

20. WESTERN POLICY TOWARDS ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia has had close relations with a number of western countries throughout the 20th century, including Belgium, France, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Sweden, and the United States. Successive governments have turned selectively to different western countries for economic, military and diplomatic support. During and immediately after the Second World War, the Ethiopian government was dominated by Britain. The British army had been instrumental in liberating the country from Italian fascist rule in 1941, and British military administration continued in Eritrea until 1952. Thereafter, Haile Selassie began to cultivate closer ties with the United States.

US Policy and Haile Selassie

Ethiopia under the Emperor Haile Selassie was the United States' closest ally in Africa. This was due to several factors. One was that after the Second World War the US was promoting a policy of decolonization in Africa and Asia. Ethiopia, as the only indigenous independent state in Africa, was symbolically central to this policy, which was duly encouraged by Haile Selassie. The Emperor was instrumental in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and its adoption of a pro-western stance and conservative position on inherited boundaries. A second reason was Ethiopia's strategic position adjacent to the Red Sea, and its possession of the communications center at Kagnew, near Asmara. For more than a decade after the US signed a 25 year lease on Kagnew base in 1953, it was the most important "listening post" in the Middle East.

The strategic value of Ethiopia's Red Sea coastline, all of which fell in the territory of Eritrea, and of Kagnew station, meant that the US was an enthusiastic supporter of the unity of Eritrea and Ethiopia. In a now famous statement, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said to the UN Security Council in 1952:

From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked to our ally, Ethiopia.

As a consequence, from 1953-76, Ethiopia was the largest recipient of US aid in Africa. This included generous military assistance, based on the 1953 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement. Ethiopia received more than half of the US's entire military assistance to Africa during this period. Between 1953-76 the US trained and equipped an army of about 40,000 men

and an air force of 2,000, at a cost of \$280 million.¹ The annual subsidy to the army was about \$12 million. About 4,000 officers and air force personnel were trained in the US. However, when Haile Selassie made repeated requests for increased arms deliveries to offset the threat of Soviet-armed Somalia after 1960, the US was unwilling to supply all the armaments and finance he requested. Such requests were made in 1967 and 1973, and turned down because the US considered them excessive.

Earlier, in recognition of US support, Haile Selassie had sent a battalion to fight in Korea. However, he was no simple vassal of the US; for example he visited the Soviet Union and to discuss economic and military assistance, and publicly supported the Arab states over against Israel in 1973.

The United States was not the only western supporter of Haile Selassie. In the 1940s and '50s, and to a lesser extent afterwards, the Swedish government had supplied training and material for the Imperial bodyguard and the air force. The British trained the army until 1949, and provided limited technical assistance thereafter. Ethiopia and Israel signed a military pact in 1958, whereby Israel provided training at the Holeta military academy and (from 1964) counter-insurgency advisors in Eritrea. This continued until Haile Selassie broke diplomatic relations with Israel in October 1973, in deference to the OAU's support for the Arab states in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Ethiopian-Israeli relations remained warm, however, and Israeli military advisors returned during 1975-7.

The West and the Revolution

In the early days of the revolution, the United States continued to be the major foreign power with an interest in Ethiopia. For three years from the outbreak of popular unrest in February 1974, the US attitude can be described as conciliatory but concerned. Other western governments followed comparable policies, while internal conditions led to scaled down assistance to development programs. Italy -- worried about the welfare of the large numbers of Italian citizens, especially in besieged Asmara -- remained close to the government diplomatically, but net flows of economic aid completely dried up by 1977. Thereafter there was a dramatic break in US-Ethiopian relations, which cooled to the point of becoming frozen in cold-war hostility.

For its part, the Dergue both demanded armaments from the US, and attacked "US Imperialism" in official pronouncements, before instigating the rupture itself.

¹ Lemmu Baissa, "Militarization and Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa," in Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on the Horn of Africa, CUNY, New York, May 26-28, 1991.

During 1974-6, the US policy of supplying generous military aid to Ethiopia continued.² In fact, in 1975 and 1976, arms shipments increased substantially. However, the amounts delivered were not enough to satisfy the Dergue, which sent missions to a variety of countries asking for military assistance. The US expressed dismay at certain Ethiopian military policies, notably the 1976 Peasants' March on Eritrea, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger went so far as to say that if the march went ahead, continued US military assistance would be jeopardized. On the whole, however, the US sought to influence events by maintaining warm relations with the government, including considering increased arms requests. This was not to last.

The inauguration of President Jimmy Carter in January 1977 was followed within a month by the seizure of absolute power by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu was not only the most determined, ruthless and militaristic of the Dergue members, but he was the USSR's closest ally in the government. Pro-Soviet and anti-American statements became more frequent and vitriolic, and arms shipments from the USSR started immediately. The Red Terror officially began. On February 23, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Talcott Seelye visited Addis Ababa and told the government that it could expect a termination of military assistance, on human rights grounds.

Since 1977, when they were first issued, the Department of State's annual human rights reports on Ethiopia have, with few exceptions, been thorough and objective.

In April 1977, the US notified the Ethiopian government of the imminent closure of Kagnew station the following September when the 25-year lease expired. The decision had in fact been made in 1973, on purely technical grounds (the base had been superseded by the use of aerial and satellite reconnaissance). On April 30, Colonel Mengistu responded by unilaterally terminating the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, and ordering all US military personnel to leave immediately. Shortly afterwards, he ordered a cut in US Embassy staff of 50%.

The US-Ethiopia breach was confirmed by the massive airlift of Soviet arms to Ethiopia during the Ethiopia-Somalia war. In November 1977, the US embargoed all arms deliveries to both Ethiopia and Somalia. Shortly thereafter, the US made a military pact with Somalia, which had just expelled the Soviets, accusing them of perfidy. (The naval base at Berbera was the strategic prize that changed hands.) Ethiopia's other longtime regional adversary, Sudan, also moved closer to the US at this time. Meanwhile, between 1975 and 1980, Ethiopia's arms budget jumped tenfold. More than \$1 billion in military assistance was provided by the USSR, and 13,000 Cuban combat troops were stationed in the country. East German security advisors were to follow.

² The following discussion owes much to: David A. Korn, Ethiopia, The United States and the Soviet Union, London, 1986.

Despite Mengistu's evident preference for closer ties with the Soviet Union, the US continued to make efforts to ensure that relations were not broken off altogether. In 1978, the incoming US Ambassador, Frederick Chapin, recommended a small program of economic assistance, and a small amount of non-lethal military assistance was provided to the army. However, any further attempts to upgrade economic ties were prevented by the Hickenlooper Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act, which stipulates that all US development assistance must be cut off to a country which nationalizes US-owned assets without providing compensation. Some 25 US companies claimed compensation amounting to \$30 million following the Ethiopian government's nationalizations of 1975, and the Ethiopian government refused to pay this relatively insignificant sum.

The failure to reach agreement on the compensation issue, together with increasing cold-war tension, led to further mutual US-Ethiopian hostility. In 1979, the USAID program was officially terminated, and in 1980, the US Ambassador was asked to leave; since then, the US has been represented by a charge d'affaires. In 1981, Ethiopia signed more far-reaching agreements with the USSR, allowing it use of military bases in the Red Sea islands, and signed the Tripartite Agreement with South Yemen and Libya. In 1982, the Reagan Administration's policy review for the Horn of Africa determined to isolate Ethiopia, supporting its pro-western neighbors, but stopped short of supporting the rebel fronts.³ In 1984, when BandAid leader Bob Geldof visited Ethiopia and suggested that private agencies pay the \$30 million compensation due under the Hickenlooper amendment, thereby removing the formal obstacles to the far larger amounts of official development assistance, the idea was given a cold reception.

Other western countries' relations with Ethiopia cooled over the same period, though none went so far as withdrawing full diplomatic accreditation and suspending all development assistance.

Western Humanitarian Assistance 1980-84

Throughout the 1980s, all US assistance to Ethiopia was humanitarian aid.

Between 1977 and 1980, the US provided on average \$15 million official assistance to Ethiopia each year, substantially down on previous years. In 1981, that fell to \$2 million and in 1982, to less than \$1 million. It was planned to phase out bilateral assistance altogether in 1983, but in fact USAID responded to requests from humanitarian agencies, and assistance rose to \$6

³ The conservative Ethiopian Democratic Union was the United States' favorite rebel front, but after 1977 it was not an affective military force. In 1984-5 the State Department considered supporting the TPLF, but rejected it as too left-wing. Support for the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance, a conservative organization of exiles, was entertained but rejected because of its lack of a military presence in Ethiopia.

million in 1983 and \$18 million in 1984.⁴ Other western donors such as Great Britain cut their programs in similar proportion in 1980/1, though were quicker to increase them afterwards. By contrast, in 1985, the US gave \$142 million and in 1990, \$177 million.

The United Nations was, comparatively speaking, much more generous. While overall assistance stagnated between 1979 and 1982, the major UN agencies (World Food Program, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Development Program and UNICEF) all increased their assistance substantially. From \$13.1 million in 1977 and \$22.6 million in 1979, their donations had trebled to \$67.0 million by 1981. As shown in chapter 5, some of this assistance was aimed at the "rehabilitation" of the war-affected southeastern regions and the return of refugees. This assistance can be criticized for assisting the government's war aims.

While assistance from western Europe stagnated, aid from the European Commission increased over the same period. The EC aid program to Ethiopia was described by an ex-US Charge d'Affaires in these terms:

[It] seemed less a product of thought than of bureaucratic momentum and badly oversimplified logic: the EEC had a fund to aid needy Third World countries, Ethiopia was a large and exceptionally needy Third World country, ergo the EEC program for Ethiopia.⁵

EC assistance to Ethiopia grew steadily from \$4.2 million in 1977 to \$41.5 million in 1981. (It reached \$153.4 million in 1988.) Like the UN assistance, the program was little influenced by the human rights considerations that affected US policy at its best. The only EC country to increase its aid substantially over the period was Italy, which donated an average of over \$30 million each year during 1980-2.

In 1983, all western donors increased their bilateral aid programs to Ethiopia, and overall assistance rose from \$221 million to \$361 million. An appeal by British voluntary agencies for famine relief donations in March 1983 was considered a success, though the amounts given were small compared to what was to come later. In 1984 overall aid levels topped \$400 million and in 1985 reached nearly \$800 million.

When the Ethiopian famine became a matter of domestic political interest in the West, one of the questions which was repeatedly asked was: why had not the western countries responded sooner? The above account makes it clear that there had been a response, albeit a selective one. For a famine of 1970s proportions, the assistance would have been adequate. As it was to turn out, the amounts given were far less than needed. The US government was notably ungenerous.

⁴ Figures from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

⁵ Korn, 1986, p. 58.

Some donors claimed that their tardy response was due to the Ethiopian government concealing the famine. But, while it was certainly the case that between April and September 1984 the Ethiopian government had been preoccupied with the preparations for the tenth anniversary celebrations for the revolution, and had been anxious to conceal the famine from its own people and from visiting journalists, this period was the exception rather than the rule.⁶ Until March 1984 the government was quite frank about the existence of a famine -- Colonel Mengistu even mentioned it in his 1983 May Day speech -- and at all times the RRC was publishing figures of people in need and amounts of food required. There were no fewer than 21 warnings of impending famine from March 1981 to October 1984 by RRC and relief agencies.⁷ Western governments were well-provided with official information about the developing famine.

Why was the response small relative to the real need? There are three reasons, which range from a genuine attempt to grapple with an insoluble moral dilemma, to behaving in a frankly cynical and unethical manner.

At the cynical end of the spectrum, Ethiopia was seen as a cold war enemy that was engaging in gratuitous abuse of the west, and thus deserved to be shut off from any assistance. The attitude was that if Ethiopia needed assistance, it should turn to its patron the USSR. Thus in early 1984, when the US Congress drafted a bill mandating aid to Ethiopia, President Reagan attached to it an amendment requesting military assistance to El Salvador and the Nicaraguan contras.

This policy subsequently came in for much criticism by the media and humanitarian agencies, and was at times even equated with having caused the famine. It did not of course cause the famine, though generous assistance provided earlier would certainly have prevented much suffering.

A second reason for the lack of response was a degree of scepticism about the figures produced by the RRC. The figures for people in need were produced with an exactness that appeared spurious (with hindsight, correctly so), and no opportunity for cross-checking. They were widely held to have been inflated in order to attract western aid. As has been shown, at times they were certainly mendacious. While the specifics of the distortions of the figures were not always known, the general fact of their manipulation was understood.

This justifiable scepticism combined with a lack of understanding of the dynamics of famine (specifically, few appreciated the fact that starvation is the end result of a very long

⁶ See: Article 19, Starving in Silence: A Report on Famine and Censorship, London, 1990.

⁷ Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD Thesis, London, 1988, pp. 365-7.

process of destitution) and with a general cynicism to produce a climate of indifference in the upper echelons of the aid community. At different times in the development of the famine, relief officials were heard to say:⁸

Every year I have been here for the last four to five years they have said that several million people were facing food shortages. If this was true, at least a million would have died by now. (World Food Program [WFP] official)

If we see the figures we tend to divide by ten -- maybe that is a very cynical attitude. If there is a very bad year, we might add ten per cent. (European Community official)

The RRC says it will put on a show and it puts on a flop. (Canadian official, after being given a guided tour of a famine-stricken region)

This attitude even continued into 1985:

How many do you think died in 1984? I would fervently hope that it was less than one million. But, frankly, to have believed those March figures from the RRC, there should have been three million dead. (WFP official)

Time and again, the RRC was accused of "crying wolf." This turned out not to be the case. However, as this report has demonstrated, the major reason why the famine developed into the cataclysm that it did was not that western aid was tardy or inadequate, but that the Ethiopian government insisted on pursuing a set of military and economic policies that seriously aggravated the problem. The aid agency officials were, for the most part, not well-informed about these policies, and were thus unaware of their likely consequences. This ignorance both led to an underestimation of the severity of the impending famine (in 1983-4) and a failure to appreciate what kind of response was really required (in 1985).

The third reason for withholding aid is the most legitimate. It assumes that western governments were aware of the government's policies which were creating famine, and were not prepared to underwrite them with funds. The refusal of the US to support UN initiatives to repatriate and "rehabilitate" refugees in southeast Ethiopia during 1979-82 lends credence to this view. The argument would be that the donors were presented with a difficult moral dilemma: were they to provide assistance to mitigate human suffering, knowing that the underlying causes of that suffering would not be affected, and might even be strengthened or legitimized by their assistance? Or should they refuse to intervene until basic conditions for the neutrality and accountability of relief were met, and the policies creating the suffering were changed? This is a genuine dilemma and one with no easy solution.

⁸ Quoted in: Cutler, 1988, pp. 362-3, and Peter Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa: Politics, Bureaucracy and the Famine*, London, 1986, p. 32.

There were undoubtedly some individuals in the major western donor agencies who were aware of this dilemma. However, they were not the ones who were dictating policy. As a result, the central issues of Ethiopian government culpability in the famine were never addressed.

In the first instance, the allegations of the abuse of humanitarian aid did not consist in documenting its use as a counter-insurgency tool, but instead consisted of claiming that it was being diverted to the military. Aid was, of course, being diverted to the military (see chapter 10), but it was relatively easy for RRC officials to impress any visiting officials and diplomats and "prove" that the allegations were unfounded.

In March 1983, the Canadian Ambassador to Ethiopia stated that there was no evidence of any diversion of food. Britain's Overseas Development Administration endorsed this view in April. In May-June there was a visit from a delegation from the European Parliament, which failed to uncover any diversion. In March 1984, a bipartisan committee of the US Congress also failed to find evidence of misallocation, and shortly afterwards a mission from the US General Accounting Office pronounced the rate of diversion to be within acceptable limits. None of these investigations visited rebel-held areas or was able to travel independently of official guides. Several were primarily concerned with the issue of whether relief food had been re-exported to the USSR.

The sustained ability to pursue the marginal issue of food diversion, and still not get to the bottom of it, continued into 1985/6. The western donors would have been better advised to investigate whether the government was pursuing a set of policies that created famine conditions. The US was the only government to do so, and then only in 1985, which was too late.

Human Rights and Famine, 1985: UN and US Approaches

The sudden media interest in the Ethiopian famine in October 1984 and afterwards radically changed the West's relations with Ethiopia.

In 1985, all western donors increased their assistance to Ethiopia substantially. Assistance to Ethiopia was extremely generous. The US became the country's largest donor. US assistance was all -- with a small exception -- directed through non-governmental organizations. The details of the programs can be criticized, but not the fact of the generosity and the willingness to support a people whose government was engaged in persistent hostility to the US. Other western donors were, however, prepared to give support directly to the government RRC.

The US was the only donor government to undertake an investigation into the human

rights aspects of the famine. This investigation, mounted between July and September 1985, has to be seen in the light of the UN role in the famine.

In late 1984, the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE) was set up, ostensibly to coordinate relief efforts, which were becoming extremely complex as a result of proliferation of donors and agencies. It was frequently turned to as an authoritative voice on issues to do with the diversion of food, forcible resettlement, and other abuses. Rather than investigating the abuses, UNEOE consistently concealed disturbing evidence produced by its own monitors. Its role has been described thus:

UNEOE's main function was to act as a "screening device", giving the appearance of competent action in response to famine but not compromising its actual position in Addis Ababa by unduly antagonizing the host government ... it would have been as embarrassing for the donors who had entrusted resources to the Ethiopian government as it was for the government itself to have aid misallocation exposed.⁹

Mr Kurt Jansson, head of UNEOE during 1984/5, continued to play this role even after leaving his position, as will be evident from reading his account of the famine.¹⁰

Some members of the US Congress were unhappy with the UN whitewashing of the Ethiopian government's culpability. In late July 1985, Representative Toby Roth (R., Wisconsin) introduced an amendment to the foreign aid bill, the International Security and Cooperation Act of 1985.¹¹ President Reagan had to determine within 30 days of signing the bill whether the Ethiopian government was (1) conducting "a deliberate policy of starvation of its people" and (2) failing to grant its citizens "fundamental human rights." If the President found the Ethiopian government guilty on both counts, the US would be obliged to impose a trade embargo that would cover all exports save emergency humanitarian aid. The bill was signed on August 8. It was to raise an insoluble moral dilemma, and be the most severe test of the US policy towards Ethiopia.

In early August, UNEOE released a report authored by Kurt Jansson, consisting of a "comprehensive review" of the relief operations in Eritrea and Tigray. Jansson and other leading aid officials, including a US diplomat and RRC director Dawit Wolde Giorgis had spent four days in their inquiry, which was confined to a few garrisons in government held areas -- no contact was made with ERA and REST. (During its entire lifespan, UNEOE made no effort to direct any assistance to ERA and REST at all.) The report concluded that 75 per cent of the

⁹ Cutler, 1988, p. 408.

¹⁰ Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987.

¹¹ This account owes much to: Jonathan B. Tucker, "The Politics of Famine: US Foreign Policy in Ethiopia, 1982-1985," mimeo, 1985.

affected people in Eritrea and Tigray were being reached from the government side. This was manifestly untrue (see chapter 11).

Rebuttals of the report by ERA and REST were forthcoming in the following days. As has been shown, it was produced at a time when the government was directing only one twentieth of the relief to Tigray, which had one third of the affected population. It had just completed a bloody offensive in Tigray and was preparing a massive offensive in Eritrea. Nevertheless, UNEOE rejected these dissenting voices.

UNEOE had not addressed the dilemma of whether to channel assistance, no questions asked, into the government side of the war zone. It was prepared to endorse the ten per cent contribution to survival represented by aid, without questioning the role of the government in attacking the other 90 per cent.

USAID administrator Peter McPherson was asked to prepare the US report for the President. For the most part he accepted the UNEOE report's conclusions, but with significant reservations. On August 24 he visited Addis Ababa for three days, and then went on to Khartoum. He announced that most of the needy were being reached from the government side. He did not mention (and perhaps did not know -- the subsequent report only gives distribution figures up to July) that RRC deliveries to Eritrea and Tigray had fallen 85 per cent since the UNEOE mission. McPherson also mentioned that the US was supporting cross-border relief operations too. The US support for the cross-border operation was indeed more generous than any other donor, but it fell short of both promises made and real need.

The report was released on September 7.¹² It accused the government of deliberate policies that "have no doubt caused vast and unnecessary suffering, including starvation," and documented a number of these policies. But it also said that the evidence did not show that the government was "at this time conducting a deliberate policy of starvation." The carefully-chosen inclusion of the words "at this time" indicated that the investigator was prepared to believe that the government had been pursuing such a policy until recently -- and implicitly trusted that the government's policy had now changed for good. As chapter 10 has shown, the Ethiopian government was at this very moment beginning to realize the asset that it now had in the form of relief food, and was changing its counter-insurgency strategy in Eritrea accordingly - - though scarcely so in Tigray.

The essential problem with the inquiry was not that it was cursory, but that it was essentially asking the wrong question. The aim of the military policy was not to create starvation *per se*, but to create a population without any independent means of livelihood -- i.e. to create a choice between starvation and submission for the civilian population living in areas

¹² Presidential Determination No. 85-20, "Determination with Respect to Ethiopia," September 7, 1985.

controlled by the rebel fronts. Without international aid, the policy would be tantamount to starvation, but with that aid, it need not be, while still meeting the same military and political goals. The deeper issue was: Was the Ethiopian government engaged in a war against the economic, social and political fabric of Eritrea and Tigray, and on what terms was it prepared to provide assistance to the people? The Ethiopian government could -- barely -- escape the charge of using starvation as a weapon in August 1985, but it could not escape these other charges. The Presidential Determination implicitly recognized this, concluding:

[The amendment] does not call for any determination concerning the past conduct and policies of the Ethiopian Government concerning starvation of its people. Nor does it call for an evaluation of policies that may have had political or military purposes, but which nevertheless caused increased starvation. The Government's past conduct, and the effects of its policies, are matters of grave concern, even though the evidence on these subjects cannot justify a determination under this statute.

The US administration could justifiably have returned a verdict of "guilty" and imposed an embargo on Ethiopia -- and indeed gone further and cut humanitarian assistance programs on the government side. This would have also provided a post hoc justification for the earlier scaling down of aid. However, the administration chose not to do so, and also not to defend its earlier policy on those grounds.

The pragmatic humanitarian rationale behind the US decision to reject the charge that the Ethiopian government was using starvation was that at this point it was necessary to deliver aid to the hungry, no matter what. The US was also providing cross-border assistance to ERA and REST, and as the rebel-held areas expanded, USAID support to these organizations grew to eclipse assistance given through the government side. (The same was never true of other major donors such as the European Community, let alone the UN.) The political rationale was a domestic one: since BandAid and Live Aid, it was necessary in terms of domestic politics to be seen to be giving generously. As television cameras and politicians could not visit rebel-held areas (though they did go to refugee camps in Sudan), it was necessary for US assistance to have a high media profile in government-held areas.

Although it is possible to criticize the details of the assistance program to Ethiopia after 1985, the essential fact was that the US gave assistance generously, where it was needed, and limited that assistance to humanitarian aid. By 1990, Ethiopia was receiving the largest amount of US assistance of any country in Africa -- without even full diplomatic representation or a USAID mission.

The involvement of the OAU also deserves mention. The Chairman of the OAU, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, was pressured to take an initiative to negotiate a safe passage agreement for relief aid in the war zone. President Nyerere declined, fearing that the precedent of giving even a small degree of de facto recognition to insurgent groups (and in the

case of the EPLF, secessionists) would be contrary to the common interest of African governments. The OAU, which has its headquarters at Addis Ababa, took no further part in initiatives to relieve the famine, curtail human rights abuses, or promote peace.

Western Assistance after 1985

During the 14 years of Mengistu's rule, western assistance to the country grew from \$105 million to over \$1 billion. Most of this aid was disbursed without the same scruples that informed the US assistance program at its best. Because of the artificially low official exchange rate, an equivalent or larger amount was contributed direct to the Ethiopian treasury.

In 1986 and 1987, western assistance to Ethiopia dropped slightly, but by 1988 it surpassed 1985 levels, and in 1989 topped \$1 billion. The main stimulus to the increased levels of assistance was continued appeals for humanitarian relief by the Ethiopian government on account of drought. The appeal for 1987/8 was the most successful -- more than one million tons of grain was donated, enough to feed the entire "at risk" population with extra to spare. As only a dwindling proportion of the needy were in government-held areas, especially after April 1988, the pattern continued to be that the less-needy in government-held areas received priority over the more needy in EPLF- and TPLF-held areas.

US assistance was consistently over \$150 million per annum after 1987. US relief aid was sent through both voluntary agencies working on the government side and through ERA and REST. The US also assisted in negotiating the Joint Relief Program for aid to TPLF-held Tigray in 1989/90, and for aid through EPLF-held Massawa to Asmara in 1990/91.

After Massawa was reopened in January 1991, the US stopped committing further food to the cross-border operation, ostensibly on the grounds that such food was no longer necessary because of the opening of the port. This was not the case, because the Massawa operation was not able to provide all the necessary assistance. Suspicions were voiced that USAID acted in this way to bring pressure to bear on the EPLF and EPRDF to negotiate a ceasefire. After aid agencies publicly criticized the decision in early May, it was reversed.

The ban on US development assistance to Ethiopia on account of the Hickenlooper Amendment remained in force. No further investigations into human rights abuses and their relationship to famine were undertaken, but the US continued to be highly critical of the Ethiopian government's human rights record. In particular, the US government opposed giving assistance to the resettlement program.

European countries provided assistance to an even greater extent: in 1988, the EC and its member countries donated over \$500 million, over half of the entire assistance program to Ethiopia and twenty times the level of 1977. Italian assistance alone was \$246 million in 1988,

including generous aid to the "development" project of Tana-Beles, which was coextensive with the Metekel resettlement project.¹³ European countries and the EC were much more reluctant to support the relief effort in rebel-held areas than the US, and the great majority of the assistance was provided to the government side.¹⁴ In 1991, several European donors followed the US in cutting cross-border assistance to ERA and REST. This was not criticized in the same way by voluntary agencies because agency staff recognized that these donors were unlikely to respond to such criticism, and certainly would not respond rapidly -- unlike USAID, which was much more sensitive to pressure.

European assistance included direct aid to the government, notably to the RRC during 1985 and afterwards. There is no evidence for a significant withholding of aid on human rights grounds. The only issue of internal policy which was raised was economic liberalization in the years after 1988.

Assistance from the principal UN agencies to Ethiopia grew from \$107.6 million in 1985 to \$155.8 million in 1988. Only in 1991 did UN assistance first flow to rebel-held areas, when the opening of the EPLF-held port of Massawa was accompanied by an agreement to allow half of the food to be distributed by ERA. As in the case of European assistance, human rights considerations do not appear to have influenced aid levels. On several occasions, the UN appealed for assistance to be given to the resettlement program, on the grounds of preventing suffering among the resettled population.

From late 1988 onwards, the Ethiopian government engaged in a concerted campaign to woo the West, in order to obtain increased economic assistance. This led to changes among many Western governments in return. The US, however, only hinted at an improved relationship -- nothing of substance changed.

The corollary of generous western assistance to Ethiopia was that aid was given to neighboring countries such as Sudan and Somalia in a similarly uncritical manner. In the case of Somalia, much of the assistance destined for refugees was used to feed soldiers and militiamen loyal to the Somali government.

Ethiopia under Perestroika

Despite the ambitions of Soviet cold-war strategists, President Mengistu refused to be a

¹³ As detailed in chapter 12, in 1985, the Metekel project was killing ordinary people faster than the greatest assaults of the famine.

¹⁴ EC assistance was legally constrained by the provisions of the Lome Convention, to which Ethiopia is a signatory.

simple vassal of the USSR. Certain policies, such as the delayed formation of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, were opposed by his Soviet advisors. In the late 1980s, Mengistu was also impervious to the changes taking place in the USSR under President Gorbachev. He is reported to have prohibited talk of both *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and certainly he ignored advice from Soviet economists about the need for economic reform in 1987. The USSR showed increasing impatience with President Mengistu's unreconstructed Stalinism, insatiable appetite for military hardware, repeated military disasters, and embarrassing famines, and announced that arms deliveries would be cut off when existing contracts expired in March 1991. Arms deliveries continued up until that date, so that the warning never actually impeded Mengistu's military strength; he was no straightforward "victim of *perestroika*."

However, the Soviet declaration that the line of credit was finite struck a psychological blow. Together with the military debacles in Eritrea and Tigray, this encouraged the opposition and contributed to the attempted coup in April 1989 and the "change in direction" whereby Marxism was formally abandoned in March 1990. It also forced Mengistu to look elsewhere for military and economic assistance.

Israel and the Falasha Issue

Under Haile Selassie, Ethiopia had close relations with Israel. Israel's primary interest at that time was a strategic one -- it was concerned about the growth of militant Arab states in Sudan and on the shores of the Red Sea. Israel was supporting the Anyanya insurgents in southern Sudan through Ethiopia. A secondary concern was the population of Ethiopian Jews, the Falasha.

The Falasha are a small group who numbered about 50,000 in 1980. They lived in northern Gonder and adjoining areas. They refer to themselves as Beita Israel ("House of Israel") or Kayla, an Agau word of uncertain interpretation. Their origins are uncertain and controversial; most scholars regard them as belonging to the Agau ethnic group, who inhabited northern Ethiopia before the arrival of the Tigrayans and Amhara. Their Judaism incorporates the Pentateuch but neither the Mishnah nor Talmud; their religious language is Ge'ez (ancient Ethiopic). The Israeli Rabbinate was, until 1973, unsure of the legitimacy of their claim to Judaism. The Falasha traditionally aspired to migrate to the Holy Land.

Until the revolution the Falasha were not allowed to own land, and made their living primarily from occupations such as pottery and craftwork; they were also subjected to various forms of discrimination. In other respects they were relatively fortunate; for instance their area of northern Gonder was little-affected by the droughts of 1983-4 and continued to produce food surpluses.

In the 1970s, the plight of the Falashas aroused concern among Israelis and Jewish Americans, who lobbied for them to be allowed to migrate to Israel.

After the revolution, the Dergue aligned itself with left-wing states in the Middle East and north Africa, and became publicly hostile to Israel -- though a low level of contacts between the two governments always continued. From 1978 to 1988, Ethiopia's closest African ally was Libya, which provided military and technical assistance, and the Palestine Liberation Organization was given the use of an "embassy" in central Addis Ababa. Israel, which had expressed repeated concern over the plight of the Falashas was rebuffed several times.

In 1984/5, Israel sponsored "Operation Moses" whereby Falasha were encouraged to leave Ethiopia and migrate to Sudan as refugees, from where they were airlifted to Israel. This clandestine operation was terminated in early 1985 when it became public in Sudan, which is a member of the Arab League and officially a supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization. After the exodus was made public, it was condemned by the Ethiopian government.

By November 1989, Ethiopia had reversed its position: an Israeli Ambassador was accredited, and the Libyans were close to being expelled.¹⁵

The emigration of Falasha direct from Ethiopia to Israel started in 1989. In return for allowing the Falasha to emigrate, Ethiopia received weapons and military instructors. Israeli officials at different times admitted to having supplied small arms, non-lethal military technology, and training in counter-insurgency,¹⁶ and at other times denied giving any assistance. However, a confidential congressional staff memo leaked to Washington Jewish Week¹⁷ confirmed that in late 1989 about 100 cluster bombs were supplied, which the Ethiopian air force was particularly eager to have. President Jimmy Carter said to Israeli Knesset member Dedi Zucker: "You don't need to sell Mengistu fragmentation bombs in order to persuade him to let your people go."¹⁸ Cluster bombs were used in the bombing of civilian targets in Eritrea including Massawa, causing large numbers of civilian casualties.

Between 1989 and May 1991, the Ethiopian government repeatedly used the Falasha population as pawns to obtain arms. The US government consistently opposed the delivery of arms to Ethiopia, and was particularly hostile to the Israeli sale of cluster bombs, because these had been developed with US technology. This opposition appears to have prevented the further

¹⁵ A bomb explosion in Addis Ababa was blamed on the Libyans. Later, the Ethiopian government was to accuse the Libyans of supporting the EPRDF.

¹⁶ For example: Israeli ambassador to Ethiopia, Mr Meir Joffe, interviewed by Richard Dowden on British TV, Channel 4, The World this Week, June 2, 1990.

¹⁷ July 12, 1990.

¹⁸ Quoted in: Return, April/May 1990.

delivery of cluster bombs by the Israeli government from early 1990 onwards.

Almost the entire Falasha population was drawn from Gonder to Addis Ababa in 1990 in the expectation of resettlement in Israel. They abandoned their farms and livelihoods. Because the Ethiopian government allowed only a very slow rate of exodus, many were forced to remain in Addis Ababa for a long period, without adequate shelter or food.

The US expressed particular concern for the Falasha population, and repeatedly raised the question of their freedom to emigrate to Israel with the Ethiopian authorities. The underlying reason for this concern was pressure brought by the pro-Israel lobby on congress and the administration, and accompanying media attention.

In the dying days of the Mengistu regime, the Israeli government mounted a dramatic airlift known as "Operation Solomon" to bring the remaining Falasha from Addis Ababa to Israel. This was successfully completed before the EPRDF occupation of the city, which, it was feared, would lead to disorder, reprisals against the Falasha, and restrictions on their emigration by the new government. In the event, the EPRDF occupation led to none of these things for the small number of Falasha remaining behind.

Peace Negotiations

In 1990 and 1991, along with other intermediaries, the US was active in convening a succession of negotiations between the government and the rebel fronts. Given continued though declining Soviet patronage of Ethiopia, and very limited US economic or strategic interest in the country, this involvement was remarkable. The US agenda appeared to reflect its concern with the Falashas, the provision of relief, and a commitment to the resolution of conflict by negotiation. With the ending of the cold war, strategic interests were fast waning; the only remaining political commitment of significance was the maintenance of Ethiopia's territorial integrity -- i.e., opposition to the independence of Eritrea.

During the first months of the Gulf crisis of August 1990-February 1991, Ethiopia held a seat on the UN Security Council. In order to ensure the votes were carried in its favor, the US cut deals with several other members of the Security Council, notably China. Ethiopia was however in a weak position to exact terms from the US: it declared its opposition to Saddam Hussein in the very first days of the crisis (and attempted to brand the EPLF as an Iraqi pawn), and was begging for US and Israeli assistance already. The Ethiopian government had some successes: a meeting took place between Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka and US Secretary of State James Baker, the highest level meeting between officials of the two countries since Mengistu seized power, and the US softened its opposition to some World Bank loans to Ethiopia. However, apart from these developments and some reassuring diplomatic platitudes,

US-Ethiopia relations remained cool.

The US administration does, however, deserve criticism for a rather clumsy attempt to portray the government and rebel fronts as equally responsible for human rights abuses. Presumably this distortion of the facts was made in order to further the peace negotiations. According to the Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1990:

Both government and the various insurgent movements, notably the EPLF and TPLF, have practiced forced conscription, imprisonment without recourse, violence against civilian populations, torture, and extrajudicial killing. Women have fallen victim to rape and abuse by government and rebel soldiers, as both sides loot and pillage.¹⁹

While the rebel fronts have certainly been guilty of abuses, the failure to distinguish between their record and that of the government is a significant shortcoming. Ironically, in May 1991, the US government praised the EPRDF for its treatment of civilians.

The US came to play a crucial role in the final days of the Mengistu government. Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen was due to convene a meeting between representatives of the government, the EPLF, EPRDF and OLF in London in mid-May, in order to negotiate a ceasefire. If this were successful, a second round of negotiations was envisaged, which would establish the terms of a transitional government. The meeting was postponed to May 27 at the instigation of the rebel fronts, almost certainly because they recognized their military supremacy (which the US and Ethiopian government had consistently underestimated) and wanted to press home their advantage before the talks began. Their victories caused Mengistu to flee on May 21, and the army to disintegrate over the following week. In the final days, the US publicly appealed to the EPRDF not to advance on Addis Ababa before the talks were concluded in an effort to forestall the massive bloodletting that it was feared might occur if the EPRDF encountered strong resistance.

As it happened, the peace talks convened in the Berkshire Hotel in London on a morning when Acting-President Tesfaye Gebre Kidan had lost effective control of the remnants of the army, and Addis Ababa was almost completely undefended. The EPLF had taken Asmara and Assab in the previous three days. After consulting with the four parties, the US asked the EPRDF to take control of Addis Ababa, to prevent a breakdown in law and order. The government delegation then withdrew in protest. The US was later accused by some opposition groups which had been left out of the ceasefire talks of having "given the keys" of Addis Ababa to the EPRDF; the EPRDF replied that "the door was already open" -- i.e. that there were no military obstacles remaining to its victory. Simultaneously, the US also dropped its longstanding demand for the maintenance of Ethiopia's "territorial integrity," and accepted the EPLF demand for a referendum on the issue of Eritrean independence.

¹⁹ Department of State, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1990," p. 118.

The US made clear its conditional support for the transitional government of the EPRDF and EPLF. The conditions were that a political conference should be held by July 1 in which non-combatant political forces should also be represented, and that multi-party elections be held within one year (this was later extended to two years). Herman Cohen described the conditions as "no democracy, no cooperation." This principle can only be applauded, though it remains to be seen if the US consistently applies it in future dealings with Ethiopia and other African countries. If it had been applied by the US, the European Community and the United Nations over the previous thirty years many of the tragedies which fell Ethiopia would have been avoided.