

* The establishment of an "Institute of Nationalities"

An "Institute of Nationalities" has been established by a proclamation issued on 24th March 1983. Die-hard chauvinists creating such an institute to "solve" the nationality problem democratically! Doesn't this remind us of the "Ministry of Land Reform" established by the feudal emperor to "solve" the land question in Ethiopia? Yes, it does! And we can say from the outset that the latest finding of the dictatorship will fare no better than its infamous predecessor.

The Institute, which is answerable to the Central Committee of COPWE, is entrusted with a number of functions including a) the registration of all nationalities in Ethiopia, b) the study of their economic, social and cultural lives, as well as the stage of their development, c) the study of their settlement areas and the geography of their regions, d) the possibilities of restructuring the present administrative arrangements in view of the formation of the People's Democratic Republic, etc.

The idea of such an Institute was put forward by Ethiopia's Progressives as early as 1976. At that time, the National Democratic Revolution Programme was accepted by the regime as the comprehensive guideline of the revolution. It recognised the right of all nationalities to self determination. The idea was, therefore, put forward on the assumption that the political will to solve the problem peacefully and "in a democratic manner" existed.

While accepting the programme as a whole, ME'ISONE declared at that time that it had reservations concerning the imposition of "Regional Autonomy" as the one and only solution. The central pillar of Me'isone's argument was that the choice of the administrative setup to be adopted was something that should be worked out with qualified representatives of the nationalities concerned.

It is against the background of this principal position and in light of the chauvinist developments that have taken place in the country ever since, that Me'isone judges the move of the government.

The collection of data is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the democratic solution of the problem. One declared aim of the Institute is the study of possible arrangements to allow the nationalities to be "self-governing" under the overall leadership and control of the "Working Class Party". One does not have to read between the lines to conclude that the intention is to work out a "solution" within the general framework of the chauvinist military rule. Therefore, even if these "self-governing" entities ever see the light of day, they will be no more democratic than the present "mass organisations" led by hand picked appointees of the regime.

In the interval, the government's move seems to have two objectives. By promising equality and "self-rule", it intends to undermine the actual or potential mass base that nationalist organisations could muster. On the other hand, the aim is to "prove" the regime's good will and its desire for a peaceful and democratic solution of the problem of nationalities. This political window dressing is of course intended for international consumption.

Such promises made by chauvinists are not more credible than those made by the feudal emperor on the abolishing of the feudal land holding system. If some people do entertain illusions on this matter, we are sure that the frenzy military preparations that are underway and the grosse violations of human rights that continue will help them open their eyes.

* Forced conscription legalised

On 4th May 1983, the Ethiopian regime issued a proclamation establishing an obligatory national military service. A few days later, this was followed by another decree establishing a Military Commissariat and territorial peoples militia in order "to enable the broad masses to contribute their due share in defending the country and the revolution".

The NMS proclamation makes all 18-30 year-old Ethiopians eligible for conscription and allows for all 30 to 50 year-olds to be trained as reservists. It will involve at least 6 months' military training and two years of active service. The follow-up and implementation of the service and the overall responsibility for the setting up of the territorial peoples' militia is assigned to the chief commissar and military commissars at the regional, provincial and district levels as well as in urban centres.

Ethiopia already has by far the strongest army in Independent Africa. And yet, this does not seem to be ruinous enough. The objective behind the new proclamation is an expansion of the Ethiopian army. Mengistu made no secret of this. At a rally speech, a few days after the proclamation, he clearly stated that the NMS would mean "an expansion of our defense base by the active participation of the regional militia and those on national service". According to the dictator, this decree does not imply a shift away from a defense policy based on an over inflated and economically ruinous regular army. There will still be a need for "a highly capable and reliable regular army, which should have adequate knowledge of modern military science and is properly equipped".

The idea of a "Peoples' Militia" raised to allow peasants to defend the revolution in their respective regions, while at the same time participating in production, has never been put into practice by the military regime. Most of the militia originally recruited on a short term basis in 1977-78 and moved to war fronts outside their respective regions have never been demobilised. In spite of wide spread peasant opposition to this concept of "peoples' militia", the proclamation maintains and legalises this practice. It clearly states that "the territorial people's militia at all levels must accept postings outside the administrative zone in which they were established".

If all 18-30 year-olds and especially young peasants are eligible for the so-called peoples' militia and could be posted anywhere in the country, then one wonders why the NMS is introduced. The answer is clear. Behind the scene discussions among leading COPWE members have shown that the primary targets of the NMS are unemployed young people in the country's cities. This in fact was the aim openly declared by a spokesman of the regime in early January 1983. At a press conference, reported by the AFP, Major Girma Newaye, of the COPWE's ideology department, stressed this point by declaring that the NMS will "concern young boys and girls aged at least 18 years and having completed their secondary education".

In 1983, over 100.000 students sat for the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate examination. Out of these, less than 7.000 passed and even fewer were admitted to the University. This means that over 90.000 young people have joined the ranks of the large army of unemployed. As usual, faced with real and overwhelming problems, the regime has opted

for the wrong solutions. By forcing young educated Ethiopians to join the army, the dictatorship intends to "solve" the unemployment problem and ward off agitation which would inevitably result from growing discontent in the cities. At the same time, the government intends to offset the effects of defections and demoralisation in the Armed Forces.

ME'ISONE believes that it is the duty of all Ethiopians to defend the national independence of the country and the fundamental democratic rights of its peoples. But this is quite different from defending the interests of the military clique. One basic objective of the so-called "National" military service is precisely this. That is why ME'ISONE will continue to oppose the NMS, which is nothing but yet another exclamation of the regime's war against our people and a move that would surely aggravate the already overwhelming social and economic problems of our country.

Comparative military strength in Africa

According to the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies, South Africa is still militarily the most powerful Nation on the African Continent. Pretoria has 81.400 men permanently under arms and more than 400.000 more capable of being mobilised quickly, while its 211 combat planes makes its Air Force without rival.

Africa's second largest army belongs to Ethiopia. It's Armed Forces have 250.000 men and 113 combat aircraft, mainly Migs. In addition, logistic support is provided by 1.400 Soviet advisors, 13.000 Cubans and 250 East Germans.

Among other military powers in Africa, the IISS notes Somalia (62.000 men and 55 aircraft), Nigeria (138.000 men and 30 aircraft), Tanzania (40.350 men and 29 aircraft), Kenya (16.650 men and 29 aircraft), Zaire (26.000 men 19 aircraft) and Zimbabwe (63.000 men and 41 aircraft).

* Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti: The new plight

"In the present state of spreading economic crisis and faced with the impossibility of local integration, time has come to envisage, with respect to refugees granted asylum in the Republic, new measures, the most favourable being their return home".

This is how Djibouti's President, Mr. GOULEDE; justified recent moves to return refugees to Ethiopia. The economic problems raised by the Djibouti leader should not be overlooked. The country is devoid of natural resources and as such has not much to offer to the 42.000 refugees who crossed its frontiers after 1977-78. This, by the way, is a reality which some officials of the UNMCR tend to overlook when they assert that these Ethiopians have flocked to the country for "economic reasons", ie in search of a better life there! Neither does Djibouti's economic problems would justify in any way the persecution and harassment of the refugees by the country's security forces.

The fact of the matter is that these Ethiopians have fled the country as a result of military conflicts and chauvinist repression in regions neighbouring Djibouti and unprecedented violation of fundamental human rights elsewhere in Ethiopia. As such, the refugee population is composed of two more or less distinct groups.

In the first group, one finds peasants and nomads who fled "en masse", leaving behind them areas affected by armed conflicts. But it would be wrong to assume that these are only "war refugees". Their flight started to take alarming proportions after the end of the Somali-Ethiopian war in March 1978. It was provoked by the Ethiopian regime's punitive expeditions against the civilian population and by its criminal efforts at permanently depopulating the area. In this sense, the suggestion contained in the tripartite agreement between the UNMCR and the Ethiopian and Djibouti governments to the effect that "the conditions which previously led to the exodus of the refugees from their country are no longer present" does not hold water. Has the Ethiopian dictatorship grown less repressive over the past years? The answer is of course No! Nobody in his right senses would argue that such an evolution has taken place in Ethiopia. Nobody can make us believe that all the refugees can return to their villages without risking yet another massive repression. As the French Newspaper "Le Monde" mildly put it, those acquainted with the regime's human rights records can put no confidence in the "guarantees" that are being offered.

In the second place, there is the case of "political refugees" in the strict sense of the term. It would be a serious mistake and a criminal miscalculation to try to solve this problem by referring to illusory "guarantees" concerning their safety after return. This group of political opponents is composed of students, intellectuals, defecting soldiers and officers, merchants, etc. They all fled the country while on the verge of arrest or execution. If they return, these refugees will be all the more exposed to brutal repression that they are politically motivated and therefore considered as potentially dangerous elements. Their isolation in the country's urban centres will make them an easy prey to the regime's security forces.

In view of all these, Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti have repeatedly stated that they will not return to their country until the overall political situation shows signs of substantial improvements. This position is maintained in a series of statements issued by the "Ethiopian Refugees Committee in Djibouti".

Put under strong pressure to return "voluntarily" to Ethiopia, some peasants have already registered for repatriation. In late September, the first group of peasants (about 200) left for home and the Ethiopian regime quickly moved to exploit what Major Dawit Wolde Giorgis of the RRC termed as "a major success" for his government. This, however, is a far cry from the reality. According to Radio Djibouti, out of the 35.000 refugees in the Ali Sabeh and Dikille camps, only 3.500 have registered for repatriation. Independent reports speak of several refugee families fleeing into the Somali Republic and suffering a second exil in order to escape what the concerned authorities still prefer to call "voluntary" repatriation.

The plight of the vast majority who refuse to return will surely continue, unless the international community mobilises to save lives by sharing the Djibouti government's burden. We also believe that there should be a positive response to the call made by the "Ethiopian Refugee Committee" concerning the resettlement of political refugees in other countries. This, we believe, is a human response to the problem and the only one that should be pursued if yet another tragedy is to be averted in the Horn of Africa.

* Ethiopian Youth: The ordeal continues

Since the notorious "National Revolutionary Development Campaign" was launched in late 1978, the use of forced labour has constituted an important feature of the regime's attempts at solving Ethiopia's economic problems. In 1981, this inhuman practice was exposed before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The London-based "Anti-Slavery Society" submitted a well documented report accusing the regime of institutionalising forced labour and disclosed that 1626 people had died in one such labour camp in SETITE HUMERA, north-west Ethiopia

In spite of the wide coverage given to this accusation and despite strong protests from concerned international humanitarian organisations, this practice has been continuing over the years.

Hardly noticed by the international community, a new campaign of rounding up "unemployed" young people has been going on since late September. The latest campaign, although on a scale hitherto unknown, has followed patterns that are already too familiar to our people. In August, the government called upon the unemployed to register. Having learnt from past experience and fearing that such registration would lead to army barracks or labour camps, not many people turned out to register.

As usual, the regime then started kidnapping youngsters on the streets, resorted to house to house searches and after-mid-night surprise raids. As the criteria used for such "recrutemets" were being young and unemployed in a country where dozens of thousands of high school graduates are in search of jobs, the number of those who "qualify" for the regime's raids is inevitably very high. It is not, therefore, surprising that in Addis Abeba and other major cities, thousands of young people have already fallen victims to the latest campaign.

As usual, the government issued no statement by way of explanation. But it is now known that those kidnapped have been taken to the TATEK Military Camp near the capital and to two other camps in the regions of Hararge and Kaffa. Reliable sources in the capital say that the present drive is to raise about 200.000 youngsters, some for the army and others to be used as forced labourers in the various "State farms".

Some may find it surprising that this move should come at a time when the Ethiopian dictatorship, entangled in a deep economic crisis, is trying to "improve" its image in the west. Only last month, a high level delegation led by the notorious Captain Legesse Asffaw, toured western European countries to exhort the regime's embassies to launch a vast publicity drive. The least one can say is that the latest massive violation of fundamental human rights is not exactly the kind of action that would enhance such a campaign.

The fact of the matter is that the regime cannot simply do otherwise. The country finds itself in a deep economic and financial crisis. The various military offensives launched over the past years have proved to be costly failures, both in terms of human lives and economic resources. The new ordeal imposed upon the country's youth will not solve this problem. It is only a desperate move which comes as one more testimony to the fact that the regime's survival continues to depend on such brutal and dictatorial methods.

NEWS BRIEFS [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

* Protest march in New York

About 300 Ethiopians residing in the United States staged a demonstration in New York on the occasion of the expected visit of Mengistu Haile Mariam to the UN and his address to the 38th General Assembly. The demonstrators denounced the regime's violation of human rights and demanded the immediate release of political prisoners, the respect of the right of Nationalities, democratic rights for the Ethiopian people and the restoration of the country's national independence.

As Mengistu had other very urgent matters to attend to in Ethiopia, his visit was cancelled at the last minute. In fact, while the demonstration was going on, he was on a secret visit to the Hararge region and busy putting down a mutiny in the 10th Army Division stationed in the Ogaden (see ME'ISONE's letter to the UN General Secretary in this issue of N.E.).

* More defections reported

An Ethiopian patrol boat was hijacked to Berbera (Somalia) on 25th September. Its commander, Captain Alemu Bekele and his men gave themselves up to the Somali authorities and asked for asylum there. At a press conference, held on the 29th in Mogadisho, Captain Alemu disclosed that Soviet bases existed in the Dalhake and Nora Islands where "Ethiopians themselves were not allowed to enter".

In Eritrea, the head of the political education department of the army in Asmara, Lt. Molla Shibeshi, deserted to the EPLE. Lt. Molla was a high ranking cadre of COPWE and was trained in the Soviet Union for over two years.

* Mengistu "the leader of Africa"

In what most Ethiopians see as a tribute to misrule, Mengistu, the champion of human rights violations and the instrument of soviet expansionist policies in Africa, has been named the current Chairman of the OAU. As should be expected, he lost no time to exploit this "victory"; he added yet another item to his already over inflated official title:

SECRET