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TIME FOR ACTION AGAINST MENGISTU'S ETHIOPIA

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Ethiopia has been so poor that it would be hard to believe it could be worse off. Yet in the past decade this is precisely what has happened. Since taking power in February 1977, Ethiopian ruler Mengistu Haile Mariam has imposed on his country one of the world's most brutal regimes. He has sought total control over all segments of national life--political, social, and economic--in his drive to turn Ethiopia into Africa's first fully communist state.

Mengistu's development scheme, based on the twin pillars of forced resettlement and agricultural collectivization, turned what would have been a bothersome drought into the horrendous famine of 1984-1985. Despite massive assistance from the West, it claimed the lives of one million Ethiopians. According to the best estimates, three-quarters of those victims died from starvation caused when Mengistu's forced resettlement and forced labor interrupted planting.¹

Politically, Ethiopia steadily moves closer to the Soviet Union. Since 1977, Moscow has sold (on credit) some \$3.5 billion worth of military assistance to Mengistu. There are currently an estimated 7,000 Cuban combat forces in Ethiopia plus 2,000 Soviet bloc military advisers. Since consolidating power, Mengistu has fulfilled his duty to "proletarian internationalism" by supporting revolutionary movements in Sudan, Somalia, and South Africa, and communist regimes in Angola and Mozambique.

1. "Ethiopia's Famine Tax," The Wall Street Journal, November 12, 1986.

U.S. policy toward Ethiopia since 1977 has been based on the hope that cooperation with Mengistu would lead to a reduction in his commitment to Marxism-Leninism and his alliance with the Soviet Union. Famine aid was provided out of U.S. commitment to humanitarian ideals and a belief that Mengistu would use the aid for humanitarian purposes. Clearly, these beliefs were wrong, and U.S. faith, misplaced.

U.S. policy must be based on a better understanding of Ethiopian realities. The Mengistu regime is committed to imposing Marxism-Leninism throughout Ethiopia as quickly as possible. It neither represents nor cares about the welfare of its citizens. And it will use any assistance from external sources to further its goals, irrespective of donor nations' stipulations.

Though U.S. officials correctly have sought to ensure that no U.S. famine aid is diverted from its intended destination, they have not been able to do so. Indeed, some U.S. aid has been used for the brutal forced resettlement program. The U.S. must permit this no longer. All U.S. assistance to Ethiopia should be halted, and Washington should impose economic sanctions against Ethiopia until Mengistu ends his forced resettlement and collectivization programs, institutes basic human and civil rights, and allows free elections. Further, the Reagan Administration should launch a major worldwide public diplomacy campaign to expose the true nature of the Mengistu regime and the real causes of the famine. Mengistu should be warned publicly that there will be no U.S. bail-out the next time his policies cause starvation.

If these steps do not convince Mengistu of the gravity of U.S. concern--and thereby elicit positive responses--further steps would be in order, such as severing diplomatic relations and providing military assistance to Ethiopia's democratic resistance forces.

ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in September 1974 after 33 years in power. He was toppled by a group of junior- and middle-grade officers who called themselves the "Derg." A number of factors contributed to his downfall: pressure from neighboring Somalia, renewed guerrilla activity in the Ethiopian province of Eritrea, discontent among Ethiopia's Western-educated elites, a famine

2. Mengistu's policies have so alienated members of Congress that Congressmen William Gray (D-PA) and Toby Roth (R-WI) have recently introduced legislation to impose sanctions on Ethiopia.

and the Emperor's poor response to it, and "the inevitable physical decline of an aged monarch."³

Mengistu Haile Mariam, a young member of the Derg, took the first step in his march to power on the night of November 22, 1974. On his own authority, he ordered the arrest of the former Chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), General Aman Andom,⁴ who was killed when he resisted. After consolidating his power in the Derg, Mengistu turned to establishing control over the civilian population. Ruthless suppression followed in what a former State Department official termed an "orgy of killing." By May,⁵ one observer reported that 1,000 children lay dead in the streets. From November 1977 through the following March, in what was later called "the Red Terror," government forces massacred some 10,000 civilian opponents of the regime.⁶

MOSCOW MOVES IN

From the start, Mengistu and the Derg desired Soviet backing. First, they were revolutionaries with a radical program. According to one former regime official, Mengistu's decision to adhere to Marxist ideology was not the result of any intellectual analysis of ideological and political options, it was a personal choice: a Marxist-Leninist system would give him the power to do whatever he wanted.⁷

Second, the PMAC had decided soon after coming to power that the solution to the secessionist guerrilla war in Eritrea was military. To achieve a victory over the guerrillas, the Ethiopian army would have to be enlarged much more than Washington would permit. Soviet military aid hence became a necessity. Members of the Derg first

3. David A. Korn, Ethiopia, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 5.

4. The PMAC was the body through which the Derg formally ruled Ethiopia following Selassie's downfall. Aman, who had served the Selassie regime as its last Defense Minister, had been seen by Western observers to be friendly and moderate. Mengistu had disagreed with Aman about how to handle the growing insurgency problems in Eritrea.

5. See Korn, op. cit. pp. 26-27.

6. U.S. Department of State, "Background Notes: Ethiopia," August 1985, p. 3.

7. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, "Power and Famine in Ethiopia," The Wall Street Journal, January 12, 1987.

asked Moscow for an arms agreement in September 1974, long before the U.S. cut off military aid to Ethiopia.⁸ The first Moscow-Addis Ababa military agreement was signed in December 1976; the first shipment of tanks arrived in Ethiopia in March 1977.⁹ Clearly, the U.S. did not force Ethiopia into Moscow's hands.

Mengistu has moved Ethiopia steadily into the Soviet orbit. He satisfied one of Moscow's strongest demands in September 1984 by establishing the Worker's Party of Ethiopia (WPE), a vanguard Marxist-Leninist party tied to the Soviet Communist Party. The official celebration of the WPE's establishment variously is estimated to have cost the regime between \$100-\$250 million at a time when 17 million Ethiopians were threatened with starvation.¹⁰

Mengistu apparently has offered himself to the Soviets as the Castro of Africa, portraying himself as the leader of the communist movement on the continent. Since signing a Tripartite Agreement with Libya and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) in 1981, Ethiopia has supported subversive elements in both Somalia and the Sudan.¹¹ Ethiopian pilots meanwhile fly combat missions against Jonas Savimbi's democratic resistance forces in Angola. Early last year Mengistu offered to train 10,000 guerrillas of the African National Congress (ANC), the Soviet-backed opposition movement in South Africa. And recent reports from Mozambique indicate that Mengistu may even be sending troops to help bolster the communist FRELIMO regime against pro-Western RENAMO freedom fighters.

This February 22, Mengistu edged closer to Moscow by proclaiming establishment of the "People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia," imposing a name on his country that echoes the names Moscow has given to its East European satellites.¹²

8. See Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, The Ethiopian Revolution (London: Verso Editions, 1981), p. 244; Bruce D. Porter, The USSR in Third World Conflicts (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 192.

9. Washington maintained cordial, though increasingly strained, relations with Addis Ababa after Selassie's downfall. Washington did not end the military assistance relationship until September 1977. Between 1974-1977, U.S. military assistance to Ethiopia totaled some \$180 million, approximately one and a half times more than it had furnished up to 1974. Korn, op. cit., p. 21.

10. See Dawit, op. cit.

11. "Background Notes: Ethiopia," p. 3.

12. See James Brooke, "Ethiopians Officially Joining Ranks of Communist Nations," The New York Times, February 23, 1987.

THE DROUGHT AND FAMINE OF 1984-1985

The drought that hit northern Ethiopia in 1984 was not a surprise. It continued a series of droughts that had plagued northern Ethiopia since the early 1970s. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) first warned of a possible catastrophe in December 1983. Yet the FAO could not take action unless the Ethiopian government requested it.

The Mengistu regime refused to do so. In fact, the Ethiopian army's scorched earth tactics in its struggle with secessionist guerrillas in Eritrea and Tigre contributed to the drought. So did the regime's policy of discouraging private agricultural production by restricting agricultural prices. Under this system, farmers had no incentive to produce more than their minimal needs. The result: when drought struck, there were no reserves.¹³ The regime also insisted that the farmers attend Marxist-Leninist "political education" classes, giving them less time in the fields.¹⁴

Through early 1984, even as evidence of impending drought mounted, the regime was concentrating almost solely on preparations for the September celebration of the establishment of the Workers Party of Ethiopia and the tenth anniversary of the revolution. By September, thousands of starving peasants were walking all the way from the northern provinces to the gates of Addis Ababa. According to Dawit Wolde Giorgis, head of Ethiopia's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, the RRC was instructed to stop them. Police prevented them from entering the city and "spoiling the show" that was being staged for Western journalists.¹⁵

The Resettlement Program

Mengistu's solution to the food problem was simple: if there was no food to feed the people of the north, they would be resettled in the southwest. If they did not want to move, they would be resettled forcibly. This callousness was exposed in an exchange between senior Ethiopian officials and a Western journalist: "It is our duty to move the peasants," said one Ethiopian, "if they are too stupid to move

13. Dr. Rony Brauman, "Famine Aid: Were We Duped?," Reader's Digest, October 1986, p. 67.

14. See Edward W. Desmond, "Mengistu's Ethiopia: Death by Policy," Freedom at Issue, March/April 1986, p. 19.

15. See Dawit, op. cit.

themselves." Added another Ethiopian: "First we try to persuade people to move. If this doesn't work, sometimes we use force."¹⁶

In fact, Mengistu's aim was to use the famine as an excuse to forcibly uproot 1.5 million peasants and dry up local support for insurgents battling the regime in the northern provinces of Eritrea and Tigre.¹⁷ Beginning in early 1985, hundreds of thousands of peasants were moved to southwestern provinces. Famine aid from Western nations was used as bait to lure peasants to the resettlement camps. The message was simple: if you want to eat, resettle; if you don't want to be resettled, die. Most shocking was Mengistu's remark to two Western diplomats that only the able-bodied would be resettled; the old and young, those who were no threat to the regime, would be left in the drought-stricken areas.¹⁸

Villagization

Mengistu also has initiated a long-term program to restructure Ethiopia's agricultural production system. Called "villagization," it was in fact an attempt to collectivize Ethiopia's agricultural system. As recently as 1985, 93 percent of Ethiopia's produce came from private farms.¹⁹ Yet the regime's latest ten-year plan envisions 53 percent of all peasants and 50 percent of the land under production cooperatives by 1994.²⁰ The eventual goal is to move 33 million peasants--three quarters of the population--onto collective farms.

The stated purpose of the program is that the government can give the farmers better health and education services once they are "congregated." But the real purpose apparently is to take direct, forcible control of the nation's food supply and to move peasants to where they could be more easily watched and indoctrinated.²¹

A wave of international protest forced Mengistu to halt the resettlement program in December 1985. By that time, 600,000 peasants had been moved forcibly to the southwestern provinces; 100,000 had died along the way. Some 4.5 million had been moved from their

16. John Greenwald, "Red Star over the Horn of Africa," Time, August 4, 1986, pp. 31-32.

17. See below, "Ethiopian Opposition Movements."

18. See Korn, op. cit., p. 127.

19. "Background Notes: Ethiopia," p. 5.

20. See Allan Hoben, "The Origins of Famine," The New Republic, January 21, 1985.

21. The Editors, "The Famine: Next Time," The New Republic, December 15, 1986, p. 7.

traditional homes onto state farms. Early last month, regime officials announced that resettlement would soon begin again.²²

ETHIOPIAN PRIORITIES

Broadly speaking, there were two responses to the famine from the international community: the West sent food, and the Soviet bloc sent arms. A close examination of the two responses and the Mengistu regime's responses to them reveals his priorities.

The West's televised scenes of starving Ethiopian children energized constituencies in a score of countries. For fiscal years 1984 and 1985, for example, the U.S. gave Ethiopia \$276 million in food aid, plus \$27 million in such nonfood aid as blankets, medicines, and transportation. Official Western assistance to Ethiopia during 1985 totalled \$667 million.²³

By contrast, Moscow sent military transport aircraft, helicopters, and 300 trucks, all of which were manned by military crews. Their purpose was to speed the forced resettlement of Ethiopian peasants. Later the Soviets sent a fully equipped field hospital to care for wounded Ethiopian soldiers. Other than a shipment of rice (which highland Ethiopians would not eat), Moscow sent no food to the starving Ethiopians. To make matters worse, when Western ships carrying food arrived in Ethiopia's ports, they were forced to wait while Soviet bloc ships unloaded their military cargoes. For Mengistu, arms to fight the insurgents were more important than food for the starving. Food rotted while ships were waiting to unload; more food spoiled when it sat on the docks for days, waiting for transport, while Soviet-provided trucks and planes were used to transport refugees from north to south in the forced resettlement campaign or to take army units to the front.

The regime cynically profited from the West's concern for starving peasants. Mengistu forced donor nations to pay for dock unloading, trucking to the interior, and other services. These import fees added up to \$139 per ton of food. It had to be paid in hard currency and replaced coffee as Ethiopia's biggest money earner.²⁴

22. "Ethiopia to Resume Resettlement," The Washington Times, February 3, 1987, p. 6A.

23. There was a great deal of unofficial Western assistance as well, best represented by the musical groups BandAid and USA for Africa, and the LiveAid rock concert, all of which raised an estimated \$100 million for famine relief. See Brauman, op. cit., p. 66.

24. See "Ethiopia's Famine Tax," op. cit.

ETHIOPIAN OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS

The various guerrilla movements that flourished in Ethiopia in the mid-1970s for the most part have been reduced to two: those operating in Eritrea (the Eritrean People's Liberation Front or EPLF) and Tigre (the Tigre People's Liberation Front or TPLF); the two northernmost provinces of Ethiopia.²⁵

The Eritrean insurgency began in the mid-1960s, after Haile Selassie's 1962 decision to assert control over the province, which heretofore he had largely ignored. Through the 1960s and early 1970s, Eritrean insurgents received arms and other assistance from the Soviets, Cubans, and Chinese.²⁶ Though the insurgents' Marxist-Leninist doctrine gives them no quarrel with Mengistu's communization of Ethiopia, they want to be the rulers of their own land. The EPLF is not fighting a classic guerrilla war. With 24,000 soldiers, backed by thousands of trained militiamen, the EPLF is waging a conventional, set-piece war against the Ethiopian armed forces.

Fighting in Tigre erupted in the mid-1970s, after Haile Selassie's fall. By the late 1970s, the TPLF controlled the countryside, which makes up about 90 percent of the province. Unlike the EPLF, the TPLF employs classic guerrilla methods.

Since consolidating power in 1977, Mengistu has ordered yearly offensives against the rebels. In the early 1980s, Mengistu's forces, assisted by Soviet military advisers, are believed to have used poison gas and other chemicals against rebel-held areas of Eritrea. In Tigre, the regime's forces have scorched the earth, and their planes have dropped napalm on villages and farmlands.

Less well-known opposition to the Mengistu regime includes the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance. Based in Sudan, the EPDA appears to be noncommunist and nonsecessionist. Its program calls for democratic self-government, respects private property, and guarantees individual freedoms. EPDA leader Dereje Deressa claims that, with

25. A 1980 survey of Ethiopian opposition movements showed at least twelve different groups fighting the Mengistu regime for control of various parts of Ethiopia. The most effective of these groups, the Oromo Liberation Front, the Western Somali Liberation Front, and the Ethiopian Democratic Union, have all seen their activities sharply curtailed over the past several years.

26. The Chinese cut off their support for the guerrillas when Selassie accorded Beijing diplomatic recognition. The Soviets and Cubans cut off support for the guerrillas when Mengistu established his alliance with Moscow.

political and financial support, the group could field 50,000 fighters within months.²⁷

Another opposition group is headed by Dawit Makonnen, the grandson of Haile Selassie and one of the heirs to the throne. His Ethiopian National Alliance to Advance Democracy is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and has no soldiers in the field. It is active diplomatically, working with many of the former Mengistu regime officials who have defected to the West. The Dawit Makonnen group, like the EPDA, claims Sudanese support and that it could field 50,000-80,000 soldiers, if the U.S. would support it.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

U.S. policy toward Ethiopia has shifted dramatically since the rise to power of Mengistu Haile Mariam. During Haile Selassie's reign, Ethiopia was a very close friend of the U.S. In response to Mengistu's hostility in the past decade, however, Washington has halted all military assistance to Ethiopia, reduced its diplomatic representation to the level of charge d'affaires, cut off all bilateral development assistance, denied Ethiopia access to the generalized system of trade preferences for developing countries, and voted against loans to Ethiopia from multilateral development banks.²⁸ Though humanitarian assistance continued through the 1980s, reaching the high point of \$279 million in 1985, the U.S. Agency for International Development has concluded that it is impossible to do useful development work in Ethiopia under current circumstances. As a result, AID has scaled back its program vastly.

Now that Mengistu seems determined to forge ahead with villagization and forced resettlement, the U.S. should signal its strong opposition to such policies. Specifically, the Reagan Administration should:

o Terminate all humanitarian assistance. Two years after the famine, it has become clear that Western famine relief was misused by the regime. By continuing to send aid to the regime, the West becomes an accomplice in the slaughter that is taking place in Ethiopia. Even though AID has reduced its commitments to Ethiopia over the last two years, it still is asking Congress for \$3.4 million for fiscal year

27. See Orrin Hatch, "Keep Ethiopia Part of the Reagan Doctrine," The Wall Street Journal, April 4, 1986.

28. These last three measures were taken in accordance with U.S. law, because the Mengistu regime has not paid U.S. citizens for assets lost when the regime expropriated U.S. holdings. See "Background Notes: Ethiopia," p. 7.

1988. This sends the signal that the U.S. still does not believe the worst about the regime. It is time to send a different signal: the U.S. has concluded that the worst about the Mengistu regime is true, and the U.S. will not be a party to it.

o Publicly warn Mengistu of the consequences of his policies. Mengistu's current policies in Ethiopia recall the starvation campaign waged by Stalin against the Ukraine in 1931 to 1933 or Cambodian dictator Pol Pot's murderous depopulation of Phnom Penh. Mengistu should be warned publicly by Ronald Reagan that his policies are sure to cause more deaths, and if he persists in them, the West will feel no responsibility for bailing him out.

o Launch a public diplomacy campaign. The world too little understands the true causes of the famine in Ethiopia. Until other Third World governments recognize the relationship between resettlement, collectivization, and famine, such a disaster could happen elsewhere. To prevent this, the Reagan Administration should launch a high-profile public diplomacy campaign, including international organizations, to educate the global community about the real causes of the famine in Ethiopia and the true character of the Mengistu regime.

o Declare Ethiopia communist. Though the regime signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union ten years ago, formally handed control of state power to the Workers Party of Ethiopia in September 1984, and just established the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the U.S. government has yet to declare the Mengistu regime communist. This statement is not for ideological or propaganda purposes; it has real consequences. Communist governments are not eligible for U.S. Export-Import Bank loans and are subject to other restrictions under the amended Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

o Impose economic sanctions. The U.S. has imposed economic sanctions on a host of governments around the world that, in Washington's view, do not meet minimum standards of human rights. Most recently, the South African government was added to the list. Surely Ethiopia's deliberate slaughter warrants U.S. condemnation and sanctions.²⁹

o Consider applying the Reagan Doctrine. If all else fails to prod Mengistu to halt his resettlement and villagization campaigns, the U.S. should consider applying the Reagan Doctrine to Ethiopia.

29. Even Rep. William Gray, one of the leaders of the South Africa sanctions campaign, has recognized the horrors of Mengistu's Ethiopia. With Rep. Toby Roth, Gray has cosponsored legislation that would ban the importation of Ethiopian coffee, which provides the regime with 60 percent of its foreign currency earnings.

This means that the U.S. would provide supplies and other resources to those groups resisting repressive regimes. Candidates for U.S. aid would include the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance and the Ethiopian National Alliance to Advance Democracy.

CONCLUSION

Since the rise to power of Mengistu Haile Mariam exactly a decade ago, the historically poor people of Ethiopia have become even poorer. Where before they lived under an autocratic emperor and had few political rights, they now live under a near-totalitarian system, which controls much of their daily lives, which forcibly uproots and resettles them, and which aims to communize their society. It was Ethiopian government policies, more than any natural occurrence, that turned the drought of 1984 into the great famine which killed one million Ethiopians.

The West's response was typically compassionate and overwhelming. Within weeks of the first news reports, hundreds of thousands of tons of food were on their way to Ethiopia. Private contributions raised the total even higher. All told, the West sent almost \$800 million in just one year. Yet the Ethiopian government exploited the West. Food sent for distribution in drought-stricken provinces was used instead to lure peasants into resettlement camps or to feed Ethiopian soldiers, or it was sold to raise hard currency. Meanwhile, Soviet bloc aid to Mengistu consisted mostly of help in his resettlement campaign. When Western governments and charitable organizations complained, they were threatened, and at least one--Doctors Without Borders--was expelled.

Mengistu has made clear his contempt for Western values and Western counsel. It seems that all he wants from the West is continued humanitarian assistance to be used however he wants. Knowing what the U.S. and the West now know about the Mengistu regime, the U.S. in good conscience no longer can aid it. To do so would be to become an accomplice. Instead, the U.S. must signal its readiness to break completely with the regime and take other actions aimed at eventually replacing it.

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