



EVIL DAYS
Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia

An Africa Watch Report

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Africa Watch

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and an ammunition dump, which caused a series of explosions. Several bridges across the Baro river were destroyed, almost certainly by government soldiers. Shells fired by the advancing forces landed close to the camps. The shelling and explosions alarmed the refugees -- especially those who had previously fled from Tsore.

Earlier in the year, the SPLA had laid contingency plans for an evacuation of the refugee population.²⁶ The refugees had been warned beforehand that they might have to leave, river transport was arranged for community leaders and administrators, and the migration to Sudan was conducted in a remarkably orderly manner.

Throughout the day of May 26 and the following night, the camp of Itang was evacuated. Most people headed for Nasir; smaller numbers went to Akobo and to the other refugee camps, from where they returned to Sudan. Some people went back to Itang the following day to collect possessions, but members of the government Anuak militia were present, engaging in looting, and this deterred them. There is some evidence that this looting had been planned in advance, for example Anuak militiamen had prevented the camp administrators opening the food stores the day before. The Anuak militia and unaffiliated bandits also preyed on small groups of refugees as they trekked towards Sudan. A Gaajak Nuer militia (also armed by the Ethiopian government) crossed into Sudanese territory (partly because of a conflict with the Anuak militia) and preyed upon the refugees there. Dead bodies of those killed by these militias and bandits floated down the Sobat River the following week.

The camps at Fugnido and Dima were evacuated over the following weeks. The refugees from these camps neither saw nor heard any sign of the OLF or EPRDF forces. In Fugnido they were reportedly warned to leave by armed local people, and migrated to Pochala in Sudan in accordance with SPLA instructions. In Dima, the SPLA closed the camp, looting and destroying vehicles and other property, and ordered the refugees to leave to Pakok in Sudan. The SPLA forces then made a stand inside Ethiopia against the EPRDF forces until they were forced to leave in early July.

The Sudan government was aware in advance of the likely return of the refugees, and closely monitored the return movements, by listening in to radio traffic and sending airplanes to overfly the area. The Sudanese air force bombed Nasir on May 14 (killing 49 people and wounding 50,

²⁶ Proposals had been circulating for some time for a gradual return of the refugees to their homes. Western donors had disagreed over whether it would be better for the refugees to remain or return. Some refugees had also made independent plans to return after the harvest of late 1991.

and forcing the evacuation of the town) and on May 22, killing one. Columns of returning refugees were also bombed, at Jokau (on the way to Nasir) on May 30 and Akobo on May 31. The bombing was carried out from a great height and was highly inaccurate and caused at most one fatality.

A UN-led relief program, including an airdrop of food to Nasir, was implemented almost immediately. Like other such programs in southern Sudan, it has been subject to delays and restrictions by the Sudan government. To date, while a large relief-dependent population exists in Nasir, Pochalla, Akobo, Pakok and in the surrounding areas, the previous good nutritional state of the refugees, the local resources of the area, and the relief program has prevented the extremes of famine.

Conclusion

The continued support of the SPLA for the Mengistu government until its final days was a debacle for the organization, and particularly for its leader Col. John Garang who was personally identified with the policy. The SPLA lost military supplies and bases, its radio station, and a haven for its civilian sympathizers. These factors contributed to an attempted coup by the SPLA military commanders in Upper Nile province in August 1991. The outcome of the split in the SPLA remains uncertain at the time of writing. Relations between the EPRDF, OLF and the two wings of the SPLA will be an important determinant of the peace and stability of the border region in the foreseeable future.

Lowland Gamu Gofa: Carriers of New Guns

The lowlands of Gamu Gofa, adjacent to the frontiers of Sudan and Kenya, is the remotest periphery of Ethiopia. The peoples of this area have never been fully controlled by the highland states -- they are peripheral but not subjugated. They are mostly cattle-herders, and have a history of inter-communal violence. However, in the 1980s, this violence changed markedly, with the supply of modern automatic weapons to some groups. This weaponry upset the previously existing state of approximate balance between different groups, and led to unprecedented numbers of civilian deaths. The increased level of violence was also caused by, and in turn caused, direct military intervention by the Kenyan army, and may yet provoke a similar response from the Ethiopian government.

Conflicts up to the 1980s

The river Omo drains into Lake Turkana in Kenya. In its lower reaches, it passes through territory inhabited by pastoral groups, such as the Dassenatch (also known as Marele), Nyangatom (also known as Dongiro and Bume),²⁷ Mursi, and Hamar. Their immediate neighbors in Sudan are the Toposa and in Kenya are the Turkana.

These peoples have traditionally conducted armed conflict between themselves. Some of this conflict consisted of cattle raiding, and some of disputes over territory. Social anthropologists have observed the rules followed in this local warfare, which include attempting to maintain reciprocity in attacks, and formalizing relations and boundaries after periods of hostility. Dr David Turton, who has been studying the Mursi for over two decades, describes a typical raid carried out by the Hamar, which occurred on December 25, 1969, in the Elma Valley:

In the early hours of the morning a rifle shot was heard by people living nearby but it was assumed that the stock of this [cattle] camp were being worried by hyenas. Later it was discovered that the camp had been raided and three people killed — the herd owner, who had been shot, and his two sons, aged about seven and thirteen, who were lying where they had been sleeping with their throats cut. All the cattle had been taken and their tracks led in the direction of the Mago Valley. The tracks of the raiders indicated that there were no more than four of them.²⁸

It can be seen that the fighting involved "civilian" loss of life. The hostilities also contributed to recurrent food shortages, not just because loss of cattle or farmland meant loss of food, but because fear of raids led herders to take measures such as keeping their animals in large, well-protected groups, thus not utilizing grazing resources fully, and caused farmers not to cultivate outlying fields.

²⁷ "Before the introduction of firearms, this particular group called themselves Nyam-Etom ('Elephant-Eaters'), which stressed their hunting abilities, but after the acquisition of guns, they rephrased this slightly to Nyang-Atom ([carriers of 'new guns') which stresses their bellicose qualities instead." Jan-Ake Alvarsson, *Starvation and Peace or Food and War: Aspects of Armed Conflict in the Lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia*, Uppsala, 1989, p.87 (quoting Serge Tornay).

²⁸ David Turton, "Warfare, Vulnerability and Survival: a Case from Southwestern Ethiopia," *Cambridge Anthropology*, 13.2, (1988-9) p. 71.

David Turton also describes a series of wars between the Mursi and their immediate neighbors in the highlands, the Bodi, over territory. Wars occurred in the early 1950s and between 1971 and 1975, and consisted in occasional raids and ambushes, with long quiet periods in between, until a formal peace agreement concluded the conflict and re-drew the territorial boundary.

These conflicts and the measures taken to preserve security directly contributed to famine in the area in 1971-3, when they coincided with drought. The drought and famine itself led to increased pressure on natural resources and led to more conflict with the Bodi. Disease, hunger and homicide all accounted for high levels of mortality during those years.²⁹

Between 1968 and 1971, a war was also fought between the Bodi and their eastern neighbors, the Dime. The Bodi enjoyed the advantage of superior access to firearms, and were able to undertake raids with relative impunity. About 700 Dime men, women and children were killed and a further 1,000 forced to leave the area, a considerable loss to a population totalling no more than 11,000. The war was brought to an end by Mursi attacks on the Bodi and a government-punitive expedition which confiscated cattle and firearms.³⁰

Another local war was fought between the Dassenatch and the Nyangatom.³¹ In the late 1960s, the Dassenatch, under pressure from the rising waters of Lake Turkana, which was flooding their farmland, began to press on Nyangatom territory. The Kenyan police enforced a peace in 1966 between Dassenatch, Nyangatom and Toposa, which involved burning several villages and trying to make the Ilemi Triangle a "no-man's land."³²

²⁹ David Turton, "Response to Drought: The Mursi of Ethiopia," in J. P. Garlick and R. W. J. Keays (eds.) *Human Ecology in the Tropics*, London, 1977, p. 180.

³⁰ Dave Todd, "War and Peace between the Bodi and Dime of Southwestern Ethiopia," in Katsuyoshi Fukui and David Turton (eds.) *Warfare among East African Herders*, Osaka, 1979.

³¹ The following is based upon a detailed account of this conflict, in: Serge Tornay, "Armed Conflicts in the Lower Omo Valley, 1970-1976: An Analysis from within Nyangatom Society," in Fukui and Turton (eds.), 1979.

³² The Ilemi triangle is an area of Sudanese territory, adjacent to Ethiopia, that has been administered by Kenya, under agreement, since colonial days. The international frontiers in this area have been drawn without reference to the boundaries and migration patterns local ethnic groups.

This peace began to break down in 1968–71, with killings by all groups, including three Kenyan policemen killed by Dassenatch in July 1970.

In 1972, this developed into a serious Dassenatch–Nyangatom conflict, with each side raiding the other and killing between six and ten people in four separate incidents between March and early June, followed by a major Dassenatch attack on three settlements south of Kibish on June 20, in which at least 204 Nyangatom men, women and children were killed as they slept or awoke. The Nyangatom were driven from their fields before they could harvest, and lost many cattle; famine resulted.

In January 1973, a joint Hamar–Kara war party attacked the Nyangatom, killing between 80 and 100. After the Ethiopian police failed to respond to Nyangatom appeals to intervene, the Nyangatom retaliated and killed 104 Kara at the village of Kurdam the following month. On June 21, the Hamar–Kara alliance attacked the Nyangatom at Aepa on the Omo River, killing about 60. The Nyangatom did not retaliate, as they were preparing (jointly with the Toposa) a raid against the Dassenatch. The raid was only a partial success: the intended victims managed to escape and only five were killed, 3,000 animals were taken, but 20 of the raiders died of thirst on the way home. The Dassenatch counter-attack in December at Kibish left 20 dead.

Further clashes continued into 1974, with at least 41 fatalities. The Nyangatom were in the ascendant: thereafter the Kara were obliged to become the lesser partners in an alliance with their erstwhile opponents.

During this period there were sporadic attempts by the Ethiopian and Kenyan governments to control the local warfare. This included paying compensation for cross-border raids, negotiating settlements, undertaking punitive patrols (four against the Dassenatch), and on one occasion, aerial bombardment of villages (the Ethiopian government against the Hamar).

Between the mid-1970s and 1986, the level of violence was much lower, with only 28 confirmed inter-tribal homicides.³³

These conflicts remained under the control of the leaders of the respective ethnic groups. While involving regular violence and homicide, the problems remained within well-defined limits, and the level of military technology was low. In the 1980s, with the intervention of regular armed groups, notably the SPLA and the Kenyan army, and supplies of modern weaponry from these sources and from the Sudan government, conditions began to change, and bloodshed on a larger scale began to occur.

The Nyangatom Massacre of the Mursi

In the mid-1980s, both the SPLA and the Sudan government began to distribute automatic weapons to a number of cattle-herding people close to the Sudan–Ethiopia border. These groups then participated in cattle raiding inside Ethiopia. One group that was heavily armed was the Toposa, who were supported by the Khartoum government as an anti-SPLA militia. The Toposa in turn distributed arms to local allies inside Ethiopia, prominent among whom were the Nyangatom.

The Nyangatom were one group which benefitted from the Sudanese supply of weapons. The Chai, as noted above, lost out heavily. The Mursi were next in line. Mursi–Nyangatom conflict has been longstanding, interspersed with periods of friendly relations and indeed interdependence with mutual trade. A typical incident of homicide occurred in April 1985, when two Mursi boys were shot dead by Nyangatom. Cases such as this were not considered exceptional; a cause for retribution but not for upsetting a fundamentally equitable relationship. In 1987, however, events occurred out of all proportion to what had gone before.

In January or early February 1987, six Nyangatom who were visiting a Mursi village to buy grain were killed by their hosts, using guns and bush-knives. This was considered an outrageous violation of local norms of hospitality. In retaliation, the Nyangatom launched a massive raid on February 21. Equipped with automatic weapons, the destruction was unprecedented. A man who lost three family members in the attack recounted what happened.

The Nyangatom crossed the Omo at the Kara village of Dus, south of the Omo–Mago junction and, guided by Kara, moved northwards up the east bank of the Omo, crossed the Mago and attacked the southern Mursi, who were now sitting targets, from the east. Thus, when the attack began at first light, the Mursi assumed that their attackers were Hamar.³⁴ It was only when they heard the sound of automatic rifles that they realised they were Nyangatom.

The slaughter was indiscriminate, most of those killed being women and children. This was, firstly, because a good proportion of the men were with the cattle, north of the Dara range and, secondly, because it was easier for men and boys, unencumbered with young children,

³³ Alvarsson, 1989, p. 77.

³⁴ The significance of this is that the Hamar were not in conflict with the Mursi, so that the worst that could be expected was a small-scale cattle raid.

to scatter and hide in the bush. The majority of people were killed with spears, having been wounded in the rifle fire. One particularly respected elder, who was well-known to the Nyangatom, was deliberately sought out and speared to death. The hands of women and girls were chopped off with bush knives so that their metal bracelets could be more easily removed ...³⁵

Another visitor to the area met a girl who survived despite having both wrists severed with almost surgical neatness. Another Mursi described the aftermath of the massacre:

The vultures could not eat all the corpses. Crocodiles pulled the bodies into the water. The grass down there died because of all the fat from the bodies.³⁶

Between 600 and 800 were killed -- over ten per cent of the entire Mursi population. Almost the entire southernmost section of the Mursi was annihilated.

The anthropologist Jan-Ake Alvarsson spoke with Nyangatom who had participated in the massacre and recounted how it had come about.

The attack in question had been well planned in advance. The force was supposed to charge at dawn, the vanguard consisting of four people, armed with one heavy and three light machine guns. They were also to carry four hand grenades. The second line was supposed to give the first one cover. They were equipped with sixteen carbines. The third line carried the ordinary (Austrian) rifles,³⁷ and the rest were intended to follow suit, equipped with spears or bush knives and to finish off those shot down by the front lines.

In reality, things turned out differently.... It is unclear whether the target [i.e. which Mursi section] or the day of the battle were the ones planned. Furthermore, the army crossed the Omo around 8 a.m., much later than planned, and the attack was not as surprising as intended as people were

³⁵ Paraphrase based on an eyewitness account, in: Turton, 1988-89, p. 83.

³⁶ In: "The Land is Bad," a film by Leslie Woodhead, shown on Independent Television, UK, July 17, 1991.

³⁷ These weapons were widely available during and after the second world war, most brought by the Italians.

awake. The military order was soon transformed into an unordered and undisciplined row. At least eight Nyangatom warriors were killed from behind by their own forces during the phase of wild shooting.³⁸

The Mursi reprisal was taken against the Kara, the weaker part of the attacking alliance. On March 28, six Kara (including two children) were killed by Mursi, who retaliated by killing seven Mursi. In November, two Nyangatom were killed while working on a dug-out canoe. These were however only short term responses. The Mursi were emphatic that a counter-raid on a comparable scale was needed before an equitable peace could be concluded with the Nyangatom.

Mursi plans for counter-attack verged on the suicidal -- they were heavily outnumbered and possessed no automatic weapons. A much greater danger was further Nyangatom raids, which if carried out on a comparable scale, could have meant the end of the Mursi as a group.

The Kenyan Massacre of the Nyangatom

These plans and fears were overtaken by events. The Nyangatom were also engaged in raiding some of their other neighbors, such as the Dassenatch. In July 1988, in alliance with the Toposa, they carried out one such raid in the Ilemi Triangle. About 60 people were killed in the attack. Earlier in the year the Kenyan government had decided to annex the Triangle, and was fast developing a military presence in the area. The Sudan government was able to lodge only diplomatic protests, as all the surrounding countryside was controlled by the SPLA, which enjoys close relations with Kenya.

The Kenyan government has a long-standing hostility to the pastoralists who live on its borders, who cross the international frontiers as if they did not exist, and who engage in livestock raiding. The administration of these nomads has long consisted of punitive expeditions interspersed with attempts to persuade them to live a settled life, wear clothes and send their children to school.

On July 28, the Kenyan police clashed with a group of Toposa or Nyangatom raiders who had previously attacked the Dassenatch, and came off worst. Fifteen policemen were killed, and some taken hostage. The Kenyan government responded the following day with an attack using helicopter gunships and paramilitary forces on the Nyangatom area of Kibish, which straddles Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan. About 200 Nyangatom

³⁸ Alvarsson, 1989, p. 68.

raiders and a minimum of 500 civilians were killed by the Kenyan forces over the following 18 days. In the attack, at least five villages inside Ethiopia were partly destroyed, and the Swedish Philadelphia Mission at Kibish was burned. The Kenyan army also undertook a retaliatory massacre against the Toposa in Sudan.³⁹

Recent reports indicate that another round of killings may have started, with a reliable account that Mursi raiders killed tens of Ari in May 1991 in retaliation for the killing of one Mursi.

Conclusion

Successive Ethiopian governments centered in the highlands have shared a similar attitude to pastoral nomads to that of the Kenyan government. The power base of the EPRDF is, like its predecessors, located in the highlands. The EPRDF avows an ideology which gives equality to all and the right of self-determination to peripheral people. However, the First National Congress of the EPRDF, held in February 1991, adopted a political program that included an item resolving "to settle nomads in settled agriculture."⁴⁰ This implies that if nomadic pastoralists do not agree to settle, the state is entitled to settle them by force. The history of such attempts indicates that the nomads will resist. Democratic rights and the enforced settlement of nomads are incompatible.

The Lower Omo valley presents a more general challenge to the government of Ethiopia (and indeed those of Kenya and Sudan). It is an area where their writ scarcely runs, and where central control can only be enforced by extraordinarily high levels of violence. Government-mediated settlements of local conflicts, the so-called "stranger's peace", can be successful only when both sides to the conflict share an interest in a settlement, and the terms of the settlement can be enforced. At least one such negotiated "stranger's peace" broke down in the 1970s for these reasons. A lasting peace and respect for human rights in this troubled area can only be achieved through long and patient interaction with the indigenous people, undertaken by all the governments concerned.

³⁹ See: Africa Watch report, *Kenya: Taking Liberties*, July 1991, pp. 334-6.

⁴⁰ Revolutionary Democratic Program of the EPRDF adopted at the First National Congress, Political Program, Article 8(d).

19. DIVIDE AND MISRULE: THE EAST, 1984-91

In 1983-4, the Ethiopian government completed a bloody victory over the insurgencies in the southeast. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), Somali-Abo Liberation Front (SALF) and Sidama Liberation Front were all defeated and the OLF was severely weakened and would no longer pose a significant military threat. A key element in this success was the Ethiopian government's strategy of fostering divisions in the ranks of the insurgents: its support for the Somali National Movement (SNM) against the WSLF was the clearest example. In this strategy of "divide and rule," the Ethiopian government was, ironically, assisted by the Somali government, which was following exactly the same strategy.

As a result, the lines of conflict became more fragmented and complex. As well as attacks on civilians by the Somali and Ethiopian armies, there was an increasing level of inter-communal violence which extended throughout eastern Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. This chapter documents some of the abuses of human rights that resulted from this fragmentation, for which the Siad Barre and Mengistu governments share ultimate responsibility.

Unrest in the Ogaden

The Ogaden did not return to peace after the defeat of the WSLF; but neither was there widespread rebellion. Instead there was a low level of violence between the well-armed but impoverished, restricted and frustrated herders, and the Ethiopian army, police and members of other communities. A breakaway group from the WSLF, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) was formed in 1984, but failed to make a military impact.¹

The drought of 1984 together with government policies led to a number of violent incidents in the Ogaden. The villagization of the highland Oromo involved the relocation of many communities in areas which had previously been used as pasture by the herders. Other areas were allocated to resettlers from Wollo. There were a number of violent disputes between the pastoralists and farmers.

¹ The words "Western Somali" in "WSLF" indicate an attachment to the ideal of a greater Somalia; the "Ogaden National" title of the ONLF indicates the belief that the Ogaden are a nationality, not merely a clan, and indicates no relationship with the Somali state.