

19. DIVIDE AND MISRULE: THE EAST, 1984-91

In 1983-4, the Ethiopian government completed a bloody victory over the insurgencies in the southeast. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), Somali-Abo Liberation Front (SALF) and Sidama Liberation Front were all defeated and the OLF was severely weakened and would no longer pose a significant military threat. A key element in this success was the Ethiopian government's strategy of fostering divisions in the ranks of the insurgents: its support for the Somali National Movement (SNM) against the WSLF was the clearest example. In this strategy of "divide and rule," the Ethiopian government was, ironically, assisted by the Somali government, which was following exactly the same strategy.

As a result, the lines of conflict became more fragmented and complex. As well as attacks on civilians by the Somali and Ethiopian armies, there was an increasing level of inter-communal violence which extended throughout eastern Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. This chapter documents some of the abuses of human rights that resulted from this fragmentation, for which the Siad Barre and Mengistu governments share ultimate responsibility.

Unrest in the Ogaden

The Ogaden did not return to peace after the defeat of the WSLF; but neither was there widespread rebellion. Instead there was a low level of violence between the well-armed but impoverished, restricted and frustrated herders, and the Ethiopian army, police and members of other communities. A breakaway group from the WSLF, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) was formed in 1984, but failed to make a military impact.¹

The drought of 1984 together with government policies led to a number of violent incidents in the Ogaden. The villagization of the highland Oromo involved the relocation of many communities in areas which had previously been used as pasture by the herders. Other areas were allocated to resettlers from Wollo. There were a number of violent disputes between the pastoralists and farmers.

In September or October 1987, in relation for an ambush on a military lorry at Dhakato, for which the ONLF claimed credit, army units moved to Fiiq, south of Harer, confiscated animals and killed three people.

A series of incidents occurred in August 1988. Ogadeni herders had delivered their animals to the government Livestock Exporting Company agents in Gode and Degahabur, and were awaiting payment. The payment did not come; and in reprisal some herders attacked a

¹ The words "Western Somali" in "WSLF" indicate an attachment to the ideal of a greater Somalia; the "Ogaden National" title of the ONLF indicates the belief that the Ogaden are a nationality, not merely a clan, and indicates no relationship with the Somali state.

government geological team in the area, killing one Soviet and three Ethiopian technicians. An army force responded by surrounding the livestock herds which had congregated at a well at Bulale and holding the animals until the killers were handed over. The herders denied knowing who was responsible for the killing, and the animals were confiscated.

This event led to increased tension between the army -- still behaving like an occupying force -- and the local people. Shortly beforehand, the army had refused to let the herders use a valley between Degahabur and Aware for grazing. It had been a traditional pasture area used especially during times of drought, but had been occupied by the army as a training area. Use of the valley had become more important since 1984 when another valley at Tur, near Gode, had been allocated to a resettlement scheme for farmers from Wollo. The members of a delegation sent by local people to protest their exclusion were detained. Some young Ogadeni herders (armed, as is usual) wandered into the restricted area, whereupon an army unit opened fire on them. The herders fired back. According to reports, 21 of the herders and three soldiers were killed. In another incident at Dhanaan, soldiers killed 17 herders in a punitive expedition mounted in reprisal for the killing of a government officer, before senior army officers intervened and ordered them to halt.

While most of the violence was between Ogadeni clansmen and the army, there were also clashes with member of other clans. One incident occurred in 1985, following a fight between herders belonging to the Isaaq and Abasguul clans. The governor of Jijiga ordered the army into the area and 125 Isaaq herders were reported killed.

Arming Refugees in Somalia, 1984-87

The refugee population in northern Somalia played a central role in the conflicts that developed after the demise of the WSLF in 1983. This occurred because the Somali government used them for military purposes against the SNM. At first, only members of the Ogaden clan were conscripted or armed; later this included members of all Somali clans and also Oromo refugees. The arming of refugees was well under way before the outbreak of full-scale war in northern Somalia in May 1988.

Immediately after its military defeat in March 1978, the Somali government began recruiting Ogadeni refugees into the WSLF. In 1983, this was changed, and refugees were instead conscripted directly into the army. A special Division (the 12th) was formed, initially comprising 5,000 refugee conscripts, the great majority of whom were from the Ogaden clan. The conscription of refugees to the military is contrary to international law, under the 4th Geneva Convention of 1949.

From early 1984, the 12th Division was used against the local Isaaq population. Some of the abuses it committed include:

- * December 6, 1984: Sheikh area: in retaliation for an ambush by the SNM in which the commander of the 12th Division was killed, soldiers rounded up teachers, merchants and others and transferred them to Burao, where they were later shot. A total of 43 were executed in this incident.²
- * January 1988: Alleybadey: about 20 civilians executed.
- * March 14, 1988: Gebiley and Tug Wajale: 25 community leaders executed in reprisal for an SNM attack.³

In 1985, as unrest intensified in northern Somalia and more Isaaq soldiers and officers defected from the army to the SNM, the Somali government increasingly used force to obtain conscripts to fill the gaps in the ranks of other divisions. Between 1985 and 1987, refugee health workers were taken more than ten times, and high level intervention was needed by the refugee administration to obtain their release. At one point in 1987, 140 community health workers were press-ganged; 50 were taken in 1986, together with a number of hospital outpatients.⁴ In May 1987, the Somali army raided the refugee camp at Bihin near Berbera and

² See Africa Watch report, *A Government at War with its Own People: Somalia: Testimonies about the Killings and the Conflict in the North*, January 1990, p. 65.

³ Africa Watch report, 1990, p. 65 and appendix 5.

⁴ Africa Watch interview with Mohamed Dahir Khaire, Refugee Health Unit, September 1991.

took 200-300 refugees for military service, and also took conscripts from the nearby Biyoley camp. During September and October 1987, 5,000-7,000 refugees were forcibly conscripted in the camps.⁵

The recruitment operations often included violence against refugees, including some killings. UNHCR protests to the government met with no response. However, these were not backed up with effective sanctions. The US and other western donors continued to support the Somali government with generous and unconditional aid, seeing it as a strategic cold-war ally.

Starting in November 1984, the government also created camp militia. The rationale for this was that refugee camps were often located in remote places, far from army and police posts, and increasing SNM incursions meant that a self-defense capacity was required. Members of the Ogaden clan received arms preferentially.

During 1984-6, there was a new influx of Oromo refugees, fleeing villagization and related atrocities. Some of the new refugee camps (for example Bihin and Bioley) were sited in remote areas, unsuitable on account of poor access and health hazards. The rationale behind their location was that they would provide a military presence in these areas, where the SNM was active.

In 1985, the Somali government began to arm some of the Oromo refugees. An organization was created headed by Sheikh Ibrahim Belissa, a religious leader who was formerly a member of the Somali-Abo Liberation Front, who was living in exile in Hargeisa. Sheikh Belissa's Oromo front was assisted with arms and internationally-donated food aid, with the intention that it would infiltrate into northern Harerghe province of Ethiopia to engage the Ethiopian army and the SNM. Before 1988, it did not engage in military actions or commit significant atrocities inside Somalia.

There was also a small group of Amhara refugees in Somalia, some of whom were pressured into joining the Somali army -- the alternative was indefinite restriction to a refugee camp or detention.⁶

The refugee camps thus became military targets. One of the first SNM actions against the camps was the kidnapping of a French medical team in Tug Wajale camp on January 24, 1987. The eleven members of the team were released unharmed after ten days.

Other Somali-backed Fronts

⁵ Agence France Presse, October 27, 1987.

⁶ Hiram Ruiz, "Detained in Exile: Ethiopians in Somalia's Shelembod Camp," United States Committee for Refugees, Washington D.C., 1987.

The Somali government also fostered two other small armed fronts from among refugees, residents on northern Somalia, and former fighters of the WSLF.

After the demise of the WSLF, one of its divisions, known as Iil Tire, remained active among members of the Issa clan in northern Harerghe. This was later renamed the Issa and Gurgura Liberation Front (IGLF), and joined the EPRDF. It enjoyed the support of the Somali government, and clashed with the SNM on the Somali border. It is unclear whether clashes between the Issa and Oromo communities near Dire Dawa and the Issa and Afar in the late 1980s were related to the ILF, or were due instead to armed members of the clan unaffiliated to it.

In the late 1980s, the Somali government also assisted a Gadabursi Front (also known as the Somali Democratic Alliance). The Gadabursi Front was hostile to the SNM and is reported to have killed a mentally-handicapped Isaaq civilian in a reprisal attack in 1989.⁷

The conscription and arming of refugees in southern Somalia also took place, though there was no outright warfare in the region at the time.

Peace and War in Northern Somalia, April-May 1988

On April 1-2, 1988, just two weeks after the EPLF victory at Afabet, President Mengistu hurriedly negotiated a formal peace with Somalia. His aim was the transfer of troops from the Ogaden to Eritrea. The belated peace agreement also allowed for the exchange of prisoners of war captured in the war a decade before, and for the repatriation of refugees to be put on a more formal basis. Finally, an essential part of the agreement was a commitment by each country to end assistance to insurgent groups operating out of each others' territory. While neither side followed this policy fully, the promised expulsion of the SNM from Ethiopia had immediate consequences.

In late May, the SNM launched surprise attacks on the major towns of northern Somalia, and succeeded in occupying Burao and most of Hargeisa.

The delivery of relief supplies to the Ethiopian refugees was cut off, and the fighting also included several SNM attacks on refugee camps. According to testimonies obtained by Robert Gersony of the US State Department, the SNM attacked nine refugee camps in the region and killed at least 240 civilians.⁸ While the killing of civilians is a grave abuse, the

⁷ Robert Gersony, "Why Somalis Flee: Synthesis of Accounts of Conflict Experiences in Northern Somalia by Somali Refugees, Displaced Persons and Others," Bureau for Refugee Programs, Department of State, Washington D.C., 1989, p. 43.

⁸ Gersony, 1989, pp. 50-2, 63. Contrary to Gersony's claims, there was widespread distribution of arms to the refugees during the preceding years.

camps themselves also constituted genuine military targets.

Further abuses against refugees occurred in early 1989. The SNM executed ten prisoners of war whom it described as "Ethiopian refugees who had received weapons from the Somali Armed Forces in order to combat the SNM."⁹ Another reported incident took place in March when eleven Ogadeni refugees (including three children) were killed and 16 wounded in an SNM attack on a truck.

The Somali army responded with land and air attacks against the SNM and the towns of northern Somalia causing an extremely high level of devastation.¹⁰

Refugee soldiers and militia were prominent during the army counter-offensive. This included Ogaden refugee units in the regular army (notably the 12th Division), members of the camp militias, and -- for the first time -- Sheikh Belissa's Oromo front, which fought alongside the army. These attacks witnessed an extraordinarily high level of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, including routine summary executions, looting and rape as well as some large-scale massacres.

As a result of the war, about 20,000 refugees returned to Ethiopia and about 400,000 northern Somalis also fled across the border to take refuge in camps near Jijiga.

Upheaval in Southern Somalia, January 1991

In 1989, the Ethiopian government also began to provide arms and support to the United Somali Congress (USC), a recently-formed opposition group active in central/southern Somalia.

In January 1991, the government of Siad Barre was finally overthrown after a prolonged battle in Mogadishu. The USC was the immediate victor: although a relative newcomer to the opposition, it drew its support from the vicinity of the capital and so was able to occupy the seat of power -- or what was left of it. The fall of the Siad Barre government did not, however, mean peace or stability. Fighting and insecurity continues in Mogadishu and the countryside.

The breakdown in security and the resulting cut-off in supplies to the refugee camps made life extremely difficult for the refugees in southern Somalia. There were also a number of attacks on refugees. On January 21-25, over 100 refugees were reported killed at Baladweyne by USC forces. Other attacks on refugees occurred in the Hiran region.¹¹

⁹ Gersony, 1989, p. 34.

¹⁰ See Africa Watch report, *Somalia*, 1990.

¹¹ A report by the OLF on February 11, 1991, that over 600 Oromo refugees were killed by Ethiopian forces at Luuq, has not been confirmed and was almost certainly inaccurate (BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts*, ME/0995, February 13, 1991).

These factors cumulatively led to a massive return of refugees from Somalia, plus an inflow of refugees. About 140,000 refugees and returnees crossed the border in a matter of two months, and numbers continued to increase. 90,000 crossed into northern Harerghe, about 100,000 into the southern Ogaden, and 50,000 into the lowlands of Sidamo. This created a humanitarian crisis, especially in the remote southern Ogaden camps.

The Oromo Fronts in Ethiopia

By 1984, Ethiopian military strategy was effective in counter-acting the threat posed by the OLF and the Oromo Islamic Fronts (OIF)¹² in Harerghe. The combination of villagization, continued military operations and cutting off any possible support from Somalia proved successful. The Somali government's strategy of using the Oromo population and fronts for its own purposes contributed to this military eclipse.

The OIF, headed by Sheikh Jarer, emerged as a significant force in northeast Harerghe in the mid-1980s. Sheikh Jarer was a military commander in the OLF until he split from them in 1978 to form his own movement, which in about 1985 acquired the label "Islamic."¹³ It acquired support from the Somali government and a link with Sheikh Belissa's front inside northern Somalia, though the extent to which the two fronts cooperated in military terms is unclear. The Somali government closed the OLF office in Mogadishu in 1982 and prevented the organization operating from Somalia. There was also lack of unity between the OLF and OIF and both failed to cooperate with the WSLF. These factors combined with the success of the SNM in controlling the northern Ogaden border to create a great hindrance on the successful maintenance of an Oromo insurrection in the southeast.

Throughout the period 1985-91, atrocities by the Ethiopian army accompanied routine actions against suspected OLF sympathizers, and reprisals after OLF actions. For example, in February 1987, there are credible reports that the army killed up to 270 people at Qadridayah and Dibleley, in reprisal for an attack by the OLF.¹⁴ The following month, the army sealed off wells at Bullale, causing many animals to die of thirst, and in July, the army rounded up an estimated 8,000 villagers and kept them for a while in four military camps. While most were later released, seven were reported shot dead, 41 remained in detention, and 23 young women were kept for the soldiers' sexual gratification.

¹² This front has used a variety of names during its existence; OIF is used here for convenience.

¹³ The front has no significant links with Islamic fundamentalist organizations in Sudan or the Middle East. "Sheikh Jarer" is a *nom de guerre*; he is not a religious leader.

¹⁴ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1987-8, p. B288.

Some instances of OLF killings of civilians have also been reported, including the selective killing of Amhara settlers in eastern Harerghe in March 1990.

The Ethiopian government launched a number of military actions against the OIF. It also engaged in a systematic attempt to destroy centers of Moslem learning in Harerghe, which it saw as the source of anti-government mobilization. During 1985 and 1986, mosques, Islamic schools, tombs of local Moslem holy men and pilgrimage sites were destroyed. These included Fayaanbiro mosque and Sufi lodge (near Babile), the Sheikh Sayed Ahmed lodge at Babile, and the tomb of Abdel Rahman Zeilahi, between Degahabur and Qabridaharre.

The OIF clashed with the SNM on several occasions, particularly after 1988. In January 1991, an SNM unit kidnapped Sheikh Belissa and handed him over to the Ethiopian government; he was detained until the fall of the government in May. This incident reportedly led to violence between the Oromo and Isaaq communities inside Ethiopia.

Instances in which OIF units engaged in ethnically-based violence against Amhara settlers have also been reported.

On one or two occasions, the OIF also came into conflict with the OLF. Some of the OIF leaders were defectors from the OLF, and there was deep resentment between the two organizations. There were armed clashes between the two fronts on several occasions, and OIF units ambushed and killed some members of the OLF.

The EPRDF Takeover, May-June 1991

Until 1991, all the armed Oromo and Somali groups in eastern Ethiopia had one thing in common: the knowledge that if their military activities became too successful, the army would engage in large-scale reprisals. The sudden collapse of the Ethiopian army in May 1991 removed this fear. The divisions that had deepened over the previous years were the cause of an increase in inter-communal violence. Neither the OLF nor the OIF had sufficient military strength or political mobilization to fill the power vacuum that suddenly appeared.

In the days after the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa, the Third Army in Harerghe was deeply split. Some officers proposed surrendering to the EPRDF; others proposed resistance, and still others tried to flee the country. In Dire Dawa the small garrison put up no resistance and the town was occupied on the evening of May 29. In the brief interregnum there was a looting spree, especially of the airport, and about six people were killed. There were also ominous signs of inter-ethnic violence between the Issa Somali and the Oromo communities. On May 30, there were anti-EPRDF demonstrations in the town, which were dispersed when EPRDF fighters fired over the heads of the crowd. No casualties were reported.

Two senior army officers who attempted to flee the country by helicopter were

apprehended by army units close to the border and later handed over to the EPRDF.

The only significant resistance occurred around Harer, where a garrison of about 10,000 troops was stationed. On May 28, the commanding officer of the Harer garrison announced a surrender. Two days later, middle-ranking officers, encouraged by a spate of anti-EPRDF demonstrations by students, mutinied and killed their superiors, and vowed to fight against the EPRDF. The mutiny led to widespread violence in Harer, including looting and killing. One employee of a UN relief program was killed outside the Ras Hotel in the town center on May 31. By June 1, the mutineers had gained control, and prepared defensive lines close to a military base outside the town on the Dire Dawa road and distributed arms to the civilian population with instructions to defend the town itself.

On June 2, the EPRDF force attacked the army positions. About 600-800 combatants were killed in the engagement, probably including some former civilians armed and mobilized by the mutineers. The EPRDF forces won the battle. Most of the armed civilians refused the order to defend Harer and instead let the EPRDF peacefully occupy the town the following day. The occupation was disciplined and there are no reports of fighters committing abuses against civilians.

The disintegration of the army and police led to a sudden upsurge in banditry, including some robbery by deserting soldiers. A relief convoy was attacked at Kebri Dehar on May 30, and two trucks were stolen. Eight other relief vehicles were stolen in other incidents, and many rural roads became impassable.

Continuing Violence Since the EPRDF Takeover

In the rural areas around Harer, there are numerous reports of violence against Amhara civilians, including employees of the government and the United Nations agencies, mainly by Oromo residents. Some of the violence can be traced to members of the OIF. A number of Amhara civilians fled from the towns of Harerghe to Addis Ababa, fearing for their lives. Some reported that they had been ordered to leave the region within 24 hours.

There was a serious incident of inter-communal violence in Dire Dawa on July 7. A large section of the Oromo community held a political rally in the soccer stadium, sponsored by the OLF. After the rally a number of armed Oromo gathered and attacked Issa civilians in the town, killing eight. EPRDF forces intervened to stop the fighting and disarm the two groups; about 12-15 people were killed during this operation. In reprisal for the deaths of the Issa civilians, between July 8 and 15, Issas in Djibouti attacked Oromo refugees. Between ten and 15 were confirmed killed, though some Oromo sources claimed that the number was as high as 200. About 500 refugees fled to seek sanctuary in the compound of the UNHCR, and several

thousand sought refuge among Afar groups in Djibouti, particularly in Arbeha. There is fear that this inter-communal violence may intensify and bring about a civil war in Djibouti and neighboring areas of Ethiopia.

In the highlands of Harerghe and Bale, many rural communities also resisted the re-introduction of central authority in the form of the EPRDF. Community leaders argued that there was no need for an EPRDF military presence, because the areas were "liberated" already. Incidents of violence have occurred between residents and EPRDF forces, and a number of people have been killed. The fighting has been sufficiently serious to close main roads in Harerghe for weeks. It has caused friction between the EPRDF and the OLF; the EPRDF demanded that the OLF demobilize its fighters so as to restore law and order, or close its offices. However it is highly questionable whether the armed units are under the command of the OLF. An agreement was reached on August 27 which established zones of control for both organizations, but did not address the fundamental problems the mutual suspicions between local Oromo villagers and the EPRDF units controlling the towns and main roads.

The Oromo highlands of the southeast present a major challenge to the new government. The EPRDF needs to maintain law and order and to allow the expression of popular aspirations without resorting to indiscriminate violence. The OLF and OIF, for their part, needs to ensure that the legitimate demands of the population are not channelled into violent resistance while the options of democratic participation are open.