

SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE WITH VICTIMS OF REPRESSION (SCVR)
REPORT ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN ETHIOPIA
(1990 -1991)

submitted to

April 1991

I. Introduction

After more than ten years of steadily deepening crisis, developments during the last few months have been accelerating at a breath taking pace. This report which should have been submitted in late january or early february 1991 has been constantly delayed as we thought it appropriate to postpone the dispatching date in order that it may contain news about the latest developments.

As it happened february and march witnessed an unprecedented succession of dramatic events which continue to unfold in the country even while we are writting these lines. Eventhough the comming months or even weeks will be crucial to the fate of the democratic struggle and indeed to that of the country itself, we decided to submit this report which by the time it will reach you will surely be far from complet as in the mean time many important political and military developments would have already taken place. That is why COSETH representatives are requested to update you in order that you may have a clear picture of what exactly is happening in our country.

At the time of writting nobody can tell what will come out of the many-fold and complex military and political developments the most important features of which can be summed up as follows:

1. The new EPRDF offensive in the north and west of the country which allowed it to take control of the administrative regions of Gojjam and Gondar and of parts of Wollega. This is in addition to those areas that have already fallen to EPRDF ie practically the whole of Tigray, northern Wollo and parts of the central Showa administrative region.
2. EPLF's offensive in southern Eritrea and the fall to the Front of the approaches of Assab which after the fall of the other Red sea port of Mitswa early last year, is the country's last outlet to the sea.
3. Partial disintegration of the government armed forces who are retreating from whole regions without putting up any resistance and sometimes joining en mass rebel

troops. This has gone hand in hand with the dramatic erosion of central government authority and increased lawlessness and anarchy in conflict areas.

4. The stepping up of mutual incriminations and incidents of armed clashes between EPRDF forces on the one hand and other armed opposition movements like EPRP and Oromo Liberation Front who operate in areas now coming under the control of EPRDF.
5. The public call made by 200 Ethiopian academics for the government to resign and for the formation of a transitional "Government of elders" which would pave the way for multiparty democratic elections to be held under international supervision. This has led to the formation of an eleven member "Ethiopian Peace Initiative Committee" headed by Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam of Addis Abeba University.
6. The formation of CODEF - Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces - regrouping 5 political parties, about 30 human rights, refugee, cultural and religious associations and many prominent individuals. The declared aim of CODEF being to work for a peaceful transition towards multiparty democracy.

All these developments took place within the last 3 months. More importantly, the process is accelerating and one can surely say that the unfolding events are preparing the way for more far reaching positive or negative developments for the people of Ethiopia and indeed for all those in the international community who feel concerned about the fate of our people the times are of both fear and hope.

Fear is inspired by the possible collapse of central government authority without the emerging national democratic alternative having either the time nor the means to ensure an orderly transition. If this happens there will be anarchy and lawlessness with thousands of undisciplined remnants of the army and hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of armed civilians trying to take the law into their own hands.

A confused civil war with no clear political or other objectives coupled with the ever present famine situation looming in the horizon will undoubtedly lead to the death of millions and the dislocation of the country. Many fear that the magnitude of the disaster threatening our country could be worse than what happened in Liberia or what actually is happening in neighbouring Somalia where lawlessness and anarchy have reached appalling proportions after the collapse of the Siyade Barre dictatorship in late January 1991.

Unfortunately, these fears are becoming reality in some areas recently liberated by EPRDF forces. In Gondar and Gojjam, retreating government forces have deliberately left behind considerable amounts of war material which has been captured not by the gorillas but by peasants and other people who with encouragement from the central government have already launched "gorilla war" against EPRDF. This is particularly true of regions adjacent to Shoa where these "Legal gorillas" as they are called

by the government controlled mass media can receive supplies from Addis Abeba.

In addition to this, the long feared fighting between armed opposition movements has already started in areas newly held by EPRDF. In early April EPRDF radio announced the "liquidation" of 154 EPRP fighters in a single engagement near Dangilla in Gojjam province. In Wollega administrative region the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) has issued a communique calling on EPRDF forces to withdraw from the Oromo regions on the grounds that the TPLF led EPRDF is "as alien to the Oromos as is the Amhara government in Addis Abeba". This will mean that fighting will soon break out between these two rebel forces even though both say they are dedicated to the overthrow of the central government.

There is also some room for hope if the country's democratic forces and indeed the international community realise the seriousness of the situation and decide to act swiftly in order to impose a peaceful solution to the problem. In this respect it is encouraging to note that after years of apathy and a certain sense of powerlessness Ethiopians of different political, ideological, religious and ethnic background are now mobilising and coordinating their efforts to bring peace and democracy to our people.

The peace initiative proposed by 200 intellectuals who published a courageous document demanding the resignation of the government and its replacement by a provisional government of "elders" which will pave the way for multiparty elections is a clear sign of the mood now prevailing in the country. That the government did not resort to its favorite methods of repression against these intellectuals shows not only the degree of decomposition reached by the regime but also the enthusiastic support that the call enjoyed among the general public.

To be sure, the practicality of this proposal which excludes all political groups (armed or otherwise) from the initial phase of the transition process is open to question specially in view of the fact that with almost half of the country under rebel control it would be hard to see how any "election of elders" to the transitional government could be envisaged without the consent of these rebels. But the fact remains that the existence of such a group organised inside the country itself and calling for a

peaceful transition to democracy is a positive development which can be integrated in the global strategy of the country's democratic forces.

The other reason for hope is the setting up of CODEF which has been received with great hopes and expectations by the general public in the country. We are sure that you will receive the appropriate documents announcing the creation of CODEF in due time. The last few months have also witnessed the emergence of other groups of concerned Ethiopians like the London based "Ethiopians against war" group, the "Ad hoc committee for peace in Ethiopia" and the group called "Ethiopians for a peaceful transition to democracy" both based in the USA.

Although these initiatives come from different quarters all admit the necessity of a transitional democratic government which should pave the way for multiparty democracy and free elections under international supervision.

It is not yet clear if the TPLF led hard line alliance will accept the proposals made by these different groups as it has up to now adamantly rejected the "liberal bourgeois" concept of multiparty democracy. In as much as the hard line alliance now stands as the most important armed opposition group to the military government it would be legitimate to ask oneself what the consequences would be if it remains adamant and refuses to enter into a coalition with other democratic forces in order to preside over a peaceful transition.

The hope now is that TPLF/EPRDF, under pressure from the Ethiopian people and the international community would come to terms with democracy, human rights and individual liberties as accepted by all concerned Ethiopians and indeed advised by the international community. If this is the case, a broad coalition of democratic forces can be formed very soon and present itself as a credible democratic alternative that will avert disaster. If not, even if Mengistu's regime accepts the people's demands and steps down there would be no rapid return to peace in the country as EPRDF will continue the struggle for the triumph of its concept of "revolutionary democracy". The same danger of prolonged war awaits our people if the government collapses and EPRDF forces take over power. In this case it would be the democratic forces who would be obliged to continue the struggle for democracy even if it means resorting to arms to resist the new dogmatic dictatorship.

As has been done by all prominent personalities and groups who have up to now announced initiatives aimed at bringing to an end the crippling wars in the country, we would like to seize this opportunity to appeal to the international community in general and to the NGO community in particular to act as a matter of urgency on the side of peace and justice for our people. We appeal to them to take their own initiatives in order to

contribute their share in the solution of the crisis before the situation goes completely out of hand for every one and our country plunges into another cycle of anarchy and violence.

We are thus taking the exceptional step to request you to act concretely and in a coordinated way. COSETH representatives have been mandated to study with you ways and means of involving friendly organisations in this search for peace at this crucial juncture in the history of our country.

II. THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

With the escalation and extension of the armed conflicts the human rights situation in the country has grown from bad to worse during the past 12 months. We are sure that you know about the growing intensity of the wars and already heard of claims and counter claims by the parties to the conflicts, read communiques about "destruction of enemy forces", of "victories achieved", and about territories "liberated from bandits" or from the "fascist Derge" etc

This report will be different from the ones we have been submitting to you during the past years. It will concentrate on the dramatic human rights situation in the war zones and the sufferings of our people as a result of abuses from both sides.

1. ARRESTS AND SUMMERY EXECUTIONS

Mass arrests and extrajudiciary executions have taken place and continue in areas of armed conflicts. It is very difficult to asses what exactly is happening in these areas as reliable reports are scarce. It is however clear that hundreds of civilians who do not actually participate in the wars are falling victims to such practices every week.

The government who systematically refers to the rebels as "bandits" does not recognize the statut of prisoner of war to those captured in battle. Most are executed on the spot. The Fronts accept government troops as POWs but in the case of EPRDF they are intimidated into joining one or the other of the "mass organisations" fonctionning under the umbrella of the Front. That is how the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Ethiopian Revolutionary Officers Organisation were recently created by POWs in areas controled by EPRDF. It is known that members of OPDO are now actively participating in the offensive launched in the Oromo regions specially in Wollega.

However, the most serious abuses are committed against civilians who are not directly involved in the war. In our report last year we noted that "As villages and towns are won and lost by the contending forces civilians are falling victim to mass arrests, torture and summary executions for alleged "collaboration" with the enemy". That year we based this statement on eye witness reports from people who managed to flee and who spoke of hundreds of peasant association leaders, government and party officials executed by the EPRDF and of hundreds of others specially young people killed by government troops for trying to escape forced recruitment in these areas.

This year the war has spread to other regions and specially to Gojjam and Wollega. With more regions now involved in the conflict the number of civilians caught in the middle of the cross fire and victimised by all sides has considerably increased.

In towns like Baher Dar, Gondar, Dejene, Betchena, Nekemte etc all now under the control of EPRDF, hundreds of government officials, party activists, leaders of KEBELES, trade unionists and students are known to have been arrested.

A new phenomenon as compared to previous patterns of human rights abuses is the mass arrest of students and other young people in these cities and towns. This seems to be out of fear that young people may spearhead - as they actually did in Dangilla, Gondar, Debre Marcos etc - opposition to EPRDF. It is now known that in the town of Dangilla (Gojam province) which was captured by EPRDF in february, the town hall has been turned into a prison where 70 students are held under very harsh conditions.

The same pattern of abuses can be observed on the side of government troops. In many cases, regular troops under attack from rebels are known to have executed political prisoners before retreating and abandoning the locality. On march 2 1991, just 24 hours before EPRDF entered the town of Gondar, government troops executed more than 200 political prisoners before retreating.

Assasination of alleged "collaborators" which had been a constant feature of the Fronts' method of struggle has also increased during the last few months. The most known cases of such practices are those of the governor of Gondar M. Gezahegne Worke who according to EPRDF radio was killed "by the peasant masses as he was trying to escape the people's judgement."

For its part EPLF has stepped up this practice in government controlled parts of Eritrea. Since mid december 1990, the Front's radio has officially announced at least 8 such assasinations by special commandos sent to government

held towns. The government has "responded" to these killings by summarily executing Eritrean political prisoners. On 6 february for example, 5 Eritreans held in Asmara prison and 7 others detained in Adi Kuala were executed after 2 Eritrean members of the national SHENGO Dr. Yassin MOhammed and MR. Hagos Abera were killed in Asmara by EPLF.

2. FORCED TRANSFER OF PEOPLE

We have received many reports which indicate that political prisoners held in some war zones are being transfered to safer detention centers in regions securly held by the governement. Some reports speak of mass deportation of such

prisoners. In december 1990 for example, 750 Eritrean political prisoners held in Sembel and Hazaz prisons in Asmara were moved further south. Half of them were transfered to the Alem Bekagne central prison in Addis Abeba whereas the remaining were taken to Awasa in Sidamo region where they are forced to work on state farms.

In addition to such forced transfers there are also what one may call "spontaneous" population movements on a far wider scale. Insecurity in the northern half of the country has already forced whole communities to flee localities in the war zone. Those fleeing are not only politically motivated people who fear arrest and execution in case the "other camp" takes over their locality. There are also peasants and their families who flee en mass to avoid being caught in the war zone. This accounts partly to the fall in agricultural production in some rural areas in Gondar, Wollo and Northern and western Shoa.

These population movements are creating serious problems in sometowns and cities specially in Addis Abeba. During the last 12 months the population of the capital has increased by an estimated 200,000 with refugees comming from Eritrea, Tigray, Gondar and other rebel held and/or conflict areas. More recently, hundreds of thousands of Somali nationals and Ethiopians of Somali origin have crossed over to Ethiopia to escape the fighting in that country. Out of these a few hundred - who happen to have relatives in Addis Abeba - have arrived in the capital. All this has swelled the city's population beyond managable proportions.

3. CONFISCATION OF LAND AND PROPERTY

This search for security by people who are not directly involved in the armed conflicts may seem a natural response to a dramatic situation. But it is often opposed by both the government and the rebels who resort to threats and intimidations to discourage such movements.

As we noted already, government officials and people associated in one way or another with the regime are ordered to stay in their respective localities and "fight on". In september 1990 for example, hundreds of such government officials and their families found it wiser to leave the town of Dessie and moved to the town of Komboltcha 23 Kms. furtehr south as it was feared that the capital of Wollo province was on the point of being captured by the rebels. They were ordered to return to Dessie within 24 hours and had no choice but to do so.

For some time now, EPRDF has also been faced with the problem of mass population movements away from areas under its control. The flight of peasants is causing serious problems for the agricultural sector. That of urban dwellers - merchants, property owners, health officers, teachers and other professionals - is disorganizing the local economy and social services. After repeated calls for these "run-aways" to return EPRDF radio has announced on 24 december that "All land abandoned by peasants in the liberated areas will be confiscated if these peasants did not return to claim it before january 6, 1991" The same ultimatum was issued to merchants and other property owners who have fled from urban centers.

4. LOOTING OF FOOD AND PROPERTY

Here again people in conflict areas are subjected to untold sufferings due to abuses from both sides. While stationed in remote towns and villages government troops are known to behave as if they were in "conquered enemy territory" Looting of property, rape of women and young girls, breaking into g rain stores have long been standard practice in many areas. At one point last year (april 1990) the government was obliged to aknowledge the existence of such abuses and threatened to take "severe disciplinary measures" against soldiers and officers indulging in such practices.

This however did not bring any substantial change for the better. In many cases government troops are known to have taken away with them every thing they could carry before abandoning a locality in the face of advancing rebel forces. The argument often heard to justify these practices is " We do not want food and other property to fall into the hands of bandits who will in any case take them away themselves." Such abuses, specially the pillage of grain stores by retreating government soldiers have contributed to the emergence of food shortages in some areas of Gondar and recently even in the surplus producing region og Gojjam.

The same pattern of abuses can be observed on the side of the rebels. As they do not know how long they will stay before government troops mount a counter offensive and drive them out of a locality, transporting any and all material of value to areas securely held by them has been a long established practice. Grains from stores, fertilisers, electric generators, lorries, etc have thus been looted from Gondar and Gojjam and parts of Wollo.

5. FORCED RECRUTMENT

Successive waves of forced recruitment of people both from the country side and urban centres including Addis Abeba have taken a heavy toll of the country's young generation. With no adequate training, these young recruits are used as cannon fodder and are being killed or wounded by their thousands every month. The latest call made by the government for a general mobilisation has been issued in March and university

students who "requested to be allowed to participate in the struggle for the unity of the country" as the official government version put it - have been taken for training from Asmara and Addis Abeba universities, from Alem Maya agricultural collage, Jimma and Awassa junior agricultural colleges and the Jimma health centre.

Although the government insists that the new round of recruitment is on a strictly voluntary basis it is clear that most university students have been forced into joining the army. In Addis Abeba for example we know that students who are from the capital and the region have gone into hiding to escape military service. On the other hand those coming from far away regions, especially from the northern areas of Gojjam, Gondar, Tigray, Eritrea, ...etc. who have no where to go to hide have been left with no choice but to accept the government's new round of recruitment.

Again the same holds for rebel held areas. The forced recruitment of peasants has been a long established practice by all rebel movements. Now the young in the cities and towns held by EPRDF are falling victim to this practice even if here again the fronts' leadership assert that the young people who are joining the rebel army "by their thousands" are doing so out of "revolutionary fervour".

In Baherdar for example, captured by the rebel on 3 march, tigrean students at the Baherdar polytechnic school are known to have been rounded up at night and forcibly taken further north to receive military training in Tigray. Eritrean students at that school and in other areas newly captured by the EPRDF were taken away in order to be deployed in Eritrea. This was reported by EPLF's radio

"the voice of the broad masses of Eritrea" on 18 March which announced that "Eritrean youngsters in Gondar and Gojjam administrative regions have after a long time of refugee life () joined the EPLF army saying that they would like to contribute their share to shorten the life of the enemy".

III. PROSPECTS FOR SCVR ACTION: TOWARDS THE SETTING UP OF AN ETHIOPIAN LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (ELHR)

What SCVR can do in defense of human rights in Ethiopia and indeed its own fate will of course depend on what will happen during the coming few months. In our report last year we spoke of an uncertain political situation in the country which did not allow for any clear forecast concerning SCVR activities. Now 12 months later, the crisis has come to a head and uncertainty will not last very long.

Although most improbable there is the eventuality of collapse of the government and seizure of power by the TPLF led alliance. The other possibility is a solution based on compromise and democracy following negotiations between all political parties and organisations. Between the two there is the possibility of military stalemate but this can only continue with further democratic concessions by the besieged government which will certainly allow for some sort of legal existence of opposition groups at least in government held areas and especially in Addis Abeba.

Leaving aside the long term political and military implications of an EPRDF take over we have been envisaging its immediate consequences for the human rights situation in the country. The first result of such developments will be the setting in of unprecedented chaos and lawlessness. We have noted what is happening in regions already "liberated" by the EPRDF forces.

An EPRDF take over in Addis Abeba would only lead to intensification of the warlike remnants of government forces will join en masse the "rebel" forces against the new government. Chaos in the provinces will surely go hand in hand with a considerable deterioration of the human rights situation in the capital. Given the experience of other towns and regions "liberated" by the EPRDF we fear that hundreds if not thousands of people associated with the government and even people known for their sympathies for other opposition movements like OLF, Meison, EPRP ...etc. will fall victims to abuses. All this would mean that a considerable and very difficult work will

await SCVR not only to defend victims of human rights violations but also to ensure its own survival.

A negotiated political solution or even the start of such negotiations will create undoubtedly favourable conditions for defense of human rights and for SCVR actions. The government will have to announce amnesty for all political prisoners and exiled Ethiopians and allow a certain degree of tolerance towards political opponents and human rights activists.

The SCVR leadership has already decided to seize the opportunity as it comes and to announce the creation of the "Ethiopian League for Human Rights" (ELHR) as soon as the political situation warrants such a historic move. Legal recognition of the League, the first of its kind in the country, may be long in coming. But this will not hinder the organisation from openly demanding legal recognition as a humanitarian association and from embarking upon organisational and agitational work in favour of human rights in the country. The experience of the initiative by university professors and the fact that no repression has been unleashed against them already shows that internal difficulties and the wider international

context do not allow for the government to resort to its favorite methods of suppression against such democratic activities. It would not be in a position to dismantle the League or to proceed to arrests.

We hope that the creation of the League will be a tremendous step forward in rehabilitation of some moral and human values of traditional Ethiopian society and popularisation of broader values of individual rights and liberties as embodied in various international and pan african instruments like the African Charter on Human Rights. COSETH representatives abroad have been requested to contact concerned international quarters and exiled Ethiopians in order to see to it that the creation of the league when it comes will have the widest possible support which will be crucial in preventing any repressive move against its activists.