

# Eritrea's Independent Revolution

*with Hagos Ghebrehiwet*

**BF:** Could you briefly describe the current situation in Eritrea?

**HG:** We have reached a turning point in our struggle. We have over 90% of the country under our control. Since we took the port of Masawa in February, battles have been going on around a place called Ginda. The Ethiopian government is trying to recapture Masawa and we are defending that line. There is no way that they will recapture Masawa because they have lost so heavily in previous fights. We think that what they are doing now is just out of desperation.

As soon as we captured Masawa we declared the city to be open for relief supplies to come in, but the Ethiopian regime refused to allow that. They are bombing the city. They have bombed it now up to six times, and they have killed over 100 people. They have got the support of the Soviet Union which they have had since this regime came to power. And there is a new element now: The Israelis are involved and are supporting the Ethiopian regime.

**BF:** How would you anticipate a victory taking place?

**HG:** Well, militarily speaking, if they didn't have all this aid coming from the Soviet Union and others we could have finished the war a long time ago. Because for us it is a matter of getting freedom. We are fighting in our land and we have a voluntary army. People know what they are doing when they join. But for the Ethiopians, it is a matter of a foreign army coming into our country.

In all these battles the morale of their army is very low. There is now the possibility for us to finish it militarily. But you always want to solve the conflict peacefully and we have been trying to solve it peacefully. We have not been very successful, however, because the regime in Addis Abbaba [the capital of Ethiopia—*ed.*] does not understand the language of peace. The only language Mengistu [the current leader of Ethiopia—*ed.*] understands is war.

**BF:** What happened with those highly publicized talks that Jimmy Carter was sponsoring?

**HG:** We were working to finalize the preliminary talks—you know, the talks on talks—on the procedural issues. We had two rounds of talks; one in Atlanta and the other in Nairobi. But the Ethiopian government tried to disrupt those talks. There was a formula we agreed to where each side would choose two observing delegates, and three others would be cho

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Most of the EPLF's armaments, including tanks and anti-aircraft guns, have been seized from the Ethiopian army.

sen by both sides. It was agreed that the first two would be chosen without any reservation from the other side. But when we chose the UN and the OAU, the Ethiopian government tried to block UN participation. They went to the UN and said they didn't agree the UN should be there. So the talks stopped right there.

**BF:** Do you anticipate the talks getting back off the ground?

**HG:** The Ethiopians have refused to go back to the talks again to try to resolve the obstacles created. They say they have finished preliminary talks; unless we meet for substantive talks, they are not coming back. Well, we're now fighting on the battle field. There is a possibility of them coming back; we don't know. There is major international pressure to get the talks going again. We will see what happens.

**BF:** A few months ago in the US press there was some reference to a relationship or talks between the EPLF and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and some other anti-Dergue forces. Could you say a little about your relationship with these forces?

**HG:** We have good relations with the movements inside Ethiopia, especially the TPLF and the OALF. We coordinate things, we have regular meetings to assess the situation, we even have joint operations in some areas mainly inside Ethiopia with TPLF and with OALF. Our relations are good because we are facing one enemy. Even though we have differences on some issues, we

are working together against this enemy.

**BF:** Do the recent victories that the TPLF has won in Ethiopia combined with your recent victories spell the imminent demise of the Mengistu regime, or do you think they can hold out?

**HG:** The days of this regime, led by Mengistu, are numbered. The only thing sustaining this government is the foreign aid it receives. Because of the aid, it will be a question of time, but this regime will go very soon.

### Who Is Supporting Ethiopia?

**BF:** You mentioned earlier that Israel is involved. What is their interest in this?

**HG:** Israeli involvement is recent, now about seven months. The Israelis think the Eritrean struggle is allied with the Arab countries in the area. They say in the final analysis Eritrean independence will be in the interest of the Arabs. Because of this, they have propagated the idea that we are getting arms in from Libya and other places, which is not true. So they say they don't want to see Eritrea independent because it will be allied with the Arabs.

Another issue they talk about is the strategic significance of the area. The only way they could take advantage of that is by allying with the Ethiopian government. This is another consideration for them. The final factor being talked about a lot is the issue of Falashas [Ethiopian Jews—ed.].

So the Israelis are trying to help this regime. So far they are giving them plaster bombs which are being used by the Ethiopian Air Force to

bomb civilians in cities and towns, to get the Falashas out of Ethiopia.

**BF:** The Falashas—are they actually persecuted in Ethiopia?

**HG:** Well, all minorities in Ethiopia are persecuted. Ethiopia is a unique place because we have the Amhara minority nationality which is in power, persecuting even the majority. And, of course, other minorities are persecuted, including the Falashas.

**BF:** The Soviet Union has been very actively involved in supporting the Mengistu regime for quite some time. To what do you attribute their continued assistance to the regime, particularly in light of developments around the world?

**HG:** Even now, there is a lot of talk of the Soviet Union trying to withdraw: their agreement goes until 1991 and there is talk that they will not renew it. But what we have seen in practice on the battlefield is that they are aiding the regime and arms are still coming. Maybe it's too expensive for the Soviets, and they might want to change their policy. But we haven't seen that yet. Of course, the area is strategic. They don't support our right to self-determination because we control the Red Sea.

There is a lot of pressure and a lot of things are changing in this world and their support for Ethiopia might change. We don't know. But right now the war is continuing.

**BF:** Is there any pressure on the Soviet Union to withdraw its assistance?

**HG:** As far as we know there is continuous talk between the US and the Soviet Union on this issue. The Soviet Union has been saying that they are putting pressure on the regime to resolve the issue peacefully. But as far as we're concerned all this has been just talk. We haven't seen anything in practice.

**BF:** What about the Cubans? Are they still there?

**HG:** The Cubans have withdrawn militarily from Ethiopia. They might have advisors and some other people here, but they don't have military personnel. Still, we haven't heard the Cubans saying that the situation should be resolved peacefully nor have they come out in support of our self-determination.

**BF:** One of the things that is very perplexing about the situation is that all of Ethiopia and Eritrea is strategic in a geopolitical sense. But the Soviet Union has an ally right across the straits in South Yemen. Wouldn't they be able to save face by withdrawing from Ethiopia, given their alliances across the straits?

**HG:** They are thinking of controlling of the whole area. In the minds of such big powers, if you have an alliance with South Yemen and then control the other side you'll effectively end up controlling the whole Red Sea. They think in those terms.

Also things are changing, even in South Yemen. There is a lot of movement toward uniting with North Yemen, where they have democratic elections, and the influence of the South Yemen party will be minimized. [In May, the two Yemens reportedly achieved unity—ed.] So the Soviet Union stands to lose ground in the future, if we look at it in those terms.

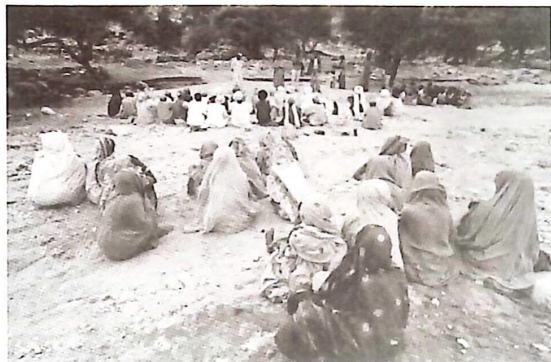
But the Soviet's reason for wanting the Horn is to be able to control the southern entrance to the Red Sea.

## Democracy And Self-Determination

**BF:** Let's turn now to the international situation. The EPLF is well-known for being a very independent political movement. Particularly in that light, how is the EPLF looking at the developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe? What kind of effect are they having on your movement, if any, and what lessons are you drawing from this?

**HG:** Well, of course, it is very difficult to say anything definitive because things are still happening. But, in general, we think something good will come out of all this: something good for all the populations involved. I think the people in the Soviet bloc are going to bring in a system that will be in their own interest. As things settle down, people will figure out what is best for them. They will correct the mistakes made in the past and have a better system. Democracy will be their main issue. We think with a real democratic system you can build what you want to build. People know what they need. In the final analysis, I think these systems will end up correcting what was wrong in the past and the people will be satisfied.

As for ourselves, we always wanted to be independent. We are happy that we were independent in the past and we want to be independent in the future. Our movement has been indepen



**Key to the EPLF's success has been its consistent efforts to help the people organize themselves.**

dent from the very beginning. For this reason, what is happening in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is not affecting us directly. We were not getting any aid from them; we never had clear support for our fight for self-determination. The only exception was in the 1950s when the issue of what to do with former Italian colonies came up in the United Nations. At that time, they were Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia. When Eritrea was singled out to be federated with Ethiopia, the Soviet Union and the others supported our right to self-determination. Leaving that aside, we never had any support from these countries. So whatever changes take place there will not affect us.

The question of democracy is the number one issue for us. It has been in the past and it is now as well. We want to make sure that any political force or party coming to power in Eritrea will have the consent of the people. It should have the vote of the people. We want to create a real democratic society where the population will have full say. It's not an easy thing to do, especially in the Third World, in a very backward society, and taking into consideration the interference of foreign powers. Foreign powers, either from the area or other powers, can manipulate the results and corrupt the democratic system.

We are aware of all this, and we know that there are difficulties, but we are working toward a democratic society. We are not only fighting the Ethiopian regime now, but we are creating a new situation in the liberated areas. We have been fighting for thirty years. We captured nearly all

the cities in 1977, and we were forced to withdraw because of Soviet intervention. We saw what it means to run cities, even the whole country. And we have drawn our lessons from that experience. We think we can establish a very democratic system in Eritrea. We want to have a multi-party system with a mixed economy. These are our goals. They are clearly stated in our program of 1987.

**BF:** Speculating for a moment: When you succeed in achieving independence, should the current regime in Addis Abbaba collapse, has any thought been given to some sort of federated relationship with Ethiopia?

**HG:** The question here is our right to self-determination. We are always saying that. The Ethiopian government says the entire population wants to be united. In response, in 1981, we gave the Ethiopians a referendum proposal. We said that if this is the case, let us hold a referendum in Eritrea and let the people choose between independence, federation with Ethiopia, or autonomy within Ethiopia. And then we will abide by the results of that vote. They never responded. They don't want to see that, because they know the Eritrean people want independence.

Even if we achieve our goal by military means, we want to have a referendum in Eritrea. We want to make sure, or show, that the Eritrean people want independence. Unless the Eritrean people needed and wanted to have their independence, our struggle wouldn't have gone so far

without any support from outside. So it is a question of our right to self-determination, something we cannot compromise. Our people must choose. And then we can talk about forms.

**BF:** On this issue of democracy: What does democracy mean in the context of the revolutionary transformation of a society, whether it be semi-feudal, capitalist or whatever? You mentioned goals of a mixed economy and multi-party system. Yet democracy in the United States has its own limits. What are the limits of the democracy you seek? What does it look like in practice?

**HG:** Democracy is a very complex issue. The simple explanation of democracy is that it means to govern with the consent of the people, and that people have the right to choose what they want. But democracy is different in different situations. If you talk about right now, we're building a democratic system in the liberated areas where the civilian population lives. We make sure the people elect their leaders on a village, town or zone level. This democracy is different than the democracy within our army because the army is fighting, and it has to follow military discipline. We will have much broader democracy when we are independent.

But making democracy work means making the people know what their interests are. People have to have houses. People have to eat. People have to have health services. People have to have the right to education. People have to have all the other things they need. Of course there is a limit on resources. But the country should give everything that is available to the people. Whatever support we have from the population is derived not from what we preach, but from what people have seen in practice. We have built schools. We have built health clinics. We have distributed land to the farmers. And we gave them the right to elect their own leaders and administer their affairs.

**BF:** Even if they disagree with EPLF?

**HG:** Yes, yes, even if they disagree with the EPLF. Because, in an election people with different views come to power. But what we have seen in practice is that the population is satisfied with what they have seen and the majority of people support EPLF.

**BF:** What happened to the ELF [Eritrean Libera-

tion Front—another liberation organization once active in the struggle for Eritrean liberation—ed]? Do they have any kind of support? Do you have any relationship with them? And do they have people that get elected in any of these local elections that you're describing?

**HG:** In fact this is a very good example of how people choose. Because ELF has not been actively involved in Eritrea since 1981. What drove ELF out of Eritrea was not mainly the military factor. They lost ground in Eritrea among the population. They didn't have enough support. Even though ELF established the armed struggle in 1961, they never reached out to the population with all the services I was talking about.

People were able to choose who stands for their interest, especially the peasants, who are not educated (I'm talking about formal education) but who know practical things very clearly. You cannot convince such people by just talking. You have to show them what you are talking about. This was, in fact, where ELF lost the fight to win the people. Now they don't have anybody inside Eritrea. Many ELF members joined EPLF. There was a unity congress in 1987 where the majority faction of the ELF joined the EPLF. And many people who used to be ELF sympathizers inside Eritrea have been working with EPLF.

**BF:** What position, if any, did you take on the crack-down in China last year in Tienanmen?

**HG:** Well, because we are fighting and the issue is complex, we don't take positions on different issues internationally. This doesn't mean we don't follow and look at all the situations that are going on, but there is no official position on that or on anything that is happening. All we do is just learn and follow the situation and gain experience about what to do in our own situation.

But in general we don't support any crushing of people's movements. We think such situations should be settled politically. This is our general policy.

## Building New Societies

**BF:** In other parts of Africa there have been various experiments with revolutionary transformation. There have been movements which have tried to transform from the bottom up, and there have been state-proclaimed socialist governments. There are countries as different as Mozambique,



Self-reliance has been a hallmark of the Eritrean struggle from the start.

the People's Republic of the Congo, Benin, Angola and Guinea-Bissau. Yet in the recent past, Mozambique and its Frelimo Party dropped adherence to Marxism-Leninism, and I believe that Benin did as well. How does the EPLF look at these experiments in Africa and the changes going on?

**HG:** One thing I want to clarify about EPLF: EPLF was never Marxist-Leninist. It was never a party. It is a front where people from different political persuasions are united to work for independence and create a democratic government. There are a lot of differences from the countries you mention. One thing is we didn't come to power early. The length of our struggle gave us a lot of chance to learn from our experience and the experience of others.

Also, while it's good to talk about ideal things, you have to work first to change reality. And you change reality, especially in backward countries, over a long time. Step by step, you make people conscious of what can be done to change their present situation. If you have illiterate people, you have to educate them first. You have to work for their basic needs and that takes a lot of effort and time. But in many cases in the Third World what you heard was talk about big ideals without having the basic things in place. I think that situation leads to failure later on.

This doesn't just apply to third world countries; it applies to other countries as well. The situation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union shows clearly that things were not handled right. This mainly had to do with the ruling parties' relations with the population. You have to have the

support of the population. You have to understand that whatever you are doing is for them. If you don't have that point of view, you'll end up having fights inside the country which will hold up everything you want to do, as in the case of Mozambique.

**BF:** Looking at Mozambique for a second, I believe that they began their armed struggle around the same time that your armed struggle began in the very early 1960s. When Frelimo was formed it was a front, but then within a couple of years of taking power they transformed themselves into a political party. Would you see, after independence, EPLF becoming a party, or do you see political parties developing out of the EPLF?

**HG:** No, EPLF is not going to transform into a party. EPLF's mandate is to finish this war and to establish a democratic government. After that, parties will definitely emerge and people in EPLF will go into different parties. So it will not be EPLF transformed into one party, but different parties coming from within EPLF.

What we are making sure of right now is that people understand and live the ideals we are fighting for. We think people understand and support the basic idea of a democratic system with a multi-party presence. But later on, after independence, issues are going to be different. And then people will have the right to have their own ideas and try to gain the support of the population.

**BF:** Is socialism part of the program of the EPLF?

**HG:** No, it's not part of the EPLF program although some people within EPLF may want to

have socialism. When we say we want a multi-party system, we mean one that will be open to everybody. People who think we should have a socialist system in Eritrea will form their party, and if they get support from the population they can come to power. What we want to make sure is that a real democracy is established in Eritrea.

### Eritrea and the Crisis of Old Models

**BF:** What led the EPLF to these views about the revolutionary transformation, which are unique in

your successes and in light of the setbacks in places like Mozambique and the Congo?

**HG:** I think a lot can be learned from us because we have been out there struggling and building for a long time, and we have tried to learn from the failures or mistakes of different governments and countries. But the main advice we give to others is to be self-reliant and to learn from others' experience but adapt it to your own situation.

**BF:** I don't know whether you're going to want to answer this question because you said socialism

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a lot of ways. Certainly this has nothing in common with the Soviet model, which was adopted by a number of countries in Africa.

**HG:** What helped us was that we relied on ourselves. We have been self-reliant for two reasons. First, we believed in self-reliance, but also we were not getting any aid because of the complexity of the issues. That pushed us more toward continuing on the path of self-reliance.

This doesn't mean we don't need aid from other sources or other countries. This country has been at war for so long, there is a lot to be done and we need help. The question of aid will be solved differently once we get our independence. But we will not take any help with strings attached. We don't want the aid of anybody who plans to come and tell us what to do. That would be abandoning everything we have sacrificed for.

We say we shouldn't adopt any model in this world. We can learn from all experiences, but we are a society of our own, different from every other. There are similarities between third world countries but each country's situation is unique. The problem with looking here and there for models is that you may try to adopt a model that doesn't work in your reality. So, in general, our view is: Don't copy others but learn from their experience and see how it can work in your own reality. And we try to learn from everybody; we don't limit ourselves to any particular country.

**BF:** Having said that, what can other African revolutionaries learn from your experience in light of

is not an objective of the EPLF. But one of the debates—it's an historic debate but it's arisen again—is whether or not socialism can be built in technologically backward countries, given not only their technological backwardness, but the whole problem of outside interference. Where do you come down on this issue?

**HG:** It is not the aim of the EPLF to establish a socialist system. But I can give you my own view. What I think was wrong in many countries and movements had to do with exactly that point: trying to transform a backward society into an advanced society in a very few years—establishing big factories, etc. It's not realistic.

At the same time, you don't have to adopt a capitalist system simply because you don't have the base there for socialism. Even if a country like ours wanted to have a capitalist system, you couldn't have it. It's not realistic. Can a third world country be like the United States simply because it wants to be like the United States? It's just not possible. So I don't think it's a question of whether you choose to be a socialist country. Or a capitalist country.

What I think we'll have to do in the Third World is first work to change our backward societies to meet the population's basic needs. If we can reach a stage where at least everybody is fed and educated and has health services, then we can go on from there.

**BF:** Thanks. ■