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Director of
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Special Analysis

ETHIOPIA: Mengistu Under Pressure

The Marxist regime in Ethiopia faces growing challenges as a result of the worst famine in decades and deteriorating military morale. The stability of the government is not immediately threatened, but Chairman Mengistu clearly is concerned over potential challenges to his rule. He is mindful that a similar crisis contributed to the ouster of Haile Selassie in 1974. [redacted]

The Army remains the backbone of Mengistu's support, and the regime is taking steps to ensure its loyalty by making sure that it does not suffer from food shortages. The government also is closely monitoring military morale, which has suffered in recent months because of setbacks inflicted by insurgents in Eritrea and Tigray Provinces. [redacted]

The regime is continuing its special efforts to placate the potentially volatile urban population by insulating the cities from the effects of the famine. The government is using scarce resources to buy food for urban distribution, asking the US for food aid for the cities, and keeping refugees from entering Addis Ababa. Nevertheless, food shortages almost certainly will leave the government hard pressed to provide adequate supplies to urban areas early next year. [redacted]

Mengistu continues to take advantage of the famine and refugee situation to relocate Eritreans and Tigreans to remote areas and to hamper relief efforts in regions controlled by insurgents.

- The regime apparently is prepared to use military force if necessary to keep supplies from reaching insurgent areas.
 - Earlier this month, the Ethiopian Air Force strafed a large group of refugees who were moving toward the Sudanese border in the company of a small group of armed insurgents.
- [redacted]

Mengistu is currently in Moscow to seek more Soviet assistance. In addition to more support for Ethiopia's resettlement effort and more food aid, he is likely to press the Soviets for more military assistance to reverse the Army's steadily eroding position against the insurgents in the north. [redacted]

Although Moscow is likely to be forthcoming on the request for arms, it may again press Mengistu to consider a political solution to the northern insurgencies. [redacted]

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The next six months could be particularly difficult for Mengistu. Spreading food shortages will force the regime to use additional scarce resources and to divert international assistance. If food shortages should lead to serious civil disturbances in Addis Ababa, disgruntled military officers could be tempted to move against the regime. [redacted]

The regime will remain dependent on Western donors for large amounts of assistance over the coming year, but Mengistu's deep suspicions of US intentions will continue to hamper relief efforts to insurgent-controlled regions. He probably believes Washington would use the guise of famine relief to supply arms to the Tigreans and Eritreans. [redacted]

If he becomes more seriously pressed in the coming months, Mengistu may launch the long-delayed offensive in the north to deflect military attention from the famine. [redacted]

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