

September 20, 1990

ETHIOPIA

200 DAYS IN THE DEATH OF ASMARA

Starvation as a Weapon and Violations of the Humanitarian Laws of War

Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, is a besieged city. Food supplies are running out, and there is scarcely any fuel and water. The army rules, exercising a wide range of arbitrary powers, requisitioning food at will, and preventing people from trying to ease their plight by searching for food outside the city. The civilians of Asmara are ultimately held as hostages, a human shield for the army garrison.

Apart from Assab far to the south, Asmara and its immediate environs is the last area of Eritrea still controlled by the government; the rest of the population live in areas controlled by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which is fighting for independence for Eritrea, in a war that entered its thirtieth year this month. Asmara contains 280,000 civilians, plus people displaced by the war. The other towns and villages in the enclave contain a further 800,000 people, who suffer conditions even worse than those in the city. The garrison consists of over 120,000 soldiers.

Asmara has been cut off from overland supply for more than 200 days, since the EPLF captured Massawa in February. The army ensures that very little food is traded across the battle lines. The only relief supplies come by air. A small UN-sponsored airlift, which continues despite constant shelling of the airport, provides only a fraction of the food needs of the civilian population. Government resources are directed solely to the delivery of troops, ammunition and military supplies. The huge garrison also feeds itself by requisitioning from the local civilian population.

Asmara is running out of food and becoming a famine emergency. The EPLF has shown inflexibility in responding to requests for the safe delivery of humanitarian relief. However, the primary responsibility for the current disaster lies with the Ethiopian government, which is using the civilian population as a weapon to achieve its military objectives. Civilians are forced to remain at the front line to deter EPLF attacks, and the government has made an implicit threat to destroy the city and its inhabitants should it fall to the EPLF. Worse even than the hunger and hardship of the present is the fear of the future. Bloody retribution has already been taken against towns controlled by the EPLF, such as Massawa.

The actions of the Ethiopian government are in contravention to the international law governing armed conflicts. The civilian population of Asmara and the surrounding enclave is being denied protection from attack, forcibly prevented from moving to safety, deliberately starved, and held hostage. These actions are in contravention of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 (to which Ethiopia is a signatory), and the Additional Protocol on the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (to which Ethiopia is not a signatory, but which may be taken as laying down the standards of conduct for the war in Eritrea). While the EPLF is pursuing military objectives in a manner that endangers and harms civilians, there is no evidence that it has committed specific violations of these laws during the siege of Asmara.

Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government to observe its obligations under international humanitarian law, and appeals to both sides for a truce to allow the provision of relief to the civilian population, and to allow people to leave the enclave in safety.

200 Days' Siege

Life in Asmara has a thin veneer of normality. The residents still go to work, dressed in suits, and frequent bars in the early evening, before returning home. But this is a population in a state of hunger, weariness, and fear. All travel on foot, because there is no fuel available for private citizens. There is nothing to do in offices or factories because there are no telephone links with the outside world, virtually no business transactions, and no electricity supply during daylight. On returning home there is very little food, and firewood is almost unobtainable, so people must burn their furniture in order to cook, or else eat grains soaked in cold water (which is particularly difficult for children). Without electricity for most of the time, the water pumping stations are inoperative and there is a dire shortage of water. People can scarcely drink, let alone wash. Lines of empty drums stand in the streets in the forlorn hope of the arrival of a water lorry. Instead of the normal hum of traffic, the city is quiet except for the roar of military aeroplanes from the airport and the occasional explosions of rockets fired by the EPLF.

Since February, Asmara has been under siege. However, it is a siege with a difference. The great majority of the besieged residents do not support the army "defending" their city, instead they have more sympathy with their own relatives, often their own children, who are a few miles away in the hills, planning their attacks. It is the fact that the government sees the civilian population of the city as a potential (if not an actual) "fifth column" that makes the siege of Asmara one of the most gruelling on record.

Food Supplies before the Siege

Like all cities, Asmara has never fed itself. The 1.1 million civilians in Asmara and the surrounding government-controlled enclave normally consume about 15,000 tons of food per month. Until the 1980s the city relied on grain supplies from the surrounding countryside, especially to the south west. The districts of Anseba and Agordat in western Eritrea have long supplied the city with fruit and vegetables, and Shire district of Tigray has been one of the principal

granaries. These supplies continued even when the production areas were outside government control. Since 1985, with drought in the region and the supply lines increasingly disrupted by war, supplies brought in by the government Agricultural Marketing Corporation have been important.

Since that date, food aid has also been critical. Food relief has been supplied in large quantities to residents of the town itself. Wheat has also been the preferred method of payment for the militia - which is known as *milisha sirnay* ("wheat militia") as a consequence. During the 1985 famine the militia consistently received priority in food distributions over the civilian population. Militiamen also received a larger ration, of 90 kilograms of wheat per month; if there was food remaining after this, civilians received about 10 kilograms per month. This practice continued until February 1990. Much of this wheat has subsequently been sold on the market by the militiamen, to raise money. It could then be bought by residents, or by traders who transported it south to drought-stricken rural areas. During 1989, large quantities of relief wheat were taken to neighboring Tigray province and sold on the market. In Asmara, the price was between 30 and 50 Birr* per quintal, and in northern Tigray 80 to 160 Birr per quintal. Substantial profits were to be made transporting grain from one place to the other, in what became a regular trade. Tigray province is controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the traders needed to bribe soldiers in order to transport the food into rebel-held territory.

During and after the famine of 1983-5, food aid was also distributed liberally in areas close to the front line with the EPLF. The area around Keren, behind the Halhal Front where government troops faced the EPLF, is a case in point. It appears that generous distributions were made in part to encourage loyalty from the local population. Some of this food crossed the front line, taken by traders to sell, or by individual recipients to donate to relatives living in EPLF-controlled territory. Food aid distributed by the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), the humanitarian organization associated with the EPLF, has crossed the front line in the opposite direction.

Commercial Food Supplies during the Siege

Since the siege began, the price of grain in Asmara has risen over ten times, to over 700 Birr per quintal. This is far more than the great majority of the residents can afford: a laborer earning the minimum wage of 92 cents per day is able to buy 130 grams - about one third of an adult's minimum intake of staple food (not counting vegetables, salt, etc, or firewood).

The previous section has shown that food can be easily "smuggled" across the "battle lines". This is made possible because (1) the actual fighting is relatively infrequent and (2) both sides tolerate, and indeed profit from the arrangement. Since February there has been intensified fighting on all fronts. However, the fighting has not been continuous and it has been possible for trade to be conducted between Asmara and the EPLF-held rural areas, particularly to the south. The "battle lines" remain porous.

* The Birr is the Ethiopian unit of currency. It is officially exchanged at 2.05 to the US dollar, and unofficially at about 5. A quintal is a sack of 100 kilogrammes.

Despite the 1989 drought, according to an independent crop assessment mission, Shire district in Tigray produced a harvest surplus of over 50,000 tons of staple grain. The price of grain in this area - a traditional granary of the city - is a maximum of 150 Birr per quintal. Normal market forces would mean that large quantities of this grain should be transported to Asmara. There are no bans on its export by the TPLF or EPLF.

Very little commercial grain has reached Asmara overland. Africa Watch has learned of instances in which grain was confiscated by soldiers when people tried to bring it in. Residents who are caught with grain traded from EPLF-controlled areas are regularly detained and punished. There have also been instances in which people travelling by air from Addis Ababa to Asmara, and bringing food with them for their relatives, have had this food unloaded from the aeroplane at Addis airport.

Why is there this ban on importing food to Asmara? There are several reasons. One is the army's fear of infiltration from the EPLF. The second is that the army does not want people to leave the city, even for trade, because they are keeping them there as hostages. A third is that the soldiers on the front line, short of food themselves, regularly confiscate so much food that traders are deterred from doing any business. A fourth is that soldiers are themselves involved in the grain trade, and profit from the high prices. Fortunes are being made from the famine. A fifth is that there is a deliberate policy of starving the civilian inhabitants of the city.

The army's ban on free movement of people from the enclave and free movement of commercial food into the enclave is the single most important reason for the hunger affecting the civilian population.

Food Relief During the Siege

The Closure of Massawa

When the EPLF captured Massawa on 8-11 February, 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 the government threatened to destroy it with aeroplanes. Despite diplomatic pressure, the government did not yield and the ship was diverted to Port Sudan.*

Airlift of Relief

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian government proposed a relief airlift to Asmara. In March the UN came

* See [News from Africa Watch](#), July 24, 1990.

up with a plan acceptable to the Ethiopian government for an airlift from Asseb and Djibouti. The donors, however, were unhappy with the proposal that the food should be distributed by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) of the Ethiopian government, which had been responsible for supplying large amounts of food to the militia forces. 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 Asseb and making four trips each per day. This allowed the delivery of a maximum of 4800 tons per month, considerably less than the 8000 tons 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 is able to deliver less than the maximum figure: between June 1 and September 6, it delivered 10,300 tons, or 66% of maximum capacity. A plan to airlift food using Soviet transport planes was proposed in June but has not materialized.

Fearing that the airport may be closed for longer periods or even indefinitely, the ECS has appealed to international donors for more aircraft to fly in relief while it is still possible. This request has so far met with no response. The funding for the airlift is secure only until the end of September.

The Ethiopian government has 26 civil and 16 military aircraft available for transporting food. Not one of these aircraft has been employed for this task. The RRC is distributing no relief in the enclave.

The EPLF warned against the airlift, and later renewed its "warning to those quarters which are still involved in military intervention by transporting military material to the Dergue government pretending it is relief and humanitarian aid."* 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 are also airlifting military equipment to Asmara, and the USSR has provided most of the army's hardware). 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 operated by ERA.

The suggestion that the UN relief airlift is transporting military supplies is not supported by the evidence. However, the civilian and military airports in Asmara are not wholly separate, but share the same runway and other facilities. The airport is also used for the airlift of military supplies (usually ten flights each day), and as the base for bombing missions by MiG fighter-bombers. It may thus be considered a legitimate military target. Under present circumstances it is not possible for the EPLF to pursue its military objective of closing the airport and damaging the military aircraft without endangering the relief airlift, nor is it possible for the relief planes to request safe passage without implying the extension of immunity from attack to military aircraft.

The EPLF have been continually shelling Asmara airport since March. The shells have damaged military transport planes, MiG fighter-bombers, a plane belonging to the RRC, and airport

* Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, ME 0806, 3 July 1990.

installations. So far no plane associated with the UN airlift has been damaged. The airport has been closed on several occasions on account of the shelling (one day in July, four days in August, several days so far in September).

The relief distribution faces two main additional problems. One is fuel, which is in chronically short supply. Each day the airlift brings in just enough fuel to run the minimum relief journeys. The second is the population displaced by the fighting. The displaced are wholly destitute and need a full ration. About 20,000 people fled towards Asmara after the capture of Massawa, and more flee each town that falls to the EPLF. There is a policy of keeping the displaced out of Asmara town itself. For instance, the Massawa displaced remain at Nefasit, just behind the front line at Ghinda. The residents of Ghinda itself have been prevented from fleeing to Asmara, and are living in caves and other shelters to protect themselves from the fighting.

The ECS distribution gives priority to the displaced and other very poor people. Increasingly, however, the middle classes of Asmara are unable to provide for themselves, and need relief. Some impoverished middle class people are too ashamed to stand in the queues at the distribution points and remain hungry in their houses.

Massawa Remains Closed

At the Washington Summit in early June, 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 Program (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 between WFP and the EPLF 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. There have been no subsequent missions to the port, though negotiations are continuing between the UN and the EPLF.

The EPLF reported that on the morning of September 4, three government aeroplanes carried out a bombing mission against Massawa, which occurred without casualties or significant damage.* It has yet to be seen whether this attack is an isolated incident or the start of another systematic bombing campaign against Massawa. If it is the latter, it is an extremely grave development.

* There was some mutual recrimination over the failure of this operation. Two reports in the New York Times (22 and 25 July) blamed the EPLF, while a story in Africa Confidential (August 10) implied that the UN had yielded to Ethiopian government pressure aimed at preventing the mission's success. Africa Watch cannot verify either version of events.

* Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts ME 0864, 8 September 1990.

The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA)

ERA has meanwhile continued its own distributions in the areas of Eritrea controlled by the EPLF. This year, about 90,000 tons of grain has been 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 is allocated to needy people according to lists drawn up by village committees. A spokesman for ERA commented that some of this food later finds its way into Asmara, as recipients give help to their needy relatives: "this food is always transferred from one hand to another at the end of the day". ERA has offered to set up distribution centers in EPLF areas, to which the residents of Asmara can come and collect a ration. The Ethiopian government has not agreed.

Some people from the enclave do attempt to venture out after curfew hours to collect grain. Residents caught with grain that originates from ERA (identifiable because of its type, known as "Sudan sorghum") are subject to punishment. This is normally imprisonment but also includes, according to reliable reports, summary execution.

The Ethiopian government remains 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."** ERA food convoys are forced to move only at night for fear of aerial bombardment, a massive constraint on the efficiency of the relief operation. Hiding under trees during daylight, they are still often attacked. The last such raid occurred on September 3, near Tessenei in western Eritrea, when a relief lorry was burned.

Requisitioning by the Army

The army in Asmara and the surrounding areas constantly requisitions food from the residents. While some of the requisitioning is looting by undisciplined soldiers, much of it is founded on directives from the military command. The wheat militias have ceased to be paid their ration and have turned to looting.

Instances include:

- * 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;
- * the people of Senhit (around Keren) are required to feed the garrison there;
- * in the area of Chendek (near Keren) there has been an order prohibiting people from picking heles, a cactus fruit eaten as a famine food in times of shortage, so that it is reserved for the soldiers;

** Voice of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa; BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts* ME 0704, 5 March 1990.

- * 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.

Immediately after the fall of Massawa the administration of Asmara ceased the distribution of (rationed) fuel for private and commercial use. Excepting small quotas for essential services, the military now utilize all the fuel in the enclave. The army also requisitions medicine, housing, and other commodities, such as furniture to use as firewood. There are unconfirmed reports of soldiers stealing money, stealing blankets from sleeping people, confiscating the relief food in a store belonging to the Evangelical Church in Mendefera, and on one occasion seizing two oxen and two goats, eating them, and then "selling" the skins back to the former owners.

The requisitioning of food and other commodities and removal of people is based on powers given to the military authorities under the State of Emergency legislation, decreed for Eritrea on May 14, 1988.

Medicine

Medical care in Asmara is a nightmare. The hospitals are overflowing, and there are shortages of essential drugs, equipment, and medical staff.

The military have first call upon any medical facilities in Asmara. There are three military hospitals in the city, with 6000 beds. These are constantly full. Cases of serious injury are removed at once to Addis Ababa (where most civilian hospitals have been requisitioned and the corridors are filled with wounded soldiers); those with soft tissue wounds stay two weeks or so before being sent back to the front line. The army has 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 are also required to serve in the military hospitals. Much of the supply of drugs to the hospital - late on account of the interruption of the normal supply route through Massawa - is often "bought" by the military. (The army makes payment, but the hospital has no option but to sell, and replacement stocks cannot be obtained). The hospital has a limited quota of fuel to run its vehicles and limited supplies of electricity for essential operations and sterilization. The overburdened staff have been described walking backwards from bed to bed through the wards so as not to see the enormous line of patients awaiting treatment.

The reduced facilities at the civilian hospitals are overwhelmed by the need to treat the ordinary run of complaints, plus injuries to civilians arising from the war, and illnesses associated with undernutrition such as severe gastro-intestinal complaints. The demands of the army come on top of this. There is also the growing threat of epidemic diseases associated with poor sanitation due to lack of water.

Security

The residents of Asmara are at risk, not only from hunger and disease, but from the arbitrary and brutal actions of the Ethiopian army, and from shelling by the EPLF and other dangers associated with the war.

The State of Emergency decreed in Eritrea in May 1988 gives almost unlimited powers to the Overall Administrator. The Overall Administrator is able to requisition any property, move any people, issue special proclamations, and convene military tribunals. These tribunals have jurisdiction over a wide range of offenses, including, *inter alia*:

- * Crimes committed against the freedom of the country;
- * Crimes committed against the constitutional order or against organs of that order;*
- * Crimes committed against Ethiopia's unity and the unity of the people;
- * Anti-revolutionary crimes;
- * Crimes of armed terrorism and the waging of civil war;
- * The crime of agitating and organizing;
- * Crimes committed in violation of a special proclamation;
- * Other crimes which the Overall Administrator decides shall be transferred to the military tribunals from the ordinary courts.

The tribunals are staffed by serving military officers. They may impose the death sentence, which must be confirmed by the Overall Administrator before it is carried out. There is a right of appeal to the Supreme Military Tribunal.

The security forces are able to inspect or hold any property, and imprison any individual. There is a curfew from 9.00 p.m. until dawn, during which time people are liable to be shot on sight.

These provisions amount to a total suspension of the rule of law in government-held Eritrea, and give almost absolute power to the Overall Administrator to act in a summary and arbitrary manner.

There have been many instances of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment in Asmara and the surrounding areas. There have also been killings by members of the armed forces. On June 9, a group of soldiers left their military base and entered the city. They shot dead 31 youths and injured at least fifteen more. The killings took place in several parts of the city as the youths were returning home from watching a televised World Cup soccer match at Kidane Mehret in the city center. They were shot in the street and in the doorways of houses, just before the curfew hour. Independent sources have confirmed that this massacre was the work of a special army "death squad".

The arbitrary actions by government forces have contributed to the climate of fear in the enclave.

The residents of the town are also at risk from shelling by the EPLF. Starting in March, the EPLF

* The meaning of this provision in a region where the State of Emergency has suspended the constitutional order is not altogether clear.

began regular shelling aimed at the airport. The artillery is located some 30 kilometers away. In the first few days, shells landed over a wide area, causing a number of civilian casualties, both from the blast directly and from fragments hurled over a large distance. Since then, almost all the shells have landed in the airport and the neighboring two quarters of the town, Godaif and Sembel. The EPLF warned the residents of these areas to evacuate their homes, but not all did so, in part because of the fear that their houses would be requisitioned by the army.

Between March and June about 60 civilians were killed in the shelling and 100 houses badly damaged. The shelling intensified in late July, leading to a higher casualty rate.^{*} In late August the government reported a total of 88 fatalities to date, including 18 in a single day.

The airport may be considered a legitimate military target and these casualties are the result of collateral damage (with warning given) rather than a deliberate policy of indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets. The killing of civilians in the shelling cannot be condemned as a violation of the laws of war; however it is an indictment of the savage inhumanity of the war in Eritrea that such deaths are now inevitable and routine.

The shelling is reported to have intensified the oppressive feeling in the city. Intensive shelling occurs soon after dawn, at midday, and in the early evening, with occasional shots at other times and during the night. There is a gap of sixteen seconds from the sound of the shell being fired and the explosion as it lands: in the meantime the residents hold their breath, count, and pray. The nights are tense and often sleepless, as people listen for the shells.

Outside Asmara, civilians are exposed to the dangers of war from both sides. There are frequent rocket attacks and shelling by the EPLF of roads, military emplacements and other targets, and both artillery and aerial bombardments by the government forces. There are unconfirmed reports that about 30 peasant farmers were summarily shot by the army during a military engagement near Decamhere in late August.

Preventing Escape

The civilian residents of Asmara are mostly Eritreans, and are the relatives of the members of the EPLF. Concern for the safety of these civilians has certainly influenced the EPLF's willingness to launch an attack on Asmara. It is widely believed that the Ethiopian government is holding the civilian population hostage, preventing them from leaving, with the implicit threat of large-scale bloodshed should the EPLF appear to be close to a final victory.

The army prevents people from leaving Asmara. People who try to leave on foot are subject to summary arrest, detention and even execution. If they can, people try to leave by air. Ethiopian

^{*} AFP 29 August 1990.

Airlines flights come irregularly. They arrive half full, but leave packed. The plane stays on the ground for as short a time as possible, engines running. The arriving passengers disembark through the forward door at the same time as the leaving passengers board through the rear door. While a ticket costs 150 Birr, the extra cost for obtaining all the clearances (including bribes) amounts to another 600 Birr or more - prohibitively expensive for most.

The army has already displayed its willingness to use a civilian population as hostages during a military engagement. In the battle for Massawa, when the government forces retreated to an island, they used civilians as a shield. During the battle for Ghinda (which lies in a strategic location on the Asmara-Massawa road) on March 11-13, the army prevented the civilian population of the town from leaving, deterring the EPLF from launching an all-out artillery barrage against forces in the town.

Civilians living near the front line have been prevented from leaving towards Asmara, suggesting that there is a general policy of using them to deter attacks by the EPLF. This is a flagrant violation of the international laws which bind parties to a conflict.

Life in "Liberated" Towns

The fate of towns and villages which are taken by the EPLF is bombardment from the air.* Everywhere has suffered, notably Afabet and Massawa. The attacks are carried out partly to wreak revenge and punishment, and they serve to demoralize people who learn that "liberation" from the government's control does not mean protection from its air force.

A visitor to EPLF-controlled Eritrea in April witnessed the aftermath of four bombing attacks on Massawa (on April 4-7), which left 89 civilians dead, and one attack on Afabet (April 3), which killed 16. He reported that "in spite of many large buildings clearly visible from the air, MiGs carefully picked out crowded residential areas with shanty housing, to ensure maximum civilian casualties" and that the planes dropped cluster bombs, which are particularly deadly against such targets. The fear of such attacks created ghost towns, alive only at night, if at all:

About 80% of the people in both Massawa and Afabet were daily evacuating the town at dawn and coming back at dusk. They were spending their days sheltering under trees and bushes some 5-10 kilometers from the town. Many were camping permanently outside the town, and we visited such camps in Afabet. The people spread themselves over large areas, so as not to provide another target for MiG bombings. In Massawa after the initial takeover, many people removed to the outskirts of the town, and were spotted and bombed with napalm. We interviewed many of these victims in Orotta hospital. In Massawa from about 5.00 p.m. onwards we were able to witness files of people, many kilometers long, returning to the town,

* See [News from Africa Watch](#), 24 July 1990.

to go to market, eat in their houses, and prepare food to carry out of town for the next day. More and more people were beginning to sleep outside the town as well, and we watched many beds being carried out of the town late in the evening.

On [our] arrival in Massawa, shells were fired from Ethiopian gunboats at about 2:30 a.m. With enormous explosions sounding as though they were occurring just above our heads, we took fright and raced to a large underground bunker, where we joined about 500 other people, mainly women and children, for the night. It turns out that there are about 5 such hiding places in the town, where a total of about 2,000 people spend the day-time and often the night-time as well, instead of leaving the town altogether. With soaring temperatures and excessive humidity, these bunkers are crowded, dark, dingy and covered in flies. On Friday, April 13, in the heat of the day, we found ourselves taking cover in the bunker, dripping with sweat as we listened to the sound of MiGs flying over in the distance. The doors to the bunker were closed, people put their hands over their ears, and the place fell silent except for the noise of babies crying. The MiGs disappeared without dropping any bombs over Massawa this time, but the terrible disease of fear, which hangs constantly over the entire population, did not disappear with them.

For three months after the Washington Summit in June, there were no bombing raids on Massawa, although they continued on other towns. The attack of September 4, may presage another concerted campaign.

Conclusion

Asmara is starving. While EPLF inflexibility over permitting safe passage of food to the government-controlled enclave has contributed to this, by far the greater part of the blame belongs to the Ethiopian government. The government has made no effort to supply relief itself. It has blocked relief proposals based on the utilization of ERA's capacity for bringing food from Sudan, attacking relief lorries and preventing civilians from moving freely to obtain food at distribution centers and markets controlled by the EPLF. The army is feeding itself from the depleted stocks of the local civilians. The EPLF siege amounts to a sentence of hardship; government actions make this into a sentence of death.

The government has suspended any semblance of the rule of law in Asmara and the surrounding area, and exercises arbitrary and brutal control of the population. People are at risk from death and injury due to the side-effects of the fighting, but the government is in addition following a policy of deliberately exposing the civilian population to these risks as part of a strategy for deterring attack by the EPLF.

The people of the government-controlled enclave are weary and frightened. The current situation is a nightmare, which may yet become a worse nightmare should the EPLF capture the city and the Ethiopian government unleash an apocalypse of aerial bombardment upon it; a repeat of the horror

and terror of Massawa, but on a larger scale.

Recommendations

Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front to observe a truce, without military activity or re-supply, for a period of one month in order to allow the safe delivery of food and other relief items to Asmara by air and land, and in order to allow civilians to leave the enclave if they wish. Africa Watch calls upon both parties to expedite the supply of food and other essential commodities to Asmara and the surrounding enclave.

Specifically, we call upon the Ethiopian government to:

- * Allow the unhindered flow of commercial food from Tigray into Asmara;
- * Allow the importation of relief food by ERA across the Sudanese border in safety, and cease attacks on relief convoys;
- * Not attack Massawa and allow the free flow of relief through the port;
- * Allow the residents of Asmara to leave the town freely to seek relief in areas controlled by the EPLF;
- * Cease the requisitioning of food, medicine and other commodities from civilians by the armed forces.

We call upon the EPLF to:

- * Facilitate the early opening of Massawa for relief deliveries;
- * Allow the civilian population of Asmara free access to relief food distributed by ERA.

We call upon the western donors to:

- * Facilitate the early opening of Massawa for relief deliveries;
- * Increase the size of the UN airlift of food for distribution in Asmara by ECS;
- * Increase the provision of relief food to ERA.

Africa Watch calls upon both the Ethiopian government and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front to observe the international humanitarian law governing the conduct of parties to a conflict; to take all possible precautions to prevent unnecessary civilian casualties from the fighting; to allow the free and rapid evacuation of civilians from areas affected by fighting; and to hold no hostages.

Africa Watch asks the government to ensure that members of the armed forces do not detain or execute civilians extrajudicially, and to rescind the provisions in the State of Emergency which empower members of the security and armed forces to commit basic violations of human rights.

Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government to ratify the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts.

Please write urgent appeals to the authorities listed below.

Please address appeals to:

His Excellency Colonel Mengistu Haile
Mariam
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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 Richard Carver; Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorensen are Research Associates; Jo Graham and Ben Penglase 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, and Susan Osnos is Press Director.

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