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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

107 (E)

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

5 March 1984

ETHIOPIA-SUDAN: Tensions Rise Over Dissident Activity [Redacted]

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Summary

Tension between Sudan and Ethiopia has steadily heightened in recent months because of the increasingly effective military operations of dissidents based near their mutual border. Ethiopian- and Libyan-backed dissident groups have recently expanded operations by attacking military garrisons and vital economic projects in southern Sudan. Addis Ababa, on the other hand, holds Khartoum responsible for the increased military activity of Sudanese-based Eritrean and Tigrean insurgents against Ethiopian targets in the border provinces. The situation has been further enflamed by strident propaganda in the national media of both countries and the sacking of the Ethiopian consulate at Kassala in retaliation for an attack on the Sudanese consulate at Gambela. [Redacted]

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Mutual suspicions between Ethiopia and Sudan run deep and, despite initiatives by outside parties such as Egypt to defuse

This memorandum was requested by Frederick L. Wetters, Director of African Affairs, National Security Council. It was prepared by [Redacted] Horn of Africa Branch, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division [Redacted]

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the situation, we believe both countries will continue their efforts to destabilize the other. These efforts are facilitated by the refusal or inability to date of both Sudanese President Nimeiri and Ethiopian Chairman Mengistu to deal with the root causes of their problems in the region--unworkable domestic policies which would generate widespread dissidence independent of external subversion. Libya's willingness to fund and arm the Sudanese rebels will make it easy for Mengistu to keep his hand in the volatile game, and Khartoum will find it difficult to counter this activity because of its weak political and military posture. Both governments will in all likelihood remain careful to avoid direct military confrontations--although minor border clashes could occur--because neither has the resources to sustain a major conflict at this time.

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Sudan and The Eritreans

The major Eritrean insurgent group and several minor Eritrean movements have offices in Khartoum. They openly propagandize and recruit among the large Eritrean community in both the capital and refugee camps along the Sudanese side of the border. Arab supporters for years have shipped weapons and other material into Port Sudan where it is received by the dissidents and moved across the Ethiopian border along an intricate logistical pipeline. Although Sudan itself provides little direct military support to the insurgents in northern Ethiopia, it has long permitted this dissident use of Sudanese territory both as a base of operations and as a logistical corridor.

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We believe Sudanese involvement with the Eritreans and other Ethiopian dissident groups has been driven by three primary, and at times overlapping, motivations:

- Tying down the Ethiopian military in Eritrea, thereby preventing its use against Sudan.
- Providing assistance to Eritrean Muslims against a Christian-dominated Marxist regime.
- Using support to the Eritreans as a bargaining chip to pressure Ethiopia into ending its support to Sudanese dissidents.

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In their comments to US officials, Nimeiri and other senior Sudanese have made plain their belief that the Soviet Union is attempting to use Ethiopia to overthrow their government and install a Marxist regime. Thus, they see the insurgencies in Ethiopia as serving a useful purpose by tying down substantial numbers of troops that could otherwise apply serious pressure along the frontier. We believe Khartoum views its role in providing assistance to the northern Ethiopian dissidents as a key element in hindering Moscow's plans to dominate the Red Sea area. []

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Khartoum has been frustrated, on the other hand, in its attempts to act as a middle-man to pressure the Eritrean factions into unifying. Historically, the dissidents have refused to live up to proposed merger agreements and, more importantly, Khartoum has been unable to force its writ upon the major Eritrean faction, the Marxist-dominated Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF).¹ []

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Khartoum has also been ineffective in attempting to use its support for the Eritreans as a source of leverage over Addis Ababa. Embassy analysis suggests that this is due, at least in part, to a serious split within the Sudanese government between the Foreign Ministry, which favors negotiations and concessions, and the security service, which wants to adopt a hard-line approach toward Addis Ababa. Embassy reporting indicates that Nimeiri often wavers in deciding which position to adopt. Thus, while threatening to "unleash" the Eritreans and other northern dissidents by supplying increased amounts of arms and funds, the Sudanese only took this step briefly in 1976, when Ethiopia was much weaker politically and militarily. Although willing to extend limited assistance, we believe Nimeiri sees little to be gained in providing substantial military aid to the EPLF, fearing a more forceful Ethiopian response and viewing a Marxist-dominated independent Eritrea as little improvement over his present situation. Khartoum probably is also aware that stepped-up assistance to other Eritrean groups would be of limited effectiveness because these factions--the losers in bloody struggles with the EPLF--have little support remaining within the province and too few troops to absorb an influx of additional weapons. []

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¹ This movement has long been ignored or opposed by the Arab states because its members are primarily Christian and strongly committed to Marxist ideals. As a result, the Arabs have little leverage or influence on the EPLF, which obtains most of its weapons through the arms market or captured Ethiopian stocks. []

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In addition to keeping fresh his dissident option, Nimeiri has embarked since 1980 upon a program of seeking both a rapprochement with the Mengistu government and a settlement between the Eritreans and Addis Ababa. He apparently believes this approach can lessen Soviet influence in Ethiopia by eliminating the need for substantial arms deliveries and the Soviet military advisory role. Nimeiri, however, has had little success in either venture because of the Ethiopian government's suspicions of his motives and its refusal to make realistic concessions to the Eritreans. [REDACTED]

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On several occasions in recent years, the Nimeiri government has attempted to restrict the activity of the Eritreans for short periods in an effort to appease Addis Ababa. Even at these times, however, the Sudanese military lacked the manpower and other resources to seal the border and the Eritreans, in particular, easily circumvented these efforts to interfere with their logistical flow or political operations. In addition, many of the Arab countries--such as Saudi Arabia--supporting Eritrean factions provide important assistance to Nimeiri, and he runs the risk of their displeasure if he clamps down on the insurgents too hard. [REDACTED]

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The Ethiopian Reaction. Addis Ababa, on numerous occasions, has protested the use of Sudanese territory for propaganda, recruitment, and logistical purposes by the dissidents, especially the Eritreans, and has demanded the expulsion of dissident leaders from Sudan. It has publicly and through diplomatic contacts portrayed the Nimeiri regime's support for the Eritrean rebels as a direct Sudanese effort to subvert the Ethiopian government and its failure to rein in the Eritreans and other northern dissidents as a reflection of Sudanese duplicity. [REDACTED]

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We believe the Ethiopian leadership is convinced that its inability to defeat the Eritreans and to halt the expanding Tigrean insurgency is the direct result of Sudanese aid to the insurgents. Moreover, the Ethiopian government almost certainly sees a link between the growth in the military capabilities of the Eritrean rebels and the expansion of the US role in Sudan; Addis Ababa views the United States as the main threat to its Marxist revolution and the driving force behind efforts to subvert it. The Mengistu regime, in our view, looks on Sudan and Somalia, Ethiopia's other major enemy, as surrogates for US policy in the region. [REDACTED]

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Ethiopia, Libya, and the Sudanese Insurgents

Ethiopia has cooperated with Libya since the mid-1970s in providing assistance to Sudanese dissidents who operate out of Ethiopia. The degree of Addis Ababa's involvement has fluctuated over the years, however [redacted]

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[redacted] The Ethiopians primarily provide advisers, logistical support, and training facilities for the estimated 2,000-2,500 dissidents now in Ethiopia. We believe Addis Ababa seeks to keep a low profile in this activity because it is sensitive to its image in Africa. [redacted]

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The signing in 1981 of the Aden Pact between Libya, Ethiopia, and South Yemen gave Addis Ababa an added incentive for cooperating in efforts to overthrow the Nimeiri regime. [redacted]

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[redacted] Qadhafi agreed to provide Ethiopia with over \$800 million in badly needed economic assistance--approximately \$340 million of which has already been delivered--in return for expanding its cooperation against Sudan and Somalia and other pro-Western regimes in the region. The prospects of this financial assistance, in return for very little from Addis Ababa, apparently struck a responsive chord in an Ethiopian leadership faced with continuing economic problems. [redacted]

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We believe Qadhafi has been careful to fulfill his economic pledges to the Ethiopians, as well as to provide some military aid directly to Addis Ababa, because of the high priority he assigns to overthrowing Nimeiri. We further believe that his performance thus far has alleviated some of the mistrust toward Libya felt by Mengistu and other senior Ethiopian officials who have seen Qadhafi renege on previous assistance agreements. [redacted]

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The upsurge of domestic unrest over economic, political, and religious issues that began in southern Sudan last year created the opportunity for Tripoli and Addis Ababa to press their effort to overthrow the Nimeiri regime. Nimeiri's decision in Spring 1983 to dissolve the regional government in the south and create three separate administrative regions, the Army mutiny and subsequent harsh crackdown by the central government that were consequences of Nimeiri's attempt to move southern troops to the north, and the intensification of southern fears of the Arab north that occurred as a result of Nimeiri's Islamization campaign have all served to swell the ranks of Sudanese rebel forces in Ethiopia, which,

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[redacted] now include several hundred former military personnel who defected from the Sudanese Army. [redacted]

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In our opinion, Tripoli has been more than willing to provide the funding, specialized training in Libya, advisers, and weapons for the southern Sudanese. [redacted] the Ethiopians have recruited personnel for the dissident forces, set up several training camps in areas of western Ethiopia, provided advisers, and given logistical support. Our evidence of Ethiopian troop deployments, however, does not support Sudanese claims that the Ethiopians have been directly involved in cross-border operations with the rebels, nor do we have any indication that the Ethiopians have massed their own troops along the frontier in an effort to intimidate Khartoum. In fact, [redacted] the deteriorating military situation in Eritrea, Tigray, and Gonder Provinces indicates that attempting to contain the dissident forces has left the Ethiopians few troops to deploy directly against Sudan. [redacted]

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The Present Situation

[redacted] both Khartoum and Addis Ababa have seriously misinterpreted developments along the frontier. Each side clearly tends to believe the worst about the other's intentions, [redacted]

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[redacted] Embassy reporting indicates that Nimeiri, for example, has persisted in attributing the recent problems in the south to Libyan and Ethiopian subversion rather than a reaction by southern Sudanese to his policies. As a result, Khartoum to date has been reluctant to enter into serious discussions with the insurgents or to offer concessions that would form the basis of a political settlement. The Sudanese Army and security services have also overreacted to Ethiopian military activity along the frontier, apparently perceiving an invasion threat when almost all unit deployments and resupply efforts appear to us to have been responses to the increasing insurgent threat. [redacted]

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The Ethiopians, on the other hand, appear convinced that the Sudanese military played a role in the Eritrean capture of the town of Tessenei in January. Mengistu and his senior commanders also appear to believe that the Sudanese military is planning to conduct cross-border operations against Sudanese dissident camps in Ethiopia. As a result, according to [redacted] has periodically put its forces along the border on a defensive alert, which Khartoum interprets as being preparations for offensive operations against Sudan. [redacted]

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Non-military developments have also worked to keep tensions at a high level. Both sides have expelled members of the other's embassies, Ethiopia recalled its Ambassador for a short period of time, and Khartoum has conducted a heated propaganda campaign against the Ethiopians. The US Embassy reported an acrimonious meeting between Mengistu and a delegation from Khartoum late last year, and both governments have condemned the actions of the other in several diplomatic exchanges. [redacted]

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Each side has appeared eager to portray itself as reasonable and responsive to third-country overtures toward reducing tensions. For example, Ethiopia has supported the recent peace initiative spearheaded by Egyptian Foreign Minister Boutros Ghali and has accepted his proposal to meet with the Sudanese to discuss the situation. Khartoum has also agreed to the meeting, reportedly scheduled for Nairobi in mid-March. [redacted]

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Outlook

In our judgment the Ethiopians will continue to try to capitalize on signs of unrest in southern Sudan, especially since the cost and risk are minimal. In addition, we believe that the Mengistu regime has no intention of making significant concessions to Khartoum despite its willingness to go along with the Egyptian initiative. In fact, we believe Mengistu will attempt to use any negotiations to drive a wedge between the Sudanese and the Eritreans and to force significant concessions out of Khartoum in return for ending its support to the dissident Sudanese--a tactic he has used during previous crises with Sudan. [redacted]

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We see little possibility that Ethiopian troops will launch major attacks along the border or attempt to seize border towns. At present, the Ethiopians have less than 5,000 troops deployed in the border area. Because of the deteriorating military situation in the north, the Ethiopians have only a limited capability to threaten the Sudanese by moving additional troops to the frontier. Moreover, Addis Ababa's continuing preparations for yet another northern offensive against the dissidents in Eritrea and Tigray impose a further drain on military resources. Inadvertent small-unit clashes could occur, however, and the Ethiopian Air Force could launch airstrikes against selected border targets at any time. [redacted]

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There is little likelihood that the lingering mutual mistrust between Mengistu and Qadhafi will seriously undermine their cooperative effort against Sudan. In fact, the strains that developed when Mengistu assumed the Chairmanship of the OAU--a post that Qadhafi desired--appear to have subsided. [redacted] the Ethiopian leader

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has frequently consulted with Qadhafi on OAU issues important to the Libyan leader, such as Chad, in an effort to preserve the relationship.

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Sudanese President Nimeiri, on the other hand, finds himself in a "no-win" situation vis-a-vis Ethiopia. Indeed, in our view, his regime will continue to have difficulty formulating a cohesive policy to counter the domestic unrest in the south and the threat posed by Ethiopian support to Sudanese dissidents. Khartoum is unable to provide the level of support needed to give the Eritrean and Tigrean insurgents the capability to seriously challenge Ethiopia's hold over the northern provinces by capturing and holding major population centers. Nor is it able or willing to exert the sort of control over the Eritreans--let alone cut off all assistance programs--to meet the demands put forth by Addis Ababa as necessary steps for a peaceful resolution of the problem. [redacted]

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Nimeiri cannot rely on the Sudanese military to deter Ethiopia's meddling in the South. Several understrength battalions--totaling 4,000-5,500 troops--with little heavy equipment and only limited mobility are spread thinly along the frontier. While the Sudanese Army and Air Force could launch small-scale attacks against dissident training camps inside Ethiopia, we believe Nimeiri and his senior commanders would be reluctant to take this step out of fear that the Ethiopians would respond on a larger scale. [redacted]

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Nimeiri will continue to look, therefore, to the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt for political and military support. His realization that there are limits to what each nation can or will do, however, may force him to make some concessions to Sudanese dissidents to firm up his regime. But he has yet to address the major fears and problems in the south, the area of the main threat. Until he takes this step, the Ethiopians and Libyans will have a pool of ready recruits for the dissident forces to keep the pressure on Khartoum. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA-SUDAN: Tensions Rise Over Dissident Activity

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