

# ETHIOPIA'S GREAT TERROR

by Thomas M. Magstadt

Last fall the United States ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, attempted to draw worldwide attention to the "savagery" of Ethiopia's Marxist regime. "It is estimated that some 30,000 persons in Ethiopia were summarily executed for political reasons between 1974 and 1978," she told the U.N. General Assembly on October 2, 1981. "Twelve-year-old children were among those immersed in hot oil, sexually tortured, or flung out of windows and left to die in the street."

At about the same time Ambassador Kirkpatrick was detailing the horrors of the Mengistu government, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service was busy preparing a review of the residency status of Ethiopians living in the United States. For the past several years some 20-30,000 Ethiopian nationals have enjoyed temporary asylum here; but the State Department has now concluded that things have settled down enough in Ethiopia to warrant a case-by-case review of many of the refugees.

But has the situation in Ethiopia really changed? Obviously our U.N. ambassador does not think so; neither do many outside observers. Because of the press censorship imposed by the ruling clique, reliable reports of current conditions in Ethiopia are virtually nonexistent. Even so, enough is known about the character and background of Miriam Haile Mengistu's regime to give cause for grave concern over the plight of the Ethiopians in the United States who are forced to return home.

## THE DERGUE

When Haile Selassie became emperor of Ethiopia, Woodrow Wilson was president of the United States and Lenin's October Revolution was still in its infancy. Excepting the Italian Fascist occupation of 1935-41, Emperor Selassie, the "Conquering Lion of Judah," ruled his feudal kingdom for nearly six decades. In the fall of 1974 a military coup d'état led by Major (later Lieutenant Colonel) Mengistu brought Emperor Selassie's retrograde rule to a sudden end.

The country over which Mengistu's Provisional Military Administrative Council seized control was

poverty stricken and premodern. Situated in the Horn of Africa on the lower southern shore of the Red Sea, Ethiopia is both blessed and cursed with a great variety of cultures, ethnic groups, languages, and climatic conditions. Her peoples, concentrated in the central plateau region and numbering 30-35 million, retained their separate tribal identities and centuries-old methods of agricultural production.

At the time of the revolution 65 per cent of the total arable land in this large country (equivalent to Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico combined) was owned by Selassie, members of his family, and a handful of feudal lords. Another 30 per cent was held by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church under Selassie's patronage, leaving a meager 5 per cent for the small number of Ethiopians fortunate enough to own any land at all.

Ethiopia's per capita income in 1974 was among the lowest in the world. The infant mortality rate was nearly 50 per cent, the average life expectancy at age one was thirty-six years, and the literacy rate was a paltry 5 per cent. Only a fraction of Ethiopia's arable land was under cultivation. The economy was precariously dependent on one commodity, coffee, for its income-earning potential, with roughly a quarter of the population engaged in its production.

In late 1972 an all-too-familiar famine threatened the lives of some two million Ethiopians. While Selassie exported what small amounts of grain and vegetables the arid land yielded up, whole villages were wiped out and hundreds died on the dusty road leading to Addis Ababa, the capital. As an estimated 200,000 people were perishing, news reports were censored and Ethiopians were reminded that famine had stalked the land since the beginning of time.

Ethiopia in 1974 was the antithesis of the industrial hothouse Marx believed would render a society ripe for proletarian revolution. Like Cambodia in the same period, Ethiopia was (and is) a preindustrial, agrarian country with a largely uneducated and unskilled population. Undeterred by the facts of social and economic life, Mengistu's military junta—known as the *Dergue* ("the Committee")—adopted a crude form of Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology of the new Ethiopian government. One of the first official acts of the *Dergue* was to issue a proclamation calling for the establishment of a Soviet-style, state-controlled socialist economy. Early in 1975 all

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