

Ethiopian coup foiled ... too bad

If any African leader deserves to be overthrown, it's the strongman of Marxist Ethiopia, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam.

On Tuesday, hours after Mengistu left on a visit to East Germany, disgruntled senior army officers tried to do just that. Unfortunately, the coup seems to have failed, at least so far. Some rebel army units are still in the field and the situation remains confused.

Ethiopia, Africa's oldest independent nation and one of its most important states, desperately needs a new government. The Mengistu regime, in power since 1974, is by far the worst violator of human rights in Africa — and, with Afghanistan's Marxist regime, the worst in the world. Torture, hostage-taking, wide-scale executions and something close to genocide have been the hallmarks of Ethiopia's Stalinist rulers.

In recent years, the Mengistu regime organized the great man-made famine that took close to one million lives in Ethiopia's rebellious provinces of Eritrea, Tigre and Wollo. At least half a million northerners have been forced into labor camps in the arid south. The fiercely independent Galla (or Oromo) have been savagely repressed for years.

Ethiopia's Moslems, who make up about 60% of this supposedly Christian nation have been brutally persecuted. The nation's Coptic Church has been gelded into a lame bureaucracy. Compared to the horrors inflicted by the Mengistu regime on Ethiopia's wretched people, South Africa's blacks look like Swiss citizens. Few people in the west have taken the time to note this irony. Black-ruled states seem to have a special dispensation to maim and murder their peoples that white-skinned Africans do not. Mengistu has been kept in power by his Soviet-

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equipped army, East-German directed secret police, Cuban mercenaries and massive aid from the East Bloc. Food and "humanitarian" aid that has poured in from credulous western donors has played a large part in sustaining the Marxist regime.

Canada has been one of the most prominent aid donors to Ethiopia. Canadian wheat routinely feeds Ethiopian troops. Last year, Canadian military aircraft were even flying food into besieged Ethiopian army garrisons in the north. Left-tilting Christian aid outfits, like Oxfam and World Vision, have also lent highly useful economic and propaganda support to the Marxist regime. Yet in spite of all this help, Mengistu is in deep trouble.

The long war against secessionists in Eritrea and Tigre is going terribly. In the last year, the Ethiopian army has suffered shattering defeats. This week's attempted military coup was doubtless a reaction by disgusted officers. Now Moscow is hinting that Soviet military and economic aid to Ethiopia may be cut.

During the expansionist Brezhnev era, the Soviets saw Ethiopia as the springboard for the spread of Soviet influence into East and Central Africa — and the Red Sea. But the Kremlin's coffers are now empty and aid to Third World satraps must be sharply reduced. Besides, the blood-stained Col. Mengistu is an ugly blot on the

current peace-loving, humanitarian image the Kremlin is trying to project — a sort of Soviet Papa Doc.

At the same time, Egypt has been busy undermining Ethiopia's Marxists by arming the northern secessionists. Half of the Nile's waters come from Ethiopia's wild highlands. If Mengistu were ever to dam these headwaters, the Nile Valley would turn to sand.

Other Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq, have also been aiding foes of the Mengistu regime. More power to them. Sadly, virtually all African states have turned two blind eyes to the murderous regime in Addis Ababa. Africans have kept busy ranting about South Africa while a million or so blacks have been exterminated in Ethiopia.

Yet even if Mengistu and his cohorts were to be removed, Ethiopia's problems would not end. Ethiopia is Africa's last colonial empire. There, a Christian minority, the Amhara — who are of Semitic origin and who do not consider themselves to be blacks — rule over a variety of subject peoples. Many of them want independence from Amhara feudal rule. Any new regime in Addis Ababa will have to deal with this critical problem, one which also happens to be the chief nightmare of black Africa.

Most of its states are brittle amalgams of inimical tribes or peoples, cobbled together by former colonial rulers. A breakup of colonial Ethiopia might provoke disintegration in other African states. This is another reason why black African states have remained so very quiet about events in Ethiopia.

Whatever happens in the next few weeks, it's highly likely that Ethiopia is going to shortly emerge as one of Africa's hottest hot spots. Keep your eyes peeled on Addis Ababa and the land of the Queen of Sheba.