



የኢትዮጵያ:የመረጃ:አገልግሎት:አውታር:በሆላንድ::
Ethiopian Information Service Network In Holland
P. O. BOX 17618 - 1001 JM AMSTERDAM HOLLAND

SOLDIERS OF MENGISTU ARE A LOST GENERATION

DE VOLKSKRANT, JULY 6, 1991
A Dutch National Daily Newspaper
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

The following is an Article that appeared on the above-mentioned Dutch daily Newspaper. It is an account of a Dutch woman journalist who visited and talked to some of the surviving Ethiopian soldiers and civilians who have become victims of EPLF and EPRDF policies in the aftermath of recent upheavals in Ethiopia. It has been translated into English by an Ethiopian residing in Holland so that it may be accessible to Ethiopian and foreign readers who follow the gruesome ramifications of events unfolding in Ethiopia.

Translation by Assefa Negash

July 22, 1991 Amsterdam (Holland)

THE RED CROSS DOES NOT KNOW AS TO WHERE TO
BEGIN WITH THE HELP IN RELIEF CAMPS.

From Our Correspondent: Els de Timmerman
Addis Abeba

While eccentric Tigrean ex-rebels in their hard rock T-shirts and turban around the luxuriant hair, dance in a park in the Ethiopian capital Addis Abeba, there lies on the corner an ex-soldier of dictator Mengistu dying from bloody diarrhoea. While the "Weyanes" drive around cheerfully on a UN jeep now modified into a panther wagon, the armed forces of the Dergue (former Ethiopian soldiers) walk around like zombies through the streets with their smelly and tattered uniforms.

On the site of the still burning ruins of Mengistu's giant Russian military (ammunition depot), which absorbed 60% of the national income, the victorious EPRDF forces posed for a photograph with their AK-47's. The 500,000 soldiers of Mengistu, who were mostly recruited under duress to fight against the three resistance fronts in the country, are a lost generation. The more than two million family members of these soldiers, who are without any income today, form one of the most formidable challenges to the transitional government.

There is no more (horse) race on the horse race track of Jan Meda on the outskirts of Addis Abeba. Where, in the past, the shining horses of emperor Haile Sellase galloped, plod today 38,000 defeated soldiers of what was once the largest African army. Shivering in the drizziling monsoon rain, limping on one leg or sliding in the mud (mire) for lack of toilets, the

Ethiopian elite troops of Mengistu Haile Mariam are reduced to desperate beggars, begging (beseeching) for food, money, blanket or sigaret. The wounded soldiers are crammed in EEC tents waiting long for the boiled egg of the Charity Sisters. The rest (the not wounded ones) have to make do with two slices of bread per day.

In front of the water pump, the only form of hygiene in the camp, stand in a queue people with primitive crutches, like skiers, implanted in the mud. Amputation was, it appears, the only form of war medicine here. But many are happy that they still survive. This is attributed to the fact that their leader fled on 21 May and the already demoralized army generally surrendered without resistance.

"The policy of the (new) government is that recruits who have been in service for less than two years as well as the old and the sick will be released and repatriated" said Rainer Baudendistel, head of the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The rest will go to a "rehabilitation center where they will learn different kinds of skills". Some 8000 former military officers of the Ethiopian army are kept in a training camp some 40 kilometers outside Addis Abeba.

There are also some 23,000 civilians. They were forced to flee along with the Ethiopian army when the port town of Assab was captured at the end of May by the Eritrean rebels. Actually they wanted to go to neighbouring Djibouti. This small, poor port-city on the Red Sea with half million inhabitants, was already this year flooded with tens of thousands of refugees from Somalia that has been torn by anarchy and violence. As such the Ethiopians were promptly refused entry and sent back (by the Djibouti authorities) with the help of the French military (stationed there).

These returnees were stranded in Dire Dawa, from where they reached the capital city (Addis Abeba) either on foot or by truck. "We have already sent back 3000 of these returnees to Dessie" said a sister (nurse) of the Ethiopian Church. We did not dare drop them in Assab because the security situation was not certain yet ". Jan Meda is just one of the many camps that has arisen in the last weeks everywhere in the country. "There are 60,000 in Gondar, 30,000 in Wello, 30,000 in Gojjam, 20,000 in Mekele, 10,000 in Adigrat and they continue to come. We do not know where to begin. It is something about which one becomes hopeless", sighs Red Cross spokeswoman Catherine Pelisser.

In shelter II at Mekele, the capital of the northern province Tigray, the number of soldiers of the Second Revolutionary Army that fought in Eritrea has doubled in a week from 7000 to 15,000. Many have malaria, pneumonia (inflammation of the lung), diarrhoea and tuberculosis and show signs of dehydration and exhaustion.

A former officer, who is one of the few officers that had the chance to escape the extreme cruelty of the EPLF has the following to say. "I was sick, I had malaria and after having stayed in prison for a month, I was thrown by chance on an EPLF bus to Adigrat.

They (EPLF) hit us with sticks, refused to give us food and water and whoever asked permission to go to toilet, got the bullet. The Eritrean civilian population also avenged itself".

According to this officer, everyone between the rank of second lieutenant and cornel was executed (by the EPLF). Although he himself joined the army of his own free will "tantalized or attracted by the nice food and the beautiful clothes", in recent years more and more recruits were taken forcefully from their farms, school or market places. "Mengistu is an assassin. The majority did not want to fight at all, they were not motivated and did not believe in the aim (of the war). That is why 75% of the 100,000 soldiers in Eritrea surrendered when their commander fled to Sudan and a day later Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe."

M.A led a peaceful life as a teacher in a town in southern Ethiopia until one day when a delegation of the (Dergue) junta came along and wanted two men (as recruits to be trained as future soldiers). "I was chosen by the teacher's committee and sent to Cuba for three years where I had to undergo an intensive military training" tells us with eyes full of tears.

"In 1986 I was at last sent to Asmara for this terrible war against the EPLF. They had put mines everywhere. I had nothing against the Eritrean people, but the rebels were worse than Hitler's army (describing the attitude and conduct of the EPLF fighters towards Ethiopian soldiers after their surrender in May 1991). First they let us almost die of thirst. When a water tank came forward and we wanted to take water, they shot on us. They even searched the private parts (sexual organs) of our women in search of gold and jewels."

In Mekele between 1000 and 2000 soldiers arrive per day. On the other hand only 250 of them leave daily aboard two trucks. "Transport is the biggest problem" says Pelissier. Due to lack of fuel, ten of our trucks were stranded a week long.

Mengistu recruited (soldiers) principally from the south. As such these soldiers find themselves thousands of kilometers from their home villages. The repatriation is as such an enormous logistical undertaking whereby the Red Cross has set up various transfer-camps on the route so that the people may be taken care of and fed. They get rations for three to five months; but there is no talk of rehabilitation for these soldiers in the form of seed, oxen and farm implement provision.

The stream of Ethiopian soldiers, who are crossing the barren desert-like landscape of Tigray, under the scorching heat of the sky, is coming to an end. In a school building at Adigrat that now serves as a Red Cross camp, some 30 kilometers from the Eritrean border, we came across 7000 children and women with their possessions wrapped in a piece of clothing. They are crammed 60 (people) to a room.

All were driven out of Eritrea. Some are relatives of the Ethiopian soldiers; others belong to the Tigrean community in Eritrea or are of mixed descent. They were thrown out of Eritrean territory by the EPLF without pardon and left on the border from

where Red Cross trucks took them to Adigrat. Eritrean women married to Ethiopian soldiers faced the same lot. Only those (Eritrean women) who agreed to divorce their (Ethiopian) husbands could stay (in Eritrea).

The Eritrean border guards have strict instructions: aliens may not enter Eritrea. "This is Ethiopia and that is Eritrea" reads the explanation. The four-man delegation of the Red Cross returned with us from Asmara. (The Eritrean authorities) told them (the Red Cross) that "Your contact was signed with the Ethiopian government and not with us" whereupon they were told that they had just 24 hours to leave the province.

"We let in only people with serious motives. (We do not let in) journalists that spread false rumours " said Essayas Afeworki, leader of the EPLF during a peace conference in Addis Abeba. "And we drive out only non-Eritreans that belong to the old military regime, the bureaucrats and all that are unproductive".

"Eritrea established last month its own government and waits for the results of the referendum that will take place under the supervision of international observers within two years on her way to independence. The present purification drive and isolation measures in this Red Sea province really promise little good for the crispy (fragile) peace in Ethiopia.

=====////////=====

N.B. From the Translator

Please pass this paper to all patriotic Ethiopians and humanright organizations so that the plight of these victims, who are now suffering in camps and on the streets as beggars and helpless destitutes may come to the attention of the world community. Today in one relief camp alone (i.e at Jan Meda in Addis Abeba), between 5 to 7 of these Ethiopians (expelled from Eritrea) die of hunger and communicable diseases secondary to malnutrition; the majority of them being children and elders who can hardly adapt to such extreme deprivations and physical assault. The plight of former Ethiopian soldiers and their families is equally gruesome. They suffer from the deliberate and vengeful policy of the Tigrean-led (EPRDF) transitional government in power which sees it fit to starve even innocent children of these former Ethiopian soldiers and their families. We maintain that this vengeful policy has to end. Otherwise it will lead to an untoward political conflagration the consequences of which will be disastrous for the EPRDF (TPLF) and especially for its overzealous ethnic constituency. This outcome may sound far-fetched for the now victorious EPRDF and its zealous supporters; however the very rise of yesterday's insignificant TPLF to power would attest to the veracity of our prediction. No matter how strong they may feel today, those who cannot take lesson from recent history of the downfall of intransigent and seemingly omnipotent dictators are doomed to suffer an ignominious failure.

=====////////=====