

## THE GULF CRISIS AND THE HORN

While it is feared that one immediate effect of the crisis in the Gulf might be to mask the catastrophic famine threatening many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and specially Sudan and Ethiopia, many observers agree that its short and long term consequences on the political, military and diplomatic situation in the Horn could be considerable.

As we noted in our last issue of New Ethiopia, the various conflicts in the region mainly stem from contradictions among the local contending parties themselves. We also noted that neighboring and wider conflicts have significant bearing on developments in the area. During the cold war years, superpower rivalry was an important factor. All sides in the conflict were trying to seize the opportunities offered by east-west contradictions in their attempts to advance their respective objectives and interests. However, the role of the superpowers was deliberately exaggerated to meet the propaganda needs of local forces in search of support of one camp or the other who blamed 'Soviet expansionism' or 'American imperialism intrigues' for the plight of the peoples of the region.

One effect of this simplistic presentation of the problem was to belittle the otherwise important role played by regional powers, and specially middle eastern actors, in the deadly political and military tangle that continues to characterize the region. As the primary importance of the local contradictions and the role of regional actors was not given the emphasis it deserved, it was wrongly assumed, that the end of the cold war and relative superpower disengagement from the area would usher in an era of peace and tranquility for the peoples of the Horn.

During the past two years superpower rivalry gave way to cooperation and common endeavors to bring peace to the region. However, international efforts did not advance the cause of peace. Among the reasons which explain the ineffectiveness of international mediation efforts are of course the high degree of incompatibility of the theses and interests defended by the warring groups, their incapacity to compromise and the multitude of regional contradictions and interests that these local forces can exploit in their search for military solutions.

The Israeli-Arab conflict and the rivalry between conservative and radical Arab regimes have often constituted important ingredients in the Horn embroglio. Now, the gulf crisis has proved no exception to the rule that crises and contradictions in the Middle East have inevitable implications and consequences in a region like the Horn, situated at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East and the juncture of the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the black continent.

Among the three states of the Horn, only Somalia's Siad Barre, at grips with fast advancing guerilla forces which have now reached the outskirts of Mogadisho has not been in a position to exploit 'new opportunities' offered by the crisis, although his

belated anti-Iraqi stand earned him about 70 million US dollars of financial aid from Saudi Arabia early December.

Khartoum and Addis Abeba were quick to come out in support of one camp or the other. While the Islamic Al Bashir military junta sided with Saddam Hussein, Mengistu condemned the 'arrogant aggression' and called for firm international action against the invasion.

For Mengistu this was not just the 'right choice' in terms of political expediency, especially in view of his declared desire of rapprochement with the west. For a leader of a country where successive governments had held Arab countries and specially the Baasist regimes in Syria and Iraq as the arch enemies of Ethiopian unity there was no place for second thoughts. Suffice it to note that official maps published in these two countries already classify Eritrea as part and parcel of the Arab world and that Ethiopian immigration law prohibits nationals of Syria and Iraq, together with those of 'white' South Africa from entering the country.

The first consequence of the crisis as far as the Ethiopian government is concerned is the strengthening, and even more significant, the abandon of the low profile posture which had long characterized Ethio-Israeli relations. It can be recalled that when the diplomatic ties broken in 1973 were restored last year, there was an outcry in the Arab world and Mengistu's former ally, Khadafi, even went as far as calling for 'joint Arab action against Ethiopia'. At that time, the Ethiopian government did everything to play down the importance of restoring official ties with Israel and went to great length to assure Arab governments that the move was not directed against the Arabs and still less against the Palestinian cause. Now with the Arab world divided as never before, Mengistu saw no need for Ethio-Israeli relations to maintain low profile.

In an interview with the Jerusalem Post (9-10 November), Mengistu's first ever to an Israeli paper, he praised the 'enduring relations between Ethiopia and Israel to ward off common Arab hostility', expressed admiration for 'the military achievements of Israel' and his wish to benefit from Israeli experience in the struggle against "secessionists supported by Arab countries specially Iraq and Syria".

There was a prompt reaction from Libya's Foreign Minister, who according to Radio Tripoli summoned Ethiopia's ambassador "in connection with an interview given by Mengistu Haile Miriam, to a Zionist newspaper and his call for an alliance with the Zionists in order to confront the Great Jammahriya and Iraq".

But in the midst of shifting alliances and confusion provoked by the Gulf crisis, Khadafi's was indeed an isolated voice. Mengistu's strengthening ties with Israel did not stand in the way of improvement of hitherto uneasy relations between Ethiopia and the



Gulf States, nor compromise Ethiopia's good ties with Egypt.

A number of delegations and notably one from the Kuwait government in exile visited Ethiopia to thank Mengistu for his firm stand against Iraq. On 22 November, a Saudi envoy told Mengistu that his country "whole-heartedly admired the strong stand taken by Ethiopia in condemning the illegal Iraqi invasion and that ever stronger relations and friendship developing at present between Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia would enable them to achieve great results and benefits in spheres of mutual concern". One immediate benefit to Mengistu was a promise of 400 million US dollars of Saudi financial aid.

Although this was not spelled out clearly, one field of cooperation in the "spheres of mutual concern" was in connection with the declared objective of the Saudis to give political, military and financial support to the Sudan People's Liberation Army engaged in a long drawn-out war against Khartoum, and which for its part has offered to dispatch a contingent of 500 men "to defend Saudi Arabia and participate in the liberation of Kuwait". It is widely believed that the Saudi military and material assistance to rebels in southern Sudan will transit through Ethiopia where the movement has long enjoyed all-round support.

All this has led some observers - including many Ethiopians - to conclude that the Gulf crisis has been a windfall for Mengistu.

The same cannot be said of the Al Bashir military junta in Khartoum which finds itself practically surrounded by countries which have opted for the anti-Iraqi coalition. With hostile Egypt to the north, Ethiopia to the east and Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea, the consequences to the fundamentalist junta's hold to power were so obvious that one Sudanese opposition spokesman termed Al Bashir's pro Iraqi stand as "an incredible blunder".

Except Iraq and distant Iran, which has expressed full support of Khartoum's Islamic orientation and has called for a resolute struggle against the Christian dominated SPLA which Teheran terms as "a danger to Islam and the Muslims" the Al Bashir junta seems to enjoy no substantial outside support in its struggle against rising opposition.

Old foes like former president Jaffar Al Nimery, ousted from power in 1985 are now openly preparing to give what they believe will be a "coup de grâce" to a beleaguered and isolated regime which is also facing tremendous economic problems aggravated by the interruption of Western aid. The former president toured Gulf states in October and November declaring, as he did to the UAE daily AL ITTAHID that "He came to seek support to topple the military junta which has become a tool of Iraq" and that in this connection, he would visit Ethiopia and Kenya soon.

A more serious threat came in late September when the former Chief of Staff of the Sudanese army, Lt. general Fathi Ahmed Ali went underground with two other retired high ranking officers. A few days later, he

surfaced in Cairo and declared that although he had been ousted following the "illegal coup d'Etat in June 1989" he still considered himself the head of the army and the only legitimate representative of the Sudanese armed forces. On 29 September a clandestine radio calling itself "Voice of the force of National Democratic Alliance" read out a statement by the "legitimate leadership of the armed forces" which condemned the junta's policy in the Gulf and forcefully rejected the idea of Sudan's "Being a dagger aimed at the chest of fraternal Egypt, of being a tool used to threaten the security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and a threat to the unity of our neighbor Ethiopia".

All these indicate that the Al Bashir regime, which faces unprecedented and growing hostility from its immediate neighbors and coordinated opposition from within the country, is in great danger and may not survive the turmoil.

The dangers for the struggle for democracy in Ethiopia are no less clear. Mengistu had always tried to suppress all and any opposition to his dictatorial rule, although military setbacks and increased international isolation during the past years, have led him to make some half-hearted efforts at reforms and unconvincing attempts at negotiations to peacefully resolve the armed conflicts ravaging the country. Many fear that this political and military 'windfall' may lead the dictator to make incorrect and dangerous conclusions. Feeling stronger than before, he may resort to his favourite scorched earth tactics to silence democratic opposition and pursue his never abandoned dream of a military solution to the various armed conflicts in the country.

Although the costs of this dangerous illusion may be high in terms of increased war damage, continued repression and denial of our people's fundamental rights, sooner or later it will become clear that there will never be peace and stability in Ethiopia until and unless the questions of democracy and self-determination are seriously and positively addressed.

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Africa, drought will remain a problem for many years to come. But food shortages resulting from poor rains or other natural factors turn into devastating famines only in countries like Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, Sudan and Liberia where man-made problems generate serious crises of which famine is but the most tragic manifestation.

That is why it would be difficult for us to accept the figures which limit the number of expected famine victims of man made problems to only one-fifth of the total. We argue that man-made problems are not only the armed conflicts but a whole series of economic, political and policy problems which must be addressed if a solution is to be found to our country's problems. Without recognizing the overwhelming role played by political and other policy matters which are of the regime's making, it would be hard to combat the immediate effects of famine by providing the necessary assistance to victims, let alone to do away with famine in the long run.