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ETHIOPIA

Human Rights Crisis as Central Power Crumbles Killings, Detentions, Forcible Conscription and Obstruction of Relief

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Introduction

Ethiopia is in the midst of a massive political upheaval. Government forces have been defeated in recent rebel offensives, endangering the survival of the government of President Mengistu Haile Mariam. President Mengistu and the National Shengo (Assembly) have made a desperate and dramatic bid for a "transitional system" embracing all "pro-unity" forces, and involving a "peace forum" and an amnesty for all Ethiopians living abroad. The principal rebel forces -- the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF*) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) -- are almost certain to reject the government's new peace conditions, because the peace offer explicitly rules out the possibility of Eritrean independence, which is a central plank of their programs. Indeed, Mengistu himself appeared to rule out the participation of the EPRDF and EPLF in a transitional government when he dubbed them "anti-unity groups" and described their actions in these words "at no time in our country's history has our country produced treachery of this magnitude."**

Concurrent with the peace/unity initiative, President Mengistu and the Shengo have called for an unprecedented mobilization for war.

At the time of writing, the forces of the EPRDF are close to Addis Ababa on both the northern and western sides, and the government appears unable to mount an effective counter-offensive. Meanwhile, EPLF forces are close to the port of Assab, Ethiopia's key link to the outside world. Whatever happens next, it is certain that the power of the central government in Ethiopia has been dramatically eroded.

Since seizing power, Colonel Mengistu's rule has been characterized by wanton disregard for human rights. The country is already in a long-term human rights crisis. The disintegration of central power is bringing with it a new wave of human rights abuses, mostly by government forces. As the rebel fronts occupy new provinces and cities, there are fears that they will not tolerate civilian dissent. There is also the possibility of a breakdown in law and order in parts of the country, including Addis Ababa.

The major human rights concerns include:

- * Killings of civilians.
- * The detention of civilians without charge or trial.
- * An intensification of conscription for the government war effort, including the recruitment

* The EPRDF is a coalition of forces led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). It is popularly known in Ethiopia as the weyane.

** BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts, ME/1053, April 23, 1991.

- of school and university students.
- * The interruption and non-distribution of famine relief supplies.

While all sides are responsible for abuses, the great majority of human rights violations continue to be committed by the government.

War and Peace in Ethiopia, 1991

Following a lull in fighting lasting about a year, on February 23, 1991, the EPRDF launched a major offensive code-named "Operation Tewodros" with the stated aim of annihilating all government forces in Gondar and Gojjam administrative regions. Within two weeks, these objectives were achieved. All the government forces were killed, captured or dispersed, and the EPRDF forces then advanced into Wollega administrative region, driving government forces out of there too in the first week of April. Subsequently, advances have been made in Shewa, close to the capital, Addis Ababa. Meanwhile, EPLF forces swept down the coast towards the port of Assab.

The government response to this debacle was initially the familiar one of intensification of the armed struggle, including stepped-up conscription (see below), together with a round of arrests of suspected opponents.

One of the few encouraging signs during the crackdown was the emergence of a vocal movement for peace in Addis Ababa. In the first week of April, a group of 11 prominent academics at the university of Addis Ababa, headed by Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam, signed a memorandum calling for the resignation of the government (though it did not specify the removal of President Mengistu) and the appointment of "elders" to oversee a transitional government. The memorandum blamed the government and rebels equally for Ethiopia's predicament. It was presented to President Mengistu on April 11, but was not presented to either the EPRDF or EPLF.

It is not within the mandate of Africa Watch to comment upon the contents of a peace proposal or the motives of those who advocate it. However, the right of citizens to express themselves freely and to campaign for a peaceful resolution to a civil war is extremely important. Africa Watch calls upon the Ethiopian government to let Professor Mesfin, his co-signatories and supporters campaign on behalf of their peace proposal without hindrance and without threat of any reprisal. Africa Watch also calls upon the government to allow other citizens to formulate and publicly promote other peace proposals.

In response to the critical military situation and the calls for peace, President Mengistu addressed the nation on April 19. In a long and rather confused speech, he traced the history of Ethiopia and threats to its existence. He blamed the military defeats on the allegedly superior armaments of the rebels -- claiming that they were supplied by Arab powers intent on dismembering the country -- and on the lack of manpower and materiel of the Ethiopian army. Mengistu continued to describe the EPRDF and EPLF as "anti-unity groups". He said that he was acting only from love of his

country and not from any personal ambition to retain power, and offered the people the prospect of a transitional government dedicated to the preservation of Ethiopian unity. Finally, President Mengistu called for national mobilization to defeat the rebels, and implied that if all these objectives could be achieved, he would be ready to stand down.

An emergency meeting of the National Shengo debated Mengistu's proposals on April 22/23. Like Mengistu's speech, the content of the resolutions of the Shengo are somewhat contradictory. They may be summarized:^{*}

- * A peace forum, including "all opposition parties and unity forces", is to be formed, leading to their participation in peaceful and democratic elections.
- * An amnesty to all citizens living abroad, who left Ethiopia for "various political reasons", as well as those living in the country who are members of opposition forces, who are willing to participate in the pro-unity transitional government.
- * A ceasefire.
- * The mass mobilization "more than ever before", of all adult men in the country, through all organizations and workplaces, coordinated by a new National Revolutionary Campaign Centre, to join the military defence of the country: "it is time to fight alongside the revolutionary army and the militia, on all fronts, to defend against the enemy's forceful imposition of their will."

These proposals have met with a mixed response. They undoubtedly consist in the most dramatic concessions ever made -- at least verbally -- by the government of President Mengistu towards recognizing the rights of citizens to participate in the political life of the country. However, by labelling the EPRDF and EPLF as "anti-unity", and refusing to consider the issue of the right to independence of Eritrea, the proposal ensured its rejection by EPRDF and EPLF. Many Ethiopian citizens fear that the substance of the proposal is contained in the last item, and that it is largely a preparation for still further conscription efforts as a prelude to an attempted government counter-offensive.

Africa Watch welcomes the increasingly free debate that is belatedly occurring in Addis Ababa on issues of the utmost national importance. However, despite the welcome declaration of an amnesty for political refugees, Ethiopia is in a deepening human rights crisis, which is very largely the creation of the government.

Crackdown in Eritrea

^{*} BBC, *SWB*, ME/1054, 24 April 1991.

Probably the worst record of human rights abuses in recent months is to be found in government-controlled areas of Eritrea. The government is in imminent danger of losing control of all of Eritrea, and sees the civilian population as actual or potential EPLF sympathizers.

Summary execution

Government forces are engaging in the summary execution of civilians in the government-controlled enclave around Asmara. Following the assassination of a government employee, Hussein Obeid, by the EPLF in early January (see below), leading members of the military administration in Asmara publicly vowed to take vengeance. Shortly afterwards, the government announced that four civilians had been killed at Dekezure, Senhit district. The EPLF claims that government radio carried a report of a further 10 executions on April 16. There are reports of another 21 killings of civilians.

While widespread killing of civilians has undoubtedly taken place, it has proved extremely difficult to check the details of each individual case. Civilians reported to have been killed by government forces include:

1. Amine Habte Mariam, aged 12, shot by soldiers while allegedly training, Tsazega, Hamassien, January.
2. Be'emenet Zeray, a girl of 16, was killed by soldiers with a knife while resisting attempts to rape her, in Anseba, Senhit, January 18.
3. Gebre Amlakh Tekle Giorgis was returning to his village after having sold grain in Adi Quala when he was robbed and killed by soldiers on March 28.
4. Kifleyesus Fanuel, Adi Quala.
5. Negussie Wolde Mikael, Adi Quala.
6. Saba Kifle, aged 25, and her brother Yacob, 28, killed by soldiers at Adi Garma, Seraye, February 7.
7. Tekle Beyene was killed by soldiers at Sheikha Wadi Bisserat, Seraye, on April 3.
8. Teklehaimanot Tesfazgi, Adi Quala.
9. Yohannes Beyu, Adi Quala.
10. Yosef Tesfalidet, a merchant from Keren.

11. Zaid Gebre Selassie, a woman from Adi Quala.
12. Two elderly women were killed by soldiers, one shot and one strangled, at Girgir, Senhit, in February.

Many of the soldiers in the enclave are without regular supplies of food and are months in arrears in their pay. Many are hungry. There are numerous reports of them stealing money and food from civilians, and beating and executing those who resist their demands.

Assassinations by the EPLF

For many years, the EPLF has conducted a sporadic campaign of assassination against people who allegedly "collaborate" with the Ethiopian government. These alleged "collaborators" include public officials such as judges, policemen and leading members of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and administration, and civilians allegedly paid by the security forces as informers. According to the EPLF, the activities of these alleged "collaborators" are thoroughly investigated and they are tried *in absentia*. If the trial reaches a verdict of guilty, the collaborator is warned to desist from his or her activity. The warning is repeated. If he or she fails to do this, an assassination squad is dispatched, and in the terminology of the EPLF, "the arm of the revolution reaches" the person. In most years, a handful of alleged collaborators are assassinated. Since late 1990, this campaign of assassination has been stepped up.

While recognizing that some or all of the people assassinated had indeed committed crimes or human rights abuses which required that they be brought to justice, Africa Watch considers that their execution without being given the right of a fair trial amounts to a violation of their basic human rights. Africa Watch considers that a violation by one party to a conflict can never be a justification for a violation by the other party.

Some of those assassinated by the EPLF in recent months include:

1. Amanuel Wolde Libanos, head of the Senhit Farmers' Association and accused of being a member of the secret police, was assassinated in Keren on December 24.
2. Asmerom Gebre Amlakh was accused of causing the arrest and torture of many citizens, and was assassinated in the Hadis Alem area of Asmara on April 4.
3. Gebre Kristos Amare, deputy divisional officer for Senhit district, was assassinated in Keren on December 24.
4. Gidey Tesfu, accused of being head of the Senhit district secret service, was assassinated in Hagaz, Senhit, on December 18. He was convicted *in absentia* of arresting people and

harassing them in other ways.

5. Hussein Obeid, a teacher and member of the WPE in Asmara, was assassinated on January 10. Hussein was tried in absentia for informing the authorities that 12 teachers were collaborating with the EPLF, in 1979. Most of the accused teachers were subsequently executed by the government.
6. Kessete Haile, accused of being a member of the secret service in Adi Quala, was assassinated on January 13. He was tried in absentia for tapping telephones and betraying people to the authorities, causing several to be arrested, some of whom later died in prison.
7. Negesti Haile (a woman), accused of being an informer for the secret service, was assassinated on the Asmara-Keren road in mid March. She was convicted in absentia of causing many people to be imprisoned and some to be killed.

Some of these assassinations, such as those of Hussein Obeid and Kessete Hailu, have led to government reprisals, including executions and detentions.

Some of those warned to desist from their "collaboration" have complied, and defected. Recently, the most notable such defector was Musa Bakheit, then First Secretary of the WPE in Keren, who defected while visiting Yemen in September 1990, following a warning from the EPLF.

Detentions

Since late 1990, the government has arrested a large number of citizens in the enclave around Asmara. At least one hundred people -- and possibly up to 300 -- have been arrested, of whom the majority remain in detention. Many of the arrests have occurred in the small towns outside Asmara, such as Decamhare, Adi Quala, Mendefera and above all, Keren (where numerous arrests occurred during a house-to-house search of several parts of the town on January 9). However, most information is available about the arrests in Asmara city. Most detainees are arrested by the Hezbi Dehaninet or "People's Protectors"* and subsequently taken to Mariam Ghimbi ("St Mary's Palace"), a psychiatric hospital that was converted to a prison after the revolution. In Mariam Ghimbi, no visitors are allowed. The detainee's family may bring food, but not see their imprisoned relative.

There are reports, which Africa Watch has been unable to confirm, that detainees are subjected to torture, including frequent beatings, electric shocks, and immersion of the head in water or vomit.

* The Hezbi Dehaninet were previously known as the Security Department in the time of the Emperor Haile Selassie. Most of the current senior members were trained by the former East German security police, the Stazi.

The detainees fall into several categories:

- * Prominent citizens, mostly relatively wealthy businessmen and community leaders. The motivation behind their arrest appears to be to intimidate the citizens of Asmara, and also extort money from the detainees and their families. Many of these businessmen are apolitical. Most of these arrests have occurred since early January.
- * Young men suspected of sympathising with the EPLF. These arrests started in late 1990.
- * Farmers and other rural people who refuse to cooperate with the army, for instance by resisting the creation of civil patrols or refusing to donate money or food to soldiers.
- * Soldiers and militiamen who refuse to fight, and members of their families.

The following is a list of detainees in the Asmara enclave. Most of the detainees listed are prominent citizens, for the simple reason that most information is available about them.

Africa Watch has been able to confirm that the following people are currently held in detention:

1. Bakhiet Maibetot, a chief of the Bejuk tribe, arrested in Keren in late January.
2. Belew Gebre Medhin, in his late 40s, an engineer with the housing administration in Asmara, was arrested on his return from the USA in December 1990. He is held in Mariam Ghimbi.
3. Gebre Hawariat Keshi Andemikael, aged about 60, previously owner of a dairy farm near Asmara, was arrested in October 1990. He is held in the "Old Prison" near Asmara police station, where he is not allowed family visits. His family may bring gifts of food, but not fruit or tea. Shortly before his arrest, he sold his cows because he was unable to obtain feed for them on account of the severe drought, but he was suspected of planning to go abroad with his money.
4. Fituwi Asres, aged in his 40s, the owner of a private wine factory in Asmara formerly called Alboneti, was arrested on or about 1 January 1991. He is held in Mariam Ghimbi. He was accused of failing to contribute money to the government but has not been formally charged.
5. Haile Werede, district chief of Debarwa, Seraye, was detained in mid March.
6. Hassen Osman Ejal, aged about 55, a retired administrative officer from Senhit District, was arrested in Keren in late February and is held in Mariam Ghimbi. He was suspected of assisting the EPLF, but has not been formally charged.

7. Kidane Gebray, a telecommunications employee in Asmara.
8. Rusom Fissahatzion, aged in his 40s, the owner of a bar in Keren, was arrested in late February in Asmara. He was suspected of helping the EPLF, and is held in Mariam Ghimbi.
9. Suleiman Abbas, the First Secretary of the WPE in Keren, was arrested in late February.
10. Tsegay Gebre Tinsae, a businessman in his 40s and the owner of a dairy farm and a butchers shop in Asmara, was arrested in early January and taken to Mariam Ghimbi. Subsequently he has been transferred to hospital. He was accused of failing to donate money to the government, but has not been formally charged.
11. Tsehay Mogos, the owner of a sweater factory in Asmara, was arrested in early January.
12. Tsehay (father's name not known), an employee of the SEDAO Electric Co.
13. Yassin Mohamed Aftay, chief of the Beit Shahakel section of the Mensa tribe, was arrested in Keren in late January.
14. Yassin Saleh Ismail, the owner of a pharmacy in Asmara.
15. Yemane Seyoum Brei, the owner of a bar in Asmara, was arrested in early January.

The following person has "disappeared":

1. Stefanos Wolde Giorgis, aged in his late 50s, the owner of a bar in Keren, was taken by soldiers from in front of his house in September 1990. He has not been seen or heard from since.

The bodies of others who have "disappeared", and were last seen accompanied by soldiers, have been found, weeks or months later, in remote places. In January, the body of a man last seen under arrest by soldiers in March 1990 was found, in February, the corpse of a man last seen in December was discovered by shepherds.

The following people were detained and released:

1. Berhane (father's name not known), a draughtsman for a civil engineering company, was detained in Asmara in September and released five months later, in late February. He was arrested after a thief stole a cassette with European music from his car; the thief was later apprehended and was also found to be in possession of stolen cassettes which contained

EPLF songs. The thief identified Berhane's car as one of several that he had stolen from. The security searched Berhane's house and found no evidence of EPLF cassettes nor other similar material. All the same, he was taken to Mariam Ghimbi together with several others suspected of similar offenses. He was never charged, and on his release was told that he had been "pardoned".

2. Girmay (father's name not known), an employee of Mitchell Cotts Co.
3. Dr Kibreab Fre, a physician, arrested in Asmara in early January and released after one month. Dr Kibreab was accused of having supported the EPLF in the 1970s.
4. Kubrom Tesfa Selassie, a retired teacher and examination officer aged 58, was arrested in mid-March 1988, when he was discovered by security officers listening to EPLF radio. He was taken to Mariam Ghimbi, and later to the regular prison at Sembel (where visitors are allowed). Though Kubrom was never charged, he was told unofficially that he had been sentenced to three years in prison for the offence of listening to EPLF radio. In March 1991, exactly three years later, he was "pardoned" and released. Because of his "criminal record", his state pension (and only source of income) has been withdrawn.
5. Tesfay Woldu, owner of the Empero Bar, Asmara, arrested in early January and released after one month.

On December 21, the administration of Asmara imposed a one-day check on all identity cards of citizens in the streets. During the check, a number of young men who originated from Tigray were detained. Some are believed to have been conscripted into the army. On February 21, a similar check was held. A large number of women were stopped and, having been found without their identity cards, were detained for 24 hours in the central police station.

Abuses in Other Parts of Ethiopia

Violence against Civilians by the Army

Ethiopia has been at war for almost three decades. The civil war in Eritrea can be dated to September 1961, whereas widespread insurrection in Tigray, Gondar and parts of the south began in 1975/6. These decades of war have seen large-scale violations of human rights by the Ethiopian army and air force.*

Africa Watch has received reports of numerous incidents involving violence against civilians by the

* See [News from Africa Watch](#), "Ethiopia: 'Mengistu has Decided to Burn us like Wood': Bombing of Civilians and Civilian Targets by the Air Force." July 24, 1990.

Ethiopian army. The robbing, beating and killing of civilian non-combatants remains common on all fronts, including the enclave around Asmara, Wollega, northern Shewa, and the Danakil desert. There was violence and looting in the town of Nekempte following the defeat of the garrison there, before its occupation by the EPRDF. Details of these violations will be published in a later report.

Detentions

In many government-held towns in Ethiopia there have been arrests, usually of people suspected of sympathizing with one or other of the rebel groups. There have been detentions of Tigrayans and Eritreans in Assab and Addis Ababa.

In Harer, a number of civilians, who returned from northern Somalia in December 1990 and January 1991 on account of the worsening situation in Somalia, were detained on suspicion of sympathizing with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Most had spent many years in Hargeisa or the refugee camps nearby. Some of those reported to have been detained include:

1. Abdallaa Jiliibaa
2. Abdurahman Ibrahim
3. Haaji Daadi
4. Haaji Dolal
5. Fatima Haji Ammodo
6. Mohamed Harun
7. Haadha Mohamed Harun (mother of no. 6)
8. Michael
9. Sheikh Mohamed Umar
10. Yassin Yusuf

In another incident that occurred in early April at Assab, seven drivers operating UN vehicles on behalf of a relief program led by the Ethiopian churches were arrested, and their trucks confiscated. Those detained were:

1. Ephraim Fessahaye
2. Fessaha (father's name not known)
3. Gebrehiwot Tesfahunegne
4. Guesh Tareke
5. Kahsai (father's name not known)
6. Rezene Abraha
7. Tesfaye Tewolde Medhin

A possible motivation for the arrests may have been to commandeer the vehicles for military use; a

suspicion that the drivers were rebel sympathizers has also been mentioned.*

Violations by the EPRDF

The EPRDF has also carried out a number of human rights abuses, though allegations that their behavior is comparable to the government and army are not substantiated by reliable information.

One killing occurred in Humera, a town close to the Sudanese border which has been controlled by EPRDF forces for over three years. On February 8 a man accused of being a "notorious anti-people spy" holding the military rank of captain was killed by militiamen of the EPRDF. A second incident occurred after the defeat of government forces in Gondar and Gojjam in mid March, when the EPRDF publicly called upon the people of those provinces to apprehend the escaped government commanders, and to take "appropriate action" if they did not surrender. Peasants in Chilga and Arma Cheho responded to this call, and captured and killed Gezahegne Worke (First Secretary of the WPE in North Gondar), Brig-Gen Wegahu Turra (a military commander) and Col Tadesse Sillatu (chief of security, Gondar). EPRDF subsequently claimed that the commanders violently resisted arrest, and congratulated the peasants on their action.

Africa Watch is unable to verify reports that the Secretary of the WPE in Debre Markos, Gojjam, was killed by EPRDF forces.

The precise circumstances surrounding these killings remain unclear. Africa Watch calls upon the EPRDF to allow independent investigation of these and other alleged incidents. If summary executions did indeed take place, those responsible must be brought to justice.

The EPRDF has detained many senior administrators and party functionaries in the towns that it has occupied. In one incident, a group of government officials, including members of the administration, WPE, and security from Gondar disguised themselves and attempted to travel on foot to Dessie, which is controlled by the government. They were apprehended by peasants and turned over to the EPRDF, which has detained them.

There are also allegations that teachers and students have been detained following peaceful demonstrations in EPRDF-controlled towns, in which the demonstrators called for salaries to be paid, and for the unity of the country to be preserved.

Mobilization for the War Effort

Conscription "more than ever before"

* Reuters, April 5, 1991.

A major source of human rights abuse in Ethiopia continues to be the government practice of forcible conscription. In June 1990, Africa Watch published a report detailing the use of press gangs, the recruitment of under age children, the poor conditions in which conscripts are kept, and other human rights violations associated with conscription.* Since then, abuses associated with conscription have intensified. On June 21, President Mengistu addressed the National Shengo (Assembly):

Those of us who claim to be Ethiopians, without prompting or encouragement -- I repeat: without prompting or encouragement -- must mobilize today and now.**

The Shengo subsequently called for "non-stop recruitment" to the armed forces to be undertaken urgently. This included the mobilization of retired army and police personnel to serve in the armed forces, and the encouragement of civilians in the war zones to engage in guerrilla warfare against the insurgents. In addition, all citizens were urged to make financial contributions to the war effort. Unlike previous conscription campaigns, which were carried out over discrete periods with set targets for numbers of recruits, the conscription was now to be carried out constantly. In practice, this means that the press gangs' operations are much more unpredictable in the past, and there are no longer "safe" periods or places whereby people can avoid the danger of conscription.

The stepped-up mobilization has subsequently taken three main forms. One is the search for new sources of conscripts, including retired people and students, together with an intensification of established methods of conscription. The second is the attempted transformation of the militias from a merely defensive village-based force to an offensive force operating alongside the regular army. The third is the development of civil patrols.

Addressing the nation on April 19, President Mengistu called for an even greater mobilization to defeat the insurgents, and called for an army equal to that of Iraq. Subsequently, the Shengo called for "mobilization more than ever before" and authorized the recruitment of all able-bodied adult males, using all means available. In Ethiopia, President Mengistu's declared intention to build an army as powerful as that of Iraq was generally interpreted to mean that the government intended to place one million men under arms.

New Sources of Conscripts

The first new source of conscripts to be tapped was veterans, including anyone with prior experience in the army or police, however brief or long ago that experience might have been. In practice, the net was thrown widely to include people who had served in capacities which did not involve combat, such as clerks and drivers. The second new source was the schools and

* See News from Africa Watch, "Ethiopia: Conscription", June 1, 1990.

** Voice of Ethiopia (Addis Ababa), quoted in BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts, ME/0800, June 26, 1990.

universities.

Following the capture of Gondar and Gojjam by the EPRDF, students at Addis Ababa university held a protest in which they blamed all of the government, EPRDF and EPLF for waging war and bringing ruin on the country. President Mengistu met with the students, and encouraged them to support the government's war effort as the only hope for national unity. Subsequently, the official Voice of Ethiopia radio announced:

Young people have expressed their readiness to be urgently mobilized for the war front, to safeguard the unity of Ethiopia alongside the revolutionary army and people's militia. In this respect, the students of Addis Ababa University have reaffirmed their readiness to go to the war front...*

In the first weeks of March, all of Ethiopia's institutes of higher education -- including the university of Addis Ababa, the university of Asmara (transferred in 1990 to Addis Ababa), the agricultural colleges of Alemaya, Agarfa, Jimma and Awasa, and the health college at Jimma -- were closed, except for postgraduate students. Students at Addis Ababa university were required to register for military service, under the implicit threat of having their education terminated if they refused. With the university closed, many students (particularly those without relatives in Addis Ababa) were also left without means of support, and had little alternative but to join the army. Apparently no other punitive measures were used, and some students were sufficiently fired by the patriotic call to arms made by the government to have readily volunteered to fight. The great majority -- over 80% -- are estimated to have registered. Of these, about one quarter have actually gone for military training so far. The others, realizing the harsh conditions and dangers they will face at the front, and under pressure from parents and friends, have mostly gone into hiding. So far, the government has made no attempts to find the missing "volunteers" or to punish them or their families. Outside Addis Ababa, most students have simply been rounded up and taken off to training camps.

Addis Ababa university was the center of anti-government protest in May 1990.* The closure of the university and the dispersal of the students has prevented such protest occurring again.

The secondary schools have also been closed. There are reports that large numbers of students, mainly from the south-western provinces, have been forcibly conscripted and taken to training camps.

In addition, the normal methods of obtaining conscripts were intensified. Press gangs have been

* Quoted in BBC, SWB, ME/1017, March 11, 1991.

* See News from Africa Watch, "Ethiopia: Violent Suppression of Student Protest", August 30, 1990.

more active, and workers have been taken from factories and offices. Conscription has also become common in Eritrea, in contrast to the policy prevailing beforehand. In recent years, forcible recruitment in Eritrea was relatively neglected, almost certainly because each incident of conscription caused a larger number of potential recruits to disappear and join the EPLF.

Escalation of the Use of Militia

Starting in the late 1970s, the government founded People's Militia forces, to act as a "home guard" and defend their localities from insurgent groups. For many militia, especially in Eritrea, payment was in food, largely grain donated to Ethiopia for famine relief. The militia groups had varying success. In Eritrea, the most loyal militia have been those in parts of Seraye district and certain groups from the Afar nomads of the Danakil desert.

Since mid 1990, the government has attempted to use the militia in an offensive capacity alongside the regular army. This first occurred with an unsuccessful attempt to transfer militia forces from Gojjam to Shewa. A second, more sustained attempt took place when Eritrean militias were transferred to the Ghinda front, north of Asmara. This has led to friction between the government and the militias, who felt that the contract governing their deployment has been violated. The results have been a spate of desertions from the militia in Eritrea and the refusal of some battalions to be transferred from their home areas. The army has responded by confiscating all the property of deserting militiamen and burning their houses, detaining others, and threatening summary execution for any caught while attempting to desert. The families of militiamen who have deserted have been subject to reprisals, including detention. While looting, burning and detention have certainly taken place, Africa Watch is unable to confirm any incidents of summary execution.

The most serious incident occurred in early February when a militia unit that originated from Qohayn in Seraye withdrew from the Ghinda front towards Asmara. The unit was met by a force from the regular army at a place between Mai Haber and Adi Hawesha, and a firefight ensued. According to reports, casualties ran into the hundreds. The divisional officer of Seraye, Ghezay Sebhatu, was killed in the fighting. The militia were defeated, and over 300 were detained in a railway tunnel, without even the most basic facilities, and lacking fresh air. They were later transferred to the military training camp at Adi Nefas, near Asmara, where an unknown number still remain detained.

Following this incident, there were negotiations between other militia units and the administration at Nefasit during February 13-16. As a result of these negotiations, most of the militia from Hamassien, Seraye and Akele Guzay were transferred back to their home areas. Some subsequently deserted to the EPLF or refused to fight, including the Afar militia forces at Tio and Edd.

Civil Patrols

The government is making several attempts to mobilize the civilian population. On at least one

occasion, President Mengistu has called upon the inhabitants of areas controlled by the rebels to engage in guerrilla warfare to disrupt the rebels' operations.

There are numerous reports of army officers requiring villagers to undertake security functions, in particular by setting up village patrols. Village leaders have been instructed to maintain round-the-clock guards on roads and hillsides, and to prevent rebel incursions and report suspicious activity. Village leaders who have objected have been detained and physically abused. It is not known what punitive action will be taken against villagers who fail to prevent rebel activities in their areas.

Civil patrols have been started in Asmara city. On February 3, the leading members of all the kebeles (neighborhood associations) in Asmara were called together, and instructed to arrange for the neighborhood to be guarded at all times. They were told that, should there be an incident in the neighborhood, anyone caught on the street would be liable to be shot on sight. The kebele members objected, and the government conceded that women and people aged over 60 would be excluded from guard duties. For all others, nightly guard duty for three hours after dusk is enforced. The civil guards are given neither uniforms, torches, nor weapons, but are held responsible for the security of their areas. Later, youth associations were instructed to provide guards for a further one-and-a-half hours each night. Similar arrangements have been made for other towns controlled by the government.

In Addis Ababa, there are reports that the government has distributed large quantities of small arms to civilian residents, to create an undercover militia force in case the EPRDF comes to the city.

Famine Relief

The renewed outbreak of large-scale fighting since late February has endangered famine relief supplies to various parts of the country.

Eritrea

The government-controlled enclave around Asmara has been short of food for over a year. The reasons for this include the difficulties of commercial transport of food across the battle lines, requisitioning by the army, and inadequate supplies of relief.*

A major reason for the hunger in Asmara during the middle of 1990 was a government policy of preventing the free flow of commercial food across the battle lines. Traders who tried to bring in grain were liable to have their stocks confiscated and sometimes were detained as well. Ordinary citizens caught in possession of food that originated from rebel-held areas were liable to punishment. However, since October, this policy has relaxed. The army still levies unofficial taxes

* See News from Africa Watch, "Ethiopia: 200 Days in the Death of Asmara", September 20, 1990.

on imports of food, but the black market in food -- the great majority of which originates from rebel-held areas -- is now tolerated. This pragmatic policy has undoubtedly helped to alleviate much hunger in Asmara.

The port of Massawa, captured by the EPLF in February 1990, is the key to the supply of large-scale food relief to Asmara. On January 18, following many months of prolonged negotiation, a shipment of relief food finally arrived in the port of Massawa. Half of the relief was to be distributed by the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) to famine-stricken people in areas controlled by the EPLF, and half was to go to the government enclave around Asmara to be distributed by the Ethiopian churches' Joint Relief Partnership (JRP), and the government Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC).

As of mid-April, five shipments of relief had arrived in Massawa, amounting to 53,230 tones of grain. This was divided into halves according to the agreement. The ship also brings enough fuel to transport the grain to Asmara, though not beyond. Despite skirmishing on the Massawa-Asmara road near Ghinda, the relief convoys have arrived in Asmara without difficulty.

The donors report that the share allocated to ERA has been distributed according to plan.

The distribution inside the government enclave has run into major difficulties. 6,000 tones of the first shipment was distributed by the JRP. However, the remaining 20,600 tones remains in RRC stores in Asmara -- some of it has been there since January. The RRC claims that the failure to distribute the grain is due to a lack of fuel for onward transportation once the grain has arrived in Asmara. This explanation is unconvincing. Under conditions of even greater shortages of fuel, the JRP succeeded over an eight month period in distributing all the food aid it received through the airlift within days of its arrival. Much of the grain from Massawa is destined for distribution within Asmara, for which no fuel is needed (the horse has become the favored mode of transport in the city). Fuel continued to arrive regularly in Asmara by civilian aircraft until March 22, when the specialized fuel-tanker aeroplane was struck by an EPLF shell. If the food distribution was a government priority, it would have gone ahead.

The failure to distribute the relief gives rise to suspicions of the government's intentions. These suspicions are reinforced by the fact that, for many years, the administration in Eritrea has displayed a preference for feeding the army, and diverted much of the aid received in Asmara to the militias. It is quite possible that the administration is keeping the food as a reserve for the military, in case the supply by air is interrupted.

In addition, soldiers frequently tour the areas of the city in which relief distributions have occurred and demand food from the recipients. The following is a translated extract from a letter written by a resident of 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.* Worse still is what little we get from the UN and the churches during the day 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 and undignified death! Asmara is now dying.... Sadly, Ker [Keren] is also in a state worse than Asmara ...

The need in Asmara remains greater than the Massawa operation can meet -- even if the food is actually distributed and eaten by the needy civilians. Therefore, the joint UN-churches airlift of food, operating since the middle of last year, continued even after Massawa was reopened. This was despite EPLF warnings that it would not cease firing shells at the airport. The shelling of the airport has resulted in civilian casualties, including three women killed while waiting for an Ethiopian Airways flight in early January. On February 28, one of the aircraft used for the relief airlift was hit by a shell and an employee of the Catholic church was killed. The airlift was thus brought to a premature end. Since it started on June 1, 1990, it had transported over 36,000 tones of food. While the airport is a military target, and thus a legitimate object of EPLF attack, the EPLF refusal to allow safe passage to the relief airlift amounts to a willingness to use hunger as a weapon to force the submission of Asmara.

The need in EPLF-controlled areas is also much greater than can be met by the Massawa operation. The "cross-border" operation from Sudan therefore remains important. The government continues to regard this relief operation as an infringement of its sovereignty, and to use aerial bombardment against the relief convoys coming from Sudan.

Tigray

Relief needs in Tigray are currently being met by three means: a cross-border operation from Sudan, the "internal purchase" of food surpluses in the EPRDF-controlled areas, and the "southern line" relief operation run by the JRP of the Ethiopian churches, which takes relief from government-controlled port of Assab, to Dessie, the capital of Wollo, from whence it crosses into EPRDF-controlled areas of northern Wollo and Tigray. The three elements in the relief program

* The shipments have in fact been arriving regularly, but the government has not announced the fact to the population of Asmara.

are of approximately equal importance.

The government has continued to reject the cross-border operation and to bomb relief convoys coming from Sudan at every opportunity. Vehicles engaged in internal purchase are also liable to attack.

The "southern line" has been threatened on a number of occasions. On November 7, government aircraft bombed the town of Woldiya in northern Wollo. A 39-year old woman was killed and a young girl injured, and the office of the Ethiopian Relief Organization (the relief wing of the EPRDF) was burned, destroying all the records. Woldiya is a center for relief distribution used by the JRP. The attack can only be interpreted as an attempt to deter people in rebel held areas from coming forward for relief.

The EPRDF offensive launched in Gojjam and Gondar on February 23 did not involve military activities in the vicinity of the "southern line". However, on the night of March 12/13 the government launched its own offensive, apparently an attempt to capture the town of Wichale, which lies on the road north of Dessie -- the same road that is used by the JRP relief operation. The attack was repulsed. The fighting caused minor delays to a JRP convoy due to leave the following morning. On March 18/19 the EPRDF counter-attacked close to Dessie, on a different side. Though the fighting did not directly threaten the road used by the JRP, as soon as it began the government military commander in Dessie prevented a JRP relief convoy from leaving the town, and the church agencies were simultaneously informed of the decision.* On March 20 the EPRDF issued an ultimatum, threatening to "take action" unless the relief operation was restarted within one week. The EPRDF also retained 39 trucks belonging to the relief agencies that were supposed to travel back to government-held areas, ostensibly for their security, but probably also as hostages to ensure the resumption of the relief supply. On March 23, the JRP operation was given permission to restart, which it did three days later. The trucks held by EPRDF were then allowed to return. Subsequently, the EPRDF has delayed the return of empty trucks until the arrival of new convoys at the point of crossing into EPRDF-controlled territory. This action, probably an attempt to deter government cancellation of the operation, serves to delay the transport of relief.

In early April, the government's detention of 7 drivers operating UN trucks for the JRP has also severely impeded the efficiency of the operation. Not only were the drivers and their trucks taken out of action, but 16 other UN drivers in Meqele immediately refused to return to government-held areas, fearing arrest. Whether this is a short-term strike or a permanent defection is currently unclear. Their trucks meanwhile remain in EPRDF-controlled territory. Other drivers are also reportedly loathe to continue working on the operation.

* The sequence of events suggests that the decision to suspend the JRP had been made by the government before the EPRDF attack near Dessie was launched.

Thus the "southern line" relief operation to Tigray and northern Wollo remains precarious. Deep mutual suspicion between the parties to the agreement, government interference and sporadic armed hostilities mean that the supply route is vulnerable to being cut at any time. Unfortunately, the southern line is the one part of the relief operation for Tigray and northern Wollo that has received adequate funding from the western donors; both the cross-border and internal purchase programs are extremely short of funds.

Relief to Sudanese refugees

A final concern relating to relief is the 400,000 or so Sudanese refugees who are in the south-west of the country, mainly Illubabor and Wollega provinces. These people, fleeing the war-famine in southern Sudan, are largely dependent on relief supplied by the World Food Program and the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). There are two roads from Addis Ababa to the refugee camps along which this relief travels. On April 1, the EPRDF captured Nekempte, the capital of Wollega, and one of these roads. The other one is threatened and travel is possible only by military convoy. Before the cutting of the first road, the camps had only an estimated 10-15 days' supply of food rations. It is imperative that the EPRDF agree to permit safe passage of food relief to the camps.

Conclusion and Prospects

Government Abuses

President Mengistu's government -- in one form or another -- is not prepared to relinquish power without a struggle, if necessary an extremely bloody struggle. The apparatus of state repression remains intact in the main government-controlled cities, and is being used to detain a large number of citizens. It is possible that these detainees will be subject to summary execution or other harsh measures if the EPLF and EPRDF make further gains.* The government still has a formidable army capable of inflicting considerable violence on civilians, either as part of its military campaigns or during undisciplined retreat. Obtaining conscripts for this army, usually by force, remains a priority for the government. The airforce continues to attack civilian targets. Many people are dependent on famine relief supplies, which can be withheld by the government -- and in the case of Asmara, appear to be currently withheld. President Mengistu has not admitted that it is the appalling human rights record of his rule that has brought Ethiopia into its current disaster, and appears determined to carry on with his discredited methods of fighting the war, methods which can only lead to further atrocities against Ethiopia's civilians.

* According to a report in The Observer (London) on April 21, nearly 200 political prisoners were executed in Gondar by government forces the day before the town fell to the EPRDF.

Abuses by EPLF and EPRDF

The EPLF and EPRDF are also responsible for human rights abuses, though on a smaller scale. The relatively absence of indiscriminate violence against civilians has in part reflected the fact that the civilian populations of Eritrea and Tigray have mostly supported them. However, as they come to assume more governmental responsibilities over larger and more varied populations, the fronts will be faced with greater challenges. Their true human rights record will emerge from their treatment of civilians who are unsympathetic to their political programs in the months to come.

There are two major human rights worries following from the expansion of EPLF and EPRDF. One is the treatment of other "liberation fronts" and their supporters which are active in the areas into which they expand. The second is the treatment of civilians should the EPRDF try to occupy Addis Ababa.

Following its occupation of the major part of Gojjam in late February, the EPRDF came into direct contact with the guerrillas of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The EPRP was originally a predominantly urban organization with a membership drawn from young educated people. It was crushed in Addis Ababa during the "Red Terror" of 1976-8. Many members went underground or became apolitical, others fled abroad, and a small group started rural insurgency in Tigray. The EPRP guerrillas in Tigray fought with the TPLF and were defeated, with lasting bitterness remaining between the two organizations. Driven out of Tigray, the EPRP has maintained a small operational presence in western Gojjam until the present, drawing its rank and file guerrilla fighters largely from peripheral ethnic groups such as the Gumuz. There has been no reconciliation with the TPLF/EPRDF. A few minor incidents of armed conflict occurred between the two groups in March 1991, and there has been a spate of mutual recrimination. On April 15, EPRDF accused EPRP of declaring war against it, including attacking convoys and planting landmines on roads; two days later, EPRP accused EPRDF of detaining numerous EPRP supporters. A larger battle between the two groups has since occurred.

Africa Watch is unable to comment on the veracity of the mutual accusations of aggression. However, the EPRDF, as the stronger force by far and the de facto government of Gojjam, has the responsibility to ensure that any counter-insurgency operations it conducts against the EPRP guerrillas do not involve violations of the laws of war, such as indiscriminate violence against civilians or the use of hunger as a weapon.

A second force that EPRDF may confront is the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), active in western Wollega. Relations between EPRDF and OLF are strained, but not hostile to the point of armed conflict. EPRDF, as the stronger force and de facto government of the majority of Wollega, has similar responsibilities as those outlined with respect to EPRP in Gojjam. Similar considerations apply to EPRDF relations with the Oromo Islamic Front, should the EPRDF expand into eastern Ethiopia. EPLF and EPRDF relations with Afar groups in the lowlands of the Danakil desert have

at times degenerated into armed conflict, and the killings of civilians by both sides. Again, EPLF and EPRDF must take responsibility for the respect for human rights in Afar areas which they occupy, whether or not that occupation occurs with the consent of the local populace.

The presence of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), a rebel force fighting against the Sudanese government with backing from the Ethiopian government, in parts of south-west Ethiopia, presents the EPRDF with particular problems. The Ethiopian government ceded *de facto* control of parts of Illubabor and Wollega provinces to the SPLA, including allowing it to set up military bases. The SPLA has been responsible for many abuses against the local population, including widespread looting and incidents of killing, abduction and indiscriminate planting of landmines. The SPLA has frequently come into armed conflict with the OLF, though not to date with the EPRDF. Though not an indigenous liberation front, the SPLA may be considered to represent (in some respects) the interests of the 400,000 or so southern Sudanese civilian refugees currently resident in this area. It is imperative that if the EPRDF asks the SPLA to leave Ethiopian territory, or takes military action to expel it, that the human rights of these refugees are respected, and they are not forcibly returned to Sudan, nor required to leave Ethiopia on account of a cut-off in humanitarian aid to the refugee camps.

Perhaps the gravest danger of human rights abuse will occur should the EPRDF attempt to occupy the city of Addis Ababa. In Addis Ababa, the EPRDF may well be confronted with considerable opposition from armed civilians as well as military units. Armed civilians may include supporters of EPRP as well as the current government. Urban insurrection by the EPRP in 1976-7 was the excuse for the "Red Terror" in which tens of thousands of civilians were summarily executed in Ethiopia's cities. Armed urban opposition would present major problems of security to an incoming government, but it must under no circumstances be interpreted as justification for indiscriminate retaliation against a civilian population.

An EPRDF occupation of the Addis Ababa would also be likely to spark non-violent demonstrations and strikes by some residents of the city. Such expressions of dissent must be allowed to proceed without violence or threat of violence from the EPRDF.

Anarchy

A final danger is anarchy, particularly in areas where central government control has lapsed, and rebel control and administration has not been established. There are already reports of provincial administrators in the south implementing policies with complete disregard for national directives: this includes instances of both liberalization and a return to strict authoritarian communist control. Many groups, both rural and urban, are well-armed and may be ready to make use of a power vacuum for looting or for revenge attacks. Ill-disciplined government soldiers have been responsible for many human rights abuses, particularly when they are in retreat. One of the greatest fears in Addis Ababa is that soldiers from the government army will loot the city if they face final defeat. Many fear that uncontrolled inter-ethnic violence and looting -- such as that which

characterized the capitals of Liberia and Somalia after their governments collapsed, will next occur in Addis Ababa.

Conclusion

Ethiopia is already a human rights crisis. Parts of the country -- such as the western district of Eritrea -- have been in that condition for 25 years, and the rule of President Mengistu has been marked by unremitting human rights violations. There are at last some encouraging signs, including the government's amnesty for political refugees, the unprecedented open debate on the issue of peace, and the generally good treatment of civilians by the EPRDF and EPLF. However, there is a fear that matters will get worse before they get better. To many, indiscriminate violence against civilians appears probable. Further tragedy is not, however, inevitable. Africa Watch calls upon all parties to the conflict to undertake to respect human rights.

Recommendations

Africa Watch calls upon the government to:

- * Allow citizens to formulate and advocate peace proposals and other peaceful political initiatives without censorship or fear of reprisal.
- * Release all political detainees immediately.
- * Stop the indiscriminate killings of civilians, and bring to justice any member of the government or armed forces who has participated in any such killings.
- * Cease human rights abuses associated with conscription, including the use of press gangs and the recruitment of under-age children.
- * Cease the development and deployment of civil patrols and other uses of civilians in military capacities.
- * Distribute the internationally-donated food relief in Asmara, and allow relief convoys to travel unobstructed to Tigray and northern Wollo.

Africa Watch calls upon the EPLF to:

- * Cease the assassination of civilians accused of being "traitors".
- * Guarantee the safe passage of relief flights to Asmara.
- * Undertake to respect the basic human rights of civilians in newly-occupied territories.

Africa Watch calls upon the EPRDF to:

- * Allow an independent investigation into allegations of killings and detentions by the EPRDF in newly-occupied areas.
- * Facilitate the free and safe delivery of humanitarian relief to the Sudanese refugees in southwest Ethiopia.
- * Undertake to respect the basic human rights of civilians in newly-occupied areas of Ethiopia, and especially to undertake counter-insurgency operations against armed groups in such a way that the civilian population is not exposed to unnecessary suffering.

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 Chairman is William Carmichael. Its Executive Director is Rakiya Omaar; its Associate Director is Alex de Waal; Richard Carver is Research Consultant; 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, and Susan Osnos is Press Director.

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