

What The West Does Not Want You To Know About Eritrea!

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Eritrea will lead the longest battle for the independence of the African continent. For more than thirty years, the Eritrean resistance struggled practically alone against all. How did some African fighters come to grips with the world's greatest powers: the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union ...? What were the stakes of this struggle? Mohamed Hassan traces with us the epic adventure of the liberation of Eritrea. But before he reveals everything we should not know about Eritrea.

First part

The Horn of Africa is one of the most heavily battered regions of the continent: incessant wars, famine, poverty ... Images that everyone knows. But few people know that Eritrea believes it is possible to escape from this infernal circle, to resolve conflicts through dialogue and to reach an important level of development. We could rejoice. Yet, in the eyes of the international community, Eritrea is a pariah state, put to the bench of the accused of the UN Security Council! In what way does this country, of which no one speaks, threaten the Western powers? In this new chapter of our series Understanding the Muslim world, **Mohamed Hassan** reveals everything we should not know about Eritrea.

| Interview by: **Grégoire Lalieu & Michel Collon.**

Grégoire Lalieu & Michel Collon: Is Eritrea the source of all violence in the Horn of Africa? This is what the UN Security Council, which recently voted sanctions against the country, seems to be thinking. Eritrea is accused of providing weapons to Somali rebels.

Mohamed Hassan: These sanctions are based on a false campaign to destabilize the Eritrean government. There has been an embargo on the supply of weapons to Somalia since

1992, international experts are there to control the situation and there is now a serial number for any weapon that ensures its traceability. Despite all these provisions, the Security Council has no more evidence of this alleged trafficking than it had on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq! On the other hand, you again find Washington behind this type of false campaign. Yet even US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson does not believe in it. The truth, he explains, is that Somalia has been at war for twenty years and is full of weapons. Anyone can sell or buy on the black market. Somali rebels do not need Eritrea to get supplies.

Q: Eritrea is also accused of maintaining tensions with Djibouti over a border dispute. There was a clash between the two armies in 2008.

Mohamed Hassan: Eritrea has never demonstrated any land claim on Djibouti. Like most borders in Africa, the one that separates the two countries has been traced by the colonial powers. It was therefore marked a long time ago and has never been discussed.

This “incident” of 2008 is a pure fabrication of the Bush administration. It all began in April when Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki received a phone call from the Emir of Qatar. The latter reported a complaint from the Djibouti president, Ismail Omar Guelleh: Eritrea would amass troops at the border. But President Afwerki had not ordered his army and was very surprised by the call. Why did his Djiboutian counterpart go through a third party? Isaias Afwerki offered to meet Guelleh in Djibouti, Eritrea or even Qatar if he so wished. The Djiboutian president did not respond to the invitation.

A few weeks later, on 11 June 2008, soldiers from the Djibouti army attacked Eritrean troops at the border. A brief struggle ensued causing thirty deaths and dozens of wounded on both sides. The Djiboutian president claimed as soon as Eritrea had attacked his country. With disconcerting rapidity, the United States produced a communiqué condemning the “Eritrean military aggression against Djibouti”. The UN Security Council immediately echoed this condemnation. Only then did he propose to send a commission of experts to analyze the situation on the spot and establish the facts. Why did the Security Council put the cart before the horse? What were his accusations based on? There is no dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti. The peoples of these two countries have always been in good relations. But once again, the United States is manipulating the international community and the Security Council to put pressure on Eritrea.

Q: How to explain the attitude of Djibouti?

Mohamed Hassan: President Ismail Omar Guelleh has virtually no social base. It is only maintained in power thanks to the support of foreign powers. Therefore, he can not deny them anything. This explains why there are so many foreign soldiers in Djibouti. For example, the United States has only one military base in Africa, and it is in Djibouti. This small country is also home to contingents from other nations and the largest French base on the continent. Guelleh is totally dependent on Washington. If the US needs it to create a new crisis in the region, it runs. It has become a US specialty: fomenting problems and then proposing to solve them. Here, the United States seeks to turn Eritrea into a warlike country that would be the cause of all the problems in the Horn of Africa.

Q: Why does the US want to marginalize Eritrea?

Mohamed Hassan: The Eritrean government has a vision for its own country and for the region: it is possible to achieve a good level of development and to resolve conflicts through dialogue if we get rid of the interference of foreign powers. If you look at the crisis in Somalia, Eritrea has always advocated bringing together all the political actors of this country around a table for dialogue. In order to find a solution to the conflict and rebuild Somalia, Eritrea also proposes to involve civil society: women, old people, religious leaders ... Gathering everyone beyond divisions to rebuild a country that has Government for twenty years. This method would certainly be effective in bringing peace to the country. But, on their side, the United States has deliberately kept Somalia in chaos. In 2007, they even ordered the Ethiopian army to attack Mogadishu when peace had returned. And in the end, Eritrea is sanctioned by the UN!

In fact, the United States feared that the Eritrean vision would become a favorite in the Horn of Africa. This would mean the end of American interference in this strategic region. Washington is therefore trying to put Eritrea in quarantine to prevent the “virus” from spreading. This is a technique that the United States has always applied and that Noam Chomsky has studied. He talks about “rotten apple theory”: if an apple rotten in a basket, it must be removed quickly before the other apples rot in their turn. This is why the United States has always sought to overthrow governments (with or without success): Castro in Cuba, Allende in Chile, Laos in the 1960s ... Chomsky remarks that Washington intervenes under the pretext of ensuring The “stability” of the world. But this “stability”, he explains, means “security” for the multinationals and the ruling classes.

Q: For Washington, is Eritrea the rotten apple of the Horn of Africa?

Mohamed Hassan: Absolutely. But the real enemy of the region is imperialism. Particularly US imperialism. Eritrea therefore hopes that the countries of the Horn of Africa will get rid of the interference of the neo-colonial powers and develop a common project. The Horn of Africa enjoys a very advantageous geographical position: it is connected both to the Gulf countries and to the Indian Ocean, where most of the world's maritime trade takes place. It also has many resources: minerals, gas, oil, biodiversity ... If the countries of this region free themselves from neo-colonialism and united their efforts, they would succeed in getting out of poverty. This is what Eritrea wants for the Horn of Africa. Obviously, the United States does not want this project to happen because they could cross the control of this strategic region and access to its raw materials. Washington is trying to pressure President Isaias Afwerki to change his policy. Ultimately, Eritrea, which had to struggle for independence in 1993, still struggles today to protect its national sovereignty.

Q: The struggle for independence led by Eritrea is the longest in the history of Africa. The country was first colonized by the Italians in 1889. How was Italy, which was not a large colonial empire, found itself in Eritrea?

Mohamed Hassan: This must be seen in the context of Europe in the 19th century. At the time, the old continent was the scene of a merciless struggle between the imperialist powers for the control of colonies and their raw materials. There was already a very strong rivalry between France and Great Britain. And the unification of Italy in 1863 and then the unification of Germany in 1871 brought forth new competitors of size. Moreover, the capitalist world underwent its first major crisis in 1873. This crisis led to the gradual dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and further exacerbated the rival appetites of the European powers. Germany, for example, wanted to take advantage of the

dismantling of the Ottoman Empire to acquire new colonies. On their side, the British supported Istanbul to block the German expansion.

Chancellor Bismarck therefore decided to organize the Berlin Conference in 1885. It was a major event in the history of colonialism, whereas until then they had settled on the coasts of Africa, Trading posts, the European powers planned to gradually colonize the entire continent. Thus, in order to avoid new conflicts and to revive the capitalist economy, Europe agreed on the sharing of the African cake. During these discussions, Great Britain encouraged the Italians to settle in the Horn of Africa. The strategy of the British was to invite a colonial power not very threatening (Italy) to block the expansion of more serious competitors (France and Germany).

Q: Europe shared Africa, but in the early 20th century Ethiopia was the only independent country on the continent. Why?

Mohamed Hassan: This peculiarity results from a compromise between the French and the British. The former had plans to expand from Dakar to Djibouti. The latter ambioned to deploy their empire from Cairo to Cape Town, South Africa. If you look at a map of Africa, you will see that these colonial projects were bound to telescope. To avoid a conflict that would have caused great losses on both sides, France and Great Britain decided not to colonize Ethiopia. But the imperialists have not renounced this territory. They supported and armed Menelik II who reigned over one of the richest regions of Ethiopia. With the support of the colonial powers, Menelik II took power throughout Ethiopia and allowed the French and the British to have access to the resources of his empire.

Finally, if Ethiopia was the only country not to be colonized, it can not be said that it was independent! Whoever called himself Menelik II, Negus Negest of Ethiopia, a conquering lion of the tribe of Judah, elected by God, was only an agent of the imperialist powers, incapable of building a modern state. He was chosen because he was an Orthodox Christian and came from one of the richest regions of Ethiopia. Menelik II therefore ruled a minority regime in a feudal system where the majority of nationalities had no rights. Slavery was practiced there. All this has created many inequalities that are still felt today in Ethiopia.

Q: Eritrea, on the other hand, was colonized by Italy. Mussolini later declared that it would be the heart of the new Roman empire. What were the effects of Italian colonization in Eritrea?

Mohamed Hassan: When it colonized Eritrea, Italy had too many peasants within its borders. Many have emigrated to Switzerland or France. And others have moved to Eritrea. With its landscape of postcard and its pleasant climate, the new Italian colony made more than one dream. Settlers settled on the spot with the peasants. The Italian bourgeoisie then invested heavily in Eritrea. He was particularly interested in the geographical situation of this colony. Indeed, the country has long coastlines bordering the Red Sea. It is close to the Suez Canal to the north and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to the south: one of the busiest shipping corridors in the world, linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. The Italians have therefore invested in Eritrea and developed plantations, ports, infrastructures ... To give you an idea of the level of development of this colony, when the British invaded Eritrea during the Second World War, they go straight Dismantling factories to take them away!

Q: It seems far from the usual pillaging or the cut hands of the Belgian Congo. Was Eritrea an exception in the pitiless world of colonialism?

Mohamed Hassan: There have been positive aspects but we must not delude ourselves, Italian colonialism remained a discriminatory concept where blacks did not have many rights in relation to whites. Why? In fact, when Italy seized Eritrea and part of present-day Somalia in the late 19th century, it tried to continue its expansion in Ethiopia. But the Italian soldiers were defeated by Menelik II during the battle of Adoua in 1896. In the following years, fascist ideology developed within the Italian intelligentsia with the desire to restore the honor of the country that had been defeated by blacks. Italian colonialism was therefore very racist towards the latter. The Eritrean population had been integrated into the colonial project but as a lower class.

Moreover, Italian fascism (which came to power in 1922) was above all based on anti-black racism, it was not anti-Semitic like German fascism. Jews have worked in fascist organizations in Italy! And Mussolini had a Jewish mistress. Imagine that for Hitler! It was only later, towards the end of the 1930s, that Italy began to persecute the Jews. First of all, because Mussolini had approached Hitler. Then, because the Italian fascist party needed a second wind. He therefore used the Jewish community as a scapegoat to mobilize the Italian population.

Q: Finally, the Italian fascists had their revenge on Ethiopia: in 1935, Mussolini's troops invaded the only non-colonized country in Africa.

Mohamed Hassan: Yes, even if the occupation of Ethiopia did not last very long. In 1941, during the world war, the British army drove the Italians out of the region and the Allies took

control of the Horn of Africa. In the aftermath of the war, if Ethiopia regained its “independence”, the fate of Eritrea, on the other hand, was debated. The Soviet Union wanted this colony to gain its independence. On their side, as they had done everywhere, the British wanted to divide the country in two on the basis of religion: Muslims were to join Sudan and the Orthodox Christians Ethiopia. It is interesting to note that the Ethiopian Church was in favor of this option and put pressure on the Christians of Eritrea to accept it. She told them that if they refused, they would not be buried and their souls would not reach paradise. In spite of everything, the Christians of Eritrea refused: they felt Eritreans first of all! This feeling of belonging is due in part to the fact that the Italians, unlike many imperialist powers, had integrated the Eritrean people into the colonial project without any ethnic distinction. But finally, it was the third option that prevailed, that of the United States: Eritrea had to be integrated into Ethiopia in a federal system.

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Mohamed Hassan: Its geographical position had conferred on Eritrea a great importance for Washington during and after the Second World War. As early as the 1940s, the Pentagon and private weapons companies developed major projects in the country: an assembly line of aircraft, repair shops, a naval force ... And above all, in the 1950s, The American intelligence services established in its capital Asmara one of their most important bases of telecommunication abroad. At the time, there was no satellite monitoring like today and listening systems were limited in scope. But from Eritrea you could monitor what was going on in Africa, the Middle East, the Gulf and even parts of the Soviet Union.

The United States therefore pleaded for Eritrea to be attached to Ethiopia, which was an ally of Washington. John Foster

Dulles, a prominent figure in American politics, headed the Foreign Office. He acknowledged in a Security Council debate: “From the point of view of justice, the views of the Eritrean people must be taken into account. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea basin and the considerations For security and peace in the world, make it necessary that this country be attached to our ally, Ethiopia “. That was how the fate of Eritrea was settled. With heavy consequences: the longest struggle for independence in Africa would begin ...

To be followed in the coming weeks, the second and third parts of our interview on Eritrea. With Mohamed Hassan, we will trace the thirty years of an epic fight led by the Resistance. We will discover the stakes of the Eritrean revolution, its similarities with Cuba. We will also address the issue of human rights in Eritrea, the subject of attacks by the Western powers. Finally, we will analyze this famous African paradox: so much wealth for a population so poor.

Mohamed Hassan recommends the following readings:
– Dan Connell, Against All Odds. A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution, The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1997
– Firebrace & Holland, Never Kneel Down, Spokesman, 1984.

In 1950, by decision of the United Nations and according to the will of the United States, Eritrea thus becomes an autonomous entity federated to Ethiopia. How is cohabitation happening? Rather bad. This decision made no sense because it brought two incompatible systems to live together. You had on one side Eritrea, which had benefited from the development of Italian colonialism and where a certain working class emerged with a political conscience. On the other side, there was Ethiopia led

by Emperor Haile Selassie. It was a feudal regime, without a constitution, which still practiced slavery and where there were no political rights. But as it was a federal system, Eritrea kept its own flag and parliament on the one hand, and its unions, independent newspapers, on the other. All these things were forbidden in Ethiopia!

This strange cohabitation would indirectly lead to a coup attempt against the Emperor Selassie. Indeed, Ethiopian officers traveled to Eritrea and found great differences from their own country. Moreover, the Pan-African movement and the wave of independence were changing attitudes throughout the continent. Some Ethiopians were beginning to perceive that their regime was backward. Among them, the young Girmame Neway. He had studied in the United States and had served as governor in some provinces of the Ethiopian empire. With the help of his brother who was part of the bodyguards of Selassie, he attempted a coup in 1960, while the emperor was visiting Brazil. But the Ethiopian army did not follow the movement and the blow failed. On his return, Selassie had two options: either he maintained the federation with Eritrea and offered his people the same rights as those enjoyed by the Eritreans; Or it completely annexed Eritrea. The first option would have been a political suicide for Selassie. So in 1962, Ethiopia completely annexed Eritrea.

Q: With the implicit support of the United Nations. Why has the international community not protested?

Mohamed Hassan: Yes, that's pretty amazing. When Selassie annexed Eritrea he ordered the arrest of newspaper editors, sent nationalist leaders into exile, banned the trade unions, and banned the use of Eritrean native languages in schools and for official transactions. It has also relocated industries based in Asmara to relocate them to Addis Ababa. The idea was to bring

the Eritrean workers to Ethiopia and to depopulate Eritrea as a military base. Moreover, as Ethiopian troops encircled the Assembly and as streets flew over the town of Asmara, the Eritrean parliament was forced into the humiliation of voting for its own dissolution.

Eritrea protested vigorously and called for UN mediation, which replied: “Your request must first go through the federal government,” that is, by the Emperor Selassie himself! In other words, the Ethiopian regime had the blessing of the imperialist powers and especially of the United States, which dominated the United Nations. The Emperor Selassie was supported on all sides and took advantage of it to give himself a good image, that of the father of the African continent. No one was going to oppose him, for the greatest misfortune of the Eritreans.

Second part

The Horn of Africa is one of the most heavily battered regions of the continent: incessant wars, famine, poverty ... Images that everyone knows. But few people know that Eritrea believes it is possible to escape from this infernal circle, to resolve conflicts through dialogue and to reach an important level of development. We could rejoice. Yet, in the eyes of the international community, Eritrea is a pariah state, put to the bench of the accused of the UN Security Council! In what way does this country, of which no one speaks, threaten the Western powers? In this new chapter of our series Understanding the Muslim world, Mohamed Hassan reveals everything we should not know about Eritrea. | Interview by: Grégoire Lalieu & Michel Collon

Q: How has Ethiopia become a privileged ally of the United States?

Mohamed Hassan: In the 1940s, the United States wanted to weaken its European competitors and began to take an interest in Africa. But the French and the British already had many colonies on this continent. Ethiopia, on the other hand, had not been colonized. For Washington, it was therefore the gate through which it would be able to interfere in Africa to establish its influence and compete with the colonial powers. Feudal Ethiopia was to become a puppet of the United States, participating in wars in Congo, Korea ... Then, when most African countries became independent in the 1950s and 1960s, Washington pressured The Organization of African Unity is based in Ethiopia. This would allow the United States to exercise control over the entire continent. As for the Shah of Iran or Israel in the Middle East, Ethiopia was therefore a US gendarme in Africa, but a backward gendarme.

Q: After exhausting diplomatic means with the international community and organizing peaceful demonstrations, Eritrea will carry out an armed struggle.

Mohamed Hassan: Yes, initially led by the Liberation Front of Eritrea (FLE). The FLE brought together various nationalist groups that wanted independence. At the political level, this movement was dominated by bourgeois interests and its socio-economic analysis was weak. On the military level, the FLE transposed the Algerian resistance model, a system in which armed groups were divided by region. It was a gross tactical error. First of all, because most of the time, the units spread over the different regions did not speak the same language. Thus, while you are fighting for the independence of a state, you are also helping to create divisions that will one day threaten this state! Moreover, this split of the resistance into autonomous groups provoked problems of coordination which the enemy could exploit. For example, when a group of a region was

attacked, its neighbors did not help it. For the Ethiopian army, it was therefore much easier to fight separately isolated groups.

The lack of political vision of the FLE, its military strategy and its internal divisions led to the decline of the movement. But in the 1970s, Muslims and progressive Christian members of the FLE decided to found their own group. The People's Liberation Front of Eritrea (FLPE) was born. Marxist in inspiration, this movement had drawn the lessons of its predecessor. The EPLF knew that it was necessary to mobilize the whole population together rather than create divisions. He also had a much sharper political vision based on a relevant analysis of Eritrean society. More than an armed struggle, the EPLF began a real revolution: the emancipation of women, the organization of democratic councils in the villages, agrarian reform, education ... All this enabled the Eritrean people to be mobilized behind the EPLF fighters. It was absolutely necessary for Eritrea to gain its independence.

Q: Yet the fight seemed lost in advance. Ethiopia was supported on all sides and Eritrea struggled practically alone against all.

Mohamed Hassan: Indeed. Ethiopia was supported by the United States, but also by Israel, which wanted to form alliances with non-Arab countries in the region. Moreover, during the attempted coup d'état against Selassie in 1960, it was thanks to Israel that the emperor, on his journey to Brazil, was able to establish a contact with a general and make the rebellion fall. Ethiopia then presented the Eritrean resistance as an Arab threat to the region and was able to rely on the support of the Hebrew state. Israeli counter-revolution specialists led an Ethiopian elite force of about five thousand men known as the "Flame Brigade."

Europe also supported Ethiopia, supplying it with weapons. But the Ethiopian government was mainly the main beneficiary of European aid to Africa. Finally, the Emperor Selassie had a very strong presence on the African continent, which did not play in favor of the Eritreans. I have explained to you how the United States has pressed for the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to be established in Ethiopia. In the 1960s, to prevent civil wars from spreading across the continent, the organization declared that the borders inherited from colonialism were not debatable. Obviously, this decision was not applied to the case of Eritrea. Ethiopia's claims to this territory had no legitimacy. It was as if Italy were claiming France under the pretext that Gaul had been part of the Roman Empire! But Selassie had all the West behind him and his influence in Africa was such that the OAU closed its eyes.

Q: In 1974, after 44 years of reign, the Emperor Selassie was finally overthrown by a socialist revolution. But the new Ethiopian government does not grant its independence to Eritrea. Why?

Mohamed Hassan: The Ethiopian revolution was the result of an alliance between progressive-minded civilians and the military. But very quickly, divisions appeared in this movement. Indeed, when the soldiers seized power, revolutionary students and intellectuals quickly demanded that the army make a transition to a civilian government. They also supported Eritrea's right to independence. But the military junta in power, called Derg, remained very chauvinist: no question of abandoning the Eritrean territory. Moreover, the soldiers did not intend to leave power to the civilians. The army launched a campaign of arrest and killings which, according to Amnesty International, killed over 10,000 people, mainly intellectuals and students. The Ethiopian revolution was thus purged of its

most progressive elements and the military took power definitively.

At the head of the Derg was Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. He came from a modest background, his father was a soldier and his mother a servant. In power until 1991, Mengistu imposed a totalitarian regime and undertook the militarization of the country. Obviously, he did not want to hear about any autonomy for Eritrea and severely repressed the resistance. Finally, with this revolution, Ethiopia moved from one dictatorship to another. And in the middle of the Cold War, this country, which until then had been a strategic ally of the United States, swung into the Soviet lap. Moscow then brought a very important military support to Mengistu in his repression of the Eritrean resistance.

Q: Twenty years earlier, however, the Soviet Union was in favor of Eritrea's independence. How do you explain this change?

Mohamed Hassan: First, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Moscow supported Eritrea's independence because the annexation of that country by Ethiopia was the business of the United States. Obviously, when Ethiopia became an ally of the Soviet Union, Moscow saw things differently. Moreover, the Soviets had a better knowledge of the world and of the Horn of Africa in the aftermath of the Second World War. At the time, they knew that as a former colony, Eritrea had legitimate demands. But later, the foreign policy of Moscow changed and became stupid. His vision of the world was narrow.

Indeed, in the 1950s, leader Nikita Khrushchev developed a new special theory on how the Soviet Union should support socialist revolutions in Africa: African countries did not need an avant-garde party To guide their revolution, the Soviet

Union would be their vanguard party! Khrushchev therefore intended to transpose the Russian revolutionary model to African countries without really taking into account their specificities. It could be said otherwise: the Soviets had created a shoe at their feet and they thought that this shoe would go to everybody; And if your foot was too big, then it was enough to cut a toe so that it fits! Khrushchev's theory was as ridiculous as that. This explains why the Soviet Union did not have a good vision of what was happening in the Horn of Africa and supported Ethiopia. It was a serious mistake.

Q: What was the impact on the resistance in Eritrea?

Mohamed Hassan: Until then, the Eritrean fighters had achieved notable successes. The population supported the resistance. Many joined the ranks of the fighters, in particular because the Ethiopian army regularly attacked the population: burnt villages, massacred civilians ... Rather than scaring Eritreans, these reprisals reinforced the idea that cohabitation with the Ethiopia was not possible and the struggle for independence was indispensable. In 1975, for example, many young people joined the FPLE after the execution of 56 Eritrean students.

Moreover, the strategy developed by the Resistance had become very sophisticated. An example: Eritrea had virtually no support and was fighting alone against all, which posed a problem for the supply of weapons. In the absence of an ally, the FPLE made its enemy its main support! The fighters were conducting guerrilla attacks against the Ethiopian soldiers, and with every victory they won, they recovered the weapons of their enemies. Over the years, the resistance would thus become much better equipped, even possessing heavy artillery. Imagine: the Ethiopian soldiers were fighting against their own

tanks! Thanks to this technique, the FPLE became a guerrilla army and a mechanized army.

Q: But he had not foreseen that the Soviet Union would come to the rescue of the Derg in 1977!

Mohamed Hassan: It was a difficult time: the Red Army navy pounded the positions of the FPLE along the coasts, Moscow sent three thousand military advisers and an airlift to Addis Ababa poured out a lot of weapons. It is estimated that the Ethiopian army received at the time 1,000 tanks, 1,500 armored vehicles as well as 90 fighter planes and combat helicopters. On the strength of Soviet support, in February 1982 Mengistu launched a major offensive against Eritrea: the “Red Star” campaign with its 150,000 troops, the biggest battle in Africa since the Second World War.

Q: Despite all this, Mengistu did not overcome the FPLE ...

It was the hardest period of the struggle for independence. The FPLE had to abandon the positions it had conquered to make a strategic downturn. Meanwhile, Mengistu had obtained from Sudan that it completely closed its border with Eritrea: for weeks, more oil, food and other supplies that were usually sent from Sudan. More opportunities for refugees to join camps behind the border. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian army failed to eliminate the EPLF. It must be said that this movement was very well organized. Admittedly, the Ethiopian soldiers were more numerous and better equipped. But they only obeyed the orders of a dictator. For their part, the FPLE fighters were better trained and motivated more.

Finally, the “Red Star” campaign marked a turning point in this long struggle for independence: this was the last time the Ethiopian government was actually threatening resistance. When the offensive ended after months of fighting,

the FPLE began to recover the positions it had to abandon. A few years later, the Soviet Union, on the brink of collapse, announced to Mengistu that it would stop supplying it with weapons. The Ethiopian government was beginning to waver. He had to face not only the Eritrean resistance, but also other nationalist groups that had formed elsewhere in Ethiopia. Among these groups, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (FLPT) fought with the Eritreans. Initially, this movement wanted independence for the inhabitants of the Tigray region. But the FPLE knew how dangerous it would be to divide nationalities and advised: “You are Ethiopians above all, it is as Ethiopians that you must fight and encourage all your compatriots to overthrow the military dictatorship “. What happened in 1991: the Derg fell, Mengistu fled and after thirty years of fighting, Eritrea became independent.

Q: After all these changes, how did relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea evolve?

Mohamed Hassan: Ethiopia is a country made up of different ethnic groups. Whether with Menelik II, Selassie or Mengistu, the regime in power has never represented the diversity of the Ethiopian people. The country has always been run by minorities acting in their own interests, creating very strong inequalities among the population. When a new Ethiopian government came to power in 1991, everyone thought things were going to change. I myself have agreed to work as a diplomat for this government. Eritrea also had great hope. By becoming independent, it had deprived Ethiopia of access to the Red Sea. But Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki proposed creating a free trade zone between the two countries. In this way the Ethiopians were able to dispose of the ports of Eritrea with great facility. The basis for cooperation among the countries of the Horn of Africa was laid and it seemed that peace would come back for good.

Q: But you soon became disillusioned?

Mohamed Hassan: Since 1991, Meles Zenawi, leader of the Tigre movement, has been leading Ethiopia. And it has no political vision. He has perpetuated tradition, governing for his own interests and those of his entourage regardless of the ethnic diversity of the country. Moreover, rather than trying to adapt the institutions inherited from Mengistu, the new government simply destroyed them. For example, he demobilized the Derg army rather than opening a democratic dialogue to see how things could evolve. Many officers who had spent their lives in the army thus found themselves without work. The new government simply destroyed the body of the Ethiopian state. Obviously, on seeing this, the US ambassador was at the angels: Ethiopia was again at the mercy of imperialist interests.

Source: Investig'Action

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