

NEW ETHIOPIAN OFFENSIVE IN THE OGADEN

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"I was under a tree when the planes came. I saw the flames everywhere, and the rockets. The bullets were falling like rain," said the assistant municipal commissioner of Dollo, Hassan Mohamud Guhad, as we surveyed the wreckage of this small Somali border town. There was little left of it beyond heaps of rubble and ash in the wake of four days of intensive Ethiopian bombing.

The air raids along the southern boundary between Somalia and Ethiopia, which began in late June and continued into July, signaled a renewal of fighting between the two countries and the opening of a major counterinsurgency campaign against the Somali-speaking guerrillas in the Ogaden. Stepped up guerrilla activity in the area has been met with sharp retaliation against the Somali state, which supports the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF).

At the entrance to Dollo were the remains of the one-roomed primary and intermediate school. Twin bomb craters four metres deep had left the mud and stone building in ruins. Shards of twisted metal from the corrugated iron roof were strewn across the road. Fortunately, the school had been closed and no one was injured.

A walking tour of the now abandoned town revealed a tragic scenario of wanton destruction and random death. Following a trail of ankle deep ash from dozens of burned grass and stick huts, we passed the broken down walls of Dollo's only mosque, the central market where a pair of steel grey bomb tails protruded from the hard-packed dirt, and

finally an open clearing where several families had once made their homes.

Alongside the road was a blood-spattered tree where six had died during the first day of the Ethiopian attacks. "Three also burned in the house here and two more here," said Ahmed Omer, my Somali guide, as he pointed to rings of powdery white ash on the now bare ground.

The final toll in Dollo was 26 dead and 60 wounded. The remaining 10,000 inhabitants fled south to join an estimated 300,000 refugees living in southwestern Somalia, victims of the twin scourges of drought and war. Four other border towns were also hit in this series of attacks, but the Somalis there stayed to rebuild.

Three Ethiopian jet-fighters were shot down during the raids, a point which every Somali with whom I spoke made with unconcealed pride, though the army based there seemed ill-prepared to defend the region against a ground attack. Somalia has paid a heavy price for its assistance to the Ogaden guerrillas, but the people, even in this area, seemed ready to assume yet larger burdens in order to continue the struggle with Ethiopia.

The main point of contention is the Ogaden, also known as Ethiopian Somaliland. This vast semi-desert region of southeastern Ethiopia came under the rule of the highland Abyssinian empire at the turn of the last century when the emperor Menelik II managed to almost triple the size of his kingdom in conjunction with the European colonization of coastal Somaliland.

Secret treaty arrangements with Britain and Italy gave Menelik nominal sovereignty over the Ogaden and helped form the basis of the establishment of the modern Ethiopian state. Italy seized it during the 1930's when a declining British empire retired from the area.

Resistance to Amhara rule flared up almost immediately, as it had sporadically in the past when the Abyssinians attempted to move out of their few small urban enclaves. Somalia asserted its claims on the Ogaden shortly after achieving independence in 1960, and all-out wars were fought between Somalia and Ethiopia in 1964 and 1977-78.

Meanwhile, the Ogaden people also began to organize armed opposition to the then Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie who responded, with

American and Israeli help, by violently suppressing any sign of Somali nationalism. An Ogaden Liberation Front was founded in the 1960's and was followed in 1969 by the establishment of the WSLF, which is presently carrying on the armed struggle.

The situation today is extremely tense as the Ethiopian government continues to amass a fresh arsenal of new Soviet heavy weapons that includes MiG-21 and 23 fighter-bombers, MI-24 helicopter gunships, T-54 tanks and an assortment of armored cars and long-range artillery and rockets. Somalia's regular army, which was equipped by the Soviet Union and trained by Cuba, remains severely weakened from its 1978 defeat, and the WSLF faces the expected campaign with little more than small arms and mortars.

Yet the guerrillas themselves appear confident that they can not only survive but go on to eventual victory. They base their hopes on the high level of popular support they receive in the Ogaden and on the tactics of mobile guerrilla warfare which have paralyzed government forces there at a minimal cost to the liberation front.

There are now an estimated 1.5 million refugees in Somalia with the number growing at a rate of over 1,200 each day. While as many as 20 percent are of Oromo nationality from the highlands of Bala and Harreghe provinces along with an uncertain number of impoverished nomads from within the Somali Republic, there is no doubt that those remaining in the Ogaden lowlands are rapidly diminishing.

However, the gradual depopulation of the region has set the stage for a calculated Ethiopian policy of resettlement by non-Somalis, akin to Israeli policy in the Palestinian West Bank, that threatens to undercut the social base of the guerrilla war. In the long term this may provide the most serious problem for the Somali nationalists.

At the same time, the Ethiopian government has been attempting to shift hundreds of thousands of peasants from the Oromo, Amhara, Tigray and other nationalities to the fertile Wabi Shabele Area. Future plans are reported to call for the movement of up to three million farmers to the Ogaden in an effort to dismantle the Somali nation. The continuing air raids inside Somalia appear designed to further divide the Somalis there from their Ogaden cousins while also adding to the monumental social and economic burden of caring for the displaced people.

A tour of the central Ogaden combat zone found few civilians in evidence. But the arid bush was teeming with young fighters of the WSLF who, they said, still roamed the plains in significant numbers.

A three day trip by Land Rover that crisscrossed the region showed the government presence to be limited to the garrison at Degahabur and its immediate environs. Meanwhile, hundreds of guerrillas, aged ten to 22, could be seen carefully camouflaged in small clearings and cave-like shelters carved out of the dense underbrush.

Patrols of ten to 15 entered and left the hidden base camp to rotate positions around the six small outlying Ethiopian army camps where WSLF leaders estimate there are 12,000 Ethiopian and Cuban troops along with 38 Soviet tanks and at least eight BM-21 multiple rocket launchers. The guerrillas carried AK-47 assault rifles and RPG-7 grenade launchers.

"We know that Ethiopia has sophisticated weapons, and when it comes to numbers, they are more than us, but we still believe we can defeat them because we are standing on our own soil, and we are ready to die for it," said Ahmed Sheikh Mohamed, 30, the second-ranking WSLF military commander in this zone.

Yet he also conceded that the WSLF lacks a long-term military strategy for advancing beyond the stage of hit-and-run ambushes and surprise attacks. The apparent intention is to fight an indefinite war of attrition, hoping the Amhara regime will eventually collapse. "Our plan is to fight until we get our independence, no matter how difficult it is," said Ahmed.

The theme of independence, both from Ethiopia and from Somalia, was often repeated by both the guerrillas and the civilians I met there. "Somalia is an independent state and Ethiopia is a colonizer," said WSLF central Committee member Omar Nur. "We just want our independence ourselves, with no Ethiopia, no Somalia."

While it is extremely doubtful that this isolated, poverty stricken area could make a viable state, this sentiment seemed to reflect a growing feeling among the Ogaden people that the question of self-determination for them cannot be simply equated with annexation by Somalia. Some went so far as to blame the Somali Republic's 1977 intervention in the Ogaden war for the massive Soviet and Cuban

buildup in Ethiopia and for the setbacks to the liberation struggle which followed.

There was also a noticeable tension between the WSLF guerrillas in the field and the externally based leadership, with the rank-and-file guerrillas charging their leaders with too much collaboration with the Somali regime. The alternative most often mentioned was a plan to develop closer relations with the Eritrean, Tigraen and Oromo national movements. The aim of such an alliance would be to topple the Addis Ababa regime and then to choose the association with either Ethiopia or Somalia whichever offered the higher degree of Ogaden autonomy.

This, however, may be a long way off, as contacts between the movements are yet at an early stage. In the meantime, the WSLF is riding the crest of a wave of fervent nationalism which has been intensified by the Soviet-backed Ethiopian military campaigns of the past two years.

One embittered nomad who said he fought with the Somali contingent of the British Army in Aden 40 years ago, described the Ethiopians as "a cruel people." He remembers them collecting head taxes, confiscating his animals and arresting dissident Somalis. "I could name 50 or 60 people they took from here," he said. "I don't know where they are now — dead, or alive or where they are. Nobody knows."

He added that things had worsened since the current ruling junta came to power in 1974. "Ethiopia should remain within its own borders," he said. "If Ethiopia is not willing to give us our freedom, we will continue fighting until nobody remains on our land."

The source of this nationalism and the difficulty of separating the Ogaden question from the Somali state is not hard to find. The Amhara occupation of the region appears to have had a minimal effect on the general population who remain linked by language, religion, culture and in some cases family and clan ties to neighboring Somalia.

The Ogaden people are mainly pastoralists who wander back and forth across the formal border between Ethiopia and Somalia as if it had never existed. The limited settlement of the Amhara in a handful of towns has left the primitive economy of trade with the Somali coast almost untouched.

Trucks and camel caravans move in and out of the

Ogaden bearing basic commodities to exchange for animals and hides, the Ogaden's only exportable goods. Small shops run by Somalia merchants are scattered in the bush where the nomads can buy soap, food, clothing, oil and even tinned soft drinks for Somali scrip.

For their part the WSLF guerrillas, themselves children of nomads, survive in the spartan manner of their civilian sisters and brothers. They subsist on a simple diet of camel's milk, *chiwari* (low-grade sorghum or dula) and, occasionally, meat. They wear mismatched uniforms taken from their enemy, and they live in small huts cut from the brush around them.

Thus, they appear capable of continuing the war at a low level with little support from the outside. Given the vastness of the land itself, they can move about at will, choosing where and when to fight or when simply to disappear.

The terrain is one of rolling, flat plains as far as the eye can see, dotted with gnarled thorn trees and waist-high shrub. The monotonous skyline is broken only by hundreds of bulbous mud termite mounds.

Traveling mainly on foot, the guerrillas appear to have a free run of the countryside which they emerge from periodically to strike at the stationary Ethiopian forces.

Two days before my arrival, units near Degahabur made a surprise dawn ambush on the camp at Qulquul, where they claimed to have inflicted "heavy casualties" while suffering two dead and four wounded. They also took 20 small arms in the raid.

But the heaviest fighting was being reported around the northern towns of Jijiga and Harar, where company sized units were said to be engaging the government forces. The sound of heavy artillery fire could also be heard from the south, around Kebe Dehare, and the guerrillas claimed that all the major roads linking the Ethiopian-held towns were closed.

"The Ethiopian lifeline in the Ogaden is closed. They cannot move. They supply their garrisons with helicopters and aircraft only," said Omar Nur.

How long this situation will last is an open question which may depend more on political factors than on the immediate military situation. The declining Ogaden population coupled with the con-

tinuing Ethiopian arms buildup and the resettlement scheme will have to be met with a comprehensive program of social transformation and popular mobilization, not only in the Ogaden itself but in the Somali refugee camps and in the settled areas if the WSLF is to move beyond the present stalemate, let alone avoid dissipation.

Here, too the prospects are mixed. Talks with WSLF leaders suggested a vacuum in long-range social and political planning. Voicing a loosely defined ideology of Islamic nationalism, they shunted aside questions of what a future independent Ogaden might look like. "Now we want to liberate our country. When we liberate it, we will see what sort of a society we want to build," said Ahmed Sheir Mohamed.

Many of the rank-and-file guerrillas were not so quiescent. They expressed impatience with the absence of a clear political program, and they spoke of the need for the development of cadre, the increase in the embryonic literacy campaign and the politicization of both fighters and civilians along the lines

followed in the more advanced Eritrean and Tigrayan movements. These developments were also cited as necessary to establish political independence from the Somali regime.

The fact that the Oromo Liberation Front set up an official office last January in Mogadishu for maintaining contact with the WSLF and that the Eritrean People's Liberation Front followed in June suggests that closer links among the various national movements may be in the offing. The Eritrean Liberation Front sent a delegation to Mogadishu last month and the Tigray People's Liberation Front has begun regular visits there.

These budding alliances will strengthen the WSLF politically, while they will also serve to further isolate the Amhara government as an island under siege on all sides. Thus, while the immediate outlook suggests little overall change in the military picture in the Ogaden, the longterm prospects are for a formidable combination that could radically alter the political contours of the entire Horn of Africa.