

ETHIOPIA



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Depiction of the current trials in Addis Ababa

A seven-week mission, conducted under the auspices of the Ethiopian Special Prosecutor's Office, involving the exhumation of two mass and two individual graves.

During its seventeen years in power, the former Ethiopian regime known as the Dergue compiled one of the worst records of human rights abuses in recent history. Under the leadership of Colonel Mengistu Haile Marian, state security forces tortured and executed thousands of persons suspected of belonging to urban opposition movements, while the military killed tens of thousands during indiscriminate campaigns against "dissident" ethnic groups in rural areas. The Dergue also bore large responsibility for exacerbating and perpetuating the famine that killed an estimated one million persons during the mid-1980s.

In May 1991, a loose coalition including the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and other armed movements overthrew the Dergue and installed a new administration, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. One of the new government's first acts was to announce

that it would formally prosecute members of the former regime who had committed human rights violations. During 1991 and 1992 it arrested hundreds of members of the former regime, and in August 1992 it created a Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) to investigate and prosecute their alleged crimes.

Trials against former members of the Dergue have proceeded, albeit slowly. In late 1994 the SPO charged and brought to trial seventy-three members of the former regime, of whom twenty-seven, including Colonel Mengistu, were tried in absentia.¹ In early 1997 the SPO took another step forward, charging over five thousand people with criminal offenses,



EAAF member Mercedes Doretti conducting videotaped interviews with relatives of victims.

¹ Human Rights Watch. 1998. *Ethiopia: The Curtailment of Rights*. Human Rights Watch Report, Vol. 9, No. 8 (A).

particularly genocide and war crimes. Over two thousand of those charged were already in prison, many of them since 1991-1992. The almost three thousand others, many of whom had fled the country, were charged in absentia. The SPO has prepared over one thousand witnesses, and trials are moving forward slowly.²

The Ethiopian government has changed substantially since the SPO was created in 1992. In December 1994 a Constituent Assembly, elected through universal suffrage, adopted a new constitution, which established the country as a Federal Democratic Republic. In March 1995, the Transitional Government was dissolved and new elections held, and in August 1995 a new government, headed by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of the EPRDF - formerly president of Ethiopia - was elected. However, many political groups did not participate, claiming that the government had restricted their campaigning activities and curtailed their freedoms of speech and association. Despite these changes, the trials against former Dergue officials have continued.

EAAF conducted two missions to Ethiopia in 1993 and 1994, sponsored by the Carter Presidential Center from Atlanta, Georgia, to provide forensic assistance to the SPO in cases under investigation. (For more information about these missions, see the chapter on Ethiopia in EAAF's 1994-1995 Biannual Report.)

Third Mission to Ethiopia

Between October 5th and November 27th 1997 EAAF conducted a third mission to Ethiopia. Four EAAF members, Luis Fondebrider, Patricia Bernardi, Silvana Turner, and Mercedes Doretti stayed for the entire mission. Dr. Wilbert Bouts, a Dutch physical anthropologist from the Johannes Wier Foundation in The Netherlands, was invited by EAAF to participate for two weeks

while the remains were analyzed at a laboratory in Addis Ababa. EAAF's expenses were covered

by the John Merck Foundation (Boston, USA) and EAAF. Bout's expenses were fully paid for by the Johannes Wier foundation.

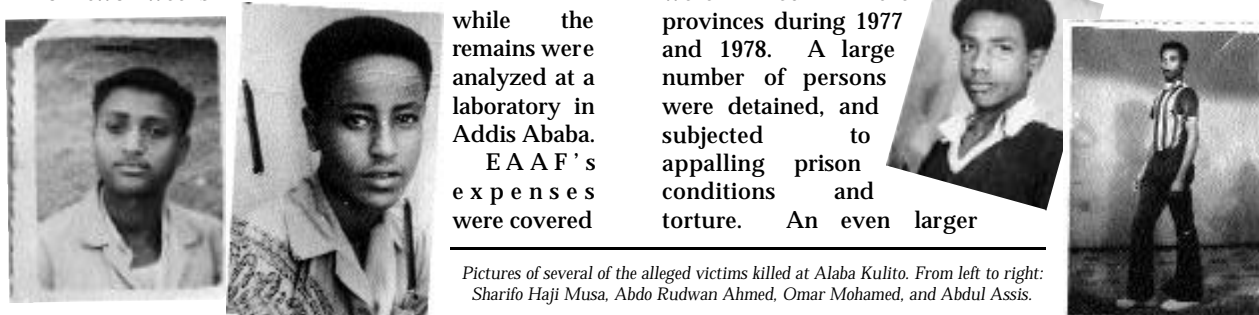
EAAF has not testified at the ongoing trials of the former officials, and it cannot release specifics about its investigation because these will later be presented as court evidence. Accordingly, this report describes the team's activities only in general terms, and does not discuss its findings in detail.

The Red Terror

During the 1996 mission, EAAF conducted exhumations in the towns of Butajira and Alaba Kulito, both located in the south of Ethiopia. All the victims in these cases were reportedly summarily executed during the period of the so called "Red Terror." The exhumations were conducted under the direction of the SPO.

Between 1976 and 1978 the Ethiopian Dergue waged an extremely violent and repressive counter-insurgency campaign in Ethiopia's main cities, particularly Addis Ababa. Ostensibly, the campaign was launched in response to the sporadic assassinations conducted by groups opposed to the government; and it was officially known as the "Red Terror," in contrast to the "White Terror," the name given to the opposition groups' guerrilla activities.

In scale, however, the government's campaign vastly exceeded the guerrilla operations. A massive and deliberate effort to terrify the Ethiopian population and eliminate dissent, the Red Terror was an instance of systematic state-instigated mass murder. Although it is not known how many people were killed, imprisoned, or forced to flee abroad during these years, a minimum of 10,000 persons were allegedly killed in Addis Ababa alone in 1977 and probably a comparable number were killed in the provinces during 1977 and 1978. A large number of persons were detained, and subjected to appalling prison conditions and torture. An even larger



Pictures of several of the alleged victims killed at Alaba Kulito. From left to right: Sharifo Haji Musa, Abdo Rudwan Ahmed, Omar Mohamed, and Abdul Assis.

¹ Peter Bach. 1996. "War Crimes Trials and the Establishment of a Public Defender's Office in Ethiopia." In *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 3 (2) (Winter) Washington DC: Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law.

number became refugees.

The “Red Terror” in the provinces

Although the killings and detentions in Addis Ababa were most numerous and received the most publicity, the Dergue also conducted a Red Terror campaign throughout the countryside, particularly during 1978. Large numbers of young people in towns such as Asmara, Gonder, Bahir, Dar, and Jimma are known to have been killed, jailed and tortured. During 1978, the government also purged the leadership of the country’s Peasant Associations, detaining many of the popularly-elected leaders and executing some of them. Almost all were replaced by government appointees.

EAAF’s Third Mission

The victims of the cases investigated in Alaba Kulito and Butajira were reportedly killed during the Red Terror campaign. At Butajira the forensic team exhumed nine individuals from a mass grave and one individual from a separate single grave. At Alaba Kulito they also exhumed a mass grave containing four individuals and another grave containing one individual. Three of the four graves were located in the police stations of these towns, strongly implicating the government in the killing. The fourth grave was located on the outskirts of one of the

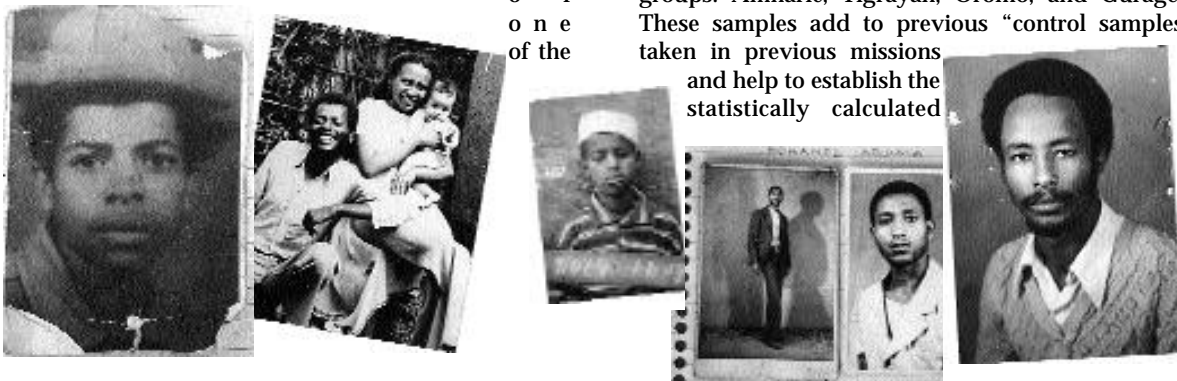
towns.

In both Butajira and Alaba Kulito, the victims were reportedly under police custody when they were killed. According to witnesses, in both cases the victims had been taken from their cells at the local police stations and executed on the outskirts of the towns. Placards accusing the victims of anti-revolutionary activities were attached to their bodies, which were publicly exhibited in the town and other public spaces for several hours following the executions. The bodies then disappeared. Although the police made efforts to conceal the location of the burial sites — even digging false graves to mislead witnesses — it was widely believed that the victims had been buried in the police stations of the respective towns. The families of the victims were expressly forbidden to mourn by the authorities.



EAAF excavation underway at Alaba Kulito.

All but three of the individuals recovered during the excavations were identified. To identify the last skeletons, blood samples were taken from presumed relatives of the victims and tooth samples were taken from the unidentified skeletons. For the purposes of identification, DNA from both sets of samples will be extracted and compared. In addition, “control blood samples” were taken from persons who are not related to the presumed victims, and who represent the four main Ethiopian ethnic groups: Amharic, Tigrayan, Oromo, and Guragee. These samples add to previous “control samples” taken in previous missions and help to establish the statistically calculated



Pictures of several of the alleged victims killed at Butajira. From left to right: Farruk Seid Meki, Tomaskin Dinsa and family, Kibret Tessema, Mohamed Abdala, and Mula Gondar



One of the skeletons exhumed at Alaba Kulito. The arrows indicate bullet holes in the victim's sweater.

probability of different matches for the purposes of identification. All the genetic tests are currently being conducted at the laboratory of Dr. Mary Claire King at the University of Washington at Seattle. Through DNA analysis, the lab has positively identified four individuals whose remains were exhumed during EAAF's 1994 mission to Ethiopia.

to Ethiopia periodically over a period of two to three years to conduct exhumations at more of these sites. The findings from such exhumations may or may not be used for legal purposes, depending on the schedule of the trials. The exhumations will also serve broader humanitarian purposes, however. They will allow the families of the victims to know, with certainty

Presenting Evidence at the Trial

The team had originally intended to testify during this third mission. When EAAF arrived in Ethiopia, however, the SPO informed its members that they

Right: Mass grave exhumed at Butajira containing the remains of Red Terror victims.



should not appear before the court until later. As of this writing, the trials are still in process. Dr. Clyde Snow, an American forensic anthropologist who participated in EAAF's 1994 mission to Ethiopia, and two EAAF members may return to Ethiopia in to testify in the near future.

Future Plans

On the basis of the evidence it has gathered during its legal investigations of the past years, the SPO has now created a "map" of mass graves throughout Ethiopia. It has proposed to EAAF that the team return



Team member Luis Fondebrider works in the laboratory in Addis Ababa.



EAAF mission participants Abebe Debosh, a pathology technician from Black Lion Hospital in Addis Ababa, and Wilbert Bout, a Dutch physical anthropologist, collecting control blood samples for DNA testing

what happened to their loved ones, and to bury their remains according to customary practices. They will also contribute to the establishment of the truth and the historical record of human rights violations in Ethiopia.

Another important goal of this proposed project is to help train a local forensic team. This would be an extremely important contribution to human rights work in the area, for Ethiopia currently has no forensic experts, and has relied on international assistance in human rights cases involving forensic analysis. During its second mission, EAAF worked with local archaeologists and pathologists on its second mission to Ethiopia. Lack of funds and continuity made it impossible to continue the training. However, the number of cases on which such a team could work fully justifies a second attempt.