



GRAPECA

RAGPEHA

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et dans la Corne de l'Afrique.*

*Research and Action Group for Peace in Ethiopia and the
Horn of Africa.*

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"BROTHERLY PEOPLES" PROJECT

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is now estimated to have a population of more than 56 million. Although there are well over 90 ethnic groups in the country, the pattern of population distribution by ethnic origin shows that there are only 15 which account for more than 1% of the population. The 1984 UN sponsored population and housing census showed that two ethnic groups, the Oromo (29.068%) and the Amara (28.288%), account for 57% of the population, followed by the Tigreans and the Gurages for 6 and 4.3% respectively. Projection of these data shows that the current respective sizes of these ethnic groups are about 16.5 million for the Oromos, 15.8 million for the Amaras, 3.4 and 2.4 million for the Tigreans and the Gurages respectively.

The rise of ethnic animosity in Ethiopia is a relatively new phenomenon in the history of the country. It is generally admitted that for centuries the peoples of this country lived in relative harmony although periods of peace were frequently interrupted as rival feudal warlords tried to manipulate the ethnic problem in their struggle for power. Even then, although the history of Ethiopia is one of permanent violence and armed conflicts, there is no record of wholesale massacre involving ethnic groups as such.

Now many observers, both Ethiopian and foreign, agree that the people of this country have grown ethnic sensitive as they had never been before. Ethnic prejudice has now developed into ethnic hatred. This development is by itself an extremely negative phenomenon. But many Ethiopians and foreign friends of our country believe that it is not too late to reverse the trend provided that the country's democratic forces remain clearheaded and determined in their search for a solution based on the respect of the right of all ethnic groups to determine their own destiny and on promotion of unity in diversity.

At the same time in Ethiopia, there is deep apprehension that time is running out. The deliberate policy vigorously pursued by a group of ethno-centric individuals controlling the country's state apparatus and its economic resources, and enjoying diplomatic respectability will develop into ethnic fear if not checked in time. If and when the country's peoples are pushed from ethnic hatred to ethnic fear and are made to believe that their very survival depends on the destruction of "the others", then the stage will be set for a Rwanda/ Burundi-type tragedy.

The vicious circle that can lead to this kind of disaster is already in place. More or less "innocent" ethnic prejudices have been deliberately allowed to develop into dangerous ethnic hatred. This, in turn, is fast developing into ethnic fear. The purpose of our project is to find a way of breaking this vicious circle and of initiating a new momentum which will pave the way for the advent of a new pluralist and multi-ethnic Ethiopia of Brotherly Peoples.

II. THE DANGERS FACING THE COUNTRY

It is not an exaggeration to say that the danger of chaos and seeing the country sink into a condition of intractable ethnic civil war is unprecedented

in the history of Ethiopia. Tyranical and dictatorial rules - and the struggle against them - is no new phenomenon. The country now faces a completely new situation.

1. What is emerging is no "ordinary" dictatorship

A group of extremists claiming to "represent" a minority ethnic group, accounting for less than 6% of the population, have gained control of the country. Political control is in the hands of TPLF, and ultimately the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, through the instrumentality of the umbrella organization EPRDF. Military control is on an unprecedented scale: the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the Minister in charge of military affairs in the Prime Minister's office, the Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief of Staff, the Chief of Operations, the Commander of Ground Forces, the Commander of the Air Force, and the first group of air force pilots graduates are all Tigreans. The new security apparatus is chaired by a Tigrean, the former chief of TPLF security, and staffed by Tigreans who are placed at all the strategic posts. Just as TPLF - and MLLT - control EPRDF, preparations are underway to bring all NGOs in the country under TPLF's Relief Society of Tigray (REST) which is expected to dominate the proposed Association of Ethiopian NGOs. In the economic field, in addition to state (ie TPLF) control of land and natural resources and systematic discriminatory diversion of the country's wealth to develop Tigray region, TPLF-controlled "private enterprises" are now in control of entire sectors of the economy - construction, transport, wholesale and retail trade, industry, import-export, travel agencies, etc.

2. Ethnic domination is pursued ostensibly and in a provocative manner

This is what makes the ethnic problem in Ethiopia explosive. The ethno-centric leaders are pursuing a deliberate Machiavellian policy which tries to induce both Tigreans and non-Tigreans into believing that TPLF is an ethnic based rule by Tigreans for Tigreans. Discrimination in favor of Tigreans and against all other ethnic groups is practised ostensibly. The aim which the ethno-centric leaders are pursuing is clear: they want to take advantage of the anti-Tigrean hatred to persuade the people of Tigray that TPLF is not only their benefactor, but also their sole protector against all the other ethnic groups in the country. This is calculated to force Tigreans to bind their fate to that of the TPLF leaders.

3. Pitting people against people

Even at the risk of indescribable chaos, TPLF's leaders want to maintain their rule not only by isolating the Tigrean people, but by encouraging ethnic animosity among all the peoples of the country and sewing division within each ethnic group. Division within all major ethnic groups has been ensured by the creation of ethnic based satellite organizations affiliated to EPRDF. The restructuring of the country's regional borders has been calculated not only to thwart the common struggle for democracy but also to fan inter-ethnic animosity with almost every major ethnic group having "territorial claims" against its neighbour. The problem of urban multi-ethnic enclaves under the jurisdiction of ethnic based regions - which has the potential of creating a Yugoslavia-type tragedy - is deliberately left unaddressed.

III. THE NEED FOR A SOBER APPROACH

Although the ethnic issue is part of the global struggle for democratization, it is a highly sensitive problem which needs the particular attention of all sober and democratic elements within Ethiopian society irrespective of their political and ideological affiliation or ethnic and religious background. It is an extremely touchy issue, not the least because it has the potential to draw the country into prolonged fratricide wars with disastrous consequences for all its people. But it is also a complex issue because as it was rightly outlined in the final resolution of the December 1993 Addis Ababa Peace and National Reconciliation Conference, there can be no satisfactory solution to the ethnic problem in our country via a "majority vote". It would rather require the obtention of a general consensus defining a democratic and fraternal modus vivendi among all the peoples of Ethiopia.

There is therefore a clear need for creating a multi-ethnic task force composed of elders, civic organization activists, individual members or sympathizers of ethnic based or multi-ethnic political organizations, scholars, etc. This group is to be called "Brotherly peoples" and will be registered officially as an association in accordance with Article 404 of the Ethiopian Civil Code. It will be based in Addis Abeba but will also have branches in the neighbouring countries where large communities of Ethiopians are to be found, in Europe and in North America.

Although the details of the Terms of Reference (TOR) of the association, its tasks, objectives and organizational set-up will be worked out at the founding congress which will be held as soon as the funds are available, the general guidelines for the organization can be summarized as follows:

1. Short term objectives

1. *Draw up a list of current or potential sources of conflicts* among ethnic groups (territorial claims and counterclaims), conflicts over the status of multi-ethnic "enclaves" and those arising from ethnically-motivated laying off of tens of thousands of workers and employees in the regions and displacement of persons on ethnic grounds.

2. *Study these problems in depth* and propose solutions acceptable to the protagonists by encouraging dialogue among them.

3. *Pre-empt attempts by extremists* from all ethnic groups and politicians (both within the government and the opposition) to manipulate the ethnic problem in order to advance petty political or other objectives.

4. *Try to involve ethnic based and multi ethnic political organizations* in the work of the association by either encouraging them to organize their own task forces on the issue or by naming people who will work closely or cooperate with the association in the identification of problems and the search for solutions.

2. General objectives

1. Contribute to efforts exerted by the country's democratic forces aimed at creating a genuinely pluralist and multi-ethnic society where the peoples of Ethiopia will gradually learn to live harmoniously in an atmosphere of mutual respect based on a common will to build a better future for all.

2. Contribute to the setting up of the appropriate legal and constitutional frameworks which will allow for unity based on diversity and guarantee all groups control of their own destiny and a fair and equitable say in the decisions affecting the nation as a whole.

3. Bring together community elders, academics, political leaders and activists, religious groups, scholars, youth and women's groups, historians and other researchers to deliberate and effect exchanges of views on the ethnic problem and work out common proposals aimed at enhancing national cohesion and the spirit of solidarity and brotherhood among the peoples of the country.

4. Sponsor the undertaking of research concerning the country's history and the centuries-old interactions among its peoples in order to contribute to the formation of a balanced view of the negative aspects of our common heritage and help identify the positive elements in this common heritage, in an attempt to reach and propagate a less conflictual reading of Ethiopia's past and the complex interaction among its peoples.

5. Facilitate the dissemination of research findings in the form of brochures, proceedings, articles in the independent press, etc.

6. Launch a vast public awareness campaign on these issues through RADO SELAM as soon as the project gets operational again.

IV. TENTATIVE PLAN FOR 1996

1. The Steering Committee: A Steering Committee already exists in Addis Abeba. It is working on details concerning the Terms of Reference of the Association, preparing a Memorandum of Association to be presented for registration and drafting a tentative plan of action for the months immediately following the setting up of the Association.

2. Organization of the founding conference: These documents will be discussed at a 3-day founding conference to be held in Addis Abeba during the first half of the year.

3. Launching of a media campaign: the proceedings of the founding conference and a media campaign introducing the Association and outlining its objectives will be launched one month after the end of the conference.

4. A summary of these documents (terms of reference, memorandum of association, action plan and content of the media campaign) will be forwarded for your information as soon as they are available.

5. Contacts with political organizations: Parallel to these efforts, contacts with leaders and members of ethnic and multi-ethnic organizations are underway to explore ways and means of cooperating in the endeavor to fight rising ethnic animosity. We hope to brief you very soon on the first results of these contacts.