

# LETTER FROM JEDDAH: AN INTERVIEW WITH WSLF\*

An American Professor

Press accounts of the recent Ogaden conflict fostered several misconceptions. In most reports, little distinction was made between the military forces of the Somali Republic and the indigenous Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). Moreover, the term "Ogaden" was rather indiscriminately applied to the disputed area. The heaviest fighting took place in the Dire Dawa-Harar-Jigjiga triangle, an area of Hararghe Province, Ethiopia, not usually included in the Ogaden—certainly not by the inhabitants. Much of this region is agricultural land whose villagers are ethnically neither Somali nor highland Ethiopians, but are Qottu Oromo. Ironically, then, much of the battleground in the Somali-Ethiopian Ogaden conflict was not in the Ogaden proper, and involved Oromo (and Harari) civilians as well as the combatants. After the withdrawal of Somali troops, in March 1978, it became apparent that little further clarification of the realities of the conflict would be made as press interest dwindled.

This interview, conducted via correspondence, represents an attempt to look into these complexities and to clarify some of the earlier misconceptions. M.A. Yusuf is the pseudonym of a member of the WSLF originally from the Harar area, now residing in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Nine questions were posed, intentionally open-ended to avoid constraints in responses. Communications were in English, which M.A. Yusuf had learned from Peace Corps teachers.

The tone of the reply is polemic and uncompromising. M.A. Yusuf documents, however, the depth and extent of the wounds of the Ogaden conflict. They must be healed and their scars erased before any words of reconciliation can be translated into action.

**Q 1:** Has all fighting stopped in the Ogaden?

**A 1:** Following President Siad Barre's instructions, all Somali soldiers returned to Somalia. Of course, many were killed while fighting in the Ogaden, as were WSLF/SALF forces. Some returned home safely and many returned with serious wounds.

The WSLF/SALF are totally different from the troops of the Somali Republic<sup>1</sup>. At the same time we cannot deny that their moral and material support

of the WSLF/SALF is priceless. The freedom fighters are still in the Ogaden desert, Bale, and the Chercher and Arussi mountains. They are determined to fight to the last, either until they liberate their people and land, or get killed by the combined Cuban and Russian mercenaries together with the rabble of Ethiopian militiamen.

**Q 2:** What is the status of the WSLF and its supporters now that the Somali military forces have withdrawn?

**A 2:** Of course the Somali regulars have been with us for some time, and now they have gone back home. We believe we still are not alone. In fact, we are not afraid of Mengistu's friends or mercenaries because the masses deep in the countryside are with us. They do all they can to help us. In fact, many young people indigenous to this area, who had left their homes in search of education or other training, are now organizing themselves. They are infiltrating into Ethiopia to support the liberation fighters. I personally know of many who have already done this.

**Q 3:** What about future tactics? Will the WSLF continue to confront Ethiopian forces in open battle?

**A 3:** WSLF/SALF fighters, as you know, used to fight the Ethiopians face-to-face in the fields. In fact the freedom fighters chased the Ethiopians to their cities. But if we try to do that again, we will be the victims of Russian weapons and Cuban mercenaries. We will use the hit-and-run system. "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day," as the saying goes.

**Q 4:** Are Somali civilians in the Ogaden and other regions of Hararghe Province being subjected to

1. WSLF is the Western Somali Liberation Front, and the SALF is the Somali Abu Liberation Front. It should be made very clear that WSLF and SALF are just different names for the same movement. They do not have different offices and are not operating separately. They are one and the same. The only difference is that the leaders operating in war zones are members of the ethnic group from the specific war zone (although 75% of the leadership in the liberation movement is from the Harar area). Briefly, WSLF is applied to the Somali-speaking people, and SALF is used for non-Somali speaking liberation fighters. (M.A. Yusuf's note.)

\* Editor's note: The interview was conducted by an American professor who, like his interviewee, prefers anonymity.

retribution, now that the Somali troops have withdrawn?

**A 4:** Practically anyone who is identified as Somali will automatically be killed in this area, regardless of age or sex. Mengistu's administration has officially set up a program to wipe out all Somalis inside Ethiopia, as well as those in occupied lands.

The day after the Ethiopians reoccupied Jigjiga, Ethiopia Radio officially announced that the *Dergue* was going to clear all the disputed area by killing all "bad citizens". Then the government would bring in 300,000 *new settlers* from other parts of Ethiopia, presumably the Amhara highlands. Radio Ethiopia clearly and repeatedly emphasized the number and origin of the new settlers. This is clearly planned *genocide*.

We had some trust in the international advocates of human rights. But we found their concern was hollow. They are the empty vessels which make the most noise. They ignored the facts and are continuing to do so.

**Q 5:** Not all of the residents of the disputed area are ethnically Somali. Most of the settled farmers of this region are Qottu Oromo ("Galla"). How have the Qottu been treated by the war?

**A 5:** Qottu villagers are counted as "enemies" by Mengistu and his bosses. They have been killed in thousands and their villages were bombarded to the ground by Russian MIG's. Fadis and Babille were once under the control of WSLF/SALF forces, so let us assume that Amharas had a reason to bomb these villages. But what about Kurfa Challe, Annano, Laga Mite, Gursum, Saqarre, Aw Waday, Aw Barkhadle, Aw Abdulkader, Bisidimo, and many more? What was their crime?

In Aw Waday, while the villagers were attending the funeral of a bomb victim, a jet came and dropped its bombs, killing 90 persons at once. In Aw Barkhadle, Ethiopian militiamen looted everything and burned the village, including the Muslim shrine. In Aw Abdul Qadir Jailan, Russian jets, probably flown by Cubans, dropped bombs to clear the way for Ethiopian militiamen to get to the shrine of Abdul Qadir itself. When the militiamen arrived at the village, they found it empty. Many there were victims of the bombs, some had fled to join the

liberation fighters. Only eleven women were left in Abdul Qadir: three children, seven very old women and one pregnant woman. The pregnant woman had her abdomen ripped open and the baby taken from her womb. All the rest were also bayoneted to death. We keep all these incidents in mind. We will revenge them in the near future.

In some villages the Qottu were ordered by armed militiamen to assemble in one or two *tukuls* (thatched-roof huts), the doors were locked from the outside, and the whole village was set on fire, as if one were burning a contaminated supply of grass just to get rid of it. One place this occurred was Obor Addish, on the Fadis side of Hakim Mountain.

In Miy Ai, they forced the Qottu to walk to the edge of Qosha River gorge at gun point. Then they told them to jump to their death into the 200-300 foot gorge. Or they shot them. This was only because they suspected the Qottu villagers of helping the liberation fighters.

**Q 6:** Newspaper accounts reported fighting on the streets of the city of Harar. Has the walled city been damaged by the fighting? How many civilian casualties were there in Harar?

**A 6:** Nothing important happened to the walled city of Harar. No shrine, mosque, or buildings were damaged. But the mosque and school which was under construction at the shrine of Aw Abdul, just outside the city wall, was occupied by the Ethiopian army and used as a military camp.

We have been receiving news that there was face-to-face combat in the streets of Harar, the liberation fighters always killing the Amhara soldiers and the *kebele* policemen, but never killing civilians. No Harari civilians have been killed inside Harar as a result of this fighting.

Almost all capable men, women, boys, and girls had fled the city. A few of these went to Addis Ababa, some to Djibouti, and the rest to the Somali Republic. There were also many young Harari, both boys and girls, who joined the liberation fighters and up to the present time are participating in guerilla actions. These are very brave boys and girls.

**Q 7:** Are the civilian refugees from Harar and the Qottu villages regrouping themselves into communities outside of their homelands?

**A 7:** Harari and Qottu are trying to reorganize themselves in some parts of the middle East, mainly in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, but not yet in Djibouti. In Somalia, those of our people who are not part of the WSLF/SALF are reorganizing themselves. There are thousands of them of both sexes and all ages, ranging from seven to seventy. All kinds of necessary arrangements are being made. Men are marrying women so that families can be established to care for orphans and the helpless old. Some youngsters, both boys and girls, are enrolled in a number of vocational and academic schools. The capable and healthy young boys and girls have enrolled voluntarily in Halane (Somalia), the famous guerrilla training center once run by Russian and Cuban trainers.

**Q 8:** Most of those fighting the Ethiopian forces in the Ogaden Conflict were Muslim. Have you heard any indications that Muslims residing in Addis Ababa are consequently under suspicion?

**A 8:** Muslims in Addis Ababa are undergoing retribution. People are being killed in the Muslim sections of town. For instance, soldiers march into Adere Safer (one Harari area in Addis), knock on a number of doors at a time, and when the residents open the doors—or if they fling open the doors themselves, as they usually do—they machinegun anyone they find in the house. At other times, they walk around in this area and whoever they meet, they ask for identification cards. Anyone who fails to produce identification is immediately shot dead. This type of patrolling is never done in other sections of Addis Ababa.

A handful of Amhara soldiers recently walked into a mosque in Adere Sefer and machine-gunned all twenty-six people who were praying inside. They even ask kids of about seven years of age to produce identification documents inside their own home, and if they fail, they get shot in the presence of their parents. And no one can ask a question.

Worst of all, Amharas with one or two Cuban or Russian mercenaries search peoples' homes at night, saying they are looking for "anti-revolutionary" per-

sons. Whenever they see good-looking women, the Ethiopians let their mercenary friends rape the women.

**Q 9:** In May, 1977, the United States made offers of support to the Somali Republic. Later the U.S. refused to send military support to Somalia as long as it had troops in the Ogaden. To what extent did the U.S. offer to aid influence the actions of the WSLF?

**A 9:** Last May when America suggested that she was going to supply Somalia with aid, we all thought it was true and even expected some of these supplies to reach the Ogaden. Later on, the Carter Administration changed its decision and said it would not give any military aid to Somalia. Of course we all felt bad about that. Fortunately we never based any of our actions on that, but you know what happened to Somalia herself.

We all had high hopes and great expectations that the U.S. would not remain with hands folded after the Somali regular troops had withdrawn from the Ogaden, and when Cubans and Amharas began massacring innocent civilians in retaliation. They are still killing hundreds of harmless and helpless Muslim civilians.

According to America's judgement, when the Somali Republic aided her brothers in Amhara-occupied Western Somalia, they called them "aggressors." But when Israel captured and annexed parts of Arab land, America was happy and satisfied with Israel's actions. When Israel invaded southern Lebanon and killed hundreds of innocent Lebanese civilians using cluster bombs, America called the act "self-defence" This is just unbelievable.

America's concept of our struggle, I am afraid, is probably the same or less as it is of other liberation seekers, like the Palestinians.

Let America's judgement be whatever it is, we don't care. We will continue our struggle until we achieve our goals.

We feel pity for America because it is deteriorating in the eyes of Africans, and people of other underdeveloped areas, as well as in the eyes of her own allies.