

## WHO IS ABERRA YEMANE-AB?

The country's democratic opposition forces, both inside and outside Ethiopia, marked the second year of the arbitrary and illegal arrest of Mr. Aberra Yemane-Abs in December 1993 as he arrived to attend the Addis Abeba Peace and National Reconciliation Conference held from 18 to 22 December 1993.

In a statement issued in Addis Abeba on 15 December 1995, the Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia called for the immediate release of the «genuine democrat Mr. Aberra Yemane Ab». In Stockholm (Sweden) Ethiopians gathered to mark the occasion and passed a resolution expressing their solidarity with the opposition leader and calling on the international community to put pressure on the ethnocentric dictatorship to end the illegal detention of CODEF's head of foreign relations. In Washington, COEDF organized a vigil and a hunger strike in front of the State Department building. In a statement entitled «The day EPRDF cut the hands of peace», the COEDF support committee in Great Britain noted that «Aberra, from Eritrean parentage, is a dangerous enemy, if not a traitor, of the regime. He is certainly a man to be feared - a man of integrity, a man of strong persuasive powers, a man with such commitment and determination as to dare to go into the lion's cage to fight for what he believed in. He is a nightmare of dictators and must be kept behind bars along with such people as Professor Asrat Woldeyes - people who despite the hardship they endure from the intense and methodical repression of EPRDF have continued to stand with the people».

## ABERA'S PROFILE

Mr. Abera, by all accounts of people who approached him, is a very honest and trustworthy man, who has struggled his whole life for the achievement of the goals of democracy, equality and unity among all the ethnic groups in Ethiopia and for social justice. Of Eritrean parentage, he was born in the southern region of Sidamo on 23 July 1940. He is married and father of four.

In the 1960s, both as a student of the National University (where he obtained a bachelor degree in political sciences) and a post graduate student at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague

(the Netherlands) he was a prominent and respected leader of the radical Ethiopian Student Movement. As a natural prolongation of his commitment to the cause of the peoples of Ethiopia, in August 1968 he became one of the founding members of ME'ISONE (the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement).

Upon his return to Ethiopia in 1971, he engaged in clandestine opposition activities against the feudal establishment while at the same time working in the various development-related departments of the country. He worked with CADU, the Ethio-Swedish Rural Development Project, which at that time was hailed as one of the few successful comprehensive Rural Development Projects in the Third World. As Executive Director of the Project, Abera contributed to this successful endeavour.

With the advent of the revolution in 1974, Abera participated in the preparation of the Land Reform Proclamation of March 1975 which abolished the feudal socio-economic order in Ethiopia. Later in the year, he was entrusted (along with two other intellectuals) with the task of designing a RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY OF ETHIOPIA. He was appointed governor of his native province of Sidamo, where along with his other responsibilities he began to be directly involved in educating the local farmers on how to organize themselves and know their rights. Nearly 20 years later, when peasants from Sidamo got the news of his arrest by the TGE, they sent a delegation to the Addis Abeba central prison to express solidarity and their indebtedness to Abera's contribution to their liberation from the yoke of feudalism.

Abera's activities among the peasants of Sidamo was judged «dangerous» by the Derg regime. He was suddenly removed from office in 1976 and was ordered back to Addis Abeba.

In late 1976, Mr. Daniel Tadesse, the Minister for Urban Development and Housing, and one of the prominent leaders of ME'ISONE, asked him to be his assistant in the Ministry where he took charge of the organization of over 2000 Urban Neighbourhood Associations (KEBELES) throughout Ethiopia. He worked as head of this department for about a year. In August 1977, when ME'ISONE broke with the military regime after having worked with the

government for about 19 months (December 1975-August 1977), Abera was among the organization's top leaders ordered to resign and clandestinely leave Addis Abeba. He voluntarily returned to his country more than 16 years after he fled Mengistu's repression, only to fall into the grips of another dictatorship.

#### WHY IS ABERA DETAINED?

At the time of his arrest with four other colleagues from COEDF, Abera was accused of «inciting violence against the government». Two months later, all the other detainees were released while Mr. Abera continued to be held. In April 1994, the Addis Abeba High Court dismissed the prosecutor's charges and ordered his immediate release. In an apparently pre-arranged move, the Special Prosecutor's Office then moved in and ordered his detention pending «investigation» of Red Terror crimes allegedly committed by the detainee.

In a show of defiance, Abera told his friends and lawyers not to press for his release but only for him to be officially charged in the hope that his trial «would turn out to be that of the defunct and the incumbent dictatorships». In an «open letter» written to Meles Zenawi, published in one of the independent papers, he impressed everyone by deliberately avoiding to plead his own case but instead presenting a sober - and grim - analysis of our country «under the control of EPRDF» and by forwarding a series of proposals to get the country out of the dangerous crisis «through peaceful and democratic means».

Although some TPLF embassies in the West are known to have written letters to governments and organizations accusing Abera of «Red Terror» activities and even «crimes against humanity!», the SPO has not yet dared to come out with the slightest document or evidence linking him to the infamous campaign launched by the Derg regime in late 1977 and early 1978.

The SPO cannot do otherwise. Abera cannot be accused of these crimes simply because he fled the Derg and the country in August 1977, a full three months before the bloody campaign was officially launched.

After almost a year of clandestine work with peasants in the Sodamo countryside and some months in Somalia, Abera arrived in the USA in April 1979 and lived there as a refugee until he voluntarily returned to Ethiopia in December 1993. During his years of exile, Abera was one of the most prominent leaders of the struggle against the Mengistu dictatorship. His leadership qualities and untiring efforts for the unity of the country's democratic forces were recognized by ME'ISONE leadership which elected him General Secretary of the organization.

In 1988, Abera went with a ME'ISONE delegation to the EPLF and TPLF controlled areas of Tigray. During his stay in Tigray, he attempted to persuade TPLF leaders to abandon their hard line Stalinist ideology and sectarian attitude and to work instead for the unity of all democratic opposition groups in the struggle against Mengistu. The serious political differences which surfaced during the delegation's stay in Tigray, which the two organizations were unable to resolve in other successive meetings which continued in Europe and America until March 1990, are the real reasons behind TPLF's vindictive action against Abera.

The other reason in his leadership role in COEDF - the coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces. This coalition of several prominent individuals, civic and professional associations and political parties was founded in 1990 at a conference initiated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Although at the time of its creation, COEDF constituted the most important multi-ethnic opposition group against the Mengistu dictatorship, the ethnocentric TPLF leaders intrigued to bar the organization from participation in the American sponsored May 1991 London Conference which led to the formation of the TGE. The argument used at that time to exclude COEDF was that it was not an armed organization. A few months later, in September 1991, COEDF applied to register as a democratic opposition party. This was rejected by the TGE. This time the pretext was that the organization was armed and had «declared war!» on the government!

COEDF's active participation in the Paris Peace and Reconciliation conference (March 1993) and its prominent role in the preparation of the December 1993 Addis Abeba Peace and Reconciliation National Conference infuriated TPLF leaders who clearly showed that they were ready to go to any lengths to bar the organization from attending the conference. In an attempt to persuade COEDF leaders not to make the trip to Addis, TPLF leaders - including Meles Zenawi resorted to intimidation and declared that «some opposition members who had engaged in illegal activities» could be arrested if they came to the country. In spite of those warnings, the COEDF leadership maintained its decision to send a high level delegation which included not only Abera but also the EPRP leader Mr. Mersha Joseph who was Chairman of COEDF. This defiant attitude was maintained even after the news reached COEDF leaders that Mr. Ibsa Gutema had been arrested in Addis Abeba after he returned to the country to represent the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) at the peace conference. The COEDF president and other members of the delegation had to cut off their trip to Cairo after they learnt that the first group of delegates had been arrested at the Addis Abeba airport.

Although some in the West have fallen victim to TPLF's SPO strategem and have stopped calling for the immediate release of Abera «awaiting a fair trial» which will never come, others, including some diplomats in Addis Abeba, have expressed concern over the opposition leader's illegal detention. It is to be recalled that during Mr. Abera's court hearings in the early months of 1994, Western diplomats (especially a representative of the German Embassy) regularly attended the hearings and had openly expressed outrage over his continued detention after he was cleared by the Addis Abeba court. In October 1994, the European Parliament, which condemned Human Rights abuses in the country passed a resolution calling for the immediate release of Mr. Abera, Professor Asrat Woldeyes of AAPO and all other political prisoners. The same year (in June) an official from the US embassy paid a visit to Abera and reportedly expressed concern over his continued detention without every being charged.

From the Addis Abeba prison where he is held under harsh conditions-even by TPLF standards-Abera continues to challenge SPO and TPLF to produce the charges against him. The TPLF, clearly irritated by Abera's steadfastness and the high profile national and international campaign in his favour, has remained adamant and seems determined to keep the opposition leader in prison. The Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO), ostensibly established to «punish» past abuses but which is now clearly used as an expedient instrument to inhibit present critics and opponents of the government, has the legal possibility to ignore Mr. Abera and to keep him in jail for several more years before it even considers filing charges against him.

#### Victim of the «SPO strategem»

Abera is not the only victim of this «SPO strategem». There are hundreds of other citizens who have fallen under SPO's jurisdiction just because they are opposed to the ethnocentric one-party dictatorship. The use of this jurisdiction has so far proved so expedient that TPLF's leaders can continue their abuses by detaining hundreds - if not thousands - of opponents and critics without ever being accused of holding prisoners of conscious.

The only way to put an end to this abuse is for the international community to start questioning the so-called SPO jurisdiction itself, particularly Article 7(2) of the proclamation establishing the SPO which gives the latter the power to jail any «suspect» indefinitely without bothering to bring charges.

Labelling a declared opponent or critic of TPLF «a suspect» and thus detaining him under SPO jurisdiction, should not suffice to conclude that the victim is not a

prisoner of conscious. Even if they do not go as far as to call for the immediate release of these «suspects», the least that human rights groups in the West could do is to show that they themselves are «suspicious» of TPLF's strategy of abuses by calling on the government to officially and urgently file charges against opponents and critics like Abera thereby giving them the possibility to defend themselves.

#### EPLF's ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON MENGISTU

The former Ethiopian president, Mengistu Haile Mariam, survived an assassination attempt on 4 November 1995. According to Zimbabwe police, the assassination attempt was made by two Eritreans, 35 year old Abreham Goitom and Yoseph Kinfe. A police spokesman said that Mengistu, who lives in a heavily guarded, state-owned villa near the capital Harare, had been taking a morning stroll with his wife Woizero Woubanchi when shots were fired. Later police disclosed that Ato Abreham said that he and his accomplice did try to gun down Mengistu. One of the would-be assassins was wounded by Mengistu's guards and taken to a military hospital where he is waiting to face charges.

Ato Fantahun Haile Michael, Ethiopian Ambassador to Zimbabwe, said that the Meles government had nothing to do with the assassination attempt. He told local journalists that he was surprised by the attempt and that his government did «not believe in such acts».

According to the ERITREAN NEWSLETTER published by the opposition ELF-RC foreign information department: «Many suspect that the would-be assassins were likely to have been sent by the EPLF to carry out the operation. This suspicion was further corroborated by the arrival in Harare a few days after the incident of the EPLF Ambassador to South Africa, Tsegaye Tesfason—presumably for talks with the Zimbabwean authorities about those allegedly involved in the attempt and now in custody. Otherwise, the EPLF has never been known to bother about Eritreans facing problems abroad.»

Commenting on the incident and EPLF's involvement, the Eritrean opposition paper noted:

«Mengistu is without doubt responsible for the death of tens of thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians during his 17 year rule of terror. There is hardly anyone who would not want to see him on trial for the crimes he has committed. In fact, the present Ethiopian government is known to have been persistently asking for his extradition in order to put him on trial along with the rest of his cohorts, who are accused of having committed genocide. But no matter how much one might want to see him pay for his crimes,