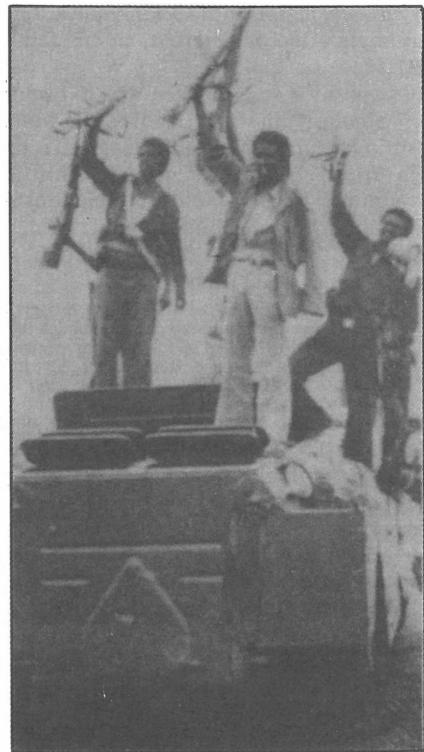


Eritrea's Victory



by Yafa Munir

Historical background

Near the end of May, two major events took place in Africa: the complete defeat of Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime in Ethiopia, and the climax of Eritrea's 30-year armed struggle, which ended in freedom, paving the way for independence. These events will be recorded in the history of all liberation movements not only in Africa but internationally as well.

In 1952, Eritrea, a former Italian colony, was federated to Ethiopia by the UN, and then annexed by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1961. This last action led to the escalation of the Eritrean armed struggle for independence, waged at that time by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

At the end of the 1960s, a Marxist current grew in the ELF, believing that a socialist program could better realize their aims of self-determination and a free, independent Eritrea. In 1970, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front

(EPLF) was formed by leftist cadres who had split from the conservative ELF in 1969. The EPLF quickly gained popularity among the masses and within a couple of years became the main force of the Eritrean struggle for freedom.

At the same time, opposition to Haile Selassie developed in Ethiopia, and in 1974 the old Ethiopian regime collapsed. Power was seized by Ethiopian officers who ruled collectively through a committee named Derg. This change in power, however, didn't change the regime's stand towards the Eritreans and their struggle. The battle against the Eritrean liberation forces continued, as it did after Mengistu Haile Mariam took power in 1977 and became the new ruler of Ethiopia. Not only did the new regime in Ethiopia keep a traditional stand towards the national question; it was also incapable of solving the country's many internal problems, mainly the social and economic crisis. This failure increased the dissatisfaction and unrest among broad sectors of the masses, who were thirsty for a real change in Ethiopia.

Balance of forces

The Mengistu regime's defeat and Eritrea's liberation are closely connected. Certain factors intertwined to create circumstances which led to both dramatic events. In other words, the balance of forces in Ethiopia tipped strongly in favor of both the Eritrean liberation forces and the opposition forces in Ethiopia.

The Soviet Union, which had been the main ally of Mengistu's regime — providing it with financial and military aid — abandoned it about two years ago. This left the Ethiopian regime without a powerful ally to support it and at the same time further worsened the already deteriorating economic conditions. The results of the economic crisis in Ethiopia: poverty, unemployment and famine, coupled with the regime's denial of the people's rights to true democracy, increased the masses' antagonism and made them rally around the opposition forces. Furthermore, Eritrean and Tigrean military advances over the years exhausted the Mengistu regime. In an attempt to preserve power and to