

February 1990

Support Committee for Victims of Repression in Ethiopia (SCVR)

Report to Project Department of Broderlijk Delen on utilisation of 500,000 Bf  
received in support of defense of human rights by SCVR in 1989.

I. General background to human rights situation in Ethiopia - 1989 -

The human rights situation in Ethiopia and the entire political scene has been dominated by developments which followed the abruptive coup attempt of May 1989. Famine, war and repression have again been the lot of the peoples of the country as offensives and counter offensives were mounted by armed opposition movements and loyalist forces in war affected areas which now englobe the entire northern half of the country.

The intensity of the engagements and the serious famine situation that affects these areas have - as in the past - drawn attention away from the human right situation that continues to prevail in all parts of the country.

The abruptive military conspiracy was staged on 16 May 1989. Almost all members of the high command of the armed forces were involved in the plot to overthrow the government. The conspirators called for peace negotiations with the Eritreans and other armed opposition groups, demanded constitutional changes to permit freedom of expression and respect for human rights and the setting up of a provisional government with participation of all opposition groups and organisations.

The rebels were defeated by 18 May after fighting at the Ministry of defense in Addis Abeba, at Debre Zeit air force base and in Asmara. Two of the coup leaders, Chief of staff Lt. General Merid Negussie et Air Force commander Lt. General Amha Desta reportedly killed themselves.

Although the coup was supported by important sections of the army and almost all opposition groups, the attempt failed due to lack of serious preparations. As it turned out later, it was also clear that Mengistu's men had infiltrated the conspirators' group at an early stage and were fully prepared to foil the attempt.

During the two days of fighting, 11 generals and 16 other high ranking officers lost their lives. According to government figures, the number of high ranking officers arrested stood at 176 including 26 generals. However, SCVR sources put the figure at more than 700 including non commissioned officers and soldiers.

With the of the experienced and professional officers killed, arrested, in hiding or having fled abroad, the country found itself with a "beheaded army" This and pressure from the military and the international community - specially the Soviet Union - forced the government to launch calls for negotiations with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which started in September and December 1989 respectively.



Opposition forces in the country are sceptical about the government's desire to concede anything substantial to Eritrean nationalists and the TPLF and see this "peace offensive" as a means of playing for time in order to allow for reorganisation of the army and to continue the quest for military solutions.

In any case, the TPLF, while conducting negotiations with the government launched an all round offensive in order to take advantage of the disorganisation and demoralisation of the army. This led to a series of sweeping military victories which brought TPLF forces to central Shoa region and within less than 200 Kms from Addis Abeba. But the Front committed serious political mistakes which turned the hitherto complaisant army to mobilise under Mengistu's call for the "defense of the mother land" and helped the government to break its isolation. The TPLF's hard line Stalinist ideology, its stand on the Eritrean question which it already considers as a "foreign country" and its sectarian attitudes towards all other opposition groups which it considers as enemies of the Ethiopian people on equal footing with the government itself....all these alienated important sectors of the population. This was clearly illustrated by student demonstrations against TPLF in Addis Abeba and other cities.

This helped the government stop TPLF's advance into SHOA and towards Addis Abeba and to contain the offensive in western Gondar and northern Wollo regions.

## II. The human rights situation

While areas of relative calm in the center and south of the country have not witnessed any substantial improvement in human rights the war affected regions have been and still are the theatre of massive and gross violation. As villages, towns and whole regions are won and lost by contending forces civilians are falling victim to mass arrests, torture and extrajudicial executions for alleged "collaboration with the enemy."

Reports reaching Addis Abeba indicate that hundreds of Peasant Association leaders, officials and activists of the official Workers' Party of Ethiopia have been executed by TPLF. Even allowing for exaggerated claims by government sources, it is now clear that serious violations of human rights have been committed in Tigrai, Wollo and Gondar by the TPLF. Similarly, government forces have been accused for bombing civilian targets and summarily executing war prisoners and civilians accused of collaborating with the opposition forces.

Fresh arrests in Addis Abeba and Asmara have been mainly in connection with the may coup attempt. According to SCVR sources, out of the 700 members of the armed forces arrested during and after the attempt, more than 200 soldiers and



officers had already been secretly and summarily executed.

37 students have also been arrested following demonstrations against the government on 22 May, 1989. Their whereabouts are not known and it is feared that at least some have been executed before being charged or tried.

As is usual in such cases, arrests were not limited to people directly involved in the attempt. Wives, sons, daughters, relatives or even close friends of officers arrested or executed have also been detained. The most known case ~~is~~ of such abuses is the arrest of Mrs. Genet Mebratu, an employee of World Health Organisation (WHO) and wife of Lt. General Merid Negussie who was chief of staff and the leader of the coup.

In August 1989, the government released 87 long term political detainees including three grand-sons of former Emperor Haile Selassie. This gave rise to unwarranted speculations on improvement of human rights situation in the country. The number of those released is however largely offset by fresh arrests of citizens for alleged political offenses.

In spite of the guarantees offered by the 1987 constitution which declared Ethiopia a People's Democratic Republic, none of the safeguards have proved effective. Arrests have frequently been carried out without a warrant and no political prisoner is known to have been brought to court and charged within 48 hours as provided by article 44/2 of the constitution.

A notable exception to this is the trial of officers accused of involvement in the May 1989 coup attempt. Out of the 176 officers accused and awaiting trial some 14 generals and 21 other officers appeared before a special military court starting 22 December 1989. Although it is known that most of them had been tortured while in custody, the government permitted that families of the accused and local and foreign correspondents be present when the defendants appeared in court. All the defendants have pleaded not guilty. Hearings are still continuing as this report is being compiled.

The trial is going on amidst elaborate arrangements made by the government aimed at giving credibility to the idea that legal procedures are being respected by the judiciary. But it is known that most of those accused to be the leaders of the attempt - like the former minister of Industry, Maj. General Fanta Belay - have already been executed without being charged or tried. The pressure put to bear on those who appeared in court and their families is such that it would be wrong to speak of fair trial before a military tribunal chaired by Maj. General Kefelegne Yibza who is a close friend of Mengistu.



In any case, the vast majority of Ethiopia's political prisoners are long term detainees who have never appeared in court and charged. They include:

- People of Eritrean, Tigrean and Oromo origine held on suspicion of supporting armed opposition organisations;
- Intellectuals, workers, government employees and students arrested on charges of 'counter-revolutionary activities';
- People imprisoned for attempting to leave the country illegally. This is an offense under proclamation n° 27 of 1981 which provides for 10 to 25 years imprisonment against those found guilty of such an offense;
- Young people held for seeking to evade compulsory military service. The government's target for the coming year being to recrute about 150,000 young people to the army, this has meant increased pressure on youth and parents and more attempts to evade the service. A majority of those detained under this charge are juveniles under 18 although they are not held in special detention centers or treated differently from adult prisoners;
- Although the resettlement and 'villagisation' programmes have slowed down this year, peasants in Wollo, Tigray, Eritrea, Gondar, Harage, Wollega etc held during previous years for their opposition to these programmes are still in prison;

Prison conditions have not changed for the better since our last report. They are still very harsh and poor although they differ significantly depending on the jurisdiction under which they are administered. At the central ALEM BEKAGNE prison, under the jurisdiction of the official Prisons' Administration Department of the Ministry of Interior, (where about 1800 political prisoners are held) conditions are relatively better not least because detainees are not tortured and weekly visits by friends and relatives are allowed.

However, conditions are particularly inhumane at detention centers which are not officially listed as prisons. These are administered by various state security agencies responsible for investigating 'counter revolutionary activities'. Most political prisoners go through one or another of these centers before being transferred to official prisons. Detainees are tortured as a matter of routine as they undergo prolonged interrogations.

In regional prisons where the majority of political prisoners are held, conditions are generally much worse due to over crowding, poor hygiene etc

### III. SCVR ACTIVITIES

The serious security crisis the committee had to face in november/december 1988 has been overcome this year mainly due to prompt measures taken by the network

but also due to the fact that the government had to address more urgent political and military problems. There is in fact a certain calm and less harassment of political dissidents in towns where SCVR operates. This does not mean however that the danger is definitively over. Network activists have all been instructed to be on the watch and to go about their duties with caution as security forces may be waiting to strike at a time of their choice.

In any case, the coming months will be uncertain ones. Depending on the development of the political situation the committee will have to adopt appropriate policies. If, after containing the TPLF offensive the government feels strong enough to return to its most repressive policies of the late 70s and early 80s, the committee will have to keep its low profile tactics and work under very strict security conditions. If on the other hand the government finds it more appropriate to project a more democratic and humane image and responds to pressure from both internal and international forces there will be room for more open and active action in defense of human rights.

It is now too early to tell which path will be taken by the committee. Whatever the option, it is clear that tremendous organisational tasks await SCVR as it embarks upon what may turn out to be a land mark in its history.