

SUBJECT: Growing Risk to Ethiopian Jews

April 1991

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April 23, 1991

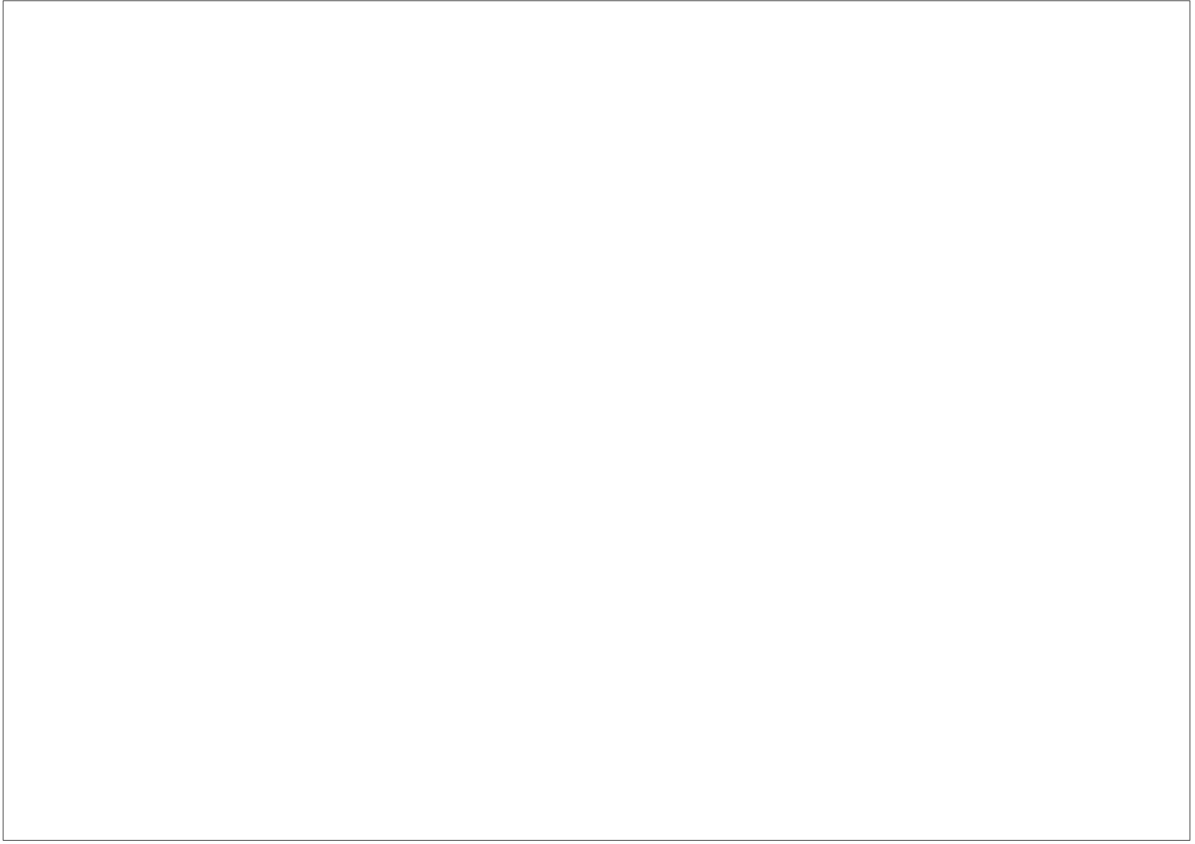
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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

23 April 1991

Growing Risk to Ethiopian Jews

Summary

Tigrean rebel gains since February raise new risks for the 15,000 Ethiopian Jews--called Falashas by the Ethiopians--who are still gathered in Addis Ababa awaiting emigration to Israel. The paralysis or collapse of President Mengistu's regime--which has allowed a sporadic and controlled trickle of emigration--could temporarily close off exit routes for Falashas and spark widespread public unrest and looting by Ethiopians resentful of the Falashas' relatively better living standards. A subsequent rebel takeover in Addis Ababa would almost certainly delay Falasha emigration, even though the Tigrean insurgents, who vocally oppose Israeli assistance to Mengistu in recent years, probably would not directly target Falashas for retaliation; indeed, rebel spokesmen have expressed support for free emigration. Mengistu has long rejected a large-scale Falasha exodus that would attract widespread international attention, but the Tigreans' intentions concerning an exodus of that size are unknown. A new Tigray-dominated regime, however,

This typescript was prepared by [redacted] Africa Division, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division, ALA, on [redacted]

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would probably be willing to consider controlled Falasha emigration if it believed such a policy insured Western aid and goodwill. [redacted]

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The Falasha Emigration

About a year ago, nearly 20,000 Falashas, or more than 90 percent of the Jewish population of Ethiopia, abruptly left their ancestral homes in Gonder Province and headed to Addis Ababa for emigration to Israel that various Jewish organizations promised to facilitate for the Falashas. The large numbers of migrants initially strained the resources of US and Israeli charitable organizations in Addis Ababa, and poor sanitation and housing led to an increase in Falasha deaths from disease. Their living conditions soon improved, however, through better coordination and logistics by assistance groups. [redacted]

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The number of Falashas granted permits to emigrate each month has been a source of tension between Tel Aviv and Addis Ababa. The pace of emigration has fluctuated due to changing bureaucratic procedures in both Israel and Ethiopia, as well as Mengistu's desire to use Falasha emigration to induce Tel Aviv to provide military assistance and to gain diplomatic favor in Washington. During 1990, the number of Falashas entering Israel monthly ranged from a low of 30 to a high of nearly 600. Emigration reached almost 1,000 per month in January and February this year, but stopped abruptly in early March as rebel military successes mounted. Israeli officials told Washington that the cut-off was due to Israel's refusal of Ethiopia's requests for military aid, while Addis Ababa alleged that Israel attempted to help the Falashas skirt certain exit regulations. Emigration resumed following both US and Israeli diplomatic pressure on Addis Ababa. Although Israel has apparently settled for a departure rate of 1,000 per month, an Israeli official said recently that Tel Aviv had a plan to bring the remaining 15,000 Falashas out of Addis Ababa in five days. [redacted]

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Text Box

The Falashas

The Ethiopian Jews call themselves *Beta Esrael* or "House of Israel," but are usually referred to as *Falashas*--"exiles" or "strangers"--by other Ethiopians. They practice a unique form of Judaism based on the Bible, certain books of the Apocrypha, and other post-biblical scripture, but uninfluenced by the ancient and medieval rabbinic traditions that shaped European and Middle Eastern Judaism. In the last century contact with Jewish travelers and organizations broke their isolation and introduced the Falashas to modern Judaism. Their original settlements were principally in southern Gonder Province around Lake Tana, but many also lived in northern Gonder and in Tigray Province; some of these original Falasha communities were broken up during Mengistu's villagization--relocation of peasants from scattered rural homesteads to newly created villages nearby--efforts. In 1973, a Chief Rabbi of Israel officially recognized the Falashas a Jews, making them eligible for immigration to Israel under the Law of Return. [redacted]

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In their home areas, the Falashas were farmers or craftsmen, whose work in pottery and blacksmithing was usually looked down upon by other Ethiopians. In the last two years, Falashas in Gonder had been periodically harassed and had property taken by non-Jews who believed the Falashas were about to depart. In early 1990, encouraged by Jewish charitable organizations, most of the Jewish population of Gonder migrated to Addis Ababa. They lived in the capital illegally at first in very poor rental housing with open latrines and cooking areas and had considerable difficulty adjusting to urban life. By late last year, however, their living conditions--although still spartan--had improved somewhat as support groups provided increased medical care, housing assistance, and educational facilities. Israel provides a monthly stipend and funding for emigration expenses, according to the US Embassy. [redacted]

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This information is [redacted]

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Would Mengistu Permit an Emergency Evacuation of Falashas?

In our judgment, the Mengistu regime will continue to oppose a massive airlift or other large-scale departure of the Falashas, for fear of losing potential leverage in securing Israeli military aid. Israel has previously supplied limited quantities of arms directly to Addis Ababa to facilitate the Falasha emigration, despite denials of a direct linkage, and lately Ethiopian officials have been desperately canvassing potential donors for assistance as the government's military situation has

deteriorated. Ethiopian pressure on Israel and other sympathetic governments for increased military aid almost certainly will intensify as the rebel successes continue. [redacted]

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What is the Risk to Falashas if Law and Order Break Down?

Although [redacted] Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebels are reluctant to engage in a direct and probably bloody attack on Addis Ababa and instead plan to provoke a regime collapse by severing supply lines into the capital, [redacted] TPLF strategists have not ruled out a direct assault. The loss of vital food supplies or essential services caused by a siege of the city, a direct attack on it, or the internal disintegration of the Mengistu government could trigger civil unrest in the capital. In the event of unrest, the Falashas--whom poor Addis Ababans almost certainly view as relatively privileged and well fed because of aid from the charitable organizations--may become targets of violence. Israeli officials say that some Falashas--who are scattered throughout the capital in rental housing--have noticed that their homes are being "marked" or cased by envious Ethiopians. [redacted]

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What are TPLF Attitudes Toward the Falashas?

In our judgment, the TPLF rebel leadership and its allies in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) would not retaliate against the Falashas for Israel's aid to Mengistu. According to the US Embassy, Falashas who arrived in Addis Ababa last year from rebel-held areas in Gonder Province reported few instances of harassment by the TPLF. Indeed, they reported that in Gonder the insurgents generally left them alone and were less of a threat than government troops. Since the Tigray rebels gained control of all of Gonder last month, however, we have had no further information on the treatment of the approximately 3,000 Falashas who remain in the province.

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A Tigrean-led government probably would not oppose Falasha emigration, but they might slow or temporarily suspend departures, partly to punish Israel for aiding Mengistu. In recent conversations with US officials, EPRDF representatives criticized what they viewed as Mengistu's sale of Falashas for weapons, but also asserted that the Falashas should be free to leave. Nevertheless, the EPRDF political program calls for the formation of a broad-based provisional government in which all Ethiopian ethnic groups will participate; the sudden departure of even a minor group like the Falashas, especially if carried out in a high profile, well publicized manner, could be viewed as an embarrassment to Addis Ababa's "liberators," and could cause them to delay emigration. Moreover, a new government would probably require time to formulate its general policy toward all Middle Eastern countries before making decisions on the Falasha issue.

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What is the Near Term Outlook?

Continued, orderly evacuation of the Falashas from Addis Ababa may become more difficult, if not impossible, within the next several months. As rebel forces move in on the capital, military activity around the city would likely close the nearby airfields. A collapsing regime in Addis Ababa is unlikely to make an extraordinary effort to facilitate a large scale Falasha exodus, especially if the officials needed for the activity are themselves trying to flee. Although overland travel to Djibouti or Kenya might be possible, as an Arab League member Djibouti probably would oppose large-scale and well-publicized Falasha emigration across its territory. The Kenyan Government likely would allow transit of the Falashas, but the distance to Kenya is greater. [redacted]

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In our view, of the 15,000 Falashas now in Addis Ababa, those who remain during the critical end-game period probably will have no choice but to ride out an unstable period following either the internal collapse of the regime or a rebel assault on the capital. They would be most vulnerable during a concurrent breakdown of law and order accompanied by widespread looting and settling of scores. Even if a new government is able to reestablish order quickly, we judge it would suspend Jewish emigration temporarily as it reconstitutes a bureaucracy and formulates its foreign and domestic policies. [redacted]

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We believe a new regime would probably not declare a wholesale end to Falasha emigration, recognizing that the issue is important to Washington and other potential donors. International attention to the Falashas' fate, meanwhile, would likely bring pressure on a new government to insure that the Falashas are not harmed. Washington's keen interest in the Falashas, however, could cause a new regime to hold at least some of them as bargaining chips for aid, allowing small numbers to leave to satisfy Washington but blocking a rapid, large-scale exodus. [redacted]

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Appendix

Israeli Involvement in Facilitating Falasha Emigration

Several American Jewish organizations, Falasha activists in Israel, and the Israeli Government have pressed the case for Falasha emigration to Israel. Tel Aviv arranged for their emigration in small groups during Haile Selassie's reign, and in 1978 reportedly arranged an arms deal with Mengistu in return for Falasha emigration. Israel's public announcement of the deal soon afterwards, however, caused Mengistu to suspend emigration. In 1984 and 1985, Washington assisted Israel's clandestine airlift of some 8,000 Falashas under "Operation Moses." Publicity again stopped the flow until Israel stepped up diplomatic and military contacts with Ethiopian officials in 1988, renewing diplomatic relations in late 1989. Prime Minister Shamir reportedly has taken a personal interest in the Ethiopian Jews, because he was held prisoner in Ethiopia during the 1940s by the British. [redacted]

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Despite Tel Aviv's repeated denials, [redacted] Israel recently has supplied and may be continuing to supply Ethiopia with military assistance to encourage Falasha emigration. [redacted]

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Although Israeli officials deny a specific linkage to the Falasha issue, early last year Israel, by its own admission, provided Ethiopia with 15,000 obsolete rifles after reaching an agreement on Falasha emigration, according to the US Embassy in Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv has repeatedly told Washington that no Israeli soldiers have been posted to Ethiopia, but [redacted] Israel may also have provided Addis Ababa with a limited number of military advisers.

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[redacted] requested training for a small number of military personnel in Israel, and we believe that some Ethiopians subsequently entered training programs there. Israel also reportedly delivered 30,000 rifles to Ethiopia last month to encourage stepped up emigration but rejected Addis Ababa's request for cluster bombs and napalm. Tel Aviv continues to deny that it is currently providing Ethiopia with any lethal aid. [redacted]

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