

NEWS ITEMS ■■■ NEWS ITEMS ■■■ NEWS ITEMS

THE 200 MILLION DOLLAR SHOW ■■■

If, as was the declared intention, the 10th anniversary was to be marked by "festivities that will be remembered by future generations", we cannot but concede that the regime has succeeded. Last week's extravagant show will surely be remembered by future generations. Just as are still remembered the festivities that marked the 80th birthday of the tyrant Haile Selassie.

In 1972, the huge sums spent to embellish Addis Ababa at a time when hundreds of thousands were at grips with a deadly famine disgusted not only Ethiopians but many foreigners as well. But now, compared to the shameless and fantastic excesses of the 10th anniversary at a time when literally millions are threatened by famine, the less than 5 million dollars spent on that birthday look as a small tribute paid to the vanity of a senil monarch.

This time the government embezzled about 200 million dollars. This is only 50 million short of the total coffee export earnings in 1982-1983 which stood at 252 million dollars. The purpose was not only vanity although the personality cult that developed around dictator Mengistu left no doubt on that. The regime was also out to "prove" that the decade of turmoil was now over and the country was at last at peace and under control. But no device, however pompous, can really mask the bitter realities of today's Ethiopia. If anything, the unprecedented security measures which for more than a week turned Addis Ababa into a besieged city, cut off from the rest of the country, only proved that the regime has the uncomfortable feeling of someone sitting on top of a volcano.

4 DIPLOMATS DEFECT

Four Ethiopian diplomats have recently defected and asked for political asylum in the west. In February, Mr. Celagay Zewde, the Commercial Counsellor at the embassy in Washington asked to remain in the US when the government ordered two Ethiopians to leave the country in retaliation to the expulsion of four American diplomats from Ethiopia. In May, Mr. Tesfaye Demeke, Chargé d'Affaires at the same embassy since April 1980, applied for political asylum in the US when ordered to return home for consultations. Mr. Tesfaye is the fourth envoy to defect while in charge of the Washington embassy since 1974. In June, the Ethiopian ambassadors to Mexico and North Yemen left their respective posts and requested political asylum.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT : A CALL FOR PEACE

While generously responding to the government's request for economic and humanitarian assistance, western governments and voluntary agencies have in the past expressed deep concern about the armed conflicts in the Horn and the human rights situation in Ethiopia. In line with this long standing concern, the European Parliament adopted in May a resolution which if implemented could lead to peace in this troubled region.

The European Parliament invited the Ethiopian government to find a peaceful and negotiated solution for the Eritrean question, condemns the intervention of the USSR and its allies in the Horn of Africa and calls for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Ethiopia.

A TEN YEAR DEVELOPMENT PLAN TO BE LAUNCHED

A census due to be published at the end of the year puts the population of Ethiopia at more than 44 million. Until now, per capita figures calculated on the basis of a rough estimate of 28-30 million used to put Ethiopia at the bottom of the 31 Least Developed Countries, only ahead of Bouhtan and Chad. Now the new figures make Ethiopia the poorest country in Africa if not in the world. This will also put the country, potentially one of the richest in Africa, at the bottom of most other statistical tables.

The government is out to "tackle" this problem by launching an ambitious 10-year development plan. This envisages total investment of nearly 15 000 million US dollars and sets an annual growth rate of 6.5% with the aim of doubling Ethiopia's GNP by 1994. This sounds unrealistic not because the country's human and natural resources do not permit such a growth rate, but due to the fact that during the coming years, the government will surely have to spend billions of dollars for "defense and security".

As Soviet and other East block "assistance" is largely confined to the military and security spheres, the regime is looking to western sources for its development plan. It has been calculated that 70% of the cost will have to be externally financed.

■■■■ DJIBOUTI : RETURNEES AND NEW REFUGEES

On September 19, 1983 when the train carrying the first group of 171 voluntary returnees from Djibouti arrived at the small Ethiopian desert town of Adigala, the passengers received an elaborate welcome from government officials, members of the diplomatic corps and representatives of the international media. As of May 30, 1984 some 6700 Ethiopians (according to UNHCR figures) are said to have returned via this programme which was set up by a triparty agreement between the governments of Ethiopia and Djibouti, and the UNHCR in 1983.

The Ethiopian government made much fuss about this "success" and not surprisingly came out with wild claims concerning the number of returnees. Now we are told that another 7000 people have been registered by the government's relief commission after having returned "spontaneously and by their own means". Over and above the political dividend expected from this "return to normal" the government lost no time in trying to make money not only out of the real and fictitious "returnees" but also requested funds for "an estimated 150,000" that are expected to return from Somalia during the coming months. A total of 14 refugee and returnee rehabilitation projects worth 40,090,000 US dollars were thus presented to the ICARA II meeting held in Geneva in July 1984.

Even if one admits the unrealistic figures of 13,000 returnees, it should be noted that this only represents a third of the total number of Ethiopian refugees already registered in Djibouti. But according to UNHCR officials, the two governments already claim that "large scale repatriation of refugees to Ethiopia is practically over, although small numbers of refugees will probably repatriate for some time to come.

What then will be the fate of the vast majority who do not want to return? Will they be allowed to stay? Judging from recent development the omens are not promising. In

spite of the Djibouti government's assurances, they will probably be forced to accept "voluntary repatriation" or to leave the country. The government does not want these refugees to stay and still less to integrate on a permanent basis. Mr. Ali Melow, the executive secretary of the ONARS (National Office for Assistance to Refugees and Victims of Natural Disasters) recently explained that it is for this reason that Djibouti chose not to make a submission to ICARA II for infrastructural assistance related to the presence of refugees in the country.

A durable solution is therefore still far from reality. Faced with the spectre of forced repatriation, some have already started to leave the country, sometimes at great risks for their lives. Whole families have crossed over to Somalia to register once again as refugees there. Recently a group of 12 young refugees arrived at a camp in Twawa (eastern Sudan) and had an extraordinary adventure to relate: They left Djibouti fearing that the remaining refugees were to be deported to Ethiopia. They managed to reach North Yemen on a small boat, then Saudi Arabia and from there they had to cross the Red Sea once again to Eritrea and finally ending up in this camp in Sudan !

It should be recalled that this repatriation programme had been justified on the grounds that the reasons for the original flight from Ethiopia no longer existed. But even while the parties to this agreement are making much fuss about the "successful" programme, everyone knows that new asylum seekers are arriving in Djibouti. Late last year a UNHCR spokesman conceded that about 50 people a day were fleeing from Ethiopia to seek asylum in Djibouti. These people know how unwelcome they are in that country. The mere fact that they seem prepared to take great risks speaks volumes about the unbearable situation in Ethiopia.

And the risks are very high. On August 27, 1984 official sources in Djibouti disclosed that 175 Ethiopians had been deported during the first half of the month. The group

was escorted to the boarder town of Galafi and handed over to Ethiopian military authorities.

■■■■ SOVIET HOLD AND CUBAN "WITHDRAWAL"

A sophisticated campaign of misinformation, master-minded from Addis Ababa, has long been underway to suggest that the Megistu dictatorship could be weaned away from its reliance on the Soviet Union. Over the years, and despite an everincreasing hold of the Soviets and their allies, this campaign enjoyed a surprising degree of complaisance from western governments and voluntary agencies. It reached new heights in recent months when news concerning the "withdrawal" of Cuban troops started to make headlines in the western press. In early February, a few weeks after the expulsion of American diplomats from Addis Ababa, ridiculous but no less orchestrated "leaks" even went as far as suggesting that two Soviet diplomats were expelled from the country on charges of "spying" for the KGB.

For some time now, insignificant "nationalist" gestures well calculated to confuse international public opinion have been taken as proof of the "ambiguous" nature of the regime's relations with the Soviet block. But for us Ethiopian patriots, there is nothing ambiguous in the regime's attitude. The crippled economy has driven the dictatorship to seek to improve its relations with the West in order to attract more economic and humanitarian aid and strange as it may seem to obtain the hard currency it needs to pay for Soviet arms deliveries. And this cannot be taken as a show of resistance to Soviet domination.

The fact of the matter is that foreign military and political hold on our country is growing ever tighter and Ethiopia is fast turning into the closest Soviet ally in Africa.

The country has accounted for more than half of all military sales by the Soviet Union to sub-sahara Africa