

Ethiopia Gets OAU Backing

Ethiopia emerged from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) meeting in Libreville, Gabon this past week with the full backing of the OAU in its dispute with Somali-speaking rebels who are trying to occupy the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and make it part of Somalia. The OAU commission refused to admit the rebel "Western Somali Liberation Front" (WSLF) to the meeting, and refused to recognize the WSLF as a legitimate liberation front. The WSLF has been receiving small arms covertly from the U.S., as well as aid and support from Somalia.

The OAU's stand, which caused a walkout of the Somali delegation, isolates Somalia, which is being manipulated by Carter to provoke a full-scale war on the Horn of Africa. With widespread African backing, Ethiopia is in a stronger position to launch an offensive to take back the key towns in the Ogaden. The Ethiopian Foreign Minister has said that Ethiopia could crush the rebels, but prefers to resolve the crisis through other means. The Somali ambassador to Kenya, Hussein Ali Dualeh has charged that a "foreign" force of 5,000-9,000 troops (from Cuba, he implied) were going to arrive in Ethiopia in the near future. Ethiopia's ambassador to Kenya, Mengistu Deste, meanwhile placed the blame for the crisis on Britain and the U.S. and their pledges of arms aid to Somalia. "It was a deplorable decision which will escalate the war and turn the entire Horn of Africa into a big battlefield," he said.

A peace offensive by the Soviets has contributed to the isolation of the Somalis. Following a trip to Moscow by the Foreign and Defense Ministers of South Yemen, the

South Yemen president went to Saudi Arabia to meet with King Khalid. The Saudis had been behind the Somali venture, and had reportedly offered to bankroll Somali purchases of military equipment from the West.

The problems of the Ethiopian government in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia have notably lessened in the past weeks, and this is also in part due to the Soviet pressure on the Saudis. On Aug. 5 Sudan President Nimeiry went to Saudi Arabia to confer with King Khalid, and although Nimeiry has been one of the key backers of the Eritrean rebels and other anti-government operations in Ethiopia, he has over the past few months altered his position from calling for the complete independence of Eritrea to calling for self-determination. Ethiopian Head of State Mengistu Haile Mariam has already offered the Eritreans autonomy within a federal Ethiopia.

The key to Nimeiry's turnabout on the Eritrea question is the resolution of his differences with the right-wing Muslim Ansar sect headed by Sadik al Mahdi, the main element in the internal opposition to Nimeiry, and who had been receiving aid from the Ethiopians. As a result of the resolution of their differences, Nimeiry has already amnestied over 400 political prisoners, including members of the Sudanese Communist Party, the other element of the anti-Nimeiry opposition.

The reconciliation between Nimeiry and Mahdi is widely reported as having been facilitated by the Saudis and Kuwaitis, and takes pressure off of Mengistu in Ethiopia, leaving the problem in the Ogaden with Somalia as his most immediate concern.