16. THE POLITICS OF RELIEF 1989-91

In the summer of 1989, there was widespread drought in Eritrea, Tigray and parts of Wollo, leading to fears of a repeat of the famine of 1983-5. Those fears were intensified when the summer rains of 1990 were also poor, and there was a near-complete harvest failure throughout Eritrea. Fortunately, to date, these fears have not been realized. There has been considerable hardship throughout Eritrea, Tigray and northern Wollo, and pockets of suffering amounting to severe famine in one or two places in Eritrea. But there has been neither the mass migration to relief shelters and refugee camps that were characteristic of the 1983-5 famine, nor mass starvation.

This chapter looks at the causes of the famines in Tigray/north Wollo and Eritrea respectively, and also at food shortages elsewhere in the country.

Scarcity in Tigray and North Wollo

In both 1989 and 1990, the harvests in Tigray and north Wollo were very poor. Rainfall was as low as in 1984, and production was further hampered by lack of oxen -- a legacy from the 1983-5 famine, the presence of land mines, and the inadequate marketing system, with many rural markets still held at night for fear of bombing. Nevertheless, according to an independent crop assessment mission, in both years there were surpluses in Shire and Raya, of about 50,000 metric tonnes (MT) and 100,000 MT respectively. Surpluses in north Gonder were not assessed, but were certainly substantial.

Throughout the period 1989-91, all of Tigray and north Wollo was controlled by the EPRDF, which meant that the famine relief could not be distributed by the government RRC or voluntary agencies working alongside it. Food relief could only be brought in with the consent of the government, or by working cross-border from Sudan.

Because the war had a direct impact on all famine relief operations for the first time, the link between war and famine began to be identified by the western media. In the case of Tigray and north Wollo, this is ironic: from 1989 onwards, this area was very largely at peace. The specific effects of the war were confined to sporadic air raids, shortages of consumer goods, and obstacles to the delivery of relief. These burdens were much less onerous to rural people than the military offensives and government restrictions and exactions of the early 1980s.

In the areas where fighting occurred, it now consisted largely of conventional battles between the opposing armies of the government and EPRDF. Several factors exacerbated food shortages:

* In the immediate vicinity of the front line there was disruption to villagers' lives by the fighting itself.

* The army garrisons imposed a considerable burden on local resources, usually requisitioning food, and often demanding that local women come and prepare it for them (see chapter 17 for examples from northern Shewa).

* In the Oromo areas of the Wollo-Shewa escarpment and Tcheffa Valley, army patrols and checkpoints imposed tight restrictions on movement and trade.

* Surveillance of migrants and trades was generally stepped up, and more local militia were mobilized to perform these routine functions.

However, with a few isolated exceptions, the level of harassment and restriction never approached that imposed in Tigray and its borderlands in the early and mid-1980s. This was probably because the army was operating in mainly Amhara areas, and persisted in seeing the conflict in ethnic terms -- as against Tigrayans. The army was also unable to penetrate into EPRDF-controlled areas to inflict damage, and from February 1990 onwards, there was little fighting on the central Wollo front on account of the international relief operation being mounted there. The constant skirmishing occurred in southern Gonder and northern Shewa, both areas in which food supplies were better. Consequently, irrespective of levels of relief assistance, the famine of 1989-91 was always going to be much less severe than that of 1983-5.

EPRDF Policies

From 1989, the EPRDF consistently implemented a policy of trade liberalization, and the intra-regional movement of grain was not hindered. Migrant labor was also possible, though in Tigray the TPLF tended to discourage it and preferred people to remain in their villages to engage in programs of environmental protection such as afforestation and terracing.

The high degree of internal security and ease of mobility within Tigray and the adjoining areas led to the functioning of the economy in a way that approximated "normal" for the first time for 15 years. Together with the absence of the government counter-insurgency strategies, this was undoubtedly the main factor in preventing the severe droughts leading to severe famine.

Relief Programs

A relatively efficient relief program also contributed to the lack of famine. The program consisted of three elements: "internal purchase," cross-border food deliveries, and the Joint Relief Program (JRP) of the Ethiopian churches. The government tried to obstruct all three, but

had neither the determination nor means to succeed.

Internal peace made possible the large scale purchase of local surpluses for redistribution as famine relief. This program, known as "internal purchase," proved to be the quickest and cheapest way of providing relief. Although the actual prices paid for the grain were relatively high, this was offset by cheaper transport costs.

Throughout 1989 and most of 1990, the cross-border relief program from Sudan was the single largest contributor of relief food to Tigray. The transport was slow and expensive, because of the long distances, the rough roads, and the fact that convoys could move only at night because of aerial bombardment. There were numerous attacks on relief trucks.

The JRP arose out of the recognition in late 1989 that the heavily drought-stricken areas of the country were under the control of the EPRDF. The plan was for the Ethiopian churches to organize transport and distribution of relief to Tigray. Initially, the relief was to be provided through government-held areas of Eritrea, but after the capture of Massawa this changed to the "southern line" through Wollo.

Initially, there was much scepticism about whether the JRP would actually work. Those doubts seemed to be confirmed when the program became mired in a set of disputes:

* The government and churches claimed that the roads needed repair; REST and the EPRDF said that their vehicles had no difficulty passing them.

* The government insisted that the JRP vehicles should not leave the main north-south road; REST argued that the most needy areas were away from the road, and that it would be unnecessarily disruptive for people to migrate to the roadside to receive relief.

* The government and churches insisted on doing their own registration of beneficiaries, and required all family members to be present at the registration; REST replied that it already had lists of needy people, and requiring all family members to come for registration required a three to four day walk for many, and would create chaos. (After such chaos did indeed ensue, and several people were injured, the requirement that all family members be present was dropped.)

* The JRP wanted to start distributions in north Wollo first, arguing that this was the area hardest to reach by the cross-border route; REST wanted distributions to start simultaneously in Tigray.

The first trucks moved north from Dessie and crossed into EPRDF-held territory on March 20, 1990, only one week behind schedule. However, during the following six weeks, progress was slow -- only four per cent of the target amount was distributed, all in Wollo. In May, one third of the target was met, including distributions in Tigray, and from then until the following March, distributions averaged over 80% of target. The program became a success, and matched the cross-border operation.

Despite the government's recognition that rebel-held areas actually existed and needed relief, and the fact that the size of the JRP operation was calculated on the assumption that REST would provide cross-border relief to much of the population, the government continued to bomb cross-border relief routes. On January 29, 1990, a REST food convoy was bombed in western Tigray; three trucks were burned, one local herder killed, and two REST employees wounded. On November 27 and 29, 1990, REST food stores near the Sudan border were bombed and more than 3,000 tons of relief food destroyed.

A food monitor noted the resulting ironies:

> It was interesting to compare this [the JRP's] very impressive fleet of white Mercedes trucks with the REST fleet of trucks. The REST fleet is also made up mainly of Mercedes trucks, but due to the Ethiopian government's propensity for bombing relief convoys coming across the Sudanese border, these have all been painted a camouflage green colour. In Tigray the JRP fleet is only allowed to travel during the day. The REST trucks, on the other hand, can only move during the hours of darkness ... during the daytime they have to remain hidden under trees or buried in trenches and covered with canvases.

The success of the JRP owed little to the government, which continued to harass the program at frequent intervals. It did not allow food monitors to travel with the JRP convoys -- all the monitoring was done by aid agency staff who had come in on the cross-border route. The requirement that all beneficiaries travel to the roadside was feared by many people as the prelude to a government offensive up the main road. The government even bombed some of the towns where JRP distributions were taking place. On November 7, Woldiya in north Wollo was attacked. One woman was killed and one girl injured, and the offices of the Ethiopian Relief Organization (the counterpart to REST working alongside the EPRDF in Wollo and Gonder) were burned. On December 27, Woldiya was bombed again. Both these attacks disrupted relief distributions.

However, on the whole the JRP had the additional benefit of bringing tranquillity to the people in its vicinity. Neither side launched significant military action on the Dessie front for almost one year after the program started. The bombing attacks along the JRP route, though prominent because well-documented, were much less frequent than elsewhere. This allowed people to travel and work in the day-time and markets to meet during the daylight. A semblance of normality returned to the towns along the main road.

Problems with the JRP intensified in February 1991, when the EPRDF launched Operation Teodros. Though the fighting was confined to Gonder and Gojjam, and so did not affect the environs of the JRP route, government interference intensified. On March 12/13, the government launched an attack on the EPRDF-held town of Wichale, the first rebel garrison on the JRP route. This held up a food convoy. On March 18/19, the EPRDF counter-attacked on

the west side of Dessie. Though this did not endanger the JRP route, the government decided to halt the JRP at once. (In fact, the timing of the decision suggests that it was made before the EPRDF attack was launched.) On March 20, the EPRDF issued an ultimatum that the program should restart within one week. Three days later the government complied.

In early April, the government detained seven drivers working for the JRP. This may have been related to an attempt to requisition their vehicles for military use. This immediately led to other drivers, who were in EPRDF-held areas, refusing to return to Dessie for fear of arrest. Fearing the halting of the program, the EPRDF also made the "release" of trucks conditional on the arrival of new relief convoys -- it was attempting to hold some vehicles as "collateral" to ensure the continuation of the program, but this served to slow down the rate of delivery.

These disruptions meant that by May the JRP was delivering relief to only one quarter of its intended beneficiaries.

On May 16, it was the turn of the EPRDF to halt the program, as it launched its Operation Wallelign to capture Dessie and Kombolcha. The EPRDF claimed that the government had already halted the deliveries before the attack was launched, but the sequence of events is not clear. The final days of Mengistu and the following week of General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan's rule saw no further deliveries.

Though it takes up most of this account, the story of the relief programs of 1989-91 is in fact relatively marginal to the story of how rural people succeeded in surviving the drought of 1989-91. The main components of that survival were the absence of ground war and the absence of restrictions on trade and movement, which enabled the economy to function in an integrated manner. The absence of outright famine, despite more severe drought than in 1983-5, serves as witness to the fact that drought need not create famine, and that the reason why the appalling famine developed in 1983-5 was not because of the weather.

Famine in Eritrea

In 1989, most of Eritrea was controlled by the EPLF, including, from February 1990 onwards, the port of Massawa. This created a mirror-image of the situation in Tigray: relief for the government-held enclave around Asmara could only be brought in either with the agreement of the EPLF, or by using an expensive airlift.

Famine in Eritrea during 1989-91 contrasted with Tigray. The siege of Asmara led to famine conditions developing in the city of Asmara and the surrounding enclave. Throughout the 1980s, Eritrea had always been more dependent on food aid than Tigray and north Wollo. The substantial cutback in relief aid that coincided with the siege was therefore more serious. In

addition, restrictions on the commercial movement of food and requisitioning by the army garrison played an important role in creating famine in the enclave. Government tactics of enforcing a food blockade are familiar from the first siege of Asmara, in 1975. Finally, western Eritrea is economically integrated into eastern Sudan, and the unprecedented shortages and famine in eastern Sudan from mid-1990 onwards aggravated the problems caused by drought and war. Therefore the famine in Eritrea during 1989-91 has proved to be more severe than during 1983-5.

Famine in the Asmara Enclave

Eritrea is, even in normal times, a food deficit area. For the city of Asmara and the surrounding area, there is an even greater relative food deficit. The 1.1 million civilians in Asmara and the surrounding area which was the government-controlled enclave would normally consume about 15,000 tons of food per month. Usually, the great majority of that is imported, either by traders operating in western Tigray and Gonder, or by government marketing organizations. Since the mid-1980s, regular delivery of food relief has also been important.

The disruption of all the supplies of food simultaneously in February 1990 brought Asmara very quickly to the brink of famine.

Before the fall of Massawa, grain was cheap in Asmara. Shortly after the siege began, the price of grain in Asmara rose more than ten times to over 700 Birr per quintal. This was far more than the great majority of the residents could afford, and made famine inevitable. Normally, the lure of profits would have brought grain traders to Asmara, paying bribes to cross the battle lines. In the first eight months of the siege, this hardly happened. The army prevented large quantities of commercial grain reaching the city. There were instances in which grain was confiscated by soldiers when people tried to bring it in. Residents who were caught with grain traded from EPLF-controlled areas were regularly detained and punished. There were even instances in which people travelling by air from Addis Ababa to Asmara, and bringing food with them for their relatives, had this food unloaded from the airplane at Addis airport.

The policy was partly dictated by the increased bribes that soldiers could charge because of the grain scarcity, and partly by a deliberate plan to make the civilian population of the town suffer.

From February until October, the army's ban on free movement of commercial food into the enclave, together with a ban on free movement of people out of the enclave, was the single most important reason for the hunger affecting the civilian population.

In October, in recognition of the severity of the food situation, the administration lifted the ban on free movement of food. The normal checks on traders continued, and bribery remained rife, but punishments were no longer meted out to those found in possession of food from outside the enclave. General Tesfaye Gebre Kidan, the Overall Administrator, justified this change in policy. He told a meeting of Asmara residents that government relief supplies had in the past ended up feeding the rebels; now it was the turn of the rebels to feed the government. This pragmatic policy did not end the hunger, and nor did it reduce the price of grain by very much, but it prevented the famine in the city from developing into mass starvation, as had appeared inevitable.

One factor that contributed to the famine in Asmara was increasing unemployment. The siege led to many enterprises being cut off from their suppliers or their markets, so they were forced to lay off workers. Some government-owned industries were also closed down, dismantled and relocated in Addis Ababa.

Requisitioning by the Army

The army in Asmara and the surrounding areas often requisitioned food from the residents. This was probably the second most important cause of the scarcity. While some of the requisitioning was looting by undisciplined soldiers, much of it was certainly based on directives from the military command. The wheat militias ceased to be paid their ration and instead turned to looting.

The requisitioning of food and other commodities and removal of people was based on powers given to the military authorities under the State of Emergency legislation.

The impact of the army's requisitioning is conveyed in a letter from a civilian in Asmara:

March 15th 1991

Dear [brother],

> Asmara has become a living hell and I can't see how we are going to survive for long.
>
> The food consignment from Massawa is unreliable and inadequate.[1] Worse still is what little we get from the UN and the churches is stolen by the town boys [i.e. government soldiers] at night. In the Edaga Hamus area many families including mine have been broken into by hungry soldiers. This happened to us twice during February when three armed soldiers broke into our house and took away our two week ration of flour, sugar and oil. Five of my friends in other parts of Asmara told me of similar incidents. This is happening all the time.
>
> My brother, we are facing a slow, terrible, undignified death! Asmara is now dying ... Sadly, Ker [Keren] is also in a state worse than Asmara ...

Apart from the instances mentioned in this letter, some incidents of requisitioning included:

* The confiscation of half of the food stocks of an orphanage in Decamhare;

* The confiscation of large numbers of cattle and other livestock in at least four villages in Akele Guzai district and the area surrounding Decamhare;

[1] The shipments were in fact arriving regularly but the government did not inform the citizens of Asmara of that fact.

* The people of Senhit were required to feed the garrison there;

* In the area of Chendek (near Keren) there was an order prohibiting people from picking beles, a cactus fruit eaten as a famine food in times of shortage, so that it was reserved for the soldiers;

* In the Adi Teclezan area, north of Asmara, the residents of ten villages were moved by military order and all their property and food stocks were then requisitioned. A similar instance occurred at Adi Beyane.

Fortunately, the supply of food and money to the garrison (which numbered about 120,000 men) never broke down entirely, so that the army did not have to depend completely on requisitioned food.

The military also requisitioned other scarce items, such as fuel and medicine. There were three military hospitals in the city, with 6,000 beds. Because these were too overcrowded, the army also requisitioned half of the 820 beds in the civilian general hospital, and with them, half of the time and equipment of the hospital staff. Two civilian doctors and several nurses and auxiliaries were also required to serve in the military hospitals. Much of the supply of drugs to the hospital was often bought by the military; it was paid for, but the hospital could not obtain replacement supplies.

Food Relief through Massawa

When the EPLF captured Massawa on 8-11 February, 1990, the port was closed to relief shipments. A month later, the EPLF announced that the port had been repaired and appealed to the UN to supply relief. The Ethiopian government shunned this offer and repeatedly bombed the town, killing over 100 people, destroying many buildings, and burning about 25,000 tons of food aid. A ship chartered by the German relief organization Cap Anamur was sent towards Massawa loaded with food, but on May 1 the government threatened to destroy it with aerial bombardment. Despite diplomatic pressure from the western aid donors, the government did not yield and the ship was diverted to Port Sudan, from where its cargo was transported across the border by ERA.

At the Washington Summit in early June 1990, Presidents Bush and Gorbachev discussed the issue of Massawa and called upon Ethiopia to allow the port to reopen. The Ethiopian government complied and ceased the bombing raids two days later.

This was followed, in July, by an attempt to open Massawa. A ship chartered by the World Food Programme (WFP) with four port technicians sailed from Djibouti towards Massawa on July 14. Their mission was to assess and repair the port facilities so that large shipments could be handled. Several days of negotiation followed, concerning the conditions

under which the technicians would enter the port. No agreement was reached. On July 21, the ship abandoned its mission and returned to Djibouti.

The failure of the WFP mission appears to have been the result of too many actors playing different roles in the whole process, each with a different agenda, and inadequate communication between them. The Ethiopian government allowed the mission to go ahead at a moment when it suited its diplomatic and military needs. Thus it coincided with a visit to Washington by Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka, with the intention of obtaining US blessing for Israeli arms deliveries to Ethiopia (the resumption of the emigration of the Ethiopian Jews was announced at the same time). The Ethiopian government also tried to impose conditions on the mission which it knew the EPLF was unwilling to accept, such as the ship remaining in radio communication with Addis Ababa. The WFP was anxious to send its technicians to the port as quickly as possible. The EPLF was communicating at different times with the WFP in Rome and USAID in Washington; the latter not only wanted the technicians to land in the port, but the ship to dock there as well, in order to make the political point that this was possible. The EPLF also demanded full information on the consignees of any relief grain that arrived in the port after it was opened -- it did not want to lose total control of the operation to the UN, nor see the grain consigned to the RRC in Asmara. The mission was aborted when an EPLF demand that the WFP technicians be allowed to land in a small EPLF boat was not passed on to WFP, but was rejected by USAID. WFP -- which might well have accepted this demand -- believed that the mission had been rejected outright, and turned the ship round.

Claims made in the press at the time, for instance that the EPLF had turned back two ships carrying grain, were unfounded -- the additional ships did not exist.[2]

Despite the agreement in principle to open the port, the government bombed it again on two occasions in September and October, to demonstrate that it still reserved the final decision.

After prolonged negotiation, and the near-complete absence of further media attention, on January 18, 1991, Massawa finally opened for relief shipments. Over the following four months a ship chartered by WFP, the Far Suez, made six round trips from Djibouti and brought over 60,000 MT of grain. This was divided into halves, with one half allocated to ERA for distribution in EPLF-held areas, and the other half to the RRC and the churches in the government-held enclave.

Despite skirmishing on the Asmara-Massawa road (initiated by the government), there were no interruptions to the supply to Asmara.

The difficulties started when the grain arrived in Asmara. 6,000 MT of the first shipment was distributed by churches, but the larger quantity consigned to the RRC, over

[2] New York Times, July 22 and 25, 1990.

20,000 MT, remained in stock for several months. The excuse given by the administration for the lack of distribution was lack of fuel, but this was extremely lame because fuel supplies continued to arrive regularly until March 22, and much of the food was due to be distributed in Asmara city anyway, where the horse had become the preferred mode of transport. The distribution only started belatedly in May. It is likely that the administration was keeping the food as a reserve to distribute to the military in case the siege was tightened further.

Airlift of Relief

From May until January, the only relief supplies that arrived in Asmara came by air. Like the supply through Massawa, the airlift was subject to political controversy and manipulation.

The Ethiopian government proposed a relief airlift to Asmara in February 1990. In March, the UN came up with a plan acceptable to the Ethiopian government for an airlift from Assab and Djibouti. The donors, however, were unhappy with the proposal that the food should be distributed by the RRC, fearing diversion to the military. Instead, they insisted that the food be consigned to the Ethiopian Catholic Secretariat (ECS). The airlift began on May 3, using two chartered Hercules planes flying from Assab and making four trips each per day. This allowed the delivery of a maximum of 4,800 MT per month, considerably less than the 8,000 MT that ECS estimated that it needed to provide half rations for the 1.1 million people in need. In addition, due to shelling of the airport, bad weather, and the need for maintenance work, the UN airlift was able to deliver less than the maximum figure: by the end of February it had delivered 36,000 tons, or 75% of maximum capacity. A plan to airlift food using Soviet transport planes was proposed in June but never materialized.

The Ethiopian government had 26 civil and 16 military aircraft available for transporting food. Not one of these aircraft was ever employed for this task.

The EPLF warned against the airlift, and later renewed its "warning to those quarters which are still involved in military intervention by transporting military materiel to the Dergue government pretending it is relief and humanitarian aid."[3] It warned that the airlift would continue at its own risk. This referred primarily to the delivery of supplies by Ethiopian Airlines planes and the proposed airlift using Soviet aircraft. (Soviet-supplied Antonov transports were also airlifting military equipment to Asmara.) The EPLF also said that an airlift was unnecessary because food could be delivered to Asmara through Massawa or overland from Sudan, using the routes used by ERA.

[3] Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), ME 0806, July 3, 1990.

The suggestion that the UN relief airlift was transporting military supplies was untrue. However, the civilian and military airports in Asmara are not wholly separate, but share the same runway and other facilities. The airport was also used for the airlift of military supplies (usually ten flights each day) and was the base for bombing missions by MiG fighter-bombers. It could thus be considered a legitimate military target.

In the event, an implicit understanding was reached whereby the EPLF did not shell the airport while the relief flights were arriving or on the ground. The EPLF was always aware of the timing of the arrival of the relief flights. This inevitably gave immunity to attack to any military aircraft that happened to land at the same time. However, the EPLF did continue to shell the airport at other times, with the intention of putting it out of action.

On March 1, an airplane used by the UN-ECS airlift was struck by a shell and one employee of ECS was killed. This brought the airlift to an end. It is not clear whether this incident was an accidental violation of the tacit agreement, or whether, after the reopening of Massawa, any such agreement had lapsed. The EPLF certainly argued that the airlift was no longer necessary after January because of the opening of Massawa. However, the food supplied through Massawa remained inadequate for the needs of the Asmara enclave, just as it was not enough to feed the needy people in EPLF-controlled areas.

The shelling of the relief airplane and the halting of the airlift again demonstrates the complexity of the ethical issues involved in determining when starvation is being used as a weapon. If the actual incident of shelling was an accident, it was part of a more general attempt by the EPLF to close the airport, which would have stopped the airlift anyway. If any tacit agreement not to fire when relief airplanes were in the vicinity had lapsed, it had done so in the context of two developments: the supply of food from Massawa (which was not for the most part being distributed) and the imminent military collapse of the government, which was hastened by the intensified bombardment of the airport.

Relief in EPLF-Held Eritrea

Both 1989 and 1990 were years of severe drought in EPLF-held areas of Eritrea. Combined with the economic decline of the two main sources of employment and marketed goods -- Asmara and eastern Sudan -- this spelled famine.

ERA continued its own distributions in the areas of Eritrea controlled by the EPLF. In 1990, over 100,000 MT of grain was transported across the border from Sudan and donated to people affected by drought and war: a far larger amount than that distributed in the enclave. This relief was allocated to needy people according to lists drawn up by village committees. A spokesman for ERA commented that some of this food later found its way into Asmara, as

recipients gave help to their needy relatives: "this food is always transferred from one hand to another at the end of the day." ERA offered to set up distribution centers in EPLF areas, to which the residents of Asmara could come and collect a ration. Implementing this proposal would have required a massive extra donation of resources to ERA, but in any case the government did not respond.

The Ethiopian government remained resolutely opposed to the humanitarian activities of ERA: "any attempt to supply food aid across the border is contrary to the sovereignty of the country ... and has absolutely no acceptance by the Ethiopian government."[4] ERA food convoys were still subject to aerial bombardment. On January 5, 1990, at Tserona, an ERA food convoy was bombed. On September 3, near Tessenei, one truck carrying relief was burned in an air attack. On May 10, 1991, at Tekombia, Barka, two trucks carrying relief were damaged in an air raid.

Shortages in the South

In 1990/91, there were also shortages in a number of parts of southern Ethiopia, such as Harerghe, Gamu Gofa and parts of southern Shewa. These occurred despite the fact that the abandonment of Marxist economic policies in March 1990 and relatively good rainfall had contributed to a national bumper crop. These localized shortages can be attributed to a number of factors.

The most important factor is the legacy of the previous decade of unremitting attacks on the economic base of the peasantry. The legacy of villagization and other disastrous policies left many rural people extremely vulnerable.

A second factor is that when the "change in direction" was announced in March 1990, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation's procurement for 1989/90 was already half complete, so that many areas were damaged by the old policies. A related factor is the incomplete liberalization; for example there was no deregulation of wheeled transport, which meant that farmers who lived more than a day or two's walk from the nearest urban market did not benefit from the regulated market in grain and other foodstuffs. In addition, the "change in direction" meant that provincial and district administrators had more local autonomy in decision making, and some enforced hard-line restrictions on trade and other activities.

The area in which human rights abuse most directly impinged upon food production was conscription. The conscription campaigns of 1989-91 were unprecedented in their size and scope (see chapter 17). Not only were large numbers of young men taken from their homes and

[4] Voice of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa; see BBC SWB, ME 0704, March 5, 1990.

farms to serve in the army, but the fear of conscription forced them to be in a state of readiness to flee to the hills at any sign of soldiers or government officials. Though it has not been investigated fully, it seems likely that some of the areas of greatest shortage in 1990/91 were areas in which the conscription campaign was conducted most extensively.

A final factor contributing to food shortages was the temporary breakdown in law and order in some parts of the country following the collapse of the Mengistu government. Retreating soldiers sold or abandoned their guns. In areas such as Wollaita (southern Shewa) and Harerghe, the opportunity was taken for looting, which contributed to an interruption of relief programs. For example, about 800 MT of relief food was looted from a relief agency store in Shashamane, southern Shewa, in the days after the government fell. The food crises affecting Sudanese refugees in Gambela and refugees and returnees in Harerghe will be examined in chapters 18 and 19.