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Eritrean Options and Ethiopia's Future

Paul B. Henze

September 1989

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This Note analyzes the present critical political/economic/military impasse in Ethiopia, with emphasis on Eritrea as the key to the problem. The solution of the Ethiopian crisis depends in large measure on resolving Eritrea's relationship to the Ethiopian state. The restoration of the political and economic health of Ethiopia, the most populous and potentially the richest country in the Horn of Africa, would greatly improve the peace and stability of the region. The Note urges a more energetic U.S. and western approach to the deteriorated situation in Ethiopia and proposes that Eritrea be made the centerpiece of a strategy for the restoration of human rights and a flourishing economy in a peaceful Ethiopia. The author bases his judgments on his experience as a student of Horn of Africa affairs for more than 25 years and as a U.S. government official and scholar, and on visits to Ethiopia in each of the last three years.

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**Eritrean Options and Ethiopia's Future**

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## PREFACE

This Note analyzes the present critical political impasse in Ethiopia, emphasizing the settlement of the Eritrean problem as the key to its resolution. Progress toward solving the question of Eritrea's relationship to Ethiopia would ease the nation's chronic political, economic, and military crisis. If Ethiopia, the most populous and potentially the richest country in the Horn of Africa, could regain its political and economic health, the prospects for peace and stability in the entire region would improve greatly.

During the past several years, the author has conducted economic research sponsored by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy under the auspices of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The work was performed under the project entitled "Study of the Economy of Revolutionary Ethiopia: Comparative Economic Performance and the Burden of Military Expenditures," in RAND's International Economic Policy Program. While not a formal product of that research, which is being reported in other RAND studies, the present Note relates to it.

The judgments expressed herein are based on the author's experience as a student of and participant in Horn of Africa affairs during more than 25 years. The conclusions reflect recent intensive research on the politics and economics of the region, several weeks of travel in Ethiopia and neighboring countries during each of the past three years, and a wide range of interviews and conversations with individuals representing most of the factions, interest groups, and viewpoints in the region.



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## SUMMARY

The decisive setbacks experienced by the Ethiopian army in Eritrea and Tigre in 1988 and 1989 have left the Marxist-Leninist government headed by President Mengistu Haile Mariam few alternatives to entering into negotiations with the insurgents, a course that the USSR has long been urging on the Addis Ababa regime. Mengistu's commitment to serious negotiations remains unclear. He may merely be playing for time. He probably finds other possible courses of action equally distasteful and unpromising.

Mengistu is paying a heavy price for his perseverance since 1974 in trying to suppress by force the Eritrean separatist movement (and its nonseparatist Tigrean counterpart since 1978), for his armies no longer display much will to fight. The Soviets have threatened to reduce their arms supply to Ethiopia, but we do not know to what extent they may be carrying out this threat.

Though increasingly disillusioned with Mengistu, who has refused to undertake serious economic reforms and forbids mention of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) in his media, the Soviets do not yet appear to have resigned themselves to losing Ethiopia. In fact, Gorbachev may not yet have developed a comprehensive approach to the dilemmas he faces in the Horn. For the time being, he continues to try to "tough it out." The failed coup that Mengistu's generals mounted against him in mid-May 1989, a few hours after he departed on a visit to East Germany, forces the USSR to consider various alternatives, all unpalatable and uncertain of success, for maintaining a hold on Ethiopia.

Success against the Ethiopian armies confronts the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) with serious dilemmas as well. Leaders of this highly centralized, authoritarian movement maintain that they have modified their Marxism, but their commitment to democracy and an open economy remains qualified and in many respects vague. They may also have eased their firm adherence to separatism and independence. Nevertheless, their call for a referendum on the future of Eritrea remains little more than propaganda rhetoric until they specify the choices that it would offer and the practical arrangements for its international supervision.

Other practical problems arise from the deeply divided nature of Eritrean society and the possibility that many elements among the extremely varied inhabitants of the territory may not fully support EPLF positions. Insurgent movements in Eritrea have in the past always fallen into disarray when they have come closest to success. Current EPLF

leadership, inexperienced in diplomacy and statecraft, may fear a breakdown of discipline over its followers in the course of a long negotiation process.

Though the United States has little direct leverage on any aspect of Ethiopia's situation, it has extraordinarily high prestige among the Ethiopian populace, including Eritreans and Tigreans. EPLF leaders have mounted an energetic lobbying and propaganda campaign to win American support. Mengistu's regime has also sought to improve relations with the United States, albeit without serious concessions on human rights and economic policy issues that have made relations difficult almost from the beginning of Mengistu's regime.

The United States can nevertheless exert political and moral pressure by defining clearly the principles according to which an Ethiopian government would have to be organized so as to be welcomed and wholeheartedly supported by the West. President Carter's effort in September 1989 to initiate negotiations between the Addis Ababa government and the northern insurgents serves as a concrete demonstration of American goodwill. Greater direct pressure by the United States on the Soviet Union to cease all military aid to Mengistu and to play a genuinely positive role in restoring peace to Ethiopia could do no harm and might bring positive results.

The West has effective channels of communication with both the Ethiopian government and people through the Voice of America, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and other Western media. Western governments might use these media to define the conditions under which they would provide increased economic assistance to a humane and democratically inclined Ethiopian government.

This Note urges a more energetic U.S. (and combined Western) approach to the deteriorated situation in Ethiopia. It proposes that Eritrea be made the centerpiece of a strategy for the restoration of human rights and a flourishing economy in a peaceful Ethiopia—a strategy that could improve prospects for real peace throughout the Horn of Africa. Eritrea still has one-third of Ethiopia's industrial capacity. It has a talented and enterprising population. Eritrea makes much less sense as a separate country than as a dynamic—even leading—component in a reconstituted Ethiopian federated state. Eritreans in general—and the EPLF in particular—can, if they broaden their horizons and commit themselves to an open society and a free market economy, serve as catalysts for peace and progress throughout the region.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am especially grateful for the encouragement I received from Fred C. Ikle during his tenure as Under Secretary of Defense to pursue work on this area. I am also grateful to the European American Institute for Security Research and to the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars for the opportunities they provided me and for the publication of some of my early writing on the Horn. Recently, in addition to support from RAND, I have been able to draw on a grant from the United States Institute of Peace for continuing work on the region.

In visits to the area during the past three years, I have enjoyed the cooperation of many institutions and individuals in gaining deeper understanding of the problems of the region. I especially thank the many Ethiopians, including high officials, who have talked to me frankly and in detail about the complexities of their situation. For the overwhelming majority of them, even though they have had to pay lip service to it, Marxism-Leninism has no meaning. Their basic commitment is to further the fundamental interests of their country.

While I hope that most of those who have assisted my work may approve and share the opinions and recommendations expressed in this Note, both are entirely my own responsibility and do not represent institutional positions.

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## ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY

AALAPSO	African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples' Solidarity Organization
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
Derg	ruling military junta of PDRE
EPLF	Eritrean Popular Liberation Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
GOSPLAN	State Planning Commission [USSR]
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDRE	People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Shengo	National Assembly
TPLF	Tigrean Popular Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
VOA	Voice of America

## I. INTRODUCTION

The rebellion in Eritrea, the northernmost region of Ethiopia (see Fig.), can be reckoned as having begun in 1956, in 1961, or at various later dates in the 1960s. Give or take a few years, it has continued for essentially a quarter century. Amounting to little at first, it steadily worsened from 1966 on because of the increasing support that Eritrean dissidents began to receive from communist and radical Arab sources.<sup>1</sup> Without this support, Eritrean insurgency probably would not have become a major military challenge to the government in Addis Ababa. By 1969, half of Emperor Haile Selassie's armed forces—approximately 42,000 men—were deployed in Eritrea, though the rebels controlled only a small fraction of the province and no cities.

The insurgents did not represent a united movement and sometimes fought each other even more enthusiastically than they did the Ethiopian army. This lack of unity reflected the fact that Eritrea is a classic transitional area, rather than a nation. Everything comes together there—Africa and the Middle East, highlands and lowlands, Islam and Christianity—but nothing dominates. Instead, tribal, regional and religious loyalties intersect, overlap, and conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Communists and radical Arabs found the fractiousness of the insurgents awkward, but it did not deter them from their larger purpose of undermining the stability of Western-oriented Ethiopia itself. Ethiopia's traditional leaders had difficulty devising a strategy to deal with the insurgency. They tried to exploit religious and ethnic differences in Eritrea but wavered between conciliation and brutality. They sought American and Israeli help but did not get a great deal.

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<sup>1</sup>Fidel Castro, with Moscow's blessing, launched the African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AALAPSO) in 1966. Both the USSR and communist China began at this time to increase support for radical Third World political movements and to intensify their competition for influence in them. Haile Selassie's alleged oppressive policies in Eritrea quickly became the object of AALAPSO propaganda. At the same time small groups of young Eritreans began to go to Cuba and China for training in guerrilla warfare. These included Isayas Afewerki, present leader of the EPLF. The USSR encouraged and supported rebellion in Eritrea through radical Arab proxies, including the PLO. See Paul B. Henze, "Getting a Grip on the Horn," in Walter Z. Laqueur, *The Pattern of Soviet Conduct in the Third World*, Praeger, New York, 1983, pp. 150-186.

<sup>2</sup>See Paul B. Henze, "Eritrea: The Endless War," *Washington Quarterly*, 9/2, Spring 1986, p. 33. For the best succinct account available of the internal frictions in the Eritrean movement during the 1960s and 1970s, see John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1987, pp. 104-145.

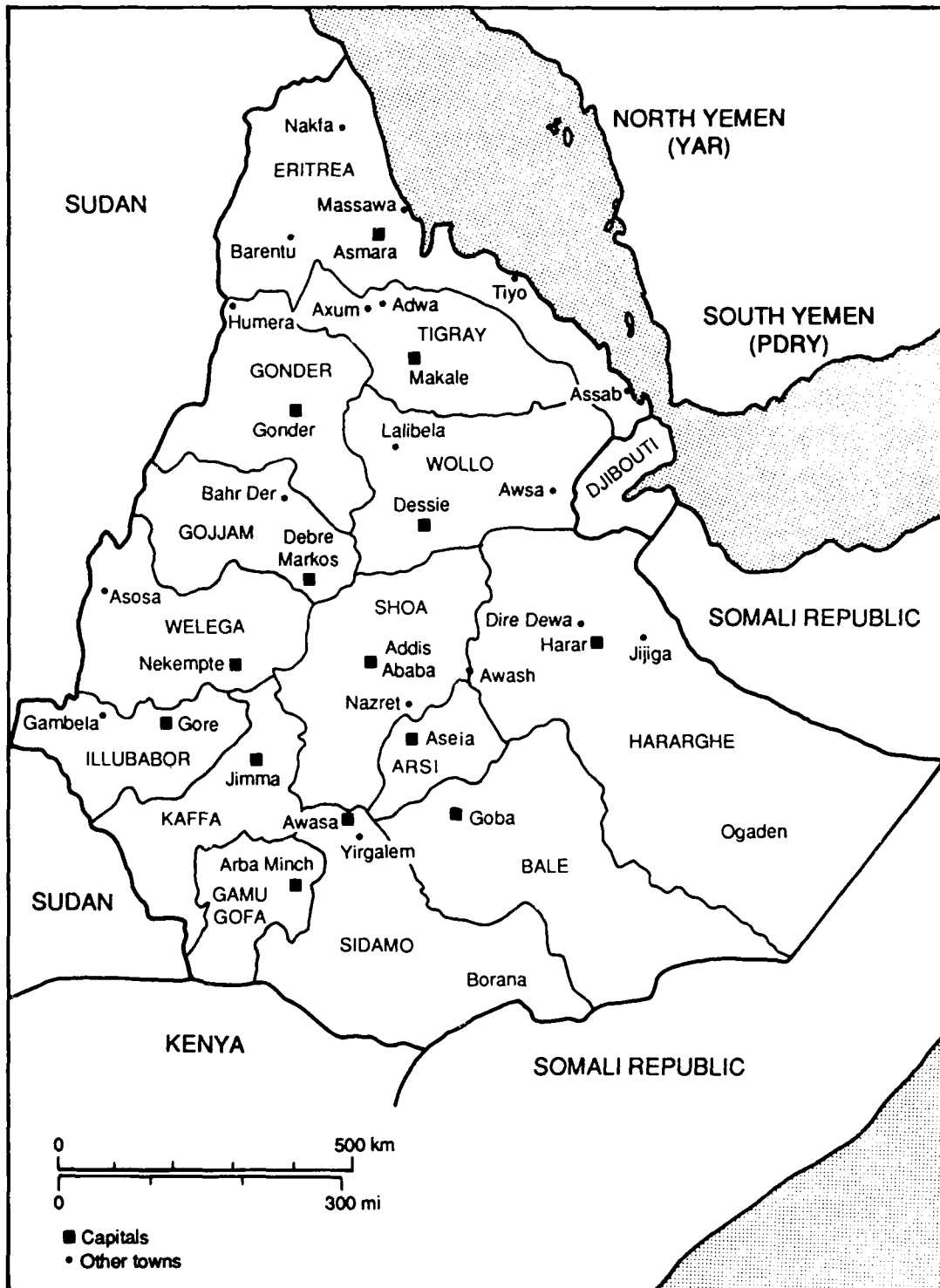


Fig. —Map of Ethiopia

Ethiopian leaders were handicapped by their own failure to come to terms with the fact that British administration had left Eritrea more politically developed than the rest of the country. The abolition of Eritrea's UN-sanctioned federated status in 1962 weakened Ethiopia's legal position. Nevertheless, Haile Selassie's standing as a respected world leader prevented Eritrean rebels from gaining recognition as a liberation movement in either the UN or the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

Peking was well ahead of Moscow in concluding by the beginning of the 1970s that seeking influence in Ethiopia itself was a more rational policy than chipping away at the edges of the country. The Chinese stopped supporting the Eritrean insurgency in return for recognition by Haile Selassie in 1971. Moscow took the opposite course.

During the two years following Nimeiry's coup in Khartoum in spring 1969, Soviet weapons and supplies flowed freely across the Sudan-Ethiopian border to the Eritrean rebels. Nimeiry's initial pro-Soviet stance greatly helped the Eritrean insurgency, but it had little effect on factionalism among the rebels who, whether they were doing well or poorly, readily fell into fratricidal conflict.

A major change occurred in July 1971: The Sudan Communist Party narrowly succeeded in overthrowing Nimeiry. He reacted by turning sharply away from Moscow, engaging Haile Selassie's help in negotiating a settlement with his rebellious southerners, and curtailing Eritrean insurgent use of their Sudanese supply lines. Because the Chinese ended their support at about the same time, the Ethiopian army made significant gains over the divided insurgents. The insurgents found a new friend in Qaddafi, however, and continued to benefit from other radical Arab, Cuban, and some clandestine East European support. The Soviets continued to encourage their clients and associates to support insurgency in Eritrea.

Haile Selassie's government proved incapable of capitalizing on the gains that it had made in Eritrea at the beginning of the 1970s. The Eritrean situation remained politically stalemated through the final two years of the old Lion of Judah's reign. The frustration of Ethiopian military units in Eritrea contributed to the ferment that led to his downfall in summer 1974.

The Derg—the military junta that replaced the emperor—inherited a situation ripe for creative initiative. Hopes for an Eritrean settlement rose when the Derg chose Aman Andom, a highly respected Eritrean-origin general, as its first chairman and acting head of state. But the cards were already stacked against him.

General Aman's energetic efforts to achieve reconciliation provoked mass enthusiasm among the citizenry of Asmara but foundered on recalcitrance in the Derg—recalcitrance that fed, in turn, on the stubbornness of the insurgents. The insecure and inexperienced military men who made up the Derg felt a strong need to demonstrate their dedication to Ethiopian national unity. Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, already emerging as a radical extremist, rallied opposition to Aman Andom's conciliatory approach to Eritrea, had him killed, and replaced him with Teferi Banti, an Oromo general, regarded by most Eritreans as hostile to their interests.

During the previous three years, the most uncompromising elements among the Eritrean insurgents had coalesced into the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front (EPLF), which committed itself to full independence and the formation of a Marxist-Leninist state. Though not yet dominant in 1974, the EPLF enjoyed Soviet favor, received support through Soviet proxies, and saw no advantage in negotiating with any government in Addis Ababa. Its intransigence deterred other Eritrean factions from compromise.

In the final weeks of 1974, the Derg committed itself to an uncompromising military solution in Eritrea and proclaimed "Ethiopian Socialism." All of Ethiopia's misfortunes during the ensuing 15 years stemmed directly from these two fateful decisions.

## II. ENDLESS WAR

The Derg's unrelenting military efforts from 1975 to 1977 to subdue Eritrea by force consumed enormous resources and incurred the hostility of much of the Eritrean population. The Derg's rush to build a rigidly centralized Marxist-Leninist state provoked countrywide opposition, and several other insurgencies developed. Mengistu alienated Ethiopia's former friends by parroting Soviet propaganda, but he received little concrete assistance from Moscow.

Playing a clever double game, the Soviets continued to give priority to the destabilization of Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> They signed a friendship treaty with Somalia in 1974 and poured \$300 million in weaponry into that country during the next three years. The bulk of Ethiopia's military strength was tied down in Eritrea. The country was so weakened that by June 1977 Somali President Siad Barre found the temptation to invade and take over the Ogaden irresistible, and his forces attacked.

In November 1977, the Soviet Union which had, in effect, maneuvered Mengistu into a trap, mounted a spectacular airlift and brought in 20,000 Cubans and \$2 billion worth of military equipment to rescue him. By early March 1978, the Somalis had been driven back across their borders.

Eritrean insurgents came close to securing *de facto* independence during winter 1977-1978, when they controlled all but a small region around Asmara and Massawa and penetrated into the outskirts of both these cities. They were defeated by Soviet air and naval bombardment and their own intense factional rivalry. During summer 1978, the Soviets provided equipment, advice, airlift, and air cover to enable Mengistu's forces to regain control of 90 percent of Eritrea. The endless war was nevertheless far from finished. The EPLF capitalized on the setback to eliminate its rivals from the ground and since then has dominated Eritrea, though other Eritrean factions continue to operate from abroad.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The late Getachew Kibret, the Ethiopian ambassador to France who defected to the United States in 1986, has provided the most comprehensive and authoritative information about Soviet maneuvering and manipulation of Mengistu and other pro-Soviet elements in the Derg from 1975 to 1978, when he held a senior position in the foreign ministry in Addis Ababa. It is hoped that his partially completed memoirs will be published in the coming year.

<sup>2</sup>By far the best account of the course of the Eritrean insurgency through the achievement of dominance by the EPLF is a short book by the Israeli historian Haggai Erlich: *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962-1978*, Hoover Institution, Stanford, Calif., 1983. His *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colo., 1986, provides historical background both on Eritrea and the rest of northern Ethiopia.



Mengistu proved unable to maintain the gains that Soviet support had enabled him to make, and during the ensuing ten years the pattern—with some ups and downs—has been one of steady erosion of the Ethiopian military position in Eritrea. The most decisive setback came early in 1988.

In February 1988, Mengistu had Tariku Ayene, a general who openly challenged his Eritrean policy, shot. The effect on army morale became apparent the next month, when the EPLF routed three divisions near Afabet and captured more than 20,000 soldiers and immense quantities of Soviet-supplied equipment. Ethiopian forces subsequently withdrew from all outlying positions, retaining only Keren, Asmara and the highland core to the south, and the road to Massawa. The military situation in Eritrea has not changed significantly since then.

In February 1989, a second major disaster occurred, in Tigre, where the Tigrean Popular Liberation Front (TPLF), with the support of the EPLF, defeated another large Ethiopian force at Enda Selassie, capturing at least 12,000 soldiers and several high-ranking officers. In the wake of this fiasco, all remaining Ethiopian forces withdrew from Tigre. Makelle became the first provincial capital that Mengistu lost. Eritrea is now cut off, except by air and a tenuous sea route, from the rest of Ethiopia.

This situation remained unchanged at the time of the military-led coup attempt in Addis Ababa on May 16, 1989, a few hours after Mengistu had left on a visit to East Germany. The Northern Military Command in Asmara immediately announced that it supported the coup and intended to seek a negotiated settlement with the EPLF.<sup>3</sup> The EPLF responded by declaring a two-week cease-fire and appealed to military forces elsewhere in Ethiopia to join in overthrowing Mengistu's government.

Subsequent events are still not entirely clear, but heavy fighting in Asmara resulted in the death of six Ethiopian generals and the reimposition of control over the Northern Command—which may contain as many as 170,000 men, more than half of Ethiopia's armed forces—by Mengistu loyalists.<sup>4</sup> Mengistu returned to Addis Ababa from East Berlin in the early hours of May 18 and began a purge of coup plotters. In a situation rich in irony and

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<sup>3</sup>General Kumbelachew Dejene, deputy head of the Northern Command, flew to Addis Ababa on May 16 with a battalion of troops to participate in the coup according to prearranged plan. He is the only senior coup participant known to have evaded capture. He arrived in the United States in August 1989. His firsthand account of the coup, both in terms of planning and execution, is expected shortly.

<sup>4</sup>Haile Selassie was able to maintain a hold on Eritrea with fewer than 25,000 men; with *seven* times more manpower, Mengistu has lost most of the province.

contradictions, he had to destroy most of what remained of the effectiveness of his armed forces to reestablish his hold on power in Addis Ababa.

Eritrea, more than ever before, remains the key not only to the fate of Mengistu's Marxist-Leninist regime, but to Ethiopia's future. In the sections that follow, I examine the options for policy and action that appear available to the contenders and other parties with potential leverage on this unstable situation: (1) Mengistu and/or any successor government in Addis Ababa, (2) the Soviet Union, (3) the EPLF, and (4) the West. I conclude by recommending a bold course of action for the EPLF to transform the present deteriorating situation and set Ethiopia on the road to recovery.

### III. MENGISTU'S DILEMMAS

What choices does Mengistu have as he attempts to regain power in Ethiopia?

- Strengthen and hold the position in Eritrea?
- Prepare for a new offensive in the north?
- Open negotiations with the EPLF?
- Appeal for OAU or UN intervention and/or supervision?
- Unilaterally recognize the independence of Eritrea?
- Withdraw from Eritrea and let the EPLF take over?

None of these courses of action appears to offer much prospect for success. Even though the attempt of the Northern Command to join the coup was frustrated, the loss of so many senior officers has left it seriously weakened. Troop morale, already low, has undoubtedly declined still further. From what we know of the attitudes of deserters and captured soldiers, we cannot easily envision what Mengistu could do to restore it.

Reinforcements brought in from the south probably would not help the Northern Command much, especially if they included (as some reports indicate) a large proportion of forcefully conscripted teenagers. In any case, the government could insert reinforcements into Eritrea only by air or a roundabout sea route. The effectiveness of the Ethiopian Air Force—the one important element of superiority Addis Ababa has maintained over the EPLF (as well as the TPLF and other insurgent groups)—has been seriously reduced by the execution or removal of air force officers sympathetic to the coup.

Under such circumstances any preparations that Mengistu might order for a new offensive in Eritrea or Tigre would fail. As of the end of September 1989, TPLF-supported forces appeared to be making steady progress southward into Wollo. Far from undertaking an offensive, Mengistu's army appears unable to contain numerically weaker and less well equipped insurgents.

With or without the assistance of an outside mediator, the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) can negotiate with the EPLF; it has actually done so at various times during the past ten years, always with Soviet knowledge and encouragement. However, negotiations never progressed far, as the EPLF found Mengistu unconvincing as a negotiating partner. The May 1989 coup attempt has made him even less convincing and weakened him seriously.

One of Mengistu's few remaining tactical options is to agree to negotiations. Participation in negotiations with the EFLF, whether serious or not, would respond to increasing Soviet pressure to negotiate and improve his recalcitrant image in the West. Unless negotiations resulted in some progress, however, these tactical gains would evaporate.

As long as Mengistu retains power in Addis Ababa, OAU or UN supervision of a cease-fire and/or referendum in Eritrea will be difficult to arrange. Prospects for successful negotiations and international supervision of whatever agreement might result would improve if a moderate leadership were to replace Mengistu.

Mengistu's claim to be the defender of Ethiopia's territorial integrity has lost credibility, but his hold on power still rests, to some degree, on his status as the leader of a *united Ethiopian state*. Ethiopian nationalism remains strong throughout much of the country. Mengistu's government and Marxism-Leninism are increasingly detested, but the excessively parochial separatist movements do not enjoy the unqualified support of a majority of the country's population.<sup>1</sup> No government that hopes to survive in Addis Ababa can risk surrendering portions of the internationally recognized national territory. Any viable new government will have to respond more to public opinion than Mengistu has.

It would be completely out of character for Mengistu to attempt to concede independence to Eritrea. Nor could he order the withdrawal of Ethiopian armed forces from Eritrea and survive politically. A compromise that conceded a high degree of autonomy or even *de facto* self-rule to Eritrea—but within the international legal framework of the Ethiopian state—appears to be the only acceptable solution for an Addis Ababa government. Everything that we know of Mengistu's record and personality works against any supposition that he might accept this kind of compromise.

Mengistu is thus caught in what appears to be a net of insoluble dilemmas: He can no longer rely on the armed forces to keep him in power or to maintain the country's territorial integrity as he defines it. Power based on party and security forces remains tenuous and temporary. As his position weakens, insurgent groups opposing Mengistu have less incentive to compromise with him. He can make concessions to them only at the expense of further undermining his power base. Can the Russians save him?

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<sup>1</sup>Some, such as the TPLF and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), claim to be better Marxist-Leninists than Mengistu.

#### IV. HARD CHOICES FOR THE SOVIETS

Mengistu has always been an awkward problem for Gorbachev. Mengistu has forbidden reporting on changes in the Soviet Union, including mention of the words *glasnost* and *perestroika*, in the official press.<sup>1</sup> He has only grudgingly implemented a few of the economic reforms that Soviet State Planning Commission (GOSPLAN) advisers recommended in a highly critical report in 1985.<sup>2</sup> The changes that he has made have been more concessions to pressures of Western aid donors than to those of Moscow.

Since the defeats at Afabet in March 1988 (three Soviet officers were captured and, as far as is known, remain in EPLF custody), and at Enda Selassie in February 1989, Moscow has more openly criticized Mengistu's tactics in Eritrea. A Soviet embassy counselor in Addis Ababa told a *New York Times* correspondent in March 1989 that the EPLF was making better use of Soviet equipment captured from the Ethiopians than the Ethiopian army itself was doing.<sup>3</sup> In spring 1989, the Soviet learned journal *Narody Azii i Afriki* (Peoples of Asia and Africa) published an extraordinarily critical article calling into question the entire Soviet experience in supporting Mengistu's regime in Ethiopia (and other similar regimes)<sup>4</sup>.

The EPLF has long boasted that it gets its weapons and ammunition from Moscow, "delivered through the Ethiopian army." There were hints that Moscow might be scaling back, or even cutting off, military aid to Mengistu, though there has been no concrete evidence that this has actually occurred.<sup>5</sup> Before the coup attempt in May 1989, speculation

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<sup>1</sup>Ethiopians have nevertheless learned of these developments from the Western press, especially the broadcasts of the VOA and the BBC.

<sup>2</sup>See Paul B. Henze, *Ethiopia: Crisis of a Marxist Economy, Analysis and Text of a Soviet Report*, The RAND Corporation, R-3677-USDP, April 1989.

<sup>3</sup>See "Ethiopia's Leader Regaining Control," *New York Times*, May 21, 1989.

<sup>4</sup>See G. A. Krylova, "National-Democratic Revolution in the Light of New Political Thinking (The Example of Ethiopia)," *Narody Azii i Afriki*, No. 1, 1989, pp. 42-53.

<sup>5</sup>Contrary to some ill-informed press speculation, e.g., Robert L. Rotberg, "As the Soviets Leave, What Next for Ethiopia," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 17, 1989, and "Soviets Press Ethiopia to End War, Envoys Say," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1989. With considerable delay following the mid-May coup, the Soviet government on June 13, 1989, issued a carefully crafted statement on the situation in Ethiopia in which it endorsed Mengistu's "parliamentary" initiative of June 5 calling for a negotiated settlement of the Eritrean problem. The statement does not advance the Soviet position beyond earlier, albeit less authoritative, direct and implied criticism of Mengistu's policies. It provides no substantiation for speculation that the Soviets might be considering a pullout from Ethiopia. See Appendix A, below, for the text of the statement, which appeared in *Pravda*, June 14.

in Addis Ababa suggested that Moscow might move to oust Mengistu. Several questions can plausibly be asked about the Soviet relationship to the coup:

- Did Moscow know that senior military officers were plotting?
- Did Soviets in Ethiopia encourage them?
- Did they inform Mengistu and his immediate entourage?
- What actions, if any, did Soviets in Addis Ababa take during the actual coup attempt? In Asmara and Harar?
- Why did the Soviets permit Mengistu to rush back to Ethiopia from East Berlin?

It is easy to understand why Mengistu returned to Addis Ababa. The action was in character. Besides, he had to emulate the example of Haile Selassie, who rushed back from Brazil during the coup in December 1960. He could not show himself less courageous in the face of a coup attempt than the old emperor had been. It is less easy to understand why the Soviets permitted Mengistu to return if, indeed, they wanted to be rid of him in Ethiopia. They missed a golden opportunity. Perhaps, with Gorbachev in China, they were too preoccupied to focus on Ethiopia. Perhaps they left the East Germans to act on their own.

Data issued by the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency indicate that the Soviets have invested at least \$11 billion in the Ethiopian armed forces over the past 12 years. The investment has produced little return. The Soviets have indulged Mengistu in his efforts to build a model communist state in Ethiopia, though they have given him very little economic support. Since the great famine of 1984-1985, the world has known that the Ethiopian economy is a disaster.

The Soviets face the immediate problem of what to do about a leader with whom they were already unhappy but who is now an international embarrassment for having executed generals, imprisoned subordinate officers, and impressed teenagers into military service. Should they

- Rush in more military aid—and perhaps troops and planes to stiffen Mengistu's weakened army and air force?
- Attempt to mediate a solution between Mengistu and the EPLF—and perhaps other insurgent movements?

- Withhold military aid to force Mengistu to begin direct negotiations with the EPLF?
- Seek to internationalize the Ethiopian problem by inviting international organizations or other countries to join in a mediation effort?
- Provide massive economic assistance to bolster the faltering Ethiopian economy?
- Abandon Mengistu and the support of Ethiopia's territorial integrity and revert to supporting Eritrean separatism and fragmentation of the Ethiopian state?

Moscow's choices are as unpalatable as Mengistu's, but Ethiopia is not a life-and-death question for Gorbachev. In 1977, Brezhnev could expect massive Soviet military intervention to decisively disadvantage the West and perhaps achieve Soviet hegemony in the entire Horn of Africa.<sup>6</sup> No one in Moscow foresaw the costs, but costs were not then a serious factor in Soviet calculations of strategic advantage. In the Gorbachev era, the strategic calculus has changed. The Soviet public knows that Ethiopia drained Soviet resources and embarrassed the USSR internationally. Soviet leaders must increasingly take into account public opinion.

But even if the Soviets were to accept the costs of massive new military aid, what basis could they have for pretending that Mengistu's demoralized armed forces could make effective use of it? The Soviets could provide aid on a reduced scale as a palliative and a holding operation. It is almost impossible to conceive of Soviet or Soviet-proxy manpower—including Cubans—being sent to Ethiopia under current circumstances.<sup>7</sup> An influx of Soviet manpower to bolster Mengistu would only galvanize the already great hostility of the Ethiopian man on the street to the Russians. Such an undertaking would elicit far-reaching international repercussions.

Moscow has long urged direct negotiations between Addis Ababa and the EPLF and has underwritten mediation efforts in the past by the East Germans and the Italian Communist Party, among others. None got to first base. If Gorbachev is too preoccupied to

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<sup>6</sup>Even at that time, the Soviets seem to have been much less eager to embrace Mengistu than he was to sell himself to them. They abetted an attempt to replace him in 1978.

<sup>7</sup>Remaining Cubans, totaling perhaps 3500, are being withdrawn according to a mid-September 1989 announcement in Havana. At what rate is not yet clear. The Cubans steadily reduced their forces in Ethiopia during the 1980s and have played no direct military role since the late 1970s. Their complete withdrawal is significant only as a political signal to Mengistu.

face up to the Ethiopian situation, he may welcome renewed efforts toward a negotiated settlement as the best temporizing tactic available, perhaps in the hope that Mengistu may somehow eventually be eliminated.

Gorbachev, faced with the need to consolidate his power at home and with higher priorities abroad, has probably preferred to "tough it out" in Ethiopia in hope that some Soviet equities could be preserved. The mid-May coup attempt reduced the viability of this approach.

In other seemingly dead-end situations, such as Afghanistan and Angola, Gorbachev has welcomed tacit or active international cooperation. Continued Soviet military reinforcement of the Kabul regime nevertheless demonstrates a strong desire to retain a position of some strength in Afghanistan, but without a major commitment of Soviet manpower and, presumably, at substantially reduced cost. Ultimate Soviet aims in Angola are less clear. Moscow is less directly exposed there than in Ethiopia, but Cuban involvement has been a far more important factor. The Cuban presence in Ethiopia is now being terminated.

Can any other Soviet-allied country provide decisive assistance to Mengistu? His frantic efforts during late 1988 and early 1989 to obtain help from North Korea, East Germany, Syria, and South Yemen produced no concrete results. In the final analysis, Mengistu's Ethiopia remains directly and unavoidably Moscow's problem.

Gorbachev's approach to other Third World problems leaves the impression that, though he has acquiesced in Western-sponsored negotiations between the PDRE and the EPLF, he will seek no further Western help in resolving the Soviet predicament in Ethiopia until he perceives the situation to be more deadlocked and directly embarrassing to Moscow than he now feels it to be. Western leaders' dramatization of the Ethiopian situation—and direct criticism of Moscow for responsibility for it—could alter his perception.

The Soviet Union has always provided miserly economic assistance to Ethiopia. Western donors are already supplying all the development aid the country can effectively exploit, given current socialist policies. It can be argued that some of it—e.g., Italian support of a major resettlement project—is in fact being wasted. Even if the Soviets could find the resources for it, a massive economic aid program would have almost no effect on current political impasses. Ethiopian public opinion would feel little gratitude for it, accepting it as overdue reparations for the damage the Soviet relationship has inflicted on the country.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Most of Ethiopia appears to have good prospects for a bountiful harvest this season. Eritrea and Tigre, however, according to recent reports, are an exception. They have received little rainfall, and serious famine may again threaten these northern regions.



Before Gorbachev came to power, the possibility that the Soviet Union might revert to its pre-1977 policy in the Horn of Africa and support Somali and Eritrean separatism—i.e., fragmentation of Ethiopia—would have to be taken more seriously than it needs to be now. Somalia, beset by internal rebellion, is much less attractive today than it was 20 years ago. Even during the heyday of open Soviet military assistance to Somalia, thinly disguised proxy support for the Eritrean rebellion, and clandestine student operations to destabilize Haile Selassie's empire, *the long-range Soviet priority* was to get a grip on the most important country in the region—Ethiopia—a historic Russian goal extending back into the nineteenth century.

Gorbachev, whose experience in foreign affairs was extremely limited before 1985, may be unfamiliar with the details of past Soviet decisionmaking in respect to the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region and must at times be irritated at having to deal with the mess his predecessors' energetic meddling in the area has created.<sup>9</sup> Still, it is difficult to see him severing alliances with the expectation that Moscow would gain from this. Such a tactic would reverse everything we have so far seen in Gorbachev's approach to international relations.

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Western governments have already been alerted to the situation. If the situation proves to be as serious as some observers are forecasting, it will provide an opportunity for Western governments to appeal to the Soviets to join in relief efforts. See, for example, Neil Henry, "In the Midst of War Eritrea Confronts New Disaster," *Washington Post*, October 21, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>Not only in Ethiopia, but in places such as South Yemen, where, it should be remembered, murderous rivalries within a Soviet-supported regime led to an explosion of civil war in early 1986. A major portion of the military equipment that the Soviets had supplied the country was destroyed and hundreds of Russian advisers had to be evacuated.

## V. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE EPLF

The May coup attempt in Addis Ababa and the involvement of significant elements of the Northern Command in Asmara bring the EPLF within sight of taking control of all of Eritrea. Since the effectiveness of the Ethiopian Air Force has been seriously imperiled by the coup, it is possible—though not a foregone conclusion—that the EPLF might be able to occupy Keren, Asmara, and Massawa with dissident Ethiopian military assistance (or acquiescence) during 1989 or early 1990. The EPLF would thus achieve a basis for *de facto* independence. Would such a development make most of the issues discussed in the two preceding sections irrelevant? No. EPLF leaders, as they contemplate this prospect, realize that they have new questions to answer and several difficult problems to solve:

- What does *independence* really mean? Can it be legally sanctioned? Do the Eritrean people have a universal desire for independence? Would it be the most advantageous status for Eritrea?
- Could it be maintained without protection by a major power? Who would guarantee Eritrean independence against a resurgent Ethiopian state? The OAU? The UN? The USSR? The United States? No guarantee could be cost-free—what are the implications of different guarantors?
- How is Eritrea to be organized internally? As a unitary state led by an authoritarian single party? Democratically, with provision for representation of all its nationalities and religious groups?
- How are the other Eritrean political (and former insurgent) factions, which still exist in exile and doubtless retain considerable sympathy among their adherents inside Eritrea, to be treated? As partners? Competing political parties? Enemies to be suppressed?
- How is the Eritrean economy to function? Nationalized and centralized? Mixed? On free market principles?
- If the issue of independence versus some degree of continued association with the Ethiopian state is to be submitted to *referendum*, what are the concrete choices? How will the referendum be held and supervised so as to be internationally acceptable as a valid measure of the will of the Eritrean people? What kind of Ethiopian government could ensure its acceptance by a majority of the *Ethiopian* people?

The EPLF has fostered a considerable historical mythology. Some of its spokesmen like to claim that Eritrea has always been an entirely separate entity from Ethiopia. Actually, both the name and the territory within its present boundaries came into existence only on establishment of the Italian colony in 1890. When faced with this fact, EPLF leaders argue that earlier history is irrelevant.

The EPLF argumentation is tenable in much of Africa, where history is myth, but not in the Horn, of which the first written records are found in Egyptian tombs, Greek, Roman, and Persian chronicles, and South Arabian and Axumite inscriptions that permit no doubt that Eritrea's highlands and its Red Sea coast formed part of the earliest Ethiopian state. Many of the leaders of this state would be called Eritreans in today's terminology.

Such facts do not automatically give contemporary Ethiopia an uncontested claim to Eritrea, but neither can they be dismissed as having no bearing on the question of what Eritrea's status should be. They still have meaning in Eritrea, where the varied groups who inhabit the territory are keenly aware of their own historical roots and traditions.

EPLF mythology does not relate only to ancient history. It oversimplifies what happened in Eritrea in 1941-1942, when British forces took it from Italy and set up a military administration, which, as a result of a UN-supervised process lasting several years, was transformed into an elected Eritrean government and federation of the territory with the Ethiopian empire in 1952.

EPLF mythology also oversimplifies the experience of the federation and its dissolution in 1962.<sup>1</sup> Eritrea's future, whether it is to be independence or some form of continued association with the Ethiopian state, cannot be worked out on the basis of tendentious mythology about the past or the present. All parties have to face this fact.

One can convincingly argue that Eritrea was unlucky in coming onto the great power agenda for attention a decade too early. If settlement of the Eritrean case had been postponed a few years, it might well have been given independence, as almost all the other colonies in Africa were in the decade after 1956.<sup>2</sup> But it is difficult, in light of African

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<sup>1</sup>Fortunately, one of the most dedicated British administrators in Eritrea, G.K.N. Trevaskis, produced a comprehensive account of the process of creating the federation: *Eritrea, a Colony in Transition*, Oxford University Press, 1960. It should be mandatory reading for anyone concerned with the Eritrean issue today.

<sup>2</sup>Certainly, the comparatively advanced Eritreans are justified in feeling that they should be as entitled to a seat in the UN as the inhabitants of Chad, Malawi, Burundi, or Guinea Bissau. And Asmara would be a far more attractive setting for foreign embassies and international meetings than Nouakchott or Ouagadougou. In terms of the symbolism and diplomatic dividends of independence, Eritreans have indeed been cheated by history.

history over the past 30 years, to demonstrate that many small separate African states have been noteworthy successes. In too many of them, authoritarian elites have exploited their status at the expense of the masses of the people, who have suffered economic stagnation, misgovernment, and various forms of abuse extending to genocide.

In comparison, Haile Selassie's domination of Eritrea may have been inept and unfair, but it was not, on the whole, characterized by savagery or economic incompetence. The central government in Addis Ababa and foreign donors invested more in Eritrean development than in Tigre, Gondar, Wollo, or Gojjam. Eritreans as individuals enjoyed advantages in being part of a large, historically based, internationally respected state.

Despite the miserable experience of the past 15 years and all the misfortunes many individuals have suffered, Eritreans still function willingly as productive citizens throughout Ethiopia today. All Eritreans are not irretrievably alienated from Ethiopia. Eritrea's future status should be determined with recognition of the entitlement of the Eritrean population as a whole to enjoy basic human rights, economic opportunity, religious freedom, individual exercise of political preference, and freedom of movement—rather than the desire of a self-perpetuating elite to exercise power.

We know too little of the EPLF and its leaders. How do they think? Many of them were trained as young men in China, in Cuba, and with the PLO. They say they have changed and learned as the world has evolved. Since many are highly intelligent, this must be true. But just what have they learned? How does the EPLF really operate? Journalism about conditions in areas under EPLF control tells us little.<sup>3</sup> The EPLF calls itself a front, but we know next to nothing about the individual political groups that constitute this front. They have no identity outside Eritrea and little inside it. How do they make and implement policies?

The EPLF's own declarations and proclamations have until recently given a picture of a highly centralized, dogmatic Marxist-Leninist party aiming to establish a classic communist-type state structure. EPLF leaders and spokesmen say they have modified their Marxist views of society and statist ideas of how an economy should function. Their official declarations still put them well behind Poland, Hungary, and China on economic and social issues and raise serious misgivings about their commitment to individual freedoms and democratic political procedures, subjects that are increasingly debated in the USSR itself.

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<sup>3</sup>No significant political, economic, sociological, or anthropological research has been done in Eritrea for 30 years or more, in contrast to many other parts of Ethiopia, where reasonably objective research by both Ethiopian and foreign scholars has continued even under the Marxist-Leninist regime.

This is perhaps not surprising, for Eritrea is inherently a deeply divided region.<sup>4</sup> No political grouping was able to gain a popular majority in reasonably free elections. Insurgency is by nature conspiratorial. Leaders gain predominance over factional rivals by a combination of conspiracy and violence. One might argue that only a firmly disciplined and autocratically led movement, such as the EPLF became after 1971, could achieve ascendancy and stand up to much larger and better-equipped Ethiopian armed forces.

The exigencies of guerrilla war leave little time or room for the practice of democracy. EPLF leaders must nevertheless face the fact that Western guarantors of Eritrean independence probably would expect the observance of minimal standards of human rights and provision for some degree of political pluralism. This consideration may even be valid from the viewpoint of the Soviet Union if it continues to evolve in a democratic direction.

Eritrea still has a third of Ethiopia's industrial capacity. Its basic economic infrastructure remains intact and capable of rapid revitalization and further development. Even under inefficient nationalized management, its industry has continued to produce and export. But the economy is not structured to operate autarkically.

The Italians developed their Eritrean colony as a springboard for the conquest of Ethiopia. The British expanded industry and services in Eritrea to support the allied war effort. Haile Selassie saw Eritrea as a valuable economic asset for the whole country and encouraged Italian and other foreign investment. As a result, Eritrea developed a substantial export capacity, in both light manufactures and agricultural products.<sup>5</sup> The Arabian peninsula, as well as neighboring parts of Africa, constitute a natural and convenient market for Eritrea, as they do for the rest of Ethiopia.

During the federation period, Eritreans moved in large numbers into Ethiopia as entrepreneurs and dominated such fields as telecommunications and air transport. They have shown high aptitude for such professions as law, accounting, industrial management, and administration. Even under conditions of the past decade, they have displayed a remarkable capacity for entrepreneurship. The underground economy has been flourishing in Eritrea, both in EPLF and government-held regions, and Eritrean traders' operations extend to all parts of Ethiopia.

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<sup>4</sup> In "Eritrea: The Endless War" (p. 34), I have termed it "Africa's Lebanon," citing its nine significant tribal groups, each with its own language (in addition to which four nonindigenous languages are in use), and three major religious groupings which overlap tribal and linguistic divisions.

<sup>5</sup>Exports include 10,000 cases per year of *Asmara* (formerly *Melotti*) beer to the United States!

Economically, Marxism-Leninism and other kinds of authoritarian state socialism make little sense in Eritrea. A free market economy combined with a reasonably open society are much more likely to provide opportunity for Eritreans to exercise their natural talents. Throughout its entire recorded history, this northernmost section of Ethiopia has looked outward. The most ancient records document a flow of trade that extended to three continents. Long before the beginning of the Christian era, the Axumite empire traded with the Mediterranean world and the Middle East. In the late Middle Ages, the Portuguese came to the Red Sea coast, and the region subsequently became part of the Ottoman Empire.

Though it often fell out of their control, Ethiopian emperors regarded Eritrea as their window on the world. Ethiopia forms a natural economic hinterland for Eritrea. The closure of the Suez Canal at the time of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war cut short promising developments in Eritrea's agricultural and light industrial export capacity. After Suez reopened, the Eritreans were unable to resuscitate their economy because of intensified war since the 1974 Ethiopian revolution.

The fact that Eritrea has continued to be an important factor in the underground economy that extends over the entire Horn of Africa—across Ethiopian borders to Djibouti, Somalia, and Kenya, and to the Sudan as well—provides some measure of the potential that this area could realize under peaceful conditions. Admirable as the EPLF's underground "factories" restoring trucks and tanks and producing ammunition and medicines may be, they do not constitute a model for a flourishing economy in an independent or autonomous Eritrea.

Evidence of serious EPLF thinking on economic matters is even more meager than evidence of awareness of the political evolution that has taken place in the world in recent years. Generalized talk of a mixed economy means little. Would nationalized industries be returned to their owners? Would Eritreans who have prospered in exile be encouraged to return and invest their money and apply their skills in industry, agriculture, trade, and services? Would foreigners be invited to invest? Under what conditions?

EPLF leaders' eloquent talk of commitment to a referendum to determine Eritrea's future gives the impression of moderation and reasonableness. The idea needs to be fleshed out. A referendum means choices. How are the choices to be defined? If the choice is simply to be independence or continued association with Ethiopia, what kind of Ethiopia is meant? Mengistu's Marxist-Leninist "people's republic?" Some other form of unitary state? A democratic Ethiopia? A federal state with autonomy not only for Eritrea but for other regions too? How constituted and established?

Without a reasonably concrete plan and set of conditions under which a referendum would be more than a mere ratification of the imposition of EPLF authoritarian control, a vote by inhabitants of Eritrea on their future is likely to be an unconvincing exercise. How are security conditions to be created under which a referendum could take place? What voice will the several hundred thousand Eritreans abroad have and how will they exercise it? Who will supervise the referendum and certify its validity? These questions have to be answered before the EPLF can expect to gain international backing for a referendum. Without international support and assistance, it will have little meaning.

## VI. ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES AND ITS FRIENDS

Since the mid-1970s, the United States has had no presence in Eritrea and no direct or immediate influence.<sup>1</sup> After a long period of indifference verging on hostility, EPLF leaders have recently been trying to create a favorable image among the American public and to gain support from the U.S. Government. To what end?

Originally, EPLF leaders must have sought a change in the long-standing U.S. policy of supporting the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. This may still be their aim, though prospects for a change in the U.S. position are poor. The same may be said of the basic policy position of all U.S. major Western allies. If EPLF leaders can bring themselves to recognize this fact, a potential for constructive action can be developed.

Western and U.S. policy and actions regarding the countries of the Horn inevitably center on existing, legally constituted states and relations between them. The West (both governments and publics) has always wanted each Horn state to develop and modernize successfully to the benefit of all its inhabitants and has encouraged these countries to cooperate and compose their differences peacefully. EPLF leaders would be naive to assume that the United States or any major Western country would adopt and maintain a policy favoring only Eritrea or any other portion of a Horn country, such as southern Sudan, over the rest of it.

Mengistu, who has never displayed much friendliness toward the United States, is now seeking improved relations.<sup>2</sup> His primary motivation appears to be to reduce his increasing isolation and compensate for his cooling relations with Moscow. He may not realize that he has an extremely negative reputation among the American public. However, we must not equate Mengistu and Ethiopia.

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<sup>1</sup>The United States has taken only three actions relating to Eritrea during the past 15 years: (1) Secretary of State Henry Kissinger personally warned Mengistu in spring 1976 that the execution of a planned genocidal mass march against Eritrea could result in the cancellation of the U.S. decision to supply F-5E fighter-bombers to Ethiopia; (2) the United States informed Mengistu in February 1977 that it did not want to use Kagnev Station beyond the expiration in 1978 of the original 25-year agreement authorizing U.S. communications facilities there; (3) during the famine that began in 1984, the United States insisted that emergency relief be provided for affected populations in Eritrea and took measures to provide food to populations outside of Ethiopian government control in EPLF-held territory and refugees in Sudan (a policy that has continued in effect ever since).

<sup>2</sup>Mengistu's substantive meetings with U.S. chiefs of mission in Addis Ababa and with visiting U.S. Government officials and congressmen have until recently been so rare that a complete list over the past decade and a half would not fill a single page.



The United States would probably want to resume a warm relationship with a less authoritarian and more humane Ethiopian leadership, and the American public would in all likelihood back it wholeheartedly. Prospects for resumption of U.S. development aid to an Ethiopian government that would adopt free market policies and meet minimal human rights standards are good. The United States and its allies would probably see no advantage, however, in providing *military* aid to any future Ethiopian government. The Horn of Africa needs no further shipments of weapons. No country in the region has improved its situation by resorting to military means to advance its interests.

In contrast to Russians, who are detested, Americans are immensely popular in Ethiopia, including Eritrea, and the United States is seen as a country that favors (rather than threatens) both the country's and individual Ethiopians' basic interests. The United States is also believed to have the potential for positive influence in the region. The major free world allies of the United States are equally positively regarded, all the more so because many of them have continued to supply generous development aid to Ethiopia during the past 15 years.

How can this popularity be exploited for the good of the Ethiopian people? How can the United States and the West improve on the present deteriorated situation? Do famine relief, humanitarian assistance, and development aid create a potential for greater leverage for positive political change?<sup>3</sup> Despite limited possibilities for *immediate* Western influence on the deepening political and military crisis in Ethiopia, the United States and its allies have a substantial potential for affecting Ethiopia's political and economic future. Western governmental actions and private initiatives (which governments may or may not endorse directly) might include:

- Declaration of the principles according to which an Ethiopian government would have to be organized to be welcomed and wholeheartedly supported by the West.

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<sup>3</sup>The two largest sources of economic development assistance in Ethiopia are the World Bank (in which the United States plays a major role) and the European Community. Neither has much influence in Eritrea. Italy is the major bilateral donor of economic assistance, a portion of which goes to Eritrean areas under government control. Several other European governments, as well as Canada and Japan, provide economic assistance. Several private organizations that draw their funds from European and American sources supply various kinds of assistance to Eritrea and Tigre. These include organizations that are, in effect, adjuncts of the EPLF and the TPLF.

- Declaration of readiness to mediate a peaceful settlement of insurgencies and to facilitate the establishment of a modified governmental system acceptable to a majority of Ethiopia's peoples.<sup>4</sup>
- Formulation of (1) programs for increased economic assistance and investment that would enable Ethiopia to begin to realize its great economic potential and (2) criteria by which international organizations and members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) could ensure multiyear support for the implementation of constructive economic policies.
- An appeal to the Soviet Union to:
  - Stop all military shipments to Mengistu
  - Press Mengistu to cease violations of his own laws and the human rights of individual Ethiopians
  - Seek modification of Mengistu's unproductive and restrictive economic policies and practices—in other words, begin to restructure
  - Restrain other Soviet-oriented governments, such as the East German and North Korean, from providing assistance that enables Mengistu to prolong futile military operations
  - Initiate and/or join Western and/or international mediation efforts to find a peaceful solution of insurgencies in all parts of Ethiopia and, at a minimum, refrain from blocking evolution toward specific steps designed to create a more viable governmental structure in Ethiopia.

The West will have little difficulty communicating a program of this sort to the Ethiopian people, for the VOA and the BBC are widely heard and respected in the country. Ethiopians, hungry for news of the outer world, also learn of developments that affect their interests through many other channels. Under current circumstances, the West should have no difficulty in communicating these proposals to the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev and his supporters might be persuaded that such a program could serve their interests, for it provides a way of relieving the USSR of a burden in Ethiopia. Mengistu's misrule and failures threaten to confront the Soviet Union with greater embarrassment and losses the longer they continue. The only way the Russians can hope to

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<sup>4</sup>Mediation has already begun unofficially with the inauguration of unconditional PDRE-EPLF talks, sponsored by former President Carter, in Atlanta, September 1989.

begin to retrieve the exceedingly negative reputation they have with the Ethiopian people is to move rapidly to stem the political and economic deterioration that their past policies and actions have inflicted on the people of the entire region.

Mengistu is likely to denounce and protest any course of action that questions the viability of his rule and the validity of the Marxist-Leninist system into which he has attempted to lock his country. In response to the kind of actions suggested here, he might even break relations with the United States and other Western countries. The prospect should not deter the United States and its allies from adherence to firm principles; any vindictive moves by Mengistu would not only further reduce current Western economic support but in all likelihood accelerate the degeneration of his rule—a process that his actions in the aftermath of the May 1989 coup attempt show is already well advanced.

Gorbachev, too, might reject Western overtures and protest “interference” in Soviet relations with its client, Ethiopia. This, too, need not greatly concern the West, for Gorbachev must eventually face the loss of the large investment that the USSR has made in Ethiopia and, specifically, in Mengistu; postponing the day of reckoning will only increase the cost and the embarrassment.

## VII. ERITREA IN THE CENTER OF A STRATEGY FOR THE HORN

The bankruptcy of Mengistu's Marxism-Leninism in Ethiopia offers a historic opportunity for the Eritrean insurgent movement to become the catalyst for a new Ethiopia, which could, in turn, point the way to reconciliation, peace, and stability for the entire region. To do so the EPLF would have to transform itself from a parochial, authoritarian, political organization into a broad democratic movement open to the most constructive political and economic thinking prevailing in today's world. It would have to expand its horizons from the narrow confines of Eritrea to all of Ethiopia and the region of which it forms a part.

Is the EPLF capable of such a transformation? Perhaps not. Perhaps the vision of its leaders is too limited. Perhaps Eritrea, a frontier region with little internal political cohesion, lacks the requirements for leadership in a larger political entity. Conversely, one can argue that Eritrea—a region characterized by geographic, ethnic, religious and political diversity, a microcosm of the larger country and, indeed, of the entire Horn region—is especially well situated to take the lead in forging a new form of unity in diversity in Ethiopia, a unity that could benefit the surrounding area as well.

Ethiopia's political evolution demonstrates that no region or ethnic group has any special claim to, or talent for, national leadership. Historically, Tigre contributed as much to the country's political development and maintenance of its integrity as Shoa, where Amharas and Oromos now dominate. Oromos, Hararis, and southerners of various backgrounds, as well as Amharas, continue to play important leadership roles in Ethiopia. Over long periods, the country's varied ethnic and religious groups have interacted with a high degree of mutual respect.

Historically, the common characteristic of the most successful Ethiopian rulers has been their ability to bring their peoples together and accommodate regional diversity. The Ethiopian state has survived through millennia by being governed *flexibly*. The great modernizing emperors, Menelik II and Haile Selassie I, were centralizers who dealt with different regions and groups with attention to local peculiarities and sensitivities. They were paternalistic, but they did not intrude into every aspect of the life of the people, as Mengistu has done.

Mengistu, in his effort to confine the country in a Marxist-Leninist straitjacket, has ignored the lessons of Ethiopian history, as well as the hard facts of the country's geography. As a result, he has exacerbated ethnic and regional strains and generated new social and economic tensions as well.

Where can a solution be found? In the breakup of the country? Or in the resort to traditional techniques in modernized form? It is difficult to see how the dissolution of the Ethiopian state could benefit anyone for long. It would further destabilize a region that has suffered more than its share of human tragedy during the past two decades. Why not, then, encourage Ethiopians, including Eritreans, to try an alternative approach to managing the country's government, with emphasis on decentralization, local *autonomy* and responsibility, and regional initiative?

The experience of the past 15 years has made most Ethiopians despise centralized authoritarian government. Mengistu has generated so much hatred for coercive, intrusive, paternalistic authoritarianism in Ethiopia that new leaders will be well advised to follow the principle of minimal central government and maximal regional autonomy. This means a federal system.<sup>1</sup>

What are the advantages of this course for the EPLF and for Eritrea, which is not necessarily synonymous with the EPLF?<sup>2</sup> Eritrea cannot remain unaffected by political and economic degeneration in neighboring Ethiopian territories. It alone cannot provide outlets for the skills and entrepreneurial talents of its population. As part of a federated Ethiopia,

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<sup>1</sup>Mengistu's countrywide administrative reorganization, which is now being implemented, recognizes the desirability of decentralization and encouragement of local initiative. The difficulty is that the envisioned *autonomous* regions are, for the most part, not now under the control of the central government. The affected populations are understandably skeptical that autonomy represents anything more than a tactical maneuver. Like Mengistu's Shengo (National Assembly) and electoral system, they appear to be imitations of classic Stalinist arrangements.

<sup>2</sup>It is by no means clear that Eritreans are any more tolerant of centralized, authoritarian government than other Ethiopians. Though the EPLF speaks in the name of all Eritreans and maintains that the entire population supports it enthusiastically, there is reason to believe that for many elements in the Eritrean population, the EPLF is merely a lesser evil than the Addis Ababa government. Significantly, the population of Asmara, the Eritrean capital, which remains under Addis Ababa's administration, has tripled in recent years. To avoid compulsory service as EPLF guerrillas, many young men go to Asmara, where they are relatively safe from recruitment into the central government's armed forces. Others go to the regional capital in search of education. The desire for advanced education is such that Asmara University cannot handle all the students pressing for admission, and the city's school system and public libraries operate under heavy strain. See my account of a visit to Eritrea in 1987, *Ethiopia—Contrasts and Contradictions*, The RAND Corporation, P-7389, October 1987, pp. 21-28.

Eritrea could gain greatly expanded opportunities for the exercise of both the economic and political skills of its people.<sup>3</sup> As I have already pointed out, there is a large precedent for Eritrean presence and enterprise in other parts of Ethiopia. Other Ethiopians do not react negatively to Eritreans.

A government in Addis Ababa that confines itself to the provision of essential services—transport, communications, electricity, management of the financial system, oversight and regulation (but not direction and control) of commerce, education, sanitation, and health services—will have more than enough to do: Ethiopia's needs are enormous and have grown steadily as the population has increased and aspirations have risen. Such a government will serve Eritrea's interests, not interfere with them, just as it will serve the interests of Hararge, Gojjam, Arussi, and all other regions of the country.

Agriculture freed of coercive regulation, with advice and support provided to farmers who are left free to plant, harvest, and sell in accordance with their own best interests as they see them, will rapidly become the basis for prosperity in Eritrea and throughout the country. Industry will develop on the basis of agricultural production, generate employment, and provide both consumer goods and exports; thus it will ensure a steadily rising standard of living. Both private entrepreneurs and regional and local governments can—in accord with their own decisionmaking processes—engage in trade, industry, and developmental activity.

An open economy requires political pluralism and provision for systematic and orderly renewal of leadership at all levels of society. The contention that Ethiopia has had no experience of democracy does not excuse the failure to encourage observance of basic democratic principles of self-government.

It is easier to describe what might be done than to devise ways of doing it. A failed clique betrayed by its own generals has met and deflected a challenge to its control in Ethiopia. The fact that Mengistu faces seemingly insoluble dilemmas does not make it easier for either Ethiopian opposition forces or external powers to deal with him. The EPLF has shown some encouraging signs of political evolution. So has the TPLF. Similar trends may be gaining momentum among other dissident and insurgent groups.

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<sup>3</sup>Marxist-Leninists in power, as well as most Marxist and non-Marxist authoritarian "liberation movements," give absolute priority to *political* power. As a result, economies are neglected, and they stagnate and decline; what remains of productive economic activity goes underground. Gorbachev's recognition of this basic truth as applied to the USSR provided the starting point for *perestroika*. The Chinese gave priority to economic reform soon after Mao died in 1976.

The attitude of the Soviet Union and its allies is unclear. We simply do not know whether the West can engage Gorbachev in an effort to set Ethiopia on the road to political and economic recovery.

The West has taken no significant initiative toward Ethiopia or other countries of the Horn of Africa for several years. The massive effort mounted in 1984-1985 to relieve famine left an indelible impression on all the people of the region, but it has not been followed by political initiative. Timely Western intervention prevented a major new famine in Ethiopia in 1987-1988 and is now alleviating famine in Sudan. But, the Sudan effort again demonstrates that merely saving lives, admirable as it is, tends to substitute for constructive thinking about how the lives of people kept from perishing might be permanently improved.

Even the medium-range economic prospects for Ethiopia are dismal. Agricultural output is not keeping pace with population growth. Agricultural policies are not raising productivity. Requirements for outside assistance to avoid famine are likely to increase during the coming decade. Will the West simply go on to the end of the century lamenting misgovernment in Ethiopia (and Sudan and Somalia) and periodically mobilizing to keep the victims of that misgovernment from starving—but doing nothing else? Surely humanitarian principles, let alone other considerations of enlightened self-interest, dictate an effort to do more.

The enunciation of a vision for the future of Ethiopia, one that offers hope for ending the present deadlock, would be a first step. It would generate hope and might even encourage initiative among Ethiopians themselves. As the recognized leader of the Free World with enormous prestige in Ethiopia, the United States could most convincingly take this action. Other possible actions (on the governmental level, privately, or in combination) include:

- Consultation by the U.S. and other Western governments with the EPLF to urge constructive engagement in the entire Ethiopian situation; preparation of plans for (1) transition to a provisional post-Mengistu government and (2) a federated Ethiopian state.
- Proposal to the USSR of a conference on Ethiopia and the Horn to consider steps that interested powers might take to alleviate—or prevent further exacerbation of—the deteriorated political situation, violations of human rights, and economic degeneration that can lead to renewed famine.

- Consultation among international aid organizations and bilateral donor countries on intensified measures that might be taken, on a coordinated basis, to handle existing emergency relief and developmental assistance programs so as to encourage economic reform.
- Development of a plan whereby a successor Ethiopian government committed to an open economy and democratic political evolution could depend on a comprehensive, long-term program of assistance and investment to develop the country's agricultural potential, industry, and export capacity.

The longer the present situation in Ethiopia persists, the more difficult the task of devising a viable and stable governmental system is likely to become and the greater the damage to the economy and the social structure that will have to be repaired. The restoration of political and economic health to Ethiopia will have a favorable effect on the entire region. The United States and its allies have nothing to lose by speaking out clearly.



## Appendix

### SOVIET GOVERNMENT STATEMENT ON ETHIOPIA

On June 13, 1989, the Soviet government issued the following statement on Ethiopia, as translated by FBIS. *Pravda* (p. 2) carried the statement on June 14.

As is known, an extraordinary session of the National Assembly (Shengo) of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was held on 5 June of this year in Addis Ababa. It was called to examine one of the most acute issues facing this country, the Eritrean problem, the failure to find a settlement of which is one of the reasons for the war that has continued for many years in the north of Ethiopia. The session has put forward an important and concrete initiative aimed at finding a political solution to the Eritrean question, the essence of which is an appeal to opposition organizations with a proposal for talks to be begun officially and publicly and without preliminary conditions.

The Soviet Union welcomes the decision of the highest legislative body of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia as an act of state wisdom, and as a demonstration of great responsibility for the fate of Ethiopia. This is a serious step opening the way toward a cease-fire as soon as possible in Eritrea, toward opening a dialogue between the government and opposition organizations at the negotiation table, and toward the democratic and just resolution to the Eritrean question.

Of course, the other side too should make its positive step in that direction. It can be confidentially said that a positive response to the call for peace for Addis Ababa, which takes account of many wishes of Eritrean organizations, would be met positively by the world public. The determining factor here could be sober realism and regard for the genuine interests of the people of the country.

An immediate halt to the bloodshed and establishment of peace in the North of Ethiopia would to a significant extent further the creation of favorable conditions for the solution of major tasks in the socioeconomic development of the country in the interests of all the peoples inhabiting it. On the other hand, an Eritrean settlement would to no small extent contribute to normalization of the situation in the region as a whole.

The Soviet government declares that it is ready to promote in every way the practical implementation of the peaceful initiative by the Ethiopian parliament. It calls for the same response from all those who are sincerely interested in the establishment of peace and stability in the Horn of Africa, on the basis of universally accepted principles of goodneighborliness, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and noninterference in each other's internal affairs.