

5. THE SECRET WARS TO CRUSH THE SOUTHEAST, 1978-84

For most rural people in Harerghe, Bale and parts of Sidamo, the end of the "official" Ogaden war did not represent the end of suffering and human rights abuse -- rather, the end of the beginning.

The Ethiopia-Somalia war had profound consequences. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam was immeasurably strengthened -- he gained both prestige and a vast new armory. He benefited from a surge of nationalist feeling in Ethiopia and also from international condemnation of Somalia's aggression. President Siad Barre was humiliated, and processes of political decay and fragmentation in Somalia were greatly accelerated.

The Somali army was gone, but internal conditions in southeast Ethiopia had not improved, and the Oromo and Ogadeni insurgencies continued. Large-scale human rights abuses by the Ethiopian army against the local population increased. Six years of secret wars, that were both more widespread and more bloody than the official war, were to end in the defeat of the insurgents, and the creation of widespread famine conditions. Many of the inhabitants fled to Somalia, where the refugees became pawns in another political struggle that was slowly degenerating into civil war, and where hunger and human rights abuse were common.

In early 1978 the Ethiopian government had acquired a new arsenal from the USSR and had built a greatly expanded army, spearheaded by Cuban combat troops. Though established to combat a conventional invasion, that force was now to be used for counter-insurgency only. The government could now contemplate crushing an insurgency by brute force alone.

The victory of the Ethiopian government was aided by dissension among its adversaries. The WSLF was very strong in mid-1978. However, it continued to be subject to manipulation by President Siad Barre, who used it to bolster his position in domestic Somali politics, especially after discontented army officers staged an abortive coup in 1978. This led to disillusion among the WSLF's erstwhile supporters, and resistance to it from other Somali groups, notably members of the Isaaq clan.

In Ethiopia, a series of events in 1977-8 conspired to increase popular support for the OLF. These included the purge of MEISON, which brought an end to hopes of a negotiated compromise with the government, the purge of the Peasant Association (PA) leadership, government declarations of intent to collectivize agriculture, the resettlement of Amhara farmers in Oromo areas, the enforced use of the Amharic alphabet in the literacy campaign, and the brutality of the 1978 counter-offensive by the army.¹ Militarily, however, the OLF was in a

¹ Africa Confidential, 25-15, July 18, 1984, p. 1.

weaker position due to the huge build up of the army in Harerghe. The "liberated area" in the Chercher highlands had to be largely abandoned in 1978-9. Tactics changed towards a more classic guerrilla campaign. In 1981, the OLF also started to open a new front in western Ethiopia, in Wollega.

The OLF also gained from the decline of the SALF, which was closely associated with the Somali government. Many Oromos had been antagonized by the evident ambitions of Siad Barre to annex Oromo areas and the abuses committed by the Somali army when occupying these areas. Much of the leadership of the SALF joined the OLF in August 1980, following large-scale rank and file defections. The SALF suffered further defections to the newly-founded Oromo Islamic Front (also Somali-backed), but maintained a small operational presence throughout the 1980s. Another group, the Sidama Liberation Front, was formed in 1978 and was active up until 1984.

The OLF remained suspicious of the Somali government, and hence the WSLF, SALF and Oromo Islamic Front, and there was no cooperation between the different insurgent groups.

Counter-Insurgency after the Somali Defeat

The Ethiopian army occupied the Ogaden for only a brief period after defeating the Somali army. Six months later, rebel attacks were increasing in frequency. Within a year, the WSLF was back in control of most of the countryside, and the army was confined to the towns, the main roads, and the air. According to journalist William Campbell, 90 per cent of the lowlands were in rebel hands.² The OLF was also able to operate freely in much of the highlands, and held its first congress at Bookhee in the Chercher highlands of Harerghe in April 1978.

Conventional battlefield tactics met with limited success against the WSLF and the OLF. Sweeps and patrols throughout 1979 in the lowlands temporarily reduced the insurgent activity, but failed to engage most of the rebel forces, and became instead more akin to punitive expeditions, attacking villages and herds, and forcing another wave of refugees to flee to Somalia.

An Ogadeni woman later recalled some of the violence that occurred when she was driven from her home:

One morning, before sunrise, in July [1979], a woman in my quarters who was on the road, heard over her ears the noisy click-clang of a heavy convoy from a long distance, but marching full-speed towards our home. Running back home, frightened and crying out, she signalled us: "Wake up! Wake up! They are Abyssinian."

² The Guardian, London, March 7, 1979.

Most of us came out of the house. Unfortunately we found ourselves surrounded by armed soldiers who immediately began to shower bullets on us before we had a chance of driving our livestock out of the pens.

Most of us were unable to escape together in family groupings. I remember that my husband and two sons jumped out of the hut together, but immediately rushed in different directions.

After running for a few minutes I saw with my own eyes my nine-years' old son caught by an Abyssinian soldier who mercilessly grasped him by the hair and smashed him to the ground. The young boy was crying out for mercy, saying: "Oh! Mamma! Pappa!" and sometimes calling to the soldier: "Uncle, don't kill me, I am young!" While he was on the ground at the feet of the soldier asking for clemency, a second soldier standing by jumped out and bayoneted the boy with a push-and-twist in the stomach several times so he was dead.³

The village was burned in the attack, and nine people killed: a mother and her newly-delivered baby, four other children, an older girl and an old blind man. As the group fled towards Somalia, they were again intercepted by soldiers and two children were killed. A baby also died of hunger.

In late 1979, the government changed its counter-insurgency strategy. It adopted a four-pronged approach, consisting of:

- (1) The forcible displacement of much of the population into shelters and protected villages;
- (2) Military offensives which attacked all people and economic assets remaining outside the shelters and protected villages;
- (3) Sponsoring insurgent groups against the WSLF and the Somali government; and
- (3) Attempts to promote the repatriation of refugees.

The counter-insurgency campaigns of 1979-84 were largely successful in their aim, though small-scale armed resistance was never entirely eliminated. However, this "success" was gained at the cost of much suffering by non-combatant civilians, and the reduction of much of the population to a state of famine.

Numbers Affected

In mid-1978, when the "official" war was over, there were an estimated 500,000 displaced persons. There were almost 200,000 in RRC shelters in Harerghe, 66,000 in Bale, and 20,000 in Sidamo.⁴ By October, the number "cared for" by the RRC in Bale had risen to

³ *Somali, Tigray and Oromo Resistance Monitor (STORM)*, 2,3, September 1982, pp. 2-3.

⁴ RRC, *The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation*, Addis Ababa,

350,000; by 1979 it was 586,000. There were an additional 230,000 in Sidamo. Bale and Sidamo had been scarcely affected by the Somali army. In 1980, the RRC claimed that one million people in Harerghe were affected by drought and war.

By 1981, the number of "war affected" people who had been relocated in villages amounted to 880,000 in Bale alone, including 750,000 in the northern part of the province, where the Somali army had never reached. A further 1.5 million were living in relief shelters.

Meanwhile, refugees streamed across the international border into Somalia. In mid-1978 there were 80,000-85,000 in camps in Somalia. A year later there were 220,000; by the end of 1979 between 440,000-470,000; and by the end of 1980 about 800,000. By 1983, the Somali government was claiming a total of 1.3 million refugees, though this number was hotly disputed by the aid donors, who argued that the true number was perhaps 700,000-800,000. Many of the refugees were not ethnic Somali but Oromo.

The war had left 600,000 displaced and refugees at the time of its "official" conclusion in March 1978. After three years of "peace," the affected population had risen by more than five times.

The fact is that the great majority of the war affected population of southeast Ethiopia from late 1979 onwards was affected not by the fighting between the Somali and Ethiopian armies in 1977/8, but by the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian government which was implemented from December 1979 onwards. Many of the people were affected by the military operations of the army, others were affected by forced relocations.

Military Action during 1979-84

Starting in December 1979, the government launched a second military offensive. Soviet advisors and Cuban troops participated. This differed from the counter-offensive of 1978 in that:

- (1) It was more specifically directed against the population's means of survival, including poisoning and bombing water holes and machine gunning herds of cattle; and
- (2) It covered Oromo areas as well as the Ogaden.

At the outset of the 1979/80 offensive, the WSLF was estimated to control 60-70 per cent of the Ogaden.⁵ The OLF controlled large areas of the highlands. The first government offensive lasted several months, followed by a counter-attack by WSLF forces based in Somalia in March 1980, and stepped-up guerrilla action by the OLF. Ethiopian forces then mounted five

1985, p. 135.

⁵ Africa Contemporary Record, 1979-80, p. B199.

major attacks between May and July, which coincided with counter-attacks by a joint WSLF-Somali army force.⁶

A new wave of refugees fled to Somalia. Some were interviewed by journalist Victoria Brittain.⁷

I had sixty camels. The Ethiopians waited at the water point and machine-gunned my two eldest sons and all my camels. I brought my six young children out on two donkeys.

The Ethiopians came twice to my farm in Sidamo, once with white men [i.e. Cubans]. They took stores of maize, pulled it from the field, beat everyone in the house. They have taken young men from us to fight in Eritrea. Nobody is left in my area.

In February there was bombing which made fires as far as the eye could see. My camels were burned and many people in our family. With two camels carrying our house I have walked since then

The air force was deployed to attack villages, animal herds and fleeing refugees. Reports indicate that napalm or phosphorous was used frequently. There were also several raids up to 20 miles inside Somalia.

The civilian casualties in the Ogaden alone during the year following the Somali defeat were estimated at 25,000.⁸ Combined with the flight of several hundred thousand refugees to Somalia, this represented an attempt to break the WSLF resistance by brute force. Perhaps half of the Ogadeni population was in Somalia, and half of the remainder in Ethiopian camps and settlements. Diplomats talked of the depopulation of the Ogaden as the "final solution".⁹

The government offensives ranged well beyond the Ogaden, as witnessed by Victoria Brittain's interviewees. There was also much military action in the highlands of Harerghe and in Bale and Sidamo. Many areas which had been affected little or not at all by the war of 1977/8 were devastated by these offensives.

In October 1980, there was fighting in the lowlands of southern Bale. During 1980, the OLF claimed to have engaged the Ethiopian army in 40 major battles, in its operational area of the highlands of Harerghe and Bale.¹⁰ As late as December 1980, journalist Greg Wilesmith was able to travel more than 100 kilometers inside the Ethiopian Ogaden with WSLF forces,

⁶ Africa Contemporary Record, 1980-81, p. B177.

⁷ The Guardian, London, May 21, 1980.

⁸ David Lamb, International Herald Tribune, May 14, 1980.

⁹ The Guardian, London, May 20, 1980.

¹⁰ Africa Contemporary Record, 1980-81, p. B178.

and testified that most of the countryside was under rebel administration.¹¹ However, by then the tide had turned; the government counter-insurgency campaign was meeting with success.

In early 1981, fierce fighting continued in Bale and Sidamo, and also in Arba Guuga district of Arsi. The south-east was described as "the most active trouble spot in the country."¹² The Sidama Liberation Front (SLF) was becoming more active, largely in response to pre-emptive government counter-insurgency policies.

The war in Sidamo in 1981 was one of the Dergue's best-kept secrets.¹³ In January, 200 people were reported killed by an army patrol at Godaboke Mito and Chire villages in Sidamo. Between March 19-21, helicopter and airplane attacks at Gata Warrancha in Sidamo caused at least 20,000 people in one valley to flee, and over 1,000 (and possibly more than 2,000) were reported killed when a "wall of flames" was ignited by bombing using either phosphorous or ethylene.¹⁴ Ethylene is a heavier-than-air gas which can be sprayed from the air, whereupon it spreads out, hugging the ground, and can be ignited by an incendiary to create instantaneous combustion over a large area. Its use in this attack has not been confirmed by other independent sources.

The government ordered the evacuation of a Norwegian mission station and hospital, leaving the wounded without medical care. In July, 615 were reported killed at a meeting called by local administrators at Alo. A well-documented killing took place on December 1, 1981, when a defense squad killed at least 48 people, including several entire families.

Throughout the southeast, the army took frequent reprisals against civilians in localities close to where guerrilla attacks had occurred. In one credible reported incident between Shilabo and Warder in the Ogaden in August 1981, houses were burned and 12 villagers were taken hostage and subsequently disappeared.

One aspect of the offensives which had far-reaching implications for Ogadeni society was a government policy of poisoning wells, in order to impoverish nomads and restrict their movements.

Large scale war was effectively over in most of the lowland south east by 1982, though sporadic guerrilla activity continued into the following year. The WSLF was able to make

¹¹ Greg Wilesmith, *The Observer*, London, December 7, 1980.

¹² *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1980-81, p. B178.

¹³ Some of the atrocities committed in Sidamo during 1980-2 are documented in *STORM*, 31, March 1983. The principal informant, a refugee named Tadesse Barsamo, was later murdered by Ethiopian security forces.

¹⁴ Reuters, April 27, 1981; St Paul Pioneer Press, April 12, 1981, reprinted in: J. W. Clay, S. Steingraber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, pp. 224-5.

dramatic raids such as storming the prison in Jijiga on August 12, 1983. In reprisal for that action, the Ethiopian army destroyed the villages of Birgot, Midha and Burey and killed 300 civilians.¹⁵

In the highlands of Sidamo and Harerghe, widespread violence by government forces continued throughout 1982. Killings by defense squads took place in Sidamo in January; on several occasions, the victims were decapitated and their severed heads were displayed in prominent places, to warn their fellow villagers. In a military sweep that began on November 26 and lasted into January 1983 (i.e. during harvest time), the army made numerous attacks on villages accompanied by the burning of crops and confiscation of livestock. Villagers who could not escape were killed. The survivors languished in relief shelters, suffering disease, malnutrition and high death rates, or tried to flee to Somalia -- though some columns of would-be refugees were reportedly intercepted and the detainees imprisoned or killed.

On April 1, 1983, in a government reprisal for SLF activities during the previous two months, soldiers killed 100 civilians in the village of Halile, Sidamo.¹⁶ In 1984, the government was able to recapture most of the areas previously held by the SLF, and forcibly relocated the population in relief shelters. In Chire camp 3,000 people died, mainly children, before relief agencies were allowed to provide services in 1984.

The war in the highlands of Harerghe continued in 1984, leading to the forcible implementation of a large-scale villagization program (see chapter 13, below).

The war in the southeast was largely a secret war, especially after the WSLF ceased to take journalists into the area after mid-1980, on account of lack of control of rural areas and pressure exerted on Somalia by the Ethiopian government. The incidents referred to above are but a few details from a much larger story of routine brutality and indiscriminate killing of civilians by the army. The figures for the numbers of people displaced by the war also indicate the scale of human suffering inflicted.

Population Displacement in Counter-Insurgency

A major part of the counter-insurgency strategy adopted by the government in the south-east was the forcible relocation of the population into protected villages, where their movements could be controlled, and whereby the guerrillas could be denied access to essential supplies. This program was implemented in Bale between 1979 and 1982, where almost the entire population was villagized during this period. There was also widespread villagization in certain

¹⁵ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1983-84, p. B139.

¹⁶ *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1982-83, p. B152.

areas of Sidamo. More than two million people were forcibly relocated during the period 1978-82. In Harerghe, universal villagization began in October 1984, coinciding with intensified military activity against the OLF.¹⁷

The security aspect to the villagization program was officially recognized from the start, while the OLF opposed villagization because it saw it as an instrument of government control. Teshale Tessema, of Addis Ababa University, basing his information on the guidelines of the Central Villagization Coordinating Committee, wrote:

the villagization is a direct blow at them [the OLF], by depriving them of any base from which they could carry out their banditry and anti-revolutionary activities. Thus the efforts of these groups ranged from counter-agitation to the burning of houses in new villages ... As some bandits who submitted said: "the villagization is the highest artillery blow directed [against the] bandits. With this launching the possibility of obtaining fresh food by bandits is over."¹⁸

The government drew up ambitious plans for villagization in the south east. By 1979, nearly 560,000 people had been villagized in northern Bale. Two years later, this had risen to 750,000 in 280 villages. Villagization proceeded more slowly in southern Bale -- the program to villagize 130,000 semi-nomads got under way only in 1981, and was completed in 1984.¹⁹ (Southern Bale was affected by the war of 1977/8, northern Bale was not -- but the latter was the locus of SALF and OLF activity). In Sidamo, 40,000 were villagized in 1979, and a further 190,000 gathered in shelters.²⁰ Following the fighting in Arba Guuga district of Arsi, villagization was implemented there in 1982. Plans were floated to villagize a further 2.4 million.

Commonly, the government would instruct people to relocate at a certain place within a certain time. If the people remained behind, punitive measures would be used. Sometimes, no warning would be given, and existing villages and homesteads were simply destroyed.

The following testimony of an Oromo refugee who had been subjected to villagization is one of the very few pieces of direct evidence that is available about the human impact of the program:

The army came and started burning everything. We ran into the forest with nothing.

¹⁷ At the time, the program was generally called "resettlement," but in this report that term is used exclusively to refer to the movement and settlement of people from the northern regions in the south.

¹⁸ Quoted in Survival International, *For their Own Good — Ethiopia's Villagization Programme*, London, 1988, p. 19.

¹⁹ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, p. 13.

²⁰ RRC, 1985, pp. 136-7.

Some soldiers came and some men in white trucks, and they told us to go back to our village and get the others. Then they took us to a place far from our homes and told us to make houses.

They gave us food every day, but there was never enough to save some. We worked five kilometers from our homes, but if we complained, they beat us. Also we didn't have any doctors and only dirty water, but we couldn't say anything. They told us the Somalis did it to us, but I knew it was them. They kept saying it though, and they told us they were helping us. Every time we harvested our crops, we had to give them to the government, and they gave us our rations.

I knew it was them who burned us because they screamed at us and called us names. They even said they hated us. They had men with guns around all of the walls -- you couldn't move outside. If your brother died in the next village, you couldn't go to bury him. Just work, they said.²¹

A particularly insidious element in the government's policy of relocation was its repeated attempts to obtain finance from the international community to carry it out. These attempts were partly successful -- had they been more so, doubtless villagization would have proceeded more quickly in Harerghe and Sidamo.

In the aftermath of the official war of 1977/8, it was not difficult for Ethiopia to obtain assistance to assist the local population and repair some of the damaged infrastructure in Harerghe. Somalia had been the aggressor in the war, which had led directly to an estimated \$1 billion in damage. Later on, however, the government was not eager to draw attention to the ongoing war. Displaced people were blamed in vague terms on the war of 1977/8, and on drought.

In June 1980, the Ethiopian government started appealing for relief aid for the "victims of drought." Officials from the RRC claimed that Harerghe, Bale and Sidamo as well as the northern provinces were stricken by an eight-month drought.²² A reconnaissance team from the RRC had visited Harerghe in February-March 1980, but delayed releasing its findings for three months. The published findings indicated an urgent humanitarian disaster -- poor rains had affected one million people out of a population of three million, mostly in lowlands. The report goes on to say that this was made worse by the destruction of water facilities in the war of 1977/8 -- it claims that pumping machines had been taken away by Somalis, and 40 supply points destroyed. Destruction of infrastructure and wells by the Ethiopian army is not

²¹ Quoted in *Horn of Africa*, "Refugees in the Horn", 41, (1981), p. 39.

²² In the lowlands of south-east Ethiopia there are two dry seasons (December to March and May to September) and two wet seasons (April-May and October-November).

mentioned.²³

Several facts about the June 1980 appeal are odd. One is the claim that a drought of eight months had caused a major humanitarian disaster. Such a drought indicates merely the failure of one of the two annual rainy seasons in the area -- a common occurrence and an indicator of hardship, but no cause for serious alarm. Moreover, the RRC team had visited the area before that rainy season was fully under way -- so the distress it found could not be blamed on the alleged drought. The three month delay in releasing the findings is itself suspicious, especially in view of the urgency with which the matter was presented to the western donors. Recalling the timing of the military operations in the area (i.e. the launch of the principal counter-insurgency campaign in December 1979), the findings of the reconnaissance team are less surprising, as is the delay in publication until the security of the area was more assured some time later.

In May/June 1980 a UN team visited Ethiopia and travelled to some accessible areas of the south-east. The team recommended "the government's resettlement [i.e. villagization] should be given all possible support."²⁴ The team recommended that 183,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food plus transport be donated to the RRC. 158,000 MT plus transport were actually pledged, including \$8.1 million from UNHCR.

The rationale for the mission's recommendation was in part that much of the population had lost its economic assets and was collecting in relief shelters. Unable to return to an economically active life without assistance, the population could be better helped by social engineering in government villages.

Following the RRC appeal in June, a second UN mission visited Ethiopia from July 6-15, 1980. After consulting with the government, this mission made the much stronger recommendation that 812,000 MT of food be pledged, and the funds be provided direct to the RRC for "internal handling."

If, as the government claimed, drought was now the main problem, the end of the year saw a return to normal. The main summer rains in 1980 were good. In November 1980, the RRC reported that the food supply situation in Bale, Hararghe and Sidamo was "normal."²⁵ This did not, however, stop an increasing flow of demands for international assistance for victims of drought and war, and for villagization.

²³ RRC, Early Warning and Planning Service, "Report on a Reconnaissance Trip in Hararghe Administrative Region," June 1980.

²⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, p. 5.

²⁵ RRC, Early Warning and Planning Service, "Food Supply Status and Forecast by Administrative Region," November 1980.

In early 1981, a mission from the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) visited the south-east as guests of the RRC. Though not as uncritical as the preceding UN missions, the ICVA team did recommend support for the villagization program. The team noted "tight security dispositions prevailing" in the villages it visited,²⁶ but did not question the official explanation that this was to protect the inhabitants from "bandits." Others believe that the military presence was to keep the population under tight control.²⁷

The Ethiopian government failed to obtain all the assistance it asked for. However, it obtained enough to relocate almost the entire population of Bale, plus substantial numbers of people in Sidamo and lowland Harerghe, and some in Arsi. UNHCR assistance rose from \$100,000 in 1979 to \$2.7 million in 1980 and \$7.3 million in 1981; UN Development Program assistance also rose. In early 1981, the Babile shelter was established near Harer for "drought-affected" Hawiye nomads. Later in the year, the Bisidimo scheme, resettling nomads for agricultural work was set up. Voluntary agencies such as Lutheran World Federation supported some projects. The ironies of humanitarian agencies working within a counter-insurgency framework were not evident to the staff: one report noted a large number of widows in the villages, explaining that "the husbands have been killed or got lost during the Somali invasion."²⁸

Despite the emphasis on drought given by the RRC and repeated UN missions, all the refugees interviewed by Victoria Brittain in Somalia in May 1980 -- a month before the RRC's major drought appeal -- denied that drought was the reason for their flight. Instead they mentioned violence and destruction by the Ethiopian army.

A second element in the relocation strategy was a series of attempts to obtain the return of refugees from Somalia. That will be discussed below.

A final element in the population displacement strategy was the introduction of settler populations from the north, in a small-scale forerunner to the resettlement program that was to attract much attention in the later 1980s. The resettlers took land from the locals, who were thereby displaced.

Two settlements were set up in Bale in 1979: Melka Oda and Harawa. Harawa was highly mechanized, and was planned to have a capacity of 7,000 families. "The Amharas have given our land to others" complained refugees in Somalia.²⁹ Many settlers were given military

²⁶ ICVA, "ICVA Mission to Assess the Situation with Regard to Displaced Persons and Returnees, January 16-30, 1982," Geneva, 1982, p. 2.

²⁷ *STORM*, 2.3, September 1982, pp. 9-12.

²⁸ Quoted in: Jason W. Clay, "The Case of Bale," in Clay *et al*, 1988, p. 148.

²⁹ Victoria Brittain, *The Guardian*, London, May 21, 1980.

training and arms.

The use of relocation as a counter-insurgency measure is common. Under international humanitarian law it is legitimate only if required by the security needs of those to be relocated or by imperative military necessity, if the government provides the relocated population with sufficient resources to attain a reasonable standard of living, and if the relocation avoids unnecessary suffering. Aside from the violations of international law, the relocation policy followed in south-east Ethiopia was objectionable on several grounds. One is that it was achieved through indiscriminate violence in areas of the countryside not controlled by the government and the threat of such violence. A second is that it was achieved by hunger -- people were obliged to congregate in relief shelters because of the destruction of the basis for their way of life. A third is that, while assistance was provided to the people in shelters and government villages, this assistance was obtained under false pretenses from the international community. Fortunately the mass human rights abuses that would almost certainly have followed the large-scale refoulement of refugees in Somalia did not occur (see below).

Sponsoring Insurgents against the Somali Government and WSLF

The Ethiopian government brought strong pressure on the Somali government to withdraw assistance to the rebel groups. The pressure included direct attacks into Somalia, usually by aircraft, notably in 1982, and sponsoring rebel Somali groups.

The SSDF

In May 1978, immediately after defeat in the Ogaden, officers of the Somali army staged a bloody but unsuccessful coup attempt. The surviving coup leaders, most of whom were members of the Majerteen clan, fled and founded the Somali Salvation Front. This soon amalgamated with two other organizations to form the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), which gained support from the Ethiopian government. Though the SSDF initially had a large armed force it failed to have a significant military impact. Its major military success was a joint operation with the Ethiopian army to capture the two Somali villages of Balambale and Galgudud in 1983. The leadership was divided and many fighters deserted back to the Somali government. The SSDF came into conflict with the Ethiopian government, reportedly for refusing to mount military operations against the WSLF. In 1982, the Ethiopian government confiscated armored vehicles belonging to the SSDF. In 1985, after a spate of assassinations within the SSDF, Ethiopian security forces detained the SSDF leader Col. Abdullahi Yusuf and 12 others. One of them, Abdullahi Mohamed "Fash" died in custody in 1986.

In Somalia, one of the consequences of the attempted coup was that President Siad Barre purged the army, promoting his kinsmen from the Marehan clan, and also bringing members of the Ogaden clan into more powerful positions. This led to political conflict between the Ogaden clan and other Somali clans and opposition movements.

The SNM

In 1981, the Mengistu government began to support the Somali National Movement (SNM). The resulting war by the SNM against the WSLF was an important element in the Ethiopian strategy, and it was resoundingly successful.

The formation of the SNM was the outcome of systematic discrimination and human rights abuse against members of the Isaaq clan, which predominates in northern Somalia, by the Siad Barre government.³⁰

Many abuses against the civilian population of northern Somalia, especially those living in the border area, were committed by the WSLF. Killing, looting and rape were common from 1978 onwards. In late 1978, Isaaq elders petitioned President Siad to form an Isaaq wing of the WSLF, which would be able to protect local civilians. This organization, known as *Afraad*, the "fourth unit," became operational in 1979. It immediately came into armed conflict with the main (Ogaden clan) forces of the WSLF. Shortly afterwards, an Isaaq army officer arrested 14 leading WSLF fighters at Gobyar who had been harassing and abusing the local population; they were taken to Gebiley and executed. The army command in Hargeisa was then transferred to General Gani, a Marehan and a clansman of the president; one of the changes that followed was the forcible transfer of the *Afraad* away from the border zone. However, many members of the *Afraad* became guerrilla fighters in their own right and continued the inter-clan conflict, which intensified in 1981.

Other grievances felt by the Isaaq included the preferential treatment of Ogadeni refugees compared to the local population, in terms of access to education, health care and services, and discrimination against Isaacs in government and army posts and in business. A dispute over access to the grazing in the Haud reserve was also flaring.

After prolonged talks, leading members of the Isaaq clan met in London in April 1981, to form the Somali National Movement (SNM). In January 1982, they negotiated with the Ethiopian government to obtain a base and arms. The SNM soon became active in the border area, supporting the Isaaq clan in its ongoing conflict with the Ogaden clan. In October 1982, there was fierce fighting in the Gashaamo area.

The war between the Isaaq-SNM and the Ogaden-WSLF involved violence against civilians, by both forces and on both sides of the border. At first, the abuses were almost entirely by the WSLF, because it had a near-monopoly on arms. Lorries were ambushed, traders stopped and robbed, houses looted, animals stolen, women raped and civilians killed. In early

³⁰ See Africa Watch Report, *Somalia: A Government at War with its own People*, January 1990.

1979, between Wajale and Alleybadey, two WSLF fighters raped a woman, whose teenage brother then retaliated by shooting the fighters. The commander of the WSLF unit then arrived and summarily executed the boy and two other family members.

One SNM abuse occurred in December 1981 when Isaaq fighters stopped a truck at Dhaberooble, between Warder and Degahabur, and killed six WSLF fighters and 13 civilians, all members of the Ogaden clan.³¹

Clashes between the fronts were intense during late 1982 and 1983. The SNM succeeded in cutting the WSLF off from its rear bases in northern Somalia. Together with the Ethiopian army offensives, this was a fatal blow to the WSLF, which never recovered. There was a final round of fighting in December 1984-January 1985, but by this time the WSLF was effectively finished.

The Refugee Issue

The Ethiopian government engaged in a concerted campaign to make refugees in Somalia return to Ethiopian territory. The refugees' destination was to be government-controlled reception centers. On the whole, Oromo returnees were then villagized, and Ogadenis were given animals.

The returnee issue over this period is complex. Tens of thousands of refugees returned and were assisted. But the Ethiopian government consistently exaggerated the number of returnees, subjected many to abuses, and used the returnee program for counter-insurgency purposes.

The Somali government was also at fault. Throughout the 1980s, an important factor determining what refugees decided to do was the increasingly unpleasant quality life in the Somali refugee camps. This was because of the policies and corruption of the Somali government, which diverted much international aid intended for the refugees, and increasing levels of violence in Somalia, which the refugees were caught up in and contributed to. Most seriously, the Somali government recruited refugees into the WSLF, and after 1983, into the Somali army (see chapter 19). The Somali government also consistently inflated the estimates of refugee numbers, and denied the existence of genuine returnee movements. Civilian refugees were caught between two evils, and their return to Ethiopia often indicated merely that conditions in Somalia had deteriorated; not that those in Ethiopia had improved.

The attempts to obtain the repatriation of the refugees involved the international

³¹ According to one report, a Majerteen woman was also killed, because she was pregnant by her Ogadeni husband and the unborn child was thus an Ogadeni.

humanitarian community, especially UNHCR, which often appeared to be ignorant of the realities of the situation.

The first attempts at repatriation occurred in May 1980 and coincided with a visit by senior UN officials, invited by the government. One official wrote:

The UNHCR representative broadly agrees with the [Ethiopian] government perception of the situation, and feels that on both humanitarian and pragmatic grounds a comprehensive approach is needed; this would include assistance for both the displaced and affected population in Ethiopia thus reducing the incentive to swell the number of refugees in neighbouring countries. ... [The Ethiopian government] feels that the UN system is taking a one-sided view of the situation by launching a large-scale assistance programme in Somalia and doing almost nothing in Ethiopia. They feel that this will only aggravate the situation in attracting a large number of people to cross the border.³²

The UN and ICVA missions referred to above followed from this initiative, as did attempts to initiate a repatriation program. The opinion (never tested) that the presence of international assistance on the far side of a border "pulled" refugees there -- enticing them to abandon their homes and trek through a wilderness to a strange country -- continued to have a substantial and dangerous influence on assistance and protection policies to refugees in the Horn for years afterwards.

In March 1981, a UN mission asked for funds for 300,000 families (1.5 million people) to be villagized over the next 18 months. Many of these were anticipated to be returning refugees. The following month, at the first International Conference for Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA I), held in Geneva, the Ethiopian Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation claimed that "as a result of a general amnesty, more than 151,000 Ethiopian refugees have returned," including 129,000 from Somalia.

However, according to one source, UNHCR officials could provide details of merely "less than three hundred" returnees,³³ and the Somali government denied that any had left. One part explanation for this discrepancy is that the returning refugees did not need to surrender their ration cards from the Somali camps in order to receive assistance (chiefly sheep and goats) from the Ethiopian RRC -- they merely needed to prove that they had been in a refugee camp. It was therefore possible for a refugee to collect the assistance on the Ethiopian side, and then return to Somalia to continue drawing rations.

At ICARA I, on the prompting of the Ethiopian government, the UN submitted projects anticipating the need to assist 268,000 returning refugees from Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia over the next three years -- despite the absence of an agreement with either Sudan or Somalia

³² Dr Zaki Hassan, UNICEF Executive Board, "Report on a Visit to Ethiopia, 13-17 May 1980," Addis Ababa.

³³ STORM, 13, June 1981, pp. 8-9.

for the voluntary return of refugees. "It is anticipated that Ethiopians living in Somalia will return as security and basic living conditions improve in the south-eastern part of Ethiopia" the proposal asserted.³⁴ The UN document asked for a total of \$27 million plus food aid in international assistance for Ethiopia.

In September the government became more ambitious and asked for aid for an anticipated 542,000 returnees.³⁵ In January 1982, it claimed that 567,000 refugees had returned home.

However, these figures were gross exaggerations. According to UNHCR the following August, "over 10,000" had returned. In 1981, the ICVA team had met individual returnees, and was assured that several thousand were living in the settlements it visited, but made no independent investigation of the total numbers -- all the figures in its report had been provided by the RRC. However, the "returnees" in el Kere (Bale) turned out to "have returned from the bush and from Somalia."³⁶ In 1982 a team from the League of Red Cross societies also visited, spending six days on a guided tour of returnee camps. Team members were told by their RRC hosts that one of the camps, Degahabur (Harerghe), had held 10,000 returnees some time previously, but the inhabitants present at the time had never left Ethiopia.³⁷

Despite the absence of an impartial assessment of the situation, in 1981 the UNHCR initiated a small pilot program for returnees, which was substantially enlarged in 1982, when it anticipated spending \$26 million to feed 200,000 returnees and set up three rehabilitation centers (two of them in Harerghe), 25 reception centers, and various smaller projects for returnees.³⁸ However, the reaction of the international community was mixed. While Australia provided 25,000 MT of food aid, the US refused to participate.

The Ethiopian government failed to obtain all the assistance it wanted for this program. This was related to the lack of a "tripartite agreement" between Ethiopia, Somalia and UNHCR to repatriate the refugees. Despite the optimism expressed in the UN submission to ICARA I, relatively few refugees did return home (in the tens of thousands at the most), and the Somali government resisted pressure from the Ethiopian government and the UNHCR to assent to a

³⁴ UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation and RRC of Ethiopia, "Short-Term Relief and Rehabilitation Needs in Ethiopia," March 1981, Annex D.

³⁵ RRC, "The Returnee Problem in Ethiopia and Assistance Requirements," Addis Ababa, September 1981.

³⁶ ICVA, 1982, Annex III, p. 3, emphasis added.

³⁷ League of Red Cross Societies, "UNHCR/RRC/League Programme of Assistance to Returnees in Ethiopia," Circular, September 17, 1982.

³⁸ Letter from Poul Hartling, head of UNHCR, to donors, dated April 30, 1982.

program of "voluntary" repatriation.

A major reason why UNHCR promoted the returnee program was impatience with the Somali government, which was also "playing the numbers game" and trying to retain its refugee population and exaggerate its size in order to obtain international assistance. The refugees were pawns as all sides played politics with humanitarian assistance. However, the exploitation and abuse of the refugees in Somalia did not justify promoting the repatriation program.

Scepticism about how voluntary such a program would have been is warranted, as can be shown by the case of Djibouti. In June 1980, the Ethiopian government declared its intention of receiving the refugees back, and shortly afterwards a tripartite commission of the governments of Ethiopia and Djibouti together with UNHCR was formed to oversee the repatriation.³⁹ In July 1981, reports indicate that 20 refugees were forcibly repatriated, of whom 14 were summarily executed on arrival. The following two years saw numerous incidents of intimidation and harassment of the refugees by the Djibouti authorities, and coercion to repatriate. There were no further reports of executions of returnees, but a number were detained and sentenced to prison terms, despite promises of an amnesty.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian government legislated against refugees. Under Article 12 of the Revised Penal Code of 1981, attempting to leave the country without official permission is a "counter-revolutionary act" equivalent to treason, and punishable by between five and 25 years imprisonment.

By mid-1983, the repatriation campaign from Djibouti had led to the return of 13,500 refugees, about half through the tripartite program, and half independently of it.

The Ethiopian government often used the term "returnees" to refer to both prisoners of war released by the rebel fronts and returning refugees. Returning prisoners of war were placed in "reception centers" in Gonder, Meqele and Harerghe, where there were frequent reports of beating and execution.

During this period the government of Somalia consistently refused to contemplate a tripartite agreement for repatriation. When such an agreement was made in 1986, only a small minority of refugees elected to use it -- about 7,200 over four years. However, during the late 1980s, perhaps 500,000 refugees did return spontaneously, as conditions deteriorated in Somalia and marginally improved in southeast Ethiopia. In 1991, with the outbreak of widespread violence in Somalia, that return flow accelerated.

The Creation of Famine

³⁹ Jeff Crisp, "Voluntary Repatriation Programmes for African Refugees, A Critical Examination," British Refugee Council, London, 1984.

During 1978-84 the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam responded to the insurgencies in the southeast with brutality, attacks on the economic base of the population, restricting movement, and creating and exploiting divisions within the society. This was the bloodiest period in the modern history of the region. The government's military strategy was instrumental in impoverishing the people, restricting their mobility and economic activities, and creating famine. The activities of the Ethiopian army, the SNM, WSLF and the Somali government combined to prevent the Ogadeni herders from freely migrating, trading or cultivating. Meanwhile, the combination of military offensives and forced relocation left much of the Oromo population destitute.

There was chronic famine in much of the southeast during the whole period 1979-84, and humanitarian assistance was used as an instrument for the further extension of state control. When drought also occurred in 1984, the famine became more widespread and severe.

The true story of these campaigns and the related famine remains largely unresearched and untold. The account given above is merely an outline based on the few available sources -- many of which were produced with the clear intention of concealing what was actually going on.