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## FM Interview

# War and Famine in Eritrea

*For ten years and more, Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Dan Connell has followed the long and truly heroic independence struggle in Eritrea. He is also responsible for much of American media coverage, however sparing it has been, of that struggle. Over the last two years, through Grassroots International, of which Connell is Executive Director, he has pressed for Eritrea, as well as the neighboring Tigray region, to get their fair share of famine relief from the West. Recently, Forward Motion's Bill Fletcher spoke in depth with Dan Connell about Eritrean politics and prospects. (For more information about Grassroots International and a sample copy of its newsletter, write P. O. Box 312, Cambridge, MA 02139.)*

**FM: News from Eritrea is hard to come by in the United States. What can you tell us about the current situation there at the time of your last visit?**

**Dan Connell:** I visited Eritrea for a month in January of 1985 for the first time in four years. I had been there a dozen times before in the 1970s up to 1980, and I was back again in Sudan on the border last May. When I went back I was struck by two things. One was the condition of the people. It was the worst that I have ever seen in ten years of visiting Eritrea. At the same time I was struck by the level of organization of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Eritrean Relief Association, which was higher and more extensive than I have ever seen it before.

It was a mixed experience—a great sadness and a great inspiration at the same time. The general condition of the people has been very poor for a long time. It is a terribly impoverished country—held back in its development for decades by Ethiopian occupation. Before that its progress was severely distorted by Italian and British colonial occupation through the early half of the century.

Over the last five years, however, drought and war have taken an enormous toll. Drought set in in Eritrea in 1980, and during the last two years there has been barely any harvest to speak of in much of the country. I travelled extensively in some of the areas that have in the past produced the most food in Eritrea, and I saw no evidence of a harvest at all during this past year. January comes right at the end of the harvest season. I visited peasants' houses and looked into the big ceramic bins that they store grain in and almost all of them were empty. We also saw dozens of abandoned villages whose entire populations had just left.

Some of that was also due to the war. The war has been quite intense, especially in

western Eritrea, for the last several years, and it is the combination of war and drought that created the current crisis. The war caused tremendous dislocation and suffering and also severely disrupted the relief effort. What you find now are massive numbers of people who have been displaced from their home villages unable to produce food. Over a half million have gone to Sudan in the last twenty years, but there are probably a million more Eritreans within the country who have moved around from one village to another. Hundreds of thousands live either in small camps run by the Eritrean Relief Association or camped out in improvised tents and shelters made out of cardboard, plastic and whatever else they can find.

The biggest change in the last five years is probably the extension of the EPLF's operations throughout the country. In 1978 two liberation fronts, the EPLF and the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) were active. At that time they controlled almost the entire country—all but three major towns, the two ports and Asmara, the capital (plus a couple of small garrisons, including Barentu in western Eritrea, which was extremely hard to capture).

In mid-1978 the war took a sharp turn, with a massive influx of Soviet military hardware and, in effect, a new Ethiopian army trained and armed by the Soviet Union. A major invasion by about 110 to 120 thousand Ethiopian troops supported by hundreds of tanks and jet aircraft forced the Eritreans to retreat from most of the large towns they had held. They went back into the countryside. After that, almost annually, large scale Ethiopian campaigns attempted to extend their control. These were stalemated, mostly by the EPLF since the ELF had suffered severely in the 1978 fighting. Efforts to bring about a unity agreement between the two movements broke down in 1980, and civil war broke out between them. In 1980 and 1981, the EPLF drove the ELF entirely out of Eritrea.

By the time I got there in 1984 the EPLF was the only front operating in the country and it had extended its control into all regions. This is a remarkable change. A lot of the areas that I travelled in this year were formerly controlled by the ELF. Now operating among all the peoples you have a front with a democratic program committed to equality among all nationalities and the two major religions of Eritrea (Christianity and Islam). The social base for any other sort of opposition based on tribal or religious grounds is gone. A lot of the problems that Eritrea had before that, as with many Third World countries in this situation, stem from right-wing movements that really base themselves in a religious or minority ethnic identity. By tackling that during the early part of the 1980s, the EPLF probably resolved the most fundamental problem of the struggle.

By 1984 the EPLF was in its strongest position ever. Opening the year by going on the offensive for the first time since 1978, the EPLF captured the western town of Tessenei and then went on to capture a large section of the Red Sea coast. It even mounted an operation in Asmara in which thirty or so Soviet aircraft were knocked out in the country's main airport.

Despite their advantage, the EPLF pulled back after that. By 1984, the major prob-

lem had become the famine. Famine had spread during the previous four years to the point where the population today is severely threatened. For this reason, the EPLF halted offensive military operations, continually raised calls for a cease-fire and put most of their efforts into dealing with civilian problems associated with the drought and famine. They built new roads and set up a logistical operation that could reach people throughout the country. By the end of the year, massive numbers of people were starving in Eritrea. In the past, Eritrea has had problems with malnutrition and large numbers of deaths associated with hunger, but not real starvation as in Ethiopia, where famines have taken place every eight to ten years. Now for the first time the impact of the drought coupled with the war threatened large segments of the population. Many people could be reached only by animal caravans because the EPLF could not get trucks in. Worst of all, even with the tremendous international response to the famine, very little aid was getting to Eritrea. Almost all was going to the Ethiopian government.



When I went in in January 1985, I saw large movements of people within the country. Many were war victims or displaced because of the war, not simply the drought. Many were moving toward the Sudan border. The Relief Association attempted to hold them in small camps camouflaged from aerial view—otherwise they would be bombed—so relatively few actually crossed into Sudan. Large numbers were piling up in the small camps in Eritrea. I saw people starving in a number of these camps for lack of emergency food items, especially milk. I also saw large amounts of internationally donated food being sold in the markets. Food had gone through the Ethiopian government to the major towns it controls, and now merchants there said they bought the food from military officers.

So you see that the necessity to deal with the famine offered an incredible contrast to the ongoing military situation. Almost every day we were there, Ethiopian aircraft buzzed overhead looking for targets of opportunity. In the central highlands, there was a significant amount of fighting early this past year—skirmishing really—around the main roads linking Ethiopia with Eritrea. Since then, in early July 1985, the EPLF returned to the offensive and captured the town of Barentu in western Eritrea. The Eritreans had been unable to take Barentu in the 1970s because it sits on top an extremely well defended hilltop. This time they mounted an attack based primarily on

artillery and tanks—captured Soviet weapons. They took it in a nineteen hour battle. This startling victory gave them complete control of western Eritrea, from the seacoast all the way down to the Sudanese border. This offers the Eritreans a very substantial base area, including protecting the civilian displaced peoples camps, a key part of their strategy.

There has been and will continue to be fairly heavy fighting in the area around Barentu in the central Eritrean highlands. The Ethiopians recaptured Barentu and Tesenei at the end of August by bringing in 35,000 reinforcements and parachuting some of them behind the EPLF lines. One other consequence was the loss of an ERA agricultural project at Ali Ghidir where 5,000 hectares were under cultivation by local farmers. This will only increase the hunger problem next year. Nevertheless, the EPLF is pushing to force the situation in that area, and I think they expect to see considerably increased combat over the coming six months. They are now finally in a position to break the stalemate. The EPLF is at the early stages of a counteroffensive which could very well end up in 1986 with a repeat of what happened in 1977, with cutting of the main roads, surrounding and isolating of the main Ethiopian-held towns and eventually even the siege of Asmara itself. I think the EPLF now feels the Ethiopians have severe morale problems among their troops. They have serious political problems that arise from the combination of famine, economic collapse, and the failure of their military campaigns over ten years. So the opportunity is there to try to force negotiations to end the war.

**FM: Are there any signs of cease-fire negotiations?**

**Connell:** There have been isolated talks off and on during 1985 between the EPLF and the government but they have not led to anything. The EPLF has a position on a peace settlement that calls for an internationally supervised cease fire leading to an internationally supervised referendum giving the people a choice between full union with Ethiopia, a federation with Ethiopia or some form of regional autonomy. The EPLF have insisted that the people of Eritrea will have to decide. The Ethiopians for their part have shown no inclination to enter negotiations that include even the possibility of independence. The fact that the government has talked may show that the Ethiopian authorities are aware that they face a serious crisis here that has to be dealt with in some way. But there has been no progress toward this.

**FM: I want to return to the issue of the famine for a second. One thing that is not clear to a lot of people is whether the famine that hit not only Eritrea and Ethiopia, but Chad, Mauritania and elsewhere is a natural phenomenon or something else.**

**Connell:** We are witnessing something qualitatively different from a natural disaster. It is the cumulative result of economic exploitation, political manipulation and horrendous mismanagement of resources principally by the narrowly-based elites in cooperation with the industrial countries. Africa has always had drought; the climate runs in cycles. In every eight to ten years, there are bad years for rain. Yet people have never starved in Africa in the numbers they are now.

Some people raise the question of overpopulation in Africa, which is nonsense when you look at the actual numbers and land areas involved. Take Sudan, for instance. It is one of the hardest hit countries but 80% of the arable land is not under cultivation. In fact they have a population shortage and are unable to take advantage of their resources. With even the simplest advances in development toward mechanized farming and light industry, they would have an extreme shortage of workers to be able to handle it. So population is a distraction from the issue.

The problems really stem from the misallocation of resources over such a long period of time. The impoverishment of the people of these countries is such that they live on the brink in good times; when bad times come along, it has a tremendous impact. Whether they are associated with East or West, these countries are deeply in debt. This has entered them into a cycle of increasing the use of good land for cash crops to pay their bills, forcing more people onto more and more marginal land. In the West African Sahel countries, you find the nomads pushed off of the bad land with their animals. That increases the pressure on that land as the goats nibble away at what little grass there is. As that happens, desertification takes place: the desert spreads. It is really important to understand that this is only partly a natural phenomenon. It is fundamentally a social and economic phenomenon, because of increasing pressure on the Sahel, which is an Arabic word meaning border of the desert. The increased pressure on the border areas is what causes them to be exhausted, eroded and then ultimately turned into desert.

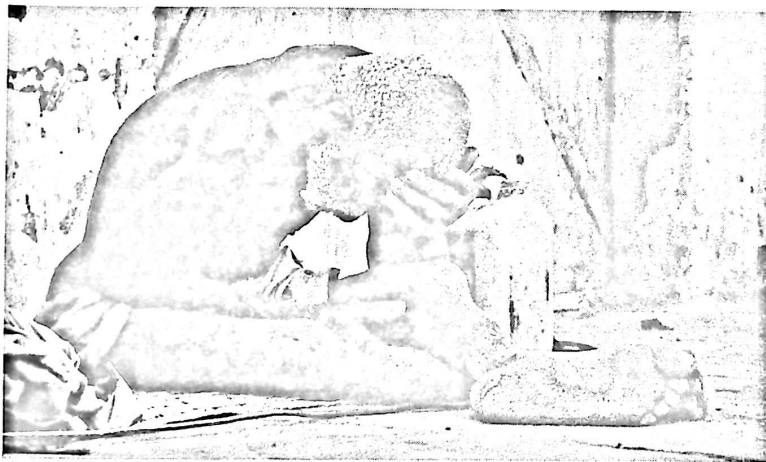


Photo courtesy of author

There are ways of dealing with this problem, but they mean going back and taking a hard look at the international indebtedness of these countries. Simultaneously, it means taking a hard look at the internal control of resources. Peasant farmers and the nomads make up 80 to 90% of these societies, but narrowly based elites supported by the industrial countries reap the fruits of what little is produced. The whole structure of the economies of most of these countries is based around the same process of extraction of resources for export as they were in the colonial period. The cycle of indebtedness encourages this at an ever accelerating rate.

**FM: Does the technology exist to reclaim the desert land?**

**Connell:** Yes it does. But it requires a multi-year investment: first simply sowing the type of grass that holds the soil in place, and then not grazing on it for periods of time. You have to set aside land to do it. You can see the same thing anywhere in the U.S. If you go to Provincetown (on Cape Cod, Mass.), you can see how they have stopped the sand dunes from moving, (or any of the beaches along the coast). You sow grass, you fence it off, and pretty soon you have grass all over the hills. Similarly, reforestation can take place but that also has to be a multi-year investment.

You need to mount a significant campaign to bring about the changes. You need a combination of emergency assistance to provide people with basic food, medicine and other supplies, a serious medium-term investment to increase available production, and a long term investment in rehabilitating the land and developing alternative forms of production that are integrated into the local surroundings.

Let me give you one simple example. The Tigray region in Ethiopia is probably the worst area in Africa right now. We have seen somewhere between three and five hundred thousand people die out of an estimated population of five million in the last year—absolutely extraordinary. This is the area that produced more than one hundred thousand refugees into Sudan in the past six months. It is also the area that produces the tremendous refugee camps that were filmed for TV and really focussed world attention on this. In one area of Tigray this past year, among the worst drought-affected territory, there was an experiment in terracing and irrigation to increase the yield. They ended up this year with an eightfold increase in production while everything else around them dropped to almost nothing. It took almost no sophisticated technology to do it. You can build terraces on hillsides with a level and a hoe and stop the erosion and catch the rainfall.

**FM: Is that the major disaster area, and is it the area controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front?**

**Connell:** The program took place in areas controlled by the TPLF, and it was done under the auspices of the Relief Society of Tigray with some international assistance, but not very much. During the past year the Eritreans have mounted another program—building small rock and earth dams around all the villages. They have a problem of flooding during the limited rain season as well as drought during the rest of the year. Water management is the key. They mobilized people to build these dams all around the area to catch the water for small-scale irrigation. They have avoided mass-

ive starvation in Eritrea in part because of this little project. This took no money and no technology. What makes it possible is that the EPLF in this case is rooted so deeply on the village level. Through the peasant associations, the youth and women's associations, they can mobilize large numbers of people to put simply two days a week during the key periods into building these. It is so starkly simple to deal with some of these problems if you take the appropriate political and social steps.

**FM: You were talking about the Tigray before. About a year ago I was surprised to see an interesting article in the *Boston Globe Magazine* about the Tigray movement. It is a little-known movement and most people have no idea where it is, let alone how to pronounce it. How do you compare that movement and the Eritrean movement, their objectives and organization?**

**Connell:** There are some interesting similarities and contrasts. There are a number of similarities in the political and social approach of the two movements, in the way they organize their people and involve them in the struggle. Certainly both of them are isolated from both major world blocks. They depend almost entirely on their own resources. Both do wage a military struggle and also the social and economic struggle.

There are also significant differences, and they start with the fact that the Tigrayans are Ethiopians proper. The Tigrayans share a history with the Amhara who presently control Ethiopia. They go back hundreds of years together. The core feudal culture that runs through Abyssinia into the twentieth century and becomes Ethiopia is Tigrayan as well. They have been dominated in the empire by the Amharic, but they identify themselves as Ethiopians. They are not struggling to separate from the rest of Ethiopia.

They are also incredibly poor, much more backward, less developed than the Eritreans. When you cross the border from Eritrea to Tigray, you notice differences immediately. It is like walking through a time warp back into the Middle Ages. You see it in the rags they wear, the poverty of the land itself, the feudal deference to foreigners where people bow toward you when they see you. There have been very few roads, few communications under the Amhara rule in this century. No industry was located at all in Tigray; scattered small plot farms still dominate the economy.

Tigray is not ethnically homogenous as a region, but there is a core of Tigrayans while Eritrea is made up of nine different ethnic groups. Eritrea is really a new creation out of the colonial period. The Eritreans include people who overlap with the former French colony Djibouti and also with Sudan. Now the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front has insisted that they have the full right to self-determination, up to and including secession. In practice, however, their program has been to try and build a united front with other Ethiopian movements, both national movements and multi-national movements, with the common aim of overthrowing the Ethiopian military regime. Their goal is a democratic Ethiopia that would promise equality for all nationalities. They are actively engaged in discussion on this now with the OROMO Liberation Front and with a relatively new movement, a multinational movement in Ethiopia called the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement. The EPDM is based principally among the

Amhara people of Wollo and Gondar province in Central Ethiopia. The three have been talking seriously about a united front. They have supported the right of the Eritreans to independence, and the Eritreans have supported their efforts to confront the regime.

**FM: So principally they are democratic movements as opposed to secessionist ones.?**

**Connell:** Right.

**FM: I recently read the book, *Never Kneel Down* and it referred a lot to mass organizations. I was curious about the way the EPLF is organized, and specifically its conception of peoples democracy.**

**Years ago some friends visited Grenada after the revolution. When they came back they talked about the way things were organized according to mass organizations—the women's organization, the workers' organization and the students' organization. After Bishop was killed, and the U.S. invasion, people went back to sum things up. One observation that they have made is that while these mass organizations existed, there were still problems of actual democracy in the way things were run. To what extent do you get a sense that the EPLF has summed up and learned from the experiences of different socialist countries and movements in terms of democracy?**

**Connell:** Well, I think that the question of democracy is fundamental to any revolutionary movement now. That is one of the lessons that we all have to take out of the several decades of successful and unsuccessful struggle.

You know every regime that comes to power in the Third World these days with any attempt at presenting itself as progressive puts forward the notion of organizing the people and setting up mass organizations. Having mass organizations in and of itself means nothing. The Ethiopian government has mass organizations. Everybody has mass organizations. The question of *democracy* is the fundamental one. We have to look at these organizations to see to what extent they represent a bottom-up mobilization of the people and to what extent are they simply a mechanism for controlling the people. They can be either one.

Let me answer your question by talking about how the mass organizations are structured in Eritrea which I know much better than Tigray. When the EPLF first goes into villages (which they did recently in the areas that had been controlled by the ELF; in other areas it goes back to the mid-70's), they start a variety of social programs to improve the lot of the people. They may present cultural programs where they will explain their programs and their positions on things just to win the confidence of the people. They will provide medical services, veterinary services and other things. They will begin with political cadres in the village getting to know who are the most active people in the village. Eventually these will be organized into small study circles which will eventually form the core of mass organizations.

The mass organizations include youth—people from age 16 to 25—women's organizations and the peasant organizations in the countryside. In the towns there are also the workers' associations, but these, of course, are almost all now clandestine and



broken up into smaller groups. In addition, there are professional associations of the people in the middle class: merchants may be in one, teachers in another and doctors. In effect this class is divided up in many different organizations.

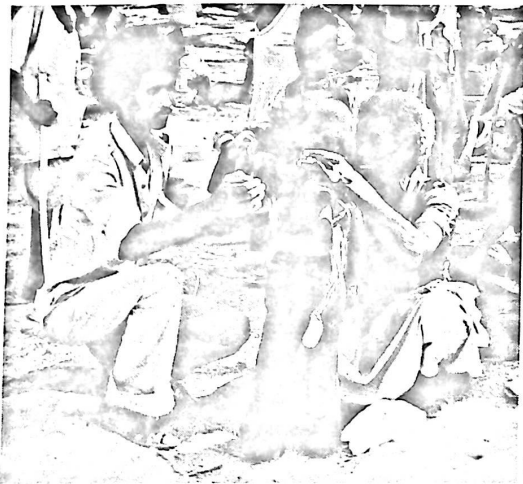


Photo courtesy of author

The EPLF brings health services to the people.

These associations in their turn are subdivided based upon class analysis of Eritrean society. For example, the peasants have been roughly categorized as poor, middle and rich peasants, depending upon their relationship to their means of production. If they are forced to sell their labor to survive, for example, they come under the heading of poor peasants. If they are able to survive on their own resources they are middle peasants. If they have surplus land and hire other laborers to work on their land then they come under the heading of rich peasants. It is a little more complicated than that but those are the rough guidelines. Now the associations themselves are divided into subgroups based upon those categories. In one village, you may have ten different poor peasant groups, two middle peasant groups, and one rich peasant group, but each with fifty people in it who are active in a peasant association. Women's associations and youth associations are being broken down similarly. Each one of these subgroups elects a leader who sits on the village assembly, a kind of congress for the village. In this way, the power in the village sits in the hands of the least enfranchised population, the poor peasants and the women.

That is the structure, and the process has been fascinating to watch. The people

there have no experience with democracy, and inevitably at first they will elect the person who speaks the loudest or had the most influence or who they feared would hit them from behind if they voted for someone else. In the early stages of their organizing, the EPLF maintains a lot of control over what happens in these associations; then they gradually divest themselves of it. They might hold elections as often as every three months simply for the opportunities to explain what elections are for. You sit down and you analyze: this person did this and didn't do that. Did he or she teach you? Serve you? Here are the issues that have been before the village: where does this person stand? EPLF representatives go through that time after time to try to educate people to recognize their interests. They also encourage a tremendous amount of public demonstrating. What you have is a process that probably has as much importance as the content of the political education. They are attempting to build a confidence among the people in their own ability to make changes. That is the key.

I was very struck this past year at how widespread the notion is that we—that labor—can really change the world. The slogan in Eritrea is that our own cooperative efforts can transform the situation in which we live. People do not say that there anymore; they are doing it. Wherever you go if people have nothing at hand to do, they are decorating or they are moving things. Nobody sits still because it is now so much a part of the daily mentality that change is possible. That is an enormous breakthrough for a feudal population which has centuries of training that the world is as it is because God made it so and there is nothing you can do about it.

In Eritrea today, you have political education, you have the process of teaching people what elections are for, and you have these two coupled with practical transformation. A whole series of land reforms have been put into effect in Eritrea. Land reform in Ethiopia has been by fiat, by government proclamation. The Eritreans did it by agitating at the grass roots level to the point where the people in the villages demand it. When demand gathers force and where a majority of the people get behind it, the village actually puts it through. The process operates at different speeds in different localities depending upon the immediate situation. That in turn is summed up at the regional and national levels under the constant attempt to pay attention to areas that are moving faster or slower than others.

But you asked about the historical experiences of other struggles. One of the things that you hear from people in Eritrea looking at the Soviet and Chinese and other experiences is that key changes were imposed on those populations and fostered a gap between the political leadership and the people. The Eritreans are concerned that if it takes ten times as long, the momentum for change has to come from the base. They have encouraged this upward motion through so many different approaches that you sit down at meetings and people have no hesitation to criticize the EPLF, or if they have concerns they will demonstrate against the EPLF.

Another important point worth bringing out is that the EPLF has made it quite clear for years that they are not going to transform the Front into a political party when they win independence. Instead they have been organizing political cadre for fifteen years

now within the front and within the civil organizations. These cadre provide the political core leadership and will form the basis for a party. This party will include as many or more civilian cadre as military cadre, so it will not be a militarized party as has been the case in many African struggles.

**FM: What would that mean practically speaking? As far as I understand, the EPLF has not united different organizations as such, it has functioned as a party, hasn't it?**

**Connell:** It has some of the characteristics of a party, but the EPLF is very careful about identifying itself as a national liberation front. No, there are not different organizations functioning within it and they don't permit caucuses within the front. In that sense, it is like a party. They have at the same time called for an agreement with other Eritrean factions now based in Sudan that would give them the right to come in and agitate within Eritrea. They have said that they would not permit more than one army in Eritrea so that they will not get into a PLO-kind of situation where there are a lot of different armed movements with different political positions operating. On the other hand, they have also said that they favor a multi-party system after independence. They truly have a distinctive advantage, but they are willing to permit open agitation by other political parties and persuasions so long as they do not disrupt the political and economic situation and are not armed.

Here is perhaps a minor point, but it illustrates something to me. On the Ethiopian side in the war, the troops can be arrested and even executed if they are caught listening to the EPLF radio, which broadcasts several times a day in a number of languages. The EPLF has encouraged the people to listen to the Ethiopian government radio and they hold seminars on it. What they are saying is that if the consciousness of the people is clear, they have nothing to fear from political ideas.

**FM: A lot of people have said similar things, but have had varying degrees of success in actually doing it, whether in the Chinese party or various national liberation movements in Africa. A commitment to a multi-party system and this trust in people is real grounds for optimism.**

**Let me ask you two other things. The Eritrean movement by all reports gets little international support, at least not any large scale military support. It is clear why the Soviets do not support them at this point. I wonder if you know whether the United States has made any overtures to give them any kind of aid. Also, why haven't other forces supported them. Years ago we used to hear that a number of countries, China included, would not support movements that aimed at changing the borders within Africa. Is this a factor, or what does account for the lack of international support?**

**Connell:** The reasons tend to be fairly straightforward and political. Many progressive countries and movements supported the Eritreans before the Soviet Union came into Ethiopia. Now many of them have either downplayed their solidarity or turned it inside out and supported the Ethiopians against the Eritreans. The Eritreans are political mavericks: they don't fit any easy categorization. They totally oppose the

Soviet Union, not only in the immediate military sense, but in a fundamental political sense. They oppose the Soviets' approach to organization, their relations with the rest of the world and their political and social programs. Yet the EPLF has not denounced the Soviet Union as socialist imperialist, so they don't fit another leftist movement category which might draw them more attention from the U.S.

The U.S. perspective apparently runs that, to start with, Ethiopia is a bigger prize than Eritrea. Also, a popularly-based left-oriented movement is much more dangerous than a narrowly-based military government holding power through a coup d'état, even if that government is now hostile to the U.S. But the Soviet Union has much more control over Ethiopia than simply the support of one or two people, and the situation is not as simple as in some other Third World countries which have suddenly shifted East to West. Still, it has been my impression that the U.S. has really looked at this situation all along from a perspective of how to win back Ethiopia. The Eritreans have been considered a bit too hot to handle. It has been quite striking to me in the ten years I have covered the situation that contacts with U.S. government officials inevitably get down to the question of, "well, how Marxist are these Eritreans?" They are trying to determine if these are people they can work with.

During this past year, the U.S. has indicated a willingness to provide at least humanitarian assistance across the border into Eritrea and Tigray as well as massive amounts for Ethiopia. Perhaps they expected the Eritreans to come hat in hand, begging. Instead the Eritreans have affirmed their unreadiness to join the U.S. camp, thoroughly angering some people here. The EPLF office has always maintained that the U.S. is the most dangerous country they have to deal with, whether through the backdoor or across the trench, and they have been wary of any assistance. The EPLF has said that Eritrean Relief Association operations should seek aid from any place they can, including the U.S., but the EPLF has declined to request direct U.S. military assistance.

As far as China, I don't know their actual position. Years back, the Chinese did offer the EPLF support conditional on the EPLF denouncing the Soviet Union as social imperialist and denouncing the Gang of Four [former Chinese leaders removed as ultra-left—ed.]. The EPLF responded that, as far as analysis of the Soviet Union, we are a national liberation front, not a party, and we do not have a position on the character of the Soviet Union, nor will we denounce it in these terms. They also maintained that the Gang of Four was an internal Chinese matter on which the EPLF would have nothing to say. They did not get any Chinese help.

They have managed; they have built a whole strategy around fighting with mainly captured weapons. It has taken a much longer time than might otherwise have been the case, but they now have somewhere between 200 and 300 tanks and armored cars giving them one of the largest mechanized forces in Black Africa. The EPLF also has very sophisticated military leadership who have demonstrated time and again that the determination of strategy and tactics and the morale of the fighters themselves ultimately are more decisive than the quality of the hardware. At the same time, when

they are outgunned and outmanned, as they have been at different periods, they have had to fall back. That extends the war and increases the cost on both the Ethiopian and Eritrean people, but it has not changed its basic course.



Photo courtesy of author

Unexploded Soviet-made bomb in the Eritrean countryside.

**FM: In an earlier conversation, you indicated that the Eritreans got a surprising level of support from the Socialist International in Europe.**

**Connell:** Yes, and they have maintained a certain level of support within some of the Eurocommunist parties, though it is an ambivalent support. For example, the Italian Communist Party supports the right to self-determination for Eritrea, and it also supports the Ethiopian government. Cuba has taken a borderline position—declining to get involved in the Eritrean struggle because it is an internal matter, yet training Ethiopian soldiers who fight there.

In the last several years, the socialist parties in Europe have provided at least more moral support. The British Labor Party has a position that if it come to power, it will provide direct material assistance to the EPLF. The French socialists support the Eritreans, but now that they are in power, the French are not providing them with significant material assistance. The EPLF, however, relocated its foreign office there from

Beirut. The ERA has gotten considerable humanitarian assistance from European organizations outside the political sphere, particularly the churches, and especially from the Scandinavian countries, from Holland, Belgium, and also from Australia and a small amount from Canada. Only a very small amount has come from the U.S.

**FM: That leads to a last question. If the principal or immediate enemies of the Eritreans are the Ethiopians and their Soviet allies, what can people here actually do?**

**Connell:** What is important to point out here is that while the Soviet Union is the immediate, battlefield enemy of the Eritreans, the U.S. has also acted in a hostile way towards the Eritreans. There are things we can do, particularly targeting the role of the U.S. in the region. The Ethiopian regime is really supported by both the Soviet Union and the U.S. The Soviet Union provides the military hardware. The U.S. and Western countries in general provide the economic means for survival without which the regime in Ethiopia would not have survived a day. It is not only humanitarian assistance which is literally keeping large sections of the population alive in a kind of welfare system that permits the government to continue to wage war. Ethiopia also receives economic assistance through the European economic community, through the World Bank and through a variety of other mechanisms. The U.S. remains Ethiopia's largest single trading partner. I cite these as examples of the ties we do have.

Where the U.S. can probably be confronted is on the human needs in Eritrea, which are enormous. The Eritrean people receive only a tiny fraction of the aid going over there. This aid is politically motivated to support U.S. policy interests and make friends in Ethiopia. That aid should be turned around so that an appropriate amount goes directly to the Eritrean people. At a simple level, Americans can challenge the U.S. government as well as private agencies, churches and every other channel. The "U.S.A. for Africa" right now has 50 million dollars ready to spend and we should make sure that this money serves the people who need it most.

Second, there is the question of a solution to the crisis over there. It is important to say that the U.S. has a historical responsibility for the Eritrean crisis as it is now. In 1950, the U.S. sponsored the federation of Eritrea to Ethiopia in the first place against the wishes of the Eritreans for independence. We should push the United States to support peace negotiations to end the war. The U.S. could raise the issue in the United Nations. We could raise it through our local politicians saying, "Enough. Twenty-four years of war is enough." The Eritreans should have a perfect right to self-determination, and the U.S. should not stand in the way of it any more than the Soviet Union.

So while the situation is a little different from some other areas, the U.S. is very much involved, and there is much we can do.

**FM: Thank-you, Dan, for talking with us.**