

ERIC
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Starving under communist rule

Africa now has its first, honest-to-Marx communist state. On the 10th anniversary of the revolution that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia's strongman, Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam announced that his wretchedly poor nation of 40 million was "100% Marxist-Leninist."

The dour, ruthless Mengistu was not exaggerating. Some African leaders parrot Marxist phrases, get some cash from the Russians and rush off to spend it in Paris on blondes and champagne. Not Ethiopia which now boasts "dictatorship of the proletariat," its own KGB and all the other accessories of communist rule.

Ten years ago, famine swept Ethiopia; 200,000 died while the utterly corrupt government of Haile Selassie tried to cover up the disaster and stole foreign-supplied food aid. A revolt by disgusted junior officers brought Mengistu to power.

At first, Mengistu and his junta appeared to be genuine democratic reformers. They fought a bloody three-year civil war against opposing factions and a brief war against Somalia. Like Fidel Castro, Mengistu subsequently shed his guise of republican liberator and revealed himself a dedicated communist.

Ethiopia is one of Africa's largest, most populous and strategic states. Unlike other African states that blame their woes on wicked colonialism, Ethiopia has always been independent with the exception of brief Italian rule in the late 1930s. Ethiopia's terrible poverty, misery and backwardness are due entirely to centuries of misrule by feudal landowners, medieval clerics and frequently demented monarchs.

Using Stalin's techniques

When the revolution occurred, Ethiopia was just creeping into the 13th century. Mengistu appears determined to wrench his nation into the modern world, using precisely the same techniques perfected by Stalin. The bourgeoisie has been crushed; industry nationalized; a reign of terror imposed and agriculture collectivized.

Just as the new Marxist utopia was announced, another great famine swept across the Ethiopian highlands. At least 200,000 drought-stricken farmers are now dying from hunger. Here we have a double historical irony: The 1974 famine brought Mengistu to power; a second one now threatens his regime on its 10th anniversary. Nor is it a coincidence that Ethiopia's new famine closely resembles that of Russia during collectivization.

Most of Ethiopia's trucks are being used to transport military goods to war zones in the secessionist provinces of Tigre and Eritrea where local rebels have been fighting for 15 years. None are available to carry emergency food supplies — if there were any.

Nor is any money available to buy food from abroad. Most of the nation's hard currency is going to pay the salaries and upkeep of 10,000 Cuban mercenary troops that reinforce Ethiopia's army. Additional sums go to Moscow to pay for deliveries of tanks, aircraft and ammunition.

Russia is today Ethiopia's closest ally and principal benefactor. Ethiopia has become a member of COMECON, the East bloc economic union, and may join the Warsaw Pact. But Russia cannot help its ally: The current Soviet grain harvest was, as usual, disastrous. Forced itself to import millions of tons of grain, Russia has none to spare for its starving African client.

Ethiopia is now turning to the West for "humanitarian aid." Should we good-hearted Westerners rush to succor Ethiopia? Can we sit back passively and watch TV images of starving Ethiopian babies promoted by left-wing groups like Oxfam?

Food to prevent revolution

We should not aid Ethiopia — at least, not yet. Food aid to the Mengistu regime will be used to enforce collectivization, to reward obedience. Enemies of the regime — and they are legion — will not receive a grain of wheat. Once the famine has crushed rural opposition to collectivization, Mengistu will use food to prevent revolution by his starving people — just as Stalin did in the 1930s.

Canada will be an immediate target of appeals for aid and we can be sure that the United Church, the Catholic bishops and other assorted leftish groups will respond with passion. We will be urged to ship wheat on credit to Ethiopia; worse, we may end up, as before, selling wheat at bargain credit terms to the Russians, who will then pass it on to Addis Ababa.

We should tell the Ethiopians, "if you want food aid, get rid of the Russian naval and air bases in your country, restore basic human rights and empty your prison camps." Send observers to ensure that the communist regime keeps its word. Send our churchmen to Ethiopia where they can see, first hand, how Christian and Muslim clergy there are being jailed and tortured. And we should demand that Ethiopia free its Jews who have been kept as virtual prisoners in terrible conditions.

Even better, instead of shoring up the communist regime, the West should be encouraging Ethiopians to overthrow their Soviet client rulers.

If we rush, in a frenzy of muddle-headed altruism, to save the bloodthirsty communist regime in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's new communists cannot help but be reassured in the rightness of Lenin's prediction — that the capitalists would sell communism the rope with which to hang them.

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