



Dan Connell

Eritrean war hurts relief effort

By Chris Cartter

OROTA, ERITREA

Last week Ethiopian government forces took control of one town and a large farming project from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in Western Eritrea, as Soviet-supplied aircraft bombed relief convoys ferrying emergency supplies to civilians in the famine-stricken Red Sea territory.

On August 31 the EPLF withdrew from Tessenei and Ali Ghidir after holding the former market town since January 1984 during a series of large-scale battles in the area, according to a spokesperson for the nationalist opposition movement here. This is the second town the EPLF has evacuated in as many weeks in the face of a massive build-up of Ethiopian military forces that includes infantry and mechanized reinforcements from southern and central Ethiopia, as well as 17,000 new recruits rushed here by ship, EPLF leaders say.

While Tessenei has little significance in the overall confrontation between the two armies, the change will have an immediate impact on efforts to aid drought and famine victims in the region. The largest agricultural rehabilitation site for displaced people run by the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), which operates in EPLF-held areas of Eritrea, was also taken by the government just as the fall harvest was being prepared.

Meanwhile, two ERA trucks were destroyed in an early morning air raid two weeks earlier by four Ethiopian MiG jets, according to an eyewitness to the incident. The trucks were carrying food and other supplies to one of 42 ERA camps for an estimated 190,000 people forced to flee their homes due to war and drought during the past year.

For 24 years the Eritreans have been fighting for independence from Ethiopia, which annexed the former Italian colony in 1962. The EPLF now controls more than 85 percent of the Pennsylvania-sized territory, while the government controls the larger towns and the main roads. The ERA is the only private aid agency with access to more than two million drought-affected civilians who live in the EPLF-controlled countryside. Recent Ethiopian advances against the EPLF seem designed to cut the front's supply lines to the highland areas where heavy fighting has been going on for months.

But this is also the route by which ERA reaches the civilian population with truck convoys and camel caravans. The Ali Ghidir farm near Tessenei was the largest of 18 agricultural projects aimed at giving famine victims a chance to become self-sufficient in food production. A visit to the farm one week before the government takeover found the project running smoothly.

There has been no word yet of the fate of the project or the civilians who ran it, but United Nations officials in Sudan report that hundreds of Eritrean refugees are now arriving each day in already overcrowded camps there. EPLF leaders claim that there are now 110,000 Ethiopian troops in Eritrea. Western diplomats in the Ethiopian capital contend that the number may grow to as many as 250,000. But most observers put the total strength of the Ethiopian army at 300,000. More than one-half are now tied down by security duties in large cities and by insurgencies elsewhere in Ethiopia.

War intensifies

A three-week tour of EPLF-held areas of Eritrea found the war there steadily intensifying at a time when millions of impoverished peasant farmers and nomads are still reeling from the five-year-old drought. At least 11 villages, including crops and livestock, have been destroyed and thousands forced off the land by advancing Ethiopian troops.

The ERA currently maintains a fleet of 124 trucks, provided by European, North American and Australian donor agencies, which move food and convoys from Sudan at night over tortuous roads to displaced peoples' camps in EPLF territory. Each camp is carefully selected to hide civilians from air attack under the sparse cover of thorny acacia trees that line the dry river bed. Water availability, access to rugged dirt tracks used by ERA trucks and proximity to

Millions of Eritreans are still suffering from the effects of the five-year-old drought.

original homes are also primary considerations that determine camp locations.

Visits to several camouflaged camps—containing 4,000-6,000 people each—reveal that ERA provided basic food rations, supplementary food and other supplies, such as blankets and second-hand clothes. The camp populations administer themselves through elected committees. Schools were started and sophisticated health services provided through the national programs of the Eritrean Public Health Program.

"Our aim is to feed and care for our people at home and help them build their own capacity to grow food. No one wants to become a refugee," said Tekie Bevene, head of ERA's Research & Development Department.

Conditions for the 190,950 of those in the camps described as "most affected" are gradually stabilizing through ERA's intensive feeding program, according to healthworkers there. The remaining 560,000 famine victims—described as "severely affected"—have mostly stayed in their highland villages, determined to eke out a survival existence despite years of drought, war and loss of livestock. There they receive aid from ERA occasionally via pack animal caravans.

But donations by international aid agencies to ERA have lagged far behind requested amounts. With only 20 percent of need being met, ERA is forced to concentrate its limited resources on those more easily reached in the camps. In addition to shortages, renewed warfare in the highlands has complicated the task of reaching the most vulnerable there.

"This is how we must work because of the war: slaves of the night," Mebratu Iyassu said during a midnight visit to Ali Ghidir project before government troops arrived. Pointing to the canal-digging machine busy in the darkness, Iyassu added, "Before this machine was bought by ERA in March, 800 to 900 farmers worked 70 nights digging the canal with only their sweat." The canal, which carries the water from

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the Gash River to agricultural land at Ali Ghidir, is 12 miles long.

Ali Ghidir was the largest of 13 water diversion projects under way that would have put a total of 6,000 hectares under cultivation this season. The remaining projects total 1,000 hectares and are situated near other ERA settlement camps.

Started by an Italian soldier in 1948, Ali Ghidir was bought by a close associate of Emperor Selassie in 1962 to grow cotton. The land was nationalized in 1976 by the current regime. Except for 200 hectares, the fertile land lay dormant under the current Ethiopian regime for the next eight years. Work began on the project after the EPLF drove Ethiopian troops out of two garrisons, one at Tessenei and another at Ali Ghidir. Today, more than 5,000 hectares are under cultivation. The crop is sorghum, Eritrea's staple food. Eighteen hundred families living in 13 villages surrounding the project divide the land according to village and family size.

Many of the families were settled farmers in the highlands. Others, like Muhammad Kur Idris, were pastoralists. Idris, 42, said, "I used to graze animals—20 goats, 30 sheep, one camel. Then the drought killed everything, and I took my family to camp in Sudan. When we heard about this, we came back to Eritrea. Now I can grow three types of sorghum with seeds supplied by ERA."

The ERA and civilian departments of the EPLF coordinated the clearing and maintenance of the project, supplied most inputs, taught basic farm techniques, and owned and operated six tractors used to assist farmers in plowing. ■

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By Salim Muwakkil

ALTHOUGH THERE IS A GENERAL consensus that the Senate will pass legislation imposing mild sanctions on the South African government of P.W. Botha, speculation grows about how President Reagan will respond to the measure. On record already as opposed to sanctions, Reagan has also vowed to veto the legislation. But congressional leaders, including some of his major allies, predict that garnering enough votes for an override will be so easy that it will be interpreted as a major rebuke of the administration's position.

The South African sanctions issue has assumed a political importance quite out of proportion to the largely symbolic effect it would have on the Botha regime. There are two major reasons for this:

- Political observers, searching for any sign of lame duckery in the Reagan administration, are closely scrutinizing the sanctions fight. Meanwhile, the White House—reportedly gearing up to present some ideological initiatives aggressively during this second term—is anxious to appear robust. If the Republican-dominated Senate passes the sanctions bill and then overrides a presidential veto, it will be an act of defiance administration officials fear may spread.

- The South African issue has provoked a bitter disagreement within the ranks of conservative Republicans, and the rift has implications that reach all the way to the 1988 presidential race. Several younger conservatives have found common cause in a group they call the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS), opposing the administration's "constructive engagement" South Africa policy. Some are actually helping to lead the fight for sanctions against Pretoria. House Republican Jack Kemp of New York, who's been a torch-bearer for many of Reagan's programs and considered a leading conservative candidate for president is also a leading member of the COS.

An intramural struggle

Most of the political right wing (including the so-called New Right), however, are diametrically opposed to the COS position. They are urging Reagan to veto any sanctions legislation and develop even closer ties with the Botha government.

The issue has escalated into an often vitriolic intramural struggle over the direction of the conservative movement and, some say, for the heart of the Republican Party. After months of tortured ruminations among Democrats about the condition of their party's heart, it's comforting to know the coronary problems are bipartisan.

The COS revealed its break with the administration's South Africa policy last December when 35 conservative House members signed an anti-apartheid letter that was delivered to the South African ambassador. They later voted with the majority when the House passed a sanctions bill 380 to 48. These young conservatives argue that the Republican Party must remove the taint of racism from its ranks if it is to become the majority party.

"This is not a break with the administration," insists Dave Hoppe, a Kemp aide. "It's just a minor disagreement. Although Rep. Kemp generally supports the president as the architect of the country's foreign policy, he feels Republicans should do more to demonstrate our abhorrence of racism in any form. And apartheid is a particularly pernicious form of racism."

Hoppe says Kemp is trying to demonstrate to blacks that their concerns also interest him. "Rep. Kemp also thinks it's necessary to send a message to Pretoria that the U.S. Congress is watching what is going on very closely." In addition to Kemp, the COS' stars are Vin Weber of Minnesota, Newt Gingrich of Georgia and Robert Walker of Pennsylvania.

Reagan's "constructive engagement"



South Africa is now threatening to divide the Republican Party

policy is also losing favor among Republicans who would probably be classified as traditional. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Richard Lugar (R-IN), a longtime Reagan loyalist, told *U.S. News & World Report* that congressional action to impose sanctions will pass because it takes an official stance that will clear up "any ambiguities in our position toward apartheid and the South African government's lack of movement to end it."

Some congressional workers who have long struggled against the U.S. embrace of apartheid contend the conservatives now speaking out against apartheid are engaged more in political maneuvering than in the search for political morality.

"Many of these conservative opponents of apartheid are concerned about their political survival, plain and simple," said one congressional source. "They're good political opportunists, trying to carve out a role for themselves as a major Republican caucus. They say they're advocates of sanctions, but what kind of sanctions are they

While denying a break with the administration, many Republican leaders are looking for ways to dissociate themselves from the Reagan hardliners.

talking about? The banning of Kruggerand sales is the only substantial sanction left in the Senate bill. These guys are looking for a middle ground that isn't there."

The Senate bill, scheduled for a September 9 vote, is a compromise between the earlier Senate version and a much stronger bill passed by the House. It includes a ban on the sale of Kruggerands, South Africa's gold coin, a ban on new loans to the South African government, except for educational, housing and health facilities, and restrictions on the export to South Africa of computer and nuclear equipment.

Campaigns of the New Right

Leading New Right theorists are imploring Reagan to disregard the possibility of an override and to veto the bill. Since the vote on sanctions is primarily a symbolic one, they reason, the president has nothing to lose by wielding his veto pen. What he gains, presumably, is Pretoria's gratitude.

New Right luminaries are busy mobilizing the troops for major propaganda assaults on the pro-sanction forces. Howard Phillips, president of the Conservative Caucus has mailed to potential donors on his enormous mailing list literature explaining the South African story from his Manichean perspective: the Free World vs. the Commies.

Moral Majority leader Rev. Jerry Falwell, just back from a helicopter tour of South Africa, announced he will stump for Botha in between his book-burning rallies against pornography. Senators Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Steve Symms (R-ID), two supporters of South Africa who feel no need to make the obligatory denunciation of apartheid, plan to continue their fight through the filibuster route. Richard Viguerie, direct mail entrepreneur and New Right combatant, has indicated that he will do all he can to help stem the pro-sanctions tide.

According to a report in the *Washington Post*, White House communications director Patrick Buchanan recently called New Right leaders together for a strategy meeting in his office. The agenda was concerned with ways to mobilize conservative support against sanctions.

So far, the major targets of their ire have been their pro-sanctions brethren. Phillips says the COS members suffer from "acute moral cowardice" and are "intellectually dishonest." Buchanan has used the word "turncoat" to describe the COS group. He also accused them of "stabbing South Africa in the back."

Constructive engagement's architect

The architect of the "constructive engagement" policy is Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester A. Crocker. A former fellow at the Georgetown Center for Strategic Studies, Crocker came to the Reagan team's attention through articles he's written on South Africa for *Foreign Affairs*. These articles provided the Reaganauts with the intellectual justifications they needed to rationalize their tolerance for apartheid, so they hired Crocker to formulate the administration's official policy.

And, though the Heritage Foundation has generously supplied the intellectual resources to aid what one quipster terms the "don't rock the Botha" campaign, Crocker has remained the Reagan regime's primary South Africa point man. Lately he's even had to spend time bailing out his boss from his most recent "misstatements."

When Reagan, in a radio interview, praised Pretoria as a "reformist" government that had eliminated many apartheid practices, Crocker was called upon to clarify things. The reforms the president applauded were denounced by Crocker as "inadequate." They "haven't addressed the core political issues that must be addressed in South Africa," he said.

The view from Trans Africa

Nii Akuetteh, a researcher with Trans Africa, the lobby group credited with sparking the domestic furor over this country's benighted South Africa policies, said the hypocrisy of the Reagan administration is "so blatant it should be embarrassing. How can Reagan and his supporters argue that economic sanctions hurt South Africa's oppressed while arguing the exact opposite in the case of our policy toward Cuba, Poland and Nicaragua, not to mention the Soviet Union.

"It's inconceivable to me how anyone who considers himself at all ethical can support this high hypocrisy," he said. Although Akuetteh expressed optimism that the U.S. would eventually recognize apartheid's evil, he's worried about electronic preachers entering the fray. "These preachers have a huge captive audience and they can pass on inaccurate information about South Africa without anyone calling them to account. That's a lot of unchecked power," he said. "That's too much power." ■