

The Gulf's ripple effect

Shock waves from the ongoing Gulf crisis are being felt around the world.

Even so, one wouldn't expect Ethiopia or Afghanistan to make the list of nations being buffeted by events in Arabia.

In fact, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is having a profound effect on the long, bloody wars that are raging in both the Horn of Africa and West Asia.

For 30 years, in Africa's longest-running war, the Eritrean people have been battling to free themselves from Ethiopian colonial rule. In recent years, Iraq became the chief arms supplier and Kuwait the prime financial backer of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), composed of Christians, Muslims and Marxists.

This year the EPLF captured Eritrea's main port, Massawa, a devastating blow to the Ethiopian government. The fall of Massawa left some 200,000 Ethiopian troops cut off and besieged in Asmara, Eritrea's mountain capital. Further south, troops of the Tigre Liberation Front, an ally of the EPLF, pushed to within 70 miles of Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. It looked as if the days of Mengistu Haile Mariam, the bloody tyrant who has run Ethiopia for the past 13 years, were over.

Mengistu's regime, currently the world's worst violator of human rights, starved to death some two million of its own rebellious citizens in recent years in a ghastly replay of Stalin's holocaust in Ukraine. Compared to Col. Mengistu, the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein looks like a convention of Quakers.

Even the Soviets, Mengistu's main ally, are stopping their aid in disgust and loathing. But then the Gulf crisis caused a near total cutoff in Arab arms and financial aid to the Eritrean rebels.

At the same time, Israel quietly stepped in, replacing Moscow as Ethiopia's new foreign ally and supplier of arms. Israeli cluster bombs and napalm have so far halted the siege of Asmara and put an end to the Tigrean offensive. Israeli technicians are keeping Ethiopia's powerful air force operational.

Equally important, Israel's powerful lobby in the U.S. is now pushing Washington to an accommoda-

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tion with the Mengistu regime. A headline might read "Saddam and Israel save Mengistu." At least for now.

Two thousand miles to the northeast in Afghanistan, the war there still drags on. A few days ago, a major mujahedin assault was launched against Kabul, where the Soviet-backed Marxist regime of Najibullah is still solidly entrenched. Najibullah, former head of the Afghan secret police, KhAD (now know confusingly as WAD), is probably the world's second worst violator of human rights after Col. Mengistu, a man in part responsible for the slaughter or torture of 1.5 million Afghans.

U.S. aid to the Afghan resistance is being cut off as Washington cozies up to Moscow. The two are trying to cut a deal that will put the old, discredited king, Zahir Shah, back on his throne, leaving the communists the real power in Afghanistan.

The mujahedin are fighting to prevent this and to set up a true Islamic state. Their main source of funding, after the U.S., was Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates. But the Saudi and Gulf petrosheiks are now too busy fretting about a rampant Saddam Hussein to think of the Afghans. And they are now having to give all of their money as baksheesh to the Americans, Egyptians, Syrians and Moroccans to protect them.

So the mujahedin are likely to be financially marooned, much to the odious Najibullah's delight.

This week, there is another interesting political byproduct of the Gulf crisis. Christian warlord Gen. Michael Aoun, who had been battling Lebanon's flimsy central government, was squashed after a huge bombardment by the Syrian Army. In spite of vows to fight to the death, the little general fled to the safety of the French Embassy in Beirut.

Aoun, a champion of half of Lebanon's feuding Christians, strongly opposed the current Syrian-dominated Lebanese government. Two-thirds of Lebanon is occupied by Syrian troops and part of the rest by Israel.

Iraq backed and armed Gen. Aoun as a way of irritating its bitter foe and rival, Syria. Aoun staged a nasty civil war for the last year against the government. Syria wanted to crush him but dared not for fear of Israeli attack. But then Syria agreed to join the U.S. and send troops to oppose Saddam. Instantly, Syria, until then deemed a mortal foe by the Americans, was removed from the U.S. list of "terrorist nations," and given a gold star.

Washington put pressure on the Israelis for a favor. The result: Syria got the green light from Washington to expunge irritating Gen. Aoun, with assurance that Israel would not intervene.

The virtual partition of Lebanon between Syria and Israel now seems complete, blessed by Washington. A strange way, one might say, to "liberate" Kuwait.

Punch



"One day, son, all this will be yours."