia's second port, Massawa, which it captured after a three-day battle. During the battle, the government forces retreated to an island some distance from the main town, taking a number of civilians as hostages. After repeatedly demanding that this force surrender, the EPLF attacked and defeated it. About 200 civilians were estimated to have been killed in the fighting, including some of the civilian hostages.

After the battle the port remained essentially intact, and required few repairs before it could function again. Starting shortly afterwards, the Ethiopian government pursued a policy intended to reduce Massawa to rubble.

The first air raids occurred on February 16. For eight days there were repeated attacks. The initial targets appeared to be the food stores, which contained about 50,000 tonnes of US-

donated wheat, for famine relief. Incendiaries and napalm or phosphorous bombs were used, and about half of this food relief was burned. Susan Watkins, an official of Oxfam Canada, who visited Massawa at the time, saw two warehouses and three stockpiles of grain burning, and commented "it was clear that food aid was the target of the bombardment."⁶ The grain was burned so systematically that piles were still smouldering one month later.

After the initial round of bombing, March was much quieter. The key issue in Massawa was whether the EPLF would be able to reopen the port. Yemane Yohannes, a senior technician in the port, told a visiting journalist "if a ship arrives tomorrow, we can handle it."⁷ He said that four diesel-powered cranes, three berths, four warehouses, and three tugs were still functional, so that relief shipments could be unloaded. Responding to an EPLF appeal for relief shipments, the German-based relief organization Cap Anamur sent a ship loaded with relief towards Massawa.

On April 4, the Ethiopian air force began another series of sustained attacks on Massawa. 30 people were killed and 54 seriously wounded. In three raids over the following four days, another 41 people died.

The inhabitants of Massawa were compelled to spend the daylight hours in air raid shelters -- in storm drains, under bridges, and in the cellars of houses -- or to evacuate the town altogether at daybreak, and spread themselves over large areas under trees, in order not to provide a target for the bombings.

On April 13, one of the encampments of evacuees, at Foro just outside the town was bombed. At least 25 civilians who were sheltering there were burned. One victim of these raids described what occurred:

When we got out from Massawa we were under the trees. We are just civil peoples. The aeroplanes have seen us [that] we are civil peoples. They came at nine o'clock ... They bombed bombs and napalm bombs. They have bombarded us for two hours.⁸

These attacks also used cluster bombs. Cluster bombs are a particularly deadly munition, as they explode before striking the ground and shower a large number of smaller bombs, each one lethal, over a large area. They are designed to kill large numbers of people. Their military use is against columns of infantry, but at this time Massawa was well behind the front line, and empty of military personnel. A foreign visitor to Massawa wrote:

ERA officials familiar with GoE [government] military tactics are shocked by a new kind of bomb which has only been used since the Massawa takeover. Everyone in the

⁶ Quoted in: *The Times*, London, March 3, 1990.

⁷ Quoted in: *The Guardian*, London, March 16, 1990.

⁸ Quoted in: Alter-Cine inc (Danielle Lacourse and Yvan Patry) *A Fight to the Death*, April 1990.

town is talking about this new kind of bomb, which destroys everything within a 100 metre radius, and which is particularly effective in shanty areas with flimsy housing structures.

These cluster bombs were almost certainly supplied by the Israeli government.

On the evening of Sunday, April 22, a particularly devastating air raid occurred. At 10:30 that morning, a raid had taken place. This attack produced no casualties, because the population was either sheltering or evacuated. The second attack occurred at 6:15 p.m., at dusk.

This was after the last hour when attacks normally occurred, as the bomber pilots left themselves enough time to return to base before nightfall. The residents of Massawa had therefore left their shelters, and were in the streets on their way to church, market, or work place. One woman described how she was making *kicha* (unleavened bread) for the feast of Medhania Alem (The Savior's Day, a monthly Christian religious feast), with her family when the bombs exploded. Another man was sitting with his family at home; only he and his sister in law survived. One woman, sheltering with her family in a drain under a road, described her situation:

The plane bombed us. The people are suffering ... entire families were wiped out -- not a single person left alive in the family. We did not come here [to the drain] to have a good time. We didn't come here for fun. We're having a bad time. Mengistu has decided to burn us like wood.⁹

Two cluster bombs exploded over a crowded street in the center of the town. About 50 people were killed and 110 wounded, many of them very severely.

Video recordings taken immediately after the bombing confirm that the casualties were civilians. One video, shot after the raid, contains pictures considered too horrific to be shown on public television: one shows the body of a woman with her face entirely burned away, another shows a dead child with a hole in his face. Other pictures, marginally less horrific, include a close-up shot of a pile of bodies lying in the street, their flesh punctured with fragments from cluster bombs, and pictures of survivors with large areas of skin burned away; in some cases the raw flesh covering the entire back.

Massawa is a town with clearly separated docks, commercial and residential quarters, and the town itself lies some distance away from the military installations. The bombers flew low, at a height of a few hundred feet. They deliberately targeted the residential areas of the town, and attacked at an hour calculated to cause the maximum number of casualties among civilians.

This series of raids also used demolition bombs, and did severe damage to warehouses and other port installations, as well as destroying more than 100 houses. Parachutes were used

⁹ Quoted in: A Fight to the Death.

to slow down the bombs' descent to ensure that they detonated at the correct moment. By this time, several offensives by the Ethiopian army aimed at retaking Massawa had failed, and it is probable that the bombing raids were now intended to destroy the port entirely. A woman resident of Massawa, Fatna Ari, commented "whenever Mengistu realizes that he is defeated he kills people with aeroplanes."¹⁰

On May 1, the Ethiopian government threatened to bomb any ship that docked in the port, forcing the ship chartered by Cap Anamur with its relief cargo to be diverted to Port Sudan.

On June 3, the question of famine in Ethiopia was raised at the Washington summit. Under pressure from the super-powers, the Ethiopian government conceded that Massawa could be used for relief deliveries. However, before this was officially announced on June 5, another air raid took place. Raids in the Massawa area continued until June 10. An EPLF spokesman responded: "the port facilities have been virtually destroyed by air raids ... I don't think Massawa could operate as a port for many months."¹¹ After early June, there were few air attacks on Massawa: one occurred on September 4 and another on October 24, in which one child was killed. These raids were probably carried out in order to demonstrate to the aid donors that any relief would be delivered to Massawa on the government's terms, or not at all.

The capture of Massawa by the EPLF also led to the government unleashing air attacks on other towns and villages in Eritrea. Some of the attacks included:

- * April 3: Afabet: 16 killed, 24 wounded.
- * April 4: Afabet: 51 killed, 125 seriously wounded.
- * April 17: Afabet: no fatalities.
- * May 21: Afabet: two killed.
- * September 13: Gedged: two wounded.
- * September 17 and 21: Matalili: no casualties, but several fishing boats destroyed.
- * September 22: Haicota: no casualties.
- * October 3: Koatit: no casualties.
- * October 11: Adi Ma'alim: three wounded.

¹⁰ Quoted in: A Fight to the Death.

¹¹ Quoted in: The Guardian, London, June 7, 1990.

- * October 14: Tikombia: three wounded.
- * October 14; Mai Shiro: three killed, one wounded.
- * October 16: Godeiti: two children killed.

The Siege of Asmara

The fall of Massawa led to the government being confined to Asmara and the surrounding area. The state of siege lasted until the defeat and surrender of the garrison on May 25, 1991. The siege witnessed the development of famine conditions in the enclave, which will be discussed in chapter 16. It also saw many abuses against civilians committed by the army and administration.

Placing Civilians in Danger

One abuse against civilians was a systematic attempt to retain them in and around the battle zones. This first occurred shortly after the fall of Massawa, when the army made a series of attempts to recapture the port by attacking from Ghinda, which lies half way between Asmara and Massawa. All the attempts failed. On March 11-13, the army prevented the civilian inhabitants from evacuating Ghinda, so that their continued presence would provide a human shield for the army and deter EPLF artillery barrages. When it became impossible to live in Ghinda, many residents had to move to caves and other makeshift shelters nearby. Elsewhere in the enclave, the army also prevented civilians from leaving villages near the front line to go to Asmara, or removed them only a short distance. For instance, the people displaced from Massawa who tried to travel to Asmara were confined to Nefasit, just behind the front line at Ghinda.

Killings

The army continued to kill civilians on frequent occasions, though no massacres on the scale of Sheib occurred -- almost certainly because the army was no longer able to penetrate into EPLF-controlled territory.

The worst single incident occurred on June 9, 1990. A group of soldiers left their military base and entered the city. They shot dead 31 youths and injured at least 15 more. The killings took place in several parts of the city as the youths were returning home from watching a televised World Cup soccer match at Kidane Mehret in the city center. They were shot in the

street and in the doorways of houses, just before the curfew hour. Other incidents include:

- * August 9: Hagaz, near Keren: two mothers killed.
- * Late August: Decamhare: about 20 peasant farmers were summarily shot by the army during a military engagement with the EPLF.
- * September 12: Asmara: soldiers shot dead 16 civilians.
- * September 27: Keren: two civilians were killed when soldiers opened fire (they claimed they were shooting in the air, celebrating the Ethiopian New Year).
- * January 1991: Tsazega: a girl of 12 was shot by soldiers while they were allegedly training.
- * January 18: Anseba: a girl of 16 was killed by soldiers with a knife while resisting attempts to rape her.
- * February 7: Adi Garma: two killed by soldiers.
- * February: Girgir, near Keren: two elderly women were killed by soldiers, one shot and one strangled.
- * March 28: Adi Quala: one man was killed by soldiers while returning from market.
- * April 3: Sheikha Wadi Bisserat: one was killed by soldiers.

Detentions and Restrictions

Another abuse against civilians was detention under the emergency powers given to the overall administrator. Civilians were arrested and detained on the slightest suspicion of sympathizing with the EPLF. Some were detained simply so that officials could obtain bribes for their release.¹² Some detainees were killed in prison. For example, on April 9, ten were executed in Mariam Ghimbi prison in retaliation for the EPLF assassination of the prison governor. One of those killed was Tsehay Gebremedhin, an employee of SEDAO Electric company.

Numerous restrictions were placed on civilians in Asmara and the other towns of the enclave. A curfew was imposed from 9 p.m. until dawn -- later it was brought forward to sundown. During the hours of the curfew, people were liable to be shot on sight. On several

¹² For more details see: "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," News from Africa Watch, April 30, 1991.

occasions, citywide searches were made, as on December 21, 1990, and again on February 21, 1991. All people were stopped in the street and required to produce their identity cards. Numerous people were detained on both occasions, especially women who were not carrying their cards, and people who originated from Tigray.

The army prevented people from leaving Asmara. People who tried to leave on foot were subject to summary arrest and detention. If they could, people tried to leave by air. Ethiopian Airlines flights came irregularly, and stopped altogether after an airplane was hit by a shell while standing on the tarmac on April 26, 1991. The cost of a ticket plus all the requisite payments and bribes to obtain travel documents was prohibitively expensive for most.

The administration began to organize the civilian population into civil patrols. In rural areas, villagers were required to take on security functions, protecting roads, bridges and hillsides by mounting round-the-clock guards. They were required to report suspicious activity. Those who objected were detained and physically abused. In Asmara city, civil patrols were organized in February 1991. Each *kebele* was required to provide a guard for its neighborhood for four-and-a-half hours each night, and was held responsible for any suspicious activity during those hours. Civil patrollers were given no weapons, torches nor uniforms.

Shelling

The residents of the town were also at risk from shelling by the EPLF. Starting in March 1990, the EPLF began regular shelling aimed at the airport. The artillery was located at Bizen and Ala, some 30 kilometers away to the northeast.

The target of the shelling was the airport, and the apparent intention was to damage the military installations and aircraft there, and put the runway out of action. The shells damaged military transport planes, MiG fighter-bombers, a plane belonging to the RRC, airport installations, and an ammunition dump. Numerous soldiers were killed while leaving through the airport in April and May 1991. The airport was forced to close on several occasions on account of the shelling.

The shelling caused civilian casualties at the airport. In early January, 1991, three women were killed while waiting for an Ethiopian Airlines plane to Addis Ababa. On March 1, an airplane used for the relief airlift was hit while on the ground and one civilian was killed. An Ethiopian Airlines fuel tanker airplane was hit by a shell on March 22. On April 26, an Ethiopian Airlines passenger plane was hit by a shell and three passengers were killed.

The shelling also caused some civilian deaths in the town. In the first few days of the attacks, shells landed over a wide area, causing a number of civilian casualties, both from the blast directly and from fragments hurled over a large distance. After that, all the shells landed in

the airport and the neighboring two quarters of the town, Godaif and Sembel. The EPLF warned the residents of these areas to evacuate their homes, but not all did so, in part because of the fear that their houses would be requisitioned by the army. Between March and June 1990 about 60 civilians were killed in the town by the shelling and 100 houses were badly damaged.

In late August, the shelling caused its highest number of civilian casualties. On August 20, one child was killed in a tank and artillery bombardment of Akria, Arbate Asmara, Inderase and Gabriel Church quarters of the city. On August 25, 17 civilians were killed. In the two incidents, 20 were also injured. The government reported the incidents, acknowledging for the first time that the city was besieged by the EPLF.¹³ The EPLF, however, blamed the incidents on the government.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the government was indeed likely to be responsible -- certainly, residents of Asmara believed so. This was based on several considerations. One is that the source of the shelling was Balazar, to the north of the city; EPLF shelling came from the northeast. Second, the shells from the EPLF artillery took precisely sixteen seconds from firing to landing; these shells took less. Thirdly, the shells were of a different kind, and made a different sound.

¹³ AFP August 29, 1990.

Assassinations by the EPLF

Throughout the last years of the war, up until the weeks before the fall of Asmara, the EPLF continued to assassinate civilians accused of collaborating with the security forces. On average, the EPLF announced approximately one such assassination every two weeks in the last months of 1990 and the start of 1991. Victims included members of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, informers for the security forces, and the governor of the Mariam Ghimbi prison, who was accused of torturing detainees. According to the EPLF, the offenders were tried in absentia, and were warned twice to desist from their activities. If they refused to heed the warnings, an assassination squad was dispatched. This practice was criticized by Africa Watch.¹⁴

Eritrean Opposition to the EPLF

Throughout the 1980s the EPLF was the militarily dominant Eritrean military front. However, it faced competition from no fewer than nine rival fronts or political organizations. The Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF), headed by the veteran nationalist Osman Saleh Sabbe, split from the EPLF in 1975, and itself split in 1979, with the formation of the ELF-PLF-Revolutionary Council, headed by Osman Ajib. After Ajib's assassination, leadership was taken over by Abdel Gadir Jeilani, who is a Baathist who enjoyed patronage from Iraq. The ELF also split in 1977, with the formation of the Eritrean Democratic Movement (EDM) headed by Hiruy Tedla Bairu. In 1981 the ELF split into three factions, led by Abdalla Idris, Habte Tesfamariam and Giorgis Teklemichael. Personal rivalries were at least as important as ideological disputes in creating the factionalism. By 1991 the ELF organizations consisted of:

- * ELF-Revolutionary Council: headed by Ahmad Nasir, secular in orientation.
- * ELF-United Organization: headed by Omer Buraj, Islamic in orientation.
- * ELF: headed by Abdalla Idris, Islamic in orientation, with close ties to Sudanese security (commonly known as the "ELF-Abdalla").
- * ELF-PLF: headed by Abdel Gadir Jeilani, Baathist.
- * Eritrean Islamic Liberation Front ("Mujahideen"), headed by Ibrahim Ali, Islamic fundamentalist in orientation, and supported by the international Moslem Brothers and the Sudanese National Islamic Front.

¹⁴ News from Africa Watch, "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," April 30, 1991.

From late 1986 until about 1989, the ELF-Abdalla was involved in negotiations with the Mengistu government. According to the EPLF and rival ELF groups, the government provided military supplies. The ELF groups received support and sanctuary from the Sudan government, which also continued to support the EPLF.

In addition, there are Afar groups in favor of a united Afar territory and two non-combatant Eritrean organizations, both secular in orientation and headed by Christians:

- * Sagim ("Return"): headed by Tewolde Gebre Sellassie.
- * Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrea: headed by Gebre Berhan Zere.

Militarily, the most important of these organizations has been the ELF-Abdalla. Operating from bases around Kassala in Sudan, the ELF-Abdalla was involved in guerrilla attacks on the EPLF in southern Barka. The main activity was the planting of land mines (both anti-vehicle and anti-personnel) on roads and tracks used by the EPLF and ERA. Some of these mines were even planted inside Sudan, and in December 1989, Dr Lars Bondestam, a Swedish academic who had long experience of studying famine issues in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, was killed when his car struck a land mine inside Sudanese territory. In August 1989, there was a battle between the Mujahideen group and the EPLF close to the Sudan border, which involved an intervention by the Sudanese army to support the Mujahideen. Some military engagements have also occurred since the EPLF victory in May 1991.

The Fall of Asmara

In February 1991, the temporary lull in the war was broken with simultaneous offensives by the EPRDF into Gonder and Gojjam, and the EPLF into the Danakil towards Assab. In mid-May the EPLF also launched an assault on Decamhare, and captured the town on May 24. Army reinforcements sent from Asmara were surrounded and captured, leaving the road open towards Asmara. The garrison at Asmara surrendered the following day.

Throughout the siege of Asmara the residents of the town had feared a repeat of the massive bloodshed that had accompanied the ELF-EPLF attack on the city in January 1975. Ethiopian military commanders had also warned that Asmara would only be captured as a ruin. The air force had shown its willingness to bomb major towns such as Massawa and Meqele. These fears deterred an EPLF assault until the air force bases at Bahir Dar and Debre Zeit had been captured -- the latter on May 24. By this time, fear of EPLF reprisals deterred army atrocities. To the great relief of all Eritreans, the city was captured intact, without either widespread destruction or loss of civilian life.

Most of the other garrisons in Eritrea followed immediately, with a significant

exception. A large contingent of the Keren and Asmara garrisons decided to fight its way out to Sudan. This included about 75,000 soldiers, some family members, and some high-ranking members of the administration and security forces. They left Keren on the Agordat road, and fought with EPLF units at Barentu and on the road to Sudan. There are no accounts of them attacking civilians. More than one thousand soldiers died; mostly in action, but some on account of thirst. About 14,000 soldiers arrived in Sudan seeking asylum over the following few days. In total, the EPLF captured 82,000 prisoners of war and 44,000 dependents.