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Byron Hove, a Zimbabwean lawyer and politician formerly with the OAU Secretariat, is today Deputy Secretary for External Relations of one of his country's liberation-movements. An active and experienced administrator who has held diverse responsibilities in Africa, his new appointment calls for up to date information on the fast evolving political developments in the explosive region of southern Africa. He knows where to find it. He reads AFRICA. DO YOU?



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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile-Mariam, Ethiopia's Head of State, talks to Raph Uwechue, Editor-in-Chief, AFRICA magazine.

'The principle that all peace-loving countries of the world should give every possible assistance to any country which is a victim of aggression is clearly embodied in the Charters of the United Nations and the OAU...'

'Our fight is wi

Q The Horn of Africa, of which Ethiopia is an integral part, is today the continent's most explosive flashpoint. For the past several months, Ethiopian forces have been engaged in heavy combat with troops of the Western Somali Liberation Front, as well as regular Somali troops in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. How would you, Mr Chairman, explain the origin of this conflict and in particular, the invasion of the Ogaden by Somali forces?

A I can say that it is a well known fact that the leaders of Somalia have nursed an ambition to expand at the expense of Kenya, Ethiopia and the Republic of Djibouti, and establish what they call 'Greater Somalia'. This ambition is enshrined in the Constitution of Somalia and encrusted on their national flag. Over the years, the leaders of Somalia have publicly reiterated this policy. To begin with, Somalia's claim to all these territories is nothing but a historical, legal and political fiction. The Somali authorities themselves cannot trace the historically defined and internationally recognised boundaries of their state, if as they claim, any such state had existed prior to 1960.

There was no time in history when Djibouti, eastern Ethiopia or the North-Eastern Province of Kenya were part of Somalia. In point of fact, it was only in 1924 that the Kenyan province of Jubaland and the port of Kismayu were snatched away from Kenya and handed over to Italy by Britain. Similarly, Somalis went *en masse* to Djibouti in search of work and a better life only after the Addis Ababa - Djibouti railway was built at the beginning of the 20th Century, and after the harbour of Djibouti itself became a centre of economic activity. In eastern Ethiopia two Somali nomadic ethnic communities from ex-British Somaliland seasonally entered our territory in search of pasture and water. But land wherever the Somalis work and live cannot automatically be considered part and parcel of the Somalia Republic.

In the hope of fulfilling their expansionist ambitions, Somali authorities have spent some 17 years in military preparations. To this end, they joined the Arab League, not because the Somali people could be considered Arabs, but in the hope of winning the support of reactionary regimes among the Arab countries for their ambitious designs. Somalia's rulers also declared themselves 'Marxist-Leninists', not because they believe in it, but only for the purpose of winning the support of the socialist countries for their expansionist ambitions. When the socialist countries refused to support their fictitious claims, they switched to the Western countries and speak of the danger of the 'Soviet build-up' in Ethiopia, again in the hope of using the West for their sinister ends.

As you will recall, the Ethiopian revolution erupted in 1974. Since that time we have been busy dismantling the old order and in its place we have started building socialism. You know, of course, that wherever there is a revolution, there will always be



Raph Uwechue with Lt. Col. Mengistu (r) at the National Palace, Addis Ababa, the seat of the Dergue



'We are prepared to fight for years. . .'

those opposed to the masses'

counter-revolution. Thus, if reactionaries operate internally, their natural allies colonialism and imperialism will not be far away. Given this fact, the remnants of the old order were active in North-Western Ethiopia. Ali Mirah's agents were busy in North-Eastern Ethiopia; and the secessionist elements were fighting the Ethiopian revolution in the North. The former landlords were pushing the country to the brink of a bloody civil war. Anarchists, saboteurs and CIA agents were creating terror in the cities - all in the hope of reversing the revolution. Somalia's trained saboteurs and members of her regular army were busy destroying railway lines, bridges, industrial establishments, farms, settlement projects and similar facilities. To crown it all, at a time when Ethiopia was being attacked from every direction and by every means, the US administration laid virtual embargo on arms delivery to Ethiopia, arms for which we had already paid. So, given the internal and the external situation, the Somali authorities could not have chosen a better time than July 23, 1977 to launch their attack into our country. At that time we were least prepared militarily. We were totally pre-occupied with domestic problems, and given the fact that we had to equip our defence forces with arms which were entirely new to them, the invading Somali forces got the upper hand.

Q How much damage would you say Ethiopia has suffered in the fighting? You seem so confident that your forces will expel the invading troops from your territory.

A Materially and in terms of human life, the damage to Ethiopia is enormous. But this war has, on the other hand, added more dimensions to the consciousness of the people. Their untapped talents are emerging. Their resolve to defend the revolution, the territorial integrity and unity of the country is greater than ever. Everywhere we now have organisation, discipline and self-reliance. 'We will fight as we produce, and produce as we fight' is the current slogan of our people. It is clear that if necessary, we are prepared to fight for years.

Talking about the material damage, the Addis Ababa Djibouti railway has been wrecked by the army of Somalia. Such an act has affected some 60 per cent of Ethiopia's external trade. Since Djibouti and Ethiopia are inter-dependent economically, 60 per cent of the port activities of Djibouti and 35 per cent of the labour forces there have also been affected.

Moreover, Djibouti used to earn some 10 million US dollars annually in port charges. Djibouti is now denied this source of revenue. Entire settlement projects that were established with the help of the UN family, our own resources and that of various friendly governments estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars have been wrecked. Farms, industries, roads and schools have been destroyed. Innocent and defenceless Ethiopians have been massacred in cold blood.

Q Do you foresee the Ethiopian army carrying the war into the Republic of Somalia itself as a retaliatory measure? What do you propose as a solution to this protracted conflict?

A As far as retaliatory measures are concerned, why should Ethiopia attack Somalia? We have no designs of territorial ambitions on any of our neighbours, including Somalia. Believing that the leaders of Somalia are principled and consistent, we extended our hands to them for friendship and cooperation, convinced that cooperation would be better than confrontation. We even took the initiative to suggest to them a number of proposals which would benefit both countries: the building of a common economic infrastructure; the utilisation of the Wabi Shebelle and Juba rivers for settlement; agricultural and industrial purposes; the expansion of trade and commerce; and cooperation in the social and cultural fields in general and the normalisation of relations in particular.

As a foundation for long lasting political and economic cooperation, we even proposed a confederation for the region. Instead of responding to these constructive proposals positively, the Somali authorities took our sincerity for weakness and launched a war of aggression against Ethiopia. We see their act as an attempt to satisfy their ambition for territorial aggrandisement, and in the process serve the sinister designs of international imperialism to reverse the Ethiopian revolution.

The present case is that of an unprovoked and pre-meditated military aggression against Ethiopia, for which the authorities of Somalia must bear complete responsibility. And so, the first pre-condition to any solution, as far as Ethiopia is concerned, is the total, speedy and unconditional withdrawal of the invading Somali troops from Ethiopian territory. Ethiopia has complete confidence in the efficacy of the OAU. It was Somalia which walked out of the OAU's mediation committee meeting in Libreville-Gabon, last year. We have always been willing to accept OAU mediation.

Q In recent months, Mr. Chairman, you have received vastly increased assistance from the Soviet Union. Somalia has claimed repeatedly that Cuban and Russian soldiers are engaged in active combat, helping Ethiopian forces. Could you comment on this?

A Right now, as you are aware, an all-round aggression is being committed against socialist Ethiopia by Somalia and reactionary neighbouring regimes, assisted and abetted by international imperialism. In the face of all these, it is Ethiopia's legitimate and unquestionable right to ask the assistance of countries of her own choice.

The principle that all peace-loving countries of the world should give every possible assistance to any country which is a



Ethiopia: 'An entire population geared for war...'

victim of aggression is clearly embodied in the charters of the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity. Accordingly, Ethiopia has asked the progressive, peace-loving and socialist countries for arms and other assistance to defend herself from outside aggression. Since Ethiopia has obtained the necessary assistance in arms, mainly from the Soviet Union, it is only logical that we have military personnel as advisers from our friends, the Soviet Union and Cuba. They are not fighting our war for us.

Q The question of Eritrea has been a long-standing matter. According to reports, the Ethiopian armed forces are involved in what can no longer be dismissed as a minor revolt in the province. Why do you think some Arab governments consider Eritrea as Arab, and what is the significance of religion, if any, in the conflict?

A A reading of the history of our country clearly establishes the fact that the administrative region of Eritrea has always been an integral part of Ethiopia, so much so that the Northern region has been one of the cradles of Ethiopian history and culture. The fact also should be mentioned that Ethiopia has always been a Red Sea state, except for a brief period, when colonialists controlled the region. As is well known, the very name Eritrea is a colonial creation.

The Eritrean population is principally made up of the Tigrigna-speaking peoples of the Highlands of Hamasen, Serae and Akeleguzay and the Tigre-speaking peoples in the North. In addition to these two major linguistic groups, there are the Afar,

the Saho, the Kunama and others who speak different languages. As you can see the Eritrean province is not one homogeneous unit, contrary to what the world is being led to believe. There are different nationalities in the region. But the reactionary Arab regimes consider Eritrea as Arab for only one reason, and that is to deny Ethiopia its rightful and historical position on the Red Sea in order to turn the Red Sea into an 'Arab Lake'.

The oppressed nationalities in the administrative region of Eritrea the Kunama, the Afars, the Sahos, etc, are in full support of the on-going revolution and its national democratic revolutionary programme. They, therefore, vehemently oppose the secessionist movements which are guided, controlled and financed by reactionary Arab states and agents of world imperialism.

The majority of Eritreans are Christians. But this is not the issue. Whether it is the Christians or the Moslems that are the majority in any part of Ethiopia, under revolutionary Ethiopia, all of them, irrespective of race, culture, creed or religion, enjoy equal rights and have equal opportunities in the exercise of their political, economic and social rights.

The real problem is the dream of reactionary Arab regimes to dismember and thereby weaken Ethiopia, and if possible expand their spheres of influence throughout Black Africa. We have many common interests with many Arab countries. For instance, we are cognisant of the fact that Egypt and the Sudan have basic interests in the waters of the Nile and we expect them to respect our established rights and fundamental interests. But Egypt's approach to our common interests has been negative,

and this attitude has been reactivated and reinforced since the onset of our revolution.

In order to weaken Ethiopia reactionary Arab regimes organised, trained, armed and financed the secessionist elements. These regimes must refrain from meddling in Ethiopia's internal affairs. They must respect Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Q Has your government any concrete plans to reach a peaceful accommodation with the Eritrean insurgents?

A We are able to solve our domestic problems peacefully. The Ethiopian revolution has a definite message for the broad masses of Ethiopia, including those in the administrative region of Eritrea.

Under the National Democratic Revolutionary programme, the various nationalities in Ethiopia have been given their inalienable right to fully participate in the determination of their social, economic, cultural and political future within the framework of the concept of full regional autonomy. To this end, a Nine-Point Peace Policy was issued on May 16, 1976 to solve the problem in the administrative region of Eritrea in line with the principles embodied in the National Democratic Revolution programme.

The response from the other side, however, has not been positive precisely because these secessionist movements are under the control of Arab and other outside interests. The problem in this region can be solved only if outside reactionary and imperialist interferences are stopped. On our part, we will

continue our efforts for a peaceful settlement of the problem.

Immediately the former feudal government was overthrown, the Provisional Military Administrative Council withdrew its forces to the barracks as a sincere gesture to solve the problem in the administrative region of Eritrea in a peaceful way. The secessionist movements, however, countered this conciliatory move on our part by mounting an offensive in a bid to secede.

In spite of this, elders and respected citizens from the region were sent to the secessionist movements to plead with them and to help in the effort to solve the problem peacefully, but again the response of these movements was an outright rejection of the idea of peacefully settling the problem. When the Nine-Point Peace Policy was issued on May 16, 1976 the broad masses of the region applauded it in public gatherings. But again the leaders of the secessionist movements turned a deaf ear to this public support and enthusiasm.

The Provisional Military Administrative Council has not confined itself to internal efforts to solve peacefully the problem in the administrative region of Eritrea. Progressive and socialist countries were asked to help in the attempt to resolve the problem in a peaceful way. Neighbouring countries such as the Sudan were approached to be involved in the effort to solve the problem in a peaceful way. A number of delegations were sent to different Arab countries for the same purpose. All this was in vain. The reason for this lies in the presence of imperialists who linked with reactionary Arab and African regimes, have been involved in the matter by financing, advising, arming the secessionist movements in order to liquidate the revolution and



'The revolution has an obligation to those who have been deprived and oppressed. . .'

'The real problem is the dream of reactionary Arab regimes to dismember and thereby weaken Ethiopia, and if possible expand their spheres of influence throughout Black Africa'

create a condition to interfere in the internal affairs of African countries for the purpose of neo-colonial exploitation.

Q The Ethiopian revolution has been assessed as a beneficial process of change by its supporters. Its detractors and opponents have, however, expressed the view that its achievements do not justify the cost so far in terms of human lives and human rights. Would you care, Mr Chairman, to comment on this?

A Since the fall of the corrupt and oppressive feudal order, there has been a constant cry of alleged abuses of human rights in Ethiopia from some Western quarters.

As the struggle towards the final achievements of the goals of our revolution gets more and more intensified this deliberate attack has equally been intensified in order to erode the support which the Ethiopian revolution enjoys among progressive peace-loving and democratic forces of the world, and undermine our struggle against imperialism, feudalism and neo-colonialism. These same countries did not only shamelessly keep silent in the face of the immense violations of human rights

which were prevalent under the defunct feudal regime but also actively encouraged and supported them by maintaining close ties with that oppressive system.

Our struggle is neither based on ethnicity nor on other parochial interests. Our struggle is a calculated and scientific attempt to neutralise the power of the reactionary forces which are trying to destroy our revolution at its very birth. Those who have been justly dispossessed of their ill-gotten wealth, status and autocratic rule have reacted and their reaction is being successfully fought by the broad masses. In this struggle there has been unfortunately and unavoidably some spilling of blood.

Reactionary Arab regimes and imperialist powers have organised and financed counter-revolutionary elements like the EPRP, EDU, ELF, EPLF with the intent of suffocating the revolution by dismembering and weakening Ethiopia. These elements have been conducting a wide range of terror in all parts of the nation.

In the face of the terror conducted by the counter revolutionary elements, the Provisional Military Administrative Council has been obliged to take legal measures to maintain peace and order like any government. But these measures which were only an answer to counter-revolutionary activities have been greatly distorted by the enemies of our revolution, such as imperialist countries, as a gross violation of human rights.

The irony of the situation is that these same countries are themselves actively encouraging the suppression of human rights in many parts of the world and in particular in southern Africa. Our struggle is a reflection of our drive for justice and fundamental human rights, for the dignity and worth of the human person and for the equal rights of men and women. Our fights are with those who are strenuously opposed to the emancipation of the masses and thus are engaged in acts of intimidation, terror and murder.

The revolution has an obligation to those who have been deprived and oppressed for centuries. Its goal is to build a socialist society in which justice, freedom, equality and the respect of human rights prevail. It is unfair and indeed contradictory to accuse us of violating the fundamental principles we cherish and for the achievements of which we are struggling. ●