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Comité de Solidarité avec l'Ethiopie (COSETH)
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HUMAN RIGHTS IN ETHIOPIA
THE STRUGGLE FOR SOLIDARITY

I. INTRODUCTION

Support for victims of human rights violations in Ethiopia, a task which the Solidarity Committee with Victims of Repression (SCVR) has been accomplishing since 1979, is part of the overall struggle against the military dictatorship.

Throughout these years, organised solidarity with direct and indirect victims, irrespective of political, ethnic or religious affiliations, has been an underground venture. This was the only way left after semi-legal activities in the late seventies led some committee members to prison, and, on more than one occasion, to the firing squad.

The prohibition of organised solidarity is not, however, a wanton act of "inhumanity" on the part of the dictatorship. Neither would it be enough to say that persecution of human rights activists is part of the regime's arsenal in its day-to-day struggle against political opponents.

The struggle for solidarity has far-reaching implications that go beyond politics. It is a fight against the "new sets of values" that the regime is trying to impose upon the country's social and moral fabric. It is a struggle for the survival of some fundamental human values cherished by Ethiopian society or any other society for that matter. In this sense, it is a multi-dimensional struggle. It is this aspect of the problem, often ignored by foreign humanitarian organisations, that this paper will try to outline.

II. BEYOND COLD FIGURES

It is a commonplace truism to say that Ethiopia, one of the least developed countries in the world, is also a country where a ruthless military dictatorship has been spreading havoc, famine and misery over the past years.

With regard to human rights, the government is among the few states that are regularly condemned by international bodies for its "gross violations of human rights". In early 1985, a book by Charles Humana, entitled "World guide to Human Rights" has singled out Ethiopia as the country where the peoples' fundamental rights are least respected among all countries of the world. While New Zealand and Denmark, with 96% come at the top, Ethiopia with 17% finds itself at the bottom of the list.

Our purpose is not to engage in a "check list" approach to Human rights problems in the country. Indicative as they might be of the grave situation prevailing in Ethiopia, cold figures leave out too much to be considered as anything other than a means of assessment. Not least because they say little about the moral and material misery of the thousands of direct and indirect victims who are more or less left on their own in their solitary struggle for survival and dignity.

Other important aspects of the problem that cannot be expressed in figures are the social and moral implications of repression and the near collapse of "old" values of solidarity and mutual help which result from the regime's hostile attitude towards attempts made by Ethiopians and foreigners to reach out and help these victims.

III. THE STRUGGLE FOR SOLIDARITY

One important dimension of human rights violation in Ethiopia, the practical, moral and psychological implications of which are not well understood by foreigners, is the prohibition of organised solidarity.

The immediate and most obvious explanation to the regime's attitude is undoubtedly political. The vigilant watch against any expression of solidarity based on political, ideological, religious and ethnic affinity can be considered "in the nature of things" coming as it does from a regime caught in a bitter struggle for survival. By outlawing such activities what the dictatorship wants to achieve is the aggravation of the already precarious material situation of prisoners, their families and other victims. The attempt to ostracize "the enemies of the revolution" is also intended as a means of demoralising and demobilising any real or potential political opposition. In this sense, the struggle for solidarity comes not only as a humanitarian challenge but is also part and parcel of the political struggle against the dictatorship.

The political facet is, however, only one aspect of the struggle. This we believe is something that should be underlined specially in view of the fact that some voluntary agencies tend to withhold otherwise available humanitarian assistance for fear of being involved in politics.

As has already been mentioned, the struggle for solidarity is also a moral issue. The regime is trying to introduce new sets of values which stress the division of society along exclusively political and ideological patterns. All other ties (family, freindship, regional, ethnic, etc..) must give way to the new relations which simply divide the country into "revolutionary" and counter-revolutionary" elements according to where people stand in their attitude towards the dictatorship. The "new values" discourage any expression of oneness and solidarity "across the line".

The slogan "Nothing above the revolution" which was fashionable in the early 1980s is an expression of this. A most blatant illustration of the damage to elementary moral values and standards that results from this policy had been given during the "red terror" campaign of 1978. At that time,

mothers were forced to publicly unmask "crimes against the people" committed by their own children and to approve the summary executions which came as a "just punishment" for these crimes. (cf : The Red Terror Campaign in Ethiopia. Amnesty International. Index A.I. AFR. 25/04/78)

Given this official policy, it is not hard to imagine why and how traditional mechanisms of solidarity have been put to an acid test. It is under such circumstances that moral and material support for victims, even among family members, came to be looked at with suspicion and considered as extremely subversive when the sole base for its expression tended to be humanitarian concern and/or political affinity.

IV. THE SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE WITH VICTIMS OF REPRESSION (SCVR)

From its inception, the SCVR was therefore a response to this challenge. Over the past six years, solidarity has been a day-to-day multi-dimensional and discrete struggle with all the dangers that such "subversive" action implies in a police state like Ethiopia. In spite of the repression which took a heavy toll of its active members and leaders, specially during the early formative years, the committee has slowly developed into a highly decentralised and an efficient network spreading from the capital to other urban centres in the provinces.

As security problems were slowly overcome due to increased experience and know-how, the main obstacle to the expansion of the network's activities became the lack and irregularity of funds.

While many voluntary agencies and exiled Ethiopians responded generously to calls made by SCVR representatives abroad, funds that were available were nowhere near the current, let alone the potential needs, of the committee. Certainly, one obstacle to the expansion of the committee's financial base was the need for absolute discretion which did not allow for a publicity campaign to raise funds. But once this problem

was overcome (by setting up solid underground networks inside the country) other problems had to be settled before voluntary agencies came out with adequate support for these actions.

As many voluntary agencies do engage in relief and rehabilitation in favour of victims of human rights violations, we do not think that the problem involved is the lack of funds. Neither do we believe that the necessarily discrete nature of the work constitutes a major obstacle to NGO participation in this humanitarian endeavour. Ethiopia is not the only country in the world where discrete support to victims is the only alternative left if any solidarity work is to be done at all. We are sure that all those concerned can understand the necessity of discretion if the needy are to be able to continue to receive what little support they get from the network.

The problem stems from the legitimate concern of donors as to the efficient utilisation of relief funds. This is a question that has always been raised by humanitarian groups approached to participate in relief and small, income-generating projects initiated by the SCVR. In this respect, we can say that in the past this question has been satisfactorily resolved following bilateral arrangements. It may also be said that, this in turn, has helped to foster mutual confidence between donors and the SCVR.

As many NGOs are involved in this type of work they may have their own control mechanisms which SCVR representatives are ready to consider. In the absence of such mechanisms, however, other procedures can be worked out by bilateral discussions, as has been done in the past with all those who have extended a helping hand and who continue to have confidence and trust in the seriousness of SCVR's action.