

07/92

ETHIOPIA (1)

THE "TIM" MEETINGS

The US government was surprised by Meles' close interaction with Sudan. When news of the T-55 tanks and crews, provided by Sudan and used in the assault on Addis by EPRDF, came to the US State department, it caused a serious confusion. Turabi (Sudan's leader of the Moslem Brothers) had el Bashir's mandate to conduct series of meetings with Isayas and Meles (the TIM meetings). Before the assault on Addis, Turabi's contact was assumed no more than a deal for the Eritrean moslems and limited support for Meles. The rumor came to alarming light when the TPLF announced the Sudan Peoples Liberation Front (SPLA) head-quarter in Addis closed and started cooperating with Sudan's intelligence to attack the SPLA. The SPLA is fighting for self-determination and abrogation of Islamic laws imposed by the moslem north. Turabi visited Meles at least four times between January and April of 92, and had constant contact with both leaders (Meles and Isayas) since June 91. He is also believed to orchestrate the Meles-Iran diplomacy which is expected to grow as the western isolation of the EPRDF is expected to rise. Iran has asked a commitment from Meles to allocate at least few training sites in Ethiopia, similar to the more than 30 sites located in Sudan. The concept is strongly opposed by Tamrat, the prime minister, and Seye, the defense minister. Seye is responsible for ordering the shooting of Meba Ali, an Oromo senior in Nairobi, through a close friend of him, Getachew Zerihun, partly to frustrate Meles for what he calls "Meles' smooth operation" in the south. Seye is also known for his dislike to Eritreans. A senior EPRDF cabinet, Seyoum Mesfin, has made few trips between March and May to Iran to accommodate and initiate high level military cooperation.

Long term consequences of joining the moslem front is worrying Isayas who argues that it might backfire and get out of control, specially in southern Ethiopia, where the moslems are the majority. This started worrying the Eritrean strategists so seriously that they are deploying larger Eritrean army to compensate for the diminishing moral of the TPLF fighters, but primarily to have a partial control over the situation. This again has annoyed Seye who disapproves the presence of Eritrean army in the south. Clashes are reported to have occurred over this issue, and a senior OPDO leader, Nagasso, was

invited to attend one of the meetings on this subject. He favored Isayas' position with a hope of diluting the liberal politics between the OLF and EPLF. Seye was so disappointed that he personally appointed a Tigre assistant to Nagasso. The EPLF's strong commitment to the 'TIM' agreement of backing the TPLF in its southern endeavors is causing some political turbulence in Addis. Isayas himself is disturbed by Eritrean rivals with strong ELF tradition who are gaining ground among the moslem population. The "TIM" agreement may be undermined by the growing influence of the ELF Revolutionary Committee in Asmara with more potential support from Saudi and other Arab countries.

The "TIM" have also planed a protracted defence system in case of an unsuccessful June assault on Addis. The EPLF was to defend TPLF in case of its forced withdrawal from the south with Sudan's support. Under this plan the EPRDF will defend the TPLF to maintain Tigray under its newly defined borders including northern Begiemdyr. The deal never assumed the presence of Eritrean army south of Tekeze as long as TPLF remains in charge in the south. The Tigray Development Institute, located in the same EPRDF building, and the new air port in Mekele for the air force (EPRDF claims it is an International civil air port) are also part of the TPLF/EPLF strategy for future defence against the eventual United Front of the south, specially the Oromos and the Amharas. Sudan is a key partner, and the EPRDF commitment to help Sudan liquidate the SPLA helps create more fertile military cooperations with Sudan. In June, Meles' commandos have participated in the capture of Torit, the rebels new headquarters about 775 miles south of Khartoum. Meles' commitment not to give control of the Asosa region to the OLF is part of this strategy.

Meles' politics has pivoted around keeping opposition disunited, while maintaining good partnership with Bashir, Isayas and EPRDF components. He is clearly impatient of recent OLF contacts with the Amhara activist, Prof Asrat, and news of OLF consolidation both internationally and nationally. In fact, a senior ELF officer has attempted to contact the OLF leaders who refused to see him thinking he is Isayas' agent. With chances of peace getting slimmer than ever, and southern support deeming out of sight, Meles counts on the agreements of the TIM meetings.