

The Impact of war and climatic changes on the environment in Eritrea: The Case of Sekwina Villages

By
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1. Introduction

This paper deals with the continued impact of war and climatic changes on the environment in the one of the most affected areas in Eritrea, the Sekwina district of the now Anseba Region. What is nowadays Sekwina district is located east of Keren town, stretching from the very surroundings of Keren through the Dearit area to adjacent areas of Mensaé. In this paper, I am concerned with the eight Sekwina villages that are located east of the Anseba River. These are, in alphabetical order, Adjerbeb, Besikdira, Feledarb, Ferhen, Fissoruxw, Hangol, Musha - Shebah, Musha-Ayg, and Sanqa. The other Sekwina villages located north west of Mariam Dearit, such as Ona, Abeytgaxa, Gebisi and Fafida along the river Anseba basin, are not part of the description in this paper. But they neither escaped the war disaster nor were they immune from the environmental causes that affected the whole of the Eritrean, and for that matter, the so-called Horn of Africa region. One major victim was a village by the name Ona², whose history remains fully uncovered so far. In fact the two victim villages and Besikdira require same treatment in history but at this moment, I am more concerned about the area that I know most and best, the other parts of Sekwina '*Beyond the Anseba River*'³, as people around Keren town would like to identify it.

As one among many who was born and raised in Sekwina region, who went to the Besikdira School (1961-1970) with many other schoolmates at in the 1960s, I am fairly well acquainted with the changes that happened or incurred in the Sekwina region since that time. However, these descriptions are personal observations and not scientifically defensible positions. Yet, I am well acquainted with the different environmental changes that took place since the 1960s. I first describe the background of the villages and the dry season rivers from which people used to fetch water in 1960s. Then I shall shortly describe how the war impacted not only on human lives, as in any other parts of Eritrea, but also describe its impacts on the environment. By the time of Eritrean Independence, the villages were reduced to mere abandoned burnt places, with no traces of houses, schools, or property. It was exactly during this period of time that the people were first rejoiced by independence but also dismayed to have no place to return as if they did not have any history or property that sustained them for centuries before. Worse enough, the dry season rivers that fed them and their livestock for centuries became barren land and the inhabitants found themselves with no support at all. The people earned their livelihood by farming and herdsmanhip, and this more or less constituted their major occupation at least until 1983 when a strong draught affected the whole country. It is to be remembered that the peasants were in the forefront of the war for liberation and suffered seriously (Gebre-Medhin 1989). As anywhere in the world, water is

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² Ona is a village two kms north of Keren town where a massacre of around 700 people incurred by the Ethiopian military soldieries in December 1 1970. The next offer on the next day was Besikdira where 124 people were killed. The phrase Ona-Besikdira, symbolizes the massacres in the region in the 1970s.

³ In Blin, *Anseber karḥ*, that is, beyond Anseba if one designates the Sekwina villages located to the east of the river.

vital for existence but it became so scarce since 1983/84 that the war worsened that scarcity to an irreparable degree (Pateman 1990). Hence, farming, herding, daily life as well as irrigated cash crop production such as gardening became different and difficult to live by once the war ended in 1991.

2. Sekwina villages in 1960s and 1970s: Water supply, schools, and burning of villages

In this part, I shall shortly describe the situation of the Sekwina villages and the environment as I lived it in the 1960s. This description is based on my actual life-world at that time, as a shepherd, pupil, farmer's son, and as a pupil who used to travel every morning from Adjerbeb to Besikdira for schooling for six years. This was the actual situation for all Sekwina pupils that travelled to Besikdira School from all other villages, including from the distant villages of Musha-Ayg and Musha-ShebaH. Yet, pupils also came to study in Besikdira from other parts of the region such as Shawsh and Guba. The first time we read about the Sekwina villages is in the book by Sapeto and Stella (1951) titled, 'Travel to the Peoples of Mensae, Bogos, and Habab'⁴. In the 1960s and before burning of the villages, the environment was rather kept in good condition, and there were forests all over the area, especially the mountains AndjeHay, Tiru, Hassen, AbaAnres, Woru-Uqwba, etc were covered with trees and grass all year round. The rainy season (shq) used to be successful every year. It was difficult to move alone in the mountains because they were so dark that people were afraid of wild animals. As far as I remember, all the rivers were wet for the major part of the year. There were two rivers that dried up early in the 1960s. These were the rivers *Anhus* (Feledarb) and *Abungulet* (Ferhen), both of which dried up failed to provide water in mid-1960s, and people were forced to fetch water from around 7-8 kms away from their place of residence. However, water is not only important for daily human lives but also for the livestock that the people still depend on their livelihood.

Burning of the villages: In 1970, the cruel Ethiopian soldiers burnt all the Sekwina villages except Ferhen. In Besikdira many inhabitants were killed inside a mosque⁵ (See also Appendix A). However, by mid 1970s, almost all the villages other than Besikdira were rebuilt. Again in May 1988, all the villages were not only burnt down to ashes but the inhabitable were also forced to flee to Keren town, abandoning their property, livestock and habitat. They were forgotten without care for almost three years until 1991. When Eritrea got its independence in May 1991, the soldiers who turned Sekwina into a battle ground fled and the people could move back to their natural habitat but with risky environmental hazards such as mines and military equipments that have made life inconvenient until now. Table 1 shows the different dry-season rivers that provided water to villages in two periods of time, the 1960s, and in early 1990s. The Table also shows the time when the Ethiopian soldiers destroyed each village, first in the 1970, and later on, in 1988 when all the villages were totally abandoned and people were dispersed around Keren town until independence in 1991. After the unsuccessful battle of Keren in May 1988, there were few Sekwina inhabitants who followed the EPLF (Eritrean Peoples liberation Front) to Sahel where they stayed until independence in 1991, and whence they returned to their respective homes but merely to barren places.

⁴ Sapeto, Giuseppe (1951) *Viaggio e Missione Cattolica fra I Mensa, I Bogos, e gli Haabab, con cenno geografico-storico sull' Abissinia*. (Tip. Propaganda Fide, 1957)

⁵ See the article on the victims of Sekwina and especially Besidkira massacre by Abba Teweldebrhan Gebremedhn and Abba Zereayakob Okbamichael, In *Advenait Regnum Tuum* Nr 73/74, 2000-2001, pp 10-24.

Table 1 Dry-season rivers/brooks that have provided water to Sekwina villages

	Village	Water sources 1960s	First destruction, 1970	Second major destruction 1988-1991	Water sources 1994	Water sources 2004
1	Adjerbeb	Meket, Terexbe, Elaqesh	Burnt, April 6, 1970	Destroyed, abandoned	Meket, Terexbe, Elaqesh	Tukul Association supplied
2	Beskdira	Bethimem, Mayhabar	Massacre in Nov 1970	Destroyed, abandoned	Bethimem, Mayhabar	Tukul Association supplied
3	Feledarb	Anhus	Burnt, November 1970	Destroyed, abandoned	Anseba	Tukul Association supplied
4	Ferhen	Abungulet	Abandoned in Dec 1970	Destroyed, abandoned	Mayhabar	Tukul Association supplied
5	Fissoruxw	Shakat, Anseba	Burnt, November 1970	Destroyed, abandoned	Anseba	Tukul Association supplied
6	Hangol	Elaqesh, Mayhabar	Abandoned in 1968	Destroyed, abandoned	Elaqesh, Mayhabar	Elaqesh, Mayhabar
7	Musha Shebah	Qetsetay	Burnt, November 1970	Destroyed, abandoned	Anseba	Anseba
8	Musha-Ayg	Ayg, Anseba	Burnt, November 1970	Destroyed, abandoned	Anseba	Anseba
9	Sanqa	Elaqesh	Abandoned in 1968	Destroyed, abandoned	Elaqesh,	Tukul Association supplied

The situation of education in Sekwina by the 1960s is shown in Table 2 below. The table shows the number of schools, year in which the school is opened, and the year when the schools ceased functioning due to the worsening political situation and due to massacres that incurred in the region by the Ethiopian military.

Table 2. Primary Schools in Sekwina (1959-1970)

School	Opened in	Closed in (i.e., destroyed)
Adjerbeb School	1959/60	April 1970
Besikdira School	1961	November 1970
Feledarb School	Built in 1966, shortly opened in 1987	March 1988
Musha School	January 1962	November 1967

In the following section, I shall shortly describe the background of each village, show how each village was relatively *self-sufficient* before the 1960s, how each was badly affected or destroyed during the war period (1961-1991), and how their situation worsened after impendence.

3. Feledarb village and water supply (1960s –1988)

The term Feledarb is a compound word from *feleda* and *arb*. Feleda in the Blin language means a monk while *arb* is a grave, burial place. Hence, Feledarb is a burial place of a monk. In tradition, it is held that there were some monks living in near the Dearit area in a mountain still called Lalmba. These monks were said to have been travelling along the region but one of them died as he travelled in the surroundings of Feledarb. It is believed that there is still a monk-grave among the many graves one can find in Feledarb. In 1848, the inhabitants of Feledarb were harshly destroyed by an invading Abyssinian military who simply raided the

area, killed around 70 youngsters, and left the people weakened (Johannes Kolmodin, 1912, *Zanta Hazegan Tseadegan*).

In early 1960s, Feledarb was a small village but some of the inhabitants were also scattered around the area. The inhabitants of Feledarb increased substantially in 1964 when the adjacent small village, Koken, was affected by a fire that sprang from a woman who was cooking in her oven inside her hut. The inhabitants of Koken then decided to move to Feledarb. Feledarb also found itself a bit developing when the Capuchins set a grinding machine for the whole population in Sekwina, which served from 1966 until the village was burnt in 1970. The Ethiopians also forced also Fissoruxw to move to Feledarb in 1967/68, and the village was a bit over-populated as the houses were constructed ad hoc to serve for temporal purposes. But that **forced villagization** was not to last long, as Feledarb was burnt in 1970. The Capuchins also constructed the Feledarb School in 1964. This was a four-room school that was meant to complement Besikdira School. But due to the deteriorating political situation in that area, no student was enrolled to Feledarb school until 1987 when the Capuchins decided to open one. That stayed merely for one year. Practically speaking, Feledarb School was a reality only in 1992.

Water Supply. Until the 1960s, the inhabitants of Feledarb and Koken depended upon a river called **Anhus**. During the dry season, people dug down wells, which stayed until the next rainy season in the Spring (June). But gradually, the Anhus river got dry and the people were forced to fetch water from **Shakat** and **Bethimem**. But this climatic change was exacerbated by the war. In 1970, the Ethiopian soldieries burnt Feledarb and the people scattered in different parts of the Keren town.

The 1988 disaster. In 1980s, the people again started to construct their houses. Then another big event happened. In May 1988, all the peoples in the Sekwina region were forced to leave their villages and immigrated locally to the Keren town surroundings, without not address or resources to live by. It is to be reminded that not all people were able to escape the invaders in 1988. Five inhabitants of Feledarb were not able to walk and were abandoned for their fate, alone at cruel hands of the blood-thrust Ethiopian soldiers. These five helpless villagers were Mr Ibrahim Gerda, a blind man with no children, his elder sister Ms Melka Gerda, widowed old women, Mr Abdulkadr Djimie Gide, Thw ife of Hiyabu Okbalidet of Musha, and the wife of Mr Ali Adjadj . The latter died in May 1988 and was buried in Feledarb by her husband, who was scared by the soldiers and transported to Keren town. The bodies of the other have not been found.

4. Besikdira village and water supply (1960s-1988)

Besk-dira comes from two Blin words, *beska* and *dira*. *Beska* is a sisal plant while *dira* is a baobab tree. Thus **Beskdria** means a place of sisals and baobab. Until 1848, the village was located in a different place but the people decided to move to the current location as a result of another battle that affected the whole area. This was the raid by an Abyssinian chieftain, Wube of Gonder and Tigre. Johannes Kolmodin in his book titled *The History of Zeazega and Hazega* (1912), recounts that Wube invaded the Keren area eight times, every year from 1841 to 1849. In a nearby location called now Halibjlut, the Wube-led raiders killed around 70 civilians, the majority of whom were inhabitants of Feledarb. Tradition has it that the people first called the place **Demdjlut**, which means **Covered-with-blood**, to express their sorrow and show respect to the victims (Adhana 1982). But later on, that name was changed to **Halibdjlut**, meaning **Covered-with-milk** (not blood anymore). In reminiscence of that event, people now say or curse anybody

who deviates from the societal norms or accepted standards of behaviour by evoking the expression *Wube gerechnkut* (et Wube cut you into pieces) (Michael Gabr 1971/1993) Eventually, the people in Besikdira moved to the current location. Interestingly enough, the same place was destroyed by the Ethiopians in November 30 1970 when almost two-third civilian inhabitants were killed by Haileselesie's solders (See list of civilian victims in Appendix A).

By 1960s village standards, Besikdira was the most developed village in the area. It had two shops⁶, a primary school, and modern mosque⁷ building. The modern mosque was built in 1966-67. The school was a common project by all Sekwina inhabitants when the people agreed that this place was appropriate for its proximity to other places. Totally around 500 pupils were enrolled in the school between 1961 and 1970. Pupils came from all parts of Sekwina, plus some from Shawsh and Guba, outside of the then Sekwina region.

Since its inception as a school, there were totally a couple of individuals who taught in Besikdira School.

Table 3. Elementary school teachers who served in Besikdira School (1961-1970)

Teacher	From	Years of service
Berhane Sleman	Musha	Sep-Dec 1961
Arhe Utman (+1973)	Ferhen	Jan 1962-1965/66
Woldeyesus Adem	Ferhen	1962-1968
Mehari Awate	Bambi	1965/66, 1967/68
Qurban Tesfamikael (+ 1976)	Glas	1966/67
Oqbaselasie	Bogu	1968/69
Zerezghi Negusse	Ashera	1968/69
Goitom Yibetit	Besikdira	1969/70
Kema weri	Ferhen	Sep-Nov 1970
Mehret Hagos	Ferhen	Sep-Nov 1970

The first ever teacher was the late Arhe Utman (1961-1966), Woldeyesus Adem (1962-1968), Mehari Awate (1965/66, 1967/68) Qurban Tesfamikael (1966/67), Okbaselasie and Zerezghi (1968/69), teacher Goitom Yibetit (1969/70), and Teachers Kema Weri and Mehret Hagos (September 1970-November 1970). How did Beskdira pupils fetch water at that time? The most interesting aspect in this connection is that pupils who travelled every morning from their respective villages to Besikdira School brought water in the water-pots from different wells in the rivers. Pupils from Musha brought water from **Ayg** River or **Bet-himem**. Pupils from Fissoruxw and Feledarb brought water either from **Shaakat** or **Bethimem**, depending on their route to Besikdira. Pupils from Adjerebeb, Sanqa and Hangol brought from the couple of rivers in their way to Besikdira. Pupils from Ferhen used to bring water from the water-well, which the Capuchins dug for the village in 1964. Besikdira was nearer to Ferhen, Sanqa and Hangol but not to other villages.

The Besiddireans of 1960s were also shifting living conditions away from farming and herding to retail trade. They had increased contacts with the town life, especially after the construction of the Keren-Mehlab highway in 1960/61. There were six cement-constructed modern houses in Besikdira at that time⁸, which was a big count in comparison to other villages at

⁶ The owners were Mr Shiker Lidjadj (+1996) and Sheik Mohamed Abdelkadr.

⁸ These were, in alphabetical order, the family houses of Mr Alamin Idris, Mr Berkay Berih, Mr Medhin Lidjam, Mr Obeker Khalifa Salih, Mr Shiker Lidjadj, and Mr Yibetit Okbankel,

that time. When the Ethiopian destroyed Besikdira in November 30 1970, the village was rather developing gradually with the necessary but not sufficient conditions for development, institutions such as a school, a mosque, modern constructed houses, shops and also increasingly growing retail traders

Water supply. As for water supply, Besikdira depended on two dry season rivers, namely, *MayHabar* in the east, and *Bethimem* in the north. Though a sad event, after the destruction of Besikdira, the surrounding vegetation was again developing especially if one compares the situation with other surroundings whose inhabitants were less affected. However, those who survived the massacre of 1970 never returned to the village and those who returned during the late 1970s, again faced the serious migration of 1988, together with all other villagers in the east, west and north of Keren town when those places were turned into military camps.

Today one can only glaze on the two former symbols of Besikdira, the mosque and the school, but ruined and looking for somebody who can write their proper histories.

5. Ferhen village and water supply (1960s –1988)

The first time Ferhen is found in the literature is in Sapeto and Stella (1851). Upon their arrival for the first time in 1851, the two missionaries baptized around 110 individuals. Although the people were Christians for around many centuries then, they had lost contact with their Tewahdo church leaders. Tradition holds that the centre of Bogos Christianity was the Parish of St George at Megarih, which lost its last priest in the 17th century. In modern times, Ferhen has been raised in importance among the Sekwina villages. St George's church in Ferhen was the centre of the Catholic Church for the whole Sekwina since its inception as a parish in 1926⁹. The modern church was built in 1959/60. It served all people and still serves inhabitants of Ferhen. The centre, or correctly speaking, the residence of parish priests, however, moved to Feledarb recently, that is, in 1998.

Although Ferhen village was miraculously saved from being burnt by the Ethiopian soldiers in 1970, its inhabitants nevertheless, faced the same fate as any other in that region. It was the inhabitants of Ferhen who graved the Besikdira victims in 1970, and graved them en mass. They were forced to leave their village in 1970 and inhabit in Halibmentl for a year. They returned to Ferhen again in 1973. Other villagers also joined them in 1973, built temporary huts there until 1974, especially people from Hangol, Sanqa and Adjerbeb. But after 1974, the other villagers returned to their respective places because it was difficult to avoid facing the ever-risky Ethiopian soldiers that roamed around the area again and again. Yet, the parish priest could settle down again without leaving the village from 1974 to 1988.

Water supply. As for water supply, Ferehen was one of those that suffered hard due to sufficiently water supply and this not only for livestock but also for the inhabitants. Until early 1960s, a nearby seasonal river called **Abungullet** provided water-well. Unfortunately, it dried up out in 1960s and the people were forced to turn to other sources of water, mainly MayHabar to the north. Pupils who studied in Besikdira School in the 1961-1970 period used to bring water from the water well. But the water well was not sufficient for livestock, the people agreed to take their livestock elsewhere, which anyway also suited grazing requirements away from the location of the village. Again, in 1988-1991 period, Ferhen was an abandoned place when it was turned into a military station of the Ethiopian soldiers.

⁹ See description by Sr Francesca Woldemichael, in *25th Anniversary the Capuchins in Sekwina* (1988), pages 7-10.

6. Adjerbeb village and water supply (1960s –1988)

Located in the northeast part of the Sekwina region, this area was proud of its forests, livestock-raising, and running water until the 1980s. The inhabitants of Adjerbeb were living scattered along the whole Adjerbeb region until 1966. Each family lived in its own fields. It can be argued the scattered life made it easier to keep the environment in a better condition than where people gathered to settle down into one place. Of course, socially speaking settling in one place was much better than being scattered into one's own fields. But both have implications for the environment. In spite of its bigger size, water supply was not a question that people cared about in the 1960s. Every smaller area had its own water supply. The rivers that supplied the water were, for example, Meket, QITa, Shaket, Terexbe, and Elaques (Priest's water-well). The main river basin runs from the eastern mountains of the Rora Bet Mensae, across the village, and down towards Mayhabar near Besikdira and Hangol, along the plains of Sanqa.

There were two main reasons why the people decided to settle in a collective village in 1966. The first was the Adjerbeb School, which was built previously in 1959/60. The second was the need for the people to build both a modern church and a modern mosque, as in any other parts of the Blin area where Christians and Muslims have lived for centuries in peace. Since its construction, the Adjerbeb School served as a centre for the people. Although the School was mainly for Christians, it served as a form of centralized focus in the area. Adjerbeb School was in fact the first ever school that was opened for the whole Sekwina¹⁰. This school constituted a centralizing mechanism in otherwise scattered community. The responsible head was the parish priest in Ferhen. The school's long-serving teacher was Zeremariam Weri of Ferhen. He taught both catechetical and modern education for pupils who travelled not only from the different scattered families of Adjerbeb area but also from Ferhen, Koken, Sanqa and Besikdira. One of the demands of the school leaders and the village elders was that every family had to send at least one child to school. As result, in the first year, around 180 pupils were registered.

Water sources. Adjerbeb was served better than other villages in the area by different rivers. It is not only the main river running from the eastern mountains that provided water all year round but the contributory rivers of Meket and QITa also were wet almost all the seasons. The current water supply is in fact located at the centre and right place with regard to access and quality of water.

Environmentally speaking, settling in one place meant a heavy burden to the environment, not least to the extensive forest and the trees around the village. Around 150 families had to re-settle in a new place, which practically had difficult consequences on the trees, grass, and even water supply. Every family had to build a new hut with four main wood planks, more than 50 round wood, and innumerable grass for thatching with dry straw. Immediately after the resettlement in the new place, I remember adults complaining about the youngsters cutting tree irresponsibly. Sometimes it was recommended that youngsters should never carry axes except for the moderate falling down of tree branches for livestock feeding. Yet, there was no central authority that could effectively curb the continued destruction of the forest trees and wood. As result, even before the village was burnt by Ethiopian soldiers in April 1970, people complained about the unnecessary and harmful practice of cutting trees.

¹⁰ See a description of Sekwina schools in the 1960s by this author, in 25th Anniversary the Capuchins in Sekwina (1988), pages 34-38

In any case, the soldiers burnt the village of Adjerbeb to ashes in April 1970 (27 Miazia 1962, in the Geez calendar). After that time, the people were forced to move to either Ferhen or Besikdira, which seemed a bit safer for the time being. Although the people returned to their places between 1976 and 1988, there have always been battles and house burning and lives were often disturbed. The village was said to have burned many times. First in 1970, second time in 1973, third time in 1984, and finally, the complete destruction between 1988 and 1991. The majority of Adjerbeb inhabitants were dispersed into two places after the sad events of May 1988 when the place was turned into a battle ground. The majority, along with other Sekwina, Mensae, and Betdjuk inhabitants, escaped to Keren and its surroundings and lived very bad lives. There were also some who followed the EPLF to Sahel, but they had better conditions of life in spite of being erased from their habitats and living in a distant place for three full years (1988-1991). They all joined together after liberation, but the villages were simply turned into ashes, and people started to re-build homes, look for water resources, create property. The environment was never the same after 1988. All these events have left traces of destruction and hardship both physical and mental.

7. Musha-Ayg and Musha-ShebaH

These twin villages had a long recorded history. Tradition has it that the term Musha appeared in some sacred literature in Geez but access to that remained difficult so far. The first Mush school was opened in January 1962. The school provided first and second grades after which pupils joined the Besikdira school which runs up to grade 6. Two important features characterize both villages: proximity to the river Anseba and proximity to the mountains adjacent to both. **Qesetay** river provided water to both, as it ran towards Anseba river lower down until it joined Anseba river. Qesetay river provided dry-season water until the 1980s but gradually dried up after the draught of 1983/84. The location of the two villages in-between mountains meant that the inhabitants had easy access to the forest and trees that provided everything for them. This also meant an undesirable effect on the environment.

By 1967, the two Mushas were forced to form a new settlement in a place called **Berdeg** by the river Anseba. Although the place was not liked by the people at that time because of the seasonal mosquitoes that might cause malaria. But Berdeg was well placed as it is located along the main highway road from Keren town to other parts of the area as well as the Mensae region such as Mehlab. Even if the two Mushas were forced to settle down in Berdeg, due to the worsening political situation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was not scared from being burnt by the Ethiopian soldiers, who arrived early morning in the 29th of November 1970, and burnt it..

8. Fissoruxw village and water supply (1960s –1988)

The name Fissoruxw is derived from two words in Blin language. *Fisso* means ‘barbecued-meat’ but the suffix –ruxw is added to show possession of. Thus, **Fissoruxw** means a *place of ‘barbecued-meat’*. The exact historical backgrounds are not well known but tradition has it that in the old days, some people used to slaughter livestock and goats that they had forcefully invaded from the grazing ones in the area, and then hid to Fissoruxw to consume them. Why did they hide in Fissoruxw?

The answer was that the place was covered with thick forest to the point that only those who had a special cause could dare going in there. Thus, only those who could overtake livestock and goats by force and consume them without being discovered. Tradition even holds that the hunters of domestic animals preserved any extra barbecued-meat in the place

until the next day. This medium-sized village near Feledarb is nicely located along the hill that links Anseba River and the other parts of the Sekwina district. Eventually, it is said that people started inhabiting the place, keeping its old naming of Fissoruxw, but also clearing the forest around it and establishing the present village. What is particular for Fissoruxw is its excellent central location, high enough to view different parts of the Keren area. It is also very close to Anseba River on one side and Shakaat River on the other. The inhabitant's life is thus highly dependent on, and influenced by, this proximity to water supply. As in any other parts of area, the inhabitants of Fissoruxw lived by farming and livestock-rearing livestock.

Water supply, in the 1960s to 1980s, was mainly from the above-mentioned two rivers, Anseba and Shakaat. Thus, pupils who attended Besikdira school in the 1960s used to fetch water either from Anseba that they prepare the day before schooling, or Shakaat, which was on their way to Besikdira. Some also depended on Bethimem, located along the road to the school.

The same fate as all the other villages met also Fissoruxw when the Ethiopian soldiers burnt it to ashes in November 29 1970. Two days before, two elderly women who travelled from Besikdira to Fissoruxw were also over fallen by some soldiers. The soldiers wanted to rob them of their jewellery. The two women had jewellery on their bodies, especially on their head (nfHora), forehead (jabriri), arm bracelets, (bexira), foot bracelets (Hldj). When the soldiers found out to their surprise that many of the jewellery were not gold but silver, they just killed the two women. Immediately, the day after, the both burnt Fissoruxw and other villages.

9. Sanqa and Hangol village and water supply (1960s –1988)

Sanqa village is located between Adjerbeb and Feledarb and its beautiful river basin, WohaTit, gives it pride and riches. The plains were covered with trees by the 1960s. The term Sanqa comes from the Blin word sanqi, meaning liver. This medium-sized village had long history. It is said that when the Hamasenian Chief by the name Raasi Woldemikael joined the Egyptians against the Abyssinian King Johannes IV in the 1870s, he used to get refuge in Sanqa and the surroundings. These two adjacent villages have share many things in common. First, they are smaller in size although Sanqa a lot bigger than Hangol. Smaller size means the land available for farming and grazing is greater for the people than another Sekwin villager can enjoy. The impact on the environment therefore is a bit better here. But the war-impact and the general deterioration in climatic conditions cannot be compensated by smaller size. Sanqa and Hangol villagers belonged to those who were forced into the mosque of Besikdira in the 30th November 1970. I have referred to the names as Sanqa or Hangol under the list of victims in Appendix A.

Hangol is the smallest of all Sekwina villages. It is located on the basins of MeyHabar river but the river Elaqesh also flows in its north and west side. The name comes from the geographic location, being at a hill. In fact Hangol mean a high hill in Tigre. Administratively, at least after the 1960s, both Hangol and Sanqa formed a unit and that is why I am including them under one sub-title in this paper.

Water supply, Sanqa and Hangol both depend greatly on MayHabar and Elaqesh for water supply. Both rivers in fact much better than any other in the area with respect to running water during all the seasons.

9. Concluding remarks

What are the reasons for the deteriorating environmental conditions of the area? As a result of war and also man-made causes, such as deforestation and villagization, the self-sufficient, proud, Sekwina inhabitants of the 1960s were totally turned into being considered as 'poor' in the 1990s. They found themselves so dependent on 'others' to look for relief assistance. Thus, each village inhabitant could not conduct daily life in the ordinary sense of the term because of the lack of water, adequate trees and wood that were required to construct houses. Without trees, forest, water and adequate environmental care, the life in the country side has become so unbearable that some former Sekwina inhabitants even could not dare return to their respective homes after independence. Surely, upon independence, Sekwina villagers started to enjoy the fruits of independence for which they particularly paid dearly for almost three decades due to their location but also their loyalty to the cause. Moreover, they also looked for resources that could make them again self-sufficient. But the environment could no longer provide its natural resources. This again exacerbated the deteriorating health conditions and many inhabitants, especially children, looked weaker and sicker than those who attended school in Besikdira in the 1960s. This is not surprising if one closely reflects upon the different living conditions of the 1960s and the 1990s.

Thus, the environment was almost destroyed by the prolonged war (1961-1991), continued burning of villages, and impact on the forest and wood, climatic changes, archaic housing construction, and unbounded grazing by pastoralist. As well as the Sekwina region turning into a battle ground in 1988-1991, not only the environment but also living conditions became unbearable for many inhabitants. It is under such undesirable conditions that relief assistance became vital and one could also argue that the TUKUL Association discovered such a condition in 1994 that it was motivated to do something for these helpless.

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Appendix A. List of Victims in the Besikdira massacre, November 30 1970

Source: Abba Teweldebrhan Gebremedhn and Abba Zereayakob Okbamichael, 'A Cruel Massacre in and around Besikdira'. In *Advenait Regnum Tuum* Nr 73/74, 2000-2001, pp 10-24 (in Tigringa).

I. Besikdira Inhabitants

- 1) Djawdj Nsur, gentle man
- 2) Dahba Menader, Djawdj's wife
- 3) Mehret Ansera, young bride
- 4) Ngsti Almedom, young daughter of Tesfu Almedom
- 5) Temertsu Brhane Tesfu, young girl
- 6) Senbetu, Negusse Ansera's wife
- 7) Gorgio Negusse Anseram, young boy
- 8) Frezghi Negusse Ansera, young boy
- 9) Mikaelet Negusse Ansera, young girl
- 10) Petros Ansera, gentle man
- 11) Ghedit, wife of Albekit Almedom
- 12) Suset Albekit, young woman
- 13) Idget Musa Debas, wife Mengstu Albekit
- 14) Hmed Derie Hmed, gentleman
- 15) Letebrhan, wife of Hmed Derie
- 16) Beyan Hmed Derie, daughter of Hmed Derie
- 17) Gideom Hmed Derie, youngest daughter of Hmed Derie
- 18) Gebremedhin Abbe Gebeselasie
- 19) Mahlet, bride of Gebremedhin Abbe
- 20) Habtemariam Abbe Gebeselasie, gentleman
- 21) Aisha Abbe Gebeselasie, bride newly married to Neberay from Feledarb
- 22) Kubrom Abbe Gebeselasie, gentleman
- 23) Nesredin Tesfamiaikel Fidel, gentleman
- 24) Qudusan, wife of Nesredin Tesfamikae
- 25) Meka Nesredin Tesfamikael, young lady
- 26) Liget, The wife of bahlbi Tekwruray
- 27) Kiolet Zeru Hambtemiakel, young daughter of Zeru
- 28) Mekonen Reda Nsur, gentleman
- 29) Beyan Mekonen Reda, young daughter of of Mekonen
- 30) Meyanit Mekonen Reda, young daughter of of Mekonen
- 31) Mehret, an elderly woman, the wife of Lidjadj Teklyes
- 32) Kierba Lidjadj Teklyes, young lady
- 33) Leteyesus Arey Lidjadj, young daughter of Arey
- 34) Lidjam Semra Mehari, gentleman
- 35) Awka Berigh MeHarizghi, wife of Lidjam Semra
- 36) Kuflom Lidjam Semra, 25-year old son of Lidjam Semra
- 37) Giblek Tekle Gender, wife of Medhin Lidjam
- 38) Woldeyesus Medhin Lidjam, 4-year old child
- 39) Medhin Lidjam's youngest 2-year daughter
- 40) Woldu Fkak Dermas, gentleman
- 41) Senbetu, wife of Woldu Fkak
- 42) Idris Affa Fkak, gentleman
- 43) Giorgis Meybetot Berih, 2-year old child
- 44) Zerai Gebtretnsae Djawe, Gentleman
- 45) Ametelidet, Wife of Zerai Gebtretnsae
- 46) Awed Zerai Gebtretnsae, young man
- 47) Okbaselasie Zerai Gebtretnsae, youngman
- 48) Djida NashiH, wife of Aasema Gebtretnsae
- 49) Habtezhghi Aasema Gebtretnsae, youngman
- 50) Luul Bahta Aasema, young girl
- 51) Okbalidet Meybetot Lidjadj, Youngman
- 52) Letensae Edig (Gerda), young lady, from QuiniE
- 53) Ali Osman Mohamed
- 54) Zahra, wife of Ali Osman Mohamed
- 55) Akiyar Mohamed Djimie, a young girl

- 56) Sitel Mohamed Djimie, a young girl
- 57) Fatna Fikak Mohamed, a young lady
- 58) Figuret Fikak Mohamed, a young lady
- 59) Meryem, wife of Adadi Fikak Mohamed
- 60) Zekiya Adadi Fikak, young lady
- 61) Kbrti Adadi Fikak, young lady
- 62) Aisha, wife of Omer Feredj
- 63) A one-year old son of Omer Feredj
- 64) Kedjidja Sheik Feredj Drui, young lady
- 65) Zeineb Saleh, wife of Omer Mohamed
- 66) Sitel Eshmael, wife of Alamin Abdela Biemnet
- 67) Abdelqadr Biemnet, gentleman
- 68) Dahba Ibrahim, wife of A Abdelqadr Biemnet
- 69) Djemie, wife of Mender Biemnet
- 70) Amna, wife of Yasin Aftai
- 71) Senet, wife of Hamd Hmid Omer
- 72) Aldjadj Isaaq, wife of Adim Atmad
- 73) Omer Djimie Abbe, a shepherd of Assma Gebretensae's family
- 74) Husein Obeker Khelifa Saleh Beimmnet, young boy
- 75) Younger brother of Husein Obeker Khelifa Saleh, young boy
- 76) Younger son of Kerar Khelifa Saleh Beimmnet
- 77) Zahra Mender Beimmnet, young lady
- 78) Grand daughter of Halima Idris
- 79) Dikan Shekay Nor, wife of Djimie Fikak
- 80) Hassen Mohamed Ali Mefles
- 81) Amina Tesfu Zeru, younger daughter of Dahba Alinor Neberay

II. Inhabitants from Hangol

- 82) Rahya, wife of Tesfe Gebirebi, pregnant with two offspings
- 83) Ametelidet Tesfe Gebirebi, young girl
- 84) Letensae Tesfe Gebirebi, young girl
- 85) Hinit Tesfe Gebirebi, a small boy
- 86) Reda Gebirebi, gentleman
- 87) Djewdi, Wife of Agdubay Gebirebi
- 88) Letezghi Agdubay Gebirebi, young girl
- 89) Gabriela Agdubay Gebirebi, young girl
- 90) Tsegga Agdubay Gebirebi, young girl
- 91) Woldu Hinit, gentleman
- 92) Nasra, wife of Ghilay Hinit
- 93) Teklay Ghilay Hinit, young boy
- 94) Anday Ghilay Hinit, young boy
- 95) Amet Isaak Mohamed, young lady
- 96) A little girl, daughter of Okbalidet Wolduy Hinit

III. Inhabitants from Sanqa

- 97) Amet Ekit Libab. young lady
- 98) Lemlem, wife of Tesfu DarseliH
- 99) Mikaelet, wife of Hamednaka Zeres
- 100) Mahder Hamednaka Zeres, young boy
- 101) Kifle Hamednaka Zeres, young boy
- 102) Frewolini Hamednaka Zeres, young girl
- 103) Medhinu, wife of Tesfahanes Ebtigergis
- 104) Adhanet Tesfayohannes Ebtigergis, young girl
- 105) Kiema Mebrahtu Isaak, young girl
- 106) Habtezhgi Mebrahtu Isaak, young boy
- 107) Awsaana Zerom Hidres, young bride
- 108) Senet Zerom Hidres, young lady
- 109) Amna Zerom Hidres, young lady
- 110) Noba, wife Zerom Hidres
- 111) Hawa, wife of Saleh Mohamed , from Wesbensrexw

IV. Inhabitants from Fissoruxw

- 112) Tiket Nashih Ukub
- 113) Mesqela, wife of Woldegabr Haamdenaka
- 114) Meharite Himed Chebae, wife of Mengstu
- 115) Kiolet, a small daughter of Meharite Himed Chebae
- 116) Tiberih Solomon Nashih Ukub
- 117) Mahyewit, wife of Haamdenaka Nashih Ukub
- 118) Dinsa, wife of adala Nashih Ukub

IV. Inhabitants from Feledarb

- 119) Adhanom Fikak Dibu, gentleman
- 120) Adjeb Berhane Abbe, wife of Negusse Tesfalidet
- 121) Gebretensae Negusse Tesfalidet, a 3-year old child
- 122) Berhane Negusse Itman*

NOTE

- 1) *The Ethiopian commandos killed Berhane Negusse Itman, a bridegroom, together with his father-in-law, in Hamedey in October 1970, when he was asked to witness his bride was not a liberation fighter but his own wife.
- 2) The commandos had also killed in March 1969, another bride groom from Adjerbeb by the name Habte Hamid, whoa was fetching consumers goods for the ELF fighters, who depended very much on personal service, economic, spying and guidance services on the people at that time. Habte was bringing consumer goods from Keren town to Adjerbeb, but the police discovered that he was carrying something for the forbidden liberation fighters; He was captured, imprisoned, and later killed in Barka
- 3) Two more victims are missing form this list