

***REHABILITATION OF THE DEMOBILIZED COMBATANTS  
AND REFUGEES IN ETHIOPIA***

by

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## **I. Introduction**

A few months back, before the departure of Africa's most brutal dictator, I made the following observation regarding the Ethiopian reality in a paper entitled "Understanding the Vital link between Democracy and Development: A realistic Approach to Africa's developmental Crisis--the case of Ethiopia" a useful point of departure for the subject under discussion:

"The legacy of Mengistu's more than a decade and half state of terror, repression and destruction is far deeper and pervasive than can be observed from the outset... a substantial number of Ethiopia's dynamic generation has been lost. Some were murdered; others were forced to exile; of those who stayed behind some were coopted, others were forced to submission or brutalized. The magnitude of the problems will become more acute when we consider hundred thousands of people who have taken up arms against his rule of terror. In fact, the psychological damage, mental stress, family break-up, social disruption, ruined homes, economic dislocation etc. are the living expression of the Ethiopian predicament. Even if peace comes at the end of the process, reconstructing the infrastructure and rehabilitation of millions of refugees and the internally displaced populace will not be easy tasks. The huge parasitic state machinery is also going to be another major bottleneck to positive changes. In short, demilitarizing Africa's most militarized society by transforming the country's war economy, undoubtedly will consume time, energy and a greater part of the country's resources for years to come."<sup>1</sup>

What we are now facing is exactly this: rebuilding of a country that has been devastated by decades of civil war and recurrent famine - a legacy that continues to cast its shadow for a generation or more. In other words, at this historic juncture while we are celebrating the end of the darker days in our contemporary history - we are also forced to answer an all important question - what is to be done to rehabilitate the displaced and beyond that to build New Ethiopia. That means, if our march to a glorious future is to be smooth and short, a sober analysis of our reality beyond the present genuine euphoria is necessary.

The central objective of this background paper is, therefore, to give an outline of the challenges against and the prospects for positive

development in Ethiopia as the result of the emerging condition in the country including the opportunities for the rehabilitation of the demobilized combatants and refugees.

## **II. The Emerging Political Condition in Ethiopia and the Problem of Rehabilitation.**

The rehabilitation of refugees, for that matter even the rehabilitation of the demobilized combatants, is fundamentally a political question both in terms of its cause and its future solutions. Especially in the case of refugees various studies have been made to this effect and this is also recognized by international organizations such as the UN and the OAU<sup>2</sup>. The problem is, however, neither this recognition nor the much publicized fanfare on Africa's Refugee Day--could not save the continent from being a "Continent of Refugees"<sup>3</sup>. Paradoxically, not only Africa's refugee population is alarmingly large--according to one study is larger than the total population of some African countries<sup>4</sup>, but the refugee specter has already started to haunt persons at the corridors of power--giving rise to the popular joke of the day--present leaders, future refugees. It is not difficult to understand such a popularly held view nor the solutions to the problem of refugees on theoretical grounds. As far back as 1984, even Mengistu Halle Mariam as the then Chairman of the OAU (an organization which unfortunately has become trade-union of dictators) sent the following message to Africa's Refugee Day:

"As one of the pressing issues of our times, the problem of refugees demands the sustained collective effort and unequivocal political will of African states if an immediate and meaningful solution to the problem is to be found."<sup>5</sup>

What came out of Mengistu's Political will and meaningful solution even in the case of Ethiopia was to create more refugees, until he himself has joined their club, although certainly not that of the destitute ones. At any rate, what disturbs us is not Mengistu's fate--definitely there is no need to worry about his future rehabilitation. What should worry us is how to go beyond hollow slogans and empty promises and break up the vicious circle of the refugee influx.



The starting point to break-up this vicious circle within the concrete condition of Ethiopia is to create durable peace and stability by democratizing the Ethiopian state and society. The military victory of the EPRDF forces which removed Africa's most cruel dictator opening the way for the July Conference has raised both genuine optimism and caution along this line. In this regard a Committee for Peace, Democracy and Rehabilitation at Addis Ababa University, in its call for the spirit of compromise has stressed an important question - "The July Conference and After: A promise for peace and Reconciliation or continued warfare and Retribution?"<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there is no clear cut yes or no answer to the above posed point. However, until the political cloud gets clearer, we can speculate one of the following scenarios as a possibility:

- 1) the hoped for durable peace and stability that could create a conducive environment for rehabilitation and concomitant positive development;
- 2) Inter and intra-power struggles between various political groupings, which in this case could lead to long period of political impasse and perpetual crisis or
- 3) an immediate acute crisis with a danger of yet another civil war, which is undoubtedly the worst scenario of all the possible future developments.

Without going to further details as to why and how the last two scenarios can happen (which is at any rate outside the scope of this study), we can single out - the unsettled political issues of which the Eritrean question, the exclusion of some political forces from the transitional government, possible power struggles within the coalition and above all the acute economic crisis that could test the wisdom and ability of the transitional government--as some of the destabilizing factors.

If we consider the rehabilitation issue correspondingly with each of the three scenarios: the first is a promising one as it could create an ideal environment for rehabilitation and reconstruction; the second scenario certainly would hamper rehabilitation and reconstruction because both need stable and dynamic environment that can facilitate positive

development while the third scenario could take us back to square one - the vicious circle of the refugee influx, out of which we are striving to escape. Tragically our contemporary history is in line with the third scenario. On top of refugees from Haile Selassie's regime refugees from the Dergue regime were added, while on the top of them refugees from the present provisional government have already been in the making - although to be fair among the new refugees a good number of them are criminals both on legal and humanitarian grounds.

The above scenarios also equally apply to the rehabilitation of the demobilized combatants and the internally displaced populace

### **III. Some Preliminary Considerations in the Rehabilitation Process of both refugees and demobilized combatants.**

#### **A) Refugees:**

One major problem in the refugee issue is their composition which can affect the rehabilitation process. The broader and simpler classification is the Urban-rural dichotomy. If we use this simpler classification, we can safely say the peasants have been forced to flee largely because of the civil war or drought. And once these problems are solved they can easily be repatriated voluntarily and also easily rehabilitated provided the managerial/technical problems are solved and national and international aid are forthcoming. The problem is with the urban refugees whose cause for leaving the country is more complicated. Some are political refugees waiting for the right political environment to emerge while others are economic refugees looking for better opportunities elsewhere throughout the world. Yet others are victims of the civil war like the rural refugees - and their will to go back home is stronger, once peace and stability is attained. The problem, therefore, lies in the repatriation and then rehabilitation of the political and economic refugees. This is so because the political refugees belong to different political orientations and hence their rehabilitation is more of a political rehabilitation. In this case probably it is only policies of accommodation that could guarantee their return back home.

The most complicated side of the refugee phenomenon is that of the economic refugees. Some are young people from destitute families looking for education and employment opportunities in the wider world



of affluent societies. Others are funny enough sons and daughters of Ethiopia's high society sometimes buying passports at the cost of several thousand-Birr and living at their families cost in the transit stations such as Egypt, Kenya etc. often for years. In this regard African Refugees No. 8, June 1986 has captured this reality when it writes:

"Young people who have no tangible reason for asking for refugee status and who dream of an imaginary well-being and a modern life which they hope to find once they leave their motherland."<sup>7</sup>

This last group of young refugees, when their wild dream about the outside world ends in a nightmare, could go back home and get settled without creating much problem for their rehabilitation.

B) In the case of the demobilized combatants their composition is relatively less complex as well as the problems involved in their rehabilitation - as a greater majority of them are of peasant origin without losing much of their intimate relationship either with their land or with their homes of cradle. Given the political will on the part of the government, the problem is more of the resources needed to facilitate their smooth rehabilitation and the technical/ managerial issues to which we now turn.

#### **IV. The Technical/Managerial Problems and Resource Mobilization Involved in the Rehabilitation Process..**

##### **A) Refugees:**

Since the problem of refugees has caused international alarm, there have been several studies sponsored by various national and international organizations, including the academics from - various learning centers, UNHCR experts etc.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Ethiopia for instance there have been intensive field studies where impacts of development projects and sustainability of the various rehabilitation programmes have been reappraised. In fact, for the last several years organizations such as UNHCR and Ethiopia's RRC have accumulated enough experience in the field of rehabilitation, although in some cases they don't enjoy popularity among the Ethiopian public at large. The point we are trying to make here is that

we are not going to start the rehabilitation programme from the blank slate.

Besides, the lessons from some of the field studies in the case of rural rehabilitation are both technical and psychological. For example, one field study in 1988 has noted the enthusiasm shown by the rehabilitated when the irrigation development schemes were launched in their areas - in the expectation of a promising future.<sup>9</sup> While another field study among the Afar pastoralists found the basic problems to be skepticism on the part of the pastoralists to abandon their traditional way of life and the failed promise on the part of the rehabilitation programme.<sup>10</sup> Needless to add that in the rehabilitation of rural refugees such past experience can be used easily and wisely.

As to the possibility of establishing rehabilitation centers- the most ideal ones are to change the special military training centers which were created to serve the war efforts of the old government to rehabilitation centers. Almost all of these special military training centers with a capacity of housing several hundred thousand persons are located in rich agricultural areas of the country e.g. Birr Valley in Gojjam, Messilo in Bale, Tole in Kaffa, Deddessa in Wollega, Blaten in Sidammo, Hursso in Hararghe and a huge training center called Tatek just outside of Addis Ababa. These centers can easily be turned to rehabilitation centers on the short-run and productive centers-especially for agricultural production and small scale industries based on agricultural products in the long-run. Even now, most of these centers have some cattle rearing, plantations, food grain productions etc.

In addition to the above centers, with the end of the civil war and some national and international efforts including material aid rural refugees could be easily rehabilitated to their original homeland. However, what must be stressed here is that the rehabilitation process to be successful and sustainable to start with basic necessities for life, food, shelter, health facilities as well as farm implements, infrastructural facilities such as schools etc. are needed.

In the case of the urban returnees their needs are more diverse and complex. For some it is the political rehabilitation what matters, while for others it is immediate employment opportunities. Especially those



who expect immediate employment can easily get frustrated as jobs are not readily available for some time to come. However, depending on their skills some can be used in the rehabilitation of their rural counter-parts while others can participate in the reconstruction of the country as a whole.

## **B) Rehabilitation of the Demobilized Combatants:**

As we have noted in our preceding discussion the rehabilitation of the demobilized combatants are by far easier than the returning refugees from foreign lands by all accounts. The majority of the fighting force on all sides are of peasant stock and in an atmosphere of peace and some material help they can easily go back to their land. In the case of the old government militia, even their farm plots are still in the hands of their families and their rehabilitation can be much easier. Moreover, the young combatants with some help could be sent to schools or retrained for civilian jobs. Fortunately, some possess the needed technical skills that could be used for the reconstruction of the country and certainly cannot be a burden. From my own personal observation, some men among the officer corps are ready to join civilian professions such as business, farming etc on their own.

Perhaps, the most difficult part of the rehabilitation of the now disintegrated government army is the psychological one--the bitter memory of defeat and humiliation. In fact, these equally apply to those who will be reintegrated to the future national army. At any rate, the most difficult of all in the rehabilitation process is the rehabilitation of several thousands of disabled ex-soldiers, who have lost part of their youth for an equally lost cause. In this connection, the initiative taken by the new government to create a commission to help such victims is a step in the right direction.

In summary, what should be emphasized is that rehabilitation cannot be seen in isolation from the over-all national plan for reconstruction. Above all, if the past has anything to teach us, beautiful blue prints by themselves can help us very little. For that matter, some of the policies of Mengistu's government were not bad policies per se. They failed because they were conceived to cover bad politics, implemented in a bad political environment and managed by a bureaucracy, which, for want of a better term, I call lootocracy.<sup>11</sup> These were what finally led



to the failure of not only the policies but Mengistu's and his crew's state of terror and repression. The implications of these past lessons are clear: Policies could be successful if they are formulated to promote good politics, implemented in an equally good political atmosphere and managed by a capable administration. We hope present and future governments of Ethiopia will not lose sight of these elementary but basic lessons of our current history.

## **V. Concluding Remarks:**

An Ethiopian intellectual has made the following observation about Ethiopia's 1974 stolen revolution:

"The revolution failed to bring the freedom, democracy, prosperity, justice and peace which many Ethiopians hoped for during the early days of the revolution. These hopes were aborted by the imposition of a bureaucratic military rule."<sup>12</sup>

What happened was that Mengistu and his kangaroos failed to fulfil these decent hopes and progressive aspirations of the Ethiopian peoples and in fact, betrayed the lofty ideals of the revolution in the most inhuman way. It is with this in mind that we have made the political issues at the centre of our analysis-throughout our discussion.

Once again it must be emphasized before we venture at meaningful rehabilitation and reconstruction--destruction should stop. In other words, durable peace and stability should be attained for our efforts to bear fruits. This in turn is highly linked to the realization of participatory democracy. But the challenges against such an alternative are immense. We all agree that we are at a historic cross-road and there is no dispute about it. The problem is, it seems some of us continue to behave like a lost child on a cross-road--not exactly sure of from where it comes and not exactly sure of where it is going either. Still worse some of us are making a fool's haste, forgetting the famous traditional saying a fool's haste is no speed. Moreover, some of us are busy talking to deaf ears. These are what all Ethiopians should accept in all honesty and sincerity. And if the international community is to contribute positively and constructively to peace and development in Ethiopia- no less than the humanitarian aid--it is in helping us solve

these and other political dilemmas. Once we find our way out of these political dilemmas and are able to settle the key political questions in the country i.e. peace and participatory democracy, undoubtedly, it is a homework half-done and we can face the challenges of both rehabilitation and a more fundamental task of building New Ethiopia with a fresh start, fresh ideas, and fresh imagination.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Merera Gudina, "Understanding the vital link between Democracy and Development : a Realistic approach to Africa's Developmental Crisis : The Case of Ethiopia", Term paper presented to the American University in Cairo (Cairo : January 1991), pp. 41-42.
2. See Gaim Kibreab, "Reflections on the African Refugee Problem : A Critical Analysis of some Basic Assumptions", Research report n° 67 (Uppsala : Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1983) and Peter Nobel (ed.) "Refugees and Development in Africa." Seminar Proceedings n° 19 (Uppsala : Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1987).
3. Term used in Michael John (translator), Africa's Refugees Crisis : What is to be done ? (London : Zed Books Ltd. 1987), p. 130.
4. See Ibid.
5. OAU, The African Refugees, n° 2 (June 1983), p. 1.
6. See a paper made public by a Committee for Peace, Democracy and Rehabilitation (Addis Ababa University), June 1986, p. 4.
7. OAU, African Refugees, n° 8, June 1986), p. 4.
8. See work of Yefime Zarjevski, A Future Preserved : International Assistance to Refugees (Oxford, New York : Pergamon Press, 1988), and various works sponsored by the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies and SAREC.



9. Markos Ezra and Kassahun Berhanu, "A Report on : An Enquiry among the Farming Households in the Project Areas" (Addis Abada : Addis Abada University, 1988).
10. Markos Ezra, "Impact Assessment and Sustainability of the Rehabilitaion Programme for the Afar Pastoralist in Nothern Shoa : A Case Study for Evaluation of Band Aid (Addis Abada : Addis Abada University, Nov. 1989).
11. See Merera Gudina, "Ethiopia : The Dynamics of Agrarian Change and Rural Transformation". A paper presented at the Land Policy Conference, University of Zimbabwe, Feb. 1990.
12. Kumssa Asfaw, "Ethiopia's Unfulfilled Revolution", Africa Today, 1st Quarter, 1990, p. 84.
13. A group of Africa's widely respected intellectuals have also advocated for participatory Democracy as a solution to the on-going African crisis. See Peter Anyang Nyong'o (ed.) Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa (London and New Jersey : Zed Books Ltd., 1987).