

VIOLENCE AND PEACE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA  
"PEACE IN ETHIOPIA" PROJECT

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I. INTRODUCTION

The last two years have witnessed tremendous, positive changes in East-West relations and the beginning of solutions to some regional conflicts. These developments have led to some optimism within the international community. Unfortunately consolidation of détente has not as yet led to peace and tranquillity in the Horn of Africa where devastating armed conflicts are continuing unabated. In fact, the various wars in the region have never been as intense as they have become in about the last year.

Factors behind conflicts that bring havoc and destruction to people in the Third World are well-known. They include gross violation of human rights, religious, political, ethnic and cultural repression, border and other conflicts between neighbouring states, rivalries between regional and international powers, natural disasters, famine ... These are but the most important of the destabilising factors.

The specificity of the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular is that all these factors intermingle and generate seemingly endless tragedies of which famine is but the most dramatic manifestation.

Situated at the cross-roads of Africa and the middle east and at the juncture of the Red Sea, the Indian ocean and the black continent, the Horn of Africa is of strategic importance for both



east and west specially in view of its proximity to oil rich areas.

However, it should be stressed from the outset that the devastating wars in the region result more from bitter contradictions between local contending forces than from intervention of foreign powers and interests.

The three most important countries of the Horn, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, are at grips with each other for a variety of reasons. All three have to face armed insurrectionary movements within their respective frontiers.

In Sudan, the instauration of an elected government in 1986 after 17 years of civil war followed by 13 years of military dictatorship did not bring peace to the country. Since 1983, civil war between Arabo-islamic forces favouring introduction of CHARIA law and animist or Christian Africans in the south demanding a secular state has been ravaging the country. Unable to mediate between these antagonistic forces and thus attacked from both sides, the democratic experience was abruptly interrupted in July 1989 by a military coup which brought to power officers close to the fundamentalist National Islamic Front.

This gave new momentum to the insurrection in the south where the Sudan People's Liberation Army - supported by Ethiopia - has intensified the armed struggle. There seems to be no end in sight to this problem which cripples Sudanese society.

In Somalia, where strife between rival clans has been dominating national political life since the country's independence in 1960, the central government mainly controlled by the Meherine tribe since the military takeover in 1969 has now to face three insurrectionary movements. The Isaas in the north and the Mejerti

and Ogaden tribes in the center of the country have taken up arms against Mogadishou, again with support from Addis Abeba.

In Ethiopia, the civil war which followed the fall of the empire in 1974 and which brought to grips supporters and opponents of the 1975 land proclamation did not end with the complete dismantling of the feudal order. In addition to the war of independence waged by Eritrean nationalists since 1961, other armed opposition movements - more or less supported by neighbouring states - have thrown the country into a spiral of violence which can lead to collapse of the society as a whole.

All in all, the Horn of Africa harbours about 15 active armed opposition movements. The situation is further complicated by the fact that these movements not only fight against their respective governments but at times tend to confront each other.

The complex situation which results from these various conflicts becomes a deadly political, military and diplomatic tangle as "neighbouring" and wider conflicts tend to draw the Horn into contradictions which do not have much to do with the fundamental interests of the peoples of the region. The Israelo-Arab conflict, rivalry between "moderate" and "radical" Arab states and between the superpowers all have a bearing on the situation in the Horn of Africa.

With a population of over 50 million - which is almost equal to that of all its neighbours put together - Ethiopia is at the heart of the Horn and of its problems. At the frontier between black Africa and the Arab world, Ethiopia is the only country in the region which is neither a member of the Islamic conference Organisation nor of the Arab League. It is the only non-Arab country - along with israel, and this has its importance - with a coast line on the Red Sea. In spite of a large Muslim community, the country's civilisation had for centuries been dominated by



orthodox Christianity. For the last 15 years, Ethiopia has had a "Pro-Soviet" government while neighbouring countries have close ties with the west specially with "moderate" Arab states in the region.

In addition to these historical, cultural and political specificities which may to some extent help understand the difficulties that the country experiences in its relations with its neighbours, a study devoted to the problem of peace and violence in the Horn of Africa should give a large place to the Ethiopian problem for several other reasons.

Out of the 15 more or less active insurrectionary movements in the region, 10 are fighting the Addis Abeba regime. The four others - the SPLA in Sudan and three armed opposition movements in Somalia - operate in their respective countries with direct and indirect support from Addis Abeba and sometimes use Ethiopian territory as base areas from which they launch their attacks against Sudan and Somalia respectively. The Ethiopian regime is therefore a party to all the conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

That is why the project, while trying to explore conditions for peace within the wider context of the Horn will mainly be devoted to the study of the causes and consequences of violence in Ethiopia and of the path that would lead to peace and development in the country.

## II. THE SEARCH FOR PEACE AND ITS PROBLEMS

The issue of peace and development in Ethiopia cannot be addressed without first referring to historical roots of violence which had bedeviled its recent and distant past. The history of Ethiopia is essentially one of a civilisation which had to fight for survival in face of repeated foreign aggressions. It is also a history of a people constantly victimised by bloody conflicts

and rivalries among indigenous warlords. A brief look at the country's history during the past two and half centuries can help to drive home the point we are trying to make.

One of the most bloody and confused periods in modern Ethiopian history is the one known as the ZEMENE MESAFINTE or Era of the Princes. With total collapse of the central imperial power and omnipotence of powerful local warlords, the ZEMENE MESAFINTE was a period of bloody rivalries and civil war which lasted from 1780 to 1855. Since then, the country has had to face about ten foreign aggressions. During the same period internal conflicts and wars of conquest continued to devastate the country. It can be asserted that over the last two hundred fifty years, Ethiopian society has enjoyed barely one decade of total and continued peace!

One major result of this constant state of war and violence is the development of a deep-rooted "culture of violence" which developed with the practice of feudal levies of peasants, constantly mobilised into armies of warlords. The introduction of a standing army in the early thirties did not bring about "demobilisation" of the rest of society. The standing army has never had a monopoly on arms. On the eve of the 1974 revolution for example, the regular army had about 40,000 men while the number of arms of all sorts in the hands of "civilians" was estimated at 5 million.

It is in the light of this "culture of violence" that the "contributions" made by Marxism - which is the official ideology of both the government and the most important armed opposition movements - should be studied and analysed. In any case the spiral of violence is such that it can reasonably be asserted that the country has unfortunately reached a stage where violence nourishes further violence and has developed into a self-sustaining phenomenon. Everybody agrees that misery, famine, exile and total collapse of the country's economy are all the



result of wars being fought on several fronts. But there is a clear case of entanglement between causes and effects of violence. If war and violence generate these endless series of crisis, it is also clear today that the later, by completely destabilising society and specially the peasantry nourish in turn these wars and the violence.

All attempts to break this vicious circle encounter a series of difficulties which add up to perpetrate the dramatic situation. At present neither the "forces of war" nor the "forces of peace" are in a position to provide credible prospects for the country's return to peace.

The "forces of war": Due to their ideological options and political objectives, the forces that are most involved in armed conflicts do not offer credible prospects for democracy without which there can be no durable peace in Ethiopia. The most important armed protagonists, professing one or another variety of Marxism, advocate "revolutionary steadfastness" and in spite of talk about peace and negotiation seem to be determined to wage the struggle until "final victory". They are entangled in a "logic of violence". What is even more serious for the country's future is that decisive victory by one or the other of the contending forces will not necessarily be of good omen to peace and tranquillity in the country as their vision of society can hardly be termed as truly democratic.

With regards to "forces of peace" what has already been noted about the historical roots of violence in Ethiopia and the absence of any democratic tradition can give an idea of the difficulties on the path of the development of a "civil society" and a strong popular movement in favour of peace and democracy. Due to historical factors and the political context as it developed over the past 15 years it can be asserted that these forces are extremely weak if not inexistent.

In addition the "forces of war" are opposed to the emergence and development of alternative forces of peace and democracy. There are of course political and ideological factors which can explain this attitude. There are also practical considerations. Action in favour of peace is perceived by all the armed protagonists as a hostile attempt at "demobilisation" and is fought as such.

Too weak to oppose the "forces of war" or even to mediate between the protagonists, the "forces of peace and democracy" are also paralysed by lack of clear prospects and alternatives which take into account all the aspects of a complex situation.

Any attempt to break the "vicious circle of violence" in Ethiopia and to initiate a dynamic peace process should therefore start by working out a "PROGRAMME FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT" which will provide a sound basis for concerted action in favour of peace. A "REFLEXION COLLECTIVE" which could lead to elaboration of such a programme must involve - if this document is to be realistic and credible - Ethiopians from all political and ideological backgrounds and from various ethnic and religious origins.

Setting up adequate structures allowing for such collective efforts - if and when realised - will by itself be a tremendous achievement as it will bring together Ethiopians from very different horizons. Once the work completed and the programme elaborated, the path should be clear for concerted action in view of transforming the historical and present context of violence and repression.

That is why the project, the implementation of which will involve two more or less distinct phases - will not be limited to academic research into the causes and consequences of violence. Although such a study will constitute a precious instrument for action.



### III. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

1. Study of the causes and consequences of violence in Ethiopia and the horn of Africa with particular emphasis on the search for alternatives capable of bringing peace to the region in general and in Ethiopia in particular.
2. Setting up "ALTERNATIVE CIRCLES" whose task would be to conduct a "REFLEXION COLLECTIVE" and based on findings of their research to work out a "PROGRAMME FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN ETHIOPIA"

### IV. THE TWO PHASES OF THE PROJECT

#### Phase 1:

##### a) Beginning the research

- gathering bibliographical and statistical data concerning the various parties to the conflicts, the causes and consequences of violence, the state of political and other forces favouring peace and the problems they encounter in their struggle.

##### b) Elaboration of a tentative outline containing proposals for action in view of developing a "Civil society" and public awareness about problems and prospects for peace. Discussion about the appropriate organisational framework for optimal use of collected data and about follow-up mechanisms.

##### c) Beginning of contacts in view of setting up "Alternative circles" which will be composed of people of good will from various political, ideological, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

#### Phase 2:



- a) Systematisation of bibliographical and statistical data and completion of documents which will serve as a basis for discussions in the "ALTERNATIVE CIRCLES"
- b) Work of "ALTERNATIVE CIRCLES" begins. A coordinating committee of these circles will be set up at this stage.  
Its task will be :
- to provide logistical support to the circles including a draft outline of topics for discussion, material support, distribution of data, and to ensure smooth contacts between circles
  - to organise a symposium with participation of representatives of the various "ALTERNATIVE CIRCLES". The symposium will elaborate a "PROGRAMME FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT" and will work out a plan for concerted action in view of the realisation of this programme.
  - to follow-up and implement recommendations made by the symposium and to that end;
  - Edit and distribute the programme, other documents and recommendations of the symposium
  - work to consolidate the "Alternative circles" in order to mobilise public opinion and to better organise the forces of peace identified in the programme
  - organise seminars, conferences, etc. to familiarize as many people as possible with the findings and recommendations of the symposium
  - find ways of distributing material within the country

- Encourage continued study by "Alternative circles" and, in line with new developments and recommendations of these circles, propose methods for concerted action so that an ever-increasing number of individuals and groups may be associated with the effort to bring peace and democracy to the country and the Horn.