

Power and Famine in Ethiopia

By DAWIT WOLDE GIORGIS

Ethiopia holds the world's attention because of the famine that has killed a million people. But the world has yet to wake up to political realities in Ethiopia and the truth about its head of state, Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, whose fantasies are ruining a nation.

I was an energetic supporter of the revolution when it began in 1974, ending the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. The Selassie era commenced with years of relative peace and hope, but the emperor was finally deposed when Ethiopia's feudal system could not accommodate the aspirations of an emerging generation of better-educated Ethiopians. Under Selassie, modernization exposed Ethiopia to the outside world, leading to the development of a Western-educated elite. Demands for freedom and economic reform, particularly land reform, became widespread. The student movement, both inside and outside Ethiopia, became the most important catalyst for change.

Order of the Day

These developments led initially to the unsuccessful uprising of 1960 and later to the violent revolution of 1974. In the ensuing struggle to overthrow the Selassie regime, many Ethiopians joined the opposition or secessionist movements, others fled the country, and still others were jailed or executed. Ethiopians were ready to accept those sacrifices as the price they had to pay to bring about the change they longed for. Instead, their hopes were shattered as they became victims of the unfolding events.

Today, chronic food shortages, civil war, political unrest and famine are the order of the day in Ethiopia. Any measure is justified if taken in the name of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The prisons are full of victims of arbitrary arrest and injustice by a regime that routinely resorts to torture. Thousands have disappeared or have been summarily executed without trial. Millions of peasants are being uprooted from their homes and villages to implement a policy of regimentation of the rural population and collectivized farming.

Col. Mengistu's dream and primary objective is to make Ethiopia the first African communist country, in the fullest sense, by restructuring the national social fabric and creating a regimented, controlled society. His second objective is to assume leadership of the communist movement in Africa. Both objectives are connected. His domestic programs and policies cannot be successful so long as there

are opposing political systems in most of Africa and the Middle East. In the spirit of the Marxist slogan of "proletarian internationalism," he has begun to instigate and support left-wing revolutions on the continent and in the Middle East.

I have known Col. Mengistu very well and have seen him change from an apparently nationalistic leader into a disoriented demagogue who has made Ethiopia an appendage of the Soviet Union. Within the first six years of the revolution, he effectively eliminated independent political pressure groups. Since then, the real Col. Mengistu has emerged as an unchallenged

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leader who wants to exact revenge for injustices he experienced as a youth. His family was not part of the Amhara, the Christian highland ruling class, and he is obsessed with a desire to settle scores with a society that castigated him.

His decision to adhere to Marxist ideology isn't the result of any intellectual analysis of ideological and political options, but a personal choice: A Marxist-Leninist system can give him power to do whatever he likes.

The Soviet Union encourages this kind of abusive power. The final seal on an Ethiopian-Soviet alliance was stamped in 1984 with the formation of the Marxist-Leninist Workers' Party of Ethiopia. To reinforce the measure, the regime established a communist state structure parallel to that of the Soviet government.

Col. Mengistu does not attempt to resolve complex issues through compromise and negotiation. He has one solution—force. An example is his aggressive response to the conflict in Eritrea. Fundamental in the search for a peaceable solution to that conflict is a recognition of the Eritrean rebels' long-term grievance against a central government that has suppressed its people's desire for local autonomy. But Col. Mengistu has failed to address the Eritreans' concerns, causing the needless death and suffering of millions during the past 12 years. In his eyes, to embark on a path of diplomacy and permit negotiations with the rebels would indicate failure.

The 1984-85 famine offers the most recent evidence of the cruelty of the Mengistu regime and the bold contradiction be-

tween the Ethiopian reality and the illusions of the leadership. In early 1984 the regime was preparing to celebrate lavishly the 10th anniversary of the revolution and inaugurate the Workers' Party of Ethiopia. More than \$100 million was spent on the festivities. But the months of March to May in 1984 were also a critical time for preparations of another kind. The government needed to respond quickly to an approaching disaster: Drought brought on by the failure of the seasonal rains threatened the lives of 17 million people. An early warning report on crop failure announced that without immediate assistance, resi-

dents in drought-stricken areas would die of starvation.

Col. Mengistu, who talked only of success and never of failure, considered the famine to be an embarrassment. His indifference to the emergency aggravated the effects of the drought, leading to mass death, starvation and migration at the earliest stage of the crisis. While he directed the extravagant preparations for the anniversary celebration in Addis Ababa, the famine was ravaging the countryside.

When the four-day celebration was held in September 1984, thousands of Ethiopians were dying in the countryside or had abandoned their homes, trekking across the desert and mountaintops in search of food and shelter. Many walked all the way from the northern part of the country to the gates of Addis Ababa. The Commission on Relief and Rehabilitation, which I headed, was instructed to stop them, and police were sent to make a human fence around the capital to prevent these people from entering the city and spoiling the show.

I met with the refugees. They had lost their cattle, abandoned their homes and property and were on their way to the southwestern part of the country to begin a new life where they would have access to sufficient water and fertile land. The commission started a resettlement effort for these people, who were already dislocated.

Our program was designed to organize this spontaneous migration of people, facilitate their movements and help establish them in more productive parts of Ethiopia. But Col. Mengistu, who wanted to take political advantage of their situation, launched a massive resettlement program

of 1.5 million people. He believed it an opportune moment to form model collective farms because it was easier to experiment on helpless people.

There were many volunteers at the initial phase of the campaign, but their numbers did not meet the target established by Col. Mengistu. Force had to be used, and a vast number of people were herded like cattle, loaded on to trucks and airplanes and sent to the south.

The world is owed a debt of gratitude for its generous response to the victims of the famine. But the humanitarian assistance has not only saved millions of starving people—it has also helped Col. Mengistu and his regime. Without foreign aid, there would have been bloody chaos, ultimately leading to the removal of Col. Mengistu and the ruling elite.

The future of the Commission on Relief and Rehabilitation is uncertain. As it struggles to address the effects of the famine and coordinate relief, it has been increasingly frustrated by government policies that interfere with its autonomy. The regime now views the commission as an instrument of Western political interests. After the present crisis is over, the agency is likely to be dismantled and reestablished as a communist party structure.

Nine-Hour Meeting

Just before I left Ethiopia, I was summoned by the government to testify on the activities of my agency. During the nine-hour meeting, the human problems that resulted from the drought were not addressed. The subject of discussion was the political costs. Government officials believed that Western imperialists were using the drought to destabilize the Ethiopian revolution. Agency personnel were accused of masterminding this conspiracy and collaborating with Western agents to overthrow the government or encourage a hostile atmosphere that would pave the way for another revolution in Ethiopia.

In the coming years, Ethiopia won't attract the attention of the world as it did in 1984-85. I make this prediction not because the crisis is over but because the prevailing situation remains unchanged and is no longer newsworthy. Unless the regime changes its policies, there will always be famine and starvation, and millions more will die.

Mr. Dawit, commissioner of relief and rehabilitation in Ethiopia from 1983 to 1985, defected to the U.S. in 1985. This is based on a talk he gave recently to the East-West Roundtable in New York.