

15. ARMED DECISION: THE NORTH, 1988-91

In Tigray, the year 1988 was the most savage in the entire history of the war. Atrocities were committed on an unprecedented scale by both army and air force. Many of the government actions were designed to reduce the population to a state of famine, such as the deliberate killing of oxen, burning of grain stores, and bombing of REST food convoys. This came on the heels of a drought in the summer of 1987. However, the number of war- and drought-displaced people never approached the scale of 1983-5. The reason for the failure of drought and war to result in famine was largely because the government was restricted to the towns and main roads in a way that had not been the case previously, and military action in the countryside was shortlived. The restrictions on movement and trade that had been so devastating four years earlier were no longer so effectively enforced because of the reduced government presence.

After three years of cool relations, the TPLF and EPLF began to coordinate their military activities again in April 1988.

In January 1989, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was formed by the TPLF and EPDM. Two new organizations were added: the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM), which consisted largely of captured officers from the Ethiopian army, and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), which was formed from among the Oromo of the Wollo escarpment and Oromo prisoners of war. The formation of the OPDO reflected and deepened a split between the TPLF-EPRDF and the OLF.

In February 1989, the TPLF-EPRDF occupied all of Tigray save one small garrison. Six months later it struck southwards, right into Shewa. During 1990, the EPRDF concentrated on consolidating its gains, and in early 1991 launched three offensives in quick succession which finally destroyed the army and government of President Mengistu.

May 1988: The Army in Disarray

Following the EPLF victory at the battle of Afabet, the TPLF quickly succeeded in overrunning many garrisons in Tigray, including Enda Selassie, Axum, Adwa, Adigrat, Wukro, and Maichew. Government troops also withdrew from other areas.

In Enda Selassie, the retreating troops destroyed the town's electricity generator, which had been built by public subscription of 500,000 Birr in 1985. At the town's health center, the

staff were ordered to load all the equipment and medicines on to trucks, which were then set on fire.

Retreating government troops committed a number of atrocities against the civilian population, including the forcible evacuation and burning of Farda village, in Raya district, on May 14.

The TPLF advance was followed by a number of punitive air raids. The raid on Wukro which coincided with food distribution by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been described in chapter 11. Wukro was bombed on two other occasions. Other raids were carried out on Axum, Hausien, and other towns and villages. Korem was bombed on May 26, when people had gathered for a food distribution; there were 24 casualties reported.

The Bombing Campaign of June 1988

On June 1, the government counter-offensive was launched. The first stage was a bombing campaign of unprecedented severity. Some of the bombing raids included:

- * June 8 and 10: Seqota: four people killed or wounded, 71 houses destroyed, and the church of Endagabriel badly damaged.
- * June 10: Amdo: five people killed, including a mother and child.
- * June 12: Dejena: REST food convoy bombed twice.
- * June 14 and 15: Samre: in two raids, 17 people killed and one third of the town destroyed.
- * June 16: Ruba Kaza, Tsegede: no human casualties, but 24 domestic animals killed.
- * June 18: Samre: casualties not reported.
- * June 19: Enda Selassie: casualties not reported.
- * June 19: Dande, Raya district: 29 killed, 74 houses destroyed.
- * June 20: Abi Adi: four killed.
- * June 20: Sheraro: two attacks, casualties not known.
- * June 21: Enda Selassie and surrounding areas: casualties not known.
- * June 22: Hausien was destroyed; an estimated 1,800 marketgoers were killed (see below).

- * June 22: Samre and seven surrounding villages were badly damaged.
- * June 22: Abi Adi attacked:
 "Two MiGs circled over the town and killed a pair of oxen that were ploughing a field just outside the town. The farmer escaped, but one woman was killed and four others wounded."¹
- * June 25: Enticho: 21 killed, seven buildings destroyed.
- * June 25: Mai Kenetal: three killed or wounded.
- * June 27: Atsbi: four killed, eight wounded, 109 houses burned, some animals also killed.
- * July 1: Adi Ramaz: casualties not known.
- * July 2: Mai Humer: casualties not known.
- * July 3: Adi Daro: casualties not known.
- * July 3: Sheraro: casualties not known.
- * July 3: Edaga Habriet: casualties not known.
- * July 8: Sheshebite: casualties not known.

Bombing attacks continued, albeit less regularly, in the following months. No air raids causing more than ten fatalities have been confirmed for the months July-December 1988, but many caused smaller numbers of deaths. An unknown number were killed when 98 houses were destroyed in Adi Hageray on August 19; eight were killed in Sheraro on December 12.

¹ Woreda Teka, farmer, trader and member of Abi Adi haito, interviewed by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, November 16, 1988.

The Destruction of Hausien

The air raid on Hausien on Wednesday, June 22, 1988, was the most savage on record in Ethiopia during the three decades covered by this report. Hausien was a market town in north-eastern Tigray. The market attracted people from all parts of the province, and from as far away as Eritrea and Gondar. On a normal market day the town was packed with several thousand people, coming to trade in animals, grain, salt, coffee, and other commodities. Though Hausien was attacked eight times in mid-1988, the residents did not consider themselves to be at serious risk from air attack, because the area was not controlled by the TPLF, and most of the market-goers came from areas controlled by the government.² Unlike the practice in TPLF-controlled areas, the weekly Wednesday market therefore continued to be held during daylight hours.

The following account is reconstructed from the interviews conducted by two visitors to Tigray, Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann.³ Though the interviews were conducted in November 1988, the memory of the atrocity remained fresh in people's minds.

The bombing started in the late morning and continued until nightfall, following a carefully coordinated plan.

Blata Aragabi, a 57-year old farmer recounted the day:

It was Wednesday, and I was in the market square. At about 10 o'clock in the morning two helicopters came low overhead and circled for about an hour. An hour later they came back with two MiGs. They circled for a while and then bombed the market area, which was packed with people, and animals waiting to be sold. Apart from the market square itself, there was also a big animal market in the old school compound. The MiGs concentrated on the markets: no-one could have stayed alive in those areas. Meanwhile the two helicopters circled round trapping people as they tried to escape, cutting them down like leaves.⁴

[The bombing] started at 11 in the morning and went on until about 4 p.m. [at this point another man said it was later -- 5.30 p.m. -- and Blata agreed]⁵; almost until it got dark. Each time the MiGs and the helicopters had finished bombing they went away, and

² The fact that eight attacks warranted consideration as below average risk indicates the intensity of the bombing campaign. Only a small minority of the attacks are mentioned in this report.

³ They are reproduced in Sarah Vaughan, "Extracts from a Report on a Visit to Tigray, October 18 - December 13, 1988," London, War on Want, and Gerry McCann, "Between Heaven and Hell," Observer Scotland, April 16, 1989.

⁴ Hausien is in a valley and there are only two roads out of the town, so it is easy to seal off with just two helicopters.

⁵ Other informants said that the bombing finished at 6 p.m.

more kept coming, two by two. I don't know how many times new planes came; because of all the dust it was dark and people were crying all around me. It seemed to be about every half hour or so that they would leave, and there would be a few minutes interval. People would come out of where they were trying to shelter and pick up the bodies thinking it was all over. Then the planes would return.

The bombers used high explosives and cluster bombs; the helicopters used machine guns and rockets. Survivors were particularly disturbed by the "burning liquid" which fell from the airplanes, presumably napalm or phosphorous. "A," a priest, aged 41, described the scene:

It was so dark, the smoke hung over the town as if it were night. People were crying, confused, and hysterical. There was something that fell from the sky, like rubber, but it burned your flesh.... There was a lot of blood in the market place. So many animals were killed by being burned or poisoned. I don't know what the poison was but it was something that burned them. Those of us who were left wouldn't even eat the carcasses, or have them near our houses.

Blata again:

[In the market] most of the people and cattle were being burned by something that seemed like rubber. It burned as it dropped off the sky, and didn't cut like metal does.

A cluster bomb remained unexploded in the schoolyard after the raid and was photographed by Gerry McCann. It was unfortunately impossible to ascertain its origin.

Most people sheltered in houses, but the bombers turned on these too, using high explosives. When the day finished, there was scarcely a building left standing.

Iqar Gebre Giorgis, a woman beer-seller:

I was selling *sewa* (local beer) in my house. Market day is always a good day for selling beer, and there were about 20-30 people in the house. I had my 13 year old daughter Negisti with me. When the bombing started we thought the safest thing would be to stay inside. They only seemed to be bombing the immediate area of the market. Soon, though, they started on the houses, and mine was hit. The roof on my house was not the usual tin, but wooden with heavy beams. The whole roof caved in, and the walls came down too. There was one woman who escaped being buried. She was crying and digging at the rubble, and she managed to dig out a man who had been buried up to his neck. Eventually the two of them dug me out, though I was buried from noon until 3 o'clock. We were the only three who survived from my house. Negisti died along with everyone else. Some of them we managed to dig out that evening were still conscious, but they died soon after. They were all farmers or traders, some from Hausien, some from the villages around. I knew most of them quite well; I can remember about half of them by name.

Haile Geresadie, a poor farmer aged 18:

[The bombing] started in the morning, and I was at the animal market with my parents and grandparents. The animal market was full of people and donkeys, but we ran as quickly as we could into the nearest house. The house was bombed, and out of about 20 people there were only three of us [who] survived. We were on the side furthest from where the bomb landed. My parents and grandparents were all killed. [The others] were

just farmers and traders who ran in from the animal market. Some of them are still buried there.

I am always thinking about my parents, and often I just can't stop. Sometimes it is very difficult to get to sleep because it is always in my mind.

Zimam Hamenur, a woman spice trader:

All six of my family were in our house when it started, and we stayed there all day. After several hours a bomb came through the window and hit my daughter Fatima. Everyone else was unhurt but her right hand was cut off. Even then we stayed in the house -- we were too frightened to go out, and we just sat and cried round my daughter.

After nightfall when the bombers had left, people contemplated the aftermath. The true number killed in the bombing will never be known. At first the TPLF claimed that 360 were killed, and 500 buildings destroyed, including nine stores, 15 shops, and a mosque. Later estimates by the TPLF were higher: 600 fatalities, then 750, finally an "official" figure of 1,300. Africa Watch believes that these figures are all underestimates. Most of the people attending the market in Hausien came from other places, so there was no list of the people present on June 22, and many of the dead and injured were quickly removed to their home villages. Some bodies remained buried in the rubble of buildings months later. According to the testimonies of the people of Hausien, the number of fatalities was as high as 1,800 or even 2,000.

Blata again, in response to the question of how many were killed:

You can't count grains of sand. Even now, six months later,⁶ we are still finding bodies. The last one was on Friday week: we found the head of a man and buried it. I heard from the [TPLF] fighters that thousands were killed, and a Dergue radio broadcast said that they had killed 3,000 bandits at Hausien.⁷ We buried between 100 and 200 in the churchyard, but there were also lots of bits of bodies -- heads and limbs -- and people took many of the corpses back to be buried in their own villages. ... People came here from different parts of the country, from Eritrea, from Wollo, for the market day.

Priests are responsible for burying the Christian dead, and so have a better idea than most people about the extent of the carnage. From priests "A" and "B":

As soon as the MiGs went away everybody started to work together to dig the bodies out of the rubble and bury the dead. We buried as many as we could immediately that night.

The task of digging through the stones went on for over a month... [Asked: how many bodies do you think are still buried?] We could estimate the number that were found, but have no idea about those who were not. They came from Sheraro and from all over the region. In every *tabia* [village cluster] or village you go to in this area you will hear that 40, 60 or 80 people were killed. Those from farther afield are harder to count.

⁶ The interview was conducted on November 20, which was in fact just under five months after the bombing.

⁷ No government broadcast concerning Hausien was published by the BBC Monitoring Service, so Africa Watch has been unable to check this.

An elderly man estimated that in the ruins of a hotel and a row of shops on one side of the market place, there were 250 bodies still remaining. Priest A gave his estimate:

I think about 1,800 were killed in total, when you include those who were taken back to their villages. There were probably another 1,000 wounded, and some of them may have died later. We buried 150 just in this churchyard, but many were too badly cut up for burial, or are buried just where they died. There were many priests killed, from Eritrea, Tembien, Adwa, even from Wollo. Sometimes as many as 10,000 people gather here for market day. No one can count the destruction of cattle and grain and money and all the property that was buried.

Not all bodies could be buried, or even identified. Haile again:

I couldn't bury [my family members] because they were burned away to ash. There was only one body that could be brought out [of the bombed house, in which about 17 people died], and even that woman was very badly burned.

Kesi Gebre Hiwet, a farmer and priest aged 54, came to Hausien the night after the attack. He spent the night digging people out of the ruins, and estimated the casualties at 2,000 dead and 800 wounded.

We found so many corpses, we went on digging until morning. Whilst we were digging we found dismembered hands and feet, but couldn't find the bodies they came from. In the morning we started to bury the dead and brought the wounded away. Four of those whom we brought back to this *tabia* died after two days.

Medical facilities are poor and many of the wounded died later. Coping with the injuries was a major problem. Zimam Hamenur needed to find treatment for her 15 year old daughter Fatima, whose hand had been cut off:

The next morning we and some neighbors carried Fatima to Nebelet; I had heard previously from some fighters that there was a clinic there. The TPLF gave her infusions and bandaged her, and kept her there for a month. They wanted to take her to Tsai where there was better treatment, but on the way we heard that the enemy was coming so we decided to go to Wukro instead. We were quite frightened of going to a government town but to help my daughter's hand we had to take the risk.

I had to come back to Hausien to look after everyone else, and Fatima stayed in Wukro. We have a message to say she is better now, and we are expecting her back at any time. A while ago someone took my youngest daughter Neehma to see her sister in Wukro. She was very upset and cried whenever she thought about her sister. She used to wake up in the night crying.

There are reports that some injured victims were denied admission to government hospitals.

Many of the survivors were deeply traumatized by the bombing and will probably suffer from psychiatric disturbances such as post-traumatic stress disorder for the remainder of their lives. Tsehai Geredche, a woman aged about 30, lost her husband in the attack and spent many

hours partly buried in the rubble. She was six months pregnant at the time.

After I was dug out I was delirious for some time -- I have been told it was for about three weeks. All I can remember is that I had a pain in my legs and that I was very frightened I had lost the baby. I think I was feverish. It wasn't for quite a few weeks I could take in what had happened, and think about what to do. The six other children were all safe, and also the baby; as you see, I gave birth two months ago. My husband was buried at the church.

The evidence of eye witnesses suggests that about 1,800 innocent men, women and children were deliberately killed in Hausien by aerial bombardment. Many others were severely injured and maimed, or psychologically traumatized. Apart from the scale of the carnage, what makes Hausien a particularly brutal atrocity is the systematic nature of the attack. It required careful planning to arrange for a succession of MiGs and helicopters to be present at Hausien, far away from the nearest airfield, in coordinated shifts throughout an entire day.

The motive for bombing Hausien can only have been terrorism against the people of Tigray, in part revenge for the military successes of the TPLF over the previous months, and in part "softening them up" for the government offensive. Hausien was probably selected as a target because, not being in a rebel-controlled area, the market still met during daylight, and there were no TPLF fighters in the area with anti-aircraft artillery to make an attack dangerous. It had no military significance.

The Summer 1988 Counter-Offensive

The ground offensive started simultaneously with the bombing campaign, with the troops moving in to towns and villages a few days after air strikes. After some fierce fighting in north Wollo on the opening days of the attack, the TPLF stuck to its strategy of not holding territory, and allowed the government troops to reoccupy most of the towns on the main roads, and to pass through others. The army quickly moved from Woldiya to Korem through the Amba Alage pass. On June 4, soldiers attacked Harako village nearby: five civilians were killed and three wounded, 77 houses were burned.⁸ Another force moved south from Meqele to retake Maichew. On June 4-5, the soldiers burned six villages near Meqele (Adi Gera, Gobozena, Grarot, Rabea, Issala and Bahri), and on June 7, a further two villages were destroyed (Mai Wewe and Adi Guguad). Casualties in these atrocities are not known. After re-occupying the main towns of southern Tigray and northern Wollo, the army then moved into central Tigray, occupying Abi Adi.

On June 24, a large number of infantry -- three brigades -- came through the town.

⁸ The following account owes much to information compiled by Barbara Hendrie.

There was a large battle at Hagerai Selam, and Dergi⁹ was going to Adwa retaking the towns. No-one was killed, but they stole or destroyed a lot of property. A lot of goats were taken, and when they found oxen they would just cut off one leg, or cut out the liver without even killing the animals. They collected people's [farm] tools together and destroyed them. I lost 400 Birr and some of my furniture. From Abi Adi Dergi went on to Mai Kenetal.¹⁰

Government forces pushed north, taking Wukro, Adigrat, Adwa and Axum and then attacked western Tigray, taking Selekleka and Enda Selassie in early July. Another army column moved north from Gonder. However, the TPLF regrouped and finally engaged the army in Shire and north Gonder in July, and defeated it.

On a number of occasions, government troops killed civilians. The following incidents have been reliably reported:

- * June 28 and 29: Adwa: 50 people killed, including 19 bayoneted and thrown over a cliff.
- * June 29: Hagerai Selam and surrounding villages: 341 peasants killed.
- * July 5: Netsege: 30 farmers burned in their houses by soldiers, 60 houses destroyed.
- * July 5: Hagerai Selam: an unknown number killed.
- * July 6: Mai Mekden: ten killed, three wounded, 25 houses burned.
- * July 20: near Maichew: a young girl thrown to her death over a cliff.
- * July 31: Adi Nebrid: 15 people killed, one wounded.
- * August 2: Kelish Emni: 13 people killed, two wounded, three houses burned, seven tonnes of grain destroyed.
- * August 9: Bahra and Senkata: many people beaten, two recently married couples taken away, four women raped.
- * August 9: Adigrat: seven women raped.
- * August 16: Mai Mado: five people killed, one wounded, 22 houses burned, grain stores emptied and the grain mixed with soil, many animals killed.
- * August 29: Adi Hagerai: 23 killed, 193 injured; the dead included five children

⁹ Tigrayans often refer to the Dergue in the first person singular.

¹⁰ Woreda Teka, farmer, trader and member of Abi Adi haito, interviewed by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, November 16, 1988.

deliberately burned, and many of the injured were cut and mutilated with knives.

By the end of August, large-scale military action had ceased, but army patrols continued to be routinely brutal. In October, at Tselessi Bit and Selekleka, 20 people were killed in five separate incidents, including people locked in their houses and then burned alive.

The bombing and ground offensive caused an estimated 60,000 people to be displaced from their homes by the end of July.

In the ground offensive, the army used mass columns of conscripts to attack TPLF positions. On at least one occasion, this amounted to mass slaughter. On July 7, an army column advanced north from its base at Dansha in north Gonder, straight into an ambush laid by the TPLF. The conscripts were in the vanguard: they were caught in a heavily-mined valley with TPLF fighters in the hills on both sides. Which ever way they turned they were cut down by gunfire or blown up by land mines. The TPLF claimed that nearly 3,000 were killed, wounded or captured. TPLF fighters later spoke of their distaste at the carnage. They said that in later engagements TPLF tactics changed, and concentrated on destroying the command unit in a military force.

The months from September to December 1988 were relatively quiet in Tigray, north Gonder and north Wollo, though intermittent bombing continued. For example, on September 8, Nebelet was bombed and several houses burned.

The Government Evacuation of Tigray, February-March 1989

In January 1989, the TPLF began to take the offensive, at first in north Gonder, and then in western Tigray. In a series of battles between February 15 and 20, a joint TPLF-EPLF force captured Selekleka and then Enda Selassie. The fronts claimed that 26,000 soldiers were put out of action, and it was certainly the government's worst defeat since Afabet. The army evacuated Humera (on the Sudan border) and Adigrat, and on February 27-28, the provincial capital, Meqele, was abandoned, leaving the government with only an outpost at Maichew. In effect, all of Tigray was under TPLF control.

The TPLF was stunned by the unexpected evacuation of Meqele and waited for three days before entering the town.

In each of the three towns of Enda Selassie, Adigrat and Meqele, the army and government officials caused widespread destruction before they left. In Meqele, on February 26, two army tanks shelled the electricity generating station, destroying completely five huge generators, each capable of producing one megawatt of power. Bedding and instruments from the hospitals were systematically looted by soldiers. Residents of the town looted many furnishings.

At 11 a.m. on March 21, airplanes bombed the generator at Enda Selassie, inflicting some damage. One woman was killed. Other raids included:

- * March 26: Humera: casualties not known.
- * March 26: Adwa: casualties not known.
- * March 27: Adwa: casualties not known; a rare example of a night attack.
- * March 30: Axum: three killed.

Punitive Patrols in the Tcheffa Valley

The success of the TPLF (now part of the newly-formed EPRDF) in taking control of all of Tigray was matched by less spectacular but equally significant progress in its penetration into more southerly areas of Wollo. This began to ignite disputes that had lain dormant, because until it became clear that the government was losing control, subjugated people had not dared to challenge the government's authority. The army responded to these local disputes and threats in a punitive manner. An example of this comes from the Tcheffa Valley in southern Wollo and northern Shewa.

The Tcheffa valley is a grazing area for Oromo and Afar pastoralists and drought refuge for all groups, including Amhara farmers from the highlands. In 1986, during villagization, Amhara highlanders were settled in the valley and piedmont. The new villagers complained of mosquitoes and that they were being settled in a grazing area, that was not appropriate for farming, and that this would upset the pastoralists. The government paid no attention.

During 1987/88 there was drought in the lowlands, and the Afars penetrated to the valley, leading to some armed clashes. The situation deteriorated during 1989, due to continued drought in the eastern lowlands and the presence of the EPRDF around Dessie and the perception that the government was losing control.

The Amhara farmers wanted to return to the highlands, the Oromo natives became increasingly militant, but a series of negotiations came to nothing. In March 1989, a party of armed Oromo horsemen came to Fursi sub-district. They clashed with the Amhara farmers (who had a militia), and eight were killed (on both sides). A rumor spread throughout northern Shewa that "the Oromo are rising in rebellion." The army was sent to pacify the area, arriving a few days later. The army mission became a punitive expedition. The soldiers went and hunted and killed as many Oromo as they could find. Only Oromo were killed.

Under the guise of preventing EPRDF activity and keeping the peace, the army occupied Oromo villages. They controlled all Oromo movements and demanded food from the villagers.

There were numerous small incidents of killings and woundings of Oromo civilians in marketplaces, at wells and on roads. This continued until October 1989. Over 200 Oromo are estimated to have been killed.

The EPRDF Southern Offensive, Late 1989

In late August 1989, as the government prepared an offensive into southern Tigray, the EPRDF struck first. By September 8, EPRDF forces had captured Maichew and Korem and were advancing along the main highway in Wollo. In October, Woldiya was captured and Dessie was almost taken, and in November, the advance guard of the EPRDF penetrated into northern Shewa. In late December, EPRDF forces captured the town of Debre Tabor in southern Gonder, to be driven out by the army a month later.

There were, as always, numerous bombing attacks on sites throughout northern Wollo and Tigray. The following have been reliably reported:

- * September 9: Chercher, Tigray: the marketplace was bombed and strafed; 148 people were killed and about 100 wounded.
- * September 9: Gobye, Wollo: one killed.
- * September 10: Gobye, Wollo: 21 killed, 100 wounded (market day).
- * September 12: Gerarsa, Tigray: four wounded.
- * September 19: Raya, Wollo: no fatalities reported.
- * September 20: Kulmelsk, Tigray: three killed.
- * September 22: Axum, Tigray: two killed, eight wounded.
- * September 25: Tekezze Bridge, Tigray: three killed.
- * October 15-November 2: Kobo, Wollo: four attacks. Casualties not known, but the clinic was strafed by helicopter gunships.
- * October 27 and 29: Meqele, Tigray: 31 killed in the first attack.
- * November 5: Adwa, Tigray: no fatalities reported, two trucks destroyed.
- * November 15: Zalembesa, Tigray: 14 wounded.
- * November 21: Sheraro, Tigray: 31 killed, 60 wounded.
- * December 27: Adwa, Tigray: four wounded.
- * January 1, 1990: Adi Nebried, Tigray: two wounded in a church.

The attacks on Meqele town deserve special mention. They were significant because

they showed that the government was prepared to attack a major Ethiopian city, a provincial headquarters and former imperial capital (1871-89). The city was more than a hundred miles behind the front line and had no military importance. It was also an unusual attack because news of it filtered back to Addis Ababa and caused widespread, though muted, public outrage.

The Meqele attack caused many residents to leave the town. The hospital was evacuated during daylight hours, with all patients returning at nightfall for medical attention. Even at night, no electric light was used for fear of attracting the attention of overflying high-altitude Antonov planes, which were occasionally used for bombing at night.

For the first time, there was also widespread bombing in Gonder and central Wollo. Some of the raids included:

- * November 13: Kara Mishig, Shewa: one killed, 25 houses destroyed.
- * November 15: Tenta, Wollo: no fatalities reported.
- * November 16: Degollo, Wollo-Shewa border: no fatalities reported.
- * November 16 and 17: Woldiya, Wollo: no fatalities reported.
- * January 4, 1990: Tenta, Wollo: two killed.
- * January 10: Wurgessa, Wollo: one woman killed, five houses destroyed.
- * January 13: Nefas Maucha, Gonder: 23 killed.
- * January 23: Deha, Wollo: seven killed.
- * January 25: near Debre Tabor, Gonder: 15 killed while sheltering in a storm drain under a road.
- * January 28: Isitayoh, Wollo: 40 killed (most of them in the church of Kidane Mehrat).
- * January 29: Wegel Tena, Wollo: two killed.

The army was mostly in retreat during these months. There was widespread looting in several towns, including Kobo and Dessie, but fewer reported incidents of attacks on civilians. One incident occurred on September 17, at Gobyeh in north Wollo, when at least one civilian was killed in an army rocket attack, which destroyed four houses. The same day at Zaremma, nearby, two civilians were killed by soldiers.

The EPRDF treatment of the civilian population during this offensive appears to have been remarkably good. EPRDF fighters and cadres were reported as entering villages and telling the inhabitants that they would not be harmed and their possessions would be respected. They took inventories of commercial and private stores in the towns they occupied to prevent

looting. No incidents of violence against civilians have been reliably reported.

Relative Quiet: February 1990-February 1991

In the twelve months from February 1990, there were no major offensives by the EPRDF. There was more-or-less continual skirmishing in north Shewa and southern Gonder, but the only major battle was a failed assault by the army at Alem Ketena in June. It was, overall, a remarkably quiet year in terms of abuses against civilians by the army. This is probably because the army was now fighting in mainly Amhara areas, and the officer class of the army, which is dominated by the Amhara, was less willing to sanction abuses against other Amhara than against Tigrayans, Oromos, Somalis and others. The pattern of abuses is more akin the result of a breakdown in morale and discipline than to deliberately-planned mass killings. However, a number of incidents warrant mention.

In March 1990, the army first evacuated and then re-entered Bahir Dar after a battle with the EPRDF. On re-entering the town, soldiers killed an estimated 50 civilians. According to some accounts, the soldiers were drunk and ill-disciplined.

Between March 15 and April 7, in Dessie town, soldiers killed 16 civilians, including two children. On at least some of the occasions, the soldiers were off-duty and had been drinking.

Another incident occurred in June. Members of the army garrison at Melkawarer in the Awash valley of northern Shewa became involved in a dispute with the local Afar inhabitants. The origin of the dispute is unknown but is rumored to be related to chat¹¹ chewing. Over 20 Afar civilians were killed in the fight that resulted.

If these and other similar incidents could be described as occurring without official sanction, the same cannot be said of the continuing air raids against civilian targets. Some of the raids included:

- * March 28, 1990: Wire Ilu, Wollo: grain stockpile burned.
- * May 2: Rama, Wollo-Shewa border: two killed.
- * May 2: Alem Ketena, Shewa: four killed.
- * May: Merhabete, Shewa: casualties not known.
- * May 5 and 9: Kolesh and Ambat, Shewa: six killed.

¹¹ Chat is a mildly narcotic leaf widely grown and chewed in Ethiopia.

- * May 11: Kinche, Shewa: 21 killed.
- * June 10: Ticha, Shewa: 23 killed.
- * June 23: Adi Abun, near Adwa, Tigray: one wounded.
- * August 1: Zinjero, Wollo: no casualties reported.
- * October 5 and 14: Meki, Wollo: five killed, six wounded.
- * October 19: Mehal Meda, Shewa: four killed, five wounded.
- * October 22: Temsa, Wollo: a family of eight killed, ten others wounded.
- * November 7: Woldiya, Wollo: one killed, one wounded, and relief offices burned.
- * November 7: Kul Mesk, Wollo: seven killed, eight wounded.
- * November 27 and 29: REST stores near Sudan border bombed and strafed: 3,000-4,000 metric tonnes of grain burned.
- * December 27: Woldiya, Wollo: nine killed, close to a relief store.
- * February 13, 1991: Debre Tabor, Gonder: two killed, ten wounded.

Operation Teodros

On February 23, 1991, the year of relative quiet came to an end, when the EPRDF announced "Operation Teodros," aimed at destroying the army in Gonder and Gojjam. The announcement of the launch of the offensive, its aims and timetable, showed an increased confidence by the EPRDF. The EPRDF clandestine radio also instructed the citizens of the towns in Gonder and Gojjam to guard the civilian infrastructure of their towns to prevent looting, such as had occurred in Meqele before its capture.

One factor that assisted the EPRDF offensive was the growing alienation of the local people from the government. This was related to the heavy conscription campaigns of the previous year, and the disarming of the local militia in western Gojjam following a revolt in March-April 1990, coinciding with the abandonment of the villagization program.

Within a fortnight Operation Teodros achieved its aims. The offensive was so swift that there was little chance for the army to undertake reprisals against civilians, though two incidents deserve mention.

One incident was the systematic execution of prisoners in Gonder town during the three

days before its capture. Most of those killed were Tigrayans detained in the town's prison for suspected sympathies with the EPRDF, and the executions appear to be an act of pre-emptive vengeance. Jenny Hammond, a British writer who visited the town the day after its capture by the EPRDF, spoke to townspeople who reported that about 120 detainees had been killed, and the executions of 100 or so more had been scheduled for the day of the EPRDF takeover. Later, Ms Hammond met Dawit Berhane, a Tigrayan merchant who had spent three years in prison on charges relating to alleged irregularities in obtaining a truck license. Dawit related how 19 of his cellmates (17 of them Tigrayans) were taken out and executed the day before the town fell. Dawit himself was scheduled for execution, but the official authorization mistakenly had his father's name made out as "Berhe", so he was sent back to his cell for another day while this administrative error was rectified. Due to be executed at 6:00 p.m., he was released by the EPRDF at 4:00 p.m. Dawit believed that 300 detainees had been executed in the final days, and said that during the previous three years over 3,400 people had been executed in the prison, 90 per cent of them Tigrayans.

A second incident was the long-distance shelling of Dejen town in Gojjam on April 16, after its capture, in which six people were killed.

The EPRDF advance brought it into conflict with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which had an armed presence in western Gojjam (see chapter 18).

In the aftermath of the offensive, the EPRP and the government made a number of allegations about killings, detentions and looting by EPRDF forces. One incident was the killing of three senior government officials, including a security chief and a military commander, by peasants.¹² Reports indicate that the officials and their armed escort opened fire on the peasants, and were killed in the ensuing battle. Other alleged incidents include the use of lethal force against anti-EPRDF demonstrators and the detention of many political opponents. The facts surrounding these cases have not yet come to light.

Following the capture of the towns in Gonder and Gojjam, traders from Tigray and Eritrea immediately entered them to buy grain for transport north -- grain was cheap in these areas and expensive in Tigray and Eritrea. According to one visitor, "deals were struck before the corpses were buried." The EPRDF forces also sealed government grain stores. These actions caused panic among some local people, who feared that their grain was being confiscated.

In late March, as the government attempted to counter-attack into Gojjam, the EPRDF launched Operation Dula Billisuma Welkita (Oromo for "Equality and Freedom Campaign") into Wollega. This captured Nekempte, headquarters of Wollega, on April 1, and then

¹² See: "Ethiopia: Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles," [News from Africa Watch](#), April 30, 1991.

advanced southwards and eastwards, towards Addis Ababa. Following the battle for Nekempte, retreating government troops looted several parts of the town. By this time, the army was on the verge of complete rout, and was unable to regroup for any significant counter-offensive. By the same token, it was unable to engage in systematic violence against civilians.

Shortly afterwards, the EPRDF occupied Fincha'a, which is the site of the hydro-electric power station which serves Addis Ababa. The power was not cut off, though the EPRDF contacted the Addis Ababa municipality by telephone to ask for senior engineers to come to carry out urgent maintenance tasks.

On April 28-30, the air force bombarded Fincha'a town and hydro-electric station, and one civilian was killed in the town and one worker wounded at the power station.

The Final Days of the Mengistu Regime

In what can only have been an act of deliberate spite against the Tigrayan people, on May 8, the air force carried out a raid on Sheraro in Tigray. Sheraro had had no military significance for more than four years, but retained its symbolic significance as the first town occupied by the TPLF, and its "home". According to reports, 15 civilians were killed and 90 wounded.

One week later, the EPRDF launched "Operation Walleign"¹³ on the Wollo front. Dessie and Kombolcha were captured the following day. In the battle for Kombolcha, an ammunition dump was blown up, causing extensive damage to the town and an unknown number of civilian casualties. The EPRDF claims that the dump was deliberately ignited by retreating soldiers, but this has not been confirmed. By May 20, the government lines throughout southern Wollo and into northern Shewa had been overrun. This coincided with a government defeat at Ambo, west of Addis Ababa, and the city was effectively undefended on two sides. President Mengistu fled the country the next morning.

President Mengistu had always boasted that he would fight to the last. Publicly, he compared himself to the Emperor Teodros, who committed suicide rather than surrender to his enemies. Mengistu's reputation for intransigence and courage was the last asset the government had; loyal soldiers respected him and were prepared to continue fighting. When Mengistu fled, the keystone that had held together the remaining elements of the government and army was gone. The army -- 450,000 strong just months before -- disintegrated. Tens of thousands of soldiers abandoned their posts and flocked into Addis Ababa, selling their weapons or using them to intimidate people into giving them food and drink. Looting became common. Other

¹³ It was named after the Oromo student leader mentioned in chapter 4.

soldiers took off their uniforms and went home. Some senior officers in the army and air force fled abroad, mostly to Djibouti. Only a few elite units inside Addis Ababa maintained loyalty to the acting head of state, General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan, but a mutiny broke out on May 27 and there was fighting around the Presidential Palace.

The final week of the war consisted in a slow EPRDF advance on Addis Ababa itself. EPRDF forces surrounded the city, capturing the crucial air force base at Debre Zeit after a small battle.

During May, western diplomats and the UN repeatedly urged the EPRDF to refrain from attacking Addis Ababa before the US-convened peace talks opened in London. They expressed fears for the safety of the civilian population should there be fighting in the city itself.

The final assault on Addis Ababa took place on the morning of May 28. Almost all of the army had melted away, and resistance to the EPRDF advance was light. There were pockets of street fighting throughout the city, but the only sustained exchange of fire occurred at the Presidential Palace, where an ammunition dump also exploded. According to the ICRC, there were about 200 deaths, both combatants and civilians. Those who died were either caught in the crossfire or killed by the explosion; there is no indication that either side targeted civilians.

It later transpired that a second explosion had also occurred at an ammunition dump at Shogole the same morning. Eye witnesses said that local residents began looting the arms depot, whereupon a fighter from the EPRDF fired a rocket-propelled grenade, which caused a huge explosion. An estimated 500 people died. When a German pastor spoke to a camera crew from a news network, claiming that the explosion had been caused deliberately, his words were cut by an EPRDF censor. However, as one journalist commented, "even if a rocket was fired, no one could have imagined the appalling consequences."¹⁴

Before dawn on June 4, another explosion occurred at an ammunition dump in the Nefas Silk area of the city. Approximately one hundred people were killed and 130 wounded, including several firefighters and members of the EPRDF who were trying to assist victims. There was extensive damage to property. The EPRDF claimed that it was the work of saboteurs loyal to the previous government, and said that they had detained several suspects, one of whom was a former army officer caught while trying to launch a rocket-propelled grenade at a fuel truck. This account was confirmed by at least one western diplomat.¹⁵

On entering Addis Ababa, the EPRDF prohibited all forms of public demonstration.

¹⁴ Richard Dowden, *The Independent*, London, June 2, 1991. At previous explosions at ammunition dumps, such as Asmara airport in January and Kombolcha in May 1991, there had been a series of smaller explosions and fires, allowing most people to escape.

¹⁵ Jennifer Parmelee, *Washington Post*, June 6, 1991.

However, protests against the EPRDF occupation soon took place. EPRDF fighters responded by firing, at first over the heads of the demonstrators, and then into the crowds. Eight were killed on May 29 and two more on May 30, and a total of 388 were injured, according to Red Cross estimates. The EPRDF claimed that members of the crowds were armed, and pointed to an incident in which two EPRDF fighters were killed by an assassin at the university campus. Some protestors were armed with weapons, including hand grenades, and the crowds had pelted the fighters (who had neither riot shields nor training in crowd control) with stones, and on at least one occasion opened fire. One journalist commented: "Even street kids have automatic weapons ... It's as if the millions of dollars of Soviet military aid have all arrived in the capital at once."¹⁶ After these killings, and after the explosion of June 4 had shown that members of the previous regime were still active in armed opposition, the protests disappeared.

Journalists also reported the summary execution of two members of the security service of the former government by members of an EPLF unit which had participated in the assault on the city.

The occupation of Addis Ababa cost between 600 and 800 civilian lives, most of them in the explosions at the ammunition dumps. Much of the violence was the work of retreating government soldiers, and it is likely that the EPRDF occupation of the city prevented further lawlessness and loss of life.

¹⁶ Jennifer Parmelee, Washington Post, May 31, 1991.