

## Peace Talks in a deadlock

Just a year ago, peace negotiations between the Ethiopian government and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) started in Atlanta under the auspices of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter. Although the launching of what was called the "Procedural phase" of the negotiations was by itself significant, most observers were sceptical as to the successful conclusion of these talks which in any case were expected to be "long and complex".

One year later, negotiations have come to a deadlock. There are now disturbing signs to indicate that the coming months will witness further escalation of military operations.

In fact, the seeds of the present deadlock were perceptible right from the start. Although the talks were supposed to be held "without preconditions", Mengistu has been declaring all along that "the unity of the country will not be subject to negotiations". This meant an adamant rejection of a referendum in Eritrea which is the basic demand of EPLF. As none of the parties to the conflict were ready to concede anything on these closely linked issues, negotiations never seem to have been accepted as a process of give and take.

The fact that none of the parties is ready to offer something at the "substantial talks" may help explain the collapse of the "procedural phase" on an apparently futile pretext concerning UN presence at negotiations.

During the first months, talks in Atlanta and Nairobi last September and November led to agreements on many procedural issues including the working languages, the chairmen, the venue of future meetings, etc. There were to be seven observers with each side inviting two of its own choice and 3 others named by common accord. The EPLF side chose OAU and the UN. The Dergue accepted the choice but refused to co-sign the invitation sent by EPLF to the UN general secretary, Mr. Perez de Cuellar. This in fact was tantamount to blocking UN presence in the talks as the international body's procedural rules demand that any participation in talks between conflicting parties should be on the invitation of both. In refusing to co-sign this invitation, the legal and procedural arguments put forward by Mengistu were not questionable. But this was a clear case of lack of good will.

The official tasks were thus interrupted in late

1989 with EPLF arguing that they can only continue if and when the Ethiopian government accepts to invite the UN as an observer.

In June 1990, the government accepted what it had refused a few months earlier and announced its readiness to invite the UN as an observer. But by that time, the military situation had drastically changed in favor of the Front, which had launched an all out offensive and captured the port of Marsawa in January 1990. It was now the Front's turn to reject a UN role as an observer. In an official statement issued on 8 May 1990, EPLF declared that any UN role in Eritrea can only be "supervision of a referendum" and nothing else.

EPLF's new stand on the nature of UN participation is one among many other signals indicating that the organization has abandoned the option of a negotiated settlement in Eritrea. Convinced that a decisive military victory is just around the corner or as the Front puts it, just "a short but fierce struggle" away, EPLF leaders have started to outline plans to "organize a referendum" in Eritrea once the besieged Dergue forces in Asmara are routed. This aim was clearly stated by Issayas Afewerki in an interview to the "voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea" on 29 August 1990.

Prospects for peace and a negotiated settlement between the government and TPLF are not encouraging either. The second round of talks held in Rome in March 1990 collapsed when the Dergue refused to include EPDM in the negotiations and insisted that talks be conducted on issues relevant to Tigray administrative region alone.

Here again, severe military setbacks forced Mengistu to make "concessions" and to accept what he refused in March. A State Council statement issued on 27 June offered participation to EPRDF provided that "it genuinely accepted Ethiopian Unity". The Front's reaction, announced on 2 July, was an outright rejection of this proposal which it considers as a call "to share power with the Dergue to collaborate in continuing the war of chauvinism against the Eritreans and other nationalities".

The frightening consequences of the present deadlock can only be avoided by setting up a democratic transitional government with the participation of all opposition forces including the Eritrean Fronts.

*Contd. page 4*



*Contd. from page 2***The Toronto Conference...**

necessity of continuing the process of dialogue initiated at the conference. The conference observed a spirit of cooperation and willingness to work together on the part of the various political organizations which in the past have each conducted their own separate struggles and expressed its hope that this spirit of cooperation will be strengthened and yield positive results in the future. With this in mind, the conference established an ad hoc committee which, on the one hand, while informing the Ethiopian and international communities of the deliberations and resolutions of the conference, is on the other hand, mandated to convene a broad-based conference in which as many political forces as possible can participate.

**CALLS AND APPEALS**

In accordance with its mandate the ad hoc committee, on behalf of the conference, has issued appeals and calls to the Ethiopian peoples, political groups, the national assembly, the armed forces and the international community.

**The Ethiopian Peoples**

It called upon all Ethiopians to actively support the spirit and recommendations of the conference and participate in the effort to bring about peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia.

**Political Forces**

a) It urges the political forces which did not attend the Toronto conference to take positive steps so as to resolve the problems in Ethiopia by peaceful and democratic means.

b) It called upon all political forces to resolve their differences peacefully and politically and to coordinate their struggles so as to form a transitional government through peaceful and political means by jointly negotiating with the government in power, or if a negotiated settlement with the government becomes impossible to wage a coordinated struggle with a view to overthrowing it and establishing a transitional government.

**The National Assembly**

The conference called upon the national assembly

to recognize the grave danger that the country is in and to join forces in the struggle to bring about a peaceful transition toward a democratic Ethiopia.

**The Armed Forces**

- considering the untold misery and oppression that the Ethiopian people, including the armed forces, have been subjected to by the present government;

- and considering the actions of the government which have exasperated the situation and gravely endangered the very existence of the country; the conference calls upon the members of the armed forces to join the struggle on the side of the Ethiopian peoples.

**The International Community**

The conference calls upon the international community to exert its influence for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and to support democratic forces advocating a peaceful transition in Ethiopia.

*Contd. from page 2***Peace Talks in a dead lock**

But in the futile search for "decisive military victory" all the parties to the armed conflicts reject this path to peace as proposed by the country's democratic opposition forces.

The Dergue and TPLF reject the idea of a multi-party democracy. EPLF refuses any participation in a democratic transition arrangement without which the genuine exercise of the right to self-determination can hardly be envisaged.

The call being made for a dialog to continue, be it by Ethiopian religious leaders or the international community, should take into account these obstacles to peace and specially the rejection of multi-partism by the Dergue and the TPLF. This call will be heard only when all those concerned support and encourage the efforts being exerted by the country's opposition forces to offer a credible democratic alternative to the present dead-lock, which if allowed to continue, can result in yet other untold tragedies, not only for the people of Ethiopia, but for the entire region.