

August 30, 1990

## ETHIOPIA

### Violent Suppression of Student Protest

For ten days in May of this year, Ethiopia saw its first significant open civilian opposition for fifteen years, in a series of protests led by students. A wave of strikes was sparked by the government execution of 12 army generals on May 19. Earlier in March, the government had promised political tolerance and pluralism. In May it betrayed those promises, and suppressed the student demonstrations with deadly force. Colonel Mengistu's "democracy" has proven to be hollow - as many had expected. Little news has reached the outside world about the brief protest movement and its suppression. Africa Watch has obtained detailed information about the events of those ten days, including fresh evidence suggesting that several students may have been killed when the security forces opened fire on the evening of May 22, 1990.

#### People Power in Ethiopia?

In March of this year Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam announced a dramatic change in the Ethiopian government's policy. He raised hopes that the former policy of hard-line one-party Marxist-Leninist rule was to be replaced by a democracy, with space for the growth of political pluralism. These hopes have now been dashed. All the structures of centralized totalitarian control - party cadres, security services, neighborhood associations, and the notorious Special Penal Code - remain in place. And they are employed with the same ruthlessness as before.

In the early 1970s, the first glimmering of civilian opposition to the authoritarian rule of Emperor Haile Selassie was seen on the campus of the university of Addis Ababa. The students were instrumental in creating the revolution of 1974 and determining its direction. However, the Red Terror of 1976-8, orchestrated by Colonel Mengistu himself, destroyed all civilian opposition to the ruling Provisional Military Administrative Committee, known as the *Dergue*. Thousands of young people were killed or imprisoned, and tens of thousands fled abroad. They included most of Ethiopia's intellectuals. The memory of this atrocity helped prevent any open dissent for over a decade.

On May 21, 1990, following the government announcement of the execution of 12 senior generals for participating in a coup attempt a year earlier, the first flickering of civilian opposition since the mid 1970s was seen in Addis Ababa. The university students began a protest strike. Meeting at midnight on the campus football pitch, they called for an independent students' union, free speech, a democratic government with respect for human rights, and for Mengistu to step down.

Mengistu's response revealed that his instincts remain those of Tiananmen, not Wenceslaus Square. The student protests were never allowed to develop into a significant movement of dissent. Instead they were crushed by intimidation, beating, punishment, the use of *agents provocateurs*, and by firing live ammunition into a crowd of protesting students.

The suppression of the student protests was not bloody, when judged by the standards set by Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu in the 1970s. The casualties following the main protest - possibly including the deaths of five students and the wounding of six others - remain to be confirmed. But the suppression was effective. The significance of these events lies not so much in the amount of blood that was shed, but in the fact that the government's first and overwhelming response to peaceful opposition was brutal violence. Mengistu has shown that his promise of tolerance was merely a high-sounding pronouncement.

The following account is based largely on the first-hand testimony of a student who was involved in the events of May 1990, and who has since left the country. His identity, and those of his colleagues, has been concealed.

## **The Promised Reforms**

On March 5, 1990, in a public speech to the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), Colonel Mengistu announced a "change of direction". After dwelling at length on the struggles of the revolutionary government, and his desire for unity, peace, and progress, Mengistu promised peace negotiations to end Ethiopia's several civil wars. He also promised economic and political reforms. The centrally-planned economy was to become mixed, with encouragement for private investment. The WPE - hitherto a Leninist vanguard party, and Ethiopia's only legal political party - "must change in content, character, and name," he said. While all members of the reformed party needed to be committed to Ethiopian unity (i.e opposed to secession/independence for Eritrea) he explained that they "need not be followers of a particular ideology." The name of the new party was to be the Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party.

At a closed meeting of the WPE Political Bureau on March 2, Mengistu had hinted that he would allow many political parties to function. In his public address to the WPE, however, he merely conceded that different political viewpoints would be allowed within the single party. He also stressed that the overriding need was for increased commitment to the war against the rebels in

the north.

On March 6, the WPE Central Committee endorsed Mengistu's proposals. The proposals were popularly welcomed, and a spontaneous demonstration in their favor and against the rebel fronts in the north started at the University. At first these demonstrations were genuinely unrehearsed. However, on the following days the demonstration was orchestrated by the government, and students were obliged to protest outside the embassies of Sudan and Libya, complaining of those countries' alleged support for the rebels.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Execution of the Generals**

On May 16, 1989, a group of senior military officers had attempted to stage a coup d'etat in Addis Ababa. Their stated aims were a negotiated peace in the wars, and political and economic liberalization. The coup was crushed after three days of fighting in Addis Ababa and Asmara. The government reported that 44 people were killed in the fighting, including the Minister of Defence and many of the leaders of the coup, and that 176 members of the armed forces had been arrested. Civilians were also arrested. There are unconfirmed reports of extra-judicial executions of detainees, including the former Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force, Air Force Major-General Fanta Belay.

In December, 13 generals and one navy commander who had been involved in the coup plot were put on trial before the Military Division of the Supreme Court. The coup attempt had been popular, and the generals commanded a degree of public support. A guilty verdict with its mandatory death sentence was a foregone conclusion. It was widely assumed, though, that Mengistu would grant clemency to the generals, in view of the fact that he had subsequently announced that he would adopt almost all of their demands, and was seeking a broader base of popular support and increased international acceptance. However, a few days before the trial was concluded in May, Colonel Mengistu removed the President of the Court, Lieutenant-General Tesfaye Gebre Kidane, from his position. As President of the Republic, Mengistu is empowered to do this under the 1987 Constitution, Article 87(1)(b). It appears that Tesfaye had supported clemency for the generals.

On Monday, May 21 1990, government radio announced that 12 of the 14 officers had been found guilty of treason and executed. The executions had taken place the previous Saturday night in the basement of the Presidential palace. The generals were given no chance to appeal against their sentences; indeed there was no higher court for them appeal to.

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<sup>1</sup> The opposition to Libya is ironic in view of the fact that Colonel Gaddafi of Libya was Mengistu's staunchest African ally, and a provider of military hardware and logistics, until the rapprochement between Israel and Ethiopia occurred a few months previously.

The news of the executions, and the speed of the implementation, came as a shock to the people of Ethiopia, and to the outside world.

## **Monday Evening: the Reaction of the Students**

On the evening on Monday, May 21, the students at the Sidist Kilo campus of the University of Addis Ababa, which contains the social science faculties, first heard of the execution of the 12 generals. Everyone was shocked by the news, and one student whose uncle was one of those executed reportedly broke down in tears. The student who spoke to Africa Watch described what happened next:

We were all very shocked. A group from the students immediately decided to hold a mass meeting at midnight. This was after the finish of a football match being shown on the television. They said the meeting would be held on the small campus football pitch.... At midnight almost all the students duly assembled there. Almost everybody came, with the exception of those from the "Edad" [Education Administration department].<sup>2</sup>

The meeting lasted three hours. The students spoke freely - we had never spoken like this before or heard views like this before in public - and expressed anger at Mengistu's actions, and his "fascist" administration. The speakers demanded him to step down. We shouted slogans. We shouted: "Down with Mengistu" and "Man-eater Mengistu" (*sau belau Mengistu*). The meeting demanded the right to form an independent student union, and to protest, and said we should have no threats against our lives. We passed a resolution which called for a strike - until the other arrested officers were released, until Mengistu's fascism was ended, and until Abiye Kifle stepped down. [Abiye Kifle is the President of the university, an appointee of Mengistu].

Meanwhile, students at the nearby campus of Amist Kilo organized their own demonstration.

While the students were meeting, the Special Police (*Fatno Darash*), with their hard helmets and machine guns, began to surround the campus. They had been summoned by the campus police.

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<sup>2</sup> Some students believe that the Edad students include a high proportion of party cadres and security agents. Africa Watch has no independent evidence concerning this. The Edad department certainly contains many mature students, and the generational difference between them and the bulk of the student body could explain the political differences between the two groups.

## Constitutional Rights

The students believed that they were acting in accordance with the spirit of the reforms promised in March. In fact, their rights to free speech, assembly, and peaceful protest were supposedly guaranteed more than two years earlier, when the *Dergue* formally handed power to a civilian republic, and Chairman Mengistu became President Mengistu.

Article 47 of the Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, adopted in September 1987, stipulates that:

1. Ethiopians are guaranteed freedom of speech, press, assembly, peaceful demonstration, and association.
2. The state shall provide the necessary material and moral support for the exercise of these freedoms.

## Strike and Counter-Strike

On Tuesday, May 22, the university was at a standstill. The students refused to attend classes. Those who lived in the city or nearby went home, and the others stayed in and around their dormitories.

The students listened to radio broadcasts on the Voice of America. Ethiopians abroad condemned the execution of the generals and compared it to the events of November 1974, when, in the first days of the revolution, the *Dergue* summarily executed 60 leading members of the previous governments, and also only announced the executions after they had occurred. A few days after the executions the *Dergue* had promulgated a Special Penal Code, including a range of new criminal offenses, which it applied retroactively to try to legitimize its action. These condemnations inspired the students.

At midnight on Tuesday, the students again assembled on the Sidist Kilo football pitch. This time they were more militant. They were afraid that the government might be using undercover security agents to foment trouble, thereby using the unrest to flush out the anti-government elements among the students. The students therefore resolved to find the agents among them. Our student's testimony continued:

Students began to turn on the Party office on the campus. They broke the windows and the doors, and seized the files inside. They set fire to some of the documents. Most of the activists covered themselves with their *gabias* [blankets or wraps] to cover their faces, and disguised their voices. There were secret agents among us and nobody wanted to be recognized.

The students searched the files and began to discover some of the names of the government agents.<sup>3</sup> These people were everywhere. A few days later I found out that one of my closest friends - we had been together at secondary school and were classmates in the university - I found out that he was a security agent. He was paid by the security. I was surprised - we had known each other for so many years and I had never suspected. We had talked about so many things.

The senior member of the State Security assigned to the university, Captain "Shambal" Ephraim, shouted at the students through a megaphone, telling them to stop. This had no effect and the students instead turned to the offices of the Ethiopian Schools Leaving Certificate, and then a group went in search of Abiye Kifle's office, and attempted to ransack it. Most of the students remained in the open air, chanting slogans. Africa Watch's informant continued:

At this moment the campus police fired their guns in the air. This was a signal for the *Fatno Darash* [Special Police] - they were standing outside the university gates - to come into the campus. Some of Mengistu's personal guard [Palace Guard] - the elite - came together with the Special Police. These are the elite of the security services. They are known as *kileb* ["loyal"], and their motto is "we shall die before Mengistu". They had been trained by North Korean advisors, and now the Israelis have taken over training them.<sup>4</sup>

The soldiers from Mengistu's personal guard [Palace Guard] drew up in a line facing the students. The officer commanding gave the order to shoot. The guards fired straight into the crowd of assembled students. Shots were purposely fired in order to kill some people. But they didn't know who to kill and who not to kill. They just shot indiscriminately.

## Casualties

The number of casualties from the shots of the Palace Guard that night is not known for certain. The students fled, and have reported leaving the bodies of dead and wounded colleagues on the ground. Police ambulances then took the dead and wounded to the police hospital. A nurse at this hospital, who was on duty that night, later said that she had seen five dead and six wounded students brought in. Another report mentions six fatalities. Other accounts, while all agreeing that

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<sup>3</sup> On this occasion the "government agents" were members of the WPE. The students also separately identified undercover security agents.

<sup>4</sup> Other reports, for instance in Washington Jewish Week, July 12, 1990, also report that Israeli advisors are now assisting the Palace Guard.

live ammunition was fired and injuries were sustained, make no mention of fatalities.

Africa Watch has been unable to obtain independent confirmation of the alleged deaths. However, the allegations made by eye witnesses are serious and warrant investigation.

The Ethiopian government has been careful to avoid mentioning casualties and possible fatalities. Relatives and friends of the injured were unable to visit the hospital. A brother of one injured student was denied entry to the hospital when he tried to visit, and was ordered to leave the vicinity at once.

## **Threats and Abuse**

At the first sign of shooting, the students fled back to their dormitories. Many locked their doors and waited fearfully. Special Policemen entered each building and positioned themselves, guns loaded and cocked, at every entrance and in every corridor. They remained there all night.

In the morning, on May 23, the WPE Secretary for Addis Ababa, Endale Tessema, arrived at the campus. Endale is a close ally of Mengistu. He called meetings to be held in the common room or TV room on the ground floor of each of the four dormitory buildings for male students. He did not go to the women's dormitory or the Edad building. In each common room Endale stood with University President Abiye Kifle beside him, surrounded by Special Police, who knelt in combat position with their automatic weapons cocked and aimed at the assembled students. Among the students were further Special Policemen. Both Endale and Abiye wore the blue uniforms of the Party - a signal that, although political reform had been promised, in this instance the old authoritarian ways of the WPE would continue. Africa Watch's informant described one meeting:

Endale insulted and abused us. He was red in the face and very angry. Some people wondered if he was drunk. He said "you are the poorest people in Ethiopia. You come from the countryside, you are the sons of peasants. Who are you to ask Mengistu to step down? Do you want your destitute and illiterate fathers to become President? You can't have an ignorant and illiterate farmer for President." He kept on shouting, "if you say 'down with Mengistu' it is you that will be the first to be killed! You burned the documents - now you will have your arses burned!"

All the students assembled in the common rooms were required to register their names.

Meanwhile, 14 buses, normally used for transport in the city, came inside the gates of the Sidist Kilo campus. Five of the buses left shortly afterwards, empty, to go elsewhere - their destination is not known. Endale told the students to go to the remaining nine buses, and threatened that any who attempted to escape would be shot. The Special Police formed a human corridor from

each dormitory to the buses. All the nine buses were filled, with people standing in the aisles. (Each of these buses carries well over 100 commuters each morning in their normal business). They were packed full, and some fortunate students were left behind.

A crowd of female students assembled close to the buses. Many of the women screamed "so loud that people in the neighboring blocks would hear them". Endale shouted to them that they could either come on the buses too, or they should be silent. There was no room for them to come on board any bus, and instead the police silenced the crowd of women by beating them with sticks. Before they could disperse, several women students were hit and injured.

### **Most Protestors are Transferred to Sendafa...**

The nine buses took the students to Sendafa Police College, which lies about 40 kilometers outside Addis Ababa to the northeast. The plan apparently was to subject the students to a brief spell of "rigorous imprisonment" at the college. The authorities' plan did not function that smoothly, though, because the cadets at the Police College were also protesting, specifically against the execution of Major-General Worku Zawdi, the Commander in Chief of the Police, who was one of the 12 executed on Saturday evening.

Endale Tessema arrived at Sendafa and spoke to the students in more moderate terms. He apologized for having insulted their parents. He warned the students not to strike again, and said that the protest had been orchestrated by infiltrators from the *Sha'abiya* and *Weyene* (terms used in a derogatory fashion by the government to refer to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front [EPLF] and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front [EPRDF], which is a coalition led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front [TPLF]). Endale then read out a message from Mengistu which warned the students to be careful of infiltrators from these rebel fronts, and to weed them out. Endale then asked the students to identify all those among them from Eritrea and Tigray. The students refused to do this, saying that they were united, and Endale withdrew his request, and merely said that future protests would be dealt with much more harshly.

The students stayed at Sendafa until Sunday. Under the supervision of the police cadets, they were required to do drilling and other hard physical exercise. The cadets' sympathy for the student cause, however, meant that the exercises were not too rigorous. The students were fed well and not subject to beatings or other physical abuse. Two students who were ill were removed to hospital on Friday, May 25.

### **...But Unrest Continues at the Campus**

The students who remained behind at the campus refused to return to their studies. Some planned a hunger strike, but this did not occur because of dissension - some of it sown by security agents - and on account of the feeling that a few more hungry people in Ethiopia would be of little



concern to anybody.

On Thursday, May 24, the protest spread to the Arat Kilo campus of the University, where the science faculties are located. Students in Medical Faculty, who had already been boycotting classes, began to organize a more militant protest. At midday, a large crowd began to gather in the Arat Kilo square, chanting slogans, smashing windows, and destroying pictures of Mengistu. Three buses of police arrived immediately, and the police charged the crowd of students. A number of students were injured by being struck with sticks. After a few minutes the crowd was dispersed and the nascent protest stamped out. The Arat Kilo campus then closed down: lectures were canceled and the students went home for the weekend.

On Saturday, May 26, the Arat Kilo students staged another protest, which occurred peacefully.

## **The Strike Enters its Second Week**

At about 5 p.m. on the evening of Sunday, May 27, the students who had been removed to Sendafa were brought back to the Sidist Kilo campus. Fifteen of them were absent. They had been picked out, photographed, fingerprinted, and interrogated. Their files had been removed from the university administration. Nine of the 15 originated from Eritrea, and three were suspected members of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP).<sup>5</sup> These 15 students reappeared on the campus on Monday, but other students were afraid to approach them, fearing they were subject to surveillance.

On Sunday evening the students decided to prolong their strike and not attend classes. On Monday, no students went to class. The university remained surrounded by police.

On Monday evening, Abiye Kifle, the president of the University, chaired a meeting of the University Senate. The resolutions of the meeting were posted in various locations around the campus. These stated that the protests were the work of infiltrators from the EPLF and EPRDF/TPLF (referred to in the usual manner as *Sha'abiya* and *Weyene*), that Ethiopians should not side with these subversives and separatists, and that all who continued to strike would be dealt with as agents of the rebel fronts.

A few students did attend classes on Tuesday, May 29. Many were uncertain, and when confronted with the unified mass of striking students, abandoned their classes to rejoin the protest. Many others stayed at home with their families or relatives in Addis Ababa.

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<sup>5</sup> A left-wing anti-government party active among intellectuals during the 1970s, which was the main target of the Red Terror, and which currently has a smaller armed wing engaged in guerrilla warfare in Gojjam province.

On Tuesday afternoon, Abiye Kifle tried once again to break the strike. He posted another notice, which announced that "anti-student" elements had prevented the students from returning to classes, but that henceforth policemen would be provided in order to safeguard the students from these subversive elements. The notices also announced that there would be a meeting with senior government officials at 1 p.m. the following afternoon, in a large hall known as the Christmas Hall, and that the university would provide transportation so that students from all the different campuses could attend. The students responded by calling their own meeting on that morning.

## The Students' Resolutions

At 9 a.m. on Wednesday, May 30, the students assembled on the football field of the Sidist Kilo campus. Students came from the Arat Kilo campus, and from the schools of Medicine, Architecture, and Technology, as well as the Sidist Kilo campus. Our student's testimony continued:

Many students spoke. Most were against the government, and some - including those we knew as government agents - spoke in support of the government and against the rebel fronts. It was very amazing to see people speaking so freely.

The majority of the huge meeting was in favor of continued action, and solidarity with the 15 students who had been fingerprinted. The meeting finished at 11 a.m. The students reiterated their call for an independent students' union and passed a six-point Resolution.

The summary of the Resolution was reported by our witness:

1. As Mengistu is an enemy to Ethiopia, killing intellectuals and others who could save the country from disintegration, he is our enemy, he should be removed.
2. As Abiye Kifle is an enemy to students, acting outside his mandate of academic affairs, and making all students suffer indiscriminately, he should be removed.
3. The students are deeply upset at the execution of the 12 generals and pass our deepest sympathies to their families, the army, and the broad masses.
4. The students have protested and gone on strike in order to awaken the broad masses of Ethiopia to the dangers of the present government. The students are not agents of the EPLF and EPRDF/TPLF<sup>6</sup>, but stand by themselves. The students' struggle will continue until there is a new and democratic Ethiopia in which human rights are

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<sup>6</sup> Here and elsewhere the students used the government's terms *Sha'abiya* and *Weyene* to refer to these rebel fronts.

respected.

5. The students from rebel-occupied areas of Ethiopia should not be considered supporters of the EPLF or EPRDF/TPLF; they should not be placed under suspicion but given equal treatment with other students, and accommodation should be provided for them during the vacation.
6. The army officers who remain in detention following the coup attempt should be released, so that they can participate in the war at this critical moment. The students reiterate their opposition to the EPLF and EPRDF/TPLF.

### **The Largest Demonstrations: May 30**

The largest demonstrations of the strike began on the afternoon of May 30.

The senior government officials were expected at 1 p.m. The students decided against agreeing to the meeting in the Christmas Hall, and instead assembled again on the football field. The students brought by the official buses moved from the Hall to the football field.

It began to rain hard, for about one hour. University staff came and planted megaphones around the field, so we thought that the authorities had agreed to the change of venue. The two university vice-presidents arrived but did not speak. Instead we chanted slogans: "down with Mengistu!" "Down with Abiye!" "Mengistu, the Ethiopian Nazi!" For three hours we waited. Students spoke, holding their own meeting.

Meanwhile, the senior government officials arrived, and went to the Christmas Hall. Some students had prepared a welcome for them there.

At 4 p.m. it began to rain again and no officials had come to address the meeting [at the football field]. Students started to drift away. One column walked to the main campus gate, chanting anti-government slogans: "Isn't it enough? Enough of this fascist administration! Mengistu is eating you!" At the gates were armed Special Policemen. When the students arrived, the policemen fired into the air and the students retreated inside the campus again.

Now all the students, from the different campuses of the University, were together in one place. This was the first time all the students were together. Those who had not witnessed the protests of the week before had for the first time heard gunshots. Security men also began to drive into the campus. Though they were plain-clothed, they were easily identified by the Lada cars they normally drive and the well-known

number-plates which start at 28000. Many students were frightened and were looking for any hole to escape, but all the gates were barred by the Special Police.

Outside the campus, ordinary people were leaving their workplaces, and school pupils were leaving classes in the Empress Menen School [officially known as Yekatit 12 Secondary School, which is located adjacent to the Sidist Kilo campus]. Some of the students shouted across the fence [which separates the university from the school] and agitated the pupils there, who brought a large picture of Mengistu - a painted picture, not a photograph. This picture had stood in the center of the schoolyard. It was huge. How they got it out of the ground I don't know, but they did. The pupils passed the picture to the students. The school pupils also started throwing mud and stones at the picture of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on one wall of the school buildings.

The students insulted and kicked Mengistu's picture. They took it to the top of a building overlooking the street, hung it upside-down out of a window, and let it fall to the ground. This was repeated several times. The police did nothing. The students believed that the police were on their side, and did not insult them or attack them. When one student threw a stone at a policeman, his friends apologized to the policeman on his behalf and shook his hand. The police asked the students to stop abusing Mengistu's picture while some senior officers passed by. The students complied and then began to throw the picture from the top window again. Ordinary people passing by in the street watched but did not stop or show support, probably on account of the heavy police presence.

Some senior policemen arrived. A police general threatened the students that they would be shot if they left the campus.

The demonstration finished at about 5 p.m. The police sealed off the campus. People entering and leaving were searched, and no students other than those who could prove that they resided on the Sidist Kilo campus were allowed to enter.

## **Breaking the Strike**

The strike began to crumble on Thursday, May 31. It was broken by divisions among the students, skillfully exploited by the authorities, by playing on the students' vulnerable position, and by the enforcement of a strict ban on free association.

Some students who had supported the government throughout, including those paid as informers, rallied behind them some of the students who originated from rural areas. Their argument was that exams were imminent, and that if the students who came from poor backgrounds were unable to pass the exams, they would fail to find employment and their families would suffer

as a result. One university vice-president, Mekonnen, threatened to terminate the semester at once if the students did not restart classes. If classes were restarted, he offered to extend the semester by one week (the students demanded three) in order to compensate for the study time lost on account of the strike. The threat of failing exams had a powerful effect on the students.

Another argument was that if the military had failed to oust Mengistu with guns, what chance did unarmed students have? There was also an implicit threat that students would be conscripted to the army and compelled to fight at the war front, which students know is no idle threat. Most of the freshman year students were persuaded by these arguments on Thursday and Friday, and broke the strike. Many graduating students followed them too. At the Amist Kilo campus one group of students refused to return, demanding the removal of police from the campus. One by one, though, their classmates returned, and this demand was then dropped. Some government supporters among the Edad students were also influential in persuading students to return.

There were verbal clashes between the students who returned to classes and those who remained on strike. But the striking students were soon unable to organize themselves. The police remained on campus until the end of the semester in early July. They were positioned at every corner, in every corridor, cafe, dormitory, and common room, and did not allow the students to congregate in groups of more than two. In the first few days, students tried to gather, but were dispersed with sticks. Thereafter, any gathering of three or more was immediately broken up. No meetings were allowed, and almost no discussion was possible.

The strict enforcement of the ban on association not only prevented further organization of opposition, but also served to suppress the free circulation of news about the events in the campus.

By the following Wednesday, June 6, the last students returned to classes. The protest was broken.

## **Dissent in Ethiopia during the 1980s**

During the 1980s, there was no significant open or organized civilian dissent in Ethiopia. The memory of the Red Terror and the ruthless use of the security services ensured that, in government-controlled areas, no one dared to challenge the government openly. Dissenters had to stay silent, try to leave the country (since 1981 an act equated with treason<sup>7</sup>), or join one of the armed rebel movements.

The only legal organizations are either religious or controlled by the government. The semi-independent Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions was crushed in 1975 through a declaration

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<sup>7</sup> Article 12 of Proclamation 214 of September 1981, revising the Special Penal Code of 1974.

of a State of Emergency, a campaign of assassination, and widespread detention. The All-Ethiopia Trade Union, created in December 1975, remains an instrument of the central government. The churches' nascent opposition to the government was crushed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since then the church has been quiescent. The political parties of the 1970s, most of which were left-wing, were crushed during the Red Terror (as was the EPRP) or immediately thereafter (as was MEISON, the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement). The press has been totally controlled and censored by the government. Independent local self-help groups and neighborhood associations, which to some extent provided the basis for Farmers' Associations (FAs) and urban neighborhood associations (*kebeles*) no longer exist: FAs and *kebeles* are simply instruments of central control.

Almost the only open expression of dissent occurred during the final match of the East and Central Africa Football Cup in December 1987. The football competition was staged in Ethiopia, and contrary to expectations, the Ethiopian national football team reached the final, where they played Zimbabwe. Mengistu felt obliged to attend the final, but regretted his decision to do so when he realized that he was in the unprecedented situation of facing tens of thousands of Ethiopian citizens in a situation in which he was not the center of attention, and over which he had no direct control. One of the players in the football team had the misfortune to bear the name Mengistu (it used to be a common name to give to children), and whenever he touched the ball, the crowd roared: "Substitute Mengistu! Off with Mengistu!" Other Ethiopian spectators cheered for Zimbabwe, and outside the stadium a Soviet military advisor had his jeep overturned and had to disperse the crowds by firing his pistol into the air. Ethiopia won the match, but Mengistu showed no sign of emotion. Recognizing a *fait accompli* as the policemen themselves celebrated Ethiopia's victory, the midnight-to-dawn curfew - in place since 1974 - was suspended for a night.

## **Intimidation and Harassment at the University**

Aware that the university was likely to be a source of civil opposition to the government, the authorities have long maintained a close surveillance of all student activities. Academic freedom has existed within strictly circumscribed limits, and the authorities have been quick to punish any student who steps out of line.

One recent example of such punishment is the case of Kebede<sup>8</sup>, a third year statistics student. Kebede was considering leaving Ethiopia in order to set himself up in business. In March 1990, he arranged to meet a German businessman visiting Ethiopia as a tourist at a well-known bar in central Addis Ababa. They met and shared some drinks. Afterwards, Kebede drove the German back to the Hilton Hotel in his car, and became aware of plain-clothed security men tailing him. Kebede returned to his dormitory on the Arat Kilo campus and went to bed. In the middle of the night he was woken by a knock on the door, and was summoned to see Captain "Shambal" Ephraim. One roommate was awake and saw Kebede taken, and this student was threatened and

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<sup>8</sup> His name and details of the case have been changed to protect his identity.

told not to speak about it. In Shambal's office he was questioned about his meeting with the German. Kebede panicked and refused to say anything, claiming he had spent the whole day in his room.

Suspecting some illegal political activity, Shambal arranged for Kebede to be taken to the headquarters of a certain police station and prison, where many political prisoners are held.

On his arrival at the prison, the policemen cut Kebede's hair, and took his watch and shoelaces. He was put in a cell constructed from iron sheets. It was cold and he was denied a blanket, and given only cold water with which to wash. He was not allowed to communicate with his family or friends. Kebede spent most of the day, each day, in solitary confinement.

In prison, Kebede was interrogated about his alleged subversive activities. He was beaten on the soles of his feet. He was made to walk on nails,<sup>9</sup> and was subjected to electric shocks. In a state of shock and delirium, he was taken to a psychiatric hospital, but returned to prison after the authorities decided that he was feigning.

In June, after two months of detention incommunicado, Shambal approached the police authorities and obtained Kebede's release. Before releasing Kebede, the policemen threatened him and told him never to speak about his experiences. After his release, Kebede's feet were still bleeding from the treatment he had received, and he was unable to walk properly for more than one week.

## **Threat of Conscription**

A particularly effective threat used against students is the threat of conscription. Conscription to the armed forces is feared by every Ethiopian (see [News from Africa Watch](#), 1 June). The authorities have been deliberately unclear as to the liability of university students for conscription, thus holding this threat over the heads of all potential student activists.

In March, a young lecturer in the Department of Philosophy was conscripted in the street, along with a university student. After presenting their case to the Captain in charge of the army unit responsible for the conscripting, both were released. Three others conscripted at the same time had their objections brushed aside. When they presented their ID cards, proving they were students at the university, the soldiers ripped them up and retorted "no education before the country!" (This is a variant on a common slogan used by conscripting officers to reject complaints: "no taxis before [the defence of] the country!", "no farming before the country!") Others have been less fortunate: university students are serving in the armed forces, and some have been captured by the rebels.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a method of torture that has been corroborated by other political detainees in Ethiopia.

## **Conclusion**

The student protests at Addis Ababa University in May 1990 represented an important development in Ethiopia. They cannot be said to represent a full fledged "democracy movement" comparable with those of Eastern Europe or China. The students were not sufficiently well-organized, nor did they have a full political program, and the protests were too short-lived. In critical respects, particularly with regard to the EPLF and EPRDF/TPLF, the students continued to support the government. A decade of totalitarian control has left an entire generation in Ethiopia without any experience of civil politics, and the naivete of the student protesters was a result.

The reforms promised by Colonel Mengistu in March raised hopes that Ethiopian politics might change. However, the ruthless repression of the student protest has highlighted the extent to which nothing has changed. The repressive tactics involved the violation of basic human rights, including those guaranteed in Ethiopian law. This has ensured that no democracy movement can develop in the foreseeable future, and revealed the hollowness of Mengistu's promised "democracy".

## **Recommendations for Action**

Please write urgent appeals to the Ethiopian authorities listed below, calling for the government to:

- \* Launch a full and public enquiry into the suppression of the strikes at the university campus in May 1990, and take appropriate legal action against those responsible for the use of lethal force against the unarmed students on the night of May 22.
- \* Respect Article 47 of the 1987 Constitution and allow freedom of speech, assembly and the right to peaceful protest.

### **Please address appeals to:**

His Excellency Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam  
Head of State and Commander-in-Chief  
Addis Ababa  
Ethiopia

His Excellency Mr. Girma Amare  
Charge d'Affaires  
Embassy of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia



2134 Kalorama Road, NW  
Washington, DC 20008

His Excellency Mr. Teferi Haile Selassie  
Ambassador  
Embassy of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia  
17 Princes' Gate  
London SW7 1PZ

### **Previous Africa Watch Newsletters on Ethiopia:**

Conscription: Abuses of Human Rights during Recruitment to the Armed Forces, June 1, 1990.

"Mengistu has Decided to Burn Us like Wood": Bombing of Civilians and Civilian Targets by the Air Force, July 24, 1990.

*Africa Watch is a non-governmental organization created in May 1988 to monitor human rights practices in Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. Its Executive Director is Rakiya Omaar; its Research Director is Richard Carver; Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorensen are Research Associates; and Ben Penglase and Jo Graham are Associates.*

*Africa Watch is part of Human Rights Watch, an organization that also comprises Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch and Middle East Watch. The Chairman of Human Rights Watch is Robert L Bernstein and the Vice-Chairman is Adrian DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, the Deputy Director is Kenneth Roth, Holly Burkhalter is Washington Director, Susan Osnos is Press Director.*

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