

EVENTS IN ETHIOPIA

► Growing unrest within the armed forces

Against a background of bitter resentment caused by the presence of foreign troops and officers in Ethiopia, the democratic and patriotic opposition in the armed forces is more and more coming to the open.

In June 1980, a meeting of a unit stationed in Negelle Borena, in South Eastern Ethiopia, was quelled by the indiscriminate bombing of the whole area.

In September, some representatives of the armed forces who came for the celebrations in Addis Abeba put forward a series of demands to the dictator Mengistu. These demands included democratic rights and an end to blind repression, an end to the war in Eritrea and immediate negotiations to solve the problem peacefully, a rotation system that would allow those who have stayed long enough at the various warfronts to rejoin their families etc.. Mengistu promised to "study" these demands but a few days later all the "ring leaders" of the "rebellion" were arrested and some of them were executed.

In early October, some units stationed in Eritrea put forward similar demands. With the news of the above events in mind, they refused to send representatives to Addis Abeba and instead demanded that Mengistu himself come to Asmara to discuss the issues with them. At the same time, there have been serious shootouts and battles within the armed forces in the outskirts of Asmara as well as Keren. Meanwhile the announced "sixth offensive" against the stronghold of Nakfa, held by Eritrean liberation forces, did not materialize. EPLF sources attribute this to the serious demoralization and contradictions within the armed forces.

► Mengistu acknowledges "problems" in Tigray

The struggle of the Tigray people for self determination, under the leadership of the TPLF is giving a tough time to the chauvinist dictators. In spite of a 30,000 strong army sent to the region to "crush" the Tigray people's struggle militarily, TPLF forces have been undertaking more and more daring and successful actions against the regime troops and liberating more and more regions. The situation has grown so critical to the dictatorship that the latter is not able to hide it any more. Answering to questions by foreign journalists in September, Mengistu acknowledged that "Ethiopia is now fighting on three

fronts in Eritrea, the Ogaden and Tigray". However, what Mengistu "forgets" to acknowledge is the fact that other parts of the country, this time in the southern regions, are also getting out of hand. He "forgets" the struggle waged by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in Harrarge and parts of Bale, the Somali Abo Front in Bale and parts of Sidamo and the increasingly active Sidama National Movement that now controls whole regions in Sidamo. Let us be sure that other such "problems" will be acknowledged and discussed at Mengistu's next press conference.

► Forced labour rejected by poor peasants

The regime's plan to "resettle" more than 250 000 peasants from the regions of Wollo and Tigray in the southern regions of the country was supposedly forwarded as the "final solution" to do away with famine in Ethiopia. But the real and unavowed reasons of the "resettlement project" were quite different. Politically, it was a move intended to give the chauvinist dictatorship "reliable" outposts in the lands of the "unreliable" oppressed nationalities. Economically, the objective was to provide the regime with a mass of forced labourers to work on "collective farms" under the strict control of the state. As the would be settlers refused to be uprooted from their lands, the government rounded up thousands of able bodied farmers from Wollo and Tigray and forcefully brought them to regions like Wollega and Kaffa. Now the unbearable conditions in these forced labour camps and the legitimate opposition of the peasants in these areas are pushing the "settlers" to demand their return to their own regions.

For obvious reasons, the regime is absolutely hostile to these demands of the peasants. In August about 200 "settlers" from Wollo representing thousands "settled" in the Kaffa region were sent to the regional capital, Jimma, to forward these demands to the authorities. As usual the regime responded by arresting all the representatives out of which 36 were brutally murdered by the government's security forces.

"Settlers" from Tigray, this time in the Wollega administrative region, decided to march all the way to Tigray after the government gave a deaf ear to similar demands. However, these peasants and their families were intercepted by the regime's security forces and were "asked" to return to their camps. A PMAC delegation, headed by the assistant secretary general, Lt. Fesseha Desta was sent to "persuade" the peasants to change their minds and return to the labour camps. When they refused, the "ringleaders" including some elderly peasants were rounded up and taken to unknown destinations while the others were forcibly taken back to their camps by military trucks...

► Workers refuse to pay "voluntary" contributions

For some time now, the regime has been devising an endless series of fund raising tricks to extort money from the people. These include compulsory feasts at which money would be raised for the "starving masses" or more frankly for the "fronts". Fines have been introduced for a variety of "offenses" such as failure to attend Kebele meetings, to participate in demonstrations of support to the regime organized by the regime etc. But the wage freezes that have been in force in all factories for the last two years and the rising cost of living have made these "voluntary" contributions and fines an unbearable burden to the low income groups. No wonder then, that the number of workers who refuse to comply with the regimes demand of "voluntary" contributions has been on the rise during the last months.

The most recent example of anti "voluntary" contribution actions is that of agricultural workers of the Merti Juju area in Arssi. The workers who have been "voluntarily" contributing during the last two years refused to comply with the latest orders which came just before the Ethiopian new year celebrations in early September. This led to the arrest of the leaders of the workers on charges of "counter-revolutionary activities". All the workers, who, as they said "had nothing to lose by daring to struggle" went on strike and defied government orders to go back to work and pay the contributions. Faced with the growing militant mood of the workers, the authorities had to retreat and the strikers went back to work after the demand for contributions was withdrawn and the arrested leaders were freed.

► Ethiopian Air Lines workers impose 8 hour day

One of the most important provision of the labour law of December 1975, was the introduction and generalization of the 8 hour working day. As is the case with the other provisions of this proclamation, the 8hr. day has been slowly discarded and has given way to prolonged working days in the factories and other work centers. Last year, with the memory of the "red terror" campaign in the minds of many workers, the dictatorship managed to intimidate many factories into accepting a 16 hr. a week overtime work. This was termed as "a voluntary contribution to the national revolutionary development campaign". It was also supposed to be limited in time.

In the case of EAL, the 16 hr. overtime obligation was supposed to last for six months and the employees "accepted" the increase on this understanding. Now almost a year after the imposition of this "voluntary work" the management tried to prolong the system for another six months. The employees refused to comply with these new demands and fought for the restoration of the 8 hr. day. Faced with the determination of the workers and fearing that a prolonged crisis would incite workers in the other sectors to follow the EAL example, the regime was forced to accept the workers demands and to do without the "voluntary" overtime work of the EAL employees.

► The regime's attempts at "consolidation"

While whole regions of the country are getting out of hand and workers', peasants' and soldiers' discontent is steadily on the rise, desperate attempts at "consolidation" are being undertaken by the military regime. Recent moves to create youth and women's organizations under the full control of the government are examples of such attempts. But unfortunately for the dictatorship, these moves, far from helping to consolidate the regime, are clearly exposing its anti-democratic nature.

Governmental decrees to organize the "Union of the Youth of Revolutionary Ethiopia" and a "Union of Ethiopian Women" were issued in early August and "representatives" from the administrative regions held founding congress in Addis Abeba in late August 1980. All necessary precautions were taken to ensure that no "right roaders" (ie members or sympathizers of ME'ISONE and its youth movement) find their way to the leadership echelons of these two organizations. But even among the hand picked delegates that attended these congresses, the regime could not trust all. It was therefore in no position to allow "democratic" elections to the offices of the organizations. During the COPWE congress in June, the names of the CC and polit buro members were read out to the congress participants.

Not withstanding the sham "elections" that took place at the youth congress, the method used was no less anti-democratic. At the end of the congress, the name of the president of the organization and those of the other officers were read out to the participants. As it turned out, the president was a "representative" from the Arssi region known only to a hand full of the 1200 participants!

As for the women's organization, the regime's leaders have found no other way than to name their own wives and mistresses to responsible posts in the organization. The "president" is a wife of a cabinet minister and the other "leaders" are wives and/or mistresses of high ranking officers of COPWE.

► Forced recrutement continues

Another aspect of the attempts at "consolidation" is the regimes policy of forced recrutement to its "peoples' militia". The dictatorship needs fresh troops to continue its wars at the various fronts and to offset the effects of increasing demoralization and unrest within the regular army. As the peasants in all regions are opposed to what they call "a tax in blood", Mengistu himself had to travel secretly to the regions of Kaffa, Ilubabor, Gamogofa and Wollega in order to discuss ways of overcoming the peasants' resistance. The "new" method is nothing new. In the countryside, surprise raids are organized by the local police and able bodied young people are kidnapped to be

taken to the "Tatek" military camp near Addis Abeba. In the urban centers, specially in Addis, the Kebeles have been rounding up the "unemployed" (a term which, in the vocabulary of the regime includes all the poor, the shabbily dressed, school dropouts etc.). Some of these are sent to the forced labour camps specially in Setit Humera in the north and others find their way to the "Tatek" camp. ME'ISONE sources in Addis-Abeba have disclosed that during the month of September, a total of 70 truck loads of peasants and urban poor have been forcibly brought to this training center.

► Mengistu in Moscow : arms for a soviet base in Ethiopia?

The regime's response to the democratic and patriotic opposition in the country is also an increased dependence on the Soviet Union... and the further alienation of the country's national independence. In late October, Mengistu left for Moscow, reportedly on a "friendship visit" to the Soviet Union. The real purpose of this visit is, however, to ask for more arms and probably for more foreign troops that the regime needs desperately to face the mounting opposition. But what Mengistu and Co. fail to understand is that increased intervention of the Soviet Union in Ethiopia would only help in stiffening the patriotic opposition specially within the armed forces.

To support his demands for more arms Mengistu has shown that he could go to any length to please his soviet masters. A communiqué issued at the end of the two weeks "friendship visit" clearly shows the Ethiopian regime's complete allegiance to the Soviet Union. To support his demands Mengistu has also come out with some "weighty" arguments. The first is of course the increasing anti-soviet sentiment within the armed forces and among the Ethiopian people and the need to "crush" such patriotic sentiments. But what the soviets would appreciate more is the acceptance by the Ethiopian regime of a demand to build a sophisticated 100 millions \$ worth military base in the Gibe region of southern Ethiopia. Nothing has filtered out about the negotiations on this issue. But ME'ISONE sources in Addis Abeba have indicated that secret agreements concerning this military base have already been worked out and that it would not be long before construction works start at the indicated site.