

EVENTS IN ETHIOPIA

UN official reports on "a camp of death" in Ethiopia

"This is a camp of death. A camp situated in the middle of nowhere. A camp where young boys who are supposed to follow literacy courses are in fact dying. I have never seen children in so bad physical conditions".

This is how a UNHCR spokesman, Mr. Leon Davidco, described the situation in a "reeducation camp" in the Ogaden area where more than 20,000 people are forced to live under the most inhuman conditions. Mr. Davidco who just returned from a visit to Ethiopia told journalists that the conditions at this camp "were the worst that I have ever come across during my long career in the service of humanitarian organizations working in the third world. According to Mr. Davidco, this camp is one of several "reeducation camps" where "displaced persons" who have nothing to eat or drink are supposed to follow "literacy courses".

Due to the security problems in the region and the difficulties of road transportation, supplies cannot reach these camps by road. The UNHCR authorities at one time considered to offer transport planes to humanitarian organizations operating in the area. But Mr. Davidco noted that the HCR "is not sure if the local authorities would allow concerned humanitarian organizations to operate independently to save the moribund". Here the HCR spokesman is clearly referring to the uncooperative attitude of the Ethiopian regime which insists that all assistance be centralized through its "relief services" instead of being directly distributed to the victims. The military dictatorship has its own reasons to insist on such "centralization". It has long been an open secret that the Derg diverts relief material in order to support its wars at the various fronts.

Mr. Davidco also spoke of the situation in Somalia where the number of refugees from Ethiopia now stands at "well over a million and half". He said that the situation in the refugee camps there was "desastrous" and warned that unless rapid assistance is forthcoming "the situation can be catastrophic". He disclosed that the UNHCR has earmarked a total of 158.4 million US dollars to help some 900,000 refugees in 1981. But as their number has already gone beyond the one and half million mark and as "the flow of refugees from Ethiopia is steel continuing" Mr. Davidco said that the sum allotted is already insufficient.

The COPWE C.C. holds meeting

The above is only a partial view of the Ethiopian tragedy.

The 20.000 "displaced people" in this particular camp are but a small fraction of the total. According to Mr. S. Adugna, the regime's commissioner for "relief and rehabilitation" the number of such "displaced people" in the country is 1.8 million! A better picture of the situation in Ethiopia can be obtained if one considers the fact that two and a half m. people have already been exiled and that according to government figures more than 5 million people are exposed to famine.

The COPWE meeting did not dwell on these problems. True, some passing remarks were made here and there but none of these problems was seriously considered.

The COPWE clique could not just brush aside the problem created by rising prices that has already made life unbearable to urban dwellers. Mengistu acknowledges this in his report and declares that "man made shortages have made it impossible for us to control the prices of basic commodities".

The famine in Ethiopia and specially in the rural areas is a reality that the regime was forced to recognize in April 1980. But now it looks as if the "food problem" exists in the urban centers only. According to Mengistu "the country cannot provide regular food supplies to the cities", and the situation is the result of the "low productivity of peasants".

The COPWE clique seems to forget that war, repression and exile whose responsibility lies entirely with the military dictatorship, have decimated the peasant productive manpower. More over, the famine situation in the cities is partially caused by the withholding of grain by surplus producing peasants who demand manufactured goods in exchange for the surplus to be marketed. Not recognizing this simple fact the COPWE clique lays the blame upon "individualist peasants" and "rural capitalism". In any case, the peasants' demand for the manufactured goods can not be met -and food shortages are bound to continue- because the industries in the cities "are no more in a position to satisfy the demand for consumption goods" even in the urban centers.

In the past two years, mass layoffs have thrown thousands of workers out of jobs. "Socialist" Ethiopia is not even able to maintain the level of employment of the pre-revolutionary days. Mengistu recognizes this and even declares that "the problem of unemployment is getting increasingly serious". But he offers nothing by way of solution to this "increasingly serious" problem.

Another problem recognized by Mengistu is that created by "the dwindling foreign reserves of the country". But he does not utter a single word about the billions of dollars that go to pay for soviet arms and "services" rendered by foreign soldiers and "advisors".

As the COPWE C.C. did not dwell upon the real issues, the solutions that are proposed are incredibly stereotyped, vague

and unworkable. The COPWE resolution proposes forced collectivization as a means of overcoming "peasant individualism" and solving the "food problem" in the country. But peasant resistance to such measures that are meant to squeeze out their surplus without giving any thing in return, has already proved to be insurmountable. Past attempt at forced collectivization have only succeeded in touching off a series of peasant revolts and the future holds nothing better in store for the regime.

According to the COPWE resolution, the country's problems in the field of industrialization are to be solved by the catchword "we must build heavy industry". To overcome unemployment the COPWE clique resolves "to create more jobs". To do away with prostitution "women will be trained in skills that would allow them to earn their lives honestly". To boost Ethiopia's foreign exchange "the country must produce more cash crops" etc.

All this is of course well and good. But one does not see how such solutions can work under a regime whose unjust wars against the popular masses are swallowing up the country's human and financial resources and are completely disorganizing it's economic life. Judging by what the COPWE clique has to say about "the modernization and reinforcement" of its armed forces, it is clear that the regime intends to pursue its devastating wars which are absolutely incompatible with the development objectives that are outlined above.

► Forced recrutement to be generalized

Mengistu's central report to the COPWE meeting is full of references to imaginary "victories" over what he calls the "bandits" in Eritrea and "counter revolutionary" forces all over the country. What one gathers from the report is that the regime continues to reject all peace negotiations with Eritrean liberation forces and any democratic solution to the other conflicts in Ethiopia.

But the various unjust wars have become so unpopular that the regime has been resorting to forced recrutement over the past years. Now, even this is not enough. The regime intends to systematize and generalize the recrutement system by setting up an obligatory "national military service" for all young Ethiopians. The COPWE resolution states that the details of this "national service" have already been worked out and would be effective in the near future. Moreover the reinforcement and modernization of the armed forces was singled out as the "priority task" of the day. According to Mengistu "the revolutionary army should be equiped with modern and sophisticated arms that can be provided by modern science and technology".

The implications of the announced measures are clear. The country is to be drained dry in order to pay for the "modern and sophisticated" arms that are to be used against its own

people. National resources that are badly needed for it's development are going to be depleted even more. But more repression coupled with less and less resources to solve the country's social and economic problems, can not lead to peace and stability in Ethiopia. It will only sharpen the contradictions between the military dictatorship and the people and lead to an intensification of the struggle that is being waged to liberate the country from the grips of the regime and its foreign allies.

▶ Young women rounded up in Addis Abeba

There were times when the regime used to come out with widely publisized propositions aimed at providing a "final solution" to the problem of prostitution in Ethiopia. One such proposal was a programme launched in 1979 that was supposed to provide "honourable employment" to prostitutes in Addis Abeba and the other urban centers of the country. To this effect, all prostitutes and other unemployed women where asked to register and where promised jobs as soon as the registration formalities where completed. But to their dismay, all those that enthusiastically registred discovered very quickly that all the talk about "new employment opportunities" was political window dressing and nothing more. In fact over the last two years no new jobs were created to absorbe the army of the unemployed in Ethiopia's cities. On the contrary, mass lay offs during the past two years have thrown thousands of people out of work. As may be expected, women were the main victimes of the economic breakdown in the country.

One consequence of the crisis has therefore been an increase in the number of prostitutes in Ethiopia's cities and specially in Addis Abeba. Their number, which was estimated at 80.000 during in the pre-1974 periode, has now gone up to well over 100.000 ! The problem was so serious that it was one of the subjects raised in Mengistu's report to the COPWE meeting in early February. But the "solution" that followed is rather unexpected even coming from a regime which seems to have nothing but "military solutions" to all and every problem facing the country.

In mid-february orders where given to the security forces to round up prostitutes in Addis Abeba. This decision is by itself condemnable. But the way the security forces tried to apply it is absolutly revolting. For a whole week young women founded in cafés, hotels, at the Bole international airport and even the unemployed and school dropouts found on the streets were molested and brought to the nearest police station for "questioning". Married women were reportedly released later as their husbands came to look for them. No charges have been brought against the hundreds of women that are still kept in custody under extremely inhuman conditions. But then, what charges can be brought against them unless and until unemployment and poverty are included in the already long list of "crimes against the revolution"?