

NEVER KNEEL DOWN!  
DROUGHT, DEVELOPMENT  
AND LIBERATION IN  
ERITREA, JAMES FIREBRACE  
WITH STUART HOLLAND MP,  
TEGENTON, NEW JERSEY;  
THE RED SEA PRESS, 1985.

MAIN DISTRIBUTORS  
P.O. BOX 40799  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94140

## *Preface*

In Eritrea hundreds of thousands of children, women and men have been killed or crippled or turned into refugees in a war which began almost a quarter of a century ago.

Many more have died in the years of continual drought. Over a third of the population is facing famine.

As the people of Eritrea face another arid year and as the fighting intensifies Stuart Holland, the Labour Spokesperson on Overseas Development and Co-operation and James Firebrace, War on Want's Programme Office for the Horn of Africa, present an assessment of the successes of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and make a plea for a much greater international appreciation of the educational, health care and other achievements made in spite of poverty and war by the EPLF administration. Its social and economic initiatives, they believe, can help to eradicate mass starvation. Basing their account on evidence gathered during their visit to Eritrea, Holland and Firebrace also urge that there should be an immediate and massive increase in all forms of emergency assistance to the Eritrean Relief Association. Without such help it is certain that many thousands more will die.

*Never Kneel Down* is set in the context of support for the people's struggle for self-determination. The authors argue that there can be no solution to the massive problems confronted daily by the people without an end to the war — and that will only come about when self-determination is secured.

I welcome the timely publication of this report and the opportunity it provides for Labour's approach, set out two years ago in our Programme for Britain, to be re-stated.

In that document we pledged support for self-determination for the people of Eritrea.

We promised financial and material help by the next Labour Government for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Eritrean Relief Association.

We gave our backing to the proposal of the EPLF that there should be an internationally supervised referendum on the future of Eritrea — a referendum which would allow the Eritrean people to choose between full independence from Ethiopia, federal association with Ethiopia or regional autonomy within Ethiopia.

Nothing has happened since 1982 to make us change our view. Indeed, events since then have borne out our approach.

The tragedy of Eritrea provokes the sympathy of all who have seen the evidence of mass starvation and the results of conflict in television reports. But sympathy alone is not enough. Whilst we urge relief we must also get at the roots of the agony. There is a major responsibility on all of us to do whatever we can to help achieve a satisfactory settlement to stop the war — a settlement that serves the interests of both the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples.

Earlier this year the European Parliament urged the Ethiopian Government to find a 'peaceful and negotiated solution of the conflict between it and the Eritrean peoples, which takes account of their identity, as recognised by the United Nations resolution of December 2 1950 and is consistent with the basic principles of the OAU'. That is a guide to action for other Parliaments and for Governments who can promote self-determination, stability and an end to the suffering of Eritrea and Ethiopia. And that most particularly includes the superpowers, both of which have, at various times, backed the Ethiopian Government, both of which are engaged in strategic competition in the area, both of which should be as ready with the means of giving life as they have been with the means of sustaining conflict.

In the meantime this book, by giving the facts behind the famine, provides an invaluable report of the situation on the ground as seen by two highly respected eye-witnesses, and it offers an invaluable insight into the issues. It will do a great deal to promote wider understanding of and support for the EPLF's case, and the recommendations listed at the end will arouse a much needed debate.

I commend this book to all who are genuinely concerned for the people of the region. But it should also command the attention of those many others — including our own Government — who have claimed to care about famine and conflict in the Horn of Africa but have failed to follow sentiment with effective aid, assistance and action.

*Neil Kinnock MP*

## *Introduction*

For ten years Ethiopia has been notorious in the West for one of the world's worst droughts. Haile Selassie, likewise one of the West's best known African leaders, fell in 1974 through his failure to cope with the drought crisis which at that time affected all the Sahel or sub-Saharan region in Africa.\* But he also fell because in a rule of half a century he failed to transcend the feudal structure he inherited. Friend of the Western democracies, who failed to help when Mussolini was his foe, he failed in turn to meet the demands for self-governing democracy in his own country. In that drama both the Ogaden in the south and especially Eritrea in the north played a key role.

This book follows a visit by the authors to Eritrea in April 1984 on the initiative of Neil Kinnock, Leader of the British Labour Party and George Galloway, War on Want's General Secretary. We went for four main reasons: (1) to report on the famine in Eritrea and its relation to the drought and the war, and the effectiveness of relief aid being distributed by the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA); (2) to examine the social and economic policies of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), to assess how these affect the Eritrean population, in particular the poorest and most disadvantaged groups, and to assess the role currently being played by external development assistance; (3) to assess the strength and significance of the EPLF as a political force; and (4) to evaluate the case made by the EPLF for Eritrean self-determination. The 1982 Labour Party Conference decided to back the referendum proposal of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and to give aid to the EPLF and to the Eritrean Relief Association (see Appendix 6a).

Our findings and recommendations concern both the British Labour Party on the means of implementing its commitment to support Eritrean self-determination and to provide financial and material support to the EPLF and ERA, and also voluntary and governmental agencies on the immediate action necessary to relieve the suffering of the Eritrean people.

The mission comprised Stuart Holland MP, Spokesman for

\*The Sahel in this wider sense is to be distinguished from the Sahel province of Eritrea of the same name.

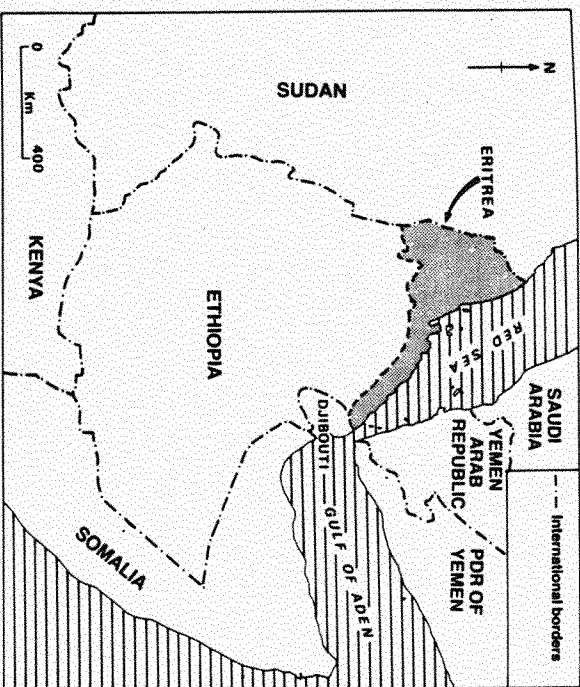
Overseas Aid and Development for the Labour Party, James Firebrace, Programme Officer at War on Want for the Sahel and Horn of Africa, and Jenny Holland of the New Socialist. This report, and its conclusions and recommendations, is largely based on the visit to Eritrea itself (16th to 26th April 1984). We were able to visit and evaluate the EPLF's activities inside Eritrea, the relief supply route from Port Sudan, and ERA's programme in Port Sudan for refugees and for the disabled. The report also draws on extensive discussions and correspondence with many people, including aid agency representatives who have travelled elsewhere in Eritrea and ERA and EPLF representatives. We are most grateful to them for their help and cooperation.

Many people have helped us in the writing of this book. Special thanks for their extensive comments and suggestions on the text are due to Trish Silkin, Richard Johnson, Gunther Schroder, Roger Briotet, Paul Kelemen, Martin Ferns and Martin Plaut. We also thank Bill Bourne, who painstakingly word-processed the various drafts at every available hour of day and night, and Tony Simpson of Spokesman for his help with the book's production. Any errors of substance are, of course, our own.

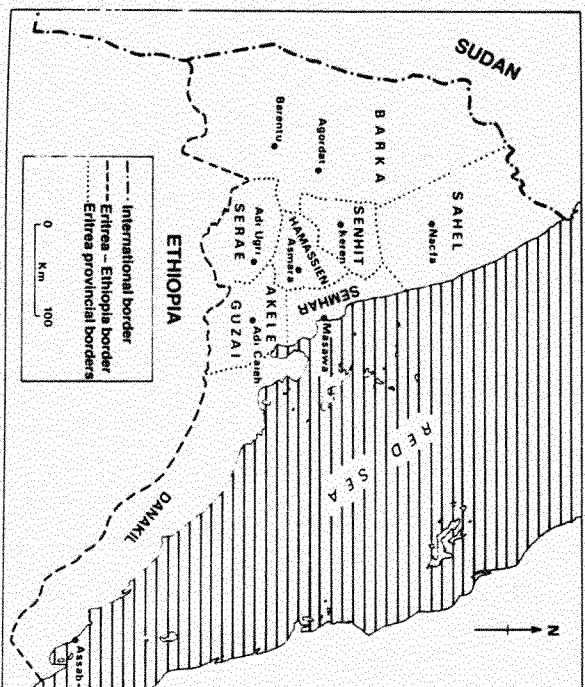
'Never Kneel Down' is a popular slogan of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

*James Firebrace and Stuart Holland*

MAP 1 ERITREA: IN THE HORN OF AFRICA



MAP 2 ERITREA: PROVINCES & TOWNS



## Authors

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**STUART HOLLAND** is the Labour Member of Parliament for Lambeth Vauxhall. In 1974-75 he was Special Adviser to the then Minister of Overseas Development, Rt. Hon. Judith Hart MP, and in 1983 he was appointed Shadow Minister of Overseas Development and Cooperation. His several publications include co-authorship of 'Kissinger's Kingdom? — A Counter Report on Central America', published in 1984, and 'Out of Crisis: A Project for European Recovery' (1983), which he edited for the Forum for International Political and Social Economy. Both books are published by Spokesman.

## KISSINGER'S KINGDOM?

A Counter-report on Central America

*Stuart Holland MP*

*Donald Anderson MP*

*Kissinger's Kingdom?* results from a fact-finding mission on the initiative of Neil Kinnock, MP, Leader of the Labour Party, which the authors undertook in Central America in December 1983.

In his preface Neil Kinnock writes that "the problems of Central America are North-South, not East-West . . . the United States of America with its immense resources could change the condition of the area but only if its Governments end the historic folly of propping up dependent dictatorships and sabotaging administrations that have been produced by the crisis of underdevelopment . . . in the USA there is an extensive body of opinion which is opposed to yet another armed crusade against some of the least privileged and most exploited people in the world, the people of Central America. They, like us, will be informed and strengthened by this report from Stuart Holland and Donald Anderson which in many important ways is a timely and necessary counter to the Kissinger Commission".

*Stuart Holland, Member of Parliament for Lambeth Vauxhall, is the shadow minister for Overseas Development and Co-operation, and Donald Anderson, Member of Parliament for Swansea East, is a shadow minister for Foreign Affairs in the Parliamentary Labour Party.*

£2.75

ISBN 0 85124 403 3

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## CHAPTER 1

# *The Eritrean Case for Self-Determination*

For nearly a quarter of a century the Eritrean liberation fronts have fought a war against Ethiopian occupation. Their demand is for Eritrean independence. But successive Ethiopian regimes have claimed that Eritrea is rightfully Ethiopian and cite precedents dating back to the Queen of Sheba, whose liaison with King Solomon allegedly founded the dynasty of the 'Lion of Judah' in Ethiopia. How do such contrasting claims from the contemporary world and biblical myth compare in reality? Also, what role was played by Britain in the modern background of today's conflict?

In the 1940s the British occupation of Eritrea was faced with the question of Eritrea's future following its long colonisation by the Italians. Britain also was responsible for Eritrea's administration when the decision was made to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1950, and therefore has a particular responsibility towards Eritrea. The eventual decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia reflected the strategic interests of Western powers, particularly the United States, and followed a period of violence sponsored by Ethiopia to intimidate those seeking independence for Eritrea. In the following decade the terms of the Federation were increasingly violated by Ethiopia, and culminated in Eritrea's formal annexation as the northernmost province of Ethiopia.

### *1.1 The Historical Background*

Eritrea's history as a political entity dates from 1889, when the Italians occupied the area during the European scramble for African colonies. The Italians planned to transform Eritrea into a settler colony — taking the best agricultural land for farms and plantations, and later establishing a sizable manufacturing and light industrial sector. Roads, railways and ports were built to service the new shipping trade in the Red Sea following the opening of the Suez canal. But the large-scale build-up of the Italian population in Eritrea only started with Mussolini's war preparations against Ethiopia. By the 1940s Eritrea had an Italian population of 60,000 and had reached a relatively advanced stage of industrialisation, with about one in five Eritreans living in towns. The Italians directly controlled central political power, only allowing the traditional local leaders the authority to settle local disputes. When local positions became

vacant, the Italians either secured the election or simply appointed a former soldier of their army or someone who had been working in their administration. But, as elsewhere in Africa, the common experience of foreign rule laid the ground for the development of a distinct national identity in Eritrea which was to become the basis for future demands for nationhood.

### *British Reforms...*

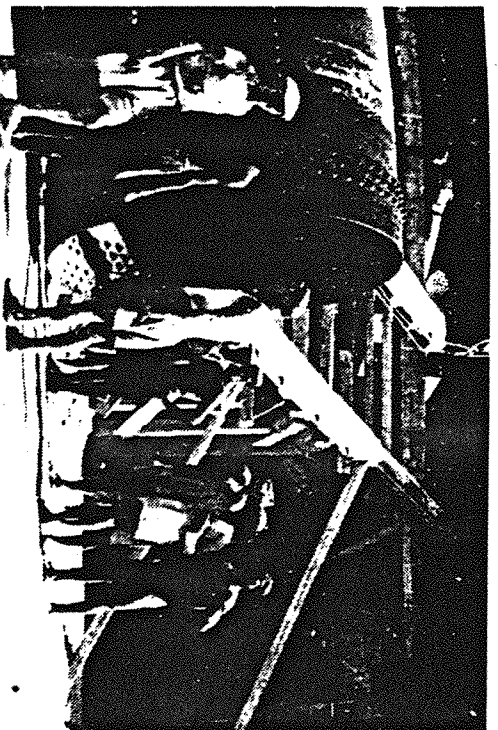
With substantial assistance from the Eritrean population, the British army defeated the Italians in Eritrea during the Second World War and Eritrea was first controlled by a British military administration from 1941 to 1949, and then administered by the British Foreign Office until 1952. During the war years Britain built up Eritrean industry — and with it Eritrea's skilled working class of the Italian colonial period — to help meet the needs of a war economy.

After the war Eritrea suffered an industrial slump. Combined with increased local taxation, the resulting large scale unemployment contributed to a growth in the political consciousness of Eritrea's now considerable urban working class. In this postwar period the British removed or sold an estimated £86 million worth of industrial plant and equipment, including port facilities at Massawa and Assab, factories producing cement, potash, and salt, and railway equipment. (E.S. Pankhurst 1952).

During the British Labour administration of 1945-1951, some far-reaching political reforms were introduced, albeit principally to develop an Eritrean educated class as a political counterweight to the Italian settlers. Labour removed the official 'colour bar' of the Italian period, allowed Eritreans to participate in the administration, and promoted the formation of both political parties and trade unions. Not least, the Labour government also sponsored an extensive literacy and education programme.

### *...and Failures*

After the war, the Peace Treaty with Italy provided that the future of her former colonies should be decided by the four major victorious powers — Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union. British policy, elaborated in the Bevin-Sforza plan of 1949, recommended partition — seeking to give the predominantly Muslim western Eritrea to Sudan and hand the Christian southern highlands to Ethiopia, even though this was unacceptable to all the Eritrean political parties. When the four powers failed to agree, a United Nations Commission, consisting of representatives of Norway, Burma, South Africa, Guatemala and Pakistan, was sent to Eritrea for two months in early 1950 to prepare a report for the UN General Assembly.



*British administrators supervise the dismantling and removal of an Eritrean cement works in 1947 (source: E.S. Pankhurst, 'Eritrea on the Eve', 1952).*

The UN Commission were to consider 'the wishes and welfare of the inhabitants of Eritrea... the capacity of the people for self-government ... the interests of peace and security in East Africa, (and) ... the rights and claims of Ethiopia, including in particular Ethiopia's legitimate need for adequate access to the sea' (see Appendix I). But in fact the UN Commission's terms of reference were interpreted to suit the United States. The US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, put this succinctly in 1952:

'From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia.' (Quoted in Permanent Peoples Tribunal 1980).

The Commission also stressed the interests of Ethiopia by stating her need for 'legitimate' sea access which implied Ethiopian sovereignty over Eritrea. Its fact-finding and consultation was superficial. An observer wrote:

'(The Commission did) no more than to carry out casual observations of rival political gatherings at each centre and address random questions to persons whose representative qualities it had no means of checking.' (Trevaskis 1960).

Meanwhile, Ethiopia intervened directly in Eritrea itself. The

leadership of the Unionist Party, which favoured union with Ethiopia, was under Ethiopian direction; the Ethiopian Orthodox Church added religious pressure by declaring that those supporting independence would not be baptised, married, buried or receive communion; and Ethiopia sponsored and armed a campaign of terror and assassination against supporters of the 'Independence Bloc'. This fomenting of internal unrest, which reached its climax immediately before the arrival of the UN Commission, proved an important factor in deciding the future of Eritrea. Some responsibility for this must be borne by the British government, whose officials did little to restrain Ethiopia in her attempts to prejudice the issue.

The UN Commission was split over its recommendations. Burma, Norway and South Africa argued for close association with Ethiopia on the grounds that Eritrea was poor and economically unviable and that the majority of Eritreans favoured union. Guatemala and Pakistan recommended full independence on the grounds that the Muslim population would never acquiesce to union, and that an independent Eritrea could decide itself at a later date whether or not to federate with Ethiopia. The UN General Assembly of December 1950 accepted the majority position and recommended that Eritrea become an autonomous unit 'with its own legislative, executive and judicial powers in the field of domestic affairs', but 'federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown' (see Appendix 1).

#### *Federation and Annexation*

In 1952 the new constitution for Eritrea was approved by its elected parliament and the Federation came into being. The incompatibility between a relatively democratic Eritrea and a feudal and autocratic Ethiopia quickly became apparent as Ethiopia began to violate and undermine the federal arrangement. Eritrean political parties and trade unions, recognised by the Federal Act, were banned by the Emperor who also expropriated the agreed Eritrean share of customs and excise duty. The Eritrean Prime Minister resigned in 1955 in protest against this intervention in Eritrean affairs.

In 1956 Tigrinya and Arabic, the official languages under the Eritrean constitution, were suppressed and replaced by Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, as the language of Eritrean official communication and instruction. Strikes and demonstrations were broken up violently by the police. Many people were killed during a general strike in 1958 when police fired on a large demonstration in Asmara objecting to the replacement of the Eritrean flag by that of Ethiopia. Eritrean newspapers were censored. Industries were closed and some factories (textiles, tanning and earthenware) were transferred to Addis Ababa, a move which served both to weaken

Eritrea's economic base and to undermine the organised Eritrean working class as a political force.

The UN commissioner who drew up the Eritrean constitution in 1952 had stipulated that 'if the Federal Act were violated the General Assembly would be seized of the matter' (Final Report of the UN Commissioner). But although repeated missions were sent to the UN to demand its intervention, the stipulation was ignored. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was formed in 1961, arguing that the only remaining path to Eritrean independence was through armed resistance.

In 1961, elections were held for the third Eritrean parliament, but under strict Ethiopian control and without the independent electoral commission stipulated by the Eritrean constitution. This parliament finally 'accepted' the dissolution of the Federal arrangement and annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia in November 1962. Controversy surrounds this decision. It is not even clear that parliament ever voted for annexation; one report (Tekie Fessehazion, 1984) states that the motion to dissolve the Federation was defeated four times, so that finally a declaration of annexation was merely read out. Certainly bribery, arrests and intimidation of members of parliament immediately preceded the event. Armed police were present in the chamber at the time, while the outside of parliament was cordoned off by military units. (Bereket Habte Selassie 1980).

In a confidential memorandum to the US State Department, now revealed through use of the US Freedom of Information Act, the American consul in Asmara, Richard Johnson, wrote:

'The 'unification' was prepared and perpetrated from above in maximum secrecy without the slightest public debate or discussion. The 'vote by acclamation' was a shoddy comedy, barely disguising the absence of support even on the part of the Government-picked Eritrean Assembly.' (Quoted in Tekie Fissehazion, 1984).

After annexation the ELF's guerrilla activities increased and were met with harsh reprisals by the Ethiopians. By 1963 an estimated 3,000 Eritrean civilians were in prison on suspicion of sympathising with the ELF (Pool 1980). Villages were burnt and their inhabitants were either massacred or moved to sites which could be more easily controlled. In 1970, following an ELF ambush in which an Ethiopian general was killed, some 600 villagers were shot in nearby villages and the town of Keren was bombed with a reported 500 civilian casualties. 30,000 refugees fled from the area following the reprisals. In the towns arbitrary arrests, detention for long periods and the use of torture became increasingly common. In the early 1970s both the ELF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which had split from the ELF in 1970 (see Chapter 2) attracted many recruits from those who escaped from the towns.

As the war intensified, the Eritrean economy went further into decline. Eritrean factories were dismantled and moved to central Ethiopia. Much of Eritrea's skilled workforce either joined the liberation fronts or dispersed around the Middle East; many found jobs in Ethiopian towns far from the Eritrean conflict where new industry was booming because of the input of US capital. By the mid 1970s an estimated half million Eritreans were working in Ethiopia (Lefort 1981).

### *An Elusive Peace*

The overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 and the radical reforms that characterised the first phase of the new regime in Addis Ababa brought fresh hope of a peaceful solution for Eritrea. Proposals were made in August 1974 for a return to a federal relationship by Aman Andom, nominal head of the Military Committee — the 'Derg' — which had seized power in Addis Ababa. But Andom was killed three months later on the orders of Mengistu Haile Mariam, who became the Derg's new Chairman. The atrocities in Eritrea and the attempts to crush the Eritrean liberation fronts continued. As the destruction of villages and crops and the arbitrary killings became more frequent, refugees again left Eritrea in large numbers. Amnesty International wrote of this period:

'During 1975-76 there were many other arrests of alleged opponents of the Government, including trade unionists, academics, senior officials in Government ministries, commercial and financial institutions, military officers, engineers, and state airline employees, teachers or students, some of whom had been in opposition to the previous government also... Eritreans continued to be a major target for political arrest, because of their suspected support for the armed struggle for the region's independence.

Political detention in Eritrea, where martial law had been in force since 1970, followed the same pattern as under the former government, with large scale arbitrary arrests, torture and killings... Very few of these political prisoners have been tried, but none of them have been released from detention.' (Amnesty International, Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia, 1978).

In July 1975, the Guardian reported 30,000 refugees arriving in Sudan following a massacre at Om Hager in Western Eritrea. By the end of the decade 300,000 Eritreans were living in the Sudan as refugees and perhaps twice this number had been displaced within Eritrea.

In May 1976, the Derg put forward a 'Nine Point Peace Plan for the Eritrean Administrative Region' (see Appendix 3b), in which they proposed a political amnesty, assistance to enable the return of the refugees, and an 'exchange of views with the progressive groups and organisations in Eritrea'. The Derg sent a delegation to Asmara with



*Housing conditions at Dein Kurea, Port Sudan where many refugees live.*

orders to contact the EPLF. On the EPLF's insistence the delegation met with the ELF and the EPLF together. But the mission appears to have been little more than a cover for Mengistu to launch a hastily formed militia, 'the Peasants' Army', against both the Eritrean fronts. Ill-equipped and poorly trained, this army was routed after suffering massive casualties.

There have been numerous other attempts to mediate the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In March 1977 Fidel Castro came forward with a highly ambitious proposal for a federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea but including also Somalia and the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). In late 1977, the Eastern bloc countries with East Germany as mediator brought the Derg and the Eritrean fronts together in East Berlin for a number of talks, which continued until June 1978 but came to nothing. In May the same year, the Soviet Union, Cuba and PDRY had brought back Negege Gobeze, a leading figure in ME'ISON\*, from his exile in Paris to investigate the possibility of establishing an alternative government to Mengistu's based on the pro-Soviet wing of the Derg, the remnants of ME'ISON, the trade unions and possibly the Eritrean and other national movements. The attempt failed and led to the recall of the Cuban and South Yemeni ambassadors from Addis Ababa.

After a speech by Mengistu in June 1978 the Derg dropped any talk of 'progressive groups in Eritrea', and the EPLF and the ELF

\*see Glossary.

were thenceforward lumped together as 'reactionaries' and 'Arab stooges'. When in November 1980 the EPLF put forward its proposals for an internationally supervised referendum to decide the future of Eritrea, the Ethiopian regime's only response was a new military offensive. In January 1982, Mengistu announced the 'Red Star Campaign' with a great fanfare of publicity. A vast military offensive to finally crush the EPLF, by then the only liberation front active inside Eritrea, would be combined with the reopening of factories and farms closed or abandoned during the war (Mengistu speech, Asmara, 25th January 1982). The EPLF held out against the offensive, tens of thousands of Ethiopian troops were killed and the economic plan never got much further than public rhetoric.

In the 34 years since the original UN decision on the postwar colonial future of Eritrea, many factors have changed. The Eritreans of today are very different from those trying to be heard in 1950. But the central issues are still the same: Eritrea saw European colonial rule disappear only to find herself once again under foreign domination after a limited period of partial self-government.

The British interregnum under the postwar Labour administration was positive in aiding social and economic reforms, but the unacceptability of the Bevin-Sforza plan opened the way to a contested UN 'solution' in the key question of relations with Ethiopia. US influence and backing for Haile Selassie until 1974 was followed by Soviet backing for the Derg in arms and aid thereafter. Cuban misgiving about the Derg's assault on the ELF and EPLF was real. But Cuban and East German diplomatic efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement have failed to secure Ethiopian agreement to the demand for Eritrean independence and self-government.

### 1.2 *The Merits of the Eritrean and Ethiopian Cases*

The EPLF's claims for the right to independence follow the same principle by which other African nations have defined themselves in post-colonial Africa. Basil Davidson wrote in 1980:

'If colonized African peoples have justly claimed and justly exercised the right to be free, and to build within colonial frontiers new nations of their own, resuming the development of their past history, then why should this right be denied to the Eritreans? They were colonized by the Italians, after all, in exactly the same way and in more or less exactly the same years as the rest of the continent was taken into colonial ownership and control. If they now find themselves formally within Ethiopia, that is not only a subsequent but also a similar development. Or if the colonial period proved to be, for other peoples, the 'forcing bed' from which there duly flowered the harvests of modern nationalism — the nationalism by means of which colonized peoples could throw off their subjection and stand upon their own — then why should it be denied that Eritreans, too, went through this same process, acquired a national

consciousness during colonial rule, and came to feel the natural need for an assertion of their own identity? What today is so 'special' about the Eritrean case except that they happen to be colonized by an African, not a European, power?' (Preface to Sherman 1980).

Eritrea's separate political identity was forged during the period of European colonisation and this identity has not been lost over the subsequent years of Ethiopian occupation. On the contrary the budding nationalism of the 1950s has flowered under the brutality of Ethiopian military rule. The struggle waged by well-organised political forces able to act to defend Eritrean interests has provided a focus for this nationalism. Furthermore, in the areas now administered by the EPLF the population is once again experiencing different political structures and a different form of development from that of Ethiopia under Derg control.

Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea rests on its assertion that Eritrea has been part of 'Ethiopia' for 3,000 years. This is based on the fact that the ancient Axumite kingdom spanned both the current Tigray province of Ethiopia and southern Eritrea. After the fall of Axum there was a break of seven centuries before an influx of Abyssinians in the fifteenth century took control of much of present northern Ethiopia and the Eritrean plateau. As a recent historian comments: 'It is absurd to conceive of invasions and migrations of ethnic groups and tribes as a basis for the continuity of political control over a geographical area to justify rule over a people... History is always rewritten but usually without such good effect' (Pool, 1979). Ethiopia itself was created by Abyssinian expansion southwards and eastwards at the end of the nineteenth century — at the same time as Italian colonialism created Eritrea.

The historical arguments are important, but the crucial issue is that Eritrea was established as a distinct nation state through its more recent colonial history. Nowhere else in Africa have ancient claims been allowed to override the principle that the frontiers established by colonial rule define the new independent African states, with the exception of Morocco's occupation of Spanish Sahara (now Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic), an act now opposed by a majority of the African regimes.

When the current Ethiopian military regime allied itself with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, a new argument was brought in against the Eritrean case — that with a 'progressive' regime in Addis Ababa a liberation struggle was no longer justified. But a nation's right to self-determination does not change with a change in the occupying power. The Derg lost the possibility of a voluntary Eritrean union with Ethiopia when it continued Haile Selassie's policies of military suppression and the denial of elementary human and political rights. This, plus its failure to negotiate with the EPLF,

calls into question its claims to be 'progressive'.

Eritrea's historical and political claims to self-determination are strong. But practical objections to its implementation may remain. We have seen how the UN decision for Federation was directed by Western interests. We now look at the three major practical issues that the UN Commission considered: (1) Ethiopian access to the sea, (2) the economic and political viability of an independent Eritrea, and (3) the interests of regional peace and security.

#### *Access to the Sea*

This is still a central issue. Ethiopian prosperity is indeed partially dependent on its overseas trade, but this is the case for other landlocked nations who must make customs and transit agreements with their neighbours. Much Ethiopian trade already makes use of the port of Djibouti. Economically, the additional cost to Ethiopia of using an independent Eritrea's ports would be insignificant compared to the sum now being spent on the war. Politically, the insecurity that Ethiopia might feel from lack of direct control over a seaboard is again minor compared to the insecurities that it and the region as a whole are suffering due to the conflict.

The EPLF has expressed itself ready to come to agreement on Ethiopian use of Eritrean ports provided that the Eritrean right to self-determination is recognised by Ethiopia (see Part III, Interview with EPLF Vice General Secretary). With the right political will, the issue of sea access can be resolved to the mutual advantage of both the Eritrean and Ethiopian populations.

#### *Economic and Political Viability*

In 1950 the delegates of the UN Commission who wished to deny Eritrea her independence argued against Eritrea's economic and political viability. Eritrea, they said, was a poor country, dependent on grain imports from Ethiopia and unable to form an independent government that would not disintegrate into anarchy and feuding. We have seen how the violence, fomented by Ethiopia during the period when Eritrea's future was being decided, helped create this impression. Whatever the situation was in 1950, the argument of non-viability would be difficult to sustain now. As we shall show in this report, we found that the economic potential of Eritrea is in fact considerable, and the EPLF has proved itself to be not only able to administer territory and provide health, education and other services to the population, but also to initiate fundamental political and economic reforms.

We discuss later the question of the unity and internal coherence of a future Eritrean government in a situation where fronts other than the EPLF are able to command some international support.

Eritrea is sometimes also said to be too small to justify independence — but a third of African states have an area less than Eritrea, and half of them have a smaller population (including Somalia and Libya).

#### *Regional Peace and Security*

The interests of peace and security in the region are clearly not served by the current situation, in which the war is causing the death and displacement of tens of thousands and is a major factor in the current famine. The Ethiopian government has argued that an independent Eritrea would be a threat to its security by potentially acting as a base for foreign invasion, particularly by 'Arabs'. The Derg has gone to some lengths to portray the Eritrean struggle as an Arab-inspired Islamic plot against Christian Ethiopia. However, the EPLF fighters and leadership include both Christians and Muslims and, while the EPLF has received some support from some Arab states, it has also been undermined by the more conservative states such as Saudi Arabia.

There is a further anxiety that allowing Eritrea to exercise its right to self-determination would set a dangerous precedent and give encouragement to opposition fronts among the constituent nations of the Ethiopian empire. Whatever the strength of the case of the national liberation fronts within Ethiopia, theirs is a different case from that of Eritrea with its distinct history of European colonisation. However, the intransigence of the Ethiopian regime towards the national question, both within its own borders and in relation to Eritrea, does strengthen the links between the Eritrean struggle and those of the nationalities within Ethiopia. It is this intransigence which is most likely to provoke the feared 'balkanisation' of the Ethiopian Empire. Peace and stability in the region will not be secured until the issue of democracy for the Ethiopian nationalities is resolved.

Elsewhere in Africa, governments are afraid that concessions to Eritrea will set off 'secessionist' demands within their own states. This is the concern of the Organisation of African Unity which in its founding charter 'determined to safeguard and consolidate... the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our states' (OAU 1963). This pronouncement should lead the OAU to review the status of Eritrea. The UN resolution of 1950 federating Eritrea with Ethiopia implicitly, if inadequately, recognised Eritrea's separate identity and her territorial integrity distinct from that of her federal partner. The annulment of Eritrea's federal status in 1962, only a year before the founding of the OAU ran contrary to the UN decision and cannot form a legal basis for the recognition of a revised 'territorial integrity' for Ethiopia.

The OAU resolution of 1964 which calls for respect for the borders 'existing on the achievement of national independence' should support the case for Eritrean independence either at the turn of the century when she successfully avoided colonisation by a European power or later in 1941 when she emerged from her 6 year occupation by the Italians. At both times Eritrea was treated as territorially distinct, but she has yet to be granted her independence.

After 23 years of warfare, in which hundreds of thousands have become refugees, and given famine conditions which are worsening year by year, the Eritrean conflict clearly calls for a radical change of strategy by the Ethiopian regime. It is important that the issue now be re-examined in the light of the basic principles of a nation's rights and the long term interests of the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ending the war and ending the suffering are the humanitarian priorities. There seems to be only one way in which this will happen — to seek, and act on, the wishes of the Eritrean people themselves. This is also the path of international justice. In the next chapter we look at the social and political changes the EPLF is seeking to bring about in transforming Eritrea into a democratic and just society.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The EPLF's Popular Revolution*

The Derg claims that the Eritrean resistance is 'narrow nationalism'. It maintains that the Eritrean fronts give no consideration to internal social and political issues, or to the broader interests of the people of the region as a whole. This is distortion and propaganda, as mendacious in its way as some of the worst CIA propaganda on the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. In reality, the EPLF has prioritised the social transformation of a backward society, and gained mass popular support by its achievements which overshadow those of the Derg itself.

#### *2.1 The Origins of the EPLF*

The ELF emerged in 1961 as a liberal nationalist movement in reaction to the denial of political rights and repression by Haile Selassie's regime. The early ELF leadership was composed of former Eritrean soldiers in the Sudanese army, foreign-based intellectuals, and some nationalist politicians of the 1950s. Their social background and connections enabled them to attract substantial support from the upper strata of Muslim society in west and central Eritrea — tribal leaders, owners of large herds and merchants. Militarily the ELF lacked effective coordination, the Eritrean Liberation Army consisted of separate military sections under independent command.

The absence of proposals for much needed social change in the ELF's political programme, the lack of working structures within the ELF allowing fighters democratic participation in the decision-making process, the corruption of many leading ELF figures and their heavy-handed handling of national minorities such as the Kunama of the Gash region of Barka province, led to internal dissent and finally to divisions. Attempts to solve these internal problems were made at a series of meetings, including the ELF's Adobeha Conference of autumn 1969. The majority of the ELF leadership adopted a strong Arab and Muslim orientation and tended to be quite conservative in their social politics. Their younger critics espoused a secular Eritrean nationalism and radical policies for social transformation, while other critics of the ELF leadership differed on regionalistic grounds.

By the beginning of 1970, disagreements between the two groups reached a head. A large group of dissidents managed to escape the

the Ethiopian authorities who have sought to develop their own administrative structures — the 'kebeles' and the peasant associations. In defining the path of the revolution, the EPLF have assessed the measures that will enhance both the economic welfare of the more oppressed sections of Eritrean society and the degree of control they exercise over the decisions affecting their lives. But the EPLF has not simply reflected the demands of the people. Some reforms, such as the granting of land to the landless and the incorporation of women representatives into the People's Assemblies, have met with quite extensive opposition.

In this sense the revolution is very much two way — from above as well as from below. It also depends upon internal and external forces. In the next chapter we look at the role played by outside powers in the Eritrean conflict.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Eritrea versus the Superpowers*

From its beginning, the Eritrean struggle has had an international dimension. In spite of the changes in international alliances in the region, foreign powers have consistently armed successive Ethiopian regimes against Eritrea, and have frustrated the hopes for a negotiated solution.

#### *3.1 The US and its Allies*

Intervention by the United States in Eritrea dates from before the UN resolution of 1950, when the US government indicated that once Ethiopia gained sovereignty over Eritrea the US would seek to take over the large British communications centre outside Asmara, the Eritrean capital. This was the basis for US support for the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia. In 1953, shortly after Federation, the US obtained use of the centre, which they named the Kagnaw Station, in return for military aid to the Ethiopian government.

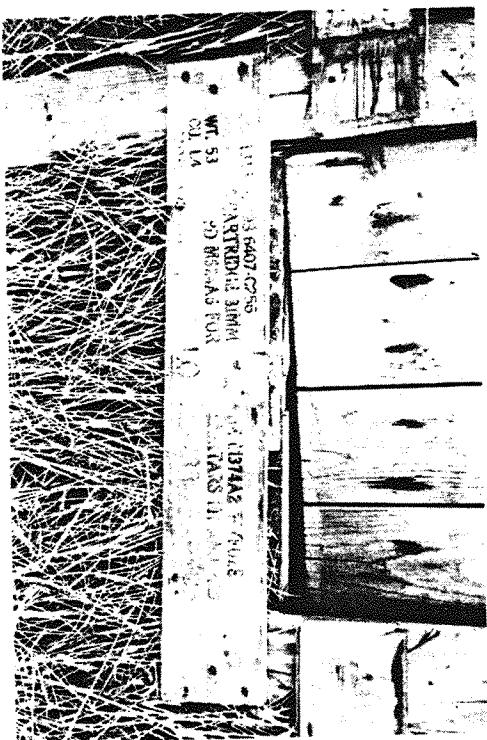
Kagnaw became the largest intelligence gathering centre outside the US, staffed by 3,500 American personnel. In many years, US support to the Ethiopian armed forces made up two thirds of US military aid to the whole African continent. Much of the training and equipment that the US provided was used against the ELF and in particular was used to establish a crack unit — the 'commandos' — which received training from the Israelis in anti-guerrilla warfare. During the period up to 1974 Ethiopia was also a major beneficiary of US economic aid.

Since the Derg took power in 1974, US assistance to Ethiopia has dried up. In 1976 the US government pressured USAID and the World Bank to reject Ethiopian requests for aid, and since 1978 the US has been concentrating its aid to the region on Sudan, Somalia and Kenya. US policy for many years was to wait and see how the relationship with the Soviet Union would develop. In 1980 the US handbook for Ethiopia noted:

'(Analysis dispute) the depth and permanence of the commitment of Mengistu and his colleagues to the Soviet variety of Marxism-Leninism as opposed to their commitment to the retention of power and to central control of political life, the economy and society. According to some observers, the long-range stability of the relationship between Ethiopia and the Soviet Union was uncertain... At issue was whether that



*Captured ammunition boxes. The Ethiopian army was armed first by the USA and then by the Soviet Union.*



adherence would persist if the regime's dependence on Moscow for survival diminished or if the Soviet perspective on a matter of immediate relevance to Ethiopia's interests ever differed from that of Mengistu.' (Ethiopia, a Country Study, 1980).

The US is now seeking actively to woo Ethiopia back into its sphere of influence. Secretary of State George Shultz met the Ethiopian Foreign Minister in October 1983 to 'iron out differences', and discussions are under way regarding compensation for American firms whose assets in Ethiopia were nationalised after the revolution. The World Bank resumed aid in 1980 and gave \$40 million per annum in 1980-84 (African Economic Digest, Special Report, Sept. 1984). On the Eritrean question, the US has consistently denied support to the movements for national self-determination, even for those groups who have opposed the socialism of the EPLF. For the US the goal is still to win back an Ethiopia complete with the occupied coastal province.

British foreign policy has coat-tailed that of the US. In July 1984 Malcolm Rifkind, Minister of State for African Affairs in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, made the first official visit to Ethiopia since the revolution, and the British ambassador in Addis is pressing for a substantial aid programme. At the same time some MPs on the right wing of the Conservative Party are calling, on the basis of crude anti-Soviet policies, for British foreign policy to ally itself with Somalia and with the case for Eritrean independence, through support for the ELF-PLF, a small Eritrean front with no presence inside Eritrea but diplomatically active in London and in the Middle East. The only likely effect of such moves will be to create confusion about the true nature of the struggle being waged in Eritrea. By contrast, the British Labour Party has for some time supported Eritrea's right to self-determination and its programme now commits it to support the EPLF referendum proposals and to commit aid to the EPLF when in government (see Appendix 6a).

The European Economic Community has differed from the US on developments within Ethiopia. The European Development Fund replaced the US as the main source of international assistance to Ethiopia, which is now the largest single recipient of EEC aid in Africa. Recently the EEC has begun to recognise the need to complement this aid with assistance to the sizable areas of Ethiopia outside governmental control and has therefore begun to make grants to the Eritrean Relief Association. On the political side, the Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community are sympathetic to the Eritrean position (see Appendix 5c), and the European Parliament as a whole resolved in April 1984:

'to strongly urge the Ethiopian government to find a peaceful and negotiated solution of the conflict between it and the Eritrean peoples

which takes account of their identity, as recognised by the United Nations resolution of 2 December 1950, and is consistent with the basic principles of the OAU' (see Appendix 5b).

This resolution is an indication of the growing impatience among Western supporters of Ethiopia with its pursuit of a military solution in Eritrea.

### 3.2 *The Soviet Union and its Allies*

The Soviet Union's position on Eritrea has gone through a complete about-turn. The Soviet delegate to the UN in 1950 said:

'The USSR has consistently supported the proposal that Eritrea should be granted independence and has continued to do so at the current session. We base our argument on the fact that all peoples have a right to self-determination and national independence... The UN must take a decision which will satisfy the longing of the Eritrean people for independence and freedom from national aggression. The General Assembly cannot tolerate a deal by the colonial powers at the expense of the population of Eritrea.' (Appendix 1 of Selassie 1980).

Furthermore, the Soviet Union played a role in building up the ELF, albeit through third parties, in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1977, during the Ogaden war, the Soviet Union made its dramatic switch of alliances, withdrawing its support for Siad Barre's 'socialist' Somalia, abandoning its naval base at Berbera and throwing its full weight behind the Derg by organising a massive airlift of arms to Addis Ababa. At the end of the Ogaden conflict, Soviet military hardware was moved north and played a decisive role in driving the Eritrean fronts back from their almost complete control of Eritrea.

In 1984, the Soviet Union has 3,000 military advisers in Ethiopia. It has also built a naval base in the Dahlak islands off the Eritrean coast, and has equipped an Ethiopian army (now estimated to number 300,000) with some 1,000 tanks, 1,500 armoured cars and 90 Mig planes and helicopter gunships. Three quarters of this military aid is on a loan basis, and Ethiopia is estimated to have run up a military debt of between \$2,000 million and \$5,000 million. (Africa Economic Digest, Special Report September 1984). The Soviet Union justified its reversal of position on Eritrea by declaring that the Eritreans were now 'objectively helping the realisation of imperialist designs' and that 'the genuine interests of the population (of Eritrea) coincide with the interests of the entire Ethiopian people, which is trying to build a life on new principles.' (Pravda 1978 quoted in Selassie 1980).

The Ethiopian determination to impose a military solution on Eritrea has proved a particular embarrassment for both the Cubans and the East Germans. Cuba was training Eritrean fighters in the

late 1960s, and in 1974 tried to put the Eritrean issue on the agenda of the Non-Aligned Conference in Havana. Both Cuba and East Germany were still giving political support to the EPLF in late 1976. But in December 1977 Cuba sent troops to the Ogaden to help the Ethiopian army push back the Somalis. East Germany began training Ethiopian security services. Since 1979, the Cubans have made a point on a number of occasions of stating that their troops are not fighting in Eritrea, even though in practice they strengthen the overall Ethiopian military position by relieving the pressure on its army in the Ogaden. In July 1984 Cuba announced that it was reducing its troop levels as a result of 'the Ethiopian armed forces' increased strength in combat capacity.' (Summary of World Broadcasts ME/7688/ii, 6 July 1984).

### 3.3 *Arabs and Africans*

The Arab countries are described by the Derg as the initiators and backers of the Eritrean fronts — in fact the truth is much more complex. The ELF during its active period (1961-81) often portrayed the Eritrean struggle as Islamic, which helped attract support from some conservative States. Of more significance was Arab concern over Ethiopia's alliance with Israel. Over the years the fronts secured Arab support from countries with as varied political philosophies as Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Libya, Yemen Arab Republic, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), and Saudi Arabia.

However, the Soviet Union's switching of its support to Ethiopia led Syria and the PDRY to stop their support for the fronts. The PDRY had provided the EPLF with port facilities for its boats, but in 1977 sent a mechanised division to Eritrea in support of the beleaguered Ethiopian army. Libya withdrew support to the fronts in 1981 on signing a tripartite mutual defence pact with PDRY and Ethiopia. Sudan's attitude to the Eritrean fronts is dependent on the state of her complex relationship with Ethiopia. Sudan and Ethiopia mistrust each other, and Ethiopia supports Sudanese opposition movements in order to pressurise the Sudanese government to cut its support for the Eritrean fronts and to limit their movement in Sudan. Generally the Sudan has backed the non-EPLF fronts, but has tolerated the EPLF presence and the transit of goods to Eritrea through Sudanese territory.

Saudi Arabia is wary of the EPLF which it sees as both Christian and socialist. Saudi Arabia gives support to the various remnants of the ELF and to the ELF-PLF. These fronts came to a Saudi-sponsored unity agreement in Jeddah in January 1983. The Saudis' action seems intended to prolong the conflict in order to weaken a hostile Ethiopia. It appears that the EPLF now receives its material

and humanitarian support in the Middle East from only Somalia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Many black African states are sympathetic to the Eritrean case but have proved reticent in lending their united support to Eritrea. As we have noted, the Ethiopian definition of the Eritrean fronts as 'secessionist' and the fear this raises for those states' own internal cohesion has been a powerful factor in ensuring their silence. Furthermore, Ethiopia has particular prestige within Africa — it successfully resisted colonisation by a European power, and Addis Ababa is the seat of the OAU. Nevertheless, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Madagascar have at various times sought to mediate in the Eritrean conflict. The Sahrawi front, Polisario, once more vocal, now keeps silent because it needs Ethiopia's support for its own battles within the OAU. Other African States, dependent on one or other superpower, are reluctant to speak out.

Successive interventions of the superpowers have denied the Eritreans military victory, while local political factors in Africa and the Middle East have limited the international political support the EPLF is able to mobilise. Such support can only come from governments able to pursue a foreign policy independent of both the US and the USSR and which are also distant from the immediate repercussions of the conflict. In Europe, the EPLF's natural allies are socialist parties, the labour movement, and the peace movement as Europe attempts to distance itself from the cold war politics of the US. The European Community may prove to be a powerful advocate for a peaceful settlement to the extent that political pressures from the Strasbourg Assembly are effective.

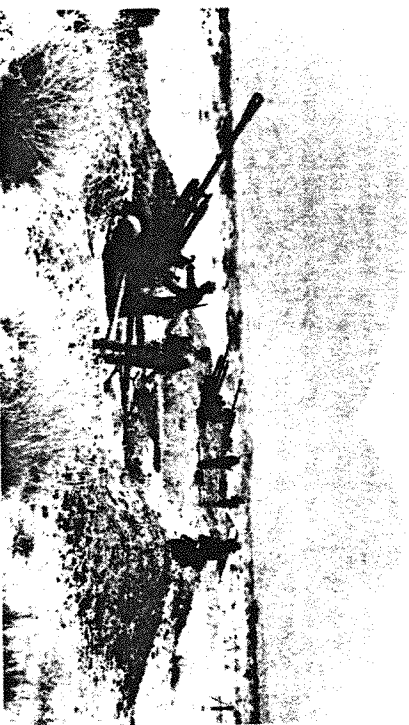
## CHAPTER 4

### *The Military Development of the Eritrean Struggle*

The Ethiopian government refers to the EPLF as 'bandits' and refuses to acknowledge that they pose anything more than a 'security problem'. In fact the EPLF is now able to field a well-trained army whose size is estimated by informed observers to be between 40,000 and 50,000 men and women. The EPLF has captured and can now mobilise some 150 tanks and armoured vehicles, as well as heavy and light artillery, rocket launchers and anti-aircraft guns. The EPLA is now a larger and better equipped army than those of most African states, and is approaching in size the armies of Ethiopia's larger neighbours, Sudan and Somalia.

The EPLF's military strategy is shaped by four considerations. First, it has always had primarily to depend on Ethiopia as a source of arms: weaponry must be captured, mostly in battle but also in guerrilla raids on specific targets.

Second, the EPLF has to face a much larger military force, several times its size (two-thirds of the Ethiopian army is stationed in Eritrea), and with sophisticated up-to-date equipment. The EPLF



*EPLF artillery in the NE Sahel coastal plains, March 1984.*

Bank in 1984 and 1985, and has secured substantial aid agreements with Italy, France and Federal Germany. The US and Britain have frozen aid until compensation to companies nationalised by the Derg has been finalised. In spite of the political upheavals of the last decade, Ethiopia has recovered as a popular trading partner for the West:

'Opportunities may be limited, but business is avidly fought for — not only because of the recession but also because Ethiopia always pays its bills. This first class repayments record applies not only to commercial transactions, but also to Ethiopia's non-military debt... Such conservative management, which has included tight controls over the money supply and a seven year wage freeze, has induced some countries to take an attitude to commercial relations diametrically opposed to their aid positions.' (Africa Economic Digest April 1983).

In one of the many ironies of the Horn, the Soviet Union's military support is protecting the profitable investment and trade of the West. East and West thus jointly deny Eritrea its basic rights and allow the war and the suffering to continue. And in the unlikely situation of the US drawing Ethiopia back into its fold, there would be little change for Eritrea.

The recent resolution of the European Parliament — to urge the Ethiopian government to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Eritrean conflict which takes account of Eritrea's identity — is significant. By virtue of its aid relationship, the EEC has political weight in Ethiopia. It remains to be seen whether progressive forces in Europe and the Third World can carry such initiatives in the wider international arena. If so, combined with the pressure of an escalated armed struggle in Eritrea, this could prove to be the elusive key to Eritrean self-determination.

## PART II

### A NEW MODEL FOR DEVELOPMENT

## *Introduction*

For those with experience of Third World countries the following scenario is only too familiar. An industrial or mineral investment project surveyed and scrutinised by skilled personnel proves to be inappropriate in size and scale to real development needs. The project is controlled and supervised by foreign management and local managers shadow their foreign counterparts, dependent on them for know-how and access to information and spares, without which the plant cannot operate.

In drought areas in Africa it also is typical for there to be major transport problems. These arise not only from the very long distances, frequently in tropical or desert conditions, but also from the absence of the skills and equipment needed to run modern transport networks. For instance, one of us visited Chad, Niger, Mali and Upper Volta ten years ago at the time of the Sahelian famine. It was common in Chad at that time either to find that the heavy lorries for drought relief had been abandoned through over-use without adequate servicing, plain misuse or inability to undertake repairs or get spare parts. Attrition rates were high, and the average anticipated lifetime of a heavy truck was little more than a year.

In contrast with such production and distribution problems encountered in many Third World countries, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front clearly has (1) produced a range of sophisticated goods with its own skilled labour; (2) achieved a repairs service with a reliability which would be envied in several developed countries; (3) machined spare parts ranging from crank shafts and cylinders through to reprocessed tyres; and (4) produced capital goods and equipment such as presses or medical equipment at a high level of sophistication on the simple copy and substitute principle. How has it managed so well and achieved so much with so little external assistance?

## *Self-Reliance in Production and Distribution*

During the debates of the British colonial era, before the UN decision of 1950, one of the arguments used against the case for Eritrean independence was that Eritrea was economically unviable. Eritrea's economy had been distorted to support the war efforts of first Italy, prior to her invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and then Britain in the latter years of the Second World War. This was one reason why the country's administration and public services were subsidised by Italian and British grants.

### *6.1 Eritrea's Industrial Past*

The peasant farming sector of Eritrea was abysmally poor and still is, but even by the late 1930s Eritrea had a commercial farming sector exporting cotton, coffee, sisal and tropical fruits and a substantial light industrial sector with a large skilled labour force.

Although the British sold off and dismantled much machinery and equipment — thereby serving to justify their argument against independence — Eritrea still had a greater industrial capacity in the 1950s than the whole of the Ethiopian empire which, with ten times the population, was hampered by archaic feudal structures. By the standards of other African colonies of the period, industry in Eritrea was highly developed. In 1939, there were over 846 registered transport companies, 624 construction works, 2,198 trade companies and 728 light industrial concerns. With their development, Eritrea had generated a highly skilled and extensive working class. In 1952 there were several electricity power stations, printing presses and tanning firms. Eritrean industries were producing chemicals, soap, canned meat, dairy products, edible oil, bread, pasta, canned sardines, beer, wines, brandy, mineral water, soft drinks, bricks, tiles, lime, marble, cigarettes, matches, batteries, nails, wire, tyres and paper.

During the federal period from 1952 to 1962, Eritrea's large skilled labour force and easy accessibility from the sea continued to offer a profitable area for foreign investment. The large Barattolo cotton factory dates from this period, as well as the commercial plantations and tomato canning plant at Elaberei. Haile Selassie's ban on trade unions further attracted foreign capital. The Emperor's own efforts, backed by large sums of US capital, concentrated on developing

Ethiopia's industrial capacity in the central Shoa province at the heart of the empire. But by 1970 Eritrea still accounted for over a third of the industrial activity of Ethiopia and Eritrea combined.

The upsurge in fighting in the mid 1970s between the new regime in Ethiopia and the liberation fronts severely disrupted Eritrean industrial production. The Derg dismantled and transported whole factories to Addis Ababa and thousands of workers fled at the time of the government's Red Terror campaign either as refugees or to join the fronts. By the end of 1977 the fronts controlled all of Eritrea except Asmara and two other towns, but were unable to operate most of the factories for lack of raw materials and missing or damaged parts. In spite of the difficulties, the EPLF were able to operate the power stations in all the towns they occupied, maintain telephone communications and water supplies, and run some smaller factories including the Keren groundnut and incense processing plants.

The EPLF made maximum use of the period 1977-78 to expand their light industries in the base area, bringing out machinery and raw materials from the towns they captured. Thousands of skilled and semi-skilled workers joined the EPLF to be employed in the workshops of Sahel province and in operating the newly acquired plant and equipment. Most of the workers we met on our trip had joined the front at this time. The EPLF estimate that in 1977 alone the number of skilled workers in the EPLF increased threefold; by the end of the year they were producing millions of pounds worth of material and covering 80% of the needs of the front.

Since the withdrawal of the fronts to their base areas in mid 1978 the EPLF's industrial sector has continued to expand, albeit at a lesser rate than in the previous years. A sound technological base is being established which will assure the economic viability of a future peaceful Eritrea.

### *6.2 An Economic Policy for Liberation*

Self-reliance is one of the watch-words of the Eritrean revolution. During our visit we were witnesses to the fact that this is no empty slogan but is integral to all the economic activity of the EPLF. At the present time, self-reliance is the means for satisfying the EPLF's material needs. For the future, it is seen as the strategy for improving the overall productive capacity of the Eritrean people and as providing the basis for a non-aligned Eritrea with a high degree of autonomy from external forces.

No country can be independent of external trade relations. There will always be materials that cannot be found locally, and products and machines that cannot be produced economically on the domestic market. The EPLF envisage that an independent Eritrea would promote trade relations based on mutual advantage and seek

economic assistance free of political strings. But it sees trade restrictions as necessary to maximise the use of local natural resources and existing skills in order to meet the needs of Eritrean workers and peasants rather than those of foreign or local owners of large-scale capital or of feudal landowners (see Appendix 2a EPLF's National Democratic Programme, Section 2). The EPLF explains its emphasis on self-reliance in these terms:

'In an economically backward Third World country like Eritrea, given the domination of world markets by the imperialist countries, this policy (of self-reliance) is a necessary precondition for the establishment of an independent and developed economy...'

The pursuance of a policy of self-reliance is essential for the total independence and liberation of a society. Politically it is the only means to complete freedom. Economically it is likewise the only means, given... prevailing international conditions, that enables a people to develop their economic potential depending on their own material and human resources. Socially, it is an essential liberating process, emphasising as it does working cooperatively and collectively to satisfy your own needs. Dependence breeds subservience and lack of self-confidence. Freedom from dependence enhances a people's independence of thinking, innovativeness, perseverance and pride in work and struggle.' (EPLF, *Self-Reliance in the Economic Field*, 1982).

On our visit we were able to witness the effects of this policy — the extraordinary self-confidence and inventiveness of the work force, and the atmosphere of enthusiasm and of cooperative working. In the EPLF base area the workshops and services we visited were cooperatives, where workers were discussing the day-to-day problems of production, receiving further education, or training others. Their commitment to the EPLF's struggle is a major force in the motivation and cohesion of these cooperatives. EPLF personnel receive no wages and we saw no money being used by them during our visit. The EPLF provides only for its workers' and fighters' basic needs for food, shelter and health care. Everyone suffers the hardships entailed in Eritrea's protracted struggle.

The EPLF administers larger areas of liberated territory than earlier liberation movements in Africa and Latin America. In these areas it is not only producing for the war effort, but attempting a far-reaching social transformation. In its own words:

'Not only has so much work been done relying on our fighters and organised masses, but a rich experience and confidence in organised collective work, a new awareness and confidence in being able to accomplish feats of amazing and ingenious work relying on one's own determined and organised effort, and an understanding of the fact that the best and quickest results could be achieved through voluntary collective work, has also been gained. The long-term effect of this new awareness and confidence is most important, for it will be essential in

the struggle to come to reconstruct and develop our economy, to lay the base for a developed socialist society.' (EPLF, *Self-Reliance in the Economic Field*, 1982)

### 6.3 *Equipment and Finance*

Self-reliance is not only an ideological driving force but also to a large extent an economic necessity. Given the EPLF's current lack of external assistance, it is imperative to minimise any inputs that must be paid for with scarce foreign exchange. The workshops and production units we visited in the base area were remarkable examples of the EPLF's policy in practice, for it was clear that the establishment and running of these workshops involved very little financial cost. The major external costs to the EPLF are: the purchase of fuel to run its extensive transport operation, generators, industrial machines and the mechanised units of the EPLA, the purchase of some heavy ammunition when insufficient supplies are captured, as well as the purchase of food for EPLF personnel.

In spite of some external assistance from sympathetic governments the EPLF says that its main and most regular source of income is from the mass organisations in and outside Eritrea. Inside the country, given the drought and the low level of agricultural production, the main financial source is the clandestine organisation of workers in the occupied Eritrean towns. Outside Eritrea, major funds are provided by the mass organisations in the Middle East, where wages are relatively high. The EPLF mass organisations in Italy, West Germany, Britain and the United States are further important contributors. After our return from Eritrea we witnessed a small example of such fund-raising at a May Day festival organised by the Eritrean Workers' Association in the UK. The EPLF thus operates an extensive voluntary taxation system among the Eritrean diaspora. Since 1980, EPLF taxation on the import and export of goods leaving and entering liberated areas of Eritrea has provided some additional income, as has the commercial use of parts of its lorry fleet in the Sudan whenever there are trucks not being used for the transport of goods into Eritrea.

### *From Shells to Ploughshares*

The vast majority of the materials used by the EPLF is captured from the Ethiopian army in battle, from overrun Ethiopian camps and positions, and from planned raids on Ethiopian-held towns. Ironically, therefore, it is Ethiopia and its foreign backers who are indirectly providing the material support of the Eritrean revolution. The input here is enormous. Apart from some heavy ammunition it is the only source of arms for the EPLF which now fields an army better equipped than most African states. Likewise, the EPLF is serviced by captured trucks, generators, metal and woodworking

machines, mobile garages, X-ray units, and sewing machines.

The most remarkable aspect of this captured material is the EPLF's efficiency in using it. Every visitor to the base areas comments on the ingenuity of the workers in the EPLF workshops. Not only are spare parts, cooking utensils, teaching materials, aids for the disabled, and hospital equipment put together from the captured debris of war, but the EPLF is also constructing many of the machines necessary for producing these items. From our own observations the most useful materials are the wood from ammunition boxes, shell and bomb casings, springs and sheet metal from destroyed vehicles. The process is almost literally from shells to ploughshares.

Every available material is put to good use or recycled. The containers in which goods arrive from Port Sudan are used to construct the rooms of the camouflaged buildings in which it is necessary to maintain the dust-free conditions needed for carrying out operations or for housing sensitive equipment. The watches of EPLF fighters are sent back for repair in workshops in the base area. Once totally beyond repair they are stripped and the parts sorted to be used in other watches. Even the black plastic sandals which all EPLF fighters wear are locally produced and then recycled.

Clearly the fact that so much material is captured provides a limitation to the description of the Eritrean economy in the EPLF-held areas as self-reliant. The economy will have to adapt when, with eventual peace, this means of supply is no longer available. Furthermore, with the return of the Eritrean diaspora, this important source of external assistance will no longer be available. However, at that time Eritrea will be in a strong position to attract grants and loans for the reconstruction process from sympathetic governments, and human and material resources currently committed to the war will be free to be reallocated to productive activities.

#### 6.4 Transport and Production

In the early 1970s the EPLF's sole means of transport was camels and donkeys. Building roads in the areas under EPLF control is imperative for the transport of arms and fighters, and with the drought, for the delivery of urgently needed food relief to the local population. By 1975 the EPLF had constructed the 'Liberation Road' — its variant of the Ho Chi Minh trail — stretching from the border with Sudan in the north, through Sahel province and the highlands, to the border with the Ethiopian province of Tigray to the south. A ten-ton load can now be transported from the base area to the trenches of the Halhal or Nacfa front lines overnight. Previously, shifting the same load could take eight days and use 30 camels. The EPLF estimates that the Transport Department has constructed over

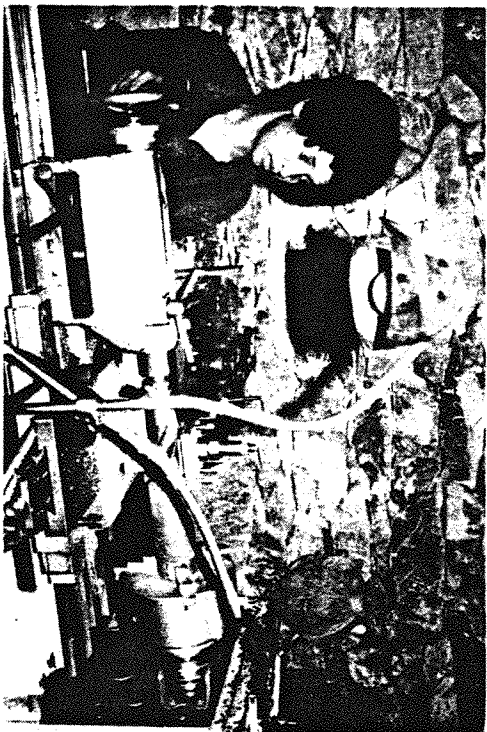


'Challenge Road', built by the EPLF in 1982, has 37 hairpin bends in 12 kms.

1,000 kilometres of road through rugged mountainous terrain.

With the limited technology at the EPLF's disposal, some of these roads represent major feats of engineering. The most dramatic route we travelled was the 'Challenge Road', cut in 1982 into the precipitous eastern slopes of the Sahel mountains to give direct access to the North East Sahel front. This road twists and winds its way from valley floor to mountain ridge with 37 hairpins built over fortress-like supporting walls in a stretch 12 kilometres long. Swiss engineers, in peacetime, without air attack, would be proud of it.

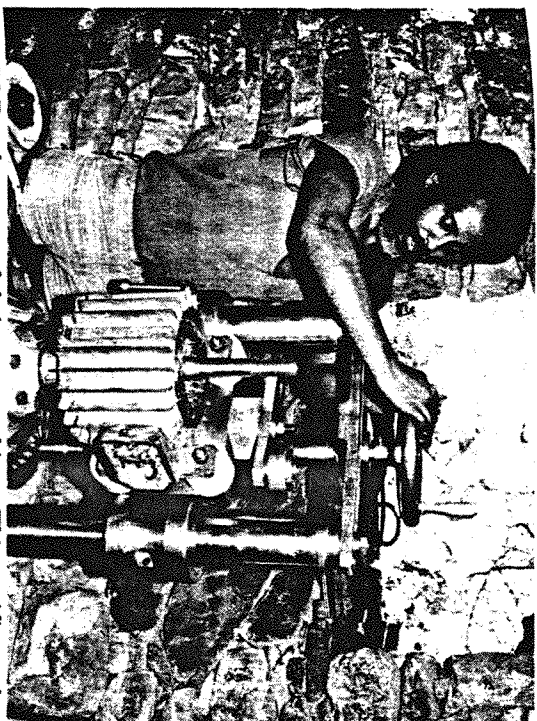
With our particular interest in economic development in the EPLF areas, we made a point of visiting the workshops and production units which we describe in this section. All were hidden under thick thorn trees to avoid air attacks from Ethiopian planes. The camouflage was often so effective that, save for the muted sound of whirling engines and machines or the banging of hammers against metal, we could have been walking in a deserted valley. The experience of leaving nomads in a hot and arid valley to enter a large area cut into the hillside full of shining machines and a skilled work force was not merely dramatic. It was moving at a step from medieval to modern times. The skill levels are illustrated by the She'eb vehicle repair garage — a number of different but related workshops. The garage is one of a network which services, repairs and rebuilds the EPLF's transport fleet. In She'eb only civilian vehicles are



*Women operating a lathe in the workshops of the EPLF base area.*

overhauled. It has 150 full-time trained staff, half of whom work with mobile repair units in more remote areas. Those responsible for individual workshops have university qualifications in mechanical engineering, and 65% of the workforce has over ten years garage experience mainly from past jobs in the Eritrean towns or abroad. A high proportion, particularly among the younger workers, are women — we estimated one in four overall. For example, at the workshops, five girls aged between 12 and 14 were training in the electrical repair shop. The She'eb workshops also serve as the main training area for mechanics, who follow two-year courses. We met a number of students from the Revolution School (see Chapter 9), who were being given basic engineering experience.

The technology in the workshops was sophisticated and included a number of lathes, drills, saws, a truck brake tester and electrical testing equipment. One of the engineers at She'eb estimated that they could make 60% of the vehicle spare parts in their own workshops. The majority of the machines which the workshops used had been made by themselves. This included a power saw, a metal planing machine, a hydraulic press, metal grinders, an angular metal-bending machine, a tubular metal-bending machine and a forge. They were constructed from a variety of materials including broken truck springs, chassis members, tank armour, shell casings and the lead from truck batteries. The ingenuity of the mechanics was plain to see — Land Rovers, criticised for being under-powered, were being



*The EPLF make many of their own machines. This rectifier makes use of welded shell casings.*

fitted with more powerful 6-cylinder Toyota engines, while their own engines were bored out to increase their cylinder capacity from 1600 cc. to 2400 cc. and fitted with larger diameter Toyota pistons.

Shakin Garage is situated in Sudan, south of the main port of Port Sudan. This garage maintains the transport fleet that brings supplies, particularly emergency food, from the port to Eritrea. The garage is extensive, employing 55 full-time mechanics, 15 of whom are women. Even after our arrival after dusk it was a hive of activity. At any one time around 15 trucks are being given a complete overhaul taking four days, while a further 10 are undergoing a day-long service to ensure a trouble-free return to Eritrea. In spite of difficulties in obtaining spare parts, trucks are extremely well maintained to squeeze the maximum use from them. The workshop was well equipped. Many of the machines had been captured during the course of the war, including the two large generators, removed from the Eritrean towns of Decamhare and Keren, which power the whole complex.

#### *'Vodka-Cola' Trucks*

At Shakin the inventiveness of the Eritrean revolution was again transparent. Normal trucks were being converted into oil tankers on site with the containers built from sheets of scrap metal. Trucks were being re-assembled using parts originating from different

countries, with 'engine swapping' commonplace. The workers describe the hybrid results as 'Vodka-Cola' trucks since most of the vehicles supplied to the Ethiopian government were American up to 1974 and Soviet after 1977. One of the workshop's home-made creations was a tyre vulcanising machine for retreading truck tyres. The Suakin mechanics had simply copied the principle from an imported model and built one themselves, which now operates adjacent to the original machine.

We also visited a number of other workshops and production units in the base area. The watches of EPLF fighters are fixed in an underground watch repair shop. This service, like all others, is free. Broken watches are collected from the EPLF units, including those operating behind the Ethiopian lines. They are registered and marked, so that they can eventually be returned to the same individual, and sent to this workshop which is run by 28 staff, most of whom have been disabled in the fighting. A few staff had watch-repairing skills before they joined the EPLF and are now teaching their skills to others. We interviewed one woman who had lost her leg in battle in 1980. After two years' rehabilitation in the camp for the disabled at Orola, she began work in this workshop. She told us that the work provided an essential outlet for her energies and for her determination to continue to contribute to the revolution in spite of her serious injuries. She also spends three hours a day



*Workshops, clinics and schools are heavily camouflaged against air attack. This is the EPLF's watch repair workshop.*

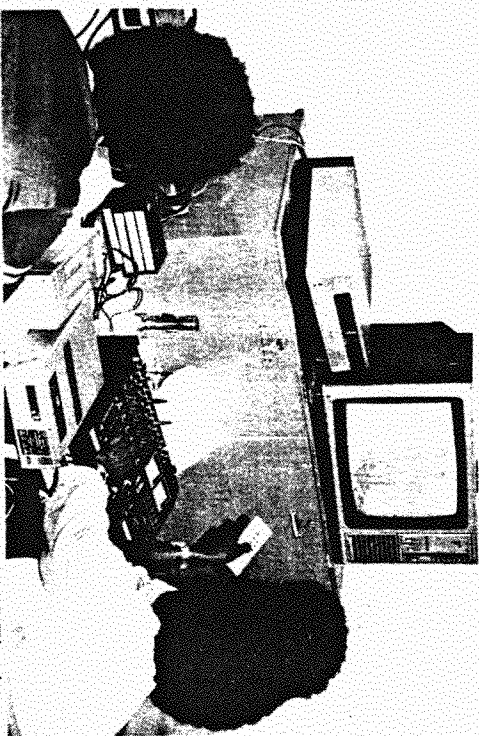
studying for higher school grades.

The radio repair workshop consists of a complex of three separate workshops — one maintains the EPLF's wireless communication equipment, another fixes personal radios and cassette recorders, and the third carries out research and training. The workers we met were remarkably well informed about world affairs and told us the BBC World Service provides their main source of information. They were well aware of the sympathetic stance of the British Labour Party regarding the EPLF and told us that fighters in the trenches had stayed up to follow both the 1979 and 1983 British General Election results as they emerged. They also showed an avid interest in other topical changes of political power abroad, such as in the succession of Chernenko in the USSR and in the US presidential elections.

The radio workshops were staffed by highly qualified technicians — six of those we met had university degrees. The radio repair training centre has so far provided four month courses with a further four month follow-up for 80 trainees who had already been radio operators in the field and had at least tenth grade education. They would subsequently work either at workshops on the front line or become 'barefoot technicians' able to do on-the-spot repairs even during battle.

The printing photographic and cinematographic workshops are all sub-sections of the EPLF Information Department. In the Printing Section we were shown the range of materials published by the EPLF, who estimate that they have produced some 200,000 copies of 72 different textbooks for EPLF schools, adult education classes and technical courses (see Chapter 9). Examples of these textbooks are displayed around the walls of the section from which orders are despatched. Primary education is in the Tigrinya and Tigre languages, but publications are also produced in the languages of the Afar and Kunama nationalities. A magazine is produced in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, for the Ethiopian prisoners of war held by the EPLF. Leaflets in Amharic are produced aimed at persuading the Ethiopian troops in Eritrea of the justice of the EPLF's struggle. These leaflets also are left in places where the Ethiopian army is likely to find them.

The Photographic Section is well equipped with basic darkroom equipment. Teams of Information Department journalists and photographers follow developments all over Eritrea. Their photographs are printed and used in the EPLF's magazines and publications, and photographic exhibitions are sent to the front lines and to the EPLF offices abroad. We were shown photos of the recent EPLF victories at Tessenei and Mersa Teklai, and at the time of our visit the Cinematographic Section was busy editing a video film of the battle of Mersa Teklai. Copies of the video film of the capture



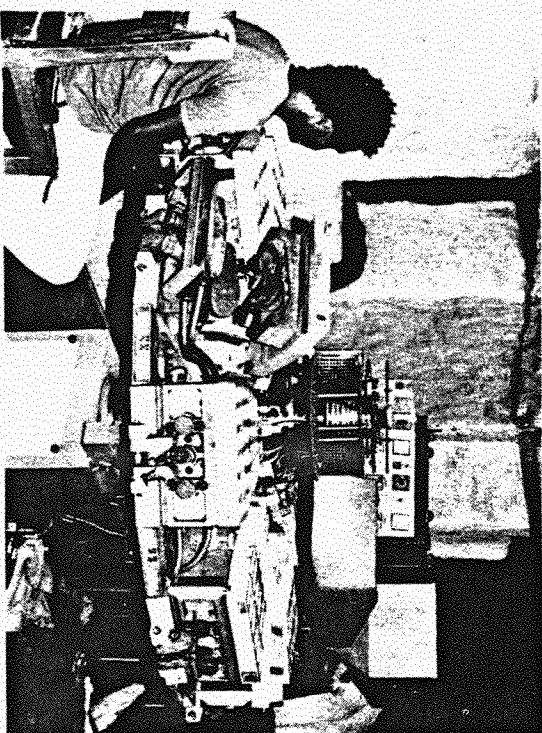
*The Information Department edits the video of the EPLF's victory on the NE Sahel front.*

of Tessenet have already been sent to the EPLF mass organisations in Europe.

The EPLF have set up a number of plants for processing food. These include flour mills, often powered by engines from damaged Ethiopian trucks, and bakeries for which the base area workshops have designed and built both electric and diesel heated ovens. The latter have reduced cooking time and led to important savings in scarce firewood. Reflecting the Italian past, a spaghetti unit is operating in the camp for the displaced and produces around 50 kilograms a day, covering a portion of local needs and providing some nutritional variety to the diet.

EPLF fighters have no uniform, although most carry at least one item of captured military clothing — a shirt or a pair of trousers, or a belt or some leggings. The one identifying feature of the EPLF fighter is black plastic sandals. A small factory, set up in the base area in 1979 now produces 600 to 650 pairs daily. Black PVC granules are fed into one end of an Italian injection-moulding machine, while the sandals are stamped out at the other. All that remains is to fix the metal buckle.

PVC is expensive and difficult to obtain and transport from the European suppliers. EPLF fighters make temporary repairs with a hot knife blade to make their sandals last longer; but when they are



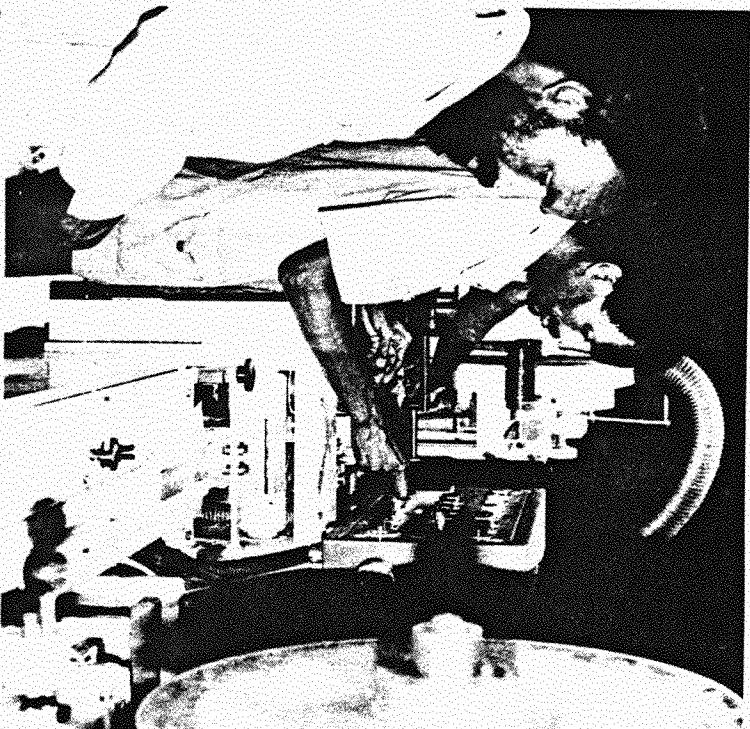
*Making the black plastic sandals worn by all EPLF fighters.*

finally beyond repair, the sandals are collected from the different EPLF units to be recycled. The base area workshops have designed and made machines which wash these used sandals, chop them into small pieces and granulate them. The raw material used for new sandals is then a 50-50 mix of new granules and recycled granules. Some sandals have been supplied to the displaced people in the camps run by ERA, and plans are under way to extend production to supply other sectors of the Eritrean civilian population.

#### *Sanitary Towel Production*

While the sandal factory can be seen as an example of EPLF import substitution, this is not the case for the EPLF's factory for producing sanitary towels, a product which previously had been used only by a tiny elite of educated urban women. The bulk of the population had to make do with much less hygienic methods. Tigre women in the lowlands, following traditional taboos, sit inside a tent sited over absorbent sand when menstruating. They would prepare food for the family in this tent and pass the prepared meal under the flap of the tent to the men outside.

In such a context the mass production and distribution of sanitary towels is revolutionary. This apparently simple measure is transforming both the self-image and the role of Eritrean women.



*Sanitary towel machine bought with funds from the National Women's Associations of Europe.*

The machine for producing sanitary towels was bought with funds raised by the National Unions of Eritrean Women in Europe, who continue to provide the funds to buy raw materials. Production started in February 1984 and the modern machine now produces at a rate of around 9,000 towels per hour. Before machine production was introduced, sanitary towels were hand made with gauze and Sudanese raw cotton by teams of women from the camps for the displaced. EPLF women fighters are the first to be supplied, but sanitary towels are slowly being introduced to the local (nomadic) population of the base area. When stocks have been built up the EPLF will produce for the civilian population in other areas. The Hygiene Department which is responsible for this factory also has plans to develop local soap production. The Department has qualified chemists with the necessary experience but has yet to find a source for raw materials.

In spite of the severe difficulties imposed by the war, the EPLF has established a substantial light industrial sector in the base areas. Industrial development in Eritrea will face a very different set of problems when a peaceful solution is finally found. But the EPLF's achievements to date provide a strong argument within the overall case for the economic viability of a future self-governing Eritrea.

## *Food and Famine*

Agriculture is central to Eritrea's economy. Four fifths of the population earn their living from the land, either from settled agriculture or from livestock rearing. Now, following years of intermittent drought and war, food production in Eritrea is in crisis, and reports are reaching the outside world of population displacement and famine. Our own visit, needing to assess the severity of this situation, looked at how the EPLF is coping with the emergency. But the famine must also be put in the overall context of food production in Eritrea.

### *7.1 Agriculture in Crisis*

Farming in Eritrea faces three major problems. The first is that the feudal relations up to the 1970s impoverished the landless and poor peasants, and caught them in a cycle of hunger, disease and debt. Second, throughout the colonial period Eritrean production had been insufficient to feed the whole population. Imports, whether from Ethiopia or from Sudan, have been necessary for many years. Third, Eritrea lies in the Sahelian rainfall zone of Africa and Eritrean agriculture is vulnerable to frequent years of drought. The current famine, caused in part by the drought conditions of the last four years, is discussed later in this section.

Eritrea has three major agricultural regions, of which the largest is the lowlands to the east and west of the central highland area (see Map 3). With an elevation of up to 600 metres, the lowlands are flat or undulating with fertile soil but little rainfall. With the exception of a few irrigation schemes, mainly in the east, most of the crops are rain-fed. Sorghum, sesame, cotton, maize and beans are grown. Some regions produce surpluses which in the past provided the towns with grain.

The second area, the Green Belt, is a narrow strip running between the eastern lowlands and the highlands, which receives rain twice a year enabling a wider variety of crops to be grown. Agriculture here is more intensive and maize, coffee and some vegetables are cultivated.

Finally, the highlands above 1500 metres have a cooler climate and sufficient rain to allow, in normal years, the cultivation of wheat, barley, millet, teff (a grain specific to this part of Africa) and maize.

All available land is used and family plots are relatively small — most being between one and four hectares. Erosion has been a major problem. Over-utilisation and grazing of the soil cover has left the earth exposed. On the steep slopes the topsoil is washed away by the infrequent, but short and heavy rains.

The Italians developed estates and commercial farms in parts of the lowlands and some agricultural mechanisation was introduced. But elsewhere in Eritrea farming has remained at the level of peasant subsistence production using rudimentary techniques. Wooden ploughs with either wooden or iron blades are drawn by oxen or camels. Sowing, weeding and harvesting is done by hand using the simplest of tools.

Although her mineral wealth may prove more important in the distant future, agriculture is still Eritrea's main economic resource, and developing self-sufficiency is an EPLF priority. How realistic is this, given a predominantly peasant production and Eritrea's recent history of cereal deficits? There are four ways in which Eritrea's food production can be boosted: (1) through land redistribution; (2) through technical improvements; (3) through expanding the areas under cultivation; and (4) through prioritising food for the basic needs of local consumption over other agricultural production. Some of these measures are already being implemented in the areas under EPLF control.

### *Land Redistribution*

A description of the first phase of the EPLF's land reform was given in Chapter 2. The second phase envisages the reorganisation of production, and anticipates 'cooperatives' in which farmers pool their existing individual plots to farm the land together. So far, most cooperatives have been established on land allocated by the local land distribution committee. The more usual form of cooperation is through 'mutual assistance teams', where poor peasants who have received land on adjacent plots during the land reform, share tools, oxen and labour. In the recent years of drought, mutual aid teams have become an important structure for the distribution of seeds and tools in programmes launched by the Eritrean Relief Association to prevent destitute peasants leaving the land.

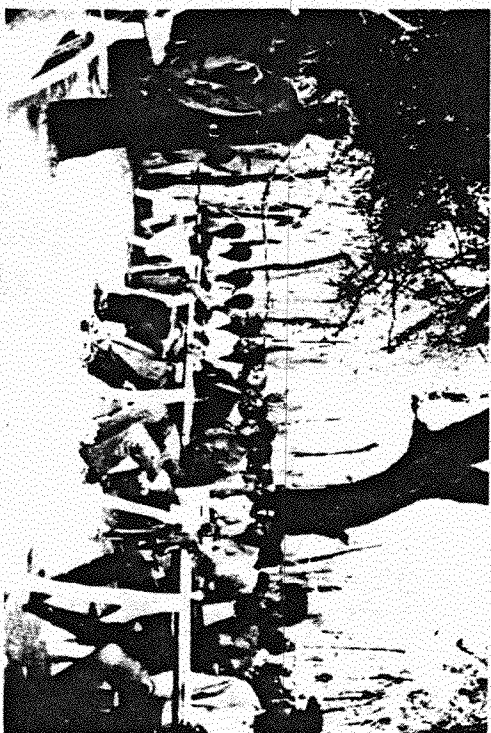
It still remains to be seen how cooperatives and organised large-scale production will develop under the EPLF. Certainly the experience of the Ethiopian government's state farms has not been positive, but these have often involved forced recruitment of workers, highly authoritarian management, and low wages. Some of the former foreign-run commercial farms in Eritrea, particularly in the Gash-Seit area, are being run with some success by the EPLF and are providing some of the food needed by the front. However, the

conversion of small-scale peasant production into larger farms may well not be welcomed by peasants whose social security in times of drought has been their ownership of land. In the future, the provision of food and credit to cooperatives during periods of drought may help overcome poor peasants' attachment to individual plots. In addition, the eventual return of refugees from Sudan could provide a workforce, already separated from traditional land holdings, for future large farms on newly exploited land.

### *Technical Progress*

Food production in Eritrea is being increased through technical improvements both in farming and on the land itself. The link with redistribution is crucial to the EPLF's success. Otherwise, as the experience of other countries suggests, such as that of India during the 'Green Revolution', technical improvements help wealthier farmers and landowners at the expense of poorer farmers, who lack the resources to pay for the agricultural inputs or are unable to repay their loans.

In 1975 the EPLF set up its Agriculture Department with numerous qualified agronomists, foresters and veterinary doctors. This has been able to make a significant impact in spite of the lack of resources. An EPLF agricultural and technical school has been established. Each village committee selects a local person to attend the basic course which covers agronomy, animal husbandry and the



*Agricultural class, Marib, Seraye Province.*

production and repair of simple agricultural implements. At the time of our visit we were told that nearly 700 peasants had received this education and were acting as extension agents in their local communities.

The Agricultural Department has been active in making available local tools through providing the necessary equipment and training for the formation of local blacksmith cooperatives. Some twenty of these cooperatives now exist making ploughs, hoes and scythes which are sold at prices well below those of the local market. Such tools have also been distributed free to mutual assistance teams of the poorest farmers, whom the Agriculture Department also provide with chemicals for treating seed and storage of grains, as well as the training to ensure their safe use. Once better rains return such measures are likely to cut grain losses significantly. In future, the Agricultural Department hopes to exploit Eritrea's mineral wealth in potash as a fertiliser, and to make available improved seed varieties adapted to the local conditions of soil and rainfall.

In the displaced people's camps, poultry production cooperatives have already been established. We saw a unit in the Solomuna camp for which the EPLF workshops, in characteristically inventive fashion, have made an incubator which is plumbed to a boiler and has the capacity to hatch 3,000 fertilised eggs at a time.

The Veterinary Section of the Agriculture Department also has been active in training and equipping teams of 'barefoot vets'. Five such teams are now operating, providing vaccination and basic curative services to both the nomadic population and the settled population, for whom oxen are vital for ploughing. But these teams face a mammoth task during the current drought as animals, weakened by hunger, are being decimated by epidemics of rinderpest and anthrax.

A Forestry, Soil and Water Section has been established to protect the environment against erosion and reduction in soil fertility. Work is beginning on terracing, afforestation and the management of surface water through building small dams in the gullies. This latter work, which we saw in progress, is vital for the long-term agricultural security of Eritrea. It is especially relevant for the highland areas where erosion and soil exhaustion is already far advanced. But it is difficult to undertake the large-scale works needed while the fighting continues, since such schemes immediately become targets for air attack. This underlines how important it is for Eritrea's future livelihood that a peaceful solution is found before the ecological destruction becomes irreversible.

### *New Land*

To boost its food production Eritrea can expand the area under

Mike Goldwater NETWORK



*Villagers in Adi-Sesa, southern Eritrea, construct dam walls to hold back water for irrigation when the rains come.*

cultivation. The eastern lowlands provide the most potential, as the highlands are already overcrowded and over-farmed. In the east, six rivers flood onto the coastal plain, allowing large areas at the bottom of the escarpment to be cultivated. In a year of reasonable rainfall, this area is very productive and can produce four crops a year. Production here was traditionally organised through agricultural committees which allocated the tasks of maintaining the earth barriers and directing the water flow to the different plots. This structure provides a good base for future collective organisation and important technical improvements can be made by replacing the earth dams with 'gabions' — wire mesh boxes filled with stones. In the western lowlands, agricultural potential is considerable in the areas around Tessenei and Om Hager.

A recent estimate gives a potential cultivable area in Eritrea of at least six and a half million acres. Three million acres were under cultivation by 1970. This is four times more than the figure provided by the British to the UN in 1950, on the basis of which Eritrea was characterised as economically unviable. A recent commentator has proposed that, were Eritrea's agricultural potential fully exploited,

it would be able 'to provide not only for its own requirements but to serve as a potential breadbasket for the neighbouring Arab and African markets.' (Araia Tsegai 1983). Not least, this unused potential could be put to use to provide work and food for the bulk of the returning refugee population. A further important food potential for Eritrea is coastal fishing in the Red Sea. But with the war it has gone severely into decline.

#### *Basic Needs*

Eritrea's ability to meet the basic food needs of its population depends on the prioritising of food crops for local consumption, as against non-food crops for local use and cash crops for export. The plantations established in the Italian period mainly produced cash crops for the Italian market. In order to avoid imports, Britain sought to make Eritrea self-sufficient in grain, fruit and vegetables. Under this policy the grain harvest quadrupled between 1939 and 1946. (Trevaskis 1960).

After Eritrea's annexation in 1962, the Ethiopian regime made increasing use of the region as a source of foreign exchange, and concentrated on the cultivation of fruit and vegetables for export while local grain production declined markedly. Those plantations which are now farmed by the EPLF continue to produce fruit and vegetables, but for the needs of the front and the local population. In the future, the EPLF plan to prioritise the plantation areas for local food and for the production of raw materials necessary for development of local industry. The example we were given was that locally produced cotton could supply an EPLF textile factory for which there are already skilled Eritrean workers, as much of the labour force of the Barattolo cotton factory is now in EPLF-held areas.

In conclusion, Eritrea has immense potential to develop its own food production, although much of its current production is threatened by over-cultivation. To put food production in Eritrea back on its feet after the years of war and drought, large-scale programmes are needed — to arrest the erosion and to utilise the unused potential. Such projects will require major grants and loans, and many can only start when they are secure from military attack or sabotage. Peace is a precondition for an Eritrea free from famine.

#### *7.2 The Current Famine*

In common with other countries in the Sahelian climatic zone, Eritrea has a long experience of periods of drought and poor harvests. To some extent Eritrea's agricultural economy has adapted to this. There is a yearly migration to Sudan of poorer farmers who supplement their income by wage labour in the 'Green Triangle' of

the fertile grain-producing area to the south of Khartoum.

The Eritrean peasant farmer can usually cope with the problems caused by a single isolated harvest failure, as in a good year surpluses are stored as a safeguard against bad years, and there may be some cash savings from past work of a family member as a migrant labourer. The difficulties become severe if there is drought for any longer. If drought persists, a vicious circle sets in. Family food stocks run down, self-rationing is imposed and people eat less. The heavy work of cultivation becomes increasingly onerous, and farmers weakened by malnourishment may have to cut back on the areas cultivated. When little is left of the family's grain, and when cash savings are depleted, farmers may have little alternative but to consume the grain put aside as seed and sell oxen and tools, leading to a reduced harvest the following year. After the 1974 famine in northern Ethiopia, only half of the land usually cultivated was sown in 1975.

In the early 1920s four successive years of drought led to a massive famine and the death of up to a third of Eritrea's population. Now, 60 years later, Eritrea is once again in the grip of a major famine. The activities of the relevant EPLF Departments and of the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), who are responsible for the relief operation in the EPLF-administered areas, have had to be prioritised towards 'emergency' programmes.

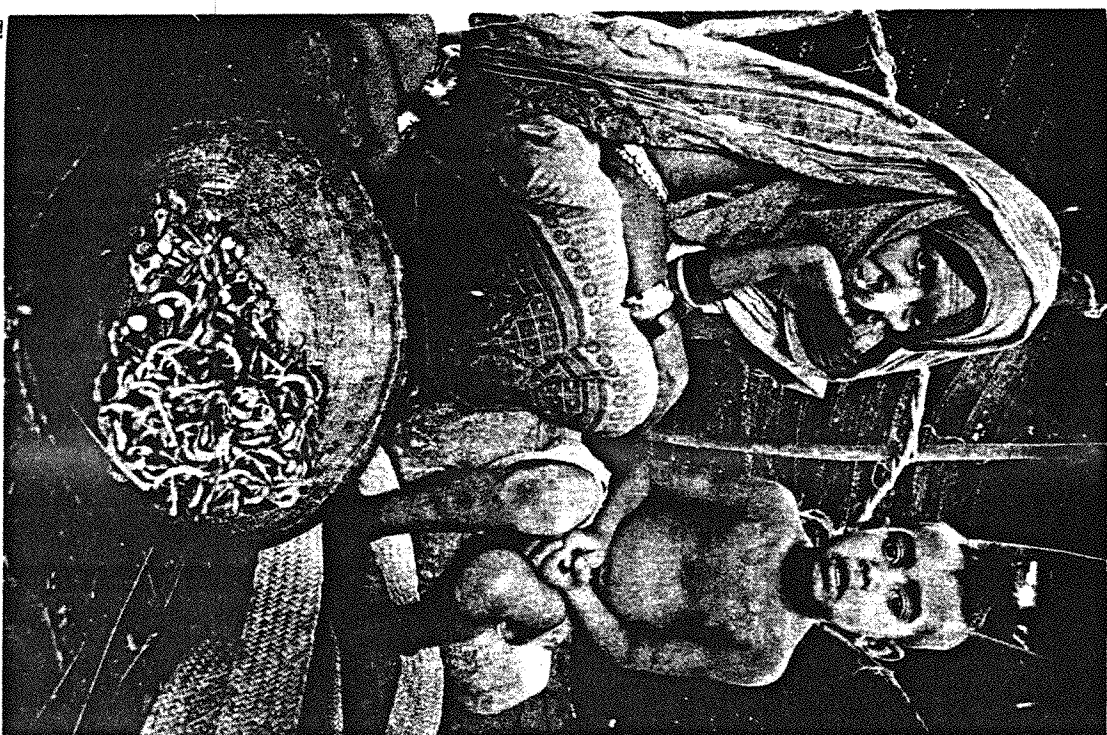
### Poor Rains

Rainfall in Eritrea has been poor for 8 of the 14 years since 1970. In particular, large tracts of Eritrea faced drought in 1980, 1981, 1982 and 1983. While some villagers harvested practically nothing in all four years, most would have harvested some grain in one or two of these years, but not nearly enough to cover a family's basic needs. 1983 appears to have been a particularly bad year for Eritrea's peasant farmers. An aid worker who visited a normally surplus-producing area in western Eritrea in October 1983 reported:

'Quite striking is the fact that all along the route from Kassala (in Sudan, near the border with Eritrea) to Shelalo there is evidence of inadequate rainfall and subsequent poor harvests. Huge plots of cultivatable land planted in May or June show no crop growth at all, and in many cases one can see tiny seedlings of less than 3 inches that have withered and died.' (Smith 1983).

Two months later an ERA report summed up the situation:

'In the last rainy season, in the areas covered by the first rainy season, the rains were extremely poor and did not come at the right time. In the beginning of June, it started to rain in many parts of these areas. However from mid-June up to the end of July, very crucial periods for



*These wild pods are all this family has to eat. They must be boiled for hours to destroy the poisons present.*

Mike Goldwater/NETWORK

cultivation, there was virtually no rain in most parts of the areas covered by the first rainy season. Furthermore, the rains that came after July were inadequate and did not last long enough for late crops. Consequently a large part of the country was left barren with little or no harvest... The condition of the people is bad and is growing more serious by the day. People have little or nothing to eat. In many of the drought-stricken areas it is not uncommon to see people trying to subsist on roots and wild fruit, some of which are not fit for human consumption.' (ERA 1983).

Independent observers from European voluntary agencies later substantiated that many starving Eritreans were reduced to eating berries. Even Eritreans with some savings were becoming increasingly hard pressed. Both the traditional surplus producing areas of south western Eritrea and the grain-growing areas of Sudan had experienced harvest failures in 1983. At the time of our visit, grain in Eritrea had more than doubled in price to 125 birr (£45) for a 100 kg sack, with which a family of five could survive for only six weeks. Official statistics estimate per capita income in Ethiopia and Eritrea at £100 per year. In Gedaret in Sudan, prices had reached a highest ever figure of 41 Sudanese pounds (£23) per sack, so that those Eritreans who had successfully found work on Sudanese farms could send back much less grain for their efforts.

### *Effects of the War*

But in many areas the war is having a more serious effect on food production than the drought. During our trip we were informed of many ways in which the military conflict was creating difficulties for farmers and grazers alike. Farmers near the Ethiopian-held areas risk losing their crop and food stocks during advances by Ethiopian forces, and time and labour must be spent to make safe hiding places for food and other possessions (see also Eisenloeffel & Ronnback 1983). The seventh Ethiopian offensive of 1983, in which the Ethiopian army, over a six month period, made thrusts into Barka and Senhit provinces, severely disrupted the farming and led farmers to abandon cultivation and flee to safer areas.

In April 1983, the Ethiopian government announced compulsory military service. Many young peasants were forcibly drafted into the army, while others fled to Sudan. By early 1984 the Khartoum office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 300 people a day were fleeing to Sudan from Eritrea and Ethiopia to join the 300,000 Eritrean and 150,000 Ethiopian refugees already living there. Many of these refugees were young people avoiding conscription. Conscription also had the effect of limiting the sale of grain between better-off and worse-off areas, as peasants were afraid to come to Ethiopian controlled market towns.

Ethiopian air bombardment, too, is causing many problems. Livestock herds are targets of bombing raids over EPLF-held territory, and we were told that over the years many thousands of cattle, camels, goats and sheep have been killed in such attacks. Agricultural work is constrained by the risk of air attack, particularly near the front lines, where work in the fields must be done at night. The effect is to reduce the area that can be cultivated and the quality of the cultivation.

The war limits the movement of the nomads' herds, thereby adding to the problems in specific areas of over-grazing and water scarcity. Large tracts of grass or crops are burnt to deny the guerrillas place for concealment. The mines left by Ethiopian troops when they abandon military positions are a danger both to grazing livestock and to the herders themselves. The EPLF try to clear these mines, but this is a time-consuming and labour-intensive process. The ERA told us that the villagers of two districts of Seraye province abandoned attempts to farm their land because their fields had been mined by the Ethiopian army.

In the coastal areas, trading and fishing is heavily restricted by the Ethiopians, who police with naval patrol boats. The ERA have recorded that 9,500 people have left three fishing villages in the Danakil (mainly to Sudan and Saudi Arabia) because of the restrictions on their only means of livelihood (ERA 1983).

### *A Million in Need*

The ERA also has produced detailed information on the extent and severity of the famine according to the numbers in each village in need of food assistance. Their overall picture indicated that well over a million people in the areas administered by the EPLF would need food assistance in 1984. This figure does not include those in the areas of Ethiopian administration. About a third of the ERA figure is in the provinces which are almost entirely under EPLF control — with over a third of a million in the Sahel and Barka provinces. The remainder are in the contested areas, with the highest concentrations in the highland provinces, where population densities are also greatest.

The figures warn of an incipient famine of dramatic proportions unless urgent action is taken. Behind the statistics for 'those in need of food assistance' are individuals — particularly women and children — wasting from malnourishment and accompanying ill health. ERA reports the incidence of malaria, tuberculosis and dysentery to be rapidly on the increase. Death from starvation has become increasingly common.

The ERA figures also indicate the extent to which the nomadic population has suffered from the drought. Weakened by insufficient

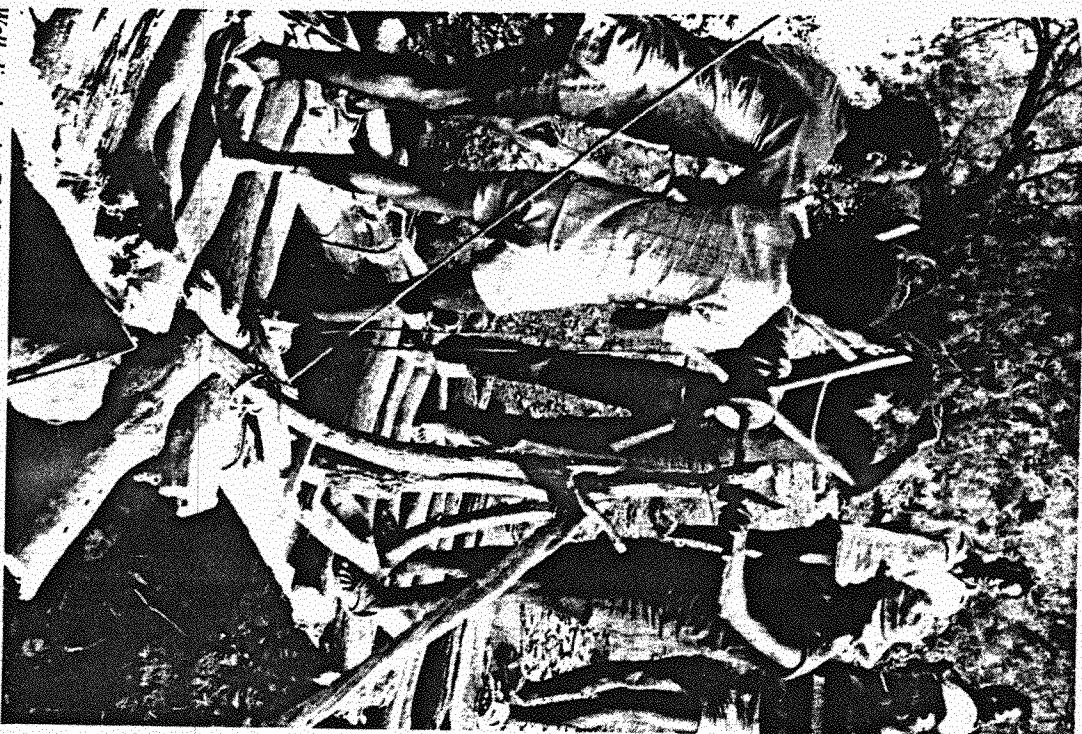
Mike Goldwater/NETWORK



*The drought affected an estimated 1.2 million Eritreans in 1984. This ten year old boy is suffering from severe malnutrition in Maiduba clinic, Seraye province.*

grazing and lack of water, their animals have become increasingly prone to disease. Thousands of animals have already died and many herders have lost nine-tenths of their livestock. In Adobetha, a district of Sahel province through which we passed, a recent ERA study showed that average animal ownership has decreased from a pre-1980 level of 34 goats, 4 sheep, 2.4 cattle, 1.0 camels and 0.48 donkeys per person to a level of 6.5 goats, 0.46 sheep, 0.18 cattle, 0.14 camels and 0.08 donkeys per person in 1983. This represents overall losses of between 80 and 90% of the livestock in this area. For the settled farming population, oxen are essential for ploughing and represent a peasant family's most prized possession. The death or sickness of an animal severely undermines the ability of poorer farmers to cultivate the land. Animals must be rented and the owner must be repaid at harvest time in grain. If the harvest is bad, poor farmers are quickly driven into debt.

Lack of drinking water is becoming critical over much of Eritrea. The wells we saw in Sahel province were either completely dry or were supplying only a fraction of the water of previous years. With two months to go before the main rains were expected, water was already strictly rationed; after the quantities needed for drinking and cooking, little was left for washing and personal hygiene. The nursery for orphans at Solomuna camp was suffering severe problems. The



*Well digging in Sahel province. This is an urgent priority in areas where wells are drying up, forcing the population to leave.*

possibility of moving the children to another site with a better supply of water was being investigated. The Revolution School nearby had not reopened a month after the half-term break because of the water shortages.

A senior water resources engineer sent by War on Want to Eritrea in March 1984 wrote in his report:

'The 1983 drought was particularly severe and it was estimated that close to 200,000 people in Sahel and Barka regions of Eritrea were affected. Present indications (March 1984) suggest that the 1984 drought is already potentially more severe than that of 1983. Water rationing has already started in many areas (two to three months earlier than in 1983) and unless substantial rains arrive by May the water situation will become very serious. If the rains arrive late in July as they did in 1983 the situation will be extremely serious in most areas.' (E. Thomas, Halcrow Water, 1984).

Lack of drinking water is the main reason for people leaving their villages. Given that a peasant family's only source of livelihood is the land, this decision is only taken when there really is no other choice. In the highlands so many wells have dried up that fetching water now often involves walking three to four hours. In one village it was reported that water was rationed so that a family of five would receive 20 litres to last five days, or about 1.5 pints per person per day. ERA are running 12 camps for displaced people whose total population now exceeds 70,000. This figure includes people who have fled from the war zones as well as from villages suffering from water and food scarcity. But the people in these camps at the moment make up only a small proportion of the vast numbers — estimated by ERA at over half a million — who have been displaced within Eritrea since the fighting began.

We interviewed women who had left their villages in Seraye province when the water supply became insufficient for even the most minimal needs of the village population. A typical story is that of Abrahel whom we spoke to in Solomuna camp in northern Sahel province.

#### *The Story of Abrahel*

For the last four years in Abrahel's village of Adi Gutkhula (in Gutchea district of Seraye province) the harvest has been very poor. In 1980 and 1981 Abrahel's family harvested small quantities, but in 1982 they harvested nothing. In 1983 the rains started in August but proved insufficient and again nothing was harvested. Over these years most villagers completely depleted all their reserves of grain. Those who had relatives in Asmara received some outside help in money or grain. Others just had to beg from those who had food. ERA had only been able to distribute small quantities. One such distribution, made in August 1983, gave a family of seven a hundred

kilo sack of grain. But this would scarcely last a month. No Ethiopian government distribution had ever taken place in the village. By September 1983 Abrahel's family had sold their ploughing oxen and other possessions. Water problems were becoming more and more severe. The children in the village were suffering badly from malnutrition. Unable to resist disease, many were dying.

In October, Abrahel left her village on foot with her two children along with 27 other families, carrying only the clothes they were wearing as everything else had been sold. She walked for two days to Maidema; from there she found a truck to Adi Tseta and another to the Mareb area where ERA run temporary transit camps and provide food. She stayed in this area for some 6 months before moving again to Solomuna camp where we met her. She told us she had heard that, of the original population of 400 families in her village, only 20 had stayed on. Those who had left had gone to find work wherever they heard reports that there had been some rain. Many left Eritrea altogether to go to Sudan or to the western part of Tigray province in Ethiopia, where harvests have been relatively good for the last few years. According to ERA's statistics 8,250 people abandoned their villages in Gutchea district in 1983.

In summary, Eritrea's population is heading for a major crisis — around a third of the population face increasing malnutrition and disease and need food assistance. Already large numbers have fled their homes and many have died. Outside assistance is urgently needed.

#### *7.3 The Scandal in Relief Assistance*

There is no disagreement about the severity of the food and water shortages in Eritrea. The figures released by the Ethiopian government through its Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) broadly substantiate ERA's own description of the scale of the problems. The RRC estimated grain yields for the 1983 harvest in the vicinity of the Eritrean capital, Asmara, to be less than one-sixth of average yields. In the RRC's report for 1984 they estimate 827,000 people in need of assistance in Eritrea. But the RRC does not publicly admit that they have no access to most of Eritrea.

As reports on the scale of the famine become wider known, more relief agencies accept that relief must go through channels other than the RRC and the voluntary agencies operating in the Ethiopian-held areas. Few, however, have spelt out these facts to the public. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) made front page news of the difficulties of bringing relief assistance to the affected areas. Carrying the headline 'Ethiopia — Over a Million Disaster Victims Out of Reach', the ICRC bulletin of May 1984 reported:

'Insecurity in many areas and the logistical problem of moving large amounts of food around a mountainous and underdeveloped country have left large sections of the civilian population especially in Eritrea, Tigray and north Wollo without hope of aid and on the brink of starvation. Relief workers operating in Eritrea and Tigray say children are already dying in large numbers.'

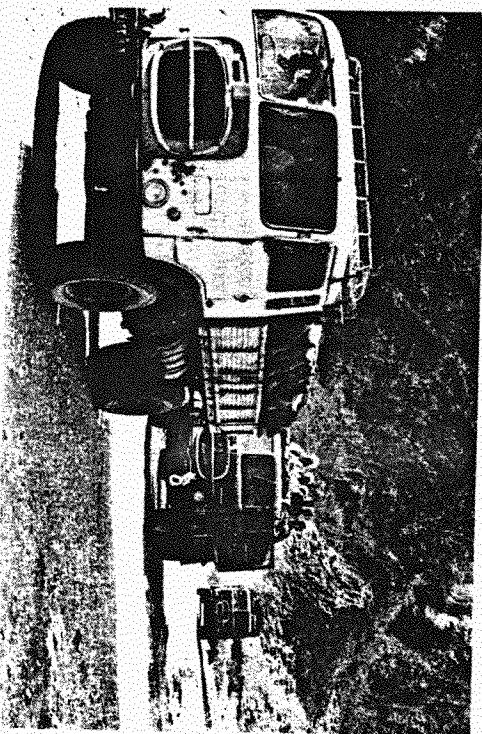
No mention is made by the Red Cross of the existence of ERA and its ability to reach those 'out of reach' in Eritrea. The Ethiopian government can enforce this silence on those agencies who have personnel in Ethiopia because the agencies fear action being taken against their programmes if they make the full facts known.

Our own conclusions on the question of access to famine victims are based on conversations with independent agency officials both before and after our visit, and with ERA officials in Eritrea, on interviews with Eritreans displaced by the drought and on the reports of both the RRC and agencies working inside Ethiopia. Firstly, we believe EPLF claims of administering 85% of the area of Eritrea to be likely to be accurate. These are the rural areas where the population most directly affected by the drought lives. For a number of reasons only a small number of these people will reach the RRC distribution points, which are limited to the Ethiopian-controlled towns. The route may be blocked by the military front lines, and the distances involved may be very large. The poorest farmers have neither the animals needed to carry the grain nor the money to rent them. Farmers are very reluctant to go to the towns, which are garrisons for the Ethiopian army, for fear of forced conscription. Peasants from the EPLF areas risk being turned back as they cannot produce the documentation to prove that they are members of an Ethiopian-sponsored peasant association.

#### *ERA's Distribution Efficiency...*

In spite of the difficulties ERA face, their relief programme is efficient and well-organised. Sorghum is bought in the eastern province of Sudan while food and medicines from the West are delivered by ship to Port Sudan. We saw the extensive base near Suakin which acts as a transit depot. Convoys of lorries transport the supplies to stores and distribution points in Eritrea. We saw such a convoy entering Eritrea, each lorry laden with 10 tons of grain. A dozen passengers were perched high on top of the sacks, as the lorries double up as the EPLF's public transport system.

The lorries are well-maintained and receive a service after every journey on their return to the garage at Suakin. There is no evidence of the abandoned and broken-down trucks which have so often characterised emergency relief operations elsewhere. On the contrary, the EPLF is able to repair its vehicles and manufacture many spare



*ERA trucks bring in sacks of grain from Port Sudan, April 1984.*

parts which, if imported, would be slow in arriving or difficult to obtain. The EPLF has developed a comprehensive network of roads which are serviced by 'petrol stations' — a single pump and tank carefully hidden under trees.

From the main distribution points, trucks deliver to the local relief committees. In more remote areas or in the areas beyond the Ethiopian lines where it is risky to take vehicles, food is transported on camels or mules. ERA's policy is to distribute food directly to the villages, so that farmers are encouraged to stay to cultivate next year's crop and thus avoid large-scale displacement which would have disastrous consequences for future food production.

The relief committees, which are part of the elected local People's Assemblies, assess the numbers in need, report their situation to ERA, and take responsibility for local distribution if and when the grain arrives. With poorer farmers well represented on these committees they are able to ensure the most needy are given priority. However, the amount ERA has had to distribute meets only a fraction of real needs. The committees must continually revise their lists by applying more stringent criteria so that only the most desperate receive assistance (Eisenloeffel and Ronnback 1983).

#### *...and Funding Crisis*

ERA told us that the amount of relief assistance they had received in the first four months of 1984 amounted to only US \$2.7 million.

This represents a mere 8% of ERA's emergency relief budget, which itself is calculated on only 30% of the total numbers of those in need. The effect of these serious shortfalls is already to be seen.

Major structural damage to Eritrean agriculture has already occurred, and it is imperative for the future prosperity of the area that this be halted. Food relief will be needed for a number of years to come even with the return of good rains. The extensive well-digging programme, for which the EPLF Construction Department is urgently seeking funds, should be given high priority. Assistance to these 'emergency' programmes must be accompanied by assistance to ERA's longer-term programmes to help the poorer farmers re-acquire tools and oxen, without being driven into the vicious circle of debt.

The quantity of aid ERA currently receives is small because the major donors — governments and the large multilateral agencies — either are not contributing or are only channelling relatively small sums through the voluntary agencies.

A report in 1983 commissioned by a group of British voluntary agencies showed that 30 times more emergency aid was being sent to official Ethiopian channels than was sent to the agencies distributing in the areas controlled by the fronts.

This distorted allocation of emergency humanitarian assistance cries out for a radical response from aid donors — especially governments who do not face the diplomatic constraints of some international agencies. But there also is the Ethiopian government's controversial — if not scandalous — record on food aid distribution. Much evidence has now come to light indicating that the Ethiopian government feeds its army with food aid granted on the basis of famine appeals. What we saw during our own trip added to this evidence. As already indicated, at Mersa Teklai, at the site of the Ethiopian army quarters, and miles from any drought refugees, we found cartons containing tins of butter-oil marked 'Gift of the European Economic Community to the People of Ethiopia'.

The questions raised over the last twelve months by this kind of evidence have yet to be satisfactorily answered in spite of the investigation missions sent to Addis. The Ethiopian RRC say they exchange imported food aid for other local products in government stores, and that these local products are then distributed to the needy population. But satisfactory accounts of this procedure have yet to be produced and unless donors protest strongly at these practices they are open to the justified suspicion of giving military not humanitarian assistance, and in this case of adding to, rather than relieving, the sufferings of the famine victims.

At the time of writing the outlook for the Eritrean population is

bleak. Unless governmental assistance massively supplements the efforts of the voluntary agencies in helping ERA there will be a short and long term disaster. Those who die in a famine are always the poorest groups, and a third of the Eritrean population is already threatened. If ERA does not receive immediate supplies and transport assistance on a major scale there is not only the risk of mass starvation but also mass emigration to neighbouring Sudan, already suffering food shortages of its own. Eritrea also needs massive assistance in the longer term to reverse the devastation of its agriculture. It is imperative for the international community to act with aid, rather than simply analyse and sympathise.

## *A National Health Service*

The radical changes that the EPLF is bringing about in health care must be seen in the context of its broader strategy to alter the structures of society in favour of the most oppressed. In the field of health this means a commitment to reach the groups most neglected by the health services of Eritrea's colonial past — the more remote communities, the nomads, and women. With the acute hardships created by the war and the drought, Eritrea is probably suffering worse health than all but a couple of other Third World countries. Less than half the children survive to adulthood and of these half will die before the age of forty.

Against this horrific background the EPLF's Health Department is attempting to establish a wide-ranging health service. Its achievements have rarely failed to impress visitors, including doctors and other trained medical personnel. At the time of our visit, charts in the Central Hospital showed the Health Department running six regional hospitals, eight health centres, fifteen health stations and over 40 mobile teams. They have trained over 1500 'barefoot doctors', and more than 140 village health workers, as well as traditional midwives and many specialist health personnel.

The EPLF's health strategy has had to confront four main 'constraints': a largely illiterate population with few trained health personnel; the need to involve the population in the delivery of health care; the problems created by the war; lack of resources and the geographical isolation of the EPLF-held areas.

### *8.1 Health Problems in Rural Eritrea*

The pattern of ill-health in Eritrea is typical of a poor Third World country; death and disease have been aggravated by the years of drought and damage from the war. The main health problems result from low standards of nutrition, water supply, sanitation and housing. Malnutrition and anaemia are widespread, decreasing people's resistance to infectious diseases and exacerbating their effect. Malaria, tuberculosis, respiratory infections and intestinal parasites are endemic.

Conditions differ between the lowlands and highlands. The lowland areas are inhabited by pastoral nomads who travel with their herds of camels, cattle, goats and sheep, carrying all their belongings.

Women and children sleep in tents while the men sleep outside, where they are particularly susceptible to malarial mosquitoes. In some lowland areas 80% of the population have malaria. Families and their livestock use the same water sources, often badly contaminated. The staple food is a porridge made from sorghum and salt. A little milk is added by the better off, but vegetables are rarely included. The men eat first; the women and children eat what is left, and when food becomes scarce they are inevitably the first to suffer. Wasted children are a common sight. An EPLF Health Department survey in the eastern lowlands found very high levels of malnutrition, 34% of all children having marasmus (protein and calorie starvation), and 6% kwashiorkor (protein starvation alone). Malnutrition is a factor in most deaths, because it results in common infectious diseases being fatal. In the Barka lowlands, 280 infants per thousand die before their first birthday. Overall, the Health Department estimates that more than half of Eritrean children — 520 per thousand — die before the age of five.

In the highlands, Eritreans live in settled villages of mainly subsistence farmers. Their diet is largely a fermented bread made from local grains. Vegetables and fruit are unavailable except near towns and irrigation schemes. Scurvy and rickets are common. Typhoid and tuberculosis thrive in the cramped conditions of village houses. Sickness makes it harder to cope with the daily physical toil: women have to fetch water from distant wells and haul it up the mountainside. Cultivating the land with primitive tools and hard manual labour raises food needs.

### *8.2 The Fight against Disease*

At the end of the 19th century the Italians introduced a medical service into Eritrea, initially designed purely to protect the settlers from the tropical diseases they encountered. They established a hospital at Asmara, and set up clinics in the areas of Italian settlement. Later, the postwar Labour government during the British occupation opened a network of dispensaries, and although some facilities, such as the hospital at Zula, were dismantled when the British left, Eritrea had a relatively advanced health service by the beginning of the federal period. This initially prospered under Eritrean administration. Mother and child clinics were established and hospitals renovated. But since colonisation, little had been done to teach the rural population about the causes and spread of disease. Sanitation and hygiene were rudimentary.

In the late 1950s Haile Selassie's regime began to cut Eritrea's health budget, which by 1965 had fallen to a third of its 1955 level. As the Eritrean liberation movement became more active, the Ethiopians began to close clinics and destroyed a further sixteen in

the fighting of the late 1960s.

In the rural areas, where the limited health services provided by successive colonial authorities had minimal impact, traditional healers were still consulted and commanded much respect. Traditional medicine is often linked to religious beliefs and involves much mystification — merely mentioning the name of a herb is thought to cancel out its effect. This belief in magical cures has influenced the population's attitudes to modern medicine and treatments involving pain, such as injections, are considered particularly efficacious. Common medical practices include herbal medicines made from leaves, roots and barks, as well as the use of holy water and amulets, burning and blood-letting. Surgical operations such as clitoridectomy, infibulation, excision of the uvula, and the cutting of tendons in cases of rheumatism were widespread.

In tackling these problems the EPLF had to face a number of immediate constraints. They lacked trained personnel since the health workers were in the towns controlled by the Ethiopians. They lacked buildings for clinics and hospitals, of which there were none outside the towns. Also, the rural population lived in conditions where ill health was inevitable.

The EPLF set up clinics in the settled areas and served the nomadic zones and the contested areas with mobile teams. The EPLF health service started in 1970 with a single mobile clinic, only competent to treat malaria and give basic first aid. Training of the first group of 25 'barefoot doctors' began in 1972, but it was not until the period 1975 to 1978 that the health service really took off. During these years hundreds of skilled Eritreans, including doctors, nurses and paramedical staff, fled the towns and joined the EPLF. The People's Assemblies then being established in the villages were asked to select candidates for training in the regional hospitals as 'barefoot doctors' and 'barefoot midwives'. The courses were short (3 to 6 months) in order to equip a large number of health workers with essential skills. In 1978 alone, 410 barefoot doctors and 18 barefoot midwives were trained.

The Central Hospital in Sahel province is now the main training hospital for operating theatre assistants, anaesthetists, radiographers, laboratory technicians and pharmacists. It also provides higher medical training for experienced nurses. During our visit to this hospital, we were struck by the commitment of these students, who were to be seen studying everywhere — under trees in the hospital area as well as in the wards or in the library. The more advanced courses are conducted in English so that students can read medical textbooks written in English as well as the more summary manuals provided by the Health Department in Tigriyya. Some highly specialist training is provided by visiting foreign medical teams. This

began in November 1980 with an Italian surgical team from Florence, to be followed by teams from Belgium, France, Denmark and Norway.

The EPLF Health Department makes use of two structures to teach the population about the prevention of disease and to improve living conditions at village level — the mobile teams and the health committees of the People's Assemblies. The mobile teams give health lectures in the community following the curriculum drawn up by the Education and Research section of the Health Department, and distribute 'Ray of Health', a quarterly magazine, first produced in 1977, which has proved one of the EPLF's most widely read publications. This deals with a broad range of subjects — the cause, transmission and prevention of diseases, first aid, contraception, latrine construction, hygienic food preparation, the need to get early advice from health workers, and the uses and dangers of traditional medical practices.

The village health committee is given basic training in health education and first aid, and takes responsibility for supervising the cleanliness of the water supply, for digging latrines, for garbage disposal, and for organising 'sanitation days'. Among the tasks of the village education committee is to encourage the population to attend literacy classes which themselves disseminate basic health education messages.

### 8.3 *Involving the People*

The success of both the EPLF's social revolution and its military struggle depends not only on gaining and maintaining the support of the Eritrean population but also on securing its active participation. Providing a health service to satisfy the demands of both fighters and civilians is a key feature in the process of revolutionary change in Eritrea.

Until Barka province came under EPLF control, the population served by the Health Department was either fighters, the settled population in contested areas, or the nomadic population of the EPLF's base area in Sahel province. These needs were considered best met by mobile health units, consisting of two barefoot doctors, one responsible for clinical work, the other for health education, a barefoot midwife and two medical assistants. They travel to villages by camel or donkey and occasionally in EPLF vehicles. Difficult cases or those requiring long treatment are referred to permanent health centres. During the drought the mobile health units have been coordinating their visits with ERA's food distribution, thus ensuring access to a much larger share of the vulnerable population.

'Barefoot doctors' are selected by the EPLF Department of Public Administration from candidates proposed by the local committees.

They must be literate, and they receive six months' training in one of the hospitals. This covers anatomy, physiology, biology, pharmacology and sterile technique, followed by two years' field work attached to mobile health units treating civilians or fighters, and finally six months' advanced hospital training in a medical specialisation. Their training therefore involves tackling a range of health problems requiring medical and surgical intervention including prescription of basic drugs, suturing and even amputation, giving health advice and follow-up care. Preventative health is emphasised and barefoot doctors are also teachers of nutrition, hygiene, sanitation and childcare. We saw copies of a monthly bulletin 'Barefoot Doctor' which is produced by the Health Department to keep barefoot doctors up to date and well informed. The barefoot midwife training includes an emphasis on obstetric problems. We met one group of young women, each from a different Eritrean nationality, being trained on the delivery wards of the Central Hospital.

Providing a health service to the nomads clearly involves special difficulties granted that the population is dispersed and often on the move. Mobile health units have provided a partial solution. Nomadic encampments hear of the arrival of a mobile unit in the vicinity and bring in their sick or ask the team to visit them. Otherwise nomadic families must come to the clinics, camping nearby with their livestock. At the time of our visit the clinics were providing food in cases of need, and the health staff were giving health education to nomadic families, while involving them in the care of their sick. In the long term, the Health Department sees the provision of an effective health service to the nomads to be possible only when they choose to settle. Otherwise medical follow-up for re-vaccination or other treatment is difficult or impossible. The EPLF's long-term policy is to persuade the nomads to settle by making the conditions in settled communities sufficiently attractive. However, this approach neglects the important economic role that nomadic grazing will continue to fill on those marginal lands unsuitable for development with improved methods of soil and water conservation.

When the EPLF moved into Barka province in 1981, the Health Department was confronted by the new task of providing a health service to a settled population where military control was no longer contested. The response was to launch the 'Eritrea Public Health Programme' and emphasise the training of two categories of health workers — 'village health workers' and 'traditional midwives'. Trainees are selected directly by the local health committees for their interest in, and knowledge of, the community, its customs and its attitudes towards sickness and healing. Village health workers receive three months' general health training from the EPLF's Department

of Public Administration, while traditional midwives receive six months' instruction from the Health Department's gynaecology and obstetrics section. Nearly four out of five village health workers — and all the midwives — are women. Family care during the training period is assumed by the village.

Village health workers not only provide basic health care and health education. They also keep records of health needs and health problems in the community, to be forwarded via the local public health coordinator to the ERA. Complex cases are referred to the nearest clinic or hospital. Traditional midwives are usually older women already confident in their work. On returning to their villages after training, these women continue to do home deliveries, but also hold mother and child health clinics, giving health education and antenatal and postnatal care.

Throughout its history the EPLF Health Department has had to cope with the particularly poor health of Eritrean women, who not only suffer the hazards of childbearing but eat a worse diet, and carry an even heavier workload than their menfolk. In the eastern lowlands, death in childbirth is common. The Director of the Central Hospital showed us a Health Department study which recorded a 27% maternal mortality rate for a limited sample of nomadic women in an area with particularly severe health problems.

This extremely high figure is thought to be partly due to the narrowness of women's pelvises deformed both by (1) rickets in childhood, a result of Vitamin D deficiency, and (2) infibulation, after which the child's legs are bound together for 40 days until the wounds heal. A further reason must be the extreme anaemia of the lowland women due to the lack of iron in the daily sorghum porridge diet. In this condition, resistance to disease is very low and a small amount of blood loss can lead to a state of shock and death.

The Health Department has found it hard to provide a service to these nomadic women. Unless the women attend the clinics or are examined by the 'barefoot midwives', it is impossible to identify which pregnant women are most at risk. A gynaecologist at the Central Hospital told us horrific stories of nomadic women, who, when complications arise in labour, try traditional remedies first and only make the trip to the clinic when these fail. Some patients arrive at the late second stage of labour with the baby's shoulder or limb stuck in the vulva.

#### *Infibulation and Clitoridectomy*

Extra complications arise from infibulation and clitoridectomy. In the mainly Muslim lowlands infibulation (the removal and suturing of the labia) of young girls is extensive. In the predominantly Christian highlands the operation is limited to clitoridectomy (the

excision of the clitoris). Both operations are done before the girl reaches the age of two. These practices are justified on religious grounds or explained in terms of ensuring virginity before marriage and reducing women's sexual drive to encourage loyalty to her husband. Infibulation and clitoridectomy can lead to bleeding, infection from non-sterile implements, tetanus, urine retention and complications in labour, and are the most dangerous of Eritrean traditional practices.

Attempts in other countries such as Egypt and Sudan to curtail these practices by both legislation and health education have met with many difficulties and very limited success. The EPLF's campaign has by contrast achieved significant results in specific areas. Within the EPLF, nearly a third of whose members are women, the practices have apparently been eliminated. In some areas which the EPLF has been administering for many years — such as in Senhar province, north of Massawa — the practice has been much reduced. The Health Department stresses the health problems of infibulation and clitoridectomy within the context of general health education on a range of different issues.

We were told about the history of the campaign at She'eb, a village through which we passed. The Health Department had been giving health education there in the mid-1970s at a time when the ELF and EPLF were able to enter each other's territories. An EPLF 'barefoot doctor' when explaining the health complications associated with infibulation said the practice was now illegal (the EPLF has not in fact 'banned' it, recognising the problems involved in enforcing such a ban). An ELF cadre began to criticise the EPLF's opposition, saying that inherited traditions should be maintained. Infibulation thereby became a political issue in the community. Those who supported the EPLF stopped it, while those who did not continued the operation. It seems that most women themselves were in favour of stopping the practice.

The Health Department is optimistic that infibulation and clitoridectomy will eventually disappear in the context of wider changes taking place in people's attitudes towards women in Eritrean society — where decisions at village level are taken by committees on which women are now represented, where women are organised in their own association, and where literacy and political education campaigns are taking place. The EPLF plans to wait until the dangers of these practices are generally understood before passing a law banning them.

The success of the EPLF's health service thus has depended on its ability to involve the Eritrean population through the structures which the EPLF has established. As we have seen, local committees at village level select the health recruits for their area, and take

responsibility for health education and sanitation. The mass associations are also involved — they provide labour for building the camouflaged buildings of the clinics, funds to purchase medicines, and volunteers to prepare the meals in the hospitals. Health workers in the Ethiopian-controlled towns smuggle out drugs and equipment to the EPLF, and an 'Eritrean Medical Association' has been set up to attract the interest and involvement of the many Eritrean medical personnel working or studying outside Eritrea.

#### 8.4 *The Wounded and the War*

The EPLF has had to forge its health service while fighting a major war, both while launching attacks and defending itself and its territory against the successive offensives of the Ethiopian army. The war has killed tens of thousands of Eritreans, and left a comparable number of fighters and civilians wounded and needing treatment. To a large extent the war has determined the nature of the service provided. Mobile health units can move in and out of areas quickly. Health clinics and hospitals are carefully camouflaged to avoid air attack. Particular precautions must be taken in the contested areas beyond the Ethiopian lines.

The EPLF member responsible for the health service in the 'semi-liberated' areas told us that 18 of the 23 EPLF health clinics are sited in such areas, although this number may vary, given the occasional sorties of the Ethiopian army from the towns. When warning is received of the movement of troops towards a particular clinic, it is dismantled and temporarily removed or literally buried underground. The clinics are permanently prepared for this eventually. We were told in some detail how two days previously he had supervised the 'burying' of the hospital in Seraye province. Most of its departments had been built totally underground, and the rooms containing the X-ray equipment, laboratory equipment and medical stores merely had to be sealed and all entrances camouflaged. The whole operation had been completed within 12 hours.

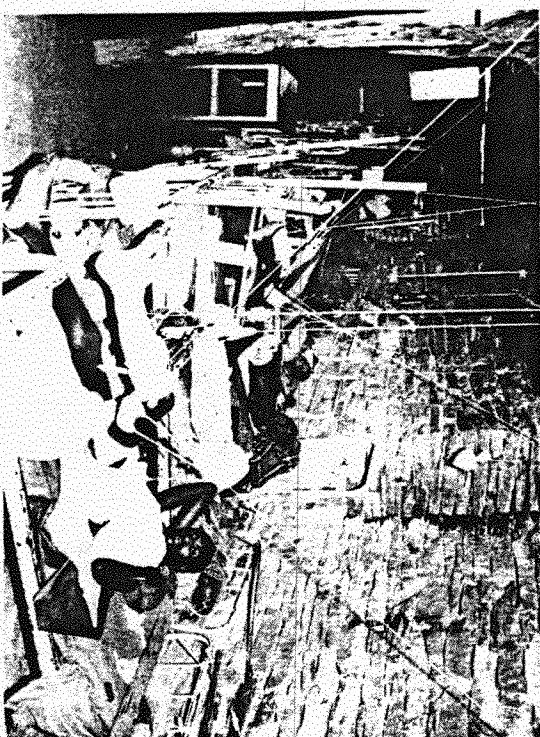
On our visit we were continually meeting injured fighters, some with serious disabilities, who were taking an active part in the economy of the base area. Over 23 years of war, the numbers of Eritreans wounded in the fighting is very high. But it is clearly a tribute to the EPLF's medical services that so many survive and continue to take an active role in the struggle. The EPLF considers the provision of a high standard of health care an essential component of meeting the needs and wishes of the population. In the case of fighters, the high standard of care for the wounded inspires their confidence. Furthermore, for a small population fighting against a numerically much larger force in a protracted war, the saving of lives is imperative.

The Director of the Central Hospital claimed that the Health Department is able to treat 99% of the cases of war injuries. Very few of the injured are treated abroad. Rates of recovery at EPLF facilities are very high — the death rate of the war injured once they arrive at a hospital is 24 per thousand.

### *The Central Hospital*

The Central Hospital is not only the main training hospital but also the main hospital for treating wounded fighters. It has 420 beds and at the time of our visit 70% of these were occupied by wounded EPLF fighters, 15% by wounded Ethiopian prisoners and 15% by civilians. These proportions vary with the level of military activity — our visit came shortly after the extensive battles at Tessenei and Mersa Teklai and on the Nacfa front.

The hospital is spread out over five kilometres of dry mountain valley floor, with wards and departments carefully hidden under trees or built into the hillside. The hospital moved to this site in 1982 after the previous site had been subject to heavy bombardment. We visited operating theatres, surgical, medical, orthopaedic and obstetric wards, a special unit for facial injuries, as well as the laboratories and X-ray units, an ophthalmic unit and a dentistry unit. As blood storage facilities are not yet available, the hospital keeps a register of local donors, who can be called upon as the need arises.



*The ward for limb injuries at the Central Hospital.*

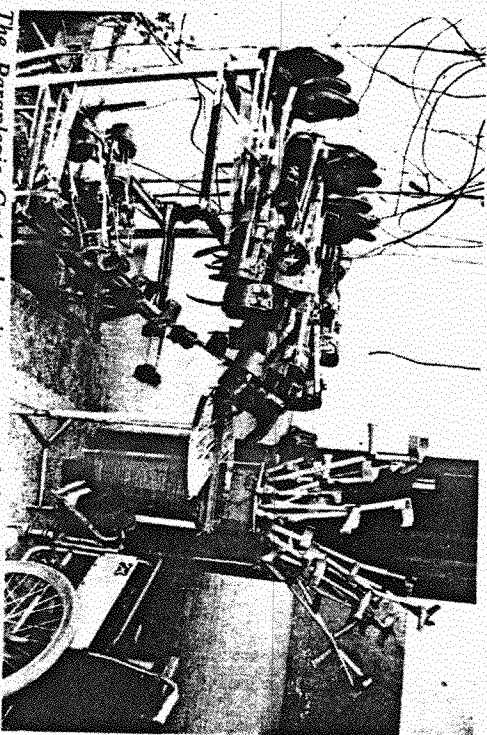
The ward for patients with facial injuries provided some startling examples of the sophisticated care available. One man had been shot in the face, the bullet entering his cheek and emerging from his neck on the other side; another fighter, a woman, had had one side of her lower jaw completely smashed. Both were well on the road to recovery but unable to speak as their jaws were immobilised by temporary clamps. They were being fed by a tube through the nose.

Another ward contained arm and leg injuries. Sophisticated techniques obviating plaster are being used effectively following a training period by one of the visiting foreign medical teams. In spite of the psychological trauma of serious injury and, in many cases, of amputation, this ward was by no means gloomy. Patients were lively and talked a great deal about the EPLF's recent victories.

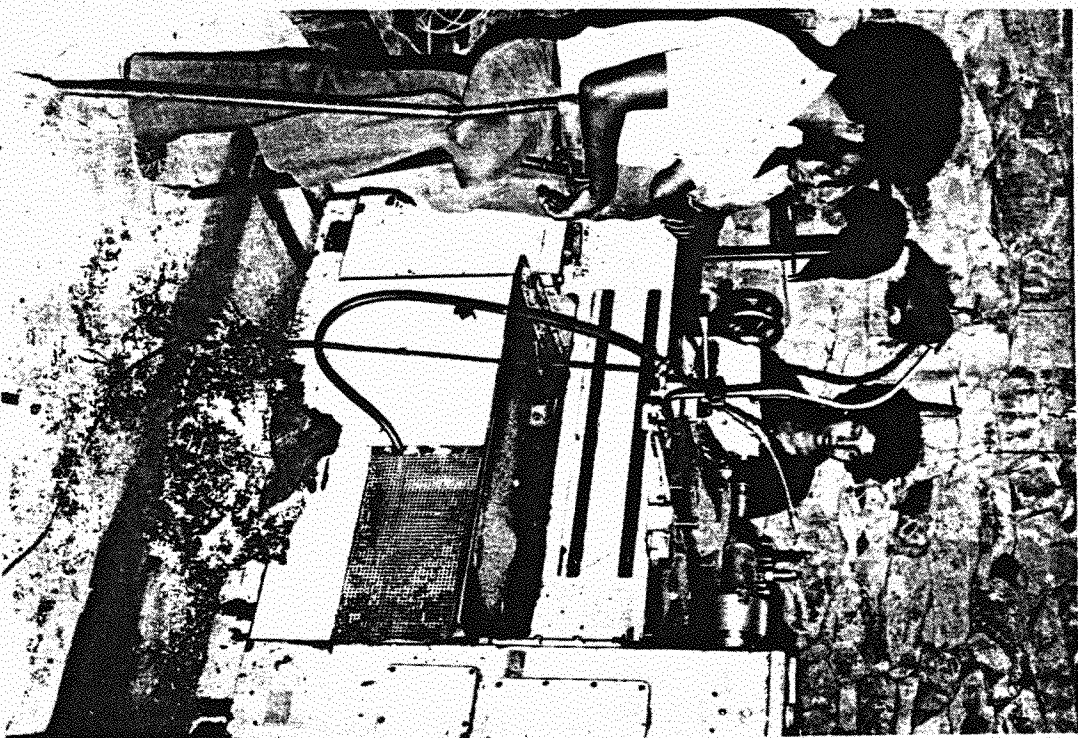
The EPLF Health Department also cares for the large numbers of prisoners captured during the fighting. On our visit to the operating theatre, the surgical team were preparing to amputate the leg of a wounded Ethiopian soldier captured on the Nacfa front.

### *The Port Sudan Clinic*

In Port Sudan, well away from the combat zones, fighters and civilians with leg or spinal injuries are given medical and surgical treatment and helped to rehabilitate at the Paraplegic Centre run by the ERA. Training is given to health workers specialising in physiotherapy. But as we saw during our stay, the centre is much more than a specialised teaching hospital. The more educated patients



*The Paraplegic Centre has its own workshop for calipers and crutches.*



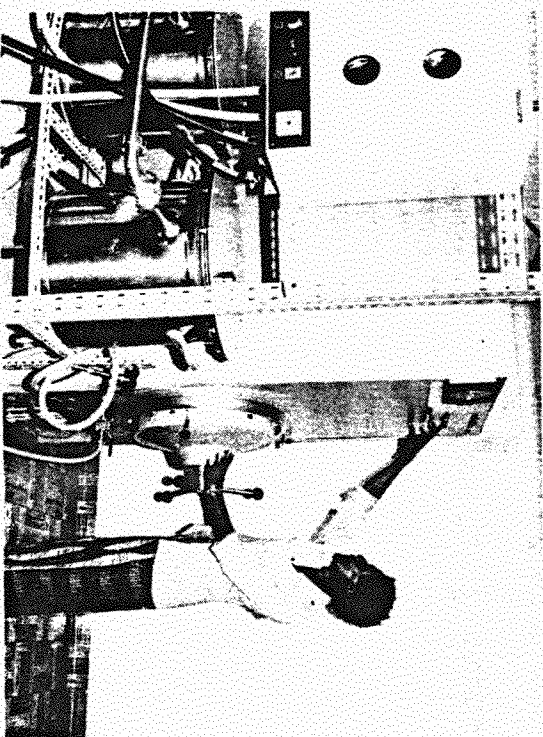
*Many disabled fighters work in the workshops of the base area.*

organise classes to teach their colleagues the higher grades of the school curriculum. Patients learn skills in the workshops of the centre where their own callipers and artificial limbs are made, do the cooking and run the small poultry project which adds eggs and occasionally meat to their diet. We saw the disabled studying their Tigrinya textbooks late into the night. Physiotherapy was imaginative and thorough. Once a week the patients are driven out of town to swim in the Red Sea, and early in the morning the centre reverberates to the shouts of patients playing basketball in their wheelchairs. The patients had formed their own musical bands and were making handicrafts for sale to visitors. Many return to Eritrea to work in the base areas in the workshops or as typists or teachers.

#### *8.5 Medical Supplies: Made in Eritrea*

The key constraint on the development of the EPLF's health service is the slim budget within which the Health Department must operate. Supplies of drugs or equipment brought in from outside prove very expensive when transport costs are included. This has forced the Health Department to be inventive with the resources at its disposal within Eritrea and wherever possible to find a 'self-reliant' solution.

As with the workshops described earlier, hospital and clinic



*Producing intravenous fluid at the Central Hospital.*

buildings and their equipment are made from the available material. The laboratories and intravenous fluid production unit of the Central Hospital were housed in freight transport containers into which windows, doors and ventilation slots had been cut. Cupboards, desks and shelving were made from ammunition boxes. Bomb cases served as stands and the traction rigged up in the orthopaedic wards was a complex system of ropes, beams and sandbags. Even the metal pins used in surgery to unite fractures were made from metal salvaged from captured war material.

The Health Department is now starting to produce its own medical supplies. It has started by producing intravenous fluids, which are expensive to transport because of their weight and bulk. The equipment was bought with funds raised by the Belgian Support Committee, who also sent out a technician to set up the plant and train a qualified Eritrean pharmacist to run it. Sandy, polluted well-water is passed through various stages of filtration, distillation and sterilisation. As we saw, after mixing with salt and sugar it is siphoned into imported bags using aseptic techniques. We were told that continuous operation is currently only meeting half the total needs and a higher capacity distiller is being sought. Intravenous fluid is greatly in demand. It is used for war injuries when fluid cannot be taken orally, for surgical operations that involve high blood loss, and for children and babies with severe dehydration due to diarrhoea.

The equipment needed to set up local production of tablets and capsules of the most frequently used drugs has already arrived in Eritrea and a supply of raw materials donated largely by voluntary agencies in Britain is on its way. The first drugs to be tableted will be aspirin, tetracycline, sulphonamides, penicillin, chloroquine, vitamin C and the anti-tubercular drug INH. The Health Department estimates that this will save 70% on its current bill for these seven drugs. The urgent need to save scarce resources, the commitment to self-reliance, and not least the absence of competition from multinational or local profit-oriented manufacturers all point to the likely success of this scheme and its future expansion. Having defeated super-power backed armoured divisions in the field, the EPLF is not intimidated by the long arms of the multinational drug companies. The policies of the Health Department are free from the kind of international pressures that the Bangladesh government suffered when it tried to control drug imports in 1982.

The Health Department has also developed a miniature laboratory microscope that is much cheaper and lighter than those currently available. With the help of staff at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine a model has been produced which is made largely of plastic, is the size of a cigarette packet and costs only £40 — a tenth of the normal price for a microscope. With these, mobile

health units will be able to diagnose and prescribe treatment for malaria, TB and intestinal parasites on the spot. The microscopes are also likely to become popular elsewhere in the Third World.

### *8.6 Implications for the Third World*

In the short span of 14 years, the EPLF has made major progress towards establishing a service able to deliver basic health care to a diverse rural population. Its achievements are remarkable, given that the service is developing using minimal resources in an area torn by war. How much can be learned from this experience by other Third World governments?

In many poor Third World countries very few trained health staff operate outside the towns, and their practice is usually limited to dispensing drugs which are expensive and often inappropriate. The preventative aspects of health care seldom go beyond vaccination campaigns. Health education and antenatal care are limited and there are no sanitation campaigns. Aggressive marketing by Western companies of baby foods, sweet soft drinks, and harmful drugs has served to aggravate the situation.

The development of the EPLF's health service has benefited from three advantages. First, both the health service and Eritrean 'consumers' have been free from commercial pressures which often have such a negative impact on health and health care. Second, the Health Department has had to devise its own solutions to health problems and learn from its mistakes. Third and crucially, apart from a brief period 1977-78, it has had to meet the needs of a rural population without having to satisfy the competing demands for a very different dynamic. In other Third World countries, governments are particularly sensitive to pressure from the towns or cities since this is where both the greatest demand and their political support generally lies.

The long-term health of Eritreans depends in part on the further development of the health service, and this needs financial support from outside. The preventative side of this service — sanitation, personal hygiene, health precautions — will need to be increasingly stressed. The acceptance of this approach, which in the longer term will have more effect on people's health, will depend on the confidence health personnel have inspired through a curative service which meets people's more immediate demands.

It is not possible as yet to measure accurately the effect of the EPLF's service on the overall health of the Eritrean people. In a situation of war and drought, assembling the necessary statistics is a secondary priority. It is clear that the shortages of food and water over the last four years have had a devastating impact on the health

of the Eritrean population.

Good health in Eritrea will only be achieved when the population has an adequate and varied diet and access to plentiful clean water — as well as basic health services. The end of the current drought will bring immediate improvements. Peace is a precondition for a more secure and productive agriculture, which will have a more lasting impact on health in Eritrea. The pioneering activities of the EPLF, both in health and food production, give grounds for confidence that, with peace and with aid, a highly efficacious programme for the health of the Eritrean people could be rapidly achieved.

## CHAPTER 9

### *Education and Vocational Training*

For the EPLF, progressive social change is impossible without a literate and educated population. But the education system it inherited from the colonial era was designed to produce a small educated elite, who used education for their own personal advancement and who despised manual labour. Those Eritreans who did go to school were handicapped in their progress after Amharic was imposed as the medium of instruction.

In formulating its education programmes, the EPLF has had to find ways to provide mass education, to promote the attitude that education should serve the common good, and to raise the status of manual labour. The EPLF also has to determine which languages should be the media of the instruction.

#### *9.1. Education under Colonial Rule*

Before the colonial era almost the only education available was religious instruction in churches and mosques: its effect was to reinforce religious and tribal divisions and to inculcate deference and passivity. Mission schools providing a broader education arrived during the nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1920s that the Italians introduced government schooling.

In the next 20 years only 24 primary schools were built. Italian schooling was designed to produce a barely-qualified, deferential labour force and army. Eritreans were not to be allowed to compete for jobs with Italian workers who, in the 1930s, were immigrating in large numbers. Legislation forbade Eritreans from progressing beyond the fourth grade, and teaching stressed the supremacy and glory of Italian culture and history. An Italian Director of Education wrote:

'By the end of his fourth year, the Eritrean student should be able to speak our language moderately well; he should know the four arithmetical operations within normal limits; he should be a convinced propagandist of the principles of hygiene; and of history he should know only the names of those who have made Italy great.' (quoted in Trevaskis 1960).

The British put more effort into expanding the education system, and by 1952 there were 100 primary schools, 14 middle schools and 2 secondary schools in Eritrea (Trevaskis 1960). But the British