

GRAPECA'S ACTION PLAN FOR 1992

We have many reasons to believe that the fragile peace in Ethiopia may not last long. The attitude of the provisional government which is dictated by the desire to survive and consolidate its hold can lead the country to another cycle of violence and the situation may be out of control for everyone. It is in this volatile context that GRAPECA defines its plan of action for the coming year.

1. The factors which threaten peace

First of all, we have the heritage of decades of civil war. Ethiopia, a country which is one of the poorest even among the LDCs, must face the challenges and problems of reconstruction. What little infrastructure existed has been destroyed specially in the northern region. Years of famine in rural areas, unemployment and inflation in the urban centres have totally disorganized the economy. There are hundreds of thousands of disabled persons, widows and orphans.

To these victims of war must be added what we may call the "victims of peace". These are over 300,000 soldiers and officers of the vanquished army, tens of thousands of former members of the security forces and the WPE who have been arrested or dismissed. We have also some 200,000 people expelled from Eritrea.

All of these people, refugees and their families, have been rendered destitute almost overnight. They can be factors of destabilization not only because of problems of survival that they are facing but also out of frustration which comes as a result of the government's attitude of "revenge" against them.

Another factor of destabilization is of course the ethnic problem. It is striking that almost all the Ethiopian participants at the Paris conference noted that despite decades of war between successive central governments and nationalistic fronts, ethnic hatred had never been a salient feature of the country's political scene. Enmity among ethnic groups as has been and is being witnessed in some African countries (Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Somalia) has never prevailed in Ethiopia.

But given the present trend and the deliberate attempts of the government to divide the country along exclusively ethnic lines, everybody wondered if and how long this "entente" among the peoples of Ethiopia will hold. Already there are disturbing signs: interethnic confrontation is fast developing in the south and east of the country. In this respect, many participants spoke of a possible "Pandora's box" while at the same time underlining the crucial role that awaits the country's intellectuals in the struggle to avoid possible disaster.

To these serious problems must be added the question of the country's unity which is seriously threatened by the de facto secession of Eritrea. This can be a serious source of conflict during the coming months or years.

The country is therefore facing considerable and complex problems. The situation is all the more serious since the policies followed by the Front in power tends to aggravate them.

At the Paris conference, it was striking to note that there was a glaring contrast between what happened in countries which went through a successful transition and what is actually unfolding in Ethiopia ... and to note the similarities between the Vietnamese and Ethiopian experiences.

A policy of "victors" against the "vanquished" which was avoided by all successful transitions is now in full vigour in the country. The ethnic problem is exacerbated and exploited for tactical reasons. Repression is unleashed not only against leaders and rank and file members of the defunct party, but also against all those who at one time or another during the past 17 years supported or worked with the ousted regime. In an attempt to divide society, the government is reviving the wounds of the past and launching calls for people to denounce all those who "morally or politically" supported the "red terror" campaign of 1977/78.

2. The need for a policy of national reconciliation

GRAPECA is convinced that in the coming months it will be extremely urgent to work out a coherent policy of national reconciliation and to act concretely to mobilize people for this task.

To this effect, GRAPECA has identified four major fields of action the contents of which will be completed and enriched with practice and taking into account changes in the political situation that may occur. These four fields of action can be summed up as follows:

a) WORKING IN FAVOUR OF A GENERAL AMNESTY AND FOR THE RELEASE OF ALL PRISONERS OF CONSCIOUS:

A policy of national reconciliation - the only one which can help Ethiopia avoid other disasters - can hardly be envisaged without general amnesty. But given the historic and cultural context of Ethiopian society and the present political circumstances, it will be difficult to gain acceptance of this idea not only from the general public but also from many politicians and intellectuals.

We have a situation where encouragement of ethnic, political and even personal revenge is being used as an instrument of consolidating power. Calling for a general amnesty can be perceived by the government as an act of opposition. Even if some political forces and intellectuals are convinced of the necessity of such a

move, working for general amnesty will demand a certain political courage as those who come out in favour of amnesty can easily be accused of "supporting the crimes" of the former regime.

It is clear that GRAPECA's move will be misunderstood or even condemned at its initial stage. That is why we are of the opinion that working to raise public awareness on the issue of general amnesty will be a protracted and difficult task.

b) ENCOURAGEMENT OF SOLIDARITY AND MUTUAL HELP

Nothing is more dangerous to peace and national reconciliation than the present government policy applied to the vanquished who are systematically humiliated and demoralized.

This policy must be countered first and foremost by moral and social "rehabilitation" of the "vanquished". This will of course go counter to the government's policy which considers for example all soldiers and officers of the former regime as "mercenaries" who deserve nothing but punishment and contempt.

Secondly, solidarity with these people must be expressed concretely by mutual help projects and material support extended to all those who continue to suffer from the sequels of the war and those destabilized by "peace" imposed by the "victor". Both for humanitarian reasons and in the interest of national reconciliation, various sectors of society must mobilize to help these people irrespective of their ethnic background or the camp to which they belonged during the civil war.

c) DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

The struggle for the defense of human and democratic rights is obviously part and parcel of the endeavour to restore peace in Ethiopia. All victims of human rights abuses must be defended without distinction. All violations of citizens' rights must be condemned. Above all there should be a systematic endeavour to raise public awareness on human rights issues.

GRAPECA will work in collaboration with groups in Ethiopia exclusively devoted to this problem. We have already contacted some people who are trying to establish a human rights organization and have accepted to support their action by sending some relevant documents, participating in producing literature, distributing publications among Ethiopians residing abroad, etc. For their part, these people have accepted to hold regular discussions on human rights issues in order to work out common strategies to achieve GRAPECA's wider concerns of democracy, peace and national reconciliation.

d) FOSTERING FACTORS OF NATIONAL COHESION

The question of symbols and national cohesion was one of the most important issues discussed at the Paris conference. Everyone was aware of the importance of symbols for national cohesion. But some were of the opinion that the country's peoples have no positive common heritage which can serve as a symbol. They believe that the present convulsions are partly the result of this absence of common positive heritage. Moreover, they contend that looking back to the past could be dangerous to present day tasks as the history of the country is made up of violence, repression, suffering and humiliation brought upon some of the Ethiopian peoples.

Others considered, on the contrary, that it would be strange, to say the least, to contend that there was no common heritage and a minimum of symbols for peoples who had lived together for so long. They argued that if there was the political will, intellectuals and politicians could mobilize to highlight and cultivate some common symbols without which national cohesion would be difficult to achieve. There must therefore be a conscious effort specially by intellectuals. GRAPECA believes that such an endeavour is not only possible but also extremely useful. That is why it has been decided to engage in wide-ranging exchanges of views and to publish a brochure in order to encourage debate on the issue during the coming year.

3. GRAPECA'S ACTIVITIES DURING 1991/1992

First the action plan envisages pursuing research and documentation on subjects that have already been chosen last year and other topics the importance of which was highlighted during the Paris conference.

Second, the situation in the country and the dynamics created at the Paris conference demand that GRAPECA undertake the publication without delay of material to raise public awareness on burning issues of the day.

Third, GRAPECA will endeavour to establish "Clubs for democracy and national reconciliation" instead of "alternative circles" envisaged in the initial phase of the project.

a) Research and documentation

Research and documentation will be conducted on the following topics:

1. The question of nationalities in Ethiopia
2. Mass organizations (peasant associations, trade unions, neighbourhood associations, etc.) and their possible role in the construction of peace

3. Urban violence in Ethiopia - The facts, the lessons to be drawn and its possible negative effects on the process of national reconciliation
4. Religious institutions and their role in construction of peace and reconciliation
5. Associative life in Ethiopia: traditional, the present situation and prospects for its development
6. The political conditions for peaceful transition
7. Problems of rehabilitation of demobilized soldiers and refugees
8. The problem of symbols for national cohesion
9. The constitutional framework for multi-ethnic Ethiopia
10. Agricultural policy or what food strategy for peace?
11. Reconstruction of the war ravaged economy.

Even if they are not in-depth and exhaustive works, GRAPECA now has some papers presented at the Paris conference on topics 7 to 11. These documents will be published and distributed to encourage debate. But GRAPECA will continue research and documentation on these topics and the other items indicated above.

b) Publication and distribution of brochures

The intention is to publish 4 small brochures of about 40 pages each and a document of about 30 pages entitled "MANIFESTO FOR NATIONAL RECONCILIATION IN ETHIOPIA".

The 4 brochures are intended to serve as a basis for a wider debate among readers and to raise public awareness on a given problem. The subjects to be published this year are:

1. The lessons of the Paris conference on peace in Ethiopia
2. Ethnic diversity and national cohesion
3. Victims of war and victims of peace: what is to be done?
4. General amnesty: a necessity and its problems.

The manifesto which will be published and distributed after the 4 brochures, will take into account the lessons to be drawn from discussions on the preceding publications. It will serve as a platform for action by the "Democracy and national reconciliation clubs".

c) Setting up of "Democracy and national reconciliation clubs"

These will replace the "Alternative circles" which we intended to set up at the initial stage of the project. We intend to associate a maximum number of people in the discussions leading to the Manifesto. All those who had participated in the discussions will then be requested to create these clubs whose membership will be drawn from Ethiopians eager to struggle for peace and democracy on the basis of the Manifesto. The appropriate structures, and working methods will be decided at a meeting of GRAPECA supporters in April/May 1992.