2. SCORCHED EARTH IN ERITREA, 1961-77

Background to the Conflict in Eritrea

The political background to the war in Eritrea has been studied many times by scholars of different leanings. Before conquest by Italian forces in the late 1880s, the history of Eritrea is controversial -- scholars dispute whether significant areas of it were tributary to states in Ethiopia proper, or not.

For half a century Eritrea was an Italian colony, until occupation by the British army during the Second World War. There then followed a decade of political turmoil, as the post-war powers dithered about the future of the territory, and the Eritreans organized themselves into a welter of political parties which campaigned for nationalist, sectarian or unionist causes using fair means and foul. For the most part, the highland Christian population was sympathetic to union with Ethiopia, whereas the lowland Moslem population wanted independence. Some of the lowland peoples, notably the Beni Amer tribe which straddles the Sudanese border, were influenced by the growing nationalist movement in British-controlled Sudan. After several false starts in trying to determine Eritrea's future, the Allied powers turned the issue over to the United Nations, which appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the wishes of the Eritrean people.

When the UN Commission of Inquiry made its investigation, there was widespread rural unrest, which made it impossible to visit many lowland areas in western Eritrea. The investigation was also cursory in the extreme, and no referendum was held. Meanwhile, an Eritrean assembly was elected, by indirect voting, and was approximately evenly-divided on the crucial issue of independence or unity with Ethiopia. The Ethiopian "liaison office" headed by Colonel Negga Haile Selassie financed the pro-Ethiopian Unionist Party, mobilized the Orthodox church on his side, and intimidated the opposition. These tactics served to alienate much of Eritrea's elite.

Finally, US strategic interests proved the decisive factor. The US was a close ally of Haile Selassie, and wanted the use of the strategically-sited air force and communications base at Kagnew, in Asmara. In 1952, Eritrea was given a constitution which included a democratically-elected assembly and the key institutions of civil society, but federated under the Ethiopian crown.

Haile Selassie reportedly neither understood nor approved of the notion of federation,[1]

[1] John D. Spencer, Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years, Algonai, Mich., 1984.

and at once set to work annexing the territory. The Eritrean administration was stripped of its powers and the Assembly was undermined. The Emperor dismissed and appointed Eritrean ministers. A strike by the Eritrean labor unions in 1958 was met with violence -- over 200 strikers were detained and 60 injured by soldiers. Finally, in 1962, coerced and bribed, and with the building surrounded by soldiers, the Assembly members voted to dissolve the Federation.

Throughout the 1940s there had been widespread shifta activity in the lowlands, with up to 3,000 bandits active. This abated after the British offered an amnesty in 1947, but by the mid 1950s many former shifta returned to violence. When Haile Selassie's intentions were clear but the act of annexation not yet consummated, leading pro-independence Eritreans fled into exile and formed the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1961. They made contact with shifta leaders, and armed revolt began in September of that year. Most of the membership of the ELF was Moslem, from the western lowlands, and in particular from the Beni Amer.

The government deepened Eritrean opposition by continuing to dismantle Eritrean institutions and deprive Eritreans of basic civil and political rights. There were also a number of political detentions and trials, including one of 19 government officials accused of supporting the ELF, which was transferred to Addis Ababa in 1963 because the government believed that no convictions would be obtained in an Eritrean court. Even those Eritreans who had previously been ardent supporters of the Union became disillusioned. For example, Tedla Bairu, the first Eritrean prime minister, defected to the ELF.

Eritrean Resistance 1961-74

The first shots in the Eritrean war were fired on September 1, 1961 in the lowland district of Barka. The leader of the ELF detachment that engaged the Ethiopian soldiers was a well-known ex-shifta called Idris Awate. Most of his band of eleven followers had previous military experience in the Sudan Defence Force.[2] Over the following few years the political and military leaders operated largely in mutual isolation. Idris Awate was killed in 1962, but the ELF continued to grow on the ground, and in the mid 1960s it had over 2,000 fighters.

Prominent political leaders of the ELF included Woldeab Woldemariam, Osman Saleh Sabbe and Idris Mohamed Adam. In 1963 a ten-member Supreme Council was established in Khartoum. Finance, armaments and training came at different times from most Arab countries, including Syria and Iraq -- under whose Baathist ideology Eritrea was incorporated into the Arab world. In the late 1960s, the ELF received assistance from Cuba and other Marxist states.

Sudanese support was important but not unwavering. While public opinion in

[2] The British-run colonial army of Sudan.

Khartoum and Kassala was strongly pro-ELF, successive Sudanese governments followed vacillating policies: support during 1961-4; increasing coolness during 1965 (13 ELF fighters were extradited to Ethiopia that year and some were subsequently executed); and coldness from 1967-9, during which time ELF political activity was prohibited. During the early radical phase of Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri's rule (May 1969-July 1971), Sudanese support for the ELF was again strong; it was then cut off in response to an Ethiopian withdrawal of support for the Anyanya rebels in southern Sudan. Relations between Sudan and Ethiopia then deteriorated after the 1974 revolution, reaching a nadir when the Ethiopian government backed an attempted coup in Sudan in July 1976. In response, the Sudanese government followed policies strongly supportive of Eritrean independence -- for two years. The most important role played by the Sudan government was allowing the Eritrean fronts to transit supplies, including military equipment, through Port Sudan.

In 1965, the ELF reorganized itself into five operational zones along the lines of the Algerian Front de Liberation National.

The ELF was an amalgam of different elements -- indeed, the zonal structure of 1965 was adopted partly in order to prevent conflict between different regionally-based elements within the organization. Many substantial conflicts within the organization were left unaddressed. In the early years, the membership was almost entirely Moslem, and the organization had a strong tinge of pan-Arabism. A position often adopted was that the liberation of Eritrea should precede social or economic transformation. In the late 1960s there was a growing radical element within the ELF, leading to the adoption of Marxist ideas.

Much of the insurgent activity in the 1960s and early 1970s involved acts of sabotage against government installations and bridges, and ambushes of convoys and trains. The ELF also regularly engaged army patrols, and attacked small garrisons and police posts. It quickly made most of the lowland countryside impassable to government forces except in military convoys.

The ELF was anxious to avoid the mistakes of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and was reluctant to let people evacuate to Sudan in large numbers. ELF leaders recognized that life in refugee camps would breed a generation of young people bitter and addicted to violence, and argued that this would undercut the revolutionary idealism necessary for their membership.

The first of a series of splits in the ELF occurred in 1968. Osman Saleh Sabbe, a prominent exiled leader, departed and founded his own organization. Ibrahim Tewolde (later poisoned in suspicious circumstances) and Isseyas Afeworki founded the Tripartite Union. This led eventually to the formation of the EPLF in February 1972, led by Isseyas and Ramadan Nur. The ELF, under the military command of Abdalla Idris, denounced the new organization.

There then followed two years of internecine strife between the two movements, which

caused an estimated 3,000 casualties among the fighters -- more deaths among the combatants than the entire thirteen years of government military actions to date. Purges within the two fronts also saw a number of people murdered. A battle between the two fronts at Wolki in October 1974 left 600 fighters dead, and caused a spontaneous demonstration by the citizens of Asmara, who marched to the battlefield and demanded that the fronts settle their differences by negotiation.

Counter-Insurgency 1961-74

Idris Awate's personal history as a shifta leader, the background of the other guerrillas, plus twenty years recent experience of intermittent banditry in western and southern Eritrea, enabled the government to regard the threat as one of straightforward brigandage utilized for personal advancement by Moslem sectarians.

Throughout the 1960s, the counter-insurgency strategy followed consisted of punitive patrols, interspersed with large offensives and a policy of forced relocation in fortified villages. This was a colonial-type technique designed to impress the subjugated population with the firepower and determination of the government. It led directly to large-scale human rights abuses.

The actions of the army also led to the impoverishment of rural people, food shortages, and famine. The soldiers requisitioned food, destroyed crops, killed animals, prevented trade, drove people from their land, and (during 1975) blockaded the entire highlands. From the very start of the war, the Ethiopian army used hunger as a weapon.

Starting in September 1961, the day-to-day brutality of army patrols caused many abuses of human rights. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, later head of the RRC, served as a military officer at the time. While fervently pro-unity (i.e. anti-Eritrean independence), he was critical of the army's operational methods:

> The army ... entered Eritrea in the 1960s with the mentality of a conqueror. It belittled the small bands of Moslem separatists operating in the lowland areas and believed it could command respect and loyalty from the people by sheer show of force.... The army made a crucial error in this operation; it did not concentrate on attacking the guerrillas directly; instead it devastated the villages suspected of harboring them.
>
> Another disastrous decision was that the army would carry only two or three days' rations at a time. After they ran out, they were expected to live off the land, to take what they needed from the people. I remember soldiers slaughtering cattle, eating what they wanted, and then leaving the rest to rot. Sometimes soldiers would kill cattle just to get the livers. It was as if they were in enemy territory.[3]

[3] Dawit Wolde Giorgis, Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia, Trenton, NJ, 1989, p. 82.

Haggai Erlich, an Israeli scholar, commented that "usually in Eritrea a company would leave for a month-long routine counter-insurgency operation carrying almost no supplies, which almost inevitably turned them into shifta in uniform."[4]

A more effective aspect of the Ethiopian counter-insurgency operation was the training of an elite commando force, with Israeli assistance. Known as Force 101, this unit became operational in 1965.

Scorched Earth: The 1967 Killings

The first large-scale abuses of human rights occurred during three army offensives in 1967. The governor of Eritrea, Ras Asrate Kassa is reported to have boasted that he would leave Eritrea as bare as his bald head. Certainly, throughout the year the army behaved as though the depopulation of the Eritrean countryside was its aim.

The first offensive began at dawn on February 11, when a force of about 5,000 soldiers began burning villages in Barka district. An Israeli advisor wrote in his diary:

> The Second Division is very efficient in killing innocent people. They are alienating the Eritreans and deepening the hatred that already exists. Their commander took his aides to a spot near the Sudanese border and ordered them: "from here to the north -- clear the area." Many innocent people were massacred and nothing of substance was achieved.[5]

Between February and April the army burned 62 villages, including Mogoraib, Zamla, Ad Ibrahim, Gerset Gurgur, Adi Bera, Asir, Fori and Ad Habab, while villagers were ordered to collect at army posts for screening. The soldiers were assisted by artillery and aerial bombardment using incendiaries. According to reports from local community leaders, 402 civilians were killed, and about 60,000 cattle and camels slaughtered with machine guns and knives and by burning alive.[6] In addition, 21 detainees, most of them teachers and government employees, were summarily executed in Tessenei prison on February 12. Traders were singled out for detention or killing, because they were believed to be responsible for supplying food to the insurgents.

Between March and May, 25,500 Eritrean refugees were registered in Sudan, and an estimated 5,000 more crossed the border and stayed unregistered in Beni Amer villages. The Ethiopian government objected to humanitarian assistance, calling them "rebels not refugees."[7]

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[4] Haggai Erlich, The Struggle over Eritrea 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa, Stanford, 1983, p. 39.

[5] Quoted in: Erlich, 1983, p. 58.

[6] Mohamed Hamed, The International Dimension of the Battle for Eritrea, Beirut, 1974, pp. 126-7 (in Arabic).

[7] Ahmad Karadawi, "Refugee Policy in the Sudan 1967-1984," DPhil Thesis, Oxford, 1988, pp. 57-9.

On March 15, the Sudanese village of Guba, close to the border, was attacked by the Ethiopian army on the suspicion that ELF fighters were present. One villager was shot dead and three were kidnapped. A nearby village, Debre Sultan, was also attacked. Immediately before the offensive began, Haile Selassie had visited Sudan to ensure that the Sudanese government would respond appropriately: it duly withdrew the refugees from the border area and prohibited the activities of the ELF, but succeeded in obtaining humanitarian assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and setting up a refugee camp.[8] This was UNHCR's first involvement in the Horn of Africa, and the first of many refugee flows over the following 25 years.

After these atrocities, a large area of Barka was left uninhabited.

In July 1967, the army turned its attention to the eastern lowlands of Semhar. The villages of Eilet and Gumhot were burned on July 11, and 30 young men were tied up and burned alive inside a house. Five other villages were burned over the following days,[9] and 51 people killed. 6,000 domestic animals were killed; according to reports, the soldiers singled out camels for slaughter, because they were vital for transport.[10]

The third offensive started in November 1967. 7,000 soldiers from the Second Division began to burn villages in the vicinity of Keren. Almost all the villages of Senhit -- 174 in all -- were destroyed. Some reliably reported atrocities included:

* Kuhul and Amadi: the army ordered the people to collect in one place, where they were bombed by air force planes.

* Asmat: the army opened fire on a wedding party, killing an unknown number.

* Melefso: thirty community leaders who met the soldiers and offered them hospitality were killed.

The army burned crops, killed or confiscated livestock and poisoned wells, with the clear intention of making the area uninhabitable.

After Senhit, the burning of villages spread to the highland districts of Seraye and Akele Guzai, which had been hitherto little affected by the war. 86 villages were burned in these two districts, and at least 159 people killed.

Forced Relocation in Fortified Villages

[8] Karadawi, 1988, pp. 62-4.

[9] One of those destroyed was Sheib, the scene of massacres in 1988 and 1989 (see chapter 14).

[10] Mohamed, 1974, p. 131.

In December 1966, the army began a policy of forcible relocation into fortified villages among the pastoral population of Barka. After each of the three 1967 offensives much of the population was relocated in new villages or forced to live in nearby towns.

In the fortified villages, curfews were imposed, together with restrictions on daytime movements. This had a profound impact on the livelihood of the herders. In normal times, pastoralists leave their village for days or weeks during the dry season in order to search for grazing; if they are confined to a radius of half a day's walk from the village, they can only keep a small number of animals on the limited grass and browse of this area. In addition, because of the daytime heat during certain times of year, herders prefer to graze and water animals at night. This is better for the animals' health and means they drink less water -- water is a scarce and expensive commodity in Eritrea. The policy of curfews made this night-time grazing impossible. On occasions when the strategic hamlets proved too difficult to maintain, the army forcibly relocated the population in nearby urban centers, with even more drastic consequences for their livelihoods. Strict controls on trade were established, with the inspection of all food items brought in and out of villages and towns by vehicle or pack animal.

However, as the ELF regained control of the countryside, the people began to return to their previous homes.

The 1970-1 Massacres

In January 1970, the army re-launched the policy of forcible villagization, coinciding with a large military sweep through Barka and Sahel. Tens of villages were burned. In March, 16,700 refugees fled to Sudan, mostly to the Tokar area along the Red Sea coast. The period from April to July witnessed many atrocities as military activities spread to the eastern lowlands. 32 civilians were shot dead when the army burned Arafali village. 88 people were executed when the people of Atshoma, between Massawa and Ghinda, refused army orders to relocate in a protected village.

Violence against the civilian population increased towards the end of the year. In retaliation for an ambush in which a senior army commander was killed, there was a series of massacres near Keren. One atrocity was the killing of 112 people in a mosque at Basadare in November. The people were collected in the mosque by soldiers who said they would be safe there from a planned air strike; the soldiers then opened fire. Another was the destruction of the village of Ona on December 1, in which an estimated 625 people were killed. This was apparently in retaliation for the villagers betraying the presence of an army patrol to the ELF, which ambushed it and killed several soldiers.[11] Acting contrary to official orders, local boy

[11] Godfrey Morrison, Eritrea and the Southern Sudan: Aspects of Some Wider African Problems, London,

scouts re-entered the village to bury the dead.

In December, the military governor imposed a state of emergency on Eritrea, and assumed powers of arbitrary arrest, and the right to displace the population. Ten-kilometer strips of land along the coast and the Sudan border were declared "prohibited zones," where the army could open fire on any target. On January 27, 1971, about 60 civilians, most of them elderly people, were killed by soldiers in a mosque in the village of Elabored.

As well as being ruthless and violent, the administration was described -- even by those sympathetic to its cause -- as "inefficient, brutal and corrupt".[12] Senior officers sold the supplies destined for their units, and the governors (the civilian Ras Asrate Kassa and the soldier Lt-Gen Debebe Haile Mariam) and their associates are alleged to have often detained prominent citizens in order to obtain large bribes for their release.

Human Rights Abuses by the Eritrean Fronts

Both the ELF and EPLF committed abuses against human rights during this period. At first, the ELF's Moslem leadership was intolerant of Christians. Some of the first Christians to attempt to join were summarily executed, as were members of a group of university students known as Siriyat Addis. The defection of a large number of Christian fighters in June 1967 presaged the splits that were to destroy the organization in the 1970s. In 1968, the Tripartite Union breakaway group was subject to harassment from partisans of the mainstream ELF based in the western lowlands, and two members were arrested and killed.

After the army atrocities of 1967, there was a widespread demand in the ELF rank and file for retributive attacks on civilian targets. In response, the leadership set up a special unit to engage in hijackings of airplanes. Civilian airplanes were hijacked at Frankfurt in March 1969 and Karachi in June 1969. In neither incident were any passengers injured.

The ELF also set up a special unit known as "Quattro Cento," after the death penalty in force during the Italian occupation. Its task was the assassination of civilians associated with the government. Gwynne Roberts, a journalist who travelled with the ELF in mid-1975, estimated that at that time the ELF were carrying out about 15 assassinations each week. Those accused of collaboration were sent two warnings, and if they ignored both, an assassination squad was dispatched. Roberts also saw numerous civilians who were detained by the ELF for having failed to give them assistance, or on suspicion of collaborating with the government.[13]

Minority Rights Group, 1971, p. 29.

[12] Erlich, 1983, p. 39.

[13] The Financial Times, London, October 24, 1975.

The Tripartite Union and the EPLF also carried out assassinations. On April 14, 1970, two judges who had earlier sentenced rebel fighters to death were shot dead in a bar in Asmara together with four other people present.

The ELF levied taxes and enacted reprisals against villages and individuals who refused to cooperate. In one of several similar incidents in 1971, 52 Christian villagers were burned to death in their huts in a village named Debre Sila for non-payment of ELF demands.[14] On March 7, 1971, the ELF plundered the village of Halib Menal, stealing many cattle, after the villagers had killed two ELF fighters while resisting an ELF attempt to occupy the village two days before. Individuals who failed to protect ELF property entrusted to them were also summarily executed.

The organization also repeatedly demanded cash payments from Christian missions in its operational areas, and on occasions confiscated medicines from hospitals and pharmacies.

There were several instances in which the fronts took European and American hostages. For example, on May 24, 1974, the ELF attacked the American Mission Hospital at Ghinda, and seized an Eritrean nurse and an American missionary as hostages. The nurse was summarily killed the same day because she could not keep up with her captors' walking pace; the American was released unharmed after three weeks. In 1975 and 1976, both the ELF and EPLF took US servicemen at Kagnew base as hostages; at one point the ELF threatened to try two servicemen for the damage and deaths caused by US-supplied munitions. The ELF also kidnapped three British tourists, while the EPLF took Mr B. H. Burwood-Taylor, the British honorary consul, from his office in central Asmara and kept him for five months. All were released unharmed, though Mr Burwood-Taylor was kept in solitary confinement for extended periods.

The Eritrean War and the Revolution

The war in Eritrea was a principal cause of the revolution of 1974 which overthrew the Emperor Haile Selassie and brought to power the Provisional Military Administrative Committee, known by the Amharic word for "committee", the Dergue. Senior army officers came to believe that the war could not be won by military means, and that a negotiated settlement was needed.

Ironically, the revolution followed two years in which there were fewer army offensives, and much of the military activity consisted in the war launched by the ELF against the EPLF to enforce unity. The government tried to sow dissension in the Eritrean ranks; attempting to

[14] Africa Contemporary Record, 1971-72, p. B113.

inflame the civil war between ELF and EPLF. Over half of the Ethiopian regular army was stationed in Eritrea, a total of 25,000 men. Regular patrols continued, together with the attempted enforcement of the protected villages strategy, and punitive missions after successful ELF or EPLF guerrilla raids.

After a spate of assassinations by the rebels in June 1974 -- including the killing of an army colonel -- the army burned the village of Om Hager, near the Sudanese border, in July. The villagers were ordered to collect in the local stadium. After waiting for two hours, soldiers opened fire with machine guns. At least 54 civilians were shot dead and a further 73 drowned while trying to swim a flooded river. Some reports indicate that 17 elders were burned to death in a hut. About 4,000 refugees fled to Sudan. The new military head of state, General Aman Andom, himself an Eritrean, apologized for the massacre and promised compensation. This was never paid.

General Aman himself was killed in November in a shoot-out with an army unit sent to arrest him by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was emerging as the strongman of the Dergue. Aman had advocated compromise with the Eritrean fronts; Mengistu wanted to settle the problem by force of arms. Starting in 1974, Mengistu made every effort to increase the size of the armed forces. During the years 1974-6, military assistance from the US was actually increased. However, the amounts provided fell short of Mengistu's ambitions.

The intervention of the citizens of Asmara after the battle of Wolki in October 1974 forced the ELF and the EPLF to try to settle their differences by negotiation. An agreement was reached at Koazien in January 1975 and the two fronts then began a concerted war on the government. In May 1975, at its second congress, the ELF voted out a number of exiled leaders and emphasized unity with the EPLF. Ahmad Nasir became the new chairman. The EPLF broke with Osman Saleh Sabbe (then head of its foreign mission) and adopted a radical socialist program at its first congress in January 1977. Sabbe then founded a third front -- the ELF-Popular Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF) -- and a series of triangular negotiations ensued; unity was not, however, achieved.

Between 1975 and 1977 the fronts succeeded in overrunning almost the entire territory, save Asmara, Massawa and the small town of Barentu in the west. At this time, the fighters of the ELF and EPLF outnumbered the Ethiopian forces, and their victory appeared to be inevitable. This was the first significant military threat faced by the new government of the Dergue.

The Siege of Asmara, 1975

Following Aman's death, the level of violence increased in Eritrea, with the ELF and

EPLF closing in on Asmara. Some guerrillas infiltrated the city on December 22. In retaliation, at least 50 Eritrean youths were killed by security forces, 18 of them strangled with piano wire on the night of December 23. ELF and EPLF commando units attacked installations in the city, including civilian targets. On December 22, a grenade attack killed six civilians. In mid-January, the US Information Service building and the main post office were attacked with grenades.

On January 31, 1975, the Eritrean fronts launched an attack on Asmara city. The attack started with a rocket attack on an army post, and there were a number of battles in nearby villages and on the outskirts of the city. Despite fierce fighting, the city remained under government control.

Over the following four days, government soldiers went on the rampage through the city. Civilians were dragged from their houses and executed. Soldiers opened fire on passing cars -- in one incident, six people were killed in a minibus. Passers by were stopped and shot dead. The soldiers looted and pillaged, in some instances cutting away women's ears to seize their earrings. According to eye-witness reports obtained by journalists who arrived in the city a week later, the soldiers used their bayonets when they ran out of bullets.[15] There are reliable reports that exactly 100 civilians were killed at the village of Woki Debra, just outside the city. About 50 people were killed at Adi Sogdo.

The government claimed that 124 civilians were killed by "stray bullets," during the four days of killing, but in a rare admission of a greater degree of responsibility, executed 13 soldiers for "excesses" and transferred 90 others in mid February. Journalists obtained reliable accounts of 331 civilian deaths, and other sources claimed that up to 3,000 were killed. The number of combatants killed by on all sides was about 3,000.

After the failure of the ELF-EPLF attempt to capture Asmara, the war intensified in the countryside as both sides prepared for a prolonged siege. The EPLF estimated that during 110 villages were partly or wholly destroyed by the army in 1975. During February-April there were a number of massacres in different parts of Eritrea, with tens or hundreds killed on each occasion: Harkiko in the eastern lowlands, Adi Worehi Sub, Waulki and Guilla in the west. In one incident at the village of Woki Debah on March 13, a group of soldiers travelling between Asmara and Keren rounded up a group of villagers early in the morning and shot dead 37. Some of the survivors fled; others remained behind. The following day the soldiers returned and burned the entire village, reportedly killing 500 people by shooting and stabbing with bayonets. Many livestock were also slaughtered.

After a lull, later in the year there were more killings of civilians, usually in reprisals for

[15] Dial Torgerson, The Guardian, London, February 15, 1975.

rebel attacks. Three families were shot dead in Asmara in August. On August 22, at least six boys were killed in Asmara. A number of villages were destroyed in air attacks.

As the ELF and EPLF besieged Asmara, the government used a blockade of food in order to try to sap their strength. Checkpoints around the city prevented food from being smuggled by sympathizers to the guerrillas. The import of food from Tigray was also severely curtailed, and the Ethiopian Red Cross was prevented from bringing in food relief. Brig.-Gen. Getachew Nadew, the military administrator, explained the blockade in these terms, made familiar by Mao Zedong: "if you wish to kill the fish, first you must dry the sea."[16] These measures brought considerable hardship to the rebel fighters, who were compelled to rely on food brought by camel trains from the Sudan border. These supplies were subject to ambush and aerial bombardment, and were inadequate. Journalist Gwynne Roberts described the ELF fighters as running short of food, and surviving on reduced diets.[17] As some of the villages near Asmara ran out of food, ELF units were forced to withdraw. In and around Asmara, the price of food rose more than twenty-fold, to highs surpassing those reached in the 1984/5 famine. Despite the food crisis -- indeed famine -- the government maintained its blockade, and prevented significant food imports until the military situation had improved.

The Peasants' March

1976 and 1977 saw relatively fewer atrocities in Eritrea. This was related to a number of factors, including several rounds of peace negotiations and the government's experience in 1975 that each massacre merely drove people into the arms of the rebel fronts. The most important reason, however, was that the two main offensives planned into Eritrea failed to reach the territory.

In 1976, Mengistu planned to overcome the problem of a relative shortage of armaments by resorting to a traditional Ethiopian tactic -- a mass levy of peasant soldiers, mobilized with the promise of booty and land in the enemy territory. The soldiers were told that they could take any land for themselves, after first driving the Eritreans from it.

The "Peasants March" on Eritrea was planned and implemented starting in March 1976. Major Atnafu Abate, a close friend of Mengistu, was responsible for the march. About 50,000 peasants, most of them from Wollo, were recruited. Some were volunteers, tempted by the government's promises, others were forcibly conscripted. Most were given antiquated surplus rifles from the armory, some were unarmed -- told they would be able to obtain weapons from

[16] Quoted in: Sunday Times, London, September 7, 1975.

[17] Financial Times, London, October 22, 1975.

dead rebels. Without training, the peasants began to march northwards. Meanwhile, in April the government summarily ordered out all foreigners engaged in evangelical or humanitarian work in Eritrea, closed all mission hospitals and confiscated most of the equipment.

Despite intense diplomatic pressure from the US, which objected to this "medieval" manner of conducting warfare, the march went ahead. However, the untrained peasant army was no match for the Eritreans -- or indeed the newly-formed Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). On the night of June 1/2, a surprise attack on the marchers was made at Zalenbessa, in Tigray, before they even entered Eritrea, and over 1,200 were killed and the remainder dispersed. Much light weaponry fell into the hands of the TPLF.

Offensive and Counter-Offensives, 1977

Atnafu and Mengistu then proceeded with a second plan for an offensive in Eritrea. Atnafu planned to create over 55,000 "Defense of the Revolution" squads, containing about 300,000 militiamen with three months' military training. (At different times, government members spoke of a force numbering between 200,000 and 500,000; probably 150,000 were actually recruited by mid-1977.) The militiamen were to march first on rebel forces in Gonder and Tigray, and then on Eritrea.

Implementation of this plan started in December 1976. In February 1977, Mengistu eliminated senior members of the Dergue who advocated negotiation with the Eritrean fronts, including the Dergue chairman, General Teferi Bante. In April 1977, the first contingents were sent to Gonder (see chapter 3). ELF forces crossed into Gonder to engage the militia in June, but the planned offensive into Eritrea was overtaken by events -- Somalia invaded the Ogaden, and the militia were diverted to the southeast.

Regular military units remained active in Eritrea, and there were numerous instances of violence against civilians, though not on the scale of 1975. In early March 1977, a naval unit killed between 100 and 160 civilians at the Red Sea village of Imberemi. On March 31, 1977, army units reportedly killed 42 civilians in reprisal for actions by the fronts.

During 1977, the Eritrean fronts remained on the offensive. They were able to enter Asmara at will -- in June the ELF displayed its confidence by taking a British journalist into the city at night. Starting in March, both fronts began to capture provincial towns -- Nacfa in March, Tessenei and Afabet in April, Keren and Decamhare in July, Mendefera in August. They appeared poised for an assault on Asmara. The main factor deterring the attack was a fear of renewed conflict between the ELF and EPLF -- the "Angola-ization" of Eritrea.

In early 1978, the Ethiopian administration in Eritrea made an estimate for the cost of

the war over the previous sixteen and a half years. According to the estimate, 13,000 soldiers and between 30,000 and 50,000 civilians had been killed or wounded. (No figure was given for casualties among the ELF and EPLF.) There were more than 200,000 Eritreans forced into exile over half of them in Sudan. The financial cost in terms of damage to property and the expenses of pursuing the war amounted to US$1.2 billion.[18]

[18] Quoted in UN Commission on Human Rights, "A Study on Human Rights and Mass Exoduses," by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Annex II, 1981, para. 32.