

EVENTS AND VIEWS

JOURNEY TO AN UNKNOWN DESTINATION

The plan to resettle peasants from Wollo and Tigray in the southern region of the country was supposedly introduced as a solution to famine. The idea of moving literally hundreds of thousands of people from one region to another was not however simply one of bringing uncultivated land under the plough. The real and unavowed reasons were quite different. Politically, it was, and remains, a move intended to provide the chauvinists with "reliable" outposts in the land of the "unreliable" oppressed nationalities in the south. In any case, these settlers far from their own homes and uprooted from their people, were unlikely to join the local people in their resistance to the regime. Economically the aim was to brigade a mass of forced laborers to work on the regime's "collective farms". Another reason is of course to squeeze funds from western governments and voluntary agencies for these supposedly "humanitarian" projects.

In the past, some of these settlements were visited by invited foreign journalists. Under the watchful eyes of government officials, some hand-picked settlers were made to relate their idyllic stories to these reporters who came out with complaisant reports on the "new life" in these areas.

Now, a Swedish TV team invited to Ethiopia late last year somehow managed to come out with the true and completely different story. The journalists visited a settlement area near ASSOSA in the Wollega administrative region of Western Ethiopia, where 17,000 peasants were made to work under extremely inhuman conditions. The commentator of the film entitled "A journey to an unknown destination" starts with a general assessment of life in the settlement : "Apart from the official spokesman of the authorities, it is difficult to find anybody who is pleased with life here. Most people feel that their expectations have not been realised".

"They told us we were going to a rich country", says one of the settlers, "they said we could find everything here; but when we came there was nothing."

"How many came in your transport?"

"We were many, about 3000."

"How did it happen when they moved you?"

"They fooled us like children and brought us here against our will".

This particular settler was one of the first to arrive when the "settlement" was established four years ago. This group was "fooled" by promise of a new life in an area with much land available for cultivation. But as news of the extremely hard conditions and the disillusion slowly reached the Wollo and Tigray highlands, the government was no longer able to persuade peasants to come to these areas. The only way to overcome peasant resistance was to use force. And that was how the "recruitment" started in 1982-83. As one newcomer put it :

"We were all tied up with our hands behind our backs and were thrown into the trucks. Then they drove us to a camp in KOMBOLTCHA. We discussed what was happening to us. Then we were closed in a steel hut. Some of us tried to escape. Then the guards started to shoot. Later on we tried to escape again. Then we were beaten up. Finally we tried to escape once again. But all failed. Now we are here".

Even if life in the settlement and labor under the watchful eyes of the regime's paramilitary units called MERTE GEBRE HAILE, (production task force) is hard, the peasants produce enough to meet their basic needs. But they do not reap the fruits of their labor.

"We suffer from lack of food, though we really produce enough. But much of what we produce is sent to the bureaucrats in the town."

"Why are you not allowed to keep what you produce?"

"When the crop is ready they load everything on trucks and we never see it again".

Attempts to escape from these settlements have always been dealt with ruthlessly and "ring leaders" executed. But still, virtually all the settlers want to return to their villages. Asked what he believes should be done to improve the situation one elderly peasant answered :

"Get away from here; the only thing to do is get away from here." Everybody wants it, but we cannot as we are not allowed to leave this place."

The dictatorship may continue to call the Assosa type "settlements" by the name it chooses, but by any standard one may care to use , these can only be called forced labor camps.

THE "WORKERS" PARTY OF ETHIOPIA

After four years of a tumultuous existence during which it failed completely to enlist the support of the country's progressive forces and to solve any one of its fundamental problems, the COPWE (Commission to organize the worker's party of Ethiopia) has now given way to the so-called "Workers' Party of Ethiopia" (WPE). From the outset it is clear that this party will not be any more successful than the COPWE in dealing with these problems which essentially are of the regime's making. If any thing, the formation of the WPE will worsen the already disastrous situation in Ethiopia. Not least because the party is dominated by the same gang of chauvinists and traitors as was the now defunct COPWE at the time of its creation.

There is no change in personnel and still less in the disastrous policies that hurled the country into the present abyss. The entire executive committee of COPWE is in the WPE politburo. The four civilians now admitted to this body are by no means new faces as they have all been closely associated with the Mengistu clique over the past years. The WPE central Committee now has 134 full members and 64 alternate members up from 93 and 30 respectively for the COPWE.

Some 25 hand picked "representatives" of workers and peasants including the notorious Tadesse Tamerat, President of the All Ethiopia Trade Union and Abdella Sonessa, Chairman of the All Ethiopia Peasants Association have entered the CC. But men in uniform who were "only" 82 in the COPWE CC are now at least 116. The composition by ranks shows that the number of Generals has gone up from 16 to 24 and that of Colonels from 28 to 46. High-ranking officers thus account for over half the men in uniform in the CC of this "workers' party" of a new type.

In his report on the makeup of the congress, Major Legesse Assfaw made a half-hearted attempt to give support to the claim that the party has a wide "all Ethiopia" base by declaring that representatives of 72 nationalities were present at the congress. But as if by magic, out of the 198 full and alternate members of the CC, about 120 are identified as members of the still dominant Amhara nationality. And that is what the die-hard chauvinists call an "Ethiopian" workers' party.

More significant perhaps is the fact that COPWE's attempts to take root in the country have proved to be a complete failure. The criteria used to recruit members being loyalty to Mengistu rather than commitment to the Ethiopian people, setting up basic party structures down to the district and sub-district levels has been an extremely lengthy affair. There are 102 provinces and 515 districts in Ethiopia. Out of these WPE basic structures have been set up in 33 provinces and 70 districts although not surprisingly some 200 groups have been formed within the armed forces. Moreover, as endless purges were conducted to rid the COPWE of "infiltrators" and "unreliable" elements, even these groups were not all able to send delegates to the party formation congress. These purges continued even after the COPWE groups organized the party formation meetings in July and August, and held "elections" to send representatives. Out of 1999 expected participants only 1742 finally attended the congress. As Mengistu himself admitted in his opening address some

250 delegates have not been able to attend "due to work". This of course is a mild way of accounting for the last minute purges that took a heavy toll of the would-be participants.

It goes without saying that ME'ISONE together with other democratic and patriotic forces will continue to oppose this party which has nothing to do with Ethiopia's workers and peasants. The WPE takeover from the now defunct DERG and the promised creation of the "Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Republic" will not bring any significant change for the better in the regime's economic, political and military policies. The rhetoric that accompanied the WPE formation process and the over 200 million US dollars that were embezzelled to celebrate the birth of the party only show how much the Megistu clique is divorced from Ethiopia's reality and the aspirations of its people, and lay bare the total bankruptcy of the dictatorship. For Ethiopia's patriots and democrats all this points to the necessity of joining forces in the common struggle for the creation of a free and democratic country on the ruins of the present regime and its foreign masters. For the WPE clique, however isolated and bankrupt, will only be done away with by the united efforts of all those who stand for democracy, self-determination and the national independence of the motherland.
