

SHOULD NGOS STAY IN ETHIOPIA ?

For some time now there has been a controversy among western NGOs centering around the question of whether or not they should stay in Ethiopia. While the vast majority, concerned about self sufficiency in food, is shifting from emergency assistance to long-term development programmes, MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES (France), the only organisation out of 47 in the country to have been expelled, is leading the campaign of those who advocate a ban on development aid to the country.

The central point of MSF's argument is that continued western assistance to Ethiopia is nothing more than a naive manifestation of what it calls "Une pitié dangeureuse". It is alleged that continued assistance is "dangerous" in that it would provide the material basis for consolidation of the dictatorship and thus would play into the hands of Soviet expansionism in Africa. This, of course, has much more to do with ideology and world strategy than humanitarian concern about the welfare of the Ethiopian people.

Nobody can deny that by diverting a part of the international assistance, the dictatorship had intensified the process of collectivisation which started back in 1979. But should one conclude from this that the best way to help the Ethiopian people would be for NGOs to leave country 'en masse'? We do not think so.

International assistance is only partially responsible for this. The famine itself has facilitated partial implementation of this policy by rendering the peasant extremely vulnerable to government pressure. Moreover, our contention is that the presence of independent organisations, while saving millions of lives, has also helped to curb the regime's frantic drive for collectivisation.

All emergency assistance is not distributed through the government's RRC. The totality of private aid and at least half of the assistance offered by governments and international bodies like the EEC is distributed through the NGOs' own channels and those of independent international organisations like UNICEF, UNHCR, ICRC etc.. It is to be recalled that in early 1985, there was talk in government circles about transferring one and half million peasants from the north to the south and west of the country. This distribution mechanism, the key element of which is NGO presence stood in the way of complete realisation of this project.

The fact that voluntary agencies in Ethiopia are now shifting to development programmes seems to anger MSF(F) and all those who advocate a ban on development aid to the country on purely ideological grounds. In spite of numerous political and bureaucratic constraints, these agencies are now involved in work which consists in distributing seeds, equipment, fertilizers, oxen and in providing training. This is not "collaboration with the people's executioners" as the detractors would have us believe. If anything, the result of NGO action which, contrary to the official policy of collectivisation, stresses the need to work among individual peasants will be to reduce their vulnerability and to consolidate their position faced with government pressure.

ME'ISONES long-standing position concerning assistance to the regime's victims had never been dictated by its political opposition to the ruthless dictatorship. In the past we have always called upon the international community to maintain and increase assistance to our people. We have also stressed the need for everyone involved to see to it that this assistance was not diverted to pay for the implementation of the same policies that created the famine situation in the first place. One element in this strategy is continued NGO presence in Ethiopia and their commitment to the individual peasant, that "bête noire" of Mengistu whose "indiscipline at work" is officially held respon-

sible for the country's food problems. Notwithstanding MSF's assertions to the contrary, Ethiopia's democrats will never consider this commitment to the small peasant as an act of "collaboration" with the dictatorships

EVENTS AND VIEWS ■■■■■■■■■■ EVENTS AND VIEWS ■■■■■■■■■■

DOGALI: The Short-lived victory

26 January 1987 marks the 100th anniversary of the battle of DOGALI at which RAS ALULA, one of the greatest generals of 19th century Ethiopia, and at that time governor of the province of HAMASSEN (in present-day ERITRIA) dealt the first blow to Italian colonialist ambitions in Ethiopia.

To understand the historic significance of the victory, one must recall the circumstances that led to the occupation of the Red Sea port of MASSAWA by the Italians on 3 June 1885 amidst protests by the Ethiopian Emperor YOHANNES IV who claimed that the sea was "the natural frontier of Ethiopia".

In 1884, a semi-religious and semi-political rebellion led by Mohammed Ashmit El Mahadi who, incidentally, is the great grandfather of the present Prime Minister of the Sudan, put the Egyptian occupation army in that country in a very precarious situation. The Egyptian commander decided to evacuate its defeated forces to Massawa which at that time was under its administration. This was however only possible if the Emperor of Ethiopia could be persuaded to allow them a safe passage through his country. There were negotiations between Ethiopia, Egypt and Great Britain which led to the signing of a treaty by virtue of which the Emperor accepted to allow the Egyptians to withdraw to Massawa. On the other hand, all the regions evacuated by the Egyptians, specially the BOGOS country (the northern part of present-day Eritrea) together with all the stores, arms and ammunition were ceded to Ethiopia. The treaty was carried out loyally; the Egyptians arrived safely in Massawa and soon with-