

## ADWA VICTORY CELEBRATIONS MIREN IN POLITICS

Celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the Adwa victory, when Ethiopian patriots under the leadership of Emperor Menelik II defeated the Italian army and secured Ethiopia's independence and survival as a sovereign nation, have become embroiled in a political row entirely of TPLF's making.

On March 2, 1896 a multi-ethnic Ethiopian army decisively defeated the largest colonial army ever to be assembled against an African state. This decisive battle fought and won in Adwa (Tigray region) which many historians describe as «the most illustrious and monumental victory of Africans over Europeans since the defeat of Imperial Rome by the forces of Hannibal of Carthage some two thousand years ago» is indeed of great historical significance, not only for Ethiopians but also for all blacks in Africa and elsewhere. Adwa helped Ethiopia become the only country in Africa with no need to celebrate «Independence day!»

It shattered the myth of the invincibility of a white European army. Fought and won during the infamous era of the European scramble for Africa, the battle of Adwa proved that the expansion of European colonialism could be halted and it gave moral and psychological boost and inspiration to millions of diaspora and continental Africans in their struggle against colonialism, racism and domination.

Unfortunately this centennial is being celebrated at a time when our country has fallen under an ethnocentric dictatorship which stands against everything that Adwa was about. In fact, Adwa has turned out to be an embarrassment to the country's present leaders first because it shatters TPLF's and EPLF's historiography which shrinks Ethiopia's century-old existence as a state to a mere hundred years. It is also an embarrassment because, contrary to TPLF's official thesis which reduces Ethiopia to a mere collection of distinct ethnic groups held together by sheer force and oppression with no sense of national identity, the multi-ethnic victory at Adwa proved beyond any doubt that all the country's ethnic groups cherished their Ethiopian heritage and were ready to stand shoulder to shoulder when the

country's survival was at risk.

These in fact, are the very mistakes Italians made one hundred years ago and which led the colonialist forces to the Adwa disaster.

Unable to completely ignore the centennial, the government embarked on a half-hearted attempt to organize the celebrations. But incorrigibly ethnocentric and vindictive as they are, TPLF leaders went about «organizing» the centennial in a manner designed to promote their own version of Ethiopia's history and perception of ethnic relations in the country. The anniversary, which in fact should have been used to foster national unity and brotherhood among the peoples of the country in the spirit of Adwa, is being used to belittle the country's glorious past and to exacerbate ethnic relations.

Whereas all serious historians of Adwa agree that «every tukul and village in every far off glen in Ethiopia responded to Menelik's call to arms and sent its warriors», the ethnocentric dictatorship claims the victory was one of the «Tigrean masses».

Whereas the war was clearly between Ethiopia and Italy, TPLF's historiography, which claims that no Ethiopian state existed at that time, asserts that Adwa was an exclusively Italo-Tigrean affair and that the «Negus of Shoa» (read Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia) just stopped by to give a helping hand to the neighbouring state of Tigray which had problems with a colonial aggressor.

While the war was fought to liberate Tigray and southern Eritrea forcibly occupied by Italy and to frustrate Italian protectorate claims over the rest of Ethiopia, TPLF's intellectuals are claiming that Menelik's march to the north was actually a Shoa/Amhara «invasion» to deliberately impoverish «the Tigrean masses».

Whereas what Africa needed at this era of European colonial expansion was 5 or 10 more Meneliks, the official version of events of 1896 tries to belittle Menelik's decisive role as a politician, a diplomat and a warrior by claiming that he was nothing more than a «colonialist» fighting «white colonialists» in order to have his «fair share» in the scramble for Africa.

To organize this ethnocentric version, TPLF set up a «National Committee for the Commemoration of the Centenary of the Adwa victory». By naming a highly controversial intellectual as head of the National Committee, the government made it clear that it intended to undermine the spirit of reconciliation and consensus - the single most important factor which made Adwa possible in the first place. By setting up a separate regional committee, the so-called «Tigray Regional Committee for the Preparation of the commemoration of Adwa», and deciding to hold the main commemoration ceremonies in the town of Adwa, the government aroused suspicions that it was still holding to its perception of the victory as a mainly Tigrean affair and was deliberately trying to undermine the national and multi-ethnic significance of the battle.

Since great victories are normally celebrated at the battlefield, not many Ethiopians protested against commemorations being held in the town of Adwa. Opposition forces argued that since the victory was achieved by Ethiopians drawn from all ethnic, regional and religious backgrounds, the main events of the centenary should be held in the nation's capital Addis Ababa in order to highlight the collective contribution of Ethiopians.

Tension was further exacerbated - and the spirit of Adwa subverted - by provocative pronouncements made by Tigrean officials and intellectuals trying to play down the role of others in order to better highlight the decisive contribution of the Tigrean people which in any case, nobody questioned. On December 13 for example, one official of the Tigrean Regional Committee, during the Tigrigna evening news on Ethiopian Television, tried to belittle the role played by Emperor Menelik by claiming that «the role of individuals in the achievement of the Adwa victory should not be given too much significance». Then came the provocative ethnocentric assertion when the official changed his mind about the role of «individual» in history and attributed the decisive role in the Adwa victory to another individual, Ras Mengasha of Tigray by saying, «When the battle became fierce, Emperor Menelik was about to flee, had it not been for the intervention of Ras Mengasha Yohannes who encouraged him to keep steadfast and made him change his mind».

Responding to a call made by the All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) nearly 300,000 residents of Addis Ababa gathered at Maskel Square on February 18 to protest against the way the government sponsored «National» and regional committees were preparing the celebrations and to demand that the main events of the commemorations be held at the nation's capital. Some of the placards carried by the protestors read: THE VICTORY OF ADWA BELONGS TO ALL ETHIOPIANS - THE BATTLE OF ADWA THAT UNITED US SHOULD NOT BE USED TO DIVIDE US - STOP THE FALSIFICATION OF HISTORY - STOP THE DISINTEGRATION OF MOTHER ETHIOPIA ...

Following this mass protest, the national committee was forced to make amendments to the official programme by splitting events between Addis Ababa and Adwa and announcing the government's decision to hold the main celebrations in the nation's capital. This announcement of the final programme, made at the 11th hour after months of polemics and tension, comes unfortunately after the damage had already been done. By subverting historical truth to suit its politics of divide and rule, the government succeeded in subverting the very spirit of Adwa. What should have been the most appropriate occasion for Ethiopians to soberly reflect and draw lessons from this monumental achievement of their grandfathers has only served to bring to light the divisions of the present generation.

We sincerely believe that the blame lies with the ethnocentric dictatorship. But except for its opposition to the way TPLF is handling the whole affair, the opposition does not seem to have seized this moment to stage an exceptional show of unity befitting this exceptional and glorious moment in the history of our peoples. While some organizations - both at home and abroad - are trying their best to organize ceremonies in the spirit of unity and consensus which made Adwa possible, others are trying to use this victory achieved in 1896 to promote their miserably narrow political agendas of 1996. The frustration felt by many Ethiopians has best been expressed by Professor Bahru Zewde of Addis Ababa University, who as a historian heads an independent celebrations committee and is organizing a symposium of Ethiopian and foreign academics on

the history and significance of Adwa: «All this is nonsense. A victory that symbolized unity and consensus has been dragged into the political arena. This generation has really failed miserably to rise up to the standards of one hundred years ago!».

What was Adwa all about? What is its historical significance to Ethiopians and other Africans and black people? Why was the victory possible? What lessons can be drawn by Ethiopians in their struggle for a democratic society of brotherly peoples? etc.

These are the questions which should be addressed by the present generation of Ethiopians and by foreign friends everywhere. That is why we have decided to devote the next issue of ADDIS DIGEST to the glorious legacy of Adwa with the hope that it would help our readers have a better insight into the past of this ancient land which in turn could lead to a better understanding of not only its present problems but also of the tremendous potential of Ethiopians to build a better and bright future if only they manage to reconcile and rise up to spirit of Adwa.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

### ABERA YEMANE AB held in solitary confinement

Mr. Abera Yemane Ab, one of the prominent leaders of the Ethiopian opposition and head of Foreign Relations of COEDF - the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces - who has been illegally detained in Addis Ababa for the last two years (see Addis Digest No. 8/9) has been shifted to a solitary confinement cell since 2 January 1996 where he is said to be chained hand and foot and interrogated under very harsh conditions.

Mr. Abera's confinement came in the wake of an incident which took place on Tuesday, 2 January at 10:00 a.m. when 19 detainees made a daring escape from the Addis Ababa maximum security prison. Prison guards fired on the escapees but sixteen of the prisoners managed to escape while two were captured and another, Lieutenant Berhanu, was wounded and later died at the Menelik II Hospital.

The TPLF government tried to use this incident to justify the move against Abera by claiming he «was the brain behind the attempt». In a statement issued 9 January, COEDF dismissed the government's allegation against Abera as «yet another malicious attempt to frame Mr. Abera and discredit his organization. Unable to come up with an iota of evidence of its former allegation, the regime has resorted to a shameful fabrication designed to make it appear that Mr. Abera is responsible for the January 2nd incident.»

### Concerns about Abera's physical well-being

Since he was illegally arrested on 16 December 1993 as he arrived at the Addis Ababa airport at the head of the COEDF delegation to attend the Peace and National Reconciliation Conference held in the Ethiopian capital, and particularly after the government ignored a court order to release him and transferred his case to the jurisdiction of the so-called Special Prosecutor's Office - which can jail any opposition activist for life without ever bringing an iota of charges against him - Mr. Abera's case has attracted the attention of many people in the international community. In October 1994, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for his immediate release and many Western diplomats in Addis Ababa are reported to have expressed concerns about his being detained without ever being charged.

The government is clearly irritated by the high profile national and international campaign in favour of the detained leader. But its attitude remains defiant. Many fear that the latest action by the TPLF could be a frame-up, aimed at facilitating conditions for the physical elimination of the opposition leader.

In the 9 January statement, COEDF «fearing for Mr. Abera's physical well-being» appealed to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, ICRC and all concerned human rights organizations to inquire about Mr. Abera's condition by visiting him in the Addis Ababa prison. We also call upon the US State Department, The European Union and the diplomatic