

OGADEN:

The Land But Not the People

The plight of the people of Ethiopia's southeastern Ogaden region — the "Ogaden-Somalis" — is perhaps the most severe and the least subject to solution of all the problems in the African Horn. Sandwiched between two competing claimants to the barren, drought-stricken region, the mainly nomadic population has been all but decimated by the rivalry over who will control them and their land. The Ogaden question is a complex one, and the conflict there has consistently reflected this. While the people have deep-rooted social, cultural and economic links with Somalia, their land is "legally" part of Ethiopia.

The Ogaden-Somalis are not only now suffering from the effects of drought, famine and war — they are also facing the destruction of their entire way of life, and with it their existence as a people. Over a half million (of an estimated population of 800,000 to 1,000,000) have fled eastward into Somalia to take up a bare subsistence life in scattered camps (see "Somalia," below). Tens of thousands more are sheltered in Ethiopian government settlements within the Ogaden. Meanwhile, with their animal herds mostly wiped out, they have little hope of ever returning to their old ways. As if to underline — or to ensure — this, the Ethiopian government is beginning to implement a plan to move millions of non-Somalis into the area. Little wonder that the Ogaden refugees often liken their situation to that of the Palestinians: stripped of land and livelihood, scattered far and wide and finally replaced by others in the process of an attempted

social transformation in which they are considered less a basic component than an irritating obstacle.

The interplay between drought and war, between humanitarian and political concerns, is central to an understanding of the Ogaden situation today, for it was neither one nor the other in isolation which brought these people to their present crisis. By the middle 1970s, years of overgrazing and a steady increase in the animal population there had carried the Ogaden-Somalis to the brink of a natural disaster. A sudden shift in the climate — and a dramatic decrease in rainfall — in 1974 and 1975 tipped the scales against them, triggering a human tragedy from which it would take almost a decade to recover under normal conditions. Unlike settled farmers who could replant fresh crops the following season, the pastoral herders of the Ogaden would have needed years to replenish their lost animals, even with good rains, which in the event were not forthcoming.

Visitors to the area then saw the fly-infested carcasses of cattle, sheep, camels and goats littering the crude dirt tracks, the brittle skins of those still living pulled taut across scrawny, emaciated frames. They also found 100,000 desperate people in a similar physical condition, crowded into more than a dozen hastily established government relief shelters where scores were dying each day from the twin scourges of malnutrition and disease. Meanwhile, Somali nationalism was also experiencing a marked rise in conjunction with the popular uprising which swept emperor Haile Selassie out of power in 1974 and as a result of stepped up aid from the Siad Barre regime in Somalia, then helping the emerging Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF).

With the social fabric of the region torn asunder by the onslaught of drought and mass starvation, the Ogaden-Somalis faced a stark choice between extinction or radical social change. There was no middle ground possible. The question was only who could give them a viable way out of this escalating crisis — Ethiopia or Somalia. The Addis Ababa regime, to its credit, responded quickly by expanding the relief network previously set up in the northern provinces of Wollo and Tigray. Fresh calls for emergency external aid were made, and rudimentary transport systems were mobilized to bring food and medicine to the scattered shelters. In taking this

action, the government forestalled the immediate growth of the armed resistance and bought time. But from this point on, the situation steadily worsened.

The newly displaced people were treated with a condescension and a militaristic authoritarianism that rekindled long standing resentments among the Ogaden-Somalis as they were herded together into squalid camps under Amhara administrators who often failed to even share a common language with their trustees. For the perhaps excessively proud and traditionally independent wandering nomads, the trade-off of food for dignity was unacceptable. One young Amhara relief worker interviewed in 1976 in the Kebri Dahar camp, described the shelters as "concentration camps." The imposition of eight o'clock evening curfews, the banning of ethnic dancing and singing and the humiliation of spending most of the day in queues awaiting handouts were among the reasons for this characterization. But the absence of any efforts to create self-administration in the camps and the daily experience of heavy-handed police power also reinforced the notion among the displaced that they were better off turning to Somalia and the WSLF.

A key aspect of this situation was the fact that most of the Ogaden-Somali men stayed outside the shelters with their few remaining animals, and with contacts to the guerrillas. While receiving reports of ill-treatment of their families, these men also became increasingly subject to random government military attacks directed at the elusive guerrillas. Early in 1976, the government also initiated security measures to relocate the camps away from the Somali border, a policy which backfired dramatically. One particularly revealing incident took place in mid-February when Relief and Rehabilitation Commission head Shimelis Adugna led a convoy of army trucks to a camp in northeastern Ogaden to forcibly move the more than 8000 inhabitants. The night before the shift, all but a score of the refugees abruptly crossed over into Somalia and the trucks returned empty, an embarrassed Adugna told reporters two days later.

The reasons for this, however, were not hard to find. The order to relocate had been given one day earlier by an Amhara administrator through a local unpopular translator. In the absence of any advance preparation or any direct participation on the part of

the refugees themselves, they interpreted the plan as an attempt to remove them from their home ground and to divide their families. The use of army vehicles — which were pointedly not being utilized for the movement of food then piling up in Dire Dawa to the north despite the escalating death rate in the camps — unwittingly or not added to the people's fears and fueled their simmering anger.

A spiral of increased armed resistance, government repression and widespread disruption of civil and military administration erupted a year later into full scale war as the nationalist guerrillas gained control of all but the main towns. The Ethiopian army, simultaneously beset with major defeats in Eritrea, began to collapse. At this point, Somali regular forces rolled across the disputed border to capture the urban enclaves with fully mechanized columns. The upshot, early in 1978, was an Ethiopian counteroffensive in which more than 13,000 Soviet and Cuban advisors and frontline troops took a leading part. In a lightning advance, leapfrogging Somali positions with helicopter drops, the government drove the invading army back into Somalia and dealt a major blow to the guerrillas. But the Ogaden civilians paid far the heaviest price after the main fighting was over.

Much of the sprawling Ogaden remained outside Ethiopian control and it was not long before a resurgence of guerrilla activity began to surface. With an all-out offensive then in progress in Eritrea and stepped up fighting in Tigray, the government fell back on the use of air power to defend its Ogaden gains. By the end of 1978, the first major outflow of refugees began arriving in Somalia with tales of extensive aerial bombing and strafing of both people and animals, the poisoning of traditional wells and the confiscation of livestock and personal property. An artificial drought and famine were apparently being created in lieu of military means to contain the continuing opposition: the spectre of wholesale genocide now appeared on the horizon. With Somalia's armed forces crippled from its 1978 losses, the guerrillas still managed through 1979 to independently regain control of the rural areas and to cut the towns south of Jijiga off from road transport.

Meanwhile, the persistence of Amhara administration in the few camps and occupied towns

throughout this period was a further reason for the failure of the government's much touted relief efforts, evidenced by the vast and unbroken flow of refugees to Somalia since then. Canadian Broadcasting Company journalist George Somerwill toured the garrison towns of Degahabur and Jijiga in June 1980. He found that the former Amhara mayor of Jijiga had only been replaced with an Ogaden-Somali four months earlier after a near riot in the town, but the two top administrators in Degahabur remained Amhara despite similar tensions there. Somerwill also reported a rapid military buildup in the two besieged towns where Soviet Antonov-12s were bringing in arms and equipment at a rate of up to ten planeloads per day. New Soviet MI-24 helicopter gunships could then be seen lining the runway at Jijiga awaiting combat. Meanwhile, attempts to settle a planned three million non-Somali farmers in the fertile Wabe Shebelle river basin (in 1976 the site of an Ogaden-Somali camp) during this period added to the conviction that it is the land and not the people over which the government seeks dominion.

Several weeks later freelance journalist Dan Connell visited the Ogaden with WSLF guerrillas. He found widespread evidence of the continuing existence of dual societies there, the one linked eastward to Somalia, the other tied northward to Addis Ababa, with little more than war connecting them. The handful of Ogaden towns were divided in two with the iron-roofed adobe buildings of the Amhara shopkeepers and administrators occupying a distinctly separate space from the brush and stick huts of the Ogaden-Somalis. The open countryside, where it was still populated, was occupied by the latter, mainly wandering pastoralists who crisscrossed the formal border between Ethiopia and Somalia as if it had never existed. The economy of the Ogaden-Somalis was connected to the Somali coast by an active trade with trucks and camels daily moving back and forth bearing food, clothing, soap, spices and other consumer goods which were exchanged for Somali script, even inside the Somali ghettos in the towns. The Somali trucks returned home loaded with sheep, goats, skins and firewood, Ogaden's only exportable resources.

Repeated interviews with local inhabitants, many of whom were directly related to families now living

in Somalia, revealed a strong psychological identification of themselves as "Western Somalis." They also shared with their Somali cousins a common language, the Moslem religion and a mutual cultural and historical heritage which appeared to have been little affected by the division of their territory. The fact that present day Somalia is itself a result of the recombination of two former colonies — Italian and British Somaliland — was also mentioned to demonstrate the rejection of arguments against the future inclusion of what they often termed "Ethiopian Somaliland."

A reason for the absence of Somali administrators in the Amhara-controlled towns also became apparent, for most of the educated Ogaden-Somalis had their schooling in the Somali Democratic Republic where many are now integrated into the civil administration and the economy there. Abstract legalisms about this area belonging to Ethiopia rolled off these people who in their day to day life felt themselves to be practically a part of Somalia. Most were not even sure where the actual borders were.

Yet, interestingly, the nature of the armed struggle — and the recent history of the war — had also begun to generate a thread of resentment toward the Somali government on the part of the guerrillas who spoke often of the wish to win independence from both competing governments, perhaps to achieve some form of genuine autonomy short of full status as a state, but not under the conditions then being offered by either side. "Somalia is an independent state, and Ethiopia is a colonizer," remarked WSLF central committee member Omar Nur, recently released from a Somali jail in Hargeisa, adding, "We just want our independence ourselves, with no Ethiopia, no Somalia." Many of the rank and file guerrillas blamed the Somali intervention into the Ogaden war in 1977 for the massive Soviet and Cuban buildup which a year later forced the regular Somali army into retreat and reduced the WSLF temporarily to roving small guerrilla bands.

Later that year, a split began to surface within the WSLF over this very question, pitting the internal guerrilla units against the Mogadishu-based leadership which was accused of being too subservient to the Somali government. But with the majority of the Ogaden-Somalis by then living in Somali camps, and the Ethiopian government well into another

major military campaign, the prospects for a turnaround on this issue seemed increasingly remote in the near future. In December 1980 *Washington Post* correspondents Jay Ross and David Ottoway simultaneously visited the Ogaden from opposing sides. Ross was unable to penetrate the war zone for more than a few hours. "Liberation Front commanders admit that their forces have had to pull back or disperse inside Ogaden in the face of vastly superior Ethiopian numbers and materials in the last months," Ross reported. Ottoway described a government success in reaching the disputed border where army camps were being set up in large numbers, and he related the growth of one relief shelter in Kebri Dahar where 300 nomads entered in three days to bring the number there to 15,000. With the border increasingly cut off to supply, the desperate drought and war victims were again turning to the nearest source of immediate food and water, and the

sparse countryside seemed all but depopulated, except for the warring armies.

By this time, there also seemed little doubt that this was the essence of the Ethiopian strategy: first to denude the arid region of its native population and in the process to cripple the Somali economy with an unbearable refugee burden; at the same time to force those who remained into government-controlled hamlets while unleashing a reign of terror on the rural areas with marauding MI-24 helicopter gunships and MiG jets; and when things settled down, to bring in new peoples loyal to the regime who could settle the area, like the Palestinian West Bank territories now turning over to Israeli immigrants. And, like the Palestinians, the Ogaden-Somalis speak bitterly of returning to fight by other means. "If we lose access to our land, we will fight them by other means, wherever we can find them—in their embassies, in the air or wherever," said one angry guerrilla fighter in an ominous prediction of the direction this war might soon take.