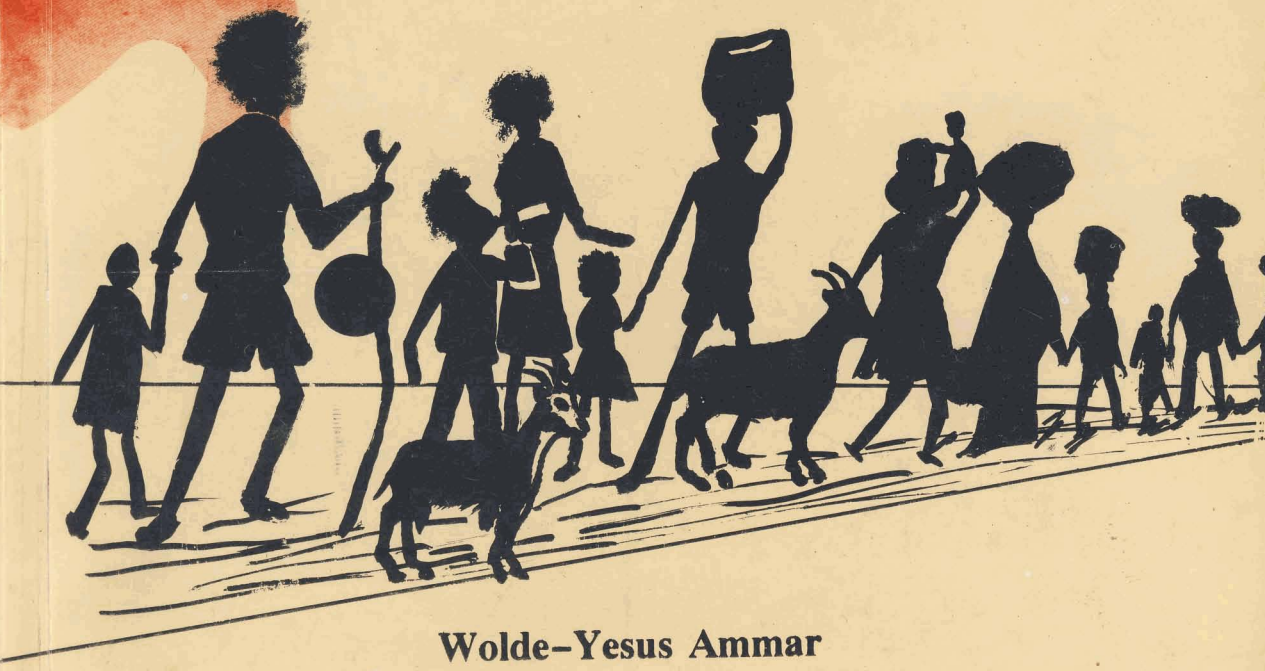
ERITREA

Root Causes of

WAR & REFUGEES



Wolde-Yesus Ammar

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Wolde-Yesus Ammar

Sindbad Printing Co - Baghdad

In memory of

Michael Ghaber,

a teacher of Eritrean nationhood

Printed in Baghdad - 1992

PREFACE

This is an attempt to examine more deeply the complex root causes of the Eritrean liberation struggle and its refugee phenomenon. The study was submitted, only two weeks before the liberation of Asmara, to the Graduate School of Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in international relations. The rapid developments that had unfolded in Eritrea and its environs since then have not affected any part of the analysis. And despite a previous intention of combining it with other related topics on Eritrea for a different project, I accepted the advise of compatriots and friends to publish it now so that it could serve at least as a reference material on issues which need be attended to seriously at this crucial hour of decision on the fate of Eritrea and its struggling people who have been unjustly subjected to too much suffering for so long.

Although a partisan in the conflict for over 30 years, I have tried to the best of my ability to treat the subject with rigorous objectivity. Proceeding on the same academic requirement, I have drawn conclusions, which I believe are objective and balanced – *albeit* sensitive – based on concrete evidences and living realities of the variegated society.

This work is, therefore, the original thesis project on the Eritrean liberation struggle and its refugees with slight editing touches on tense of verbs and a sentence or two on opening chapters for updating purposes. However, an epilogue was deemed necessary to make a quick glimpse into certain essential issues and events of the past which were not adequately treated in the text. Similarly, the epilogue surveys the political and social implications of the latest developments on the future of Eritrea.

Certain words in use in the region like Ethiopia, Habasha, Tigre, Tigrai and Tigrayans are often confusing because of their shifting meanings, depending on the user. An attempt had been made to explain them in footnotes. In particular, the words Kabassa (plateau or highland) and Kabassans (highlanders) are extensively used here referring to the mainly Tigrigna-speaking region and

people in Eritrea because of lack of a better word and in order to avoid calling them by the generic word Habasha which is not, strictly speaking, correct. This geographical reference to the Eritrean plateau also helps to distinguish the same people from the Tigrayans or Tigrigna speakers in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the adjective Christian had been prefixed whenever applicable to differentiate Kabassans of the dominant Coptic Orthodox culture from the Jabarti and Saho Moslems, most of whom are also Kabassans.

A carefully selected material is appended to the study attempting to show in a nutshell the social and political factors behind the persistently divergent viewpoints in Eritrea. The communal divisions and estimated population figures for 1952 (there has not been any population census in Eritrea since 1931) are indicative of the linguistic and cultural differences in the society that partly gave birth to 15 parties in 1951 and to nine fronts in 1992, including a pan-Afar movement in the region. Views expressed during the consultations of the UN Commissioner for Eritrea in 1951 with Eritrean parties and the interviews conducted with veteran Eritrean fighters 30 years later underline not only enduring commitment to separate Eritrean statehood but also call attention to the paramount importance of fully accommodating the interests of those concerned social forces in order not to stop with half solutions this time round. The ultimate objective is, therefore, to present some of the bitter truths of the Eritrean reality without glossing them over by falsehoods and wishful rationalizations.

I use this space to note that my modest project would not have been started under the present theme without the encouragement of my thesis advisor, Professor Raymond Smyke, and course supervisor, Associate Professor Earl Noelte. I am indebted to both for having advised me to combine the two subjects of liberation struggle and refugeeism in an international relations thesis, which conveniently fitted the Eritrean situation. I also thank the two Webster University professors for their suggestion that I could use the analysis presented in my previous seminar papers relevant to

this subject. The papers included: (1) The Ethio-Eritrean Conflict: What Solution? (2) International Law and National Liberation Movements, (3) Lebanization in International Relations: Case Study, Eritrea, (4) Super-Power Rivalry in the Horn of Africa, and (5) Ethnic Nationalism in Yugoslavia: What Prospects in the 1990s? Likewise, I am deeply indebted to my devoted wife, Leteab, for having lent me her courage to attend study courses at middle-age and for typing all the seminar papers which I scribbled, including the thesis. I am also thankful to my daughters Sophia and Harinet whose indignation over my scattered papers had been limited to the harmless remark: *'Oh! toujours l'Erythree!'*

And at last, but not least, I must acknowledge that the work appeared in its present form thanks to the skilful re-typing and formatting efforts exerted on it by Ms. Ayda Sarafian of Baghdad, who was a colleague at the United Nations Iraq Relief Coordination Unit in 1991-1992 where I have been serving as Programme Officer for Information and Research. I am grateful to the invaluable help she offered me by sacrificing many of her long-awaited weekend days.

Wolde-Yesus Ammar
Baghdad, October 1992

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CONTENTS

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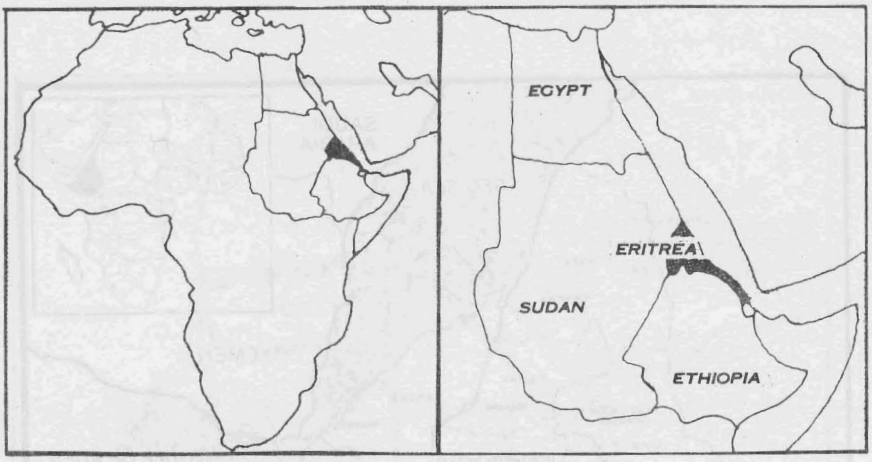
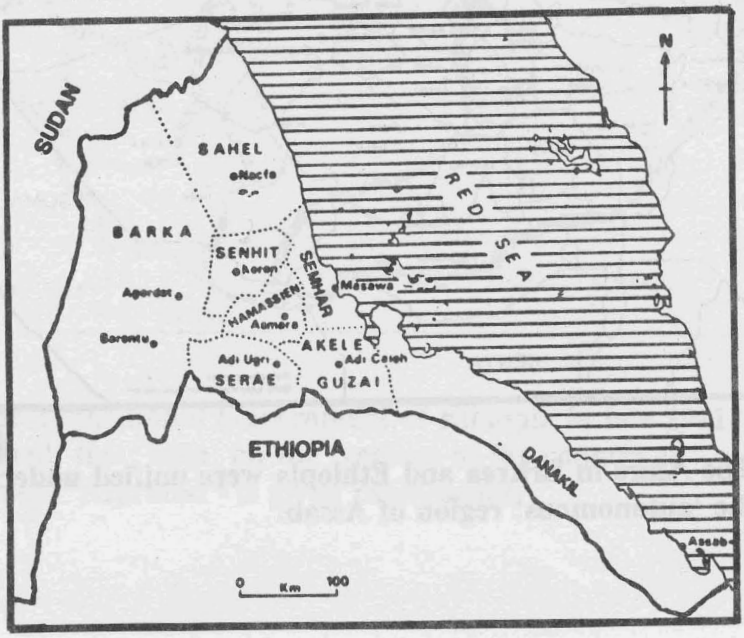
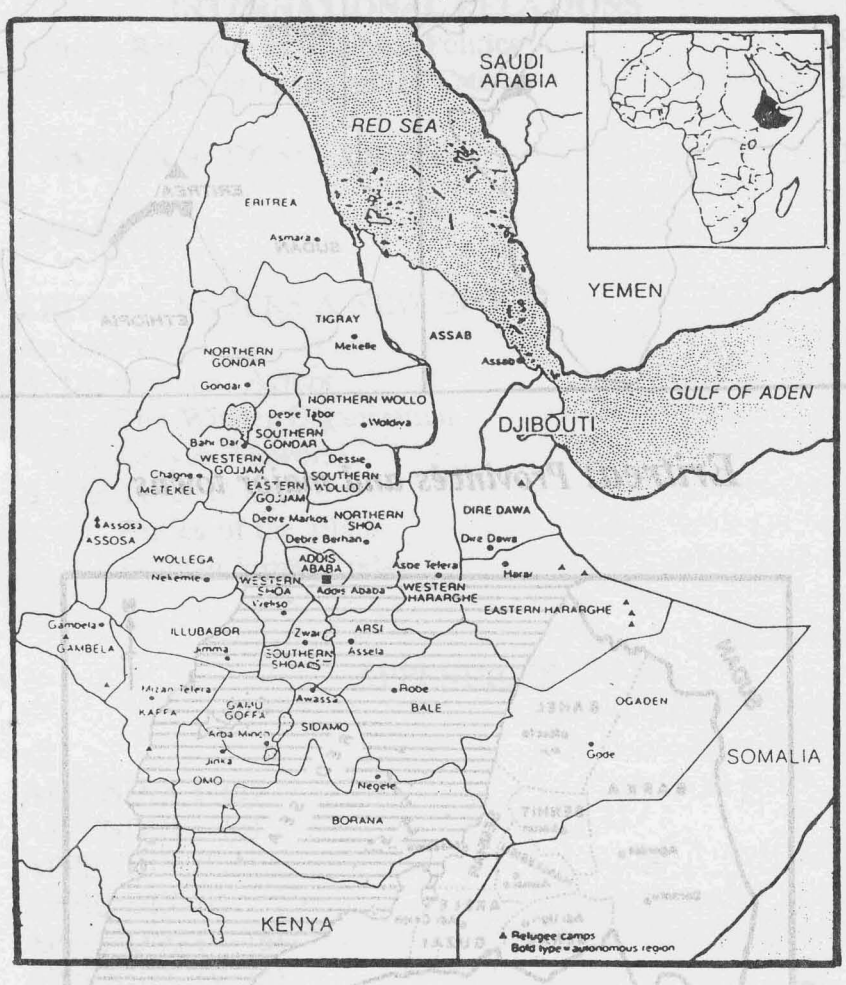


Eritrea: Provinces and major towns

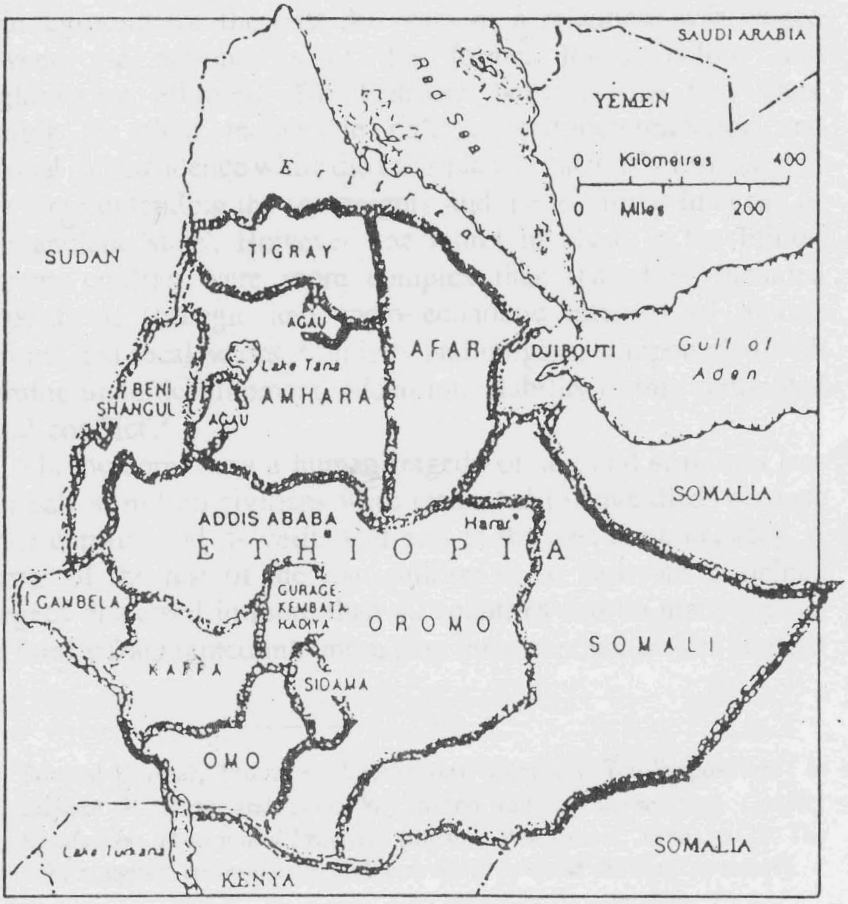


DERGUE'S MAP OF ETHIOPIA IN 1987



The Afars in Eritrea and Ethiopia were unified under the 'autonomous' region of Assab.

EPRDF'S MAP OF ETHIOPIA IN 1992



The Transitional Government of Ethiopia in late 1991 issued this map on the regions of the country in which "Afarland" is given prominence.

INTRODUCTION

Until the capture of Asmara on 24 May 1991 by the guerrillas of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Eritrea had been a battleground for the past 30 years of a relentless war waged between the nationalists of this former Italian colony and neighbouring Ethiopia. The Eritreans believed that they were fighting for their inalienable right to self-determination and national independence while the Ethiopians tenaciously insisted that they were defending the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of their ancient 'state'. However, the issues involved in the Ethio-Eritrean conflict were more complex than that: they included geopolitical, strategic and socio-economic interests of global, regional and local actors. Ethnicity and religion, compounded with yawning underdevelopment, added intractability to this 'protracted social conflict'.[1]

The outcome was a human tragedy on a grand scale: no less than half a million civilians were estimated to have died[2] because of the conflict and its various effects in the past three decades. A quarter of the rest of the four million or so Eritreans remained refugees dispersed in more than 40 countries and, in many a case, one family fragmented into more than three continents. The conflict

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1 Edward E. Azar, 'Protracted International Conflicts: Ten Propositions', in Edward E. Azar and John W. Burton (eds.), *International Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, (Sussex: Wheatsheaf, 1986), p. 28. The term suggests an on-going problem which is quite difficult to resolve.

2 'Eritrea: An unborn nation', *The Economist* (London) 20 Oct., 1990, p. 50. See also Dawit Wolde Giorghis, *Red Tears*, (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1988), p. 113, where this Ethiopian governor of Eritrea during 1979-1983 says: "According to estimates we made in 1983, 90,000 Ethiopian soldiers and 280,000 civilians have died in the civil war between 1975 and 1983. The guerrillas have lost 9,000". But, the EPLF leader, Issayas Afeworki, on 20 June 1991 said in a speech at the Asmara Stadium that Eritrea will annually pay homage to its 50,000 martyrs. Probably he was referring only to his guerrilla casualties.

had also been equally tragic to Ethiopia whose famines and the state of extreme underdevelopment were exacerbated by the costly war in Eritrea which greatly contributed in keeping it the poorest country in the world with the lowest per capita gross national product of US $130 in 1987.[3]

It is common knowledge that refugees are a symbol of political failure and social malaise or "a useful barometre of persecution and social strife".[4] But why did we have so many refugees from small Eritrea? And why did the Eritreans fight for 30 years? Answers to these two interrelated questions constitute the integral part of this book on Eritrea's long-drawn struggle and its refugees.

It must also be stressed at the outset that the problem of identity is central to the Eritrean question. The extended exposure of this coastal people to foreign influences "forged", as Fred Halliday asserted, "an Eritrean social entity and a distinct Eritrean consciousness of a kind that did not previously exist".[5] Yet, an important segment of this entity found it less easy to cut its umbilical cord with the old Habasha[6] (Abyssinia) to which it partly

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3 World Bank, *World Development Report 1989* (Oxford UP,1989), Table 1.

4 Jeff Crisp, 'Vital Statistics', *Refugees* (UNHCR) No. 68, Geneva, Sept. 1989.

5 Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 176.

6 The word *Habasha* denotes many things in the region. The Moslems in the lowland peripheries in Ethiopia and Eritrea use it in reference to the Amharic and Tigrigna speaking peoples of the plateaux. It is also sometimes generalized by these two dominant groups to mean all Ethiopians and all Eritreans. The name is derived from Habashat, a tribe from the Sahartan province of Yemen, which migrated to the western littoral of the Erythrean Sea around 700 B.C. and emerged dominant over the other Sabaean migrants. The Semitic migrants imposed their advanced peasant culture over the large local Kushitic stratum. See Spencer J. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Frank Cass 1965), pp. 32-34. See also footnote 1 on chapter 5.

belonged. The non-highlander, non-Christian half of the Eritrean society, which has few unifying factors within itself, tragically failed to accept fully those in the other segment as trustworthy compatriots. The old rival forces of Islam and Christianity, interspersed with the new forces of Arabism, Eritrean territorial nationalism and ethno-linguistic belongings, hindered integration and national unity in Eritrea. This enduring friction between Eritreanism and the cultural and linguistic affinities across its borders constituted Eritrea's main weakness for a long time, including at its hour of victory. It is an important theme that runs throughout most parts of this study.

The evolution of an Eritrean identity and entity amidst such a diversity is, therefore, the cardinal issue in the study of the background to the conflict. Furthermore, the struggle for political power in order to assure one's own group's comfortable access to the state and its material resources is an important factor in the conflict, and it deserved a especial focus.

An examination of the causes of refugee flights from Eritrea, the quality and the role of these refugees in the liberation struggle and in its internationalization is definitely another issue of great concern. During the long years of war and suffering in the country, many persons went into exile while many others in the same situation did not react in the same way. The scrutiny of Ethiopia's gross human rights violations in Eritrea as a cause of refugeeism shall be contrasted with a parallel study of the share of Eritrean organizations in uprooting their own people.

PART ONE

THE EVOLUTION OF AN ERITREAN IDENTITY

CHAPTER 1

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

At the present time, many have been made aware of a reality called Eritrea which engaged itself in a long armed conflict against Ethiopia. But this reality did not exist from the beginning of time. Like almost all colonial entities, modern Eritrea was created by European colonialism only a century ago. As one close observer of the territory and its peoples put it,

> Italy created Eritrea by an act of surgery: by severing its different peoples from those with whom their past had been linked and by grafting the amputated remnants to each other under the title of Eritrean.[1]

This is not a situation unique to modern Eritrea. The literature on European colonialism in Africa and parts of Asia is an ample testimony of the mindless fragmentation of peoples and regions to form colonial boundaries, and eventually, states. For instance, the Somalis were divided into five parts: French Somaliland, British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland; other Somali clans inhabited British Kenya and Ethiopia, a local power which expanded its territories tenfold during the late 19th century European scramble for Africa. As one Ethiopian author said in 1975, even Ethiopia's existence as a 'modern state' does not actually extend far beyond the 19th century.[2]

The Eritrean nationalist claim that a separate 'Eritrean' entity could be traced several centuries back is as untenable as Ethiopia's territorial claim over modern Eritrea. But one thing is certain: since

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1 G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition 1941–1952* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1960), pp. 10–11.

2 Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution* (London: Review of African Political Economy, 1975), p. 1.

1890, the grafted remnants that came under the title of 'Eritrean' underwent considerable historical changes during the 51 years of Italian colonialism, 11 years of British occupation, 10 years of quasi-federal relationship with Ethiopia and, finally, 30 solid years of armed struggle provoked by Ethiopia's flagrant violation of the federal arrangement. These are the main stages to be dealt with in studying the evolution of Eritrean identity and consciousness. However, the pre-1890 period is not without its imprints, *albeit* faint, on Eritrea's historical evolution. The Ethiopians had been raising not quite justifiable claims over Eritrea based on ancient history, while the Eritrean nationalists countered them by conjuring up symbolisms and historical references only applicable to parts of the territory that later made up today's Eritrea.

A. 'ERITREA' BEFORE 1890

The name Eritrea was given to this country in north-east Africa when it was declared Italian colony by King Umberto's royal decree of 1 January 1890. But the name was not alien to the region: the Ptolemaic Greeks in the third century B.C. called the waters of the zone Sinus Erythraeus and, later, the Romans called it Mare Erythraeum.[3] That is today's 'Eritrean' (or Red) Sea whose south-western littoral – present-day Eritrea – was the crossroad of migrations, commerce and trade and the hub of indigenous civilizations. Ancient records of about 3,000 B.C. attest a flourishing trade between Egypt and this region. The Kingdom of Punt of that early period, which remained dominant for a thousand years until about 1,000 B.C, comprised most of modern Eritrea.[4]

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3 Osman Saleh Sabbe, *The History of Eritrea* (Beirut: Dar Al-Masirah, no date), p. 28. It is assumed that Greek sailors could have named the sea after the reddish mosses afloat and in the banks. But ancient Greece also had an island called Eritrea (today's Yoboya). 'Cape Eritrea' exists in Crete today.

4 John Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay* (Algonac, Michigan, USA: Reference, 1984), p. 175.

The ancient port of Adulis,[5] near today's Massawa, was the capital of a political conglomeration in the area long before another city-state called Axum was founded. The author of *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*[6], an anonymous Greek traveller from Alexandria, recorded in about 60 A.D. that Adulis was still an important commercial port exporting ivory, rhinoceros horns and skins as well as east-west trade centre for ships from India, the Persian Gulf and East Africa bartering wheat, rice, sesame, cotton and honey with traders from the Graeco-Egyptian world and the Arabian Peninsula.[7] The Greek-speaking city-state of Adulis in the western Red Sea coast was a neighbour of other Sabaean principalities or 'settled kingdoms' in Akkele Guzai and Serae provinces of today's Eritrea.[8]

1. Axum: 'Eritrean' or 'Ethiopian'?

Modern Ethiopia claimed to be the successor of the city-state of Axum which was the dominant political entity in the region between the first and the sixth centuries A.D. The territories of Axum were "approximately coextensive with modern Eritrea";[9] the ancient town is situated only a few kilometres south of the present Ethio-Eritrean frontier. That civilization's:

> ruins, temples, baths and towns which may still be seen dispersed along the route between Axum and Zula [the modern

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5 *Ibid.*, p. 175. See also Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 4.

6 Trimingham, *op.cit.*, pp. 35, 214. See Wilfred H. Schoff, trans., *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (New York: Longmans, 1912).

7 Sabbe, *op.cit.*, p. 54. Trevaskis *op.cit.*, p. 5.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

9 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

name for ancient Adulis] bear witness to the presence on the plateau at this time of an ordered society which demanded and secured a higher standard of living than any 'Eritreans' or indeed 'Ethiopians' were to enjoy until recently.[10]

And the towns between Adulis and Axum included Kohaito, Matara, Tekonda'e and Saym – all of them inside the territorial boundaries of modern Eritrea. It was historically confirmed that Axum corresponded very little with the modern state of Ethiopia, which is a nineteenth century creation. In fact, Axum did not even at its golden age "extend southwards beyond the limits of the present Tigrai".[11]

However, neither Adulis nor Axum could belong to present-day states or states-to-be but to an ancient civilization equally shared among the Hamito-Semitic Habasha (Abyssinians), generally called the Amharas and the Tigrayans (here meaning all Tigrigna speakers) found in the entire plateau regions of today's Eritrea and Ethiopia.

2. Five Beja Kingdoms

Axumite power declined in about 600 A.D. in the face of invading Hamitic tribes (Bejas) from the Nubia region of southern Egypt. They subsequently established five kingdoms called Bazin, Baqlin, Jarin, Naquis and Qata, covering most of present-day Eritrea and Eastern Sudan.[12] When these Beja kingdoms in turn disintegrated because of internecine conflicts[13] in the 14th century, some Habasha migrants from the provinces of Lasta (Agaw),

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10 *Ibid.*

11 Stephen H. Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), p. 13.

12 Trimingham, *op.cit.*, pp. 49-50.

13 Sherman, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

Dambya and Tigrai came back to the land across River Mereb. It is said that the newcomers from the south:

> Wrested the 'Eritrean' Plateau from the Beja, either subjugating them or expelling them into the Northern Highlands [Sahel] and the Barka Lowlands. After an interruption of several centuries, the Plateau had once more become an outpost of Abyssinian culture and Ethiopian political power.[14]

These 'returnees'[15] from the south rapidly changed the pastoral society to settled and relatively more advanced agricultural communities called *endas* organized in a kinship system.

3. The Ottoman Turks in 'Eritrea'

The Ottoman Turks appeared at both banks of the Red Sea by the first decade of the 16th century but did not establish themselves until the coming of the Portuguese in support of Christian Abyssinia in 1541 when a Moslem force from Harar led by Imam Ahmed Gragn pillaged Christian institutions from south up to the Eritrean highlands. It was halted by a Portuguese expeditionary force from Goa led by Christopher da Gama (the son of the discoverer of the Cape of Good Hope, Vasco da Gama) with the support of "eager followers from Eritrea and Tigre".[16]

The Ottoman Turks by 1557 held control over Massawa and thence took Keren and Suakin in the north and moved up to

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14 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

15 Tradition claims that the Hamasien and Akkele-Guzai provinces were taken over in the 13-14th centuries by people from central Abyssinia descending from a mythical ancestor called Meroni and his sons (Faluk, Shaluk and Maluk). The Agaw clans of Adkemeh Malaga settled in Serae. See Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

16 Sherman, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

Debaroa in the plateau where they established a fortress.[17] Turkish presence in the Eritrean plateau was short-lived but they and the *Bahri Negassis* (Rulers of the Sea)[18] had on-and-off alliances against the other invader warlords from Abyssinia. In the coastal Samhar region of Massawa, the Turks entrusted local administration to native agents or viceroys (*naibs*)[19], a situation which lasted until the 19th century.

The Ottoman Turks always had very light presence in the region. Nevertheless, their outpost garrisons in the Massawa-Suakin-Keren triangle and their contacts with the plateau chieftains for such a long period extending between the 16th to the 19th century naturally left its imprints on the peoples and territories of the Red Sea coast.

4. Eritrea During the 19th Century

The strategic importance of the Red Sea coast around Massawa was fully appreciated by covetous regional and European powers. The Funj dynasty of the Sudan (1504-1820), whose realm extended to the Barka Lowlands of western Eritrea, was replaced by the Egyptians who occupied the entire region of Barka, Bogos (Keren)

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17 Trimingham, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

18 Bahri Negassi or Bahr Nagash (Ruler of the Sea) was the governor of the coastal 'Province of Abyssinia' which was usually in rebellion because of Ottoman influences at Massawa. See S. Rajib Haraz, *Eritria Al-Hadissa 1557-1941* (Cairo: Hannah, 1974), p. 1. This territory was also called 'Mereb Melash' (beyond the Mereb) by Tigrayans and Amharas and it was already acquiring a distinct identity. The Scottish explorer James Bruce of Kinnaird passed through Eritrea in 1770 and described the land beyond the Mereb River to be always at war with Abyssinia. See his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh: G.G.J. and Robinson, 1790).

19 The *naibs* were also chieftains of the local Balaw (Beja) tribe who became lords of the coastal strip including Massawa and Hirgigo when Turkish presence and power further thinned down.

and Massawa between 1823 to 1872. The opening of the Suez Canal gave impetus to the scramble in the region with Italy buying land at Assab on the Red Sea coast in 1869 and, encouraged by the British who wanted them to counter the French at Djibouti, the Italians took Massawa from the Egyptians in 1885.[20]

What Italy consolidated and called the Italian Colony of Eritrea on New Year's Day of 1890 consisted of the following regions:

(a) The Medri Bahri (Land of the Sea) or Mereb Melash was inhabited by the Tigrigna-speaking mainly Coptic[21] Christians of the plateau districts of Hamasien, Serae and Akkele-Guzai which were not always ruled by one chieftain. The rebellious land of the Bahri Negassis was a cultural extension of Tigrai to whose warlords it never succumbed without fierce resistance. The Saho-speaking communities of Akkele-Guzai and its eastern slopes, most of whom are Moslems, and the Jabartis also belong to this region.

(b) The Barka Lowlands, where the Tigre-speaking Beni Amer tribesmen dominate, was under the influence and sometimes the hegemony of the Funj Kingdom at Sennar, south of today's Khartoum. These islamized[22] pastoralist nomads had little contact

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20 Sherman, *op.cit.*, p. 10. It must be noted that the Ottomans took Massawa from the Arabs who were established at the Dahlac Archipelago since about 800 A.D. See Trimingham, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

21 The Axumite and later the Abyssinian Church was, since the 4th century, linked to the Coptic (Egyptian) Church of Alexandria. After some interruption due to the rise of Islam, the link with Alexandria was resumed in the 14th century. All of the Ethiopian Church's bishops were appointed by Alexandria until 1951. This link no more exists but the term Coptic is still in frequent use.

22 The Beni Amer speak Tigre, a language derived from Ge'ez which is also the origin of the Semitic languages of Tigrigna and Amharic. Other ethnic groups in the Barka-Gash region include the Kunama, some of them still animists, the Baria and the Elit; all are of Nilotic extraction.

with the people of the Eritrean plateau except in occasional raids and counter-raids for livestock.

(c) The Samhar region of Massawa was under Arab/Islamic influence since the rise of Islam. The Ottoman Turks represented by their local agents gave the area a sort of separate identity. Parts of Keren in the west and the Sahel highlands of today's Eritrea at times fell under Turkish influence and at other times paid tribute to the Funj dynasty.

(d) Dankalia, Eritrea's coastal province extending from the Buri Peninsula south of Massawa to Djibouti, was part of the Sultanate of Aussa which was never ruled by any outside power until the advent of the Italians. The Eritrean Danakils are part of the Afar ethnic people fragmented between Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

B. ERITREA UNDER ITALIAN RULE: 1890-1941

The survey of the entire period before the advent of the Italians showed that the coastal peoples, or at least those found between Massawa and the Mereb River, were, by virtue of the constant contact they had with the outside world, gradually but surely becoming different from their kinsmen in the interior of the continent. The Italian rule did not only accentuate the differences but also furnished the material factors that gave birth to a distinct identity grouping, *albeit* loose, called the 'Eritreans'.

The major Italian aims for colonization – aside from providing them with a source of pride to imperialist sentiment – were three: (a) to channel the then quite fast growing Italian emigration "to Eritrea instead of to the United States"[23]; (b) to obtain raw

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23 Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea 1962-78* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1983), p. 3. Newly unified Italy with its large unemployed labour wanted settler colonies.

materials[24] for Italian industries and market for exports, and (c) to prepare Eritrea as a springboard for further African conquests.[25] These dreams were not fully materialized but the policies and actions taken towards their implementation left behind some irreversible historical facts and socio-political legacies which are organically linked with the present Ethio-Eritrean conflict.

Soon after consolidating their conquest, the Italians signed series of treaties which clearly demarcated the boundaries of the colony with the Sudan in the north and the west, Ethiopia in the south and French Djibouti in the extreme south-east.[26] They also soon started to enforce law and order "in a country where they had previously been unknown".[27] Italian law was applied in the colony's newly created six administrative units which are still in use after 100 years. Called Commissariati, the administrative divisions were: Hamasien, Serae, Akkele-Guzai, Bassopiano Orientale or Eastern Lowlands (including Samhar and Dankalia), Keren or Senhit, and Bassopiano Occidentale or Barka.

It is true that the colony was inhabited by a mosaic of communities who had not much in common "but the accident of their residence in the territory Italy conquered and named Eritrea."[28] However, the very fact that they now shared a common territory, common name and one paramount chief – even if white – who imposed his laws and his administration over them all, slowly awakened a sense of unity among these peoples.

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24 Sherman, *op.cit.*, p. 15. The Italians cultivated cotton, tropical fruits, sisal and coffee for the home market.

25 The conquest of Abyssinia was Italy's main interest over the Eritrean coast but this was frustrated at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Mussolini, however, succeeded to invade Ethiopia in 1935; both incidents made Ethiopia a symbol of black nationalism.

26 For a series of these treaties see Sabbe, *op.cit.*, p. 197-204.

27 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

When the Italians launched their expansionist wars, they conscripted, trained and regimented under harsh military discipline large number of Eritrean youths from all parts of the territory. Out of the thousands who took part in the first Italian attempt to conquer Ethiopia in 1896, some 4,000 Eritreans were killed or wounded.[29] About 500 Eritreans who were made Ethiopian prisoners of war at that Battle of Adwa suffered amputation of their right hands and left legs.[30] About 60,000 Eritreans were said to have participated in Italy's war over Tripoli and Cyrenaica (today's Libya) between 1911 and 1931.[31] Thousands more died in Italy's 1935 aggression on Ethiopia. In World War II, Italy conscripted well over 50,000 Eritreans against the Allies. This common suffering was no doubt manifesting itself to the people that they, without their previous consent, had to have common destiny.

Material changes were effected by the Italians. Development of quite modern agricultural sector, mining, light industries and infrastructure had their lasting impact on the society. Large tracts of land, first in the plateau and later in the lowlands, were appropriated from the native people and made *terre demeniale* (Crownland reserved for Italian colonists) where cash crops like cotton, fruits, vegetable and coffee were cultivated. The mining sector was started with the Massawa salt works in 1905 followed by those in Assab (1924) and Wokiro (1925) whose total annual production reached 130,000 tons in 1930.[32] Sodium and potassium

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29 Sabbe, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

30 The amputation of especially the right hand was intended to effectively disable the victim. This author saw one of those amputees at Keren in the mid-1950s. For Eritrean nationalists, it was a reminder of the cruelty dealt upon Eritreans by the Amhara King Menelik.

31 Dan Connell, 'The Birth of the Eritrean Nation', *Horn of Africa* vol. 3(1), Jan/March, 1980, p. 17.

32 Richard Leonard, 'Eritrea: Background to Revolution', *The Eritrean Newsletter* No. 44 Sept. 1981, p. 15.

extractions from Dankalia also reached 2,650 tons in 1925, and gold mining, which yielded 17,000 ounces in 1940, was going on at Augaro in the Gash and other parts of the country.

Italian infrastructural works connected the main regions and centres of the territory. The railway, which already in 1888 linked Massawa with the foothills of the plateau, was stretched through Asmara and Keren to Agordat in the west and completed by 1922. More intensive construction works were undertaken as a preparation for the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia. During this period, the material changes were fast. In 1930, there were 56 industrial firms with invested capital of 486 million lire. In 1939, there were 2,690 commercial establishments with a total invested capital of 2,198 million lire.[33]

A concomitant development was the rapid urbanization in the colony following the land expropriations and the various economic and infrastructural works which expanded the market economy. In the 1890s, Eritrea had few towns worth that name. By the end of the Italian period, about 20 per cent of the Eritreans were living in nearly a dozen urban centres with organized municipalities. Asmara grew from a small centre of 15,000 inhabitants before 1935, to a city of 120,000 Eritreans and 50,000 Italians in 1941.[34]

Relatively speaking, therefore, Eritrea was a coherent unit by the end of the Italian rule. But many painful and deep-cutting socio-political transformations had yet to be undergone to give more meaning to its separate identity.

C. THE BRITISH PERIOD: 1941-1952

As the Italians laid down the material basis for an Eritrean body politic, so did the British provide new ideas without which

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[33] Leonard, *op.cit.*, p. 17. The conversion rate was about 80 lire to the pound sterling.

[34] *Fate of Italy's Colonies*, Report of the Fabian Colonial Bureau (London: Fabian Publications, 1948), p. 24. See also Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

Eritrea's recent history would have been different. And though usually described as quite modest and unspectacular, the short period of British administration had "a revolutionary effect on the Eritrean".[35]

> A deliberate and indeed cynical, policy of keeping the Eritrean's belly full and his head empty had earned the Italians political tranquility. During the [British] Occupation, the process was reversed. Eritrean heads were now filled with new ideas gleaned from lectures and books provided by the English Institute and British Information Office, the weekly Tigrinyan newspaper, contact with Indians and Sudanese serving in the British forces, and the liberalism of the British administration. Influences of this kind, married to the economic distress which followed, bred discontent and then political consciousness.[36]

Thus, what the British introduced to Eritrea were things which the people never experienced under the Italians. These included educational facilities, political participation through advisory councils and party-politics, and economic responsibilities in the form of taxes to run the social services. Equally important in the politicization of the Eritrean people was the British attempt to introduce their model of indirect rule through local chieftains which entailed division and feud among the different social groups. These elements of change in addition to the tug of war played by the United States, the then Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and France over the disposal of Eritrea turned its people into a politically sensitized population, which they were not before 1941. Because of the importance they bear on the future developments covered later on, dwelling a bit more on some of the factors of change enumerated above is in order.

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35 Trevaskis, *Ibid.*, p. 32.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

1. Education

When they started to rule Eritrea as an occupied enemy territory in the spring of 1941, the British found only 24 primary native schools for 2,000 pupils with the limited aim of enabling the young Eritreans to learn some Italian, the four arithmetical operations and, in history, "only the names of those who made Italy great".[37]

Within the first six years of their rule, the British opened 59 elementary schools, one middle school and one teacher training college.[38] Mission schools of all congregations, which were closed by the Italian authorities, especially starting in the year 1932, were encouraged and assisted to reopen. There was a general drive for learning.

> Not only were parents ready to make substantial sacrifices to send their children to school but, in the towns, the young and even the middle-aged clamoured to be given the opportunity denied to them during the Italian regime.[39]

When the Union Jack was lowered and replaced by two flags (one Eritrean and the other Ethiopian and 'federal') on 15 September 1952, there were 100 primary schools with 13,500 pupils; 14 middle schools with 1,200 pupils, two secondary schools with 167 pupils, and 30 students were receiving higher education abroad.[40] For the Eritrea of the time, these were unparalleled revolutionary developments. In fact, that effective British

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37 Signor Festa, the Italian director of education in Eritrea, in a 1938 circular to headmasters, quoted in Trevaskis, *Ibid.*, p.33.

38 *Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea* vol. 1 (reprinted by ELF-PLF in 1977), p. 75.

39 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

40 *Ibid.*, footnote 18, p. 129.

educational system, whose standards were kept for most parts of the 1950s, bred the intelligentsia destined to start a revolution.

2. Political Participation

We have seen that under Italian rule, the Eritrean was a subject without a role in the governance of the country. The British lifted the colour-bar and progressively associated the people with the administration. They established Advisory Councils, Native Courts and appointed Eritrean administrative officers. Many 'natives' became public transport drivers, teachers and held other occupations to which they did not have an access before. Eritreans were also for the first time admitted to the higher ranks of the Police Force.[41] In actual fact, the major towns developed into vehicles of public opinion with the consequence that even tribal chiefs "found themselves having to answer to an emergent public opinion as well as to the administration".[42] The small-scale administrative Eritreanization carried out by the British authorities thus started to restore some measure of self-confidence and dignity. The Eritreans were slowly discovering that they had human value and that it was now possible for them to attempt to decide their destiny.

3. Economic Constraints

The British military rule in Eritrea, an occupied enemy territory, was meant to be temporary and His Majesty's (King George V) Government was not willing to spend much money on Eritrean welfare and development. The people were, therefore, obliged to pay higher taxes to finance the social services which were then being introduced. It is to be noted that there were no

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41 *Fate of Italy's Colonies, op.cit.*, p. 25.

42 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

regular and substantially high taxes to worry about during the previous Italian half century in Eritrea. In the meantime, the industrial boom which the territory experienced during the early war years was by the mid-1940s replaced by "a cold wind of depression".[43] Thousands of workers were laid off when the war-time industries closed. Thousands of former soldiers swelled the ranks of the unemployed, and pensions owing from the Italian government were cut. The Italian lire was devalued sixfold and cost of living rose by 600 per cent.[44]

These severe economic hardships affected the political alignments of the people and greatly raised their consciousness on different levels – national or territorial, ethnic, religious, regional and tribal. This issue will be dealt with more fully in a later chapter.

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[43] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[44] Consequently, the lire savings of Eritreans and Italians were reduced sixfold from their 1940 value. The conversion rate in 1946 was 480 lire to the pound sterling as against the 1940 rate of 83.65 lire. See Trevaskis, *Ibid.*, p. 45, footnote 21.

CHAPTER 2

THE DISPOSAL OF ERITREA

Highly contentious debates took place in international fora over the fate of Eritrea at the end of World War II. Locally, socio-political upheaval was roused by the intervention of foreign states and various fact-finding visits by the commissions of inquiry of the Allied Powers and the United Nations. All these played a role in giving shape both to an Eritrean consciousness and finally an Eritrean entity. Social divisiveness in Eritrea and the politico-legal arguments of the later-day liberation movement originate mainly from that period.

The idea of self-determination for the Eritreans was first propagated by the British during the war when their leaflets dropped by planes on the towns and the countryside partly read:

> Eritrean soldiers, listen! Desert the Italians and join us!... You people who wish to live under the flag of His Imperial Majesty and [sic] to have your own flag, we give you our word you shall be allowed to choose what government you desire.[1]

The ambiguity and equivocation of such promises was intended to win as many Eritreans as possible to the immediate aim of defeating Italy. But when the hour of decision fell, it was the British interests that mattered most. At this juncture, it is helpful to clarify the positions of the main actors.

A. ETHIOPIA'S POSITION

Emperor Haile Selassie had dreamt of replacing the defeated Italians in Eritrea and Somalia and hoped that the British would

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1 Quoted in Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

help him to accomplish it. He thus started sending a flood of telegrammes, diplomatic notes and memoranda to the British urging them to "return" Eritrea and Somalia to Ethiopia.

The claims included hat Eritrea was historically an integral part of Ethiopia which illegally lost it to the Italians. Therefore, "with the forfeiture of Italian rule, Eritrea should revert to its rightful owner".[2] It was also argued by the Emperor that the acquisition of Eritrea would "redress in part the injustices visited upon Ethiopia by the Fascist regime".[3]

One of the early British responses to Ethiopia's claims on historical and legal bases were given in a memorandum which noted that most parts of modern Eritrea, including the Dahlac Archipelago and the numerous islands on the Red Sea, were at one time or another ruled by Arabs, Turks, Egyptians and Italians. Referring to the legal claim, the British memo concluded:

> The importance of the two treaties (Ucciali: 1889; and Addis Ababa: 1900) lies in the inconvertible fact that they were freely negotiated by Menelik, the undoubted master of the United Ethiopia, in his hour of triumph. In them were fixed the frontiers between Eritrea and Ethiopia... It follows, therefore, that on treaty or juridical grounds, the Emperor Menelik's successors can have no claim on Eritrea.[4]

Emperor Haile Selassie's memoranda in the 1940s were in fact similar to Emperor Menelik's circular of 1891 for foreign powers in which Menelik talked of his endeavor "to restore the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia as far as Khartoum and to Lake Nyanza

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2 'Cairo Conversations', Feb. 15, 1945, between the Emperor and Winston Churchill, Annex 1, Memorandum on Eritrea, Top Secret, FO 37/46052.

3 *Ibid.*

4 E.A. Chapman Andrew, 'Memorandum on Eritrea', Public Records Office, J2807/2807/1, May 29, 1942.

beyond the lands of the Galla".[5] In an eloquent historian's answer to those wild claims, Margery Perham had this judgement to pass in 1948:

> The present emperor [Haile Selassie] has taken up the expansionist policy [of Menelik], and his government is now claiming both the whole of the modern Eritrea and also Italian Somaliland as 'lost provinces' upon grounds that do some violence to history... The claim is based in the official document upon some rather indefinite references to early history and migrations, almost every sentence of which cries for comment or correction.[6]

But corrections were not to be forthcoming from any source. Instead, the interested powers pressed a resolution through the United Nations to literally hand over Eritrea to Ethiopia based on the latter's "rights and claims".[7]

B. ALLIED POWERS

Soon after the war, the UK, USA, USSR and France took the responsibility of deciding the fate of the former Italian colonies. Great Britain, which in the 1880s played a power broker's role in the colonization of Eritrea, was again in the 1940s called upon by 'fate' to re-decide on the disposal of Eritrea. Britain toyed with idea of dividing the territory in ways that would secure its interests in the vital Red Sea zone. One such proposal was presented by the historian Arnold H. Toynbee, then at the Research Department of

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5 A.H.M. Johns and E. Monroe, *A History of Abyssinia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), p. 142.

6 Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, (London: Faber, 1948), pp. 434-35.

7 United Nations Resolution 390 A(V) of Dec. 2, 1950, (See Appendix II).

the Foreign Office. He proposed ceding western Eritrea to the Sudan, but Massawa and the hinterland was to be held by one of the Big Four.[8] The British administrator of Eritrea, Stephen H. Longrigg (1941–1944), had presented it in these terms:

> Muslim tribal areas adjoining the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan should be included in that country. The central Christian highland of Eritrea, with the port of Massawa and the Samhar and Saho tribes, should form part of a united Tigrai state or province... The Danakil should be assigned to the Emperor. Eritrea should cease to exist.[9]

The 'Greater Tigrai' state suggested here, as the Greater Somalia project, was aimed to be a British trustee for 'sometime'. In any case the Colonial Office had among its documents a 1943 memo which stated: "the importance of using it [Eritrea] as a bargaining lever for the purpose of securing frontier rectifications should in no account be neglected".[10] The rectifications which interested Britain most concerned the Ogaden. British promises for Eritrean self-determination under a flag of their own and a government of their choice were relegated to oblivion.

The emerging superpowers, the USA and USSR, did not at first think of a definite solution for Eritrea. What interested them most was that any of the decisions on the former Italian colonies of Eritrea, Libya and Somalia should not be more advantageous to the other. The Americans in 1945 proposed a UN trusteeship over Eritrea to be followed by independence at the end of ten years. The USSR would accept any decision over the fate of Eritrea by the

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8 Tekie Fessahatsion, 'The International Dimensions of the Eritrean Question', *Horn of Africa* vol. 6(2) p. 8.

9 Longrigg, *op.cit.*, pp. 174–175.

10 Colonial Office, 'The Future of Italian Colonies', A Memorandum to the Foreign Office: Most Secret, FO. 372/35414, April 21, 1943.

UK and USA if Soviet trusteeship over Tripolitania were to be conceded. France was afraid of any change in the colonial system and preferred Italian trusteeship over Eritrea.

C. ERITREAN ACTORS

The concern in this section is to gauge to what extent the positions of the various actors affected the evolution of a sense of Eritreanism and an Eritrean entity. A short glimpse into the Eritrean scene, noting some major social cleavages, would thus complete the survey.

'Division' could be the most expressive single word to describe the situation of the local forces during the entire period of Eritrea's disposal by international forces. Religion, physical geography, languages and modes of life divided the people roughly into two cultural halves. It is true that, during the Italian colonial rule, religious differences were to some extent muted.[11] This was because, relatively speaking, the economic hardships were less severe during the previous period. But starting in the mid-1940s, economic distress changed the social fabric. The most authoritative source of the period witnessed that:

> Under the spur of unemployment and bad wages in the towns and land hunger in the rural districts of the Plateau, the Christian Abyssinians came into bitter and savage conflict with their Moslem neighbours. That, in similar circumstances, they may well do so again is beyond doubt.[12]

The situation, however, was favourable to the traders and businessmen in Asmara, most of whom were either Arabs (10,000) or Jabarti (Kabassa Moslems). The economically burdened

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11 *Fate of Italy's Colonies*, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

12 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 129.

Christian Kabassans thus harboured not only jealousy but also hatred towards the 'exploiters' amidst them. Similarly, the Italians, who were allowed to sell their skills to the British administration of the territory, were seen as the UK authorities' favoured kith and kin, blocking the Christian Kabassans' chances for economic and social improvement. Ethiopia, supported by the Coptic Church in Eritrea, was, from the early 1940s, fanning distrust, fear and hatred among the diverse communities in Eritrea. The British gave subtle help and encouragement to forces that would help them remain in Eritrea. Italy came to the stage late in the decade with generously distributed lire which added fuel to the fire. These centrifugal forces deepened internal division.

This, in general, was the economic, social and political settling when the Eritrean question was brought up for consideration in the international fora.

In a series of meetings in London and Paris during 1945–1946, the Four Powers considered a number of proposals on the disposal of the spoils of war but agreed on none. After ratifying a Peace Treaty with Italy on 10 February 1947 in which the defeated colonial power renounced all titles and rights to its former colonies, the Allied Powers decided to send a Commission of Investigation to Eritrea "to ascertain the wishes of the people". After less than two months' visit to Eritrea, the Commission left the territory on 3 January 1948, with each representative reporting back no new findings but reinforcing his own government's predispositions as to how the problem must be settled. Their reports thus were not better than the Eritrean partisan claims showing 71.1 per cent of all the Kabassans in support of union while 71.6 per cent of the lowlanders opposed it.[13]

When the Four Powers by 15 September 1948 reported their failure to agree on Eritrea, the UN General Assembly took up the matter to consider a recommendation for a possible solution. The stage was set for the Assembly to decide on proposals submitted

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13 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

by the foreign ministers of Britain and Italy (the Bevin–Sforza proposals) which, among other things, suggested the partition of Eritrea between Ethiopia and the Sudan, as historian Arnold Toynbee had recommended earlier in the decade. The First Committee adopted the proposals, and it seemed "reasonably certain" that the Assembly would accept them. But an outburst of riots in Tripolitania opposing Italian trusteeship changed opinions in New York.[14] On 17 May 1949, the General Assembly met and approved the partition of Eritrea by 37 votes to 11, with 10 abstentions. But, fortunately or unfortunately for Eritrea, the procedure did not end there. Voting on the Bevin–Sforza proposals as a package, the Assembly rejected them by 37 votes to 14, with 7 abstentions. This was an interesting development because the UN almost decided to partition Eritrea while the majority of the people categorically opposed such an idea.[15]

The defeat of the Bevin–Sforza plan again required a UN Commission of Inquiry "to ascertain more fully the wishes and the best means of promoting the welfare of the inhabitants of Eritrea".[16] The UN Commission of Inquiry, consisting of representatives from Guatemala, Pakistan, Burma, South Africa and Norway, visited the country between 14 February to 6 April 1950. Delegates of the first two countries proposed independence for Eritrea, and two others suggested a federal arrangement. Only the Norwegian delegate thought Eritrea should be united with Ethiopia.

All these debates and inquiries on the future of Eritrea between 1945 to 1950 shook the fragile society to its roots and led to "the

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14 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

15 The coalition of parties in the Independence Bloc were opposed to partition. And during this time, the Bloc swayed majority support in Eritrea. According to the 10 August 1949 US Embassy telegramme to the State Department based on British findings, Eritreans demanding independence constituted 75 per cent of the people. See *Journal of Eritrean Studies* vol. 1(1) Summer 1986, p. 71.

16 Resolution 289(IV) GAOR, 4th Session, Resolutions (A/1251), p. 11.

politicization of the Eritrean ethnic, religious and regional diversity".[17] Adherence to political parties had mostly been by social groups and not by individuals making choices based on political ideas or socio-economic reasons.[18] The parties which were allowed to function since late 1946 represented two major trends: those who supported union with Ethiopia (the Unionist Party) and those opposed to it (the Moslem League). Others included the Liberal Progressive Party, and the New-Eritrea (Pro-Italy) Party; both were less significant. Disunity among the independentists raised the number of parties to 15 (see Appendix III), as the case is today with the fronts. Trevaskis described the situation of the late 1940s in these terms:

> The structure of the Eritrean political unity erected during the Italian regime had concealed the fundamental conflicts of culture and interests among the Eritrean communities. The Italian regime had the effect of anaesthetizing the passions dividing them and had lent the lie of Eritrean unity a semblance of truth.[19]

The question of the disposal of former Italian colonies was a decision mostly made without considering the wishes and interests of the concerned peoples. But at least some marginal influence was possible to be exerted by a united voice of a people. One could cite the case of the violent anti-Italian riots in Tripolitania. A measure of political unity could, therefore, have spared Eritrea the trauma of a long liberation struggle with its tragedies of mass murders, refugeeism and displacement.

The findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry were submitted to the Interim Committee which could not make a specific

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17 Erlich, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

18 *Fate of Italy's Colonies*, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

19 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

recommendation because of the joint US–UK diplomatic campaign to make their favoured solution of federation acceptable to many member states of the world body. The General Assembly later referred the matter to the Ad Hoc Committee for consideration and final recommendation. Two draft resolutions for the independence of Eritrea were tabled by the Soviet bloc countries, and by Iraq and Pakistan. The US/UK–supported federal draft was sponsored by 14 states. Speaking at an Ad Hoc Committee meeting, Ibrahim Sultan, head of the Eritrean Independence Bloc, said the UN was being manipulated to impose "an ambiguous scheme" on the Eritrean people. He said federation could exist only "between independent states of equal sovereign rights and not between one independent state and one being denied independence".[20] Saudi Arabia's representative at the Ad Hoc Committee argued that any solution short of independence unjustly penalized the Eritrean people. Defending the Soviet bloc proposal, the Czechoslovak delegate opposed the idea of federation in these terms:

> Contrary to the fundamental purposes of the Charter, it [the federation resolution] would deny the people of Eritrea the right to self–determination and impose on them a federation with Ethiopia which the great majority oppose. Instead of maintaining peace in that part of the world, the Resolution would foster civil war and discord. Instead of assisting an oppressed and exploited people to achieve freedom and independence, it would attempt to cover up the annexation of a small State by a larger State.[21]

But despite all the forceful rhetoric against the American–backed draft resolution at the various committee meetings and the General Assembly, Resolution 390 A(V) was passed on 2

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20 United Nations General Assembly Fifth Session Ad Hoc Political Committee, 27 November 1950 A/AC 38/L51.

21 *Ibid.*

December 1950. Dr. Anze Matienzo of Bolivia was appointed to implement the decision in consultation with the Eritrean people (See Appendix III) and other concerned parties, including the British and the Ethiopians.

At a long last, the outcome was a defective structure; nevertheless that decision changed the status of Eritrea from an occupied enemy territory to a new 'federal" unit under Ethiopia. Indeed, a better recipe for civil war was hard to imagine.[22] The Americans were grooming Haile Selassie's Ethiopia as their Cold War neo-colony. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' famous quotation of 1952 was indeed a declaration of American policy which was to last unchanged for 41 years. He said:

> From the point of view of strict justice, the opinion of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the US and the Red Sea Basin and world peace make it necessary that the country be linked with our ally, Ethiopia.[23]

That American position was perfectly in line with Emperor Haile Selassie's memo of 10 march 1949 to the State Department promising USA military facilities in Eritrea, but only " after that area has been ceded to Ethiopia".[24]

Few could miss the point. It was a naked ploy like that over Palestine. America was acting on clear political expediency sacrificing both 'justice' and 'the opinion of the Eritrean people' in exchange for military advantages in its Cold War strategies.

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22 T. Kuhlman *et al*, *Refugees and Regional Development* (Amsterdam: Free University of Amsterdam, 1987) Annex X-7.

23 'Report on Ethiopia', *Market Intelligence Report*, (Greenwich CT) Feb. 1977, p. 2.

24 Quoted by Bereket Habte-Selassie, 'The Eritrean Question in International Law', *Horn of Africa*, vol. 6(2), p. 25.

CHAPTER 3

FEDERATION: PRELUDE TO WAR OF LIBERATION

The preceding chapters indicated the concretization of a general sense of Eritrean peoplehood and a political structure for a well-defined geographical area. The present chapter aims to link the old with the new causes of the conflict and shall examine: (a) the salient provisions of the Federal Act; (b) Ethiopia's violations of the international instrument, and (c) the external factors like decolonization and the rise of Arab nationalism under Egypt's Jamal Abdul Nasser which, among other things, necessitated the commencement of the armed liberation struggle in Eritrea.

A. ERITREA'S FEDERAL STATUS

The independentists and the UN member-states which supported the draft resolutions on Eritrea's eventual independence expressed their dismay at the triumph of the weak federal arrangement which was further diluted to satisfy the aims of other "interested governments".

The kind of federal authority remotely envisioned by the resolution was dropped during the implementation process. The UN Commissioner for Eritrea, Dr. Anze Matienzo, started to do his utmost to install a large measure of autonomy in the territory. He was telling Eritreans and other interested partied during his pre-implementation consultations that the letter and the spirit of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation as sponsored by the United Nations was:

> ...a middle of the road plan which should give satisfaction not only to those who want to be united with Ethiopia, but to those who want Eritrea to be independent.[1]

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1 Quoted in Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

implications of the Federation, as studied and presented by a UN panel of jurists meeting in Geneva, partly read:

> ...the Federal Act and the Eritrean Constitution will still be based on the Resolution of the UN and that international instrument will retain its full force. That being so, if it were necessary either to amend or interpret the Federal Act, only the General Assembly, as author of that instrument, would be competent to take decision. Similarly, if the Federal Act were violated, the General Assembly could be seized of the matter.[3]

B. ETHIOPIA VIOLATES THE FEDERATION

Ethiopia's attitude toward the Federation was negative from the start. Emperor Haile Selassie, an able and crafty diplomat who had pricked European moral conscience by constantly alluding to their inexcusable condoning of Italy's Fascist aggression in 1935, knew that few would dare accuse him of his flagrant aggression over the former Italian colony of Eritrea.

Furthermore, the establishment of a democratic government in Eritrea was an affront to the absolutist semi-feudal monarchy which was not able to tolerate free press, multi-party politics as well as trade union activities then taking root in Eritrea. Ironically, few of the authors of the UN resolution on Eritrea expected Ethiopia to respect the decision. Many delegates hinted this in the 1950 debates. As one of his prophetic warnings, the British administrator, Trevaskis wrote:

> [Ethiopia's] temptation to subject Eritrea firmly under her own control will always be great. Should she try to do so, she will risk Eritrean discontent and eventual revolt, which, with foreign sympathy and support might well disrupt both Eritrea and Ethiopia herself. Though an autonomous Eritrea has

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3 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

> admittedly unwelcome implications for Ethiopia, her need for a loyal and stable Eritrea far transcends any inconvenience a federal relationship may impose upon her. It is to her own interest as well as Eritrea's that the Federation survives in the form its authors intended.[4]

Ethiopia and her Emperor were not disposed to heed. The destruction of the federal arrangement started with a systematic erosion which, in the words of Tom Farer, was successfully carried out "through bribery, intimidation, and where necessary (as it often was), naked force".[5]

The first targets were the parties and their organs. Writers and journalists were imprisoned or intimidated and the press muzzled within the first two years of the Federation. Outright banning of the trade union movement and the political parties in the mid-1950s was followed by gradual dismantling of central institutions of the new political unit and then scrapping symbols of Eritrean identity. The 68-member Eritrean Assembly was infiltrated and turned to a subservient body after the first elections. The Ethiopian interferences became more and more arrogant and brazen. The Eritrean languages of instruction (Tigrigna and Arabic) were replaced by Ethiopia's Amharic.

And many more contraventions followed. The Eritrean flag, a concrete symbol of national identity, was discarded by a 'vote' of the Eritrean Assembly. That event was told to this writer by his class teacher of grade six, Seyoum Negassi,[6] who was himself burning with rage. Talking open politics in class for the first time,

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4 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 131.

5 Tom J. Farer, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa: A Crisis for Detente* (New York: Carnegie Endowment, 1976) p. 28.

6 Seyoum Negassi, a product of the British educational system in Eritrea, was a good example of the politicized elite. He was reportedly run over by an Ethiopian army vehicle on a pedestrian's lane in Asmara in 1977.

the teacher narrated how Bahta Hagos[7] died in the 1890s resisting Italian land expropriations. This author was shocked and had felt robbed of some personal valuables. While going home at 12 o'clock that morning, Seyoum's class went to see what had happened to the flag at the main administrative building (Commissariato) in Keren. Local guards were still cutting the iron bar on which the Eritrean flag used to fly alongside the Ethiopian flag. Deep consternation reigned all over Eritrea because that simple UN-designed flag symbolized the people's separate identity. It had, therefore, been natural for many Eritrean nationalists of that generation to always remember that day with bitterness and anger.

In September 1959, Ethiopia's penal code was introduced in Eritrea. On 9 May 1960 - another shock-day for many young nationalists - the Eritrean Government was, again by an alleged vote of the Eritrean Assembly, re-named the Eritrean Administration of Ethiopia and the Chief Executive's title became that of Chief Administrator.

The Eritrean people and the major Allied Powers which had their embassy-size Consulates General in Asmara knew what was going on; the consulates were definitely reporting it to their respective governments. The American Consul, Earl Richey, on his part wrote to the State Department in 1959:

> Eritrea is run as a police state in so far as political opposition is concerned... Devoid of any free or opposition press, and with a populace denied the political and other rights guaranteed to them by their constitution, Eritrea is today anything but the autonomous and 'democratic' unit envisioned by the framers of the United Nations Resolution.[8]

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7 Bahta Hagos, a chief in Akkele-Guzai, captured the Italian governor at Segheneiti and made a heroic call for wide-scale resistance against Italian land expropriations. See Leonard, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

8 Earl Richey, American Consul, to State Department, Foreign Service Dispatch 775. 00/6 - 2959 as quoted by Tekie Fessahatsion, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

The Ethiopians succeeded to kill the Eritrean institutions, their economy and their desire to be left alone to live in peace after many years of conflicts. The Federation was already defunct before it was officially 'voted out' by the Eritrean Assembly[9] on 14 November 1962 and Haile Selassie I's order No. 27 of the same day. Terrorism and intimidation were the accepted means; in his book, *Red tears*, Dawit Wolde Giorgis, an Ethiopian army officer at that time, witnessed how he and his unit passed the last week of the Ethio–Eritrean Federation:

> One week before the vote, my battalion, the 34th, was ordered to march through the city and to camp outside until four days after the vote. I co–commanded one of the companies that ringed Asmara during that time. It was clear from our orders that we were there in case of any trouble from the Assembly or the people. In addition to our battalion, the entire police force, the air force and a detachment of infantry from another part of Ethiopia were all on hand, making their presence felt by marching through the streets and generally being as visible as possible.[10]

But the stunned Eritreans were not at that point ready to confront and stop Ethiopia's flagrant violations of their national right and identity built through years of common suffering under different alien rulers. The Eritrean elite, be those at home or abroad, including those in Ethiopia, were already rebels at heart, although it still took them quite sometime to convince themselves that victory against the formidable Emperor's country was possible. A start was to be made soon with a few active participants.

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9 Members of the Eritrean Assembly were guaranteed to receive their salaries for life. Accordingly, the 'legislators' had been paid until March 1974! This fact was presented as a reader's letter by the author in *The Ethiopian Herald* during that Spring of Free Press in Ethiopia of 1974.

10 Dawit, *op.cit.*, pp. 80–81.

C. EXTERNAL FACTORS

Ethiopia's ill-advised destruction of the nascent democratic experiment in Eritrea and the measures it took to strangulate the territory's economic base were by themselves sufficient to rouse a rebellion. Yet, some external factors were essential to ignite a nationalist movement out of the divided and frustrated Eritrean social milieu. The new Eritrean generation could not help being strongly influenced by the global decolonization process as well as the rising tide of Arab nationalism in the Middle East.

1. Decolonization

Decolonization, sponsored by the same world organization that sealed the fate of Eritrea, allowed many new states to attain independence without the requirements that Eritrea was 'expected' to possess.

In the year 1960, 16 African states became independent. Young Eritrean nationalists were interested in comparing most of those states with Eritrea. Many of them had lesser population and smaller area than Eritrea's. No one was questioning their economic viability, nor was ethno-religious affinity of neighbouring states taken into consideration on granting colonial peoples the right to self-determination. Furthermore, none of those former colonies was denied independence because another landlocked state had the 'right' of access to the sea. The author's generation was infuriated because these were the main arguments presented at the UN General Assembly to deny Eritrea the attainment of independence. This type of envy by the young Eritreans was shared by the frustrated older generation which wished Eritrea's politics of the '*Adey Adey*' era (or the period of inquiries for Eritrea's disposal) would be replayed. In many respects it was true that:

> ... the political developments in Eritrea during the 1940s foreshadowed the rise of African nationalism across the continent a decade later, but unfortunately for the Eritreans,

> they were perhaps too early. The international stage was not yet set for decolonization and [that] first skirmish with European colonialism was met with a solid united front of opposition from the colonial powers.[11]

And when the stage was set for granting almost unqualified independence to former colonial entities, some Eritreans felt perhaps it was not too late to demand the right to self-determination for their country.

2. Arab Nationalism

Arab nationalism could well be cited as another pertinent factor as to why some Eritreans though of an armed national liberation struggle in the early 1960s. The urban Eritrean Moslems, most of them in the business sector, had easy access to the mass media. They had adequate knowledge of the Arabic language – thanks to the British and, later on, the federal periods – to absorb what was being beamed from the Arab world and other Arabic language broadcasts.

Eritrea's western neighbour, the Sudan, became independent in 1956. The charismatic Egyptian leader, Jamal Abdul Nasser, was becoming a symbol of secular nationalism in the region. Many African exiles were assisted to conduct nationalist mobilization from Egypt. The Eritrean community in Cairo, consisting of exiled political leaders and young students, was bombarded with ideas of revolution and liberation struggle. Similarly, the armed liberation struggle in Algeria was a clearer example that had to be emulated by all nationalists worth the name. By the year 1960, therefore, it was becoming more and more probable that the winds of the nationalist revolution would influence also Eritrea. The subjective factor for an armed struggle was furnished.

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[11] Connell, *op.cit.*, p. 18.

PART TWO

ERITREA: LIBERATION WAR AND REFUGEES

INTRODUCTION

The formative stage in Eritrea's gradual build-up as an identifiable entity recounted in Part One culminated in a bloody conflict which lasted for 30 years. The germination of the idea of an armed liberation struggle with all its actors, the concomitant occurrence of refugeeism and, in turn, the role of these warrior refugees in the intensification and internationalization of the conflict make up Part Two of the continuum.

The period of the armed struggle, during which Eritrean nationalism had been further built and strengthened, shall be treated under two phases, each 15 years long and each under the domination of a different front. Each of these fronts, as perceived by the Eritrean people, literally belonged to two distinct geographical and cultural groups within the country.

The next few chapters will, therefore, lay special emphasis on the material motives of the conflict which usually make use of ethnicity and religion. Some recent writings on the Horn of Africa argued that economic marginalization provided a better explanation than ethnicity or political exclusion to the armed conflicts there.[1] Ethnicity and religion could be used as the sure paths to material gains. As John Markakis aptly asserts, 'material' does not solely signify economic factors, for one would not regard ethnicity, language or religion immaterial if they serve as "the passport to power and privilege".[2] Ethnicity and religion were two intertwining cleavages which so far played a big role in Eritrea's failure to attain statehood. They were important and determinant elements in both the Ethio-Eritrean conflict and the ever present Eritrean-Eritrean tussle. Included here are introductory notes on the terms of ethnicity and religion as they are used in this book.

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1 Christopher Clapham, 'The Political Economy of Conflict in the Horn of Africa', *Survival*, vol. 32(5), September/October 1990, p. 404.

2 John Markakis, Preface, *National and Class Struggle in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), vii.

RELIGION

Christianity and Islam are two old, antagonistic and indigenous forces in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Christianity was introduced to the region in the 4th century and Islam by the Moslem refugees[3] of the first *Hijra* (emigration) in 615 A.D. Both faiths became bases for two different cultural identities in the Horn of Africa.

The old Abyssinia with its two main ethnic groups (Amharas and Tigrayans) identified itself with Christianity and always felt nearer to Christian Europe than to its Arab and African environs. As an Ethiopian professor wrote: "Ethiopia's, especially Christian Ethiopia's, image of itself is of a beleaguered country surrounded mostly by hostile or potentially hostile countries with no natural friends in the immediate vicinity".[4] This is what Spencer Trimingham's *Islam in Ethiopia* describes as a super-tribal consciousness which made Islam appear inimical and dangerous to their Christian tradition and culture. And in that conflict, it was, as it is now, "less a matter of faith against faith than of one cultural tradition against another".[5]

The Abyssinians always preferred the highlands where they lived as settled agriculturalists. The Moslems mainly belonged to the hot lowlands where they remained pastoralists. The few Moslems (the Jabarti) in the Abyssinian plateau were not allowed to own land and to have any access to state offices. The Ethiopian Moslem was for a long time a despised second-class citizen, to say the least. In general terms, the Christian Kabassan peasant shared almost the same feelings and stereo-types as the other Habasha peoples (Amharas and Tigrayans) towards his compatriot Moslems, inhabiting mainly the hot lowland zones of Eritrea. Similarly, the

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3 Trimingham, *op.cit.*, pp. 44–45.

4 Negusse Ayele, quoted in S M, Makinda *Superpower Diplomacy in the Horn of Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 32.

5 Trimingham, *op.cit.*, p. 144.

Eritrean Moslems generally felt closer to their co-religionists across Eritrea's borders than to their Christian Kabassan countrymen.

ETHNICITY

Social thinkers present many but related definitions of ethnicity which is generally thought of as a means in man's search for security and recognition. The usual definitions thus range from narrow kinship sentiment with the nepotistic propensity of favouring one's own kin over non-kin,[6] to a wider cultural affinity or solidarity of peoples. According to David Brown, an authority on ethnic revival,

> people seem to trust and prefer those of their own cultural group while feeling more distant from, and distrustful of those of other cultural groups.[7]

Ethnic mobilization, which Ali Mazrui sees as a more serious cleavage in Black Africa than religion,[8] is driven by material motive. It is a proven instrument utilized by elites in the pursuit of wealth, power and privilege.[9] People need emotional security, satisfaction of their interests and prefer to associate themselves with the most easily available social environment. Ethnicity combines all these three needs.[10] Yet, ethnicity faced two

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6 Pierre L. Berghe,*The Ethnic Phenomenon* (New York: Praeger,1987), p. 18.

7 David Brown, 'Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on State and Society': *Third World Quarterly*, vol. II(2) Oct. 1989, p. 3.

8 Ali A. Mazrui, *The African Condition* (Edinburgh: Heinneman, 1980), p. 96.

9 Anthony D. Smith, 'Conflict and Collective Identity: Class, Ethnie and Nation', in Azar and Burton, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

10 David Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

powerful enemies in this century. It escaped 'ethnocide' in the hands of the assimilationists or modernists of the West and Lenin's fusion (*sliyanie*) of ethnic nations. Ethnonationalism thus revived at the wake of the breakdown of colonial empires three decades age. The expanded interpretation of the right of peoples to self-determination, the growth of the global human rights movement and the general spread of the norms of equality made ethnic subordination illegitimate in all continents.

As the decolonization process unfolded, the objective of nation-building or national unity contradicted the idea of national liberation. The bigger or well positioned ethnies imposed themselves over the others. The various ethnic groups (and one may also add *clans* to explain the tragic developments in Somalia) knew that access to state power - and the state is the most rewarding enterprise in the new states - gave access to material resources and privilege for this 'strategic ethnie' or 'nation of state'.[11] It thus became clear that:

> those who control states make the laws in their own image (usually in their own language and in accordance to their culture) as well as in their own interests.[12]

Armed struggles were thus needed not only for national self-determination of a colonized people but also to put one's own solidarity or identity grouping in an advantageous position in the state. Otherwise, those groups who fail to have access to state power would suffer the bitter consequences of powerlessness, which usually include inferior social status and economic disadvantages. And while a liberation struggle is underway, the social and political forces start rectifying their positions in it with

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11 Azar and Burton, *op.cit.*, p. 70; J.F. Brown, *Eastern Europe and Communist Rule* (Durham: North Caroline: Duke UP, 1988), p. 443.

12 Jason W. Clay, 'Epilogue: the ethnic future of nations', *Third World Quarterly*, *op.cit.*, p. 228.

the long-term vision of avoiding power marginalization for themselves and their social groupings. Janina Dacyl observed that liberation struggle, like *perestroika*, increases ethnic consciousness. This increase in consciousness in turn "creates potential for future ethnic conflict".[13]

It is with these interpretations in mind that we shall analyze the development of Eritrea's national liberation struggle and the real causes of the refugee flights. It will be discovered that Ethiopia was the main but not the sole actor which caused the Eritrean refugee tragedy.

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13 Janina W. Dacyl, 'A Time for Perestroika (Restructuring) in the International Refugee Regime'? *Journal of Refugee Studies* vol. III(1), 1990, p. 30.

CHAPTER 4

ARMED STRUGGLE AND REFUGEES PHASE ONE : 1961 - 1975

A. THE FORMATIVE STAGE

The Eritrean armed struggle was declared a year before the Federation was unilaterally abrogated by Emperor Haile Selassie. The international instrument that linked Eritrea with Ethiopia was irreparably eroded and its dissolution became a foregone conclusion. And who was to react? For close observers of the scene, it did not require much of a prophetic calling to state the obvious:

> The Eritrean Moslem accepted a federal association with Ethiopia reluctantly; and he would be the first to resent undue Ethiopian control over his affairs.[1]

Former leaders of the defunct political parties were already in exile in the neighbouring Arab countries. Cairo was the political centre. The former president of the Eritrean Assembly, Idris Mohammed Adam, and the former leader of the Independence Bloc, Ibrahim Sultan, joined the indomitable journalist and trade unionist Woldeab Woldemariam and other political refugees in Cairo on 23 March 1959. The Egyptian capital was also hosting a fast growing number of Eritrean students who had no higher educational opportunities in their country or in Amharic-speaking Ethiopia. Literally all were Moslems.

Ethiopia's systematic obliteration of the territory's uniqueness targeted the economic sector. Thousands of workers had to go somewhere outside Eritrea both to escape the prevailing political

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1 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 130.

insecurity in the country and in search of work. Many Eritrean Moslems thus went to the Arab countries where they faced practically no cultural alienation, especially concerning religion and language. That was not easy for the Christian Kabassans.

Also ever since the British occupation of Eritrea, a very large number of Eritrean Moslems was serving in the Sudanese army. They were greatly influenced by the euphoria of independence in the Sudan and the rest of the surrounding region.

The Eritrean people were now generally unhappy. Many of the former unionists who, starting in the mid-1950s,[2] supported the existence of the Federation, did not of course like Ethiopia's excessive encroachments on Eritrean affairs. The economic strangulations and the transfer of many enterprises from Asmara to Addis Ababa were not welcome steps. Similarly, the imposition of Amharic as the sole official language and medium of instruction was felt with great bitterness.

It is important to note here that during the late 1940s, there were talks about a ten-year trusteeship period or a ten-year preparatory period of administration for Eritrea under this or that power before the question would be finally disposed. In the late 1950s, then, people were talking seriously about the end of the ten-year period with Ethiopia in 1962. Few cared or knew how to verify the "provisions" but many were prone to accept wild speculations that the UN would review and finally settle the Eritrean case at the end of the federal experiment.[3] At the same time, it was felt that some action would be necessary either to pre-

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2 A good example of this change of mind was Tedla Bairu, the former leader of the Unionist Party who resigned from the top Eritrean government post of Chief Executive in 1955 partly because of excessive interferences of the Emperor's representative in Eritrea. See Sherman, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

3 However, the Federation had no time limit. It must be noted that the 'ten-year' speculation could have also arisen of the earlier British proposal (after the Four-Power enquiry visit to Eritrea) that Ethiopia could be assigned to administer the territory for a ten-year experimental period.

empt Haile Selassie's aims or to ensure UN intervention before or even after the dissolution of the Federation. Some Eritreans thought of organizing themselves for a more concrete struggle. Two organizations were born out of this suspense; foreign support was expected.

1. The Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM)

The most important event in the spring of 1958 in Eritrea was the general strike called by the underground labour movement protesting against Ethiopia's political and economic suppression. Demonstrations which spread from Asmara and Massawa to other smaller towns in the country lasted for four days before they were suppressed through the use of brute force.[4]

The second important but sad event for Eritreans in 1958 was the lowering down of their flag. And the third no less important event was the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) late that year at Port Sudan. Popularly known as *Haraka* (movement) in Arabic or *Mahber Showate*[5] in Tigrigna, the organization established cells in the Eritrean towns. The activists were initially concentrating on Moslems whose response was usually expected to be positive. The Jabarti (Kabassan Moslems) played a very significant role in the nationalist movement of that period. Nevertheless, the response of the Christian Kabassans especially workers and students, was a surprise to the organizers.[6]

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4 The official account was five killed and 534 wounded see *Eritrea: Victim of UN Decision and Ethiopian Aggression* (ELF-PLF Appeal of 3 December 1971, New York np. nd.) p. 78. Other sources alleged up to 80 dead.

5 The Arabic rendition was "Harakat Al-Tahrir Al Eritria'. It was called 'Mahber Showate' or Association of Seven because it proliferated in cells of seven.

6 Markakis, *op.cit.*, p. 106. Total ELM membership was roughly estimated at 40,000 (see his Footnote 6, p. 283).

At that time, everyone was assuming that Woldeab and the others in Cairo were behind this movement which, it was hoped, would do something quickly. Initially, the ELM was interested in recruiting the Eritrean police for an immediate success through a coup d'etat. Its call was most welcome by Eritreans in the Sudanese army. One of them recounts how all 80 Eritreans in Brigade Two of the Sudanese army became *Haraka* members when the organization sent them a letter partly stating: "Our flag had been taken down, so we have decided and begun to organize the people to fight against the Ethiopian regime to get [our] independence".[7]

The mass mobilization has very efficient and quick. This was not because of the organizational skills employed but because of the popular enthusiasm that prevailed. The ELM held its first and last congress in September 1960 in Asmara with about 40 delegates attending. It was then decided to prepare and stage a coup d'etat within a year; but before it could do anything of that sort, *Mahber Showate/Haraka* was dismantled by Ethiopia's ruthless and suppressive machinery.

Secondly, the ELM was weakened and superseded by another organization because it was not accepted by the old politicians in Cairo. Its five founders[8] were mainly from the Keren/Sahel region and could not enlist the people of Barka without Idris Mohammed Adam in their group. A key founding member of the ELM, Mohammed Said Nawd, was born and educated in the Sudan where he became member of the youth branch of the Sudanese Communist Party. He was originally from the aristocratic Beit Asghede tribe in the Sahel as opposed to Ibrahim Sultan's serf background, also from Sahel. All these factors posed stumbling blocks to any future growth of the organization. Neither was it well

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7 Günter Schröder, 'Interviews with Early ELF Fighters' (unpublished manuscripts); Mohammed Omar Abdalla (*nom de guerre* Abu Tiyara) interviewed on 22 March 1989 in Kassala.

8 Markakis, *op.cit.*, pp. 104–109. Most of the information was provided by one of the five founders of the ELM.

served by its pacifist stance at the beginning. Its belated attempt to launch an armed struggle in May 1965 was frustrated at Ela Tsada in the Sahel when its 50 fighters were forcibly disarmed and six of them killed in an Eritrean–Eritrean skirmish.

2. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF)

The brief account about *Haraka* is partly an introduction to the wider ramifications of the Eritrean armed struggle and the perennial disunity that bedeviled the liberation movement.

The ELF or *Jabha* (front), as it was popularly called, grew from a unit of a dozen ill–armed Moslem tribesmen in 1961 to a force of about 30,000 fighters and peasant militiamen by early 1980. But, all of a sudden, the front collapsed after yet another Eritrean–Eritrean conflict.

The ELF was founded in Cairo by students and political refugees rallying around Idris Mohammed Adam and Ibrahim Sultan. According to the former, the decision to create a front was taken in December 1959 though not announced.[9] The organizers were already active by mid–1960 with the two above cited leaders visiting Eritrean communities in Jeddah, Port Sudan and Kassala.

The practical move on the ground was made by Hamid Idris Awate on 1 September 1961 when he and his followers declared the armed struggle whose first shots were fired at Mount Adal, near Barentu, in an initial encounter between Awate's freedom fighters and Ethiopian government forces. There was little planning to launch it. The call to arms, however, sounded more serious when the name Awate, a former Italian soldier and leader of armed–men 'hunting' cattle raiders from Welkait across the Setit River in Ethiopia,[10] was spread by word of mouth. Many ELM cells inside

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9 Schröder, *op.cit.*, interview with Idris Mohammed Adam in Khartoum on 15 March 1989. One of the founding members, Mohammed Saleh Hummed, told the author in 1978 that the ELF was founded in July 1960.

10 *Ibid.*, interview with Saleh Hedug in Kassala on 14 March 1989.

Eritrea and abroad supported the armed struggle. The small organization of Idris Mohammed Adam in Cairo, composed mainly of Eritrean students, also claimed that Awate and his men were the military wing of their ELF.

Awate's rug-tag peasant unit already sent shock waves in Ethiopia; however, it started to have military significance only when Eritreans from the Sudanese army and policemen from different outposts in Eritrea joined it starting in 1962. For the most part of the 1960s, it was those Eritrean former soldiers from the Sudan who played the most significant role in the military wing of the ELF (see Appendix IV).

The former political party leaders in Cairo could not work together. Woldeab was alienated[11] not only because of his Eritrean political viewpoints but also of alleged pan-Ethiopian republican ideas he expressed during the foiled Mengistu Neway coup d'etat of December 1960 in Addis Ababa. Ibrahim Sultan insisted that engaging in an armed struggle was futile. Idris Mohammed Adam decided to go it all alone with a new recruit he met in Jeddah, Osman Saleh Sabbe of Hirgigo near Massawa, and a law student in Cairo, Idris Osman Gelaidos of Keren. They named themselves the Supreme Council and remained at the helm of the liberation movement for over a decade. They were also to play key roles in its fragmentation.

The formative stage was, therefore, not very much encouraging: there was no political programme, no dialogue to iron out old and new differences (at least those between the ELM and the ELF) and no care taken or serious effort exerted to ensure the involvement of the Christian half of Eritrea in the initial phase.

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11 Woldeab had been previously contacted by ELM members and agreed to work with them. In the 1940s, he was in the Liberal Progressive Party. Later in 1951 he formed a party advocating independence to be followed by union with Ethiopia. In an interview with Sagem vol. 2(2) Feb. 1990, he said Idris Mohammed Adem abandoned him by taking Sabbe as his best man. Woldeab Woldemariam returned to Asmara recently after 37 years of exile.

3. The Foreign Factor

At the beginning, the Eritrean struggle had no outside supporter. The Eritrean Moslems knew that it was Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and a few other Moslem and Arab states which had supported, together with the Socialist bloc, the draft proposals on Eritrean independence in the UN. They in the early 1960s felt that these two camps, or at least that of Islam, could be sympathetic to and supportive of the Eritrean cause.

In December 1960, Idris Mohammed Adam and Ibrahim Sultan met Saudi Arabian King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal in Riyadh. They were promised Saudi support in the UN General Assembly if the question was ever raised.[12] A year later, Adem and Sabbe were welcomed in Mogadisho were the first ever Eritrean office abroad was opened under the name of the Eritrean-Somali Friendship Association. It was also in May 1961 that the two men were invited by the Palestinians to attend the Islamic Conference held in Jerusalem. "That was the first time we explained in detail our case to different representatives of Islamic countries",[13] recounted Idris Mohammed Adam. King Hussein of Jordan and other leaders were also notified of Eritrea's problem. Only Syria was responsive that year; its radio welcomed a struggle for Eritrean independence. But the most important Arab state remained to be Egypt and Eritreans expected a surprise from it. However, that great expectation never materialized because of Nasser's wider African interests in which Ethiopia and her Emperor had a heavy weight. In addition, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), born at that time in Belgrade, saw Nasser's role moved to centre-stage - heir apparent to the grand old revolutionary Marshal Joseph Broz Tito of Yugoslavia. Nasser could not now be seen as exporting revolution to neighbouring non-Arab countries, but rather

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12 Schröder, *op.cit.*, interview with Idris Mohammed Adam.

13 *Ibid.*

envisioned himself as a pan-Arab, anti-colonial, non-aligned unifier. The question of Nile waters, of which 80 per cent originate from Ethiopia, also eternally links the interests between the two.

The general anticipation of Eritreans to receive some help from the emerging secular Arab nationalism and revolution definitely was an important influence that hastened the start of the Eritrean armed struggle in 1961.

B. UNSTEADY GROWTH OF ELF: Pan-Arabism Frightens Ethiopia

Despite the political and material shortcomings of the initial stage, the armed struggle continued to grow slowly, at times surviving serious problems which had the potential of terminating it in an utter failure. Its salvation constantly depended on Ethiopia's alienation of the Moslem half of the Eritrean population whom it indiscriminately suspected of treason, especially when radical Pan-Arabism acquired ideological advocates in the surrounding Middle Eastern region.

The small armed unit of pastoralists led by the former Italian soldier was not a sure base for a guerrilla army. To make matters worse, Awate died ten months after having declared the armed struggle. That early start would have ended there without the soldiers from the Sudanese army who went to join Awate in 1962. Most of them could not of course find him alive. Nevertheless, they swore not to divulge his death and to never abandon his difficult mission. As noted earlier, those former soldiers from the Sudanese army provided the struggle with its initial leadership. Their sources of arms were the Eritrean police; the latter joined them from time to time especially when the 'Awate' guerrillas made daring day-light raids at police outposts in different parts of the country looking for better arms.

Then came the incessant influence of the Eritrean students in Al-Azhari University and other institutions for higher studies in Cairo. It was from Cairo and Jeddah that the first batch of 19 Eritreans went to Syria for military training and entered the field

in 1964 with new automatic Kalashnikov (AK-47) rifles or *Kalashins,* as the Eritreans called them.[14]

The home front, especially the urban population, was gradually catching up. Young people who did not experience the sectarian politics of the late 1940s were interested in the new nationalist movement more than their elders. Political groups, some of them remnants of the ELM, were organized as ELF cells usually around small-scale businessmen and craftsmen like tailors.

Secondary school students of Asmara became a new force in reawakening Eritrea's separate identity. Between 1961 and 1965, for instance, the Prince Makonnen Secondary School[15] in Asmara almost annually led student strikes and demonstrations in the Eritrean capital. The events in Asmara were emulated by students in other parts of the country. That student activism had a more lasting effect on the Eritrean armed struggle than a number of other undertakings by the nationalists at that difficult epoch. This was because: (a) a political action in the heart of the Eritrean capital was seen as a serious challenge to the locally awed and respected person of Emperor Haile Selassie; (b) news of the students' activities were easily carried to every part of the country by scared relatives; and, above all, (c) Asmara students rallying behind the Eritrean nationalist movement signified that the Kabassan population, the most important other half of the Eritrean people, will not for long lag far behind the other segments of the society in the nationalist cause. Those in Cairo and Kassala fully

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14 The training centre at Aleppo, Syria, graduated 300 ELF fighters between 1963-1968 (see Markakis, *op.cit.*, p. 284). The training continued at least until 1982. It was also claimed that Egypt had a training centre for Eritreans near Alexandria between 1958 and 1964 when it was moved to Algeria. (see Erlich, *op.cit.*, p. 62). The Algerian centre reportedly had 70 Eritrean trainees in 1970 (see *Afro-Asian Affairs*, 13 March 1970).

15 The organizers for the entire four-year period included Woldedawit Temesgen and Mussie Tesfamichael (Manka'e), both martyred; Seyoum Ogbamichael, Haile Wolde-Tinsae (Diru'e), Issayas Afeworki (EPLF Secretary General), Bereket G/Tinsae, Michael Ghaber and the author.

appreciated its far reaching significance. They expected that those young boys and girls staging yearly demonstrating in Asmara could prove to be a vital force for the unity of the people and the growth of the struggle. Secondary school students from Asmara joined the armed struggle starting immediately after a massive student demonstration in March 1965.[16]

The self-appointed Supreme Council[17] in 1965 created a new organ called the Revolutionary Command[18] to be headquartered in Kassala and devised a new structure for the Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA). Modeled after the Algerian guerrilla experience of territorial division (*wilaya*), the field of operation in Eritrea was divided into four zones which more or less corresponded with the divisions of the territory before 1890.

The old Funj dynasty territories of Barka, which were ruled by Beni Amer Diglals (princes) in the earlier centuries, now constituted Military Command Zone I and fell under the leadership of Mahmoud Dinai and his deputy, Saleh Hamid Idris, both Beni Amer tribesmen and former soldiers in the Sudanese Army. Zone II included the Keren and the Sahel regions and came under the military command of Omar Ezaz (Blin speaker from Halhal) and

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16 These included Woldedawit and Seyoum from Prince Makonnen, followed by Ahmed Nasser (ELF Chairman since 1975) and Tesfai Tekle from the Haile Selassie Secondary School also in Asmara. Many more followed in 1966: Issayas left Addis for the ELF on 17 October 1966, and Haile (Diru'e) and Mussie (Manka'e) on 4 December 1966; all three were seen off at the Marcato bus station in Addis by this author.

17 The Supreme Council members were Idris Mohammed Adam, Osman Saleh Sabbe and Idris Osman Gelaidos. But in June 1967, Tedla Bairu, Tahar Mohammed Nur, Mohammed Saleh Hummed, Osman Khair and Said Hashim were included. (see *Eritrea: National Democratic Revolution Versus Ethiopian Expansionism* (Beirut: ELF Foreign Information Centre, 1979), p. 36.

18 Its first members were eight, most of whom were retired Sudanese army soldiers, including its chairman, Mohammed Sa'ad, a Beni Amer who fought in World War II on the British side.

his deputy, Mohammed Omar Adam (Marya); both came from the Sudanese army. Zone III was to represent all the Kabassa (the provinces of Hamasien, Serae and Akkele-Guzai) and fell under the command of Abdulkerim Ahmed, a Saho who studied Islamic theology at Al-Azhari before going for military training in Syria. (see Appendix IV). His deputy, Hamid Saleh, was also a Saho speaker. The Saho-speaking Kabassan Moslems rarely had close and harmonious relationship in history with their Christian neighbours, and Abdulkerim and his deputy definitely were not the best choice to mobilize Christian Kabassa. Zone IV included the Samhar and Dankalia (Red Sea coast) regions and was commanded by Mohammed Alí Omaro, a Cairo student trained in Syria; his deputy was Abdallah Barih. Both were identified with Sabbe.

This narration is important for an analysis of the growth of the Eritrean conflict vis-a-vis Ethiopia and vis-a-vis Eritrea itself. The armed struggle grew to challenge Haile Selassie's regime, but it grew in a way that further disrupted the internal complexities.

The first military zone in Barka was loyal to the Beni Amer Idris Mohammed Adam. Zone II had the support of Idris Osman Gelaidos, a Beit Juki from Keren. Zone IV of the Massawa area had Sabbe at the helm. All these three military zones had their direct contact with the men in command of ELF resources - arms supplies, food, money, scholarships and other privileges that can be obtained through holding power. The third zone was less fortunate because it did not count on Supreme Council support. The Revolutionary Command in Kassala, intended to carry on liaison between the four field commands and the Cairo headquarters, was thus by-passed. It practically had little influence in the administration of the army which grew into rival ethnic and regional forces.[19] It is true that regionalization initially proved helpful in the expansion of the ELF, a fact which threatened

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19 For details, see *Eritrea: National Democratic Revolution Versus Ethiopian Expansionism, op.cit.*

Ethiopia. But the legacies of the competition among the zones divided the revolution against itself!

The third zone naturally failed to attract recruits from the Christian Kabassans and remained a Saho sub-front. A fifth zone, initially including elements from the neighbouring second zone (Keren-Sahel), was thus created in 1966. The aim was to try to mobilize the Christian Kabassa region whose participation, everybody believed - and Ethiopia shuddered at that idea - would be a decisive factor in the revolution. In actual fact, the trickle of young participants from that region in 1965-1966 frightened Ethiopia more than any other factor, as we will see later in this study. But that participation was partly discouraged and slowed down because of internal feuds among the five zones of the ELF.

Any significant flow of fighters to the Eritrean liberation struggle in the 1960s consisted of the Eritrean Moslems. This was because, *inter alia*, of the economic marginalization and the political suppression which weighed very heavy on that sector of the population. Ethiopia imprisoned and killed many Eritreans whom it took for 'traitors bound to sell Eritrea to the Arabs'. This policy was intensified in the second half of the 1960s and greatly contributed in the growth of the struggle. But what was the basis for Ethiopia's fear of the Eritrean Moslems and the Arabs?

Soon after the US-supported Federation was put into effect, Haile Selassie granted America a military base in Eritrea on a 25-year lease term (1953-1977). Israel also found Ethiopia a natural ally in the region. Pan-Arabism was thus justified to support the Eritrean cause, and Ethiopia knew that very well.

Haile Selassie, officially known as the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, King of Kings, Emperor of Ethiopia, visited the Egyptian capital three times (in Nov. 1963, Oct. 1966, June 1970) to talk to Jamal Abdul Nasser about the Eritrean question. The Emperor's fear was based on the fact that Egypt's support to Eritrea would be decisive. In fact it must be remembered that Haile Selassie dissolved the Federation a month after Nasser's forces entered N. Yemen to help the republicans forces against the king. But Egypt was not much concerned about Eritrea.

Ethiopia's fear of Arabism and Eritreanism became plausible when the Ba'ath Party seized power in Syria in 1963 and later supported the Eritrean cause by opening an office for the ELF and a centre for training its cadres. The story of the two plane-loads[20] of arms from Syria which were stopped at the Khartoum Airport in June 1965 was one of the early evidences that the Eritrean cause started to have outside supporters. Those Syrian arms did not reach Eritrea at that time but the media reports on them encouraged many Eritrean youths to take their national struggle more seriously.

The sympathy and support the Eritrean cause received from abroad was not of overwhelming significance. Yet, and despite the huge American and Israeli military backing Haile Selassie enjoyed,[21] Ethiopia overreacted to the matter. As we shall see in the forthcoming sections, Ethiopia's fear of pan-Arabism led to scorched-earth policies whic were destined to backfire. The displaced pastoralists and the persecuted urbanites became refugees and later swelled the ranks of the guerrillas.

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20 Markakis, *op.cit.*, p. 112.

21 The US between 1953-1976 supplied Ethiopia with military aid which was two-thirds the total for Black Africa. Israel was the second most important partner. Among other things, Israel trained 5,000 Eritrean nationals as counter-insurgency commandos for Ethiopia to fight the ELF (1964-1970). See Erlich, *op.cit.*, footnote 7, p. 124.

CHAPTER 5

ERITREAN REFUGEES BEFORE 1975

Displacement of groups of peoples and, in very rare cases, individuals, were frequent phenomena in the region[1] of North-East Africa where Eritrea is located. Yet, no one called them refugees – not even after colonial boundaries were demarcated.

The term refugee was applied to Eritreans for the first time in the early 1940s when Ethiopia claimed there were some 100,000 Eritreans in Addis Ababa who were not willing to go to still colonized Eritrea, then under British Occupation. They were used in a cover political organization called Ethiopia-Hamasien Society whose 'fighting fund' and a weekly newspaper, *The Voice of Eritrea*, were financed by Haile Selassie's government[2] in the campaign to regain the 'lost province'.

But the first real Eritrean refugees who crossed international borders 'owing to well-founded fear of persecution', as the 1951 UN Convention on the status of refugees defined the term, were leaders of trade unions and political parties who were escaping arbitrary imprisonment or death. One such early example was Woldeab Woldemariam, who having narrowly escaped seven Ethiopian assassination attempts on his life in Asmara, fled the country in 1954. He was granted by Egypt the status of political refugee which he had retained until recently. As previously noted, others followed his path. But what were the various causes of flight for Eritrean refugees before the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia? Who were they and where did they go?

These are the key questions which will have to be answered in the study of the causes of refugeeism for the first half of the 30-

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1 The Arabs think the name *Al-Habasha* (Abyssinia) is derived from an Arabic word for 'mixture' describing the constant mixing up of peoples in the region.

2 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, pp. 65-66.

year armed conflict in Eritrea. It must also be noted at the outset that the definition of 'refugee' here is not narrowed down to the 1951 UN Convention and its 1967 protocol. Political persecution can be extended to economic strangulation of a targeted victim community or groups of communities. Similarly, the new situation of protracted warfare in the Third World requires a flexible definition like the Organization of African Unity's Refugee Convention of 1969 which takes into consideration generalized conditions of violence as strong 'push' factors. As Elizabeth Ferris states:

> Changes in the nature of warfare over the past 30 years have affected the nature of refugee movements. A shift toward guerrilla warfare and involvement of peasant populations has produced a much higher proportion of civilian casualties than earlier wars fought almost exclusively between professional soldiers.[3]

The relevance of this description to the Third World refugee phenomena since the early 1960s will be manifestly demonstrated alongside the growth of the Eritrean liberation movement, the escalation of the armed conflict and the consequent displacement of peoples.

CAUSES OF FLIGHT

1. Political Persecution

Persecution of individuals known for their opposition to the union with Ethiopia was continuous throughout the period concerned. The due process of law existed only in the legal codes. Persons suspected of harbouring nationalist sentiments were being

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3 Elizabeth G. Ferris (ed.) *Refugees and World Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1985), p. 17.

imprisoned for many years without trial. There were some 3,000 political prisoners in Eritrea already in 1963,[4] a year after the Federation was dissolved. Human rights in short, were non-existent in Ethiopia, and especially in Eritrea. Anyone who had a relative in the liberation movement was considered an accomplice. He had no choice but to risk his life or somehow save it. No one knew how many Eritreans were affected by individualized political persecution but the figure definitely included the intelligentsia, created mainly during the British and the federal periods extending for a total of two decades (1941-1962) and the petty bourgeoisie in the urban centres.

2. Economic Strangulation

Ethiopia argued in the international fora, which debated the Eritrean question in the 1940s, that the territory was economically inviable to be considered for independent statehood. Economic strangulation was therefore used in later years in a systematic way to persuade the Eritreans that their nationalism had no economic backing and that Eritrea's dependence on 'Mother' Ethiopia was a bitter necessity. But equally important to this designed economic persecution was the uneven development between Eritrea's lowlands and the plateau. This sharpened "the degree of alienation from the national system"[5] of Eritreans in general but the lowlanders in particular. It was an important factor in the Eritrea of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Those who bore the brunt of real political persecution and the concomitant economic noose were the urban traders and businessmen, many of them Moslems. They were left with the choice of joining the armed struggle in Eritrea or going some where in the Arab world where they were welcome. The dictum

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4 Lionel Cliffe, 'Forging a nation: the Eritrean experience', *Third World Quarterly*, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

that one does not leave one's own country when one has no place to go was quite true to Eritrean Moslems at that period. Aristide Zolberg, a political scientist with special interest in refugees as actors in the dynamics of international relations, stated that:

> What made the Calvinists refugees was not only persecution by Louis XIV but also their recognition by other countries' political authorities as people to whom asylum and assistance was due.[6]

The politicized economic strangulation unleashed by the Ethiopians affected the entire population, especially in the urban centres. But the Middle East was not a place to go for the Christian Kabassans who were not co-religionists with the majority in the Arab world. Secondly, they had the linguistic disadvantage. Add to this the old Habasha attitude towards Islam and the Arabs. The Kabassan preferred Ethiopia and, if possible, Europe or America as his/her second home rather than the Islamic environment. Thus, Eritrean Moslems who felt insecure and persecuted (politically and economically) went to the Arab/Moslem world and the persecuted Christians had no better first choice but to go to Ethiopia. It must also be noted that once a persecuted person left Eritrea for any part of Ethiopia, he/she was considered to be relatively safe[7] probably

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6 Aristide R. Zolberg, A. Suhrke, S. Aguayo, *Escape From Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (Oxford: UP, 1989), p. 6.

7 One good example is that Michael Ghaber and this author left Asmara in early September 1965 to escape arrest because former classmates Woldedawit and Seyoum, who came from Kassala to Asmara to organize ELF cells occupational categories, were arrested and all those who were collaborating with them endangered. The arrest of the two, organized by Mulugheta Giorgis from Kassala, also affected author's former teacher Seyoum Negassi, who was at a meeting with the ELF emissaries on 30 August 1965. The two fighters remained behind the bars until the ELF liberated them in February 1975 with other 1,000 prisoners held in Ethiopia's Sambal (Asmara) and Adi-Quala gaols.

because of the total absence of population control mechanisms in the Ethiopia of that period.

3. Military Measures

The most important factor in causing refugeeism in Eritrea remained to be the deliberate military steps taken against the civilian population. A recent survey on Ethiopian refugees in the Sudan found out that 47.2 per cent of the rural refugees fled a hot conflict zone.[8] The same question posed to Eritreans would likely get much higher response because the Ethiopian army obviously was more indiscriminate and cruel toward the rural population in Eritrea. Until the mid-1970s, the Eritrean Moslems were the chosen target because the Ethiopians wrongly though that it was possible to quell the rebellion in Eritrea by terrorizing that segment of the population. Pan-Arabism was in its high tide before the 1967 Six-Day War.

Obviously, Ethiopia was frightened by (a) the anticipated Arab arms and training to the Eritreans, (b) the expansion of the fighting units in the different zonal commands created in 1965-1966, and (c) the ominous start of an influx of young Kabassans to the ranks of the ELF. It then unleashed terror and death in Eritrea's Moslem-populated regions in the lowlands and parts of the highlands, mainly the Saho areas in Akkele-Guzai, the Jabarti communities like Misyam in Serae, and northern Hamasien. Villagers were rounded and summarily executed. The murder of 46 elderly men in Madaka (Beit Ghebru) area of Keren in 1966 was among the earlier mass killings which soon escalated to ghastly massacres all over the country. Whole villages were mowed down. People and their livestock were bombed from the air or machine-gunned by roving troops. Between February to July 1967, over 3,500 persons were

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8 Mekuria Bulcha, *Flight and Integration: Causes of Mass Exodus From Ethiopia and Problems of Integration in the Sudan* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988), p. 99.

reportedly killed in Barka and Akkele-Guzai alone and half a million livestock were machine-gunned by units of he Ethiopian occupation army or strafed by air force planes which flew over the Barka and Gash pastures just for that mission. An Israeli officer and member of the counter-insurgency training teams in Eritrea commented in April 1967:

> The Second Division is very efficient in killing people. They are alienating the Eritreans and deepening the hatred that already exists. Their commander took his senior aides to a spot near the Sudanese border and ordered them: 'from here to the north - clean the area; many innocent people were massacred'.[9]

THE FIRST RURAL EXODUS

This type of exterminationist policy produced the first largest refugee wave of 7,000 Eritreans in March 1967.[10] By mid-1967, Eritrean refugees in the Sudan, who encountered 'only sand, dust and despair',[11] numbered well over 28,000.[12]

The scorched-earth policy and the refugee flow into the country were preceded and accompanied by military operations of the ELF guerrillas both in the countryside and in the urban centres. Leading Western newspapers started to give attention to what was happening in Eritrea. *The Washington Post's* Donald H. Loucheim wrote in April 1967 under the title, "Ethiopia's little war is hard to hide":

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9 Erlich, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

10 See *Keesings* June 24 - July 1, 1967 (22104A).

11 A. El-Beshir, Khartoum Seminar on Refugees, 11-14 Sept. 1982 (Ph.D. thesis, Oxford, 1978), p. 3.

12 Gaim Kibreab, *Refugees and Development in Africa, Case Study Eritrea* (New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 1987), p. 17.

> After five years of hit and run skirmishes, Eritrean separatists in rugged northern Ethiopia have begun to send nervous, poorly concealed tremors coursing through the Imperial Ethiopian Government.[13]

Among the series of 'alarming and dramatic blows' served against Ethiopia were, he reported, the death of a colonel commanding one of the army brigades; shooting down two policemen in an Asmara street and, on 25 March in a planned strike in Asmara, a carload of nationalists gunned down a high ranking Interior Ministry official in front of his house.[14]

The pacification campaign in the rural areas of the country was Ethiopia's jittery response to a escalating war. This time, however, there were all indications that it would not remain a hopeless separatist dream of 'Arab-supported few Moslem bandits'. The predominantly Christians Kabassa, which constituted the core of the Eritrean social and political set-up, was warming up to jump into the cauldron. It was in early 1967, for instance, that Tedla Bairu, the former Chief Executive of Eritrea and before that the Secretary General of the Unionist Party, declared in Damascus to have joined the ranks of the ELF.

Among the victims of this escalation who crossed the border into the Sudan for a 'temporary sojourn" as guests of a neighbouring state were Beni Amer tribesmen who were warmly welcomed by their kinsmen in the Kassala. And it was during 1967 that the Beja congress of Eastern Sudan articulated its position concerning Eritrea and the Beni Amer refugees in these terms:

> The relationship between us and the Eritrean revolutionaries is not only a relationship of religion, but also of kinship.[15]

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13 *The Washington Post,* 30 April 1967.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Beja congress resolution of 1967, quoted in Markakis, *op.cit.*, p. 113.

It was true that Eritrea's first major rural refugee exodus into the Sudan fled Ethiopia's scorched-earth policy designed to bring 'law and order' into the '14th province'. But it was also true that those refugees went to the Sudan because they knew they were welcome there. Other Eritreans in the same situation did not go.

THE SECOND RURAL EXODUS

The causes and the series of events that led to the second rural refugee exodus and internal displacement of people in the entire lowland areas of Eritrea in 1970-1971 were very similar to the 1967 developments in the political and military aspects. There was at first a lull in the war because of the effects of the previous campaigns, internal frictions and also because of the situation in the Middle East after the Arab-Israeli war.

Military operations of the ELF were again escalated in 1969 starting with aeroplane hijackings[16] by an ELF splinter group. The ELF military operations in 1970 were preceded by important internal and external developments. The internal factor was the genesis of factionalism and rivalry for control of the field operations in Eritrea. The hijackings organized by a group working abroad were part of that rivalry. The wing inside Eritrea also wanted to score parallel military victories and publicity.

Another important factor for the sharp rise of ELF operations in this period was external. In July 1968, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party took power in Baghdad and became a strong supporter of the Eritrean cause. During 1969, new radical regimes assumed power in Libya, the Sudan and Somalia. The liberation struggle of South Yemen also scored final victory in 1969 and made Aden ready for smuggling arms, ammunition and men into Eritrea. All these regimes were strongly opposed to the Ethiopian-Israeli alliance

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16 Ethiopian Airlines planes were attacked in Rome, Frankfurt and Karachi in 1969 and early 1970 and another hijacked in flight between Madrid and Athens. See Markakis, *Ibid.*, p. 128.

under the patronage of the United States, which had a military communications base monitoring the whole Middle East from the Eritrean capital. Naturally, the radical Arab regimes supported the Eritrean liberation struggle with materiel and propaganda.[17] The Soviets, who were closer to these regimes, were not for sure innocent by-standers.

Ethiopia was well aware of these developments and readied itself for another scorched-earth operation which, when unleashed in the spring of 1970, put entire populations in 'strategic hamlets' in the Keren and Sahel regions and the Red Sea coast. The ELF operations which included assassinations of government agents in the towns, the destruction of bridges and derailing trains did not stop Ethiopia's "My Lai-type of atrocities in Eritrea".[18] Among these atrocities figured the killings that followed the death of the Ethiopian commander of the Second Division in Eritrea, General Teshome Ergetu, in an ELF ambush on 21 November 1970. On 27 November, the Ethiopians rounded the 120 villagers of Basik Dira in a mosque and machine-gunned them. Eight survived to tell the tale.[19] Four days later on 1 December, the village of Ona, then serving as a 'strategic hamlet', was burned and 625 of the villagers killed.[20] On 27 January 1971, sixty elders were killed while praying in a mosque at a village not far from Elaberet. Martial law was already declared on 16 December 1970; the massacres continued unabated.

This generalized terror created big flights into the Sudan where the total refugee population reached 54,000 in late 1971. A

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17 Beside the relatively constant coverage in the press, the Eritrean revolutionaries at one time or another had radio programmes in Arabic and Tigrigna from Baghdad, Damascus, Khartoum and Mogadisho. Islamic solidarity programmes were also broadcast from Mecca.

18 *Minority Rights Group*, Report No. 5 (new edition, 1976), p. 6.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

Minority Rights Group report on refugees from the Eritrean Sahel in 1971 noted that 90 per cent of the arrivals at Tokar near the Red Sea were emaciated children and women. It added: "One visiting official from a United Nations agency reported in 1971 that he counted over 1,000 graves immediately on the Sudanese side of the frontier".[21] The World Food Programme also reportedly distributed emergency food to about 17,000 of the refugees in that area.[22] But, who were those refugees? Who did cross the border to the Sudan? And who did not?

The rural refugees of the second en masse flight to the Tokar area south of Port Sudan were from the Sahel communities, mainly from the Habab and related Tigre-speaking social groups who had their Tigre-speaking kinsmen across the border.[23]

Keren was the most severely affected region by the Ethiopian military campaigns of 1970-1971. Yet, its people, did not go in big groups as refugees to the Sudan. The settled peasants of the Keren area, mostly Blin and Tigrigna speaking and a good number of them Christians, had no kinsmen across the border. The Sudan was also relatively far away - about ten days' walk from the environs of Keren. Self-uprooting was still very much feared and many people preferred to take chances and stay at home - at least until a later date.

The years of refugee exodus (1967 and 1970-1971) were also years of internal crises for the ELF. During the first period, a few fighters (Kabassans by origin) left the front partly because of a generalized tension and ethno-religious distrust caused by the zonal commanders of the army. The second period also witnessed a similar period of fear and conflict which gave birth to factionalism.

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21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 There are a few Tigre-speaking Sudanese in the Karora-Tokar area. They migrated in the 19th century from the Habab in Sahel to work in cotton plantations in Tokar, Sudan.

Table 1: Total Number of Ethiopian (read Eritrean) Refugees in the Sudan 1967–1986

YEAR	REFUGEES
1967	28,600
1968	31,000
1969	31,000
1970	55,000
1971	54,500
1972	52,500
1973	46,000
1974	49,000
1975	85,500
1976	105,000
1977	145,000
1978	270,000
1979	346,000
1980	390,000
1981	419,000
1982	419,000
1983	460,000
1984	465,000
1986	772,000

Sources: Reports of the UNHCR, Gen. Ass. Official Records, 23rd–37th session; (a) UNHCR Information–Sudan August 1982, No. 4 Branch Office Khartoum; (b) Osman *et al.* The outcome of ICARA, 1984. (c) UNHCR Briefing Note, 25 July 1986.

Given the absence of frontier checkpoints and general population control in the Sudan until very recently, it was difficult to know who is who in the country, or how many refugees arrived from Eritrea at a given time. The above figures are, therefore, very rough estimates.

The two years preceding the revolution in Ethiopia were not 'refugee producing' years in Eritrea. In fact, as shown on Table 1, the number of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan decreased from 52,000 in 1972 to 46,000 in 1973. But a sharp upward trend which was to continue unabated for over a decade started with the new developments that unfolded in Ethiopia beginning in early 1974.

During the first 15 years (1961–1975) of the armed struggle, therefore, the fighters in the Eritrean liberation struggle and the refugees of the war had clearly identifiable ethno–religious composition: well over 90 per cent of them were Moslems, mainly from the western lowlands, the northern highlands, the eastern lowlands as well as Saho and Jabarti Moslems from Kabassa.

The number of Eritrean refugees and migrant workers in the Middle East was growing steadily by the early 1970s. The students in Egypt and in the Sudan were, at the completion of their courses, either joining the liberation struggle or going to the oil–rich states looking for work. Many others in Eritrea used the annual Hijra pilgrimage to issue visas to Saudi Arabia and later manage their way to stay outside home. That growing community of students and migrant workers was gradually becoming a 'pull' factor. It was to become a more effective magnet in the uprooting process when the security situation in Eritrea worsened.

CHAPTER 6

ARMED STRUGGLE AND REFUGEES PHASE TWO : 1975 - 1991

In a passionate, yet penetrating, editorial on the root causes of refugeeism, the *World Refugee Survey* of 1989 summarized the interplay of the issues and actors in these words:

> Refugees are the flotsam of power struggles - world, regional and local. The powerful, who have created the misery of the weak, have little regard for the tolls they have exacted and even less incentive for rectifying the losses incurred because of their actions. Therefore, the refugees are left to wait, and if they retain the energy, to hope.[1]

Those political refugees who left Eritrea to stay in Nasser's Egypt and the newly independent Sudan in the 1950s spent their life-times there. The tens of thousands who in 1967 and 1970 crossed the Eritrean border thought they were only in need of a temporary shelter in the sweltering refugee camps of Eastern Sudan. In the past quarter of a century, the situation had worsened with the number of Eritrean refugees and internally displaced persons growing to astronomical figures between 1975 and 1991. But all these waves of refugees had never totally given up the idea of returning home - one day.

Change of regime or political order in Ethiopia was long overdue. Many forces inside and outside the country had eagerly waited for the downfall or the death of the Emperor to improve their political positions in the transitional period. Everyone rightly calculated that the multi-ethnic empire-state, which Menelik II in the 19th century expanded from small Abyssinia into the big

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[1] Roger P. Winter, '1989 in Review', *World Refugee Survey*, US Committee for Refugees - Washington (1989), p. 2.

modern state of Ethiopia, would suffer instability and possible disintegration – like all empires, old and new – after Haile Selassie I. Eritreans were among those eager expectants who by their relentless action greatly contributed to the demise of the *ancien regime*. The Eritrean contribution was not limited to Ethiopia's battle-field losses and huge financial expenditures; their role in accelerating political consciousness among urban Ethiopians was very significant. Emperor Haile Selassie's regime started to crumble down in early 1974 and it took the Ethiopian army 18 months to come over its old loyalties to the absolutist 'King of Kings', and to announce a take-over in September. Dramatic developments were simultaneously taking place in Eritrea as well as in the hearts and minds of Eritreans wherever they were.

To adequately assess and interpret the process of nationalist transformation in Eritrea during this critical period in the recent history of the struggle, it is important to examine the social and political development of the liberation struggle and Ethiopia's additional contributions in the flight of many Eritrean from their homes. The subsequent two chapters will show how Eritrean fronts exacerbated refugeeism and how international action and the influence of Eritrean communities abroad also became 'pull' factors in the uprooting of many Eritreans.

ERITREAN NATIONALISM GATHERS MOMENTUM

No one can tell with figures what percentage of the Eritrean people supported the nationalist struggle at any given time in the past 30 years. Similarly, no exact figures are available on the number of liberation fighters at any given time in the past. Yet, learned guesses can be made in measuring the momentum of the struggle during the various phases.

Both popular support to the struggle and expectations of victory were definitely low in the 1960s. These had to be built through years of bitter struggle. But, by 1974-1975, "one can reasonably argue", as John Markakis states, "that an Eritrean

national consciousness, forged in the struggle, had emerged."[2] This nascent nationalism found fertile ground in the repeated failures of the new military regime in Ethiopia which opted to continue searching a solution to what it called 'the Eritrean problem created by feudal Haile Selassie' through the barrel of the gun. The most astonishing thing was that Ethiopians never learned from the Emperor's failure to win the war in Eritrea militarily. The first Ethiopian head of state named by the Dergue (or the new military junta) after the fall of the emperor was the Eritrean Aman Andom. He was killed in 1974 when he suggested a peaceful compromise solution to the conflict[3].

It was true that the majority of the Christian Kabassans became resentful of the union with Ethiopia in which they were treated as second class citizens, with very little access to state power and privilege. Nor was Ethiopia a promised land of milk and honey, as the Unionist propaganda had lied way back in the 1940s. As shown in Table 2 on page 77, Eritreans discovered that Ethiopia was lagging behind all countries practically in everything. In 1960, for instance, 62 per cent of primary school-age children in Kenya went to school while the corresponding figure for Ethiopia was a mere 7 per cent.[4] Arnold Toynbee's blatant observation that Ethiopia was "the best justification that could be found for the partitioning of the rest of Africa among European powers"[5] did not look farfetched to many people. Yet, the Ethiopian regimes were bent at

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2 John Markakis, 'The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea', *Journal of Modern African Studies* vol. 26(1) March 1988, p. 62.

3 Aman Andom, an Eritrean by origin, was educated in the Sudan. He won fame of having commanded the Ethiopian army which defeated Somalia in 1964. Success of his peace plan for Eritrea would have altered recent history in the region.

4 Zolberg et al, *Escape from Violence, op.cit.*, p. 108.

5 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Abridgment of vol. I-VI by D.C. Somervell (Oxford UP, 1946), p. 162.

suppressing Eritrean discontent at any cost. Worse was to come to Ethiopia when that suppression became more and more indiscriminate. It was already known that:

> Undue Ethiopian interference in Eritrean affairs might also provoke a dangerous, if not immediate, reaction on the part of the Eritrean Abyssinians [read: Kabassans]... it should not be supposed that the Unionists of yesterday will dance as happily to Ethiopian tunes tomorrow.[6]

An angry reaction of Kabassans to Ethiopia was delayed by two major factors. One was the Arab-Islamic tone of the early ELF leaders like Idris Mohammed Adam and Osman Saleh Sabbe. This, the Kabassans thought, was narrowing down the struggle to a sectarian ideology and non-Eritrean, non-African nationalism. The old Christian biases and fears, deepened by Ethiopian government propaganda of hatred and contempt towards the Arabs and their main religion, Islam, were also catalysts in widening the gap between the Christian Kabassans and the liberation struggle.

Another important factor that delayed Kabassan participation in the armed struggle was their relatively successful private economic ventures in Ethiopia. The highly skilled Eritrean urbanites of the Italo-British period totally controlled the transport, maintenance, and some other technical sectors in Ethiopia. Every garage and literally every road-side restaurant in the country was owned by Eritreans. The former governor of Eritrea was not very much exaggerating when he wrote:

> Almost half of the small businesses in Addis Ababa and many in other parts of Ethiopia were owned and operated by Eritreans.[7]

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6 Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 130.

7 Dawit, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

Table 2: Ethiopia's Economy in Comparative Perspective

	Ethiopia	Ethiopia World Rank	Africa Average	Developing Countries Average*
Per Capita Income	US$110	119/119	US$400	US$270
Ave. Annual Per Capita Income Growth 1965–85	0.2%	82/104	1.0%	0.4%
Ave. Annual GDP Growth 1965–1980	2.8%	83/107	5.3%	3.22%
Ave. Annual GDP Growth in Agriculture 1965–1980	1.2%	68/104	1.9%	2.0%
Ave. Annual GDP Growth in Agriculture 1980–1985	–3.4%	91/96	–0.4%	1.9%
Life Expectancy (Years)	45	117/125	50	52
Population Growth 1965–1980	2.7%	33/128	2.7%	2.7%
Population Growth 1980–1985	2.5%	76/128	3.3%	2.7%
Population/Physician 1965	70,190	121/121	36,570	26,110
Population/Physician 1981	88,120	103/103	26,760	17,350
Population/Nurse 1965	5,970	101/118	5,340	7,350
Population/Nurse 1981	5,000	77/84	2,570	7,620
Calorie Supply 1965	1,832	124/128	2,094	1,997
Calorie Supply 1985	1,681	123/124	2.024	2,073
Primary School Enrolment Ratio 1965	11%	118/122	41%	44%
Primary School Enrolment Ratio 1984	32%	115/120	77%	70%

Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*, 1987. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

* Excludes India and China.

This table shows Ethiopia's wretched position in comparison to the rest of the world and Africa. The Eritreans discovered the reality soon after the Federation was put into effect in 1952, but their utter frustrations were to be experienced in the 1960s when comparisons showed that old Abyssinia lagged far behind the newly independent African states.

Up to mid-1960s, Eritreans in Addis Ababa were insisting to call themselves and be called 'Eritreans'. This had gradually changed; and by the early 1970s. The formerly insistent Eritreans were finally accommodating by identifying themselves as 'Tigreans', a term which in its ethnic and linguistic sense is correct but never so widely accepted as a reference to Eritreans in general.

This ambivalent nationalism greatly helped to develop and be radically transformed by the actions of the military regime. The business sector was destroyed by the crude nationalization and control measures. Ethiopians in general were jealous of the successes scored by the enterprising Eritreans in the economic sector. The regime knew that many of the poor Ethiopians would rejoice to see the prospering Eritreans chased out of at least the capital. The military junta, partly exploiting people's passions, talked of taking stern measures against the "traitorous bandits" in Eritrea and their accomplices inside Addis Ababa. 'We will kill the cocoon of the poisonous serpent amidst us to liquidate the bandits in Eritrea'! became a daily slogan of the Ethiopian propaganda machinery. Eritreans, therefore, had no choice but to flee and many of those who hesitated at making a decision paid the price very dearly. As noted, the death of Head of State Aman Andom in November 1974 was a big blow to the last chance of a peaceful solution at that time.

Eritrean nationalism thus became a concrete reality. The vast majority of the people rallied behind the liberation movements which, by this time, were two. The ELF grew from a force of about 5,000 fighters in 1974 to an army of well over 10,000 in 1976. The other cluster front, then called the Popular Liberation Forces or ELF-PLF, also during the same period grew from a small force of about 300 to one with about 5,000 fighters.[8]

The factor of external support also seemed to have improved for sometime. The Western mass media, which for a long time

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[8] Information given to the author in Addis by a senior ELF cadre in 1974, and confirmed by a former PLF leader in Baghdad, 1992.

showed very little interest to the Eritrean armed struggle, started to cover the conflict quite adequately. Tunisia's attempt to raise the Eritrean question at the Kampala summit of the Organization of African Unity in July 1975 was an important gain in public information. The Sudan also for the first time talked about its full support to Eritrea's right to self-determination and national independence. Ethiopia thus reverted to yet another period of scorched-earth campaigns which contributed only towards further weakening that country and making the conflict more intractable.

ETHIOPIA AS CAUSE OF FLIGHT

Emperor Haile Selassie's paternalism combined with his clever use of divide and rule tactics worked well for 22 years to damp the Eritrean question as an "internal" Ethiopian affair.

Amidst grisly mass murders in the peripheries of Asmara, life in the 1960s went normally for most people. An Ethiopian army and commando unit reportedly killed 65 persons at Mirara,[9] north of Asmara, one morning in 1965 and went back to its barracks quietly in the evening. Haile Selassie's army unit, accompanied by the Israeli-trained Eritrean nationals carrying the name Commandoes, did not kill everybody at Mirara. Those who were slaughtered were the ones who failed to say a few prayer verses in Ge'ez[10] or who did not carry *mateb*[11] cords around their necks to show their confessional identity.

But the young hot-heads in the new military regime dropped the feudo-bourgeois monarch's tactics and decided to find a quick and final solution to the conflict by putting all Eritreans on the enemy camp. Indiscriminate killings started, and no one felt secure.

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9 *Eritrean Revolution* vol. 3(1) June-August, 1978.

10 The Coptic Church prayers are recited in the old Semitic language of Ge'ez.

11 *Mateb* was a blue silk braid which the Christians put around their necks, usually as an amulet.

THE THIRD EXODUS

The third phase of mass exodus started in mid-1974. On 10 July 1974, the small town of Om Hager in south-western Eritrea was completely destroyed; more than 170 were killed. The survivors turned out to be the first wave of Eritrean refugees from an urban settlement in the mid-1970s. Generalized killings then engulfed the whole country. The 9 March 1975 massacre at Agordat in which 208 civilians were machine-gunned in a single day, was no more a special incident in bleeding Eritrea of the second half of the 1970s. Not even Asmara the capital was spared. In the words of an authoritative Ethiopian witness, 'death squads' were established to kill as many Eritreans as possible.

> These special forces tried to drive a wedge between the people of Asmara and the guerrillas by committing atrocities and blaming it on the rebels. Young men and women were dragged out of their homes at night, strangled and thrown into the streets.[12]

The same source estimated that Asmara's quarter of a million population of 1974 was reduced to less than 90,000 by 1977. Thousands of Eritrean youth disappeared without any trace and 'thousands of prisoners had been executed as rebels".[13]

These military measures in Eritrea and the systematic terror unleashed against all Eritreans inside Ethiopia brought about a massive displacement of young men and women who did not yet cross state boundaries to become refugees. They stayed in the Eritrean countryside and in small liberated townships. Eritrean refugees in the Sudan by 1976 were double the figure in 1974 but still only about 100,000; most of the first wave of refugees in the

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12 Dawit, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

13 *Ibid.* p. 100.

third exodus were from the Om Hager and Agordat areas in the western lowlands, and a few towns–people who came individually or in very small groups from inside Ethiopia and Eritrea. The majority of the Eritreans were not willing to uproot themselves and become refugees. For one, there was not tradition of refugeeism. (Eritreans did not consider themselves 'refugees' in Ethiopia). Secondly, people were convinced that a quick victory of the liberation struggle was in the making. And, thirdly, the Sudan and the other Arabic speaking countries were not yet, in the minds of most displaced urban Eritreans, their best destination in exile; some parts of the West were nearer to one's spiritual and material culture than the neighbouring world. In actual fact, many of those displaced Eritreans had some knowledge of English and/or Italian. But their preferences were not yet realizable. So, the potential Eritrean refugees stayed at home, many of the youths joined the liberation fronts.

The Ethiopian Dergue, therefore, no doubt unified the Eritreans by its new policy of indiscriminate killings. Tens of thousands of Eritreans left Ethiopia and went back to their villages of origin in the liberated countryside. Most of them were in those villages for their first time. They were displaced, but not yet refugees. Internal Eritrean factors worked out to give them the latter status, as we shall explore in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

SELF-UPROOTING IN ERITREA

INTERNAL CAUSES OF FLIGHT

Eritrea's liberated zones in the second half of the 1970s, which constituted over 90 per cent of the territory, were teeming with displaced persons. Zolberg estimated this number to have reached 350,000 persons[1] at the end of 1976 while refugees in the Sudan were still about 100,000.[2] Two years later, when the Ethiopians reconquered some Eritrean towns, the number of refugees in the Sudan rose to about 400,000. By the summer of 1986, UNHCR's usually conservative figures estimated the number of Ethiopian refugees, mainly from Eritrea, at 772,000.[3] This number did not include all the unregistered and self-sufficient refugees in the Sudanese countryside and the major towns.

But was Ethiopia the sole cause of the Eritrean refugee flights? The answer is no. Eritrean-Eritrean conflicts and gross mistakes or omissions of relevant policies by Eritrean fronts were also responsible for huge refugee flights. Lack of a clear programme on the part of the fronts to control refugeeism, attacking or liberating towns which they would not effectively defend and, hegemonic policies of the fronts vying to control the liberated areas caused and encouraged daily flow of refugees from the country. But above all, the failure of the Eritrean liberation movement to reach a minimum programme of unity on organizational level persistently harmed the confidence of the people in final victory. Many felt that the best choice was to forget all about the infighting fronts and become a refugee. We shall examine why these factors were fertile grounds for continued exodus.

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1 *Ibid.*

2 *Ibid.*

3 UNHCR Briefing Note, 25 July 1986.

1. Lack of Policy to Contain Refugeeism

The two liberation fronts of 1975, which became three by March 1976, were not ready to contain an excessive and mainly avoidable exodus into the Sudan. The fronts grew in size very rapidly by recruiting from the overflowing displaced persons and cared little about the remainder. The majority of the displaced persons from the interior did not at first have the incentive to pack for exile. On the other hand, the demoralized Ethiopian army was no serious threat for people to stay in hidden camps and villages in most of the liberated zones.

However, the fronts did not only lack the capacity to accommodate the displaced people but also failed to give them correct guidance. Instead of improvising containment measures through self-help works or by inviting international aid to reach the needy people inside Eritrea, they – and especially the ELF – left the doors wide open for the growth of refugeeism. The wing of the ELF-PLF, which became the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) by early 1977, was not on the main refugee route to the Sudan. Nevertheless, that front, and particularly in later years, to discourage people from going to exile. At least it obliged many young persons to stay in its ranks. The ELF could not do even that.

2. Untimely Liberation of Towns

The daring attacks of the Eritrean fronts against Ethiopian army installations in Asmara in January and February 1975 were ill-planned because the fronts were not in a position to take over the capital city. Nor was it a good mobilizational tactic because the majority of the people were already riding the nationalist tide. Those guerrilla attacks gave the Ethiopians a new opportunity to escalate terror. Displacement, which was the prelude to exile, was thus partly promoted by the fronts themselves.

The liberation of towns, which mostly took place during 1977, was another costly mistake on the part of the Eritreans. Starting with Karora in the extreme north, the two major fronts entered a

competition of controlling more territory than the rival front by liberating towns. This phenomenon, initiated by the EPLF, had two negative results: (a) it accentuated the differences between the internal forces; and (b) it was an immediate cause of major refugee exodus. For instance, when the ELF captured Tessenei in April 1977, refugees from the town became a burden and the front "advised them to cross the border temporarily".[4] Those refugees did not return to Tessenei until recently. When the Ethiopian army, supported by the Soviets and a Cuban contingent, cleared the Somali army from the Ogaden by early 1978, it turned to Eritrea and reoccupied the liberated towns of Agordat, Adi Quala, Adi Ugri, Decamere, Keren, Tessenei and a few others. Over 122,000 persons[5] were displaced and some time later allowed – even assisted – by the fronts to arrive at the refugee camps in the Sudan.

3. A Pull Factor Created

A minority of the refugees, mainly the urban dwellers and the fairly educated among them, managed to leave the Sudan for Saudi Arabia and other oil producing countries. First went those whose friends and relatives migrated to the Arabian Peninsula in the early 1970s through *Hijra* pilgrimages. More followed them through various channels, including high level corruption in the ranks of immigration officials, their intermediaries, forgers and clever go-between networks politely known by Eritreans as '*Seb* Bizness', or the 'business people'. This created a 'pull' factor which attracted many more Eritrean 'refugees' from Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Eritrean political organizations did contribute in making the 'pull' factor more efficient. Their offices in the Arab countries collaborated in processing residence permits and in sending money to relatives waiting for visas and cash.

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4 Gaim, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

5 *Ibid.*

For reasons already cited, Moslem Eritreans found it easier to integrate in the Arab world than most of their Christian compatriots. Many of the latter eventually migrated, through refugee resettlement programmes or through their own channels, to the United States and Canada, and a few others were assisted to go to Australia. Tens of thousands who went to various European countries managed their own ways through money and 'Black Bizness'. As will be shown in the following section, disunity in the ranks of the liberation struggle was the most important internal factor in the displacement of many Eritreans.

4. Eritrean Disunity

In a message to the second congress of the EPLF in 1987, the veteran independence fighter, Ibrahim Sultan, found it still pertinent after 40 years to urge and advise his countrymen in terms which reveal anything but unity in Eritrea.

> Make peace amongst yourselves. Be united. Don't be Moslems and Christians... Avoid religious, ethnic and regional differences and confront the enemy through forging a common platform.[6]

But it was because of the Eritreans' failure to make a strong common platform that Ibrahim Sultan and his generation spent a life-time in exile. In other words, it was because of internal disunity that the Eritreans could not emerge victorious in the late 1940s, and again in the late 1970s when most of Eritrea was liberated by two fronts. In late May 1991, Eritrea freed itself from the Ethiopian occupation army which it crushed. But have the Eritreans made peace amongst themselves? Can they ward off external interferences, including from today's 'friendly' Europe

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[6] Quoted in *Fitsametat* (EPLF publication) No. 193 of 1987, p 15. (My translation from the original Tigrigna).

and establish a stable state? Will they be able to rehabilitate their refugees and never again produce similar victims in the future?

An analysis of this complex theme must in its preface admit that Eritrean-Eritrean conflicts had indeed been contributing to refugeeism. A 1987 study by the Free University of Amsterdam found out that, through their disunity, the Eritreans greatly contributed to their self-uprooting. The study concluded:

> It is true that the Dergue has committed appalling atrocities against the Eritreans... However, it has no monopoly on the violation of human rights. Many Eritrean refugees fled not from the Ethiopians but from the EPLF.[7]

And although the EPLF was not the sole local actor in producing Eritrean refugees, many sources claimed it was one of the major contributors. The UK-based *Journal of Refugee Studies* on its part wrote that in the 1981-1982 period, "refugees were not driven out by the Ethiopian army, but by the EPLF... [which] made all the other fronts and their supports flee from the zones that it came to control."[8]

The overall effect of internal conflicts on refugeeism must be preceded by a glimpse into the root causes of disunity in the Eritrean society which, as already indicated, had without any doubt evolved from its amputated original pieces to constitute today's distinct socio-political entity.

There are factors that cause easily identifiable divisions in Eritrea. These include the presence of nine languages, two major religions and two distinct geographical zones. These factors, however, become essential elements of division in the hands of manipulative elite. Otherwise, it was not religious faith but the struggle for political power - the source of material benefits, the

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7 Kuhlman et al. *op.cit.*, Annex-19.

8 Walter Kok, 'Self-Settled Refugees...', *Journal of Refugee Studies* vol. 2(4) 1989, p. 422.

preservation of group identity and dignity – that has caused disunity in Eritrea. We have seen that the Eritrean Moslems constituted the majority in the ranks of the independentists in the 1940s and in the liberation struggle until 1975. They acted in the way they did mainly because they perceived that their interests in the long-run would not be satisfied in a political relationship with Ethiopia.[9] On the other hand, the Eritrean Christians in general hoped that unity with the Ethiopian state, dominated by their co-religionists, would bring them "dignity, freedom equality and new opportunities."[10]

It was the question of access to the 'new opportunities' that widened the gap of division between the two Eritrean communities. Take the access to state power in Ethiopia. Out of 138 highest state posts between 1941 to 1966, 85 went to Shoan Amharas, 19 to Eritreans and seven to Tigrayans.[11] Eritrea was the second most favoured region, but the breakdown of the 19 posts made a difference locally: 16 were Christians and only three Moslems, among them Saleh Hinit, the first Moslem in Ethiopian history to become a cabinet minister in 1966.

Education, which was usually the path to high state posts and material benefits, was less accessible to the Eritrean Moslems than their Christian compatriots. In 1966, 50 per cent of children over the age of ten in Asmara were literate; 28 per cent of children of the 7-12 age-group also went to school in Eritrea as a whole. But the share of the lowland peripheries in educational opportunities was very low. Similarly, the enrolment in Ethiopian higher

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9 It must be remembered, for instance, that the aristocratic families and chiefs who were opposed to the emancipation of the serfs in the Sahel and Barka regions supported union in the late 1940s believing that feudal Ethiopia would restore their tribal supremacy over their former serfs.

10 Mesfin Araya, 'The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 28(1) March 1990, p. 83.

11 Christopher Clapham, *Haile Selassie's Government* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 81.

institutions of learning showed a very high percentage of Eritreans. On average, there were 830 Eritrean students in the Haile Selassie I University at any given year during 1963–1968, making 16.6 per cent of the total university student population. But out of those Eritreans, much less than 2 per cent came from the non-Tigrigna speakers of the Eritrean lowlands.[12]

This writer, a Christian, completed grade eight with 86 mates in the town of Keren in June 1961. In the 9th grade entrance (Ethiopian) national examination, in which a pass in Amharic was a pre-condition for further studies, only four (all Christians) obtained pass-marks. This was because both Tigrigna and Amharic are written in the Ge'ez alphabet which the Christians studied from the beginning. The Moslems constituted 90 per cent of the group. All failed. Many of them either went to the Arab world or joined the liberation struggle during the 1960s.[13]

The conflicting interests of the two cultural blocs were reflected in the liberation struggle. Short notes on two Eritrean fronts would provide a good understanding of the differences instrumentalized by ethno-religious mobilizers.

(a) The Eritrean Liberation Front

The ELF remained a predominantly Moslem organization for the first 15 years of its existence. For various reasons, the front could not attract full Kabassan participation nor could it prove capable of retaining in its ranks those young people who joined it in small numbers from time to time.

See Haile Michael (1969) quoted in Markakis (1987), p. 285, footnote No. 37. The number of Ethiopian university students averaged 5,000 a year for that duration. Extrapolation of Eritrean students is made by author who lived the situation.

Prominent among the author's former classmates in Keren who joined the ELF were Mahmoud Jenjer (martyred in 1966) and Saleh Hayoti, an ELF leader in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By early 1975, the organization expanded in size and its rank and file from the Kabassa gradually exceeded in number the 'traditional' *Jabha* members. To this author, the ELF between 1975 to 1982 represented Eritrea in its entirety and there was some hope that the organization would fulfill the much needed unity of the people. As Robert Kaplan remarked, "Welding these two population groups together psychologically... was not an easy task".[14] This was to some extent achieved in the ELF, a fact which started to give political weight to the Eritrean revolution. However, instead of strengthening this healthy process, the front destroyed itself and shattered expectations for wider unity. The Moslem elites played a major role in its destruction. The various leadership cliques mobilized their co-ethnics and allies to deprive the 'new-comers' (Kabassans) of any access to power.[15] A discernible marginalization reduced the Kabassans almost to a second-class status, similar to what they previously suffered under the Ethiopians. A few fell prey to ethnic mobilizers in another front which "condemned Christians in ELF as tools of their Moslem 'bosses'".[16] But the majority of them made historic sacrifices to guard the unity of the ELF until a democratic transformation could be effected. But, unfortunately for Eritrean unity and for themselves, that expected transformation never materialized.

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[14] Robert D. Kaplan, *Starve: The Wars Behind Famine* (Boulder, Westview, 1988), p. 63.

[15] The second ELF congress of 1975 elected only a dozen Christians to the 41-member Revolutionary Council. Hiruy Tedla, a prominent Kabassan, was dropped from the leadership. It was a grave mistake which cost the ELF thousands of fighters in a second schism after that of 1971. The ELF leadership also literally refused to hold the third congress due by 1978 because of fear of Kabassan domination. In late 1978, this author was told by an ELF leadership member, Saleh Ahmed Eyay, at Le Marley Hotel in Beirut, "You also want us to call a Kabassan congress?"

[16] Tesfatsion Medhanie, *Eritrea: Dynamics of a National Question* (Amsterdam: B.R. Gruner, 1986), p. 67.

This tug-of-war between the old ELF force, mainly led by elements educated in Cairo and other Arab capitals, and the new force of young urbanites, led by students from Asmara and the radicalized Addis Ababa campuses, weakened the front. Power centres that proliferated within the organization also in a way showed how much of Eritrea's diversity the ELF represented. In August 1980, the EPLF declared war on the ELF. The Tigrai People's Liberation Front (TPLF) fought alongside the EPLF against the ELF which was defeated in August 1981. This civil war was only an immediate cause for the eventual disintegration of the front. However, it is believed that the organization was partly weakened by squabbles of its diverse internal ethno-political forces.

(b) The Eritrean People's Liberation Front

> Any ethnic threat to the basic unity of the Empire would almost certainly come from either of two sources: the Eritreans and Tigreans in the North, or the Gallas in the South.[17]

Christopher Clapham made the prediction in 1969 based on the fact that the northern rivals of the Amharas as well as the big Oromo nation in the south may not for ever succumb to Shoan domination. The Tigrayans and the Oromos rose in revolt in 1975 by forming their own organizations. It is also important to underline here that it was during this time that the EPLF was practically built into a force to be reckoned with. The quest by all three new fronts was access to state power. In Eritrea, why and how the EPLF came into a separate existence and then to absolute domination of the Eritrean liberation movement is by itself a good example of (a) Eritrean disunity, and (b) of the legitimacy of the struggle of ethnic nations for an access to state power.

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[17] Clapham, *Haile Selassie's Government*, *op.cit.*, p. 80.

The Eritrean liberation movement suffered leadership crises in the late 1960s when the old founders of ELF clashed with the new force of young and educated cadres who were influenced by the radical politics of that period. By 1970, there were three groups which split from the mainstream ELF, which itself was gradually falling under the grip of a quasi-leftist party. One of these three splinter groups was a Christian unit of about a dozen led by a former student activist in Asmara, Issayas Afeworki. The other two splinter groups were led by Osman Saleh Sabbe of Samhar, and Adam Saleh representing a traditionalist Beni Amer force in Barka. All three formed a united front named ELF-Popular Liberation Forces, commonly called *Shabia.*

Each of the three factions had its own justifications for schism. But the most sensitive were the mobilizational tactics and some facts presented by the Issayas group which said that the ELF killed about 50 Kabassan peasants while at their Sember farms in the Gash[18] in 1967. The ELF was also accused of having killed hundreds of Christian fighters.[19] The period was full of abuses perpetrated by so-called leaders of a liberation struggle. However, that ghastly story is beyond the scope of this writing.

But whatever the reasons, the frictions in the liberation struggle were constantly increasing ethnic consciousness. As early as 1968, the founder-leader of the Kabassan schism was already writing letters to friends in cities urging them to send as many Christians as possible to the ELF in order to defend "the dignity of the

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18 The Chritian peasants killed by gunmen wearing ELF uniforms were given land and arms by Ethiopia to settle in and defend the 'pacified areas'.

19 An unknown number of young Kabassan fighters were killed by ELF unit leaders; the then splinter group alleged the death of over 100 in 1967 and over 250 in 1969-1970 for no apparent reasons other than their being Christians. Many young people from the cities, who found life in the guerrilla army difficult, were deserting. It was also claimed that Ethiopia was recruiting many Eritreans to join the ELF for a short duration and then return to Asmara carrying ELF arms. Most "returnees" were given monthly allowances, and some of Asmara's jobless were able to make use of it.

Kabassan people".[20] In the November 1971 declaration of their divorce from the ELF, Issayas and group asked their readers: "What do you do when they chase you out of what you thought was a national cause? What do you do when they oppress you while fighting for freedom?"[21] The answer to such inquiries based on a we–they perception was simple: creating a new organization even if "almost all or even all of us are Christians by birth, by culture and by history".[22] The same group wrote in 1973;

> ... The Eritrean nationalities have never been treated equally in the Eritrean national struggle and this fact is well evinced in the past 12 years of the armed struggle. And the history of *Jabha* is nothing but a history of oppression of one nationality by the other.[23]

It was essentially by this type of ethnic appeals that the Issayas–led organization grew and finally dominated the Eritrean arena. There were ample reasons to fight the archaic leadership without, however, deepening differences in the society. In the wake of the schisms followed civil wars in 1972–1974 and in 1980–1981 which made many Eritreans lose track of what the struggle was all about when every armed force suspected them of collaborating with the other. After the civil war of 1980–81 which involved regional fronts and states, most Eritreans in the Sudan decided to pack for final destinations of resettlement away from the borders of Eritrea.

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20 This author's cell in Addis Ababa received such a letter from Issayas Afeworki in 1968 which included the quoted words. The letter was not supposed to reach this author, who was the focal point of ELF cells in the University, a fact very well known to Issayas.

21 *Nehnan Elamanan*, 1st EPLF declaration, November 1971, published by the Eritreans for Liberation (Italy branch, 1971), p. 18.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

23 *Fitewerari* vol. 1(1) Jan. 1973, p. 7.

Polarization of the society into two rival ethnic divisions, based on Moslem/Christian covers, intensified during the 1980s. The worst feature of this phenomenon appeared in 1988 when Islamic fundamentalism led to the formation of an Eritrean Jihad organization pledging to fight the 'infidels' of the EPLF who 'profaned' sacred Islamic traditions in Eritrea.[24]

But it is not only this jihadist organization that is opposed to the EPLF. The mainstream ELF chaired by Ahmed Nasser is an organization with many followers inside Eritrea and abroad. Other ELF factions include one led by the former head of the front's military wing, and two predominantly Christian factions. In the Eritrea-Sudan border were camped two founding-allies of the EPLF. All these fronts had been told to disband their armed wings, dismantle their political structures and join ranks with the EPLF. All calls for the formation of a broad front by these weak organizations had been scornfully rejected. In fact, the front's secretary-general, Issayas, said over the radio in September 1990:

> It is known that some Eritrean factions are working against the Eritrean political cause and spreading propaganda aimed at weakening the EPLF... Some Arab countries use these factions as spies... Moreover, some of these factions have direct contact with the Ethiopian colonialists.[25]

On their part, those factions dubbed as Arab agents and fifth columnists had little confidence in, and respect to, EPLF's Eritreanism at least until it finally crushed the Ethiopian army and triumphantly entered Asmara. They constantly referred to an alleged chauvinist Kabassan and Christian identity of the EPLF, its alliance with the TPLF of Tigrai in attacking the ELF in the 1980-

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[24] *Al-Muslimun*, vol. 24 (238) 31 Aug. 1989. See also *The Economist*, 20 October 1990, p. 50.

[25] *Dimtsi Hafash*, EPLF Radio excerpts, 9 Sept. 1990, printed in *Horn of Africa Bulletin* vol. 2(6) of Oct. 1990.

1981 civil war and, above all, its claimed relationship with Western church and church-related NGO organizations at the expense of isolating the Eritrean cause from its traditional Middle Eastern backers. Alluding to such accusations, the EPLF leader stated:

> There are those who say that [EPLF's] final aim is to establish Axum or Christian government or a government of Tigrigna-speaking people. This is a baseless rumour.[26]

In the final analysis, internal conflicts in Eritrea and the polarization of the society into its traditional divisions were not the malicious work of one social group or a front. All the diverse social and political forces of the country contributed in their making, although it could be stated that some ethnic mobilizers in each group had more negative contributions than others. It was also true that Christian Kabassans had sound reasons to be suspicious of and reluctant to join a liberation struggle dominated by elements engaged in religious talk and backed or assumed to be backed by the Moslem Arabs in the 1960s and early 1970s. The reverse process is underway today: the devoted independentists of the past 45 years – the vast majority of the Eritrean Moslems – are not enthusiastic about an independent Eritrea dominated by the EPLF.

In short, Eritrean disunity has been a constant cause of internal conflicts in the past, and, no doubt, the future is fraught with danger. The ability of the Eritreans to establish a state without using guns against each other has still to be proven. Therefore, Eritrea is not yet a place where large groups of returnees of all social and political segments of the society could be seen milling in the newly liberated land. Woldeab Woldemariam has returned home, but not yet Idris Mohammed Adem. And without the happy return of all those refugees, the future of Eritrea could be considered to be still hanging on the scales.

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26 *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 8

ERITREAN REFUGEES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Eritrean refugees had been influential actors in international relations. They aided in the growth of the struggle and helped to re-internationalize it. Relations between Ethiopia and some Arab states were influenced by the refugees. The involvement of international organizations in relief and self-help assistance in later years widened their role. Both the international aid and the refugees themselves became 'pull' factors.

THE REFUGEES IN REGIONAL POLITICS

Refugees could be unwillingly used by host countries implementing their foreign policies. But at times, they could be willing 'instruments' or actors promoting their own political objectives. An illustrative case occurred between Egypt and Eritrean refugees in Cairo soon after the July 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal which became a political issue involving many actors in the region.[27]

In that international crisis, Ethiopia sided with the West. Nasser's Egypt[28] then called upon some Eritreans, among them Woldeab Woldemariam, to broadcast Arabic-Tigrigna programmes directed against Ethiopia. The programme was stopped a few months later when Ethiopia became member of the Canal Users Committee and Egypt made its 'arrangements' with the former.[29]

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27 Markakis, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

28 Egypt has never openly and actively supported Eritrean independence. In 1950, it voted for the federation and incurred the wrath of Arab states which voted for its independence.

29 Markakis, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

However, the influence of that short-lived broadcast motivated many more political elements in Eritrea to leave home. Egypt, nevertheless, remained "a generous host to Eritrean refugees whom it provided with work permits, stipends, and a house that served as their meeting place".[30]

Although individuals went to a number of neighbouring states, large groups of Eritreans trekked to and remained in the Sudan whose relations with Ethiopia and the Eritrean liberation movement was influenced by the refugees. The Sudanese people and governments had generally been hospitable and tolerable towards the Eritrean refugees, "although this is not to say that maltreatment has never occurred."[31] It has also been true, as Aristide Zolberg succinctly noted, that the Sudan:

> continued to use the refugees as pawns in external policy, sometimes tolerating military activities along the border as a way of putting pressure on Ethiopia and sometimes relocating them inside as a prelude to rapprochement.[32]

Ethiopia and the Sudan have been 'homes' for a large number of refugees caused by conflicts which created a mutuality of understanding between the two. That shared interest required that: "Haile Selassie says little in the South Sudan [and] the Sudan says little about the genocide in Eritrea".[33] In this way, the successive regimes in both countries continued playing off refugee issues in their relations.

Until the 1974 changes in Ethiopia, the Sudan did not attract refugee organizations except the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which established its first

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30 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

31 Kuhlman, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

32 Zolberg et al, *op.cit.*, p. 116.

33 Jack Kramer, 'Hidden War in Eritrea' *Venture*, May 1969.

camp for Eritrean refugees 350 kms south of Kassala in 1970.[34] The relationship between the UNHCR and the Sudan gradually grew into a close partnership. In recent years, the Sudanese became exclusive implementors of refugee projects and even used "international aid to solve their own economic problems".[35] Zolberg recounts that funds were channelled into capital investments and over one million refugees in the Sudan, majority of them Eritreans, "were turned into a reserve of cheap labour for the public sector and private entrepreneurs."[36]

The warrior refugee communities of Eritrea in the Sudan and the South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia had been there for over a quarter of a century now. They provided fighters for the various fronts in the region, and the two states continued to use them as pawns in their inter-state relations.

REFUGEES HELP INTERNATIONALIZE THE ERITREAN CAUSE

Through their material and 'diplomatic' contributions, the Eritrean refugees helped in re-internationalizing the cause of their national liberation movement. The internationalization of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict no doubt increased the intensity of the war, human violations and the rate of refugee flight. As stated earlier, it was individual refugees who in the late 1950s and early 1960s reactivated the Eritrean issue in the region and prepared the people for armed struggle through their material contributions and physical involvement. Then came the major refugee exodus into the Sudan in 1967, 1970-1971 and the biggest waves that started in 1974.

The first wave of Eritrean refugees in the spring of 1967 received publicity in the Sudan as well as in some Western mass

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34 Zolberg et al, *op.cit.*, p. 108.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

media.[37] Similar publicity accompanied the other refugee flights during the 1970s. This publicity was helpful in mobilizing more Eritreans to take part in the struggle.

Eritrean refugees in the Sudan and a few in other neighbouring countries provided the liberation struggle with a continuous supply of fighters. It was from among individual refugees that the ELM in 1965 tried to launch an armed struggle with a "force of fifty men assembled in the Sudan".[38] It was also from the growing refugee population in the Sudan that: "Sabbe charted planes in Khartoum to take a couple of hundred [Eritreans] to Aden"[39] before he declared his own organization in July 1970. The ELF and the EPLF were joined by large numbers of displaced Eritreans in the second half of the 1970s, but the refugee camps in the Sudan remained a source of manpower for the various fronts. Material contribution of refugees had been equally significant. At this juncture, when Eritrea could be counted as a liberated country, it would be relevant to locate the Eritrean refugees on the world map and to try to quantify their previous contributions to the struggle.

Refugee statistics is an elusive quest; it is much more so in the Sudan where there were no frontier check-points to cross nor regular identity cards to carry until very recently. There were some 660,000 Ethiopian refugees in Sudan in early 1990, over 500,000 of them Eritreans.[40] Not included in this count were the urban refugees and those self-settled rural refugees. There also were unknown number of Eritrean refugees in almost every Arab country and the neighbouring African countries like Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya. The biggest concentration outside the Sudan before the mid-1980s was in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates (about 100,000). Even bleeding Lebanon of the second half of the 1970s

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37 See *Keesings*, June 24 - July 1, 1967 (22104A).

38 Markakis, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

40 UNHCR magazine, *Refugees* No. 72, February, 1990, p. 31.

had its share of 1,500 Eritreans until the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982. By early 1992, there were about[41] 50,000 Eritrean refugees in Europe. Of these, about 14,000 were in Germany, 8,000 in Sweden, 4,000 in Holland and 3,500 in Britain. Even Switzerland, with all its restrictions on asylum, hosted about 1,000 Eritreans. The colonial "mother" country, Italy, does not welcome African refugees but all the same had some 5,000 Eritreans. In the United States, there are some 20,000 Eritreans and about half that number have been resettled in Canada.

Financial contribution to the fronts from members and some times from non-members was considerable. The most successful fund-raiser always remained to be the EPLF which at its early days depended on Eritreans in North America.[42] In recent years, the front received aid from non-governmental sources.[43] It also generated large sums from Eritreans outside home. Clapham in early 1991 reported EPLF's monthly income from Eritrean sources to be US$ 25 million per month.[44] Most of the refugees who went beyond the Sudan were either the educated ones or those from the urban milieu. They were thus able to establish contacts with peoples and institutions in the host countries and students in the

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41 The number of Eritreans in every country was difficult to establish because of their constant movement from one place to another. The figures in this paragraph were collected from diverse sources including Eritrean community leaders in different countries.

42 Associations called 'Eritreans for Liberation' in Europe and North America contributed money and published supportive writings for the ELF-PLF wing of Issayas Afeworki which later became the EPLF. Eritreans who went to the West from Ethiopia usually presented the EPLF as a victim of the other front which was never favourably mentioned.

43 Most of the NGOs were organizations which perceived and talked of religious differences between the ELF and the EPLF. Since 1985, the US Government and other European countries channelled food aid to the EPLF.

44 Clapham, 'The Political Economy of the Conflict in the Horn of Africa', *Survival*, p. 414.

West were sources of background information on Eritrea – and sometimes total distortion – to the mass media and supportive organizations. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the EPLF was the leading beneficiary of such Western largesse.

However, international aid organizations other than the UNHCR were late-comers to the Eritrean scene. When the regime was changed in Addis Ababa, those aid agencies which until then were less inclined to offend Emperor Haile Selassie, flooded to Khartoum and became 'pull' factors attracting many more rural refugees from Eritrea.[45] There were 44 humanitarian organizations working among Eritrean refugees in Eastern Sudan by the early 1980s.[46] During that time, even the United States sent its then Vice-President George Bush to visit Eritrean and Ethiopian victims of the war at the Wadi Sherifey and other refugee camps in the Eritrean-Sudanese borders. That was part of the story of refugee politics in international relations. "The impact of international factors", wrote Zolberg in 1989, "is dramatically manifested in the case of the Eritreans."[47]

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45 Zolberg et al., *op.cit.*, p. 108.

46 *Sudanow*, vol. 11(3), Khartoum, March 1986.

47 Zolberg et al., *op.cit.*, p. 165.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS

Eritrea is a typical example of the painful legacies of European colonialism. Historically and politically, it evolved into an entity which is entitled by international law to a separate existence. Yet, that evolution could not run a full circle to create a cohesive national community that can easily weather all destabilizing factors, internal and external. Primarily, therefore, Eritrea had been in conflict against itself since World War II.

Secondly, its geographically disfavoured southern neighbour, Ethiopia, perceived that its vital interests, including its very national survival, hinged on acquiring and then retaining Eritrea under its control at any cost. Cold War politics, the West's as well as Africa's fascinations with biblical Ethiopia and its emperor also worked against the rightful claims of the Eritreans. These were among the original root causes of the conflict and its devastating outcome in the region.

The following three concluding remarks, which will be elaborated later, could be drawn from this study:

1. Colonial history created Eritrea as an artificial country, like many others in the Third World, and that there was no justification whatsoever to deny the Eritrean people the right to full self-determination.

2. The Eritreans lacked minimum national consensus and their disunity has been both cause and effect of the conflict.

3. Ethnic revival in Eritrea and the big number of Eritreans already outside home may guarantee continued existence of refugees and continued flight of people from the country in the foreseeable future. The front in total control of Eritrea today does not so far promise lasting peace to Italy's former colony and its

"motley collection of diverse ethnic, linguistic, regional and religious sectors."[1]

1. The first concluding remark is based on the irreversible historical development brought about by European colonialism: that is, the colonial state as opposed to the European model of nation–state. The colonial areas which became today's territorial states had their boundaries demarcated without any consideration of the destinies of the peoples cut into several pieces by those imaginary lines drawn in Berlin and other capitals. The entities formed in that manner acquired legal significance through treaties and recognition of that status by powers of the day. Colonized Eritrea underwent that process to become an entity in international law. The United Nations Charter adopted that principle. And despite Ethiopia's interpretations to the contrary, the position of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in defence of what it called sacred colonial boundaries also justified Eritrea's legitimate claim to separate statehood and independence.

Old Abyssinia's claims to parts of modern Eritrea were renounced when Emperor Menelik in the 1890s "voluntarily signed with Italy successive treaties establishing the frontiers of kingdom and colony."[2] In 1962, Ethiopia again lost any possible and plausible claim to legal relationship with Eritrea when Emperor Haile Selassie unilaterally violated an international obligation which he had pledged to respect. According to jurists and legal experts of world renown, among them Tom Farer, Ethiopia's forfeiture of a legal link with Eritrea entitled the latter to ask a review of the matter by the United Nations.[3]

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1 Erlich, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

2 Crawford Young 'Comparative Claims for Sovereignty'. D. Rothchild and V. Olorunsola (eds.), *State Versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1983), p. 122.

3 Farer, *op.cit.*, p. 137.

Equally important political development was the emergence of a set of characteristics of a people qualifying the Eritreans to exercise the right to self-determination. The economic, social, military[4] and administrative functions of the colonizers were integrative. Living within common frontiers created a sense of belonging and solidarity on territorial basis. This territorial Eritreanism was manifested when the people in a unanimous opinion rejected the partition plan. Eritrea's demand for self-determination as one unit had also been greatly strengthened by its relentless armed struggle conducted between 1961 and 1991.

2. The assertion that Eritrean disunity constituted a major cause of the conflict is a consistent affirmation of the development of the ideals of freedom and equality that strive to make illegitimate the subordination of one group of people by another.

Eritrean disunity in the 1940s led to a federal compromise which was doomed to failure. That failure sparked the armed resistance. The Eritrean cause was again at the threshold of victory in 1977–1978 but it could not take a final political and military initiative because of disunity. Enemies as well as friends of the Eritreans knew that reality.

> In [that] moment of truth, the Eritreans failed to pull together in the name of Eritreanism. The reality of ethnic, religious, regional, social and personal rivalries couched in revolutionary phraseology legitimizing disunity proved stronger than the relatively young sentiment of Eritrean nationalism.[5]

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[4] The effect of military services by Eritreans in colonial times and in their own armed struggle since 1961 played a profound role in building a sense of oneness among the society's elite. For analysis on the effect of military services, see R. J. Smyke, *The Politics of Development*, unpublished Draft Textbook, (Webster University, Geneva Campus), pp. 30–36.

[5] Erlich, *op.cit.*, p. 96.

Eritrean discord was caused by the interaction of all these factors fueled by the competition of the local forces for scarce material resources. There is no doubt that national resources as well as international assistance to the Third World are managed by the state. Their distribution is basically determined by a given group with assured access to state power.[6] A good example in the region was the total neglect of Tigrai by the Shoan Amhara-controlled state of Ethiopia. During 1980-1990, out of Ethiopia's total financial layout for industrial investment, only 8.2 per cent was allocated for factories outside Shoa. Yet, the Ethiopian Defence Minister added insult to injury in February 1989 after the government's loss of Mekelle to the TPLF by stating: "the government is not any loser; Mekelle is after all a village whose only urban symbol is one granary".[7]

In Eritrea, the liberation struggle was partly caused by the economic, social and political marginalization suffered by the people, but first the Moslems. It is also to be noted that during the first two decades of armed struggle in Eritrea, the Moslems held absolute power in the revolution and wanted to keep it. Generally speaking, they were of the opinion that the Eritrean cause was theirs first and that only they could faithfully guarantee its fulfillment and then safeguard it. Secondly, the Moslem intelligentsia felt that Arabic must be maintained as one of the official languages in Eritrea. They were of the conviction that Eritrea's independent statehood could only be protected by establishing organic links with countries in the Arab world. This viewpoint was dominant in the ELF factions.

> By contrast, the EPLF perceives a close relationship with reformed Ethiopia indispensable to the future peace and prosperity of Eritrea... Each side suspects the other would rely

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6 Markakis, *National and Class Conflict, op.cit.*, 0. 145.

7 *Adulis* (EPLF publication) vol. VIII(4) April 1991, p. 7.

on outside support – Arab or Ethiopian – to impose its own perception of the Eritrean identity. It is perceptions of this identity that are the main obstacles to Eritrean unity.[8]

The material motive in this view is very clear. The Arabic language, for instance, is a potential factor to unify the Eritrean Moslem elite, a phenomenon not favoured by the EPLF and the power interests it embodies.[9] Arabic also has an international status and is "the medium of a great culture with which none of the Eritrean indigenous languages can compare".[10] The welcome effort to develop the other languages could partly be a cover for persistent motives. The leading cadres of the EPLF fully appreciate the material advantages connected with languages and only by gradually dislodging Arabic from an official status in Eritrea can they secure the position for Tigrigna and for themselves. The front had been able to create a purely Tigrigna-speaking organization in 15 years as opposed to the bilingualism of the ELF. And given the services of state-controlled press and electronic media, they will be able to create a Tigrigna-speaking 'nation' within a short time.

In a word, Eritrea was subjected to a compromise solution and Ethiopia was later emboldened to violate it partly because of the power struggle between the Eritreans. This disunity continued to inhibit a lasting solution to the Ethio-Eritrean conflict until the near-total breakdown of Menelik's empire-state in mid-1991.

3. The Third remark is both a result and a corollary of the other two preceding affirmations.

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8 Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

9 During the drafting of the Eritrean Constitution in 1951-1952, the Unionists proposed that "Tigrigna alone should be Eritrea's official language" while the Democratic Front and the Moslems League of Western Eritrea demanded Arabic to be one of two official languages. See Trevaskis, *op.cit.*, p. 117.

10 Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, *op.cit.*, p. 117.

The Eritrean arena had witnessed intensive social polarization in recent years when the relatively healthy broad national mood that prevailed around 1975 became a thing of the past by late 1981. Since then, we–they perceptions permeated the Eritrean social fabric. Followers and sympathizers of the EPLF felt a deserved pride in the military achievements of the organization. But the stratagem of swaying support through battlefield victories following the near–demise of the ELF in 1981 did not bring Eritrea closer to unity and consensus. The former ELF masses did not rally behind the victorious EPLF in very large numbers. In particular, the Moslems again found themselves both humiliated and alienated from power and saw their second defeat[11] in the total victory of the EPLF, a front which most Eritreans regarded as an ethnopolitical organization of one segment of the population.

In the period between 1981 and the historic EPLF victory at Afabet in 1989, people's indignation against a mounting social polarization bred apathy in the struggle, thus negatively impacting on people's conviction in final victory. It was under such a dim situation that tens of thousands left even the Sudan and the surrounding region to be resettled far away from Eritrea.

The formation of an Eritrean fundamentalist organization in the late 1980s was another disquieting sign of a less known future. Many Eritreans also reportedly fled their villages in 1989–1990 protesting against the violation of their social values and traditions by a front fighting for their independence.

After 30 years of war, the Eritreans are tired of war. However, the desire to preserve the 'dignity' of one's own group and the fight for material benefits are not ephemeral issues. Such a conflict originating from the struggle for domination of the future state of Eritrea only augurs instability, displacement and flights. Ethiopians in general more than wish to keep Eritrea within their state boundaries. The major Western powers and Africa still sympathize

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[11] The first defeat was the failure of the Independence Bloc in 1950 to win independent statehood or at least a strong federal relationship with Ethiopia.

with the wrongly claimed 'historical unity' of Ethiopia. The neighbouring Arab states see no interest in Eritrea led by the EPLF, a front which they believe has alienated the Moslem population of Eritrea. The EPLF has been further weakening the Eritrean position by its blatant refusal to accept the other fronts in a broader national coalition. Regionally isolated, politically unstable, socially disharmonious and economically weak Eritrea cannot attract its diaspora. In fact, only a few persons who have made some money and the extremely destitute refugees in the squalor-ridden camps of Eastern Sudan may return home in the near future. United Nations sources in fact estimated that more Eritreans left their country compared to those who returned after the EPLF victory. By July 1992, the count of returnees hardly reached 50,000[12] out of a very large number of refugees. The majority are likely to remain abroad and would continue to be a pull factor for many Eritreans to flee the country, with or without an alleged persecutor. Continued insistence of the front in power to alienate other political forces could also be used as a pretext by many refugees against an early repatriation.

For all these reasons, therefore, the refugee phenomenon is likely to continue haunting Eritrea at least until the end of this fast fading 20th century. But whatever happens to Eritrea's lost generation in exile, the rest of the descendants of those 191,127[13] inhabitants of four Red Sea territories whom Italy in 1890 christened *the Eritreans* will at least for sometime continue to be called by their name which is marked on the world map with red blood. It was not for nothing that Eruthros meant red in Greek!

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12 *Refugees*, UNHCR publication, July 1992, No. 90, p.33.

13 *Report of the UN Commissioner for Eritrea*, vol. 1, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

EPILOGUE

ERITREA ENTERS A NEW EPOCH

AN OVERVIEW

The long-deferred dreams of Eritrean nationalists could now be considered to have been partly realized with the Ethiopian army's debacle in the country. After having paid an enormous price in human lives and suffered half a century of absolute social and economic stagnation, the Eritreans indubitably deserved the victory they had celebrated with surprise and high euphoria during the entire summer months of 1991.

The Ethiopian defeat in Eritrea is, therefore, a vindication of a legitimate cause which almost everybody, including Africa, tried to ignore. It could also be regarded as a victory to the global movement for human rights because the demand of the Eritrean people for self-determination, which in recent years had won the sympathy and support of a good number of human rights groups, now became palatable even to powers which had denied them that right for over 40 years.

The immediate outcome of the Eritrean victory could be summarized in the following main points:

Firstly, it is true that the hopes and great expectations of the Eritrean people had been to some extent numbed by repeated failures to attain statehood in the period after World War II. In particular, the 1980-81 civil war between the major two fronts and the subsequent proliferation of factions harked back to people's memories of what had happened in the late 1940s and again the late 1970s. But no gainsaying that after May 1991, many Eritreans have regained a lost optimism and revived their slackened confidence in building a viable state and society. The declaration of a provisional Eritrean government on 29 May was, in spite of the controversies and internal sensitivities surrounding it, a significant step that lends political substance and legal precedence to the emergent state of Eritrea.

Secondly, the recognition by an Ethiopian government of Eritrea's right to statehood was another historic outcome of the dramatic events that unfolded in the Horn of Africa during 1991. At the July conference of Ethiopian political forces, convened to decide the form of transitional government in the country, Eritrea was accepted to attend as an observer alongside 18 others, among them three world powers which were responsible in deciding the fate of Italian colonies after World War II, the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity.

Thirdly, the fall of two Ethiopian regimes, successively supported by the United States and the former Soviet Union, seemed to have confirmed the Eritrean determination to struggle and win. As noted, it was US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles who once confessed that the strategic interests of his country did not allow the taking into consideration of the wishes of the Eritreans during the UN debates on the fate of the colony. Several decades later, it took another US State Department official by the name of David Cohen, Assistant-Secretary of State for African Affairs, to declare in public the reversal of that long pursued policy and to call a move towards Eritrean independence "a good idea".[1]

These results of the changed situation in the region were at the same time among the key factors that played a role in delaying a final settlement to the Eritrean question. Now that the major stumbling blocks have been partly removed – partly because some of the factors could be reversed – one can imagine of Eritrea proudly striding towards consolidating its separate identity.

Can one then say that the root causes of war and refugeeism, which bedeviled the land for so long, have been eliminated by the military victory and its immediate results just recounted? The simple answer to this question is in the negative. The unresolved puzzle is not only what type of an international relations actor Eritrea will be but also how it would reconcile with its own secondary contradictions which contributed in making it a land of

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1 *NEWSWEEK*, 10 June 1991, p. 20.

conflicts and displacement. The turn of future events and the characteristics of the new epoch will be necessarily determined by the actions and omissions of the winner organization and the reactions of the rest of the loser fronts. As one of the latter fronts wrote in June 1991 in a statement on the changed situation:

> [Eritrea] is passing through a very important epoch in the history of its national struggle. The destiny of its future generations hinges on what the fronts do today. History will pass its severe judgement on us all if we ever let the chance slip away.[2]

A. DETERMINANT ACTORS

The EPLF and Issayas Afeworki, its founder-leader who for nearly two decades had remained bigger than the organization itself, have now assumed great responsibilities towards determining the future of Eritrea. The mobilizational and organizational acumen demonstrated by the front have been highly admirable. Yet, no one can say with certainty how the EPLF would behave to successfully carry out the tasks of consolidation and nation-building. A quick glimpse into the past record of the front and its leader may probably help to roughly figure out what could be in stock for Eritrea. Hidden behind a few infinitesimal details told in this section are to be found penetrating realities that make things what they are in present-day Eritrea.

1. The Winner Organization

The EPLF, which is today the Provisional Government of Eritrea, had during the past decade grown into a formidable military force with committed total membership bound by steeled organizational discipline; its effectiveness had been guaranteed by

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2 Policy Statement by ELF-Revolutionary Council, 7/6/1991.

the ever vigilant Halewa Sawra (Guards of the Revolution). The front won the obeisance of many Eritreans through different means. Its refined tactics and show-casing coupled with concrete accomplishments helped the front to create the capacity to survive many seemingly insurmountable odds in its entire history. And no wonder that it was finally able to crush one of the largest armies in Africa. A few characteristic features of the EPLF could be listed as follows:

(a) From its very beginning, the winner front had chosen or, rather, it had no choice but to remain self-reliant. Unlike the other factions of the Eritrean armed struggle, the group that Issayas led never expected support from the neighbouring areas. The propaganda let out against it by other factions also kept it ostracized in the region. Its sole source of income had been Eritrean sympathizers who were reminded by the very first sentence in EPLF's first declaration[3] that this was a 'friendless' front they will have to support. A combination of factors,therefore, helped the new front retain relative homogeneity in a fractious society of many differences. Its solid social base was reinforced by mobilizing urbanized elements from the coastal region.

(b) Ties with Ethiopian elite were cultivated and maintained. The University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) was at one time a source of propaganda support and a few cadres[4]. The carefully developed links with the Tigrayan struggle were also among the most brilliant tactics - probably strategies - of the makers of EPLF. One need underline the fact that it was in alliance with neighbouring Tigrai that the EPLF defeated a rival Eritrean front in 1981, and the Ethiopian army in 1991. It would also be too

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3 *Nehnan Elamanan, op.cit.*, p. 1.

4 USUAA activists from Eritrea like Yohannes Sebhatu, Afeworki Teklu and Goitom Berhe (Bitsai) joined the PLF, initially, aiming to work towards expanding the armed struggle to all the '14' provinces of Ethiopia.

unrealistic to deny the truism that the leading cadres of the winner front in Eritrea and its long-time partner now in power in Addis Ababa are bound not by political ideologies but by strong cultural, historical and linguistic affinities. These links could continue influencing the shape of things to come. And who could easily dismiss Lionel Cliffe's prognostication in 1989 when he stated that:

> In redefining future relations between Eritrea (even independent) and Ethiopia, much may depend on the pivotal role of Tigrinya of Tigray, their voice in a reconstructed Ethiopian state and their relationship with the Tigrinya, especially, of Eritrea.[5]

(c) During the second half of the 1980s, the EPLF enjoyed the generous backing of several non-governmental organizations which had been attracted by the effectiveness and the impeccable efficiency of the various institutions of the front, including its relief organ. However, it cannot be denied that to some other institutions and individuals in the West, the EPLF was introduced and accepted, not as a 'separatist Moslem movement', but as another version of that nostalgic 'Island of Christendom' whose old fame and name had been blemished by a war-mongering pseudo-marxist dictator and the ugly face of mainly man-made famines.

(d) The EPLF had valued discipline and hard work more than democratic pretensions. It showed little mercy to its assumed enemies and detractors within the organization and the country; its suppressive machinery remained highly noticeable among people subjected to it. An American journalist once wrote:

> When I left the EPLF zone and got back to Port Sudan, I felt as though I had just gotten out of prison... the EPLF is a really

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5 Lionel Cliffe, 'Forging a Nation: the Eritrean Experience', *Third World Quarterly*, Oct. 1989, p. 114.

> repressive organization with no internal democracy...During my stay there, I did not hear a single complaint or criticism of anything in the EPLF organization or its line. I stress, not once from any body... This is not so in the ELF.[6]

That testimony was registered over a decade ago and changes did take place in the organization; there had been, for instance, some degree of relaxation of surveillance over each and every member. However, the basic characteristics have remained transparently intact,[7] even after the EPLF had become the Provisional Government of Eritrea at the wake of the Ethiopian defeat.

2. Issayas Afeworki

There could not have been an EPLF as we knew it without the person of Issayas Afeworki. He created the front from the scratch, and moulded its structure and strategies without any effective challenge to his ways until the entry of his forces to Asmara. The success of the EPLF no doubt attest his high leadership qualities and shrewd calculations as a seasoned guerrilla leader. His single-mindedness and courage – most of the time heedless – to face any challenge at any cost helped him achieve what he had so far achieved. His ability as a clever ethnic mobilizer cannot also be discounted; this, in fact, was one of the secrets that highly contributed to his success – or, what one must accept today as the victory of the Eritrean cause. Issayas had lent many of his characteristics to his front. A few notes on the reactions and

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6 John Duggan (manuscripts) Dec. 1978, quoted in *The Eritrean Newsletter* No. 45, Jan. 1982.

7 The kidnapping on 26 April 1992 of two Executive Committee members of the ELF-RC was but one of series of such acts by the EPLF after it has become a government. The killing of a long list of leading ELF cadres in Sudanese towns since 1983 had also been attributed to the EPLF.

utterances of the EPLF leader at different epochs of the Eritrean struggle could, therefore, suffice the purpose of this epilogue to present a picture of the past in order to help one imagine the silhouette of an independent Eritrea. (The aim here is not an ill-intentioned characterization of a hero of the liberation war but to consider facts and explain a malaise so that a solution could be tackled on time. Otherwise, military victories can be reversed by the very actors who had played key roles in their achievement).

(a) In his high school days, Issayas had neither been knowledgeable nor respectful of anything outside his physical and spiritual environment. His perceptions were revealed in various crude ways. It was just normal for him to insult Moslem classmates by evoking sensitive religious stereotypes, and it was easy to see in him a developed fear of Islam and the Arabs. For instance, in April 1966 – only six months before he left to the field – Issayas accused this author at an ELF cell meeting in Addis of hiding the truth about a "jihad conducted by Jabha". One must also reveal – even at the risk of sounding untrue today! – that schoolmates who had known Issayas closely expressed deep concern when they learned about his decision to join the fighters in Eritrea. A friend told this author a few days after that fateful departure: "Believe me, Issayas will desert the ELF and go back to Asmara together with the few boys who went from here [Addis Ababa] or he will create his own splinter group and divide the struggle in two".[8] That prediction took only a few years to come true.

(b) In the declaration he drafted for separation from the mother front in 1971, Issayas showed no wavering as to whom he should address. He was convinced that the fate of Eritrea could be determined by one segment of the society working in absolute

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8 The prediction was made by Michael Ghaber, who headed for 16 years the UNHCR-financed and ELF-administered Eritrean refugee high school in Kassala, Sudan, until his accidental martyrdom on 25 May 1992.

harmony and with firm commitment. History has not proven him wrong, or at least not so far.

Issayas made and broke alliances with different elements in the struggle without losing sight of the ethnic balance of power. He divorced his faction from Osman Saleh Sabbe's ELF–PLF in March 1976 when he sensed Sabbe's (and Woldeab Woldemariam's) call for merger with the then major front in the arena, the ELF, may end up assuring the continued domination of the liberation movement by what he perceived as "the others".

(c) For an entire decade since the near–demise of the ELF in 1981, Issayas (and his front) refused to show the slightest consideration for the others. As a victor then, as now, he could have afforded to be magnanimous. But that was not, *alas*, part of his nature – and mission. Instead, he continued to spurn the amoebic multiplication of the rest of the fronts and at one time swore to never approach for unity all those "rotten ethnic and confessional factions".[9] Ironically, he never denied the ethnic and confessional composition of his front. In September 1990, he said in his usually down–to–earth frank talk: " We do not deny that the majority of EPLF fighters are Christians or Kabassans"[10] and he condescendingly added, "those observing them could do better service to their own personal dignity and the dignity of the social groups they claim to represent by joining the ranks of the EPLF in the struggle... The EPLF defends the rights of Moslems before it does defend the rights of Christians".[11] Apparently, it was his logic that rendered superfluous and unnecessary the presence of other political organizations in EPLF's Eritrea.

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9 *Fitsametat* (EPLF publication) No. 188, Oct. 1986, p. 7.

10 *Sagem* (EPLF publication) vol. 2, No. 10, Oct. 1990, pp. 75–76.

11 *Ibid.* This language about fighting for one's ethnic 'dignity' in its letter and spirit matches the contents of his letter to friends in Addis in 1968.

(d) A week after the liberation of Asmara, Issayas declared the formation of the Eritrean Provisional Government in London and saw no need of calling the other factions for participation and power-sharing in a new Eritrea. He disdained the call for a joint Eritrean conference to build national consensus. In his first public speech in Asmara on 20 June 1991, he promised amnesty to all those individuals who were 'duped' by the other factions. He added that any person talking or acting in the name of fronts other than the EPLF will be prosecuted for criminal acts. In successive interviews over the EPLF radio[12] and other regional and international media[13], he categorically denied that there existed any genuine and nationalist force other than the EPLF.

B. THE LOSER CAMP

There was great likelihood to avoid any distinction between winner and loser Eritreans in 1991 by pursuing a flexible policy aimed at creating a broader consensus by forgetting and forgiving everything past. But the fact that the EPLF had chosen a different road for nation-building other than national consensus left Eritrea divided into the camps of vanquors and the vanquished. To be sure, the other fronts are not isolated entities but have their respective social influences as well as political backing among the Eritreans.

To state the obvious, there are striking similarities between Eritrean parties of the late 1940s and the present-day fronts. In both situations, one observes the emergence of a predominantly Kabassan party or front winning the struggle for power. The loser camp in both cases consisted mainly of the non-Christian population. A birds-eye-view of the main social and political forces in the two periods can give a meaningful summary of Eritrean politics - past and present.

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12 Reproduced in *Dimtsi Hafash Eritra*, 31 Aug. to 6 Sept. 1991.

13 *Al-Hayat* magazine, 19 Sept. 1991. *Haddas Eritra* (New Eritrea) vol. 1(35), 28 Dec. 1991.

1. Parties of the 1940s

The period preceding the installation of the UN-imposed Federation in Eritrea witnessed the rise and fall of numerous parties, some of them dissolved and reborn under different names to fit changing situations. As mentioned in the text, the Unionist Party, remained a solid organization, never shying to flex its muscle in order to terrorize the camp of the enemy. The independentists, on the other hand, failed to hold together. The heterogeneous Moslem communities which filled the ranks of most of the anti-unionist parties lacked common history, common culture, common language and common geographical base to keep united.

For instance, the Moslem League broke down into two parties only five months after its birth when the National Moslem Party of Massawa was formed in April 1947. Further fragmentation occurred in late 1949 to early 1950 when Ibrahim Sultan's League had to helplessly watch Kabassan and coastal Moslems walking out of its ranks to form their separate party called the Independent Moslem League. The Moslem League of the Western Province was also formed during the same time. Thus, it was the lack of minimum cohesion within the Moslem League that brought about "final disintegration to the [Independence] Bloc and the unity necessary to bring about an independent Eritrea"[14].

The other junior partners in the Independence Bloc were also plagued by the same germ of disunity.[15] The Liberal Progressive Party of Ras Tessema Asmerom, formed in February 1948,

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[14] Lloyd Ellingson, 'The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-50', *Journal of African History* vol. 28 (2) 1977, p. 276.

[15] The New Eritrea and Independent Eritrea parties drew most of their members from the western lowlands. It was even recorded that out of claimed 53,000 members of the Liberal Progressive Party, "only 1,300 were from the predominantly Christian highland area". *Loc.cit.*, pp. 274-276.

splintered in February 1950 when a faction called the Liberal Unionist Party left the independentist coalition. Another member of the Bloc, the Independent Eritrea Party, was weakened when some of its elements, including Woldeab Woldemariam, formed the Independent Eritrea United with Ethiopia Party. Only the New Eritrea Pro-Italy Party, the Italo-Eritrean Association and the War Veterans Association survived fragmentation.

In a word, the political struggle spear-headed by the Moslem League partly failed because the parties lacked cohesion. It could well be stated that the majority of the independentists hailed from social backgrounds that were not much used to centralized administration falling under one ethnic chieftain.

2. Eritrean Fronts Today

At EPLF's hour of victory, there were seven other Eritrean political groupings, excluding the Afar Liberation Front (ALF). Except for the mainstream ELF (Revolutionary Council) which could still claim to have more or less mixed ethno-religious composition, and two predominantly Christian factions exiled to Tigrai since the mid-1980s, the other four groups were virtually Islamic in their composition and general sentiment. After May 1991, the predominantly Moslem fronts vainly tried to form a common bloc and voice their opposition to the exclusivist policies of EPLF. These four were: (a) two former partners of the EPLF in the 1970s today known as the ELF-United Organization, which until November 1991 was led by Osman Saleh Sabbe's followers, and the ELF-National Council, which is believed to be an ardent advocate of Arab nationalism and identity in Eritrea; (b) a faction of the ELF led by Abdalla Idris, a potential ethnic mobilizer who split in 1982 but has not yet succeeded to rally the Beni Amer under his anti-Kabassan banner, and (c) the so-called Islamic Jihad Movement of Eritrea created in the late 1980s. The two ELF factions which had been allied with the TPLF are the ELF-Sagem and the Eritrean Democratic Liberation Front (EDLM). The long overdue re-alignments within these fronts continue to be attempted.

The ELF-RC, which from the start voiced its critical support to the Provisional Government without joining it, and ELF-Sagem were still negotiating in the summer of 1992 to renew relations which had been broken in 1982. Abdalla Idris' faction of the ELF, suspected to have had relations with the now defunct Dergue, is currently working closely with the Eritrean Jihad Movement. In general, the situation of the opposition groups is likely to continue in a state of fluidity until most of these fronts disintegrate in the face of rapid changes.

Evidently, the attitude of the EPLF and its continued refusal of open dialogue with the groups accentuated fears, humiliation and embitterment among all non-EPLF members. A large number of Christian Kabassan elite, most of them former or present ELF followers, strongly share these fears and frustrations. At stake is denial of group recognition. Those who ascribed their social and/or political belonging to the loser fronts no doubt suffered lack of recognition. The need to satisfy the psychological factor itself would have required that all actors:

> No matter how respectable they are, how strong they are, how deviant they are, how badly they are thought to have behaved in the past - are included in the process[16].

It should also be noted that the EPLF victory intensified not only loser complexes among non-EPLF nationalists but also brought to limelight an existent Kabassan chauvinism. A prominent EPLF figure, Haile Wolde-Tinsae (Diru'e), once confided to a leading student of international relations that the great danger facing the EPLF was how to tackle Tigrigna chauvinism[17].

And whatever the odds, it still remains true that the EPLF and its Provisional Government can afford to exclude any participation

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16 Michael Banks (ed.), *Conflict in World Society: A New Perspective in International Relations*, (Brighton, 1984), p. 17.

17 Cliffe, *loc.cit.*, p. 17.

of the other fronts for sometime and try to impose their own form of state and society without an immediate challenge to their programme. The EPLF cadres very well know that their position is secured by the perennial disunity among the opposition forces which are divided into all of Eritrea's nine linguistic and cultural divisions. We have seen that most of the parties of the 1940s faced total disintegration and dissolution before the Federation was put into effect in 1952; members of the frustrated loser parties became disorganized individuals currying favour from those Departmental Secretaries, as they were called then as now, of the 'Eritrean Government' and other elements installed in state power. The same process is being be repeated today, of course, with a few recognizable variations.

Since the summer of 1991, several fronts had lost key elements who switched sides. The EPLF has been receiving isolated elements with all the warmth it could proffer. In fact, non-Kabassan elements from EPLF rank and file and new-comers from the other factions had been placed at easily discernible posts inside Eritrea and abroad; this was a continuation of the front's old make-believe show that had served it superbly. But however well intentioned it may be to satisfy internal sensitivities, such an approach to create a national consensus cannot prove practical, nor can it even be considered genuine. Rather, what is more assuring and lasting could be to address head-on the potential differences and fears of domination of one segment of the population by the other through direct contact and reconciliation with the existing political and politico-social forces.

The victorious EPLF agreed to delay independence until a referendum is held, preferably under the aegis of the United Nations. The deference was welcomed by the Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (EPRDF) which needed it to quell Amhara chauvinism, and secondly, to buy time for attempting to prove that Eritrea was not socially and economically viable to emerge as a separate entity. In actual fact, the Tigrayans are, in their heart of hearts, as eager as the Amharas to keep Eritrea under Ethiopia because that would strengthen their position in the country vis-a-

vis the other ethnic nations, notably the Amharas and the Oromos. The EPLF, on its part, needed time to clear its own house and to assess which of the world states would extend recognition and support to Eritrea. On 6 April 1992, the EPLF announced that the referendum would be held in April 1993. In any case, most Eritreans would, if ever given that chance, vote for independence. And referendum or not, Eritrea is now *a de facto* state, *albeit*, without friends, a fact which in the first place inhibited the declaration of its independence. The Sudan and Ethiopia of the EPRDF are the only close allies so far. Eritrea's third neighbour, Djibouti, which shares the Afar ethnic nation with Eritrea and Ethiopia, had shown only timid signs of promoting relations with the Eritreans. Similarly, the Afars of Dankalia may not easily and happily accept the EPLF. On top of this, the Ethiopians will try to exploit the Afar issue to destabilize Eritrea. The military dictatorship of Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1987 cut Dankalia from Eritrea and formed a separate Afar entity which it called the Assab Autonomous Region. EPRDF's map of Ethiopia with aggrandized Afar territory is another clever move on that direction. Correctly read, it means an encouragement for the formation of a "Greater Afarland" somehow linked with Ethiopia.

It had been observed that most of the Arab states did not follow with enthusiasm the liberation of Eritrea by the EPLF, a front which had no love lost for the Arabs. In particular, the continued alienation of the predominantly Moslem fronts in Eritrea made many Arabs suspicious of the winner front. It could therefore be said that Eritrea cannot eat its cake and have it: Arab sympathy and support to EPLF-led Eritrea could be expected only when the latter also shows due respect to Arab/Islamic sentiments and regional interests[18]. An independent Eritrea cannot expect a lasting

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[18] Asmara Radio reported on 6 February 1992 that the Israeli Ambassador to Ethiopia and Issayas Afeworki talked on future relations in Asmara. Issayas had been on record wishing to create strong relations with Israel. He alleged that Arab support to Eritrea had remained insignificant.

guarantee for such a status from Ethiopian quarters while keeping at bay other potential friends of the people who had been supportive all along the long years of struggle. Even the opening of Assab and Massawa as free ports will not make the Ethiopians less insatiable to drop their dreams of having an access to the sea. Therefore, Eritrea shall be required to construct two bridges across the bordering waters: one over the Mereb River and another across the Red Sea. The EPLF has not been keen and successful to make a good start in constructing the latter.

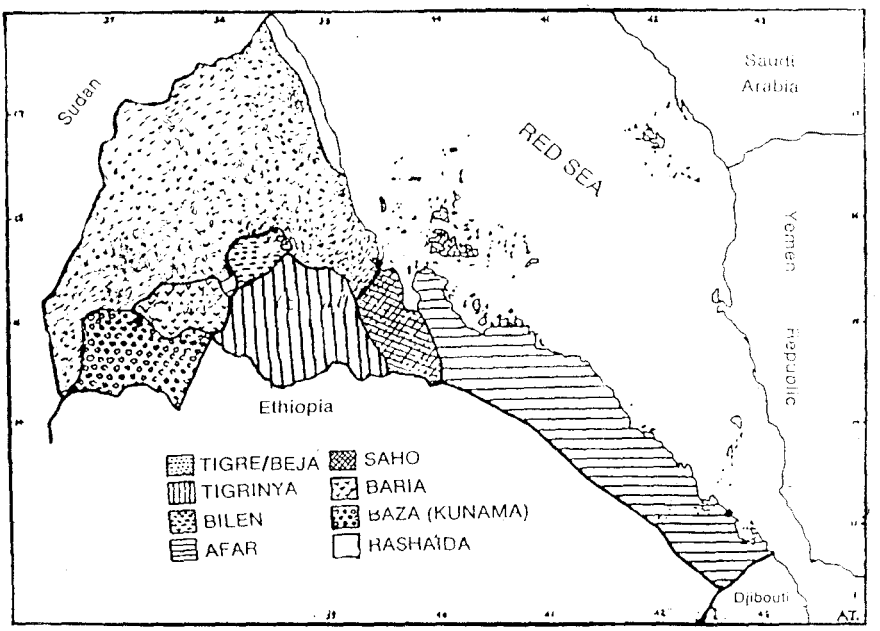
Presently, all indications are that Eritrea under EPLF politics and policies may likely than not fail to create a favourable regional and international atmosphere which need be started with one's immediate neighbours in the region. The failure to do so may very well lead to a general ostracization in international circles.

Similarly, one would expect the new Eritrea to establish national consensus as a guarantee for lasting social cohesion. This aspect is already neglected by the winner front which has been addressing the other fronts to act as losers and unconditionally joined it or face liquidation. To implement its project, the EPLF on 6 January 1992, sent its soldiers against what it called "foreign instigated small 'islamist' groups" in western Eritrea.

Today, fears of many Eritreans are that the smouldering internal instability may conflagrate and pose serious problems, thus forcing the EPLF to depend more and more on its allies across the Mereb River. This development, accentuated by feuds within those in power in Asmara and aided by conflicts within Ethiopia itself, could lead to a re-thinking about a more feasible project of forming Greater Eritrea or Greater Tigrai as a step towards reconstituting the old Abyssinia into a more modern Ethiopia. EPLF's victory, therefore, might not in the long-run preserve Eritrean independence. And if so, that was not at all the aim of the Eritrean guerrilla leader, Hamid Idris Awate, when he declared the armed struggle with shots from an old Italian rifle in 1961.

APPENDIX I–(a)

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION



Source: Adapted from *Journal of Eritrean Studies*, Summer 1990.

The Eritrean population was increasing sharply during the past 100 years. Estimates in 1893 gave the figure of 191,127 persons. By 1900, when the Italian governor of Eritrea, Ferdinando Martini (1898–1907), transferred his capital from Massawa to Asmara, the total count of Eritreans was about 300,000. The census of 1931 came out with 596,013 inhabitants. There were a little over a million in 1952. Given the conservative figures returned by local leaders trying to reduce per family taxes in their respective communities during the British period, and also taking into account the rapid population increase in the past 40 years, Eritreans are today estimated to be around 3.5–4 million, 72 per cent of them below the age of 30 and born after the armed struggle was started.

Appendix I–(a) indicates the location of the ethnic groups. Their size could be estimated by multiplying the 1952 population figures in Appendix I–(b) by 3.5 or 4, with the plausible measure for populations increasing by over 2.5 per cent per year and thus doubling every 20–25 years. The linguistic groups not listed in Appendix I–(b) are the bilingual Tigre/To–Bedawe speaking Bejaic groups in the area bordering the Sudan, and the Arabic speaking Rashaida.

APPENDIX I-(b)

POPULATION OF ERITREA: COMMUNAL AND RELIGIOUS GROUPINGS[1] IN 1952

		Christian[2]	Moslem	Pagan	Total (1952)	Present Est. (1992)
(i)	**Tigrinyans**					
	Hamasien	117,000	1,000	–	118,000	
	Serae	161,000	7,000	–	168,000	
	Akele–Guzai	108,000	1,000	–	109,000	
	Urban and Others	101,000	28,000	–	129,000	
	Total	487,000	37,000	–	524,000	2,096,000
(ii)	**Tigray**					
	Bani Amir	–	80,000	–	80,000	
	Sahel tribes[3]	–	114,000	–	114,000	
	Maria	–	43,000	–	43,000	
	Mensa	7,000	4,000	–	11,000	
	Bait Juk	–	4,000	–	4,000	
	Samhar	–	35,000	–	35,000	
	Urban and others	–	42,000	–	42,000	
	Total	7,000	322,000	–	329,000	1,316,000

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1 The figures given are, to the nearest thousand in each case, those of the British Administration in 1952. They are based on returns by village heads and the leaders of tribal sections. They may be regarded as approximate.

2 It should be noted that the 'Christian' population includes 459,000 Coptic Christians, 35,000 Roman Catholics (according to the Ethiopian rite), and 16,000 Protestants of the Swedish Evangelical Church.

3 'Sahel tribes' is the collective name adopted by the tribes which evolved after the break up of the Bait Asgaday and the Ad Shaikh (a tribe whose dominant family came from the Sudan in the nineteenth century).

Appendix I–(b)

APPENDIX I–(b) (Continued)

		Christian	Moslem	Pagan	Total (1952)	Present Est. (1992)
(iii)	**Baria and Kunama**					
	Baria	–	15,000	–	15,000	
	Kunama	3,000	12,000	7,000	22,000	
	Urban and others	–	4,000	–	4,000	
	Total	3,000	31,000	7,000	41,000	164,000
(iv)	**Danakil**					
	North Danakil	–	23,000	–	23,000	
	South Danakil	–	5,000	–	5,000	
	Urban and others	–	5,000	–	5,000	
	Total	–	33,000	–	33,000	132,000
(v)	**Saho**					
	Assa'orta	–	35,000	–	35,000	
	Minafere	–	19,000	–	19,000	
	Hazu	1,000	6,000	–	7,000	
	Debrimaila	1,000	1,000	–	2,000	
	Sana'fay	–	1,000	–	1,000	
	Urban and others	–	2,000	–	2,000	
	Total	2,000	64,000	–	66,000	264,000
(vi)	**Belain**					
	Bait Tarqay	10,000	7,000	–	17,000	
	Bait Tauqay	–	19,000	–	19,000	
	Urban and others	1,000	1,000	–	2,000	
	Total	11,000	27,000	–	38,000	152,000
	Total[4]	510,000	514,000	7,000	1,031,000	4,124,000

Source: G[erald] K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941–1952*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 132–133.

[4] In addition to the Eritrean population there were, in 1952, 17,000 Europeans, 10,000 Arabs, and about 6,000 Sudanese, Somalis, and West Africans. The total population was about 1,064,000 of whom 32,000 were aliens.

APPENDIX II

UN General Assembly Resolution 390 A(V) on Eritrea

(FROM THE FIFTH UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 316TH PLENARY MEETING, 1950).

A

Whereas by paragraph 3 of Annex XI to the Treaty of Peace with Italy, 1947, the Powers concerned have agreed to accept the recommendation of the General Assembly on the disposal of the former Italian colonies in Africa and to take appropriate measures for giving effect to it,

Whereas by paragraph 2 of the aforesaid Annex XI such disposal is to be made in the light of the wishes and welfare of the inhabitants and the interests of peace and security, taking into consideration the views of interested governments.

Now therefore

The General Assembly, in the light of the reports of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea and of the Interim Committee, and

Taking into consideration

(a) The wishes and welfare of the inhabitants of Eritrea, including the views of the various racial, religious and political groups of the provinces of the territory and the capacity of the people for self-government,

(b) The interests of peace and security in East Africa,

(c) The rights and claims of Ethiopia based on geographical, historical, ethnic or economic reasons, including in particular Ethiopia's legitimate need for adequate access to the sea,

Taking into account the importance of assuring the continuing collaboration of the foreign communities in the economic development of Eritrea.

Recognizing that the disposal of Eritrea should be based on its close political and economic association with Ethiopia, and

Desiring that this association assure the inhabitants of Eritrea the fullest respect and safeguards for their institutions, traditions, religions and languages, as well as the widest possible measure of self-government, while at the same time respecting the Constitution, institutions, traditions and the international status and identity of the Empire of Ethiopia,

A. Recommends that:

1. Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown.

2. The Eritrean Government shall possess legislative, executive and judicial powers in the field of domestic affairs.

3. The jurisdiction of the Federal Government shall extend to the following matters: defence, foreign affairs, currency and finance, foreign and interstate commerce and external and interstate communications, including ports. The Federal Government shall have the power to maintain the integrity of the Federation, and shall have the right to impose uniform taxes throughout the Federation to meet the expenses of federal functions and services, it being understood that the assessment and the collection of such taxes in Eritrea are to be delegated to the Eritrean Government, and provided that Eritrea shall bear only its just and equitable share of these expenses. The jurisdiction of the Eritrean Government shall extend to all mattes not vested in the Federal Government, including the power to maintain the internal police, to levy taxes to meet the expenses of domestic functions and services, and to adopt its own budget.

4. The area of the Federation shall constitute a single area for customs purposes, and there shall be no barriers to the free movement of goods and persons within the area. Customs duties on goods entering or leaving the Federation which have their final destination or origin in Eritrea shall be assigned to Eritrea.

5. An Imperial Federal Council composed of equal numbers of Ethiopian and Eritrean representatives shall meet at least once a year and shall advise upon the common affairs of the Federation referred to in paragraph 3 above. The citizens of Eritrea shall

participate in the executive and judicial branches, and shall be represented in the legislative branch of the Federal Government, in accordance with law and in the proportion that the population of Eritrea bears to the population of the Federation.

6. A single nationality shall prevail throughout the Federation:

(a) All inhabitants of Eritrea, except persons possessing foreign nationality, shall be nationals of the Federation;

(b) All inhabitants born in Eritrea and having at least one indigenous parent or grandparent shall also be nationals of the Federation. Such persons, if in possession of a foreign nationality, shall, within six months of the coming into force of the Eritrean Constitution, be free to opt to renounce the nationality of the Federation and retain such foreign nationality, In the event that they do not so opt, they shall thereupon lose such foreign nationality;

(c) The qualifications of persons acquiring the nationality of the Federation under sub-paragraphs (a) and (b) above for exercising their rights as citizens of Eritrea shall be determined by the Constitution and laws of Eritrea;

(d) All persons possessing foreign nationality who have resided in Eritrea for ten years prior to the date of the adoption of the present resolution shall have the right, without further requirements of residence, to apply for the nationality of the Federation in accordance with federal laws. Such persons who do not thus acquire the nationality of the Federation shall be permitted to reside in and engage in peaceful and lawful pursuits in Eritrea;

The rights and interests of foreign nationals resident in Eritrea shall be guaranteed in accordance with the provisions of paragraph seven.

7. The Federal Government, as well as Eritrea, shall ensure to residents in Eritrea, without distinction of nationality, race, sex, language or religion, the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental liberties, including the following:

(a) The right to equality before the law. No discrimination shall be made against foreign enterprises in existence in Eritrea engaged

in industrial, commercial, agricultural, artisan, educational or charitable activities, nor against banking institutions and insurance companies operating in Eritrea;

(b) The right to life, liberty and security of person;

(c) The right to own and dispose of property. No one shall be deprived of property, including contractual rights, without due process of law and without payment of just and effective compensation;

(d) The right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right of adopting and practising any creed or religion;

(e) The right to education;

(f) The right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association;

(g) The right to inviolability of correspondence and domicile, subject to the requirements of the law;

(h) The right to exercise any profession subject to the requirements of the law;

(i) No one shall be subject to arrest or detention without an order of a competent authority, except in case of flagrant and serious violation of the law in force. No one shall be deported except in accordance with the law;

(j) The right to a fair and equitable trial, the right of petition to the Emperor and the right of appeal to the Emperor for commutation of death sentences;

(k) Retroactivity of penal law shall be excluded; the respect for the rights and freedoms of others and requirements of public order and the general welfare alone will justify any limitations to the above rights.

8. Paragraphs 1 to 7 inclusive of the present resolution shall constitute the Federal Act which shall be submitted to the Emperor of Ethiopia for ratification,

9. There shall be a transition period which shall not extend beyond 15 September 1952, during which the Eritrean Government will be organized and the Eritrean Constitution prepared and put into effect.

10.There shall be a United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea appointed by the General Assembly. The Commissioner will be

assisted by experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

11.During the transition period, the present Administering Power shall continue to conduct the affairs of Eritrea. It shall, in consultation with the United Nations Commissioner, prepare as rapidly as possible the organization of an Eritrean administration, and make arrangements for and convoke a representative assembly of Eritreans chosen by the people. It may, in agreement with the Commissioner, negotiate on behalf of the Eritreans a temporary customs union with Ethiopia to be put into effect as soon as practicable.

12.The United Nations Commissioner shall, in consultation with the Administering Power, the Government of Ethiopia, and the inhabitants of Eritrea, prepare a draft of the Eritrean Constitution to be submitted to the Eritrean Assembly and shall advise and assist the Eritrean Assembly in its consideration of the Constitution. The Constitution of Eritrea shall be based on the principles of democratic government, shall include the guarantees contained in paragraph 7 of the Federal Act, shall be consistent with the provisions of the Federal Act and shall contain provisions adopting and ratifying the Federal Act on behalf of the people of Eritrea.

13.The Federal Act and the Constitution of Eritrea shall enter into effect following ratification of the Federal Act by the Emperor of Ethiopia, and following approval by the Commissioner, adoption by the Eritrean Assembly and ratification by the Emperor of Ethiopia of the Eritrean Constitution.

14.Arrangements shall be made by the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as the Administering Power for the transfer of power to the appropriate authorities. The transfer of power shall take place as soon as the Eritrean Constitution and the Federal Act enter into effect, in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 13 above.

15.The United Nations Commissioner shall maintain his headquarters in Eritrea until the transfer of power has been completed, and shall make appropriate reports to the General Assembly of the United Nations concerning the discharge of his

functions. The Commissioner may consult with the Interim Committee of the General Assembly with respect to the discharge of his functions in the light of developments and within the terms of the present resolution. When the transfer of authority has been completed, he shall so report to the General Assembly and submit to it the text of the Eritrean Constitution;

B. Authorizers the Secretary-General, in accordance with established practice:

1. To arrange for the payment of an appropriate remuneration to the United Nations Commissioner;

2. To provide the United Nations Commissioner with such experts, staff and facilities as the Secretary-General may consider necessary to carry out the terms of the present resolution.

316th plenary meeting,
2 December 1950

B

The General Assembly, to assist it in making the appointment of the United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea.

Decides that a Committee composed of the President of the General Assembly, two of the Vice-Presidents (Australia and Venezuela), the Chairman of the Fourth Committee and the Chairman of the Ad Hoc Political Committee shall nominate a candidate or, if no agreement can be reached, two or three candidates, for the post of United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea.

316 the plenary meeting,
2 December 1950.

The Committee established by the General Assembly under the above resolution to nominate a candidate or candidates for the office of United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea agreed to nominate the following candidates;

Mr. Victor Hoo (Assistant Secretary-General);

Justice Aung Khine (Burma);

Mr. Eduardo Anze Matienzo (Bolivia).

The General Assembly, at its 325th plenary meeting on 14 December 1950, elected by secret ballot Mr. Eduardo Anze Matienzo to the office of United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea.

Source: R. Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution, op.cit.*

APPENDIX III*

UN COMMISSIONER'S CONSULTATIONS WITH ERITREAN PARTIES, 1951

All the officially registered political parties, numbering fifteen, were invited for consultations. The Eritrean Democratic Front (the former Independence Bloc) which is composed of six of the parties, expressed the wish, however, to be consulted as one political group. All parties accepted the invitation with the exception of the Unionist Party, which through its Secretary-General suggested to the Commissioner, both orally and in writing, that to avoid polemics he should consult the political parties and their leaders locally by going, as had been done in the past, to the various districts of Eritrea where the political groups would make known their views.

95.Meetings with the political parties took place during the period 11–20 July 1951. In each case, a written memorandum was submitted which, together with the Commissioner's summary of his basic document, formed the basis of the consultations.

96.In each case, answers were given to the questions raised by the Commissioner in his basic document and can be said to have fallen into the following categories. The Moslem League in Eritrea and the other five parties forming the Eritrean Democratic Front – Liberal Progressive, New Eritrea, Independent Party, Italo-Eritrean Association and War Veterans Association – asked for two Assemblies, a House of Representatives and a Senate, whose terms should not exceed two years, the members of which should be elected according to the traditional systems of the country. The head of the Executive should be elected by the Assemblies jointly

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* Paragraphs extracted from *Progress Report of UN Commission in Eritrea*, vol. 3 (Reprinted by ELF-ELF, 1977), pp. 39–49.

and he, in turn, should nominate his ministers from amongst Eritreans, maintaining an even balance of Moslems and Christians. The Executive should serve for the same period as the Assemblies and should be liable to dismissal by the latter body on a vote of no-confidence. Since there was no provision in the United Nations resolution for the presence of a representative of the Emperor in Eritrea and since Eritrean autonomy must be respected, objection was raised to any representative of the Emperor, with or without powers. Arabic and Tigrinya should be the official languages but if there were opposition to Arabic, the Moslems would insist on a referendum. The flag of the Federation should be separate from that of Ethiopia and there should be a distinctive flag for Eritrea.

97.Other parties tended to divide in two camps, either following the line of the Eritrean Democratic Front as set out above or that of the Unionist Party (which was propounded later in the meetings in the Divisions) – which called for one Assembly; the appointment of the head of the Executive to be approved by the Emperor; a representative of the Emperor to be in the Executive, with powers; Tigrinya as the official language, and the Eritrean flag that of Ethiopia. There were, however, some departures from uniformity, the Independent Moslem League, for instance, asking for one Assembly composed of five members, no representative of the Emperor and a special flag for Eritrea, while the Federal flag should be that of Ethiopia. The Moslem League of the Western Province asked for two Assemblies and an Executive made up of nine members, Arabic as the official language (with the rider that Tigrinya could be used in the Highlands).

98.The Liberal Unionist Party and the Independent Party asked for one Assembly, the head of the Executive to be elected by the Assembly, and Tigrinya as the official language. While the former saw no objection to a representative of the Emperor, provided he was merely an observer with no powers, the latter wanted him to serve in the Executive with advisory powers. The Voce Federale Eritrea Party asked for two Assemblies to serve for three years.

99.Within these main differences of view, the following matters were raised. All the parties forming the Eritrean Democratic Front insisted that the Ethiopian Government should not be the Federal Government, stating that there must be three separate entities – the Federal Government, the Ethiopian Government and the Eritrean Government. These parties also stated that there must be no provision written into the constitution to sanction accessibility of foreigners to public office. The Liberal Unionist Party expressed the same view, adding that no foreigners should be allowed to take office unless they had adopted Eritrean citizenship. The Voce Federazione con Etiopia and also the Voce [Federale] Eritrea parties favoured the exclusion of foreigners. The Italo-Eritrean Association showed particular interest in the interpretation of paragraph 6 (b) of the resolution, which deals with the right of federal nationality of persons of mixed blood and asked that Italian should be adopted as an auxiliary language. One faction of the Intellectual Party asked that the United Nations should guarantee the Eritrean and Federal constitutions and suggested that there should be advisers attached to the heads of the Executive departments.

100.The proposal which departed most from the general views expressed was a joint memorandum submitted by the Independent Moslem League and the National Party. An identical memorandum was also submitted by the Moslem League of the Western Province. According to these documents it was proposed that there should be two independent administrations – independent one from the other – one being for the benefit of the Moslem regions (the Eastern and Western Provinces and the Saho tribes which form part of the Akele Guzai Division), with safeguards for the Christian minority. Each of the two administrations should have its own legislative assembly and executive council. It was further proposed that the capital, Asmara, should be excluded from the arrangements for the two administrations, a special administration being constituted for Asmara bearing the title "The Asmara Municipal

101.The views heard during the consultations with the political parties were repeated in the Divisions, either through representatives of the people or in the form of written statements handed to the Commissioner by local leaders of the parties. The questions which appear to have excited the most controversy were those of the representative of the Emperor, the official language, and the flag. It should be noted in this connexion that extreme views were expressed on the subject of representation of the Emperor, ranging from those who emphatically rejected the presence of a representative of the Emperor in Eritrea to those who would give him powers of appointing or approving the appointment of the Executive and participating in the Assembly, with various degrees of power advocated in between such as his holding the position of an observer or an adviser with no power, or his right to approve the appointment of the head of the Government.

REGIONAL CONSULTATIONS

THE PLATEAU

134 On the plateau, which is a predominantly Coptic Christian area, the majority favoured one Assembly, elected freely by the population for a term of two years; the Eritrean flag to be that of Ethiopia, and the official language to be Tigrinya. Varying views were expressed with regard to the Executive, ranging from the majority view that the head of the Executive be elected by the Assembly to a few instances where it was suggested that the Executive should be either appointed or approved by the Emperor. The representatives, generally speaking, were in favour of some form of representation of the Emperor in Eritrea, some wishing him to have extensive powers, while others wanted him to act merely as an observer or adviser. A few Moslems supported these views.

135.The majority of the Moslem minority of the plateau, with some Christian adherents, asked for two Assemblies – a House of

Representatives and a Senate – to serve for terms of two years and five years respectively and to be freely elected by the people. They were in favour of election of the head of the Government by the Assembly for a term of two years, he in turn to appoint the heads of the Executive Departments. The majority asked for Arabic and Tigrinya as the official languages, wanted a separate and distinctive flag for Eritrea and rejected any interference by the Emperor in the internal affairs of Eritrea, stating that any representation of the Emperor in Eritrea would be a violation of Eritrean autonomy.

THE LOWLANDS

136.The majority opinion was reversed in the lowlands – Western Province and Red Sea Divisions – which are predominantly Moslem areas, the greater number being in favour of two Assemblies and the attendant views on other constitutional aspects, while the few Christians supported the one Assembly thesis.

137.In the Western Province, the Moslem League of the Western Province had a large number of supporters, the remaining Moslems generally supporting the Moslem League in Eritrea. In this division the two parties which appeared to be closely allied held similar views in favour of two Assemblies, no interference by the Emperor, a new federal flag, a distinctive flag for Eritrea, and Arabic as the official language, although at Keren, where there are large Coptic settlements, there were a number of people sharing the Unionist Party views. In mentioning their common opinion that Arabic should be the official language, it should be noted in this connexion that as the consultations in the divisions reached their peak, the Moslems, who had previously advocated Arabic and Tigrinya as the official languages, provided that the Christians would agree to Arabic, on finding that the Unionist Party line was for Tigrinya only, changed their views in favour of Arabic only.

138.In the Red Sea Divisions, including Assab, the Independent Moslem League followers were vocal and had a good showing. The views of this party took a middle course between the two extreme views of the Unionist Party on the one hand, and the Eritrean Democratic Front on the other, for while asking, through the representatives at the meeting, for a distinctive flag for Eritrea; Arabic as the official language (and in a few instances, Tigrinya also); and refusing a representative of the Emperor, since such was not specified in the resolution, they asked for one Assembly only. The Moslem League in Eritrea was also heard at all the meetings in the Red Sea Division, with the exception of Assab. The Unionist Party presented views on behalf of the minority in that division, composed mostly of Christians who work in the area of Massawa, having migrated there from the plateau for work, and of some Moslems.

139.It should, perhaps,be added that individual expressions of anti-foreign feeling and of desire that the United Nations should guarantee the constitution, that there should be United Nations observers in Eritrea to see that Eritrean autonomy was not violated, were heard at several of the meetings in various parts of the territory.

* * *

(Note: the 15 parties and associations in 1951 were: 1. The Unionist Party 2. The Moslem League [of] Eritrea 3. The Liberal Progressive Party 4. The New Eritrea Party 5. The Italo-Eritrean Association 6. The War Veterans' Association 7. The Intellectuals' Association 8. The Independent Moslem League 9. The Moslem League of the Western Province 10. The National Party of Massawa 11. The Independent Eritrea Party 12. The Liberal Unionist Party 13. The Independent Eritrea United with Ethiopia Party 14. The Voice of Federation with Ethiopia Party (Voce Federatione con Etiopia) and 15. The Voice of Federal Eritrea Party (Voce Federale Eritrea).

APPENDIX IV-(a)

NOTES ON EARLY FIGHTERS OF THE ELF
(Interveiw with Saleh Hedug, 6/3/89, Khartoum)

	NAME	ETHNIC SECTION	JOIN SUD.ARMY	FINAL RANK	ADDITIONAL REMK
First group of Eritrean soldiers from the Sudanese army to join Awate					
1.	Mohammed Idris Haj	Beni Amer/Asfada	1946	Sergeant	Martyred 1962
2.	Omer Hamed Ezaz	Bilen	Same time	Corporal	Martyred 1968
3.	Taher Salem	Beni Amer/Beit Awad	Same time	Sergeant	Martyred 1964
4.	Mohammed Ali Idris (Abu Rigeila)	Beni Amer/Hashela		Corporal	
5.	Osman Mohammed Idris (Abu Shaneb)	Beni Amer		Corporal	
6.	Mohammed Ibrahim Bahduray	Beni Amer/Almada		Corporal	
7.	Mohammed Omer Abdalla (Abu Tiyara)	Maria Tselam	1944	Sergeant	
8.	Adem Mohammed Hamed (Gindifel)	Beni Amer	1953	Corporal	
9.	Omer Mohamed Ali (Damer)	Maria		Corporal	
Other fighters who joined in the early years					
1.	Mahmoud Dinay	Almada	1956	Soldier	
2.	Heshal Osman	Bilen	1944	Sergeant	
3.	Saleh Mohammed Idris (Abu Ajaj)	Beit Meala Mahmoud	1946	Sergeant	Relative of Saleh Heduq
4.	Yassin Mohammed Ali	Bilen	1946	Staff/serg.	
5.	Dungus Arey	Baria	-	-	Living in Sudan as civilian
6.	Mohammed Omer Adem	Maria	1944	Staff/serg.	
7.	Ahmed Mohammed Ali	f:Yemeni/m:Eritrean	1956	Sergent	1969 re-entry Sudanese army.
8.	Al-Hassen Abubaker	Maria	-	-	Joined from inside.
9.	Mahmoud Maybetot	Beni Amer/Habareda	-	-	Living as civilian in Gedaref.
11.	Osman Salen Ali	Bilen	-	-	Joined from inside, martyred.
12.	Abdalla Idris (Digol)	Bilen	-	-	Joined from inside, martyred.
13.	Mohammed Idris Kelbay	Baria	-	-	Joined from inside, trained in Syria.
14.	Ibrahim Dawud	Beni Amer/Ad Hamad	-	-	Joined from inside, martyred.
15.	Saleh Al-Husen	Beit Meala Hamasien	-	-	Joined from inside.
16.	Saleh Heduq	Beit Meala Mahmoud	1942	Staff/Serg.	Born in Kassala.
17.	Saeed Hussen	Saho/Assaorta	-	-	Trained in Cairo 1957 with Palestinians.
18.	Saleh Abubaker	Beni Amer/Hashela	-	-	Joined from inside.
19.	Mohammed Musa Fekak	Beni Amer	-	-	Joined from inside.
20.	Mohammed Ali Fekak	Beni Amer/Nabtab	-	-	Joined from inside.
21.	Mohammed Ali Kisha	Beit Meala	-	-	Joined from inside, friend of Awate.
22.	Abdurrahman Abu Sebak	Beni Amer/Nabtab			Eritrean police.
23.	Al-Haj Musa Ali		1919	Staff/serg.	From Eritrean police 1964.
24.	Ahmed Ibrahim Nafie (Halib Sete)	Rugbat			Joined from inside.

(From manuscripts of Günter Schröder, a German journalist who conducted a number of interviews with some early ELF fighters).

APPENDIX IV-(b)

INTERVIEWS WITH VETERAN FIGHTERS*

(Excerpts from interviews conducted by author and Omar Jaber at Rassai in the Sudan-Eritrea border area on 14-15 March 1982).

Al Haj Mussa Ali:

In the spring of 1959, Idris Mohammed Adam and Ibrahim Sultan went abroad. It was me who took them to Kassala. I stayed at Tokumbia until 1964. In 1965, I joined the ELF and became a platoon leader [45 fighters]. Later on, I led a company [about 150 fighters] in the Gash region.

In the ELF, it was me who commanded the destruction of the Ashi-Dira Bridge in 1970 and derailed the train whose pictures were taken by journalists. I assigned fighters Suleiman Zakaria, Abdulkader Ramadan and Mohammed Humed Tamtam to mine the bridge. A high-speed locomotive was also burned, 14 armed militiamen killed and nine captured in that year.

To me, the attack at Fode in October 1968 was one of the 48 most important operations of the ELF during its first ten years. At Fode were three platoons led by Dingus Arey, Abu Tiyara and myself. We spent a night near Tokumbia. The police outpost in the area learned about our presence and sent two truckloads of men in arms. We succeeded to completely destroy the two trucks; about 50 men were killed on the Ethiopian side. We lost three killed and 12 wounded.

I joined the Sudanese army in 1927 at the age of 17 and served for 19 years. I have six boys and four girls; they received no proper schooling because of my absence as an unpaid fighter for life-time in the Eritrean struggle.

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* The significance of these interviews is that (a) they show the role played by Eritreans from the Sudanese army, and (b) shed vivid light on the early phase of the Eritrean armed struggle as a whole.

Osman Abu Shanab:

I joined the Sudanese army in 1942 at the age of 25 and when I heard that Hamid Idris Awate went to the mountains against the Ethiopian government, I liked it. We left Kassala in the spring of 1962 and joined the Eritrean fighters.

The most memorable battles to me were those of Baliganda, Onal, Togoruba [15 March 1964], Hadag Hanger, and the 18-day battle at Waqat in Ansaba.

I don't regret having spent all this time in the fighting. If given the choice now, I would repeat it all over again without hesitation although I know I could have helped my six children grow better.

Idris Sifaf (Abu Suf):

I am now 55 years old. I joined the ELF on 4 April 1962. I heard about *Haraka* (Eritrean Liberation Movement) from Tahir Salim, who was the most active nationalist agitator among the Eritreans in the Sudanese army. I served with the Sudanese army for 18 years starting on 15 December 1943. It was Abu Shanab who first took me to meet ELF fighters. I met them at Sawa and instantly decided to join them leaving five children at Gedaref.

The first battle in which I participated was fought on 16 September 1963 at Adebera. We captured eight guns and were very happy with that. At Serobeti in Mogoraib, the only two platoons we then had were ambushed by the Ethiopians. But miraculously we prevailed over them. Four Ethiopian policemen were killed.

I was made company leader in 1971. Throughout the years, I was responsible for hiding out ELF arms in safe places.

Mohammed Idris Kelbay:

I was born in Barentu in 1928. World War II irrupted while I was studying in grade six in Italy. I came back to Asmara and worked at Radio Marina, 1948-1952. In 1953, I went to the Sudan. The Suez Canal war of 1956 made me think about politics.

In July 1959, two years before Hamid Idris Awate started the armed struggle, me and three other friends went to the mountains and planned to launch armed attacks on Ethiopia. The others were:

Abdalla Idris Digol, Adem Mohammed Hamid Gindifil and Hamid Ibrahim Timbar. Our first planned target was the Ethiopian bank in Tessenei so that we could get money to buy arms and recruit men. But the attack failed and we abandoned the series of attacks we planned to launch against Ethiopian establishments.

I met with Hamid Idris Awate on 5 October 1961 at Mogoraib and at first he refused to allow me join his men. He said my family would be endangered by the enemy and sent me back. My mother and brothers were arrested in 1965. My brother Mohammed Nur is still with the ELA units in Gash.

I was present at the famous Haicota bus operation of 1963 led by Gindifil. During that time, a police officer called Omar al-Din, was sent with 20 men from Bishuka to confront us. But six of his 20 militiamen abandoned his unit and joined us. In the meantime, we learned about the attack on the Adebera police station by our comrades. We then said: and why not we? We were 12 with arms and eight without arms. We then hid ourselves under a small bridge, stopped a public bus and entered the township of Haicota at noon. Ali Solomon from the government side shot and killed our comrade Mohammed Karrar. We killed the gunman, subdued the police station and were in full control of Haicota until we left it carrying in the bus 32 various kinds of guns, 12 hand-grenades, one pistol and ten very old Italian rifles.

Mohammed Ali Idris (Abu Rijela):

I was born near Agordat and joined the Sudanese army in April 1944 at the age of 17. I did not know the difference between Eritrea and the Sudan until 1956 when the Sudan became an independent republic.

I became a member of the ELM in 1959. The movement refused our demand to ask Awate to start an armed organization. At that time, Abu Shanab, Mohammed Ali Idris Tinay and myself discussed about divorcing our wives and to go to fight the Ethiopians. We joined Awate's unit of 20 fighters in 1962 and for the first time brought them uniforms. We were:

Omar Ezaz
Mohammed Idris Haj
Mohammed Ali Idris
Osman Abu Shanab
Mohammed Adam Gessir
Osman Damer
Moh. Ibrahim Bahduray
Abu Tiyara
Mohammed Osman Tango
Mohammed Ibrahim Amer
Mohammed Adem Amer
Saleh Al-Hussein
Adem Mohammed Hamid (Gindifil)
Jimie Adom
Tahir Salim
Mohammed Saad
Jaafer Mohammed
Babikir Mohammed Idris
Idris Sifaf
Saleh Mohammed Idris
and myself (Abu Rijela).

By September 1962, we were about 60 fighters moving in two platoons. No less than 80 former soldiers in the Sudanese army joined the ELA in those early years. We resembled forest guards by night and contraband traders by day. By end of 1964 and early 1965, we had six platoons with grand total of about 800 fighters.

I can remember some figures on people killed by the Ethiopians: in 1967, they killed 47 Ad-Ibrahim villagers and 200 persons from Ad-Ukut. In 1968, the Ethiopian forces killed 14 in Ad Kirmedai and 43 in Mogula.

We veteran fighters always feel bad of not having won the liberation war. We live with it every minute. I hope the new generation will work in full unity to fulfil our people's dreams for freedom, peace and prosperity.

Faid Tinga Longi:

I was born in 1912 and am one of the 50,850 Kunama today. The motion for the dissolution of the federation in 1962 was imposed on us. There was no voting. Mesghina Ghebrezghi wanted to talk but they stopped him. We were then told that we members of the last Eritrean Assembly would continue to receive Eth.$ 400 per month while working at any capacity for the state. In 1971, I was arrested and sentenced to seven years. I spent two years in prison when 870 of us were liberated by EPLF fighters. I have two wives and 12 children.

Abdulkerim Ahmed:

I was born in Senafe in 1929 and went to Koran school. In 1951, I went to Massawa and worked in the saltpans. In 1953, we clashed with the police during a strike. I was imprisoned for three months. After that, I went with some friends to Tokar and later to Port Sudan. In the Sudan, I worked as a cook and washed clothes. In 1956, Hamid Saleh Suleiman, Dawid Mohmmed and myself had a plan of stealing arms to sabotage Ethiopian institutions; there were arms hidden in Korokon. I abandoned that and went to Egypt in July 1956. I read books by myself and was later accepted by the Al-Azhari University. Our contacts and newspaper readings made us nationalists in Cairo. Some 30 of us were holding meetings at Kenatir Kheria in 1957. We asked the Egyptians to train us with the Algerians. We were allowed to attend but were told to be self-sufficient. Our interest in the matter finally made them give us military training in Al-Azhari itself. We then started our own cells in 1958. Some people like Mohammed Ali Anteta and Adem Akte who fled the 1958 strikes of Asmara joined us later that year. We sent Mohammed Adem Gessir to Eritrea with a letter to Idris Mohammed Adam. Later on, Idris Mohammed Adam, Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Nur came to Cairo. Saeed Hussein was the most active coordinator of our movement in Cairo.

In 1960 at a meeting at Jebel Muketem near Cairo, we named our organization ELF. There were suggestions to call it National Liberation Front, National Resurrection etc. We demoted Saeed Hussein to the post of deputy and named Idris Mohammed Adam as our new leader. We did not invite Ibrahim Sultan because we thought he was not good at keeping secrets. Woldeab Woldemariam was also dropped because he was still talking about Tigrai-Tigrigni (Greater Tigrai). Tahir Fedab came with a book to be printed about Haraka and asked us to join his organization. In Cairo, the Ethiopian embassy refused to accept us as Eritreans. In June 1961, we went to the embassy and tried to burn it down. Omaro and myself were carrying benzine for that purpose. In 1961, our source of news was a leaflet entitled the *Revolution,* posted on a weekly basis at a board in the meeting place. Later on, it became

a printed newspaper of the ELF. When Awate started the armed struggle, the ELM made strong campaign against us. There was tension on both sides. Many cell members left both organizations. We were told to prepare to go to China but this plan was dropped because some Somalis who went there created problems and returned without taking any training.

In 1962, I went back to the Sudan and thence to Tessenei, Barentu and Asmara. I met with three ELF members. In September 1962, the nationalist atmosphere in Asmara was very much depressed. We could not find a single Christian to coordinate work between Barka and Kabassa. By the end of 1962, I returned to Cairo. In May 1963, Saeed Hussein went to Asmara to carry out sabotage operations but was arrested. Nineteen of us received military training in Syria (nine from Cairo and 10 from Jeddah).

On 25 April 1964, we entered Eritrea with 19 Kalashinicovs (the Sudanese took two Doctoriovs and four Kalashnicovs from us). We found platoons led by Abu Shanab, Mohammed Tinai, Gindifil (later by Shamsi), Omar Ezaz, and Omar Nasser (later succeeded by Suleiman Adem). I joined Omar Nasser's platoon. In my first battle, we took five rifles from Dembalas police post (25 July 1964) and confronted the police at Hitat Faidab (Himbol).

Ahmed Awad Ajib (Deleshay)

I was born in Agordat in 1937. We started to have political cells in late 1950s.When we heard about the 1958 strikes in Asmara, we started confronting the police who wanted to stop us from demonstrating. We tried to liberate two arrested students. Shops were closed for three days; only one restaurant was open in town. I was a plantation worker then. Saleh Omer was our cell leader. Awate told us to be patient until arms could arrive from abroad. I later became a messenger for the first units of the ELA.

The first arms arrived from Ethiopia in March 1962: two guns and 24 bombs. From Aden came five rifles and seven pistols.

I was an actor at the Agordat incident of 7 July 1962. When we heard that Chief Executive Asfaha W. Michael and the Ethiopian representative were coming to Agordat, we placed armed

men at the nearly hills, Mohammed Jimie, Abdallah Digol, Gindifil and Saeed Hussein were involved in the preparations. I was in the first line of defence.

From that day on, we continued to launch guerrilla attacks. Hamid Ibrahim Timbar, Mohammed Jimie and myself retuned to Agordat on 15 October 1962 and killed an Ethiopian security agent called Kahsai inside the town.

On 10 November 1962, we entered Keren to kill Col. Erdachew. We were arrested in Ahmed Dafer's house. My *nom de querre* was Mohammed Ahmed and remained so. We were among the first few guerrillas to be arrested and sentenced to 15 years. Before us in prisoń were Bereg Norai (captured at the first battle at Adal on 1/9/61), Mohammed Era (captured in Barentu) and Omer Karar.

Omar Yahya Mohammed Saleh

I was born at Mereb in 1939 and grew up in Agordat. When my ELF cell was infiltrated by the enemy, I left Agordat in March 1963 and joined Omar Ezaz's platoon in August 1963. I fought my first battle at Hashishai. We were 30 led by Omar Nasser. We attacked the train at Darotai in August and killed six policemen. On 30 September 1963, we attacked the police post at Shebeq at 4 p.m. and killed four Ethiopians. Osman Idris was martyred there. On 10 November 1963, we were attacked by the enemy at Kurba Kurta (Mogoraib) but succeeded to escape after killing other four policemen. The attack at Mensura on 25 December 1963 cost us the martyrdom of Osman Wololo who was hit inside the police station; his two legs were broken. We saved his gun. When the Ethiopians took him to Agordat he spat at the face of Colonel Erdachew who instantly shot him at the head. Wololo's body was suspended in Agordat, the first body of a martyr to be hanged in that town since the start of the armed struggle.

On 20 April 1964 at Ketsetay (Misyam), Omar Nasser Shum, Osman Shiker, Ali Ahmed Ali and Ibrahim Kukuy were martyred. Their bodies were hanged in Agordat. On 15 August 1964, we killed six policemen and wounded several. On 18 August in

Ambore Korokon were martyred Osman Adem, Hussein Shagi, M. Idris and Abdulwahab Fitwi. Ethiopia's notorious 'Shambel' (major) Yassin was killed that day with another sergeant.

FIRST ERITREAN WOMEN FIGHTERS

(Interview conducted by author at Rassai on 18 March 1982).

Almaz Woldu:

I became an ELF fighter in April 1973 together with Ghennet Ghebre–Hiwet. Until that time, I had been a member of a five–person cell; there were many student strikes then. In August 1973, Alem Mesfin joined the ELF in the Akkele–Guzai region. She was martyred in 1974.

Before 1973, therefore, there were no well studied plans to accommodate women in the ELF. We were given a short 20–day training as *fedaeen* and stayed in the Mensa area around Gheleb sewing and repairing clothes for fighters. We also helped in the preparation of food.

Almaz was my *nom de querre*. My first name, now totally forgotten, was Nebiyat. By end of 1973, we conducted a public meeting in the Mensa area and wanted to continue doing so in other parts of the country. There were no sexual advances made on women in those days. However, women were not accepted as fighters before us. We met many girls in the countryside who told us that they were sent back with their hair shoven by ELF units when they asked to become fighters in the 1960s.

Ghennet and I started talking to women about their rights and duties in the revolution; we addressed in gatherings like village holidays, and at matrimonial and burial ceremonies. We were later given a two–month course at Debir Sala by martyrs Hassan Bashumel and Idris Omar. In February 1974, we joined a 13–member women's committee already formed in 1973. The Constituent Congress of the Eritrean Women's General Union was held on 27 June 1974 with 40 women participants.

Talking about other women fighters, Almaz added the following:

Saadia Tesfu was one of the early and heroic women participants in the Eritrean nationalist cause. In early 1968, Saadia Tesfu agreed with two ELF *fedaeen* to help them liquidate Ali-Bekhit (Wed-Hayget), a deserter from the ELF who was helping the Ethiopian authorities to arrest many cell members in the town.

Ali-Bekhit had terrorized Keren. Many of the town's inhabitants had some connections with the ELF, and had reason to spend sleepless nights or leave the town to become refugees. It was then that Saadia was asked to help. She soon befriended herself with Ali-Bekhit and had him killed. She left the town with the ELF men but her father was shot dead by the Ethiopians. Saadia spent five months in the field and later went to the Sudan.

Another early woman participant was Rumana Saleh who helped in the liquidation of another deserter, Abu Nurit; the latter had terrorized the town of Agordat until he was killed by the ELF in January 1975.

Mana Mussie was an important political cadre of company 97 until her martyrdom at the battle of Metekel, and Martyr Haregu G/Egziabeher was a brilliant platoon leader. After 1975, the number of women fighters became very large.

Jum'a Omar:

I joined the Third Zonal Command of the ELF on 18 October 1967. With me was Rahma Saleh who in 1971 went to the PLF. We attended literacy courses in the field and were later sent to Kassala in April 1968 where we worked in an ELF clinic. In October 1969, we were sent to Iraq for training in public health and returned in August 1970. We were 18 girls and 17 boys; all of us had continued to work at Kassala.

Nisrit Karar (Rassai, 19 March 1982):

The first ELF women's cell in Kassala was formed in June 1963 whose key members included Jemie Bahdur, Sitel Hamid, Fatna Mahmuday, Khadija Nur, Aisha Osman, and myself. We

helped organize cells in Aroma, Halfa and Ghirba. Cells were expanded after the October 1964 revolution in the Sudan. Our cells in Kassala rose to 35. We also encouraged the establishment of cells in Tessenei, Agordat and Keren. Already by 1964, Fatna Jaffar was our contact in Haicota. We in the Sudan were contributing 25 piasters per month each. Besides, we sewed flags and prepared dry food. Bekhita Abdalla joined the ELF in 1970 and had been serving as a nurse ever since then. There were ten women participants in the first ELF National Congress of 1971, eight of them nurses.

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1. Eritrea - Political Conditions
2. Refugees
3. Eritrean Conflict I.title

National Library, Catalogue Card No. 561/1992

In This Book:

'Since 1890, the grafted [territories] that came under the title of 'Eritrean' underwent considerable historical changes during 51 years of Italian colonialism, 11 years of British occupation, 10 years of quasi-federal relationship with Ethiopia and, finally, 30 years of armed struggle (p.8).

*

'Eritrea's western neighbour, the Sudan, became independent in 1956. The charismatic Jamal Abdul Nasser had become a symbol of secular nationalism in the region...The Eritrean community in Cairo was bombarded with ideas of revolution and liberation struggle. Similarly, the armed liberation struggle in Algeria was a clear example that had to be emulated. By the year 1960, therefore, it was becoming more and more probable that the winds of the nationalist revolution would influence also Eritrea. The subjective factor for an armed struggle was furnished (p.39).

*

'Ethiopia was the major but not the sole cause of Eritrean refugee flights (p.82). Eritrean disunity had been a constant cause of internal conflicts in the past and the future is fraught with danger. Therefore, Eritrea is not yet a place where large groups of returnees of all social and political segments of the society could be seen milling in the newly liberated land. Woldeab Woldemariam has returned home, but not yet Idris Mohammed Adem. And without the happy return of all those refugees, the future of Eritrea can hardly look very bright (p.94).

*

'Polarization of the society in two rival divisions, based on Moslem/Christian covers, intensified during the 1980s. The worst feature of this phenomenon appeared in the form of an Eritrean jihad organization (p.93).

*

'There could not have been an EPLF as we knew it without the person of Issayas Afeworki. He created it from the scratch, and moulded its structure and strategies without any effective challenge to his ways until the triumphant entry of his forces to Asmara (p.113)... [But, today, fears of many Eritrean are that, partly because of him] EPLF's victory might not in the long-run preserve Eritrean independence (p.122).

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