

### 13. VILLAGIZATION, 1984-90

In late 1984, the Ethiopian government began a program of villagization, which was intended to regroup the scattered homesteads, small hamlets and traditional villages of the entire countryside into a completely new pattern of grid-plan villages, laid out in accordance with central directives. The aim was ostensibly to promote social and economic development and facilitate the delivery of services such as education and water supplies. According to President Mengistu:

Collecting the farmers into villages will enable them to promote social production in a short time. It will also change a farmer's life, his thinking, and will therefore open a new chapter in the establishment of a modern society in the rural areas and help bring about socialism.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, like so many government policies, it had important counter-insurgency elements too. The experience of villagization in Eritrea since 1966 and Bale during 1979-84 suggests that social transformation may only have been a secondary objective. This is borne out by the fact that the nationwide campaign of villagization was started in Harerghe in October 1984 primarily in order to combat the activities of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). More generally, the program was conceived and executed in a military manner. When a delegation from Ethiopia visited Tanzania in 1978 to assess the results of that country's experiment with villagization, the members concluded that Tanzania's failure could be attributed to a lack of resolve -- i.e. force.

Many of the aspects of the villagization program have been dealt with elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> hence this chapter will give no more than a summary of its impact. The policy was abandoned in March 1990.

#### Counter-Insurgency and Villagization in Harerghe

The government counter-insurgency measures of 1979-83 succeeded in restricting OLF activities in much of the south-east. In 1984, the Sidama Liberation Front was beaten decisively.

In the highlands of Harerghe, the OLF continued to be active in 1984. The government response included heavy bombing of areas such as Maya Qolo and Maya Guella, close to Harer town, and a large campaign launched in June, which lasted until August. The worst atrocity

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<sup>1</sup> President Mengistu Haile Mariam, Report to the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, April 14, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Survival International, *For their Own Good... Ethiopia's Villagization Programme*, London, 1988; Jason Clay, Sandra Steingraber and Peter Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988; John M. Cohen and Nils-Ivar Isaksson, "Villagization in Ethiopia's Arsi Region," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 25, (1987) pp. 435-64.

reported was destruction of much of the district of Daro Billiqa in July, where 1,000 houses were reported burned and 6,000 cattle confiscated.<sup>3</sup> According to the OLF, 102 peasants were killed, usually in front of the assembled villagers, for resisting forced relocation. The offensive coincided with the main planting season and directly contributed to harvest failure. Between May and October over 50,000 Oromo refugees fled to Somalia, and by December there were 30,000 displaced people in Dire Dawa. Immediately after the offensive ended, the government started a large-scale villagization program.<sup>4</sup>

The villagization in Harerghe was accomplished by force. Village leaders and Moslem religious teachers were detained (and sometimes executed) while army units instructed the villagers to relocate to a new site. Exemplary punishments were meted out to objectors, including mass public executions. Existing villages were burned, crops were often burned too, and cattle were stolen or killed. People were buried alive, and survivors raped, beaten or mutilated.<sup>5</sup>

In late November and December 1984, the air force bombarded several areas of the Gobelle valley, south-west of Harer town. In January 1985 there was a military offensive through the same area, in which there were several reported instances of killings of civilians. An unknown number of men were shot and killed on January 29, at Gonda Abbadh, while working as manual laborers on a government project. There was a second influx of refugees into Somalia.

In the new villages, the government (represented by cadres and militiamen) enforced a strict work routine. In some places, such as Habro district, several days' unpaid work per week on state coffee farms was also enforced.

The program included strict control of food supplies. This met two government aims simultaneously: it could obtain higher quotas of crops from the farmers, and it could deprive the insurgents of access to food. It was combined with fiercely-imposed restrictions on trade.

A particularly irksome part of the whole process is the central control over food supplies. Locals cannot eat what they want, and have reportedly been told not to give their children milk: cows are state property. Officials announced that the government would distribute 500 grams of rations daily to everybody. For farming families which have traditionally produced huge food surpluses and maintained a very varied diet, such control is anathema, especially since local people feared, justifiably, that the army and urbanites would cream off the highest quality food, leaving the villagers with a meagre diet of sub-standard grains...

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<sup>3</sup> *Africa Contemporary Record*, 1984-5, p. B244.

<sup>4</sup> Jason W. Clay, "The Case of Hararghe: Testimonies of Refugees in Somalia," in Clay *et al.*, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Numerous instances are reported in Clay, 1988 and Survival International, 1988.

Freedom of movement is greatly restricted in the villagized areas. People are forbidden to travel through the countryside. They could be shot if they do. The new villages are connected to each other and to cities by a network of usually new roads, built with forced labour. Troops can thus be deployed rapidly. The militia organizes security locally, making sure its members are recruited from another area -- in contrast to the past, when the militia was locally-recruited. The absence of social ties between the new militia and the locals probably accounts for what some refugees have described as the systematic rape of women.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the villagization disrupted food production in the year of its implementation.

Village sites were selected with a view to defense, rather than access to water, fuelwood, pastures, or fields. Many farmers had to walk much greater distances to get to their fields, and some crops which require special conditions and attention had to be abandoned. This was particularly the case for villages which were relocated from highland to lowland areas. Villagers who previously followed a mix of farming and herding, moving each year from the village to dry season pastures, were forced to become wholly sedentary, and give up many of their animals. The combination of impoverished agriculture, greater extraction of food by the government and army, and the effective ban on local trade and migration, was instrumental in turning the drought of 1984 in the highlands of Harerghe into a famine.

The down-hill relocation of villages also led to the alienation of grazing land from pastoralists, including valleys used as drought-retreats. This was one factor in the creation of famine in the lowlands in 1984/5 and again in 1987/8, and a cause of inter-communal violence.

By mid-1985, over half of the highlands of Harerghe had been villagized. The remainder was relocated in a four month campaign between November 1985 and March 1986. In total, 2,115 new villages were constructed, and more than two million people relocated.

The second phase of villagization in Harerghe appears to have been conducted with less violence and more attention to local agricultural needs. Some "model villages" were constructed at this stage, with facilities such as an electricity supply provided. These were used as showcases.

The villagization program was effective, however, in restricting the military activities of the OLF. The existing splits in the OLF also deepened, with the Oromo Islamic Front gaining ground (see chapter 19).

## **Social Transformation and Villagization**

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<sup>6</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 27.12, June 4, 1986, p. 7. The systematic rape of women by PA officials, cadres and others was also reported in non-insurgent areas.

Following the successful conclusion of the first stage of villagization program in Harerghe in June 1985, national villagization was declared as a program the next month. By August 1988, the government reported that over 12 million people -- about half of the rural population in the areas the government then controlled -- had been villagized. While the collectivization of agriculture was probably one of the ultimate goals of the program, fewer than four per cent of the farmers in the country were members of producers cooperatives by the time the policy was abandoned.

Cultural Survival draws a distinction between villagization implemented as a counter-insurgency strategy in war areas, and as a program for social transformation in non-war areas. This distinction is important, but the difference is one of degree. There has been insurgency in all the southern provinces. The government was also waging a form of economic warfare against the peasantry, partly in order to exact higher levels of payment, and partly because it feared the sort of spontaneous rural uprising that occurred in 1974/5, when there was no effective government control over the rural areas at all.

The villagization program in most of the south was implemented with relatively little violence. But there is no doubt that it was involuntary. Cohen and Isaksson, who recount the implementation of the program in Arsi in a manner sympathetic to the government, note:

Indirectly there was psychological force. The experience of Arsi's inhabitants since Menelik's conquest [in the 1880s] has been that unless the writ of central government is followed, then the army and/or the police will enforce it. Knowing this, Arsi's peasants dismantled their houses, moved them to new sites, and reconstructed them on assigned compounds with few overt signs of resistance.<sup>7</sup>

The Arsi peasants' proximity to Bale and Harerghe, and their knowledge of the villagization program there, undoubtedly reinforced this preparedness to comply with official commands. The government's preparedness to withhold food aid from non-villagized areas also put pressure on villagers to comply with the program.

The implementation plan for each province was devised locally. While this decentralization could have avoided many of the errors associated with central planning, it also created a climate of competition for correctness and zeal between the cadres of different provinces; in 1986 the most successful officials were rewarded with prizes and promotions.

The creation of new villages involved a number of measures which led to unnecessary hardship and hunger. Government officials and cadres surveyed sites and insisted on house construction in the middle of growing crops. Labor was diverted from essential household and agricultural tasks. Houses of reluctant farmers were arbitrarily demolished. Levies were exacted from the peasants in order to finance the program. The villagers were moved before

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen and Isaksson, 1987, p. 452.

essential ancillary buildings had been constructed, such as latrines, kitchens and stables. Inadequate space for housing animals and long distances to pastures led to enforced sale of livestock.

In some areas of south-central Ethiopia, the staple crop is the root of the *ensete* (false banana) plant. This is a perennial plant which is traditionally grown around the homestead. Several agricultural experts recommended that villagization be deferred or cancelled in *ensete*-growing areas, because the forced relocation would require the abandonment of existing *ensete* trees and it would be several years before new trees would achieve maturity. This advice was ignored, and villagization proceeded apace (though in some parts of southern Shewa, a compromise was reached whereby the existing dense pattern of settlement was merely rearranged). Some of the hunger that afflicts these fertile areas in 1991 can be ascribed to this policy. Similar problems affected villagization in coffee-growing areas and places where the mild narcotic leaf *chat* is grown.

A number of villages had to be relocated after their sites were selected by urban cadres in places without water, or where there was no drainage so that flooding was prevalent.

## **Resistance**

The villagization program was deeply unpopular throughout Ethiopia.

Most rural resistance to villagization and its accompanying programs took the form of unobtrusive sabotage. Peasants would do the minimum possible amount of corvee labor<sup>8</sup> on roads, schools and forestry schemes, and produce shoddy work. There are accounts of villagers planting saplings upside-down, certainly not from ignorance.

In some areas there was violent resistance. A notable example is Gojjam, where there is a long history of resisting central attempts to meddle in affairs connected with land (see chapter 3). Villagization in Mota district was achieved in 1986 only with the assistance of helicopter gunships sent from Addis Ababa. There are other reports of villagers killing or mutilating cadres sent to enforce villagization, for example, 25 people killed near Shashamane in Shewa, one in Gojjam, two in Sidamo, and an unknown number in Gamu Gofa.<sup>9</sup>

In March 1990, President Mengistu unexpectedly announced the abandonment of the villagization program. Almost overnight, the existing cooperative farms were physically stripped of their assets. Villagers -- for so long sullen and cowed -- suddenly displayed great energy and initiative in redividing their farmland and returning to their original homesteads, or

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<sup>8</sup> Forced labor exacted as a tax demand.

<sup>9</sup> Survival International, 1988, p. 26.

at least laying claim to them in anticipation of a future move. In some areas, cadres were expelled from the villages, or fled anticipating retribution. In Mota, Gojjam, some cadres who tried to resist the dismantling of the village were killed by the peasants.