

# The Role of Ethiopian Workers Militia in the Ethio-Somalia War (1977-78)

Adane Kassie Bezabih (PhD)  
Assistant Professor of History and Heritage Management  
Policy Researcher, Policy Studies Institute  
E-Mail- [dnkassie@yahoo.com](mailto:dnkassie@yahoo.com)  
Mobile+251-911764592

## Abstract

The Somali irredentist aimed at establishing Greater Somalia by conquering the Somali speaking areas in Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. In doing so, Somali invaded Ethiopia in 1964 and 1977/78 respectively. During the two invasions, the Ethiopian workers led by the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU) and the All Ethiopian Trade Unions (AETU) defended the sovereignty of their country. More importantly, in the second Ethio-Somalia war, a number of workers militia were organized under two workers militia Brigades and three mixed Brigades defended their country. This paper therefore attempts to reconstruct the role of the Ethiopian workers in defending the sovereignty of Ethiopia in the two Ethio-Somalia wars. Since this is a qualitative study, data for the study was collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews. The collected data were analyzed thematically. The findings show that the Ethiopian workers participated in the second Ethio-Somalia war not only as drivers and technicians of military convoys but also as militia combatants and defended their motherland from irredentists.

**Keywords:** Militia, Brigade, Irredentism, Workers, Internationalism

**DOI:** 10.7176/RHSS/12-22-02

**Publication date:** November 30<sup>th</sup> 2022

## 1. Introduction

Since Somalia became an independent republic on 1 July 1960, its leaders have begun dreaming to uniting all the territories in the Horn of Africa inhabited by the Somalis. Ethiopia is one of the countries in the Horn of Africa where Somalis are living. The two countries share nearly 1600 kms boundary. The Somali Irredentists aspired to incorporate the Ogadèn region from Ethiopia, Mandèra (a district in the North Eastern Province of Kenya) from Britain and Djibouti from France. They orchestrated the Pan-Somali notion of creating "Greater Somalia" by disregarding the interests of Ethiopia, Britain and France in their respective regions.<sup>1</sup>

The Somali irredentists invaded the Ogadèn region of Ethiopia for the first time on 22 January 1964.<sup>2</sup> During the first invasion, Ethiopian workers, through their organization, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Union (CELU), expressed their solidarity with the imperial government of Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie I by sending an ultimatum to the president of Somalia, Aden Abdulle Osman Daar. The executive committee of CELU, together with its Board members and some local trade unions leaders from Addis Ababa and its environs went to the palace to show their solidarity to the emperor. In the letter that he read before the emperor, the president of CELU, Beyene Solomon passionately announced that if the Somali army refused to withdraw from the Ethiopian territories, the fifty thousand Ethiopian workers would march to the warfront to defend the crown and Ethiopian sovereignty. The letter was highly praised by the emperor and disseminated to the public through the mass media. A copy of it was also sent to the president of Somalia. Thus, one can argue that even though the letter was more of a manifestation of CELU's subordination to the imperial government, it used to initiate the Ethiopian workers to contribute a large sum of money to the war effort. The president of CELU was also elected as a member of the fund raising committee organized by the government to support the people who were affected by the war. The committee was led by *Däjjazmač* Keflè Eregätu, Minister of Interior. After the war was culminated with the victory of the Ethiopian army within a few days, however, the money collected for the war effort was used to construct the airport at Godè, and to improve some of the facilities for the soldiers stationed in this area.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>David D. Laitin, "The War in the Ogaden: Implications for Siyaad's Role in Somali History," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 1979, p. 96, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/159897>; Tefera, *Revolution...*, p. 211; Paolo Tripodi, *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1999), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup>Fantahun Ayele, "The Ethiopian Army: From Victory to Collapse, 1977-1991," PhD Dissertation, Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 2009, p. 114. Laitin, p. 96; Tefera, *Revolution...*, p. 211; Tripodi, p. 112; Gebru Tareke, "The Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977 Revisited," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2000, p. 637, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3097438>; Mesfin Wolde Mariam, "The Background of the Ethio-Somalian Boundary," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July 1964, p. 216, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/158818>.

<sup>3</sup>Beyene Solomon, *Fighter for Democracy...*, pp. 81-82.

## 2. The Outbreak of the Ethio-Somalia War (1977-78)

Even though the Somali army faced humiliating defeat on the hand of the Ethiopian army in the first Ethio-Somalia war (February 1964) and was expelled from Ethiopian territories, the irredentists did not drop their idea of establishing "Greater Somalia". As a result, small scale skirmishes continued to break out along the border of the two countries. This indicated that the Somali government was waiting for another opportune moment to invade Ethiopia and realize its dream. The 1974 Ethiopian revolution and the subsequent instability of the country were taken as the ideal time by Somalia irredentists to realize their dream. More importantly, Mohammed Siad Barre, the president of Somalia (1969-1991), took the year 1977 as the right time to implement "Greater Somalia" as the new military government of Ethiopia under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-1991) was beset by a multitude of internal problems. Besides the creation of deep cracks among the top *Därg* officials internally, the government was fighting against several liberation fronts in northern Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> True, in its long history, the internal problems often had an impact in exposing the country to external invasions.

The small scale skirmishes which were occurring intermittently on the border of the two countries further worsened with the creation of guerrilla groups, the Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF) and the Somali Abbo Liberation Front (SALF). They were organized and supported by the Somali government to create chaos in the Ogaadèn region in Ethiopia. From March 1976 on, these Somali insurgents crossed the border and began to attack Ethiopian military posts and police stations and destabilize the low lying regions in eastern Ethiopia. They blocked roads and disrupted transport services between Jijjiga and other major towns. Moreover, they ambushed and destroyed both military and civilian vehicles traversing in the region. The security of the region became totally precarious by early 1977. The Somali government used the insurgents to create conducive situations to declare a full-scale war on Ethiopia on 12 July 1977.<sup>2</sup>

Threatened by the attacks launched by the Somali insurgents and the imminent full scale invasion of the Somali government, the Ethiopian government began to strengthen its army both in manpower and artillery to defend the sovereignty of the country. On 12 April 1977, Mengistu Haile Mariam announced on the mass media the imminent danger looming on the country. In his speech, Mengistu made a call to the general public commonly known as *Yä Enat Hägär Teri* (call of the motherland) to take up arms and defend the sovereignty of the country.<sup>3</sup>

The call, sometimes also known as *Yäketät Awaj* (mobilization decree) reverberated among the general public across the country. As the other sections of the society did, the Ethiopian workers under the leadership of their organization, AETU, expressed their determination to sacrifice their lives for the sovereignty of the country. On the next day of the call, the leaders of AETU, Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA) and *qäbällè* associations met in Addis Ababa and expressed their solidarity to the government and amongst themselves to work hand in hand and defend the sovereignty of the country. In addition, they vowed to support the war effort with material, manpower and finance. Thus, AETU began to collect material and money from all members of its affiliates and submit to the government starting on 24 April 1977.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the financial support continued in different forms until the end of the war.

Following the inconclusive end on 26 March 1977 of the Aden peace Conference which was arranged by Fidel Castro, the Cuban president, and Abdul Fatah Ismail, President of South Yemen, to bring peace between Ethiopia and Somalia, Mengistu started preparation to train 300,000 militiamen [though the actual figure at the end did not exceed 120,000] that could repulse the Somali invading force and restore the sovereignty of the country. To this end, a military training camp commonly called *Taṭāq Ṭor Säfär* (*Taṭāq* Military Camp) was established on 6 *gaša* or 240 hectares of land in the western outskirts of Addis Ababa.<sup>5</sup> The training camp was named after the horse name of the renowned warrior king of Ethiopia, Tewodros II. This name was selected apparently to invoke patriotism among the general public and enhance the national feeling of the trainees, and initiate them to die for their motherland.

<sup>1</sup>Fantahun, p. 114; Gebru Tareke "The Ethiopia-Somalia War...", p. 638.

<sup>2</sup>Fantahun, pp. 115-116; Patrick Gilkes, "Revolution and Military Strategy: The Ethiopian Army in the Ogaadèn and in Eritrea, 1974-1984," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, April-1-6, 1991* (Addis Ababa University: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1994), p. 722.

<sup>3</sup>Mengistu Haile Mariam, *Teglaçen: Yä Iteyopiya Hezeb Abyotawi Yä Tegel Tarik, Volume I* (Lose Angeles: Tsehai Publishers, 2004EC/2011), p. 386; Fiqreselassie Wogdres, *Eña ena Abyotu* (Lose Angeles; Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publisher, 2006 EC/2014), p. 368; *Addis Zämän, Miyazya* 5, 1969 EC (13 April 1977).

<sup>4</sup>*Yä Mälaw Iteyopiya Säratäñoç Mahebär*, "Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñoçe Tarik: Kā Eisäma...", p. 59.

<sup>5</sup>IES/MS 2907, Mamo Wudneh, "Yä Taṭāq Ṭor Säfär Mäsärätu ena Edegätu," 1970 EC, pp. 3-4. Mengistu Haile Mariam, *Teglaçen: Volume I...*, pp. 383-384; Fiqreselassie Wogdres, *Eña ena Abyotu...*, pp. 367-368.

**Figure 1. Taṭāq Ṭor Sāfār (Taṭāq Military Training Camp)**



Source: Mengistu Hailemariam, *Teglačen Volume I*: p. 388.

### **3. The Role of the Ethiopian Workers in the Ethio-Somalia War (1977-78)**

#### **3.1 Military Camp Construction**

The Ethiopian workers, who were contributing a chunk of their monthly salary to the war effort, also began to contribute their skills to the construction of the military camp. A number of carpenters, electricians, plumbers, foremen and Engineers from different enterprises accepted the call of the government and AETU, and played an indispensable role during the construction of the camp. Nearly 4,500 workers participated at different stages of the construction from the beginning to the end.<sup>1</sup>

The construction of the military camp was almost completed within a month and hosted recruits from all sections of the society. True, a large number of them came from the peasantry. The first recruits who arrived to the training camp were from Kāffa province on 28 April 1977. This was followed by other peasants, workers and urban dwellers from all over the country. After they took the training for nearly two months, the militia paraded at the revolutionary square on 25 June 1977 and expressed their determination to defend the country from the Somali invaders. During the occasion, the government praised the people's militia as the vanguard of the regular army on which the red army of the revolution would be built up. The militia began to be transported and deployed in the Northern, Eastern and Southern war fronts as of 26 June 1977.<sup>2</sup>

#### **3.2. Recruitment and Training**

Besides contributing their material, skill and salary to the war effort since the declaration of the call of the motherland, the Ethiopian workers also joined Taṭāq to get military training and fight for their country. Following the call, AETU made successive discussions and propaganda campaigns among its affiliates and persuaded them to take up arms against the Somalis. Since then, the workers began to shout common slogans: "...እያመረኩን እንታገላል እየታገልን እናመርታል!" and "በመዶሻ ምርታችንን በጠብመንጃ ድንበራችንን!"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Yä Mälaw Iteyopiya Säratäñoč Mahebär*, "Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñoče Tarik: Kä Eisäma...", pp. 58-59.

<sup>2</sup> IES/MS 2907, Mamo Wudneh, "Yä Taṭāq Ṭor Sāfār Mäsärātu ena Edegātu," 1970 EC, pp. 8-10.

<sup>3</sup> "...We struggle as we produce and we produce as we struggle!" and "We defend our border with a rifle, As we produce with a hammer!" See also *Yä Mälaw Iteyopiya Säratäñoč Mahebär*, "Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñoče Tarik: Kä Eisäma...", p. 61.

In the meantime, AETU held its General Congress from 2 to 5 August 1977 and discussed the overall situations of the country and the type of support that the workers could provide to the government. At the end of the meeting, the General Congress passed a seven point resolution. The resolution urged every basic trade union to recruit manpower as per the criteria set by the government and send to *Tafäq*, urge the remaining workers to work extra hours without payment and cover the gap that would be created because of the recruited workers, take care of the family of the recruited workers and pay their salary on time, and to defend any anti revolutionary activities in their workplaces and surroundings. It also urged workers to contribute from their salary to the war effort as per the new quota system which would come into force as of 7 August 1977. Thus, every worker was bound to contribute from 0.25 cents to 10 birr as per the amount of his/her salary. The money was not fully given to the government; rather it was also used to support the family of the workers militia. The quota was appropriated as follows.

**Table 1: The Quota System in which all workers were bound to contribute to the war effort.<sup>1</sup>**

Salary in Birr	50 and Below 50	51-250	251-350	351-450	451-600	651-850	850 and Above 850
Expected Contribution	0.25 cents	1 birr	2 birr	3 birr	4 birr	5 birr	10 birr

Nearly 20, 000 workers were believed to have been recruited from all trade unions organized across the country to take military training at *Tafäq* in three rounds. In the first round, workers were recruited through their *qäbällè* without the knowledge of their basic union or industrial union or AETU. Though it seems exaggerated, AETU noted that about 7,000 workers took military training with the peasants and other sections of the society during the first round.<sup>2</sup> Their number was apparently reported to AETU by the Ministry of Defence after they reached the war front and began to request their salary. Worthy of mention here is that the salary of workers during the Somalia-Ethiopian war was covered by their former employers, not the government.

In the second round, the recruitment of workers was, however, undertaken through a quota system. Every enterprise was obliged to recruit 5 percent of its manpower.<sup>3</sup> Most of the enterprises fulfilled their quota through a lottery system. But, some enterprise picked only those workers who were interested to take military training and die for their country. In its letter sent to Transport and Communication Industrial Union on 13 July 1977, the Ethiopian Freight Service Organization Workers' Union clearly indicated how it implemented the quota system while recruiting the workers militia as follows. "...ከ 10 ቀን 1969 ዓ.ም በማህበር ለተደራጁ ከአብዮታዊ ዘመቻ መምሪያ የወዘአደር ዘማች ከመስሪያቤታችን እንድንመለምል በተፃፈልን ማሳሰቢያ መሰረት/ከመቶ አምስት/ ከ 1300 ሰራተኞች ውስጥ 75 ብቁ ናቸው ብለን ያመንባቸውን ወዘደሮች መርጦን አዘጋጅተናል። ሆኖም ከእነዚህ ውስጥ የሚፈለግብን 65 ሲሆን 10 በተጠባባቂነት እንዲቆዩ አድርገናል።"<sup>4</sup>

During this round, workers were not allowed to be recruited through the *qäbällè* where they were residing; rather every worker was obliged to register in his basic union or industrial union or AETU. Moreover, members of the workers' revolutionary defence squads were also recruited during this round.<sup>5</sup> The revolutionary defence squads were not allowed to be recruited in the first round apparently because the government wanted them to continue their work and stabilize the internal situation of the country which was equally dangerous to the government.

It was only those workers who fulfilled the criteria set by the government that were recruited and registered by AETU, and joined *Tafäq* for military training. The second round recruits began to enter *Tafäq* military camp on 12 August 1977 and the training was started at the end of the same month. They were recruited from all enterprises across the country. It was also in this round that nearly 10,000 workers joined the training.<sup>6</sup> The Ethiopian Amharic daily newspaper reported this on its 14 August 1977 edition as follows. "...የአብዮታዊ ኢትዮጵያን ዳር ድንበር ለማስከበርና የሰፊውን ጭቁን ህዝብ አብዮት ለመጠበቅ በግንባር ቀደምትነት ለመዝመት በርከት ያሉ የመጀመሪያዎቹ የወዘደሩ ህዝባዊ ሠራዊት ምልምሎች [የመጀመሪያዎቹ ሲል በወዘደር ስም ለመጀመሪያ ጊዜ

<sup>1</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 62-63; Beyene Solomon, *Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñöç Andenät Mahebär Wuldät, Edegät, Wudeqät* (Addis Ababa: Image Enterprise PLC, 2004 E.C/2012), p. 218.

<sup>2</sup>*Voice of AETU*, Vol. I, No. 1, *Teqmet*, 1970 (October 1977).

<sup>3</sup>ENALA, MoI/ 17.1.1.218.01, A letter written from *Šaläqa Däbäla Dinsa*, Chairman of the Addis Ababa Revolutionary Campaign Coordinating Committee to AETU on *Mäskäräm* 9, 1970 EC (19 September 1977). It deals about the precautions that AETU was required to take during recruiting the workers militia.

<sup>4</sup>"...Based on the notice that the Revolutionary Campaign Office wrote to our office on 10 June 1977 concerning on how to recruit workers' militia, we recruited 75 workers whom we believe are well qualified out of 1300 employees on the 5percent basis. But, since we are expected to send only about 65 persons, we keep the remaining 10 as reserve. See also CETU, Box No. 133, File No. OT7, A letter sent from Ethiopian Fright Service Organization Workers' Union to Transport and Communication Industrial Union, *Hämlè* 6, 1969 EC (13 July 1977); *Addis Zämän, Mäskäräm* 10, 1970 EC (20 September 1977); *Addis Zämän, Mäskäräm* 11, 1970 EC (21 September 1977).

<sup>5</sup>*Addis Zämän, Mäskäräm* 10, 1970 EC (20 September 1977); *Addis Zämän, Mäskäräm* 11, 1970 EC (21 September 1977).

<sup>6</sup>*Yä Mälaw Iteyopiya Säratäñöç Mahebär*, "Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñöçe Tarik: Kä Eisäma..." p. 70; Educational and Information Department of All Ethiopian Trade union, *May Day 1978* (Addis Ababa, 1978), pp.19-20.

የተመለሰ ለማለት ነው። ባለፈው ዓርብና ቅዳሜ ታላቅ ጦር ሰፈር ገብተዋል።"<sup>1</sup>

### 3.3 The Deployment of Workers Militia Brigades

The workers were organized under two workers militia brigades. These were 100<sup>th</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup>. They took the training at Taṭāq for nearly two months. At the beginning of October 1977, the two brigades went out of Taṭāq and were deployed in different fronts. The 100<sup>th</sup> worker's militia brigade was put under the 1<sup>st</sup> Division or Central Division and deployed along the Addis Ababa-Assāb road to clear out insurgents who were creating havoc behind the Ethiopian defence lines and to protect roads, bridges and the railway line from sabotage. It used Awaš Sābat Killo as its headquarters. As soon as it reached the area, it faced sudden attacks from the Somali insurgents at Afdām and Bekiè on 15 and 16 October 1977 respectively. But, the brigade defeated the insurgents and brought the area under its control until it was incorporated into the 117<sup>th</sup> Division and left the area for Eritrea to participate on the Red Star Campaign of 1982.<sup>2</sup> True, since the Addis Ababa-Assab road was very significant to transport arms and other military equipment from the port to Addis Ababa during the war, the government deployed the brigade at various points, mainly from Awaš to Assāb, and made the security of the road safe for transportation. Thus, the 100<sup>th</sup> worker's militia brigade played an indispensable role in this regard.

The 101<sup>st</sup> workers militia brigade, however, fought not only against the Somali insurgents but also against its regular army. It left Taṭāq for Dire Dawa on 15 October 1977 and joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> People's Militia Division. It was, however, transferred to Babilè after two weeks and joined the 5<sup>th</sup> people's militia division to strengthen the Ethiopian army defence line. Since the brigade was equipped with a new rifle, K-47 which was not used during the training, it used the two weeks to get acquainted with the machine gun with the help of their veteran commanders. Though it faced some attacks from the Somali insurgents on its way from Dire Dawa to Babilè, it reached the area without any significant causality.<sup>3</sup>

Even though there is no consensus among scholars who wrote on the Somalia-Ethiopian war concerning the exact date when Somalia launched its full scale invasion on Ethiopia, they all argued that it was undertaken in the second week of July 1977.<sup>4</sup> Fantahun Ayälä, who consulted the archives of the Ministry of Defence, however, disregarded other assumptions and definitively argued that it was launched on 12 July 1977.<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, within a matter of 3 to 4 weeks of the beginning of the full scale invasion, the Somali army, which was well armed and numerically superior, easily defeated the Ethiopian army and penetrated 700 kms deep into southeastern and 300kms into southern Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup>

The 101<sup>th</sup> worker's militia brigade reached at Babilè on 1 November 1977 nearly two months the fall of Jijiga and Karra Mara into the hands of the Somalis. Though the Somali army failed to advance beyond Karra Mara because of the stiff resistance of the Ethiopian army at Qorè, it continued to launch its attack through Fädīs, Babile and Jarso-Kombolča fronts. The Babilè front was mainly opened to cut off the Harär-Qorè route and block any further support that could come from Harär for the Ethiopian army at the Qorè defence line.<sup>7</sup>

The Somali army began to launch its attack on the Babilè front on 12 November 1977. Despite the stiff resistance it encountered from the 68<sup>th</sup>, 91<sup>st</sup> and 94<sup>th</sup> militia brigades, 101<sup>st</sup> worker's militia brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> tank battalion, 013 veteran battalion and other units of the Ethiopian army, it managed to control some strategic points. The defeat was attributed to the EPRP. Some EPRP members who were also accused of killing some junior commanders were executed in front of the army. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian army launched a counter offensive on the Somali army and controlled Abu Šārif, a strategic place between Babilè and Fiq towns.<sup>8</sup>

The execution of some of the radio operators who created miscommunication between brigade and battalion commanders in the first engagement contributed a lot for the success of the counter offensive. Three radio operators of the worker's militia brigade were suspected of being EPRP members and summarily executed.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the families of the executed militia were immediately deprived of the salary and other benefits of the deceased. In his letter to all enterprises where the 21 executed militias were recruited, Pètros Kälklè, the vice president of AETU, ordered them to stop paying the salary of the deceased and other benefits to his/her family. This was a double jeopardy. The letter which was written to the Ethiopian Airline reads as follows:

...ከድርጅታችሁ ሀቀኛ በመምሰል ተመልምሎ የእናት ሀገሪን ዳር ድንበር አስከብራለሁ በማለት የበግ

<sup>1</sup>"...The first batch of the workers militia recruits [the first batch refers to those militias recruited for the first time in the name of labourer] joined Taṭāq military training camp last Friday and Saturday [6 and 7 August 1977] in large number to march in the forefront and defend the revolution of the broad oppressed masses and protect the border of revolutionary Ethiopia." See also *Addis Zāmān, Nāhāsè* 8, 1969 EC (14 August 1977).

<sup>2</sup>Informants: Gānāt Mālāsā and Alāmu Yasin

<sup>3</sup>Informants: Dāmes Bongār and Ahmād Mohammād

<sup>4</sup>Gilkes, p.724; Gebru, p. 644.

<sup>5</sup>Fantahun, p.119.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 122; Clapham, *Transformation...*, pp.61-62.

<sup>7</sup>Informants: Dāmes Bongār and Ahmād Mohammād

<sup>8</sup>Gebru, p. 654; Informants: Dāmes Bongār and Ahmād Mohammād.

<sup>9</sup>Informants: Dāmes Bongār and Ahmād Mohammād.

ለምድ ለብሶ ዘምቶ የነበረው የአሸን ቁጥር 447067 ወዛደር ማሙዬ ብዙነህ አብዮታዊ እርምጃ ከተወሰደባቸው ፀረ አብዮተኞች አንዱ ስለሆነ ከላይ ተብራርቶ በተገለፀው መሰረት ከድርጅቱ ይከፈለው የነበረ ደሞዝም ሆነ ማናቸውም ልዩ ልዩ ጥቅሞች እንዳይሰጡት ታደርጉ ዘንድ አብዮታዊ ትብብራችሁን አጥብቀን እንጠይቃለን።<sup>1</sup>

...Labourer Mamuyè Bezunäh who was recruited from your organization to defend his mother land with service number 447067 was found to be one of the anti revolutionaries on whom revolutionary measure was taken. We, thus, firmly request your revolutionary cooperation to revoke his salary and other benefits that he had been receiving from your organization.

In fact, the cleansing of EPRP members who were allegedly labeled as "fifth columnist" by the *Därg* and top army officers was started at the Qorè defence line a day after the fall of Jijjiga and Karra Mara to the Somalis on 12 September 1977 and continued to be practiced at different fronts until the end of the war. A number of EPRP members who were implicated in the retreat of the army were summarily executed on 13 September 1977. A dozen officers were also executed by firing squad for conspiring with the "anarchists" (EPRP) on the same day. This measure helped the commanders not only to clear out the fifth columnists but also to maintain discipline among the ill-trained and inexperienced people's militia.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the balance of the war began to shift in favor of Ethiopia with the arrival of the Soviet arms and the South Yemeni tank units in late October 1977, the Ethiopian army began its full scale counter offensive on 23 January 1978. The coming of around 1500 Soviet military advisers under the leadership of General Vasily Ivanovich Petro, Deputy Commander of the Soviet Ground Forces, and more than 12,000 Cuban combatants with their own military hard ware under the leadership of General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez strengthened the preparation of the Ethiopian army for the counter offensive. In late January 1978, the Ethiopian army was in the final stage of its preparation to launch the counter offensive. The operation was painstakingly planned by the Supreme Military Strategic Committee (SMSC). It was composed of the Ethiopian Officers and Soviet and Cuban military advisers. It was planned to apply surprise massive artillery barrages followed by infantry and mechanized attacks on the enemy. Nevertheless, the Somali army started its attack on Babilè in a bid to take over Harar on 22 January 1978. On the next day, the Ethiopian army began to implement its full scale counter offensive against the enemy on several fronts.<sup>3</sup>

The Ethiopian workers who joined Taṭāq for the third round around mid November 1977 completed their training and left for the various war fronts in late January when the Ethiopian army was getting ready to launch its counter offensive. Nearly 3, 000 workers participated in the third round training. At the end of the training, they were organized in mixed brigades with peasant militia, revolutionary guard and veterans, and deployed in various fronts as a rearguard. The revolutionary people's militias mixed brigades were 504<sup>th</sup>, 505<sup>th</sup> and 506<sup>th</sup>. While 504<sup>th</sup> and 505<sup>th</sup> mixed brigades were put under the eastern command in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> divisions respectively, the 506<sup>th</sup> was put under the southern command in the 4<sup>th</sup> division. They were deployed as a rearguard to control the liberated areas.<sup>4</sup> But, the coming of these mixed brigades further consolidated not only the number and strength of the army but also the security of the country.

The Ethiopian regular army and militia units were reorganized into seven infantry divisions. It was also named as the First Revolutionary Liberation Army (FRLA). Accordingly, the worker's militia brigade was put under the 8th infantry division. It was this division that, with the help of the Cuban artillery battalion and BM battery, saved Babilè and pushed the Somalis a few kilometers away from the town. The various units of the 8<sup>th</sup> division including the worker's militia brigade cleared the Babilè- Fiq road and controlled the town of Fiq on 8 March 1978. The division also pushed further into the heart of Ogadèn and controlled smaller towns in the next two days.<sup>5</sup> On 14 March 1978, the division entered Qäbri Dähar with the help of the 3<sup>rd</sup> par commando. Thereafter, the town began to be used as the headquarters of the division. The worker's militia brigade subsequently participated with the units of the division in the liberation of Godè, Wardèr and Qälafo.<sup>6</sup>

The control of Jijjiga by the Ethiopian army and the Cuban troops on 5 March 1978 marked the culmination of the Somali Ethiopian war. Thereafter, the Somalis were on the run and a number of smaller towns fell into the hands of the Ethiopian army without any major engagements. Dägahabur was also liberated on 8 March 1978.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the declaration of victory by the Ethiopian government after the control of Jijjiga, border towns such as Gäladin, Šilabo, Mustahil, Fërfër and other areas remained under the control of the Somalis until 1980.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>CELU, Box No. \_\_\_\_\_, File No. 271, A letter written from Pëtros Käklè, the vice president of AETU to all enterprises from which the executed militia was recruited on *Ṭeqmet* 6,1971 EC (16 October 1978). It deals about revoking the right of the executed militia.

<sup>2</sup>Gebru, p. 650; Fantahun, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup>Gebru, pp. 656-657; Fantahun, pp. 130-132; Gilkes, p. 725

<sup>4</sup>CELU, Box No. \_\_\_\_\_, File No. 271, Yä 504, 505 and 506 Ṭemer bergèdoč sem zerzer kä 1969 eskä1975 EC; Informant: Näjid Šekur.

<sup>5</sup>Dämes Bongär and Ahmäd Mohammäd.; Fantahun, p. 136.

<sup>6</sup>Dämes Bongär and Ahmäd Mohammäd.; Fantahun, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup>Fantahun, p.137; Gebru, p.659.

<sup>8</sup>Gebru, p. 660; Fantahun, p.139.

The control of these border towns was mainly undertaken by the 8<sup>th</sup> division in the *Laš* Operation. The worker's militia brigade also participated in the liberation of those border towns. The brigade remained under the division until it was later combined with the regular army. True, a number of workers left the brigade for several reasons and only those who were fit continued to serve in the regular army.<sup>1</sup>

The other thing worth mentioning here is that it was not only workers who took military training at Taṭāq and were organized into brigades and battalions to defend the sovereignty of the country; rather there were also armed and unarmed workers who participated in the war and paid the ultimate price for their country. The workers of Dire Dawa factory workers can be mentioned in this regard. Being aware of the strategic importance of Dire Dawa, the Somali Army launched two major attacks to control the town on 16 July 1977 and 16 August 1977. While the first attack was repulsed without any significant damage to the town, the second attack, however, virtually destroyed the major facilities of the town. For instance, the Somali army destroyed the air traffic control tower at the airport and the fuel depot, and bombarded textile, meat and cement factories. They terrorized the residents and nearly came to control the town. But, the Ethiopian air force, which had relocated to Dābrā Zāyt, tilted the balance of the war in favor of the Ethiopians by destroying the Somali tanks and saved the town.<sup>2</sup>

It was at this difficult time that the workers of Dire Dawa textile factory played indispensable role to the Ethiopian army by evacuating wounded soldiers and providing supplies. Moreover, the revolutionary defense squad of the factory fought against the Somalis who tried to control the compound of the factory and paid the ultimate price for their country. Zārgi Häylä Maryam can be mentioned in this regard. She died in the compound of the factory while fighting against the Somalis.<sup>3</sup>

In general, the Ethiopian workers played an indispensable role in defeating the Somali army. The Ethiopian workers participated in the Somali-Ethiopian war not only as combatants but also as technicians, mechanics and drivers. Though the war was initially fought between the Somali irredentists who were dreaming to establish "Greater Somalia" and the Ethiopian nationalist government and people who were determined not to relinquish even an inch of land, it eventually evolved into a struggle between internationalism and irredentism following the coming of the Soviet military advisers and the Cuban and South Yemenis combatants on the Ethiopian side. In addition to their national interest, the three countries gave support to Ethiopia apparently in the spirit of socialist solidarity. At the end of the war, the *Dārg* saw it as a part of the international proletarian struggle. Regarding this, Gebru Tareke, who consulted the communiqué that Mengistu wrote to praise the Eastern Command for their contributions, argued that the *Dārg* gave the credit of the victory not only to the Ethiopian people but also to the workers of the world.<sup>4</sup>

In his book, *Teglaḥen: Yä Iteyopiya Hezeb Abyotawi Yä Tegel Tarik*, Mengistu also made a similar argument: "...ያሽነፋቸው እነርሱ በትክክል ያልተረዱት የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ አብዮት ነው።"<sup>5</sup> Here Mengistu tried to indicate that the Ethiopian revolution not only galvanized the oppressed masses of Ethiopia to fight against the Somali irredentists but also it carried out its defensive war as part of the struggle of proletarian internationalism that brought socialist countries to fight on its side and score a resounding victory over the Somalis. The deployment of worker's militia brigades in the war was also apparently made to push the war to the level that it could be considered as a part of the struggle of the international proletariat and get the support of socialist countries across the world. Thus, one can argue that, since the proletarian ideology was at the center of their politics and proletarian internationalism was the *modus operandi* of their communist parties, it is possible to argue that the intervention of the Soviet, Cuban and South Yemeni governments during the Somali-Ethiopia war was part of the struggle of the international proletariat. In addition, though the Workers' Party of Ethiopia was still in the process of formation, the defensive war that the *Dārg* was fighting to keep the sovereignty and independence of socialist Ethiopia was in complete harmony with the requirements of proletarian internationalism. Also worth mentioning here is that, regardless of the nature of the struggle they were in, the Ethiopian workers played an indispensable role in the victory that Ethiopia scored over the Somalis in the 1977/78 Somalia-Ethiopian war .

## Conclusion

The Ethiopian workers led by the All Ethiopian Trade Unions (AETU) contributed a lot to defend the sovereignty of the country in the second Ethio-Somalia war. In addition to their contribution of 1 to 10 birr from their monthly salary to the war effort, a number of engineers, technicians, carpenters, electricians, plumbers and others participated in the building of *Tateq* Military Training Camp. Had the Ethiopian workers not participated without payment, the construction of the military camp would not have been completed on time. Above all, the Ethiopian workers were organized under 100<sup>th</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> brigades and deployed as military combatants in the

<sup>1</sup>Informants: Dāmes Bongär and Ahmäd Mohammäd

<sup>2</sup>Informants: Tadässä Amarä; Negusè Lämna and Kābādä Duguma; Fantahun, pp. 122-123.

<sup>3</sup>Dire Dawa Textile Factory Workers' Union, *Dire Dawa Factory Workers' Day* (Harär: Harär Printing LTD, 1980EC/1988), p.17.

<sup>4</sup>Gebru, p. 659.

<sup>5</sup>"...It was the Ethiopian people's revolution on which they [the Somalis] did not have a clear understanding that defeated them". See also Mengistu, p. 486.

Addis Ababa-Assab road and Babile fronts respectively. Nearly 3000 workers were also organized under 504<sup>th</sup>, 505<sup>th</sup> and 506<sup>th</sup> mixed militia brigade with farmer militia and defended their country from Somali irredentists. They paid their life to defend their motherland. The military government also used the Ethiopian workers to get military assistance in the name of proletariat internationalism from socialist countries, United Soviet Socialist Russia (USSRA), Cuba, and South Yemen. As a result, Internationalism defeated Irredentism.

### Reference

- Bejene Solomon. *Fighters for Democracy: The Saga of an Ethiopian Labor Leader*. Baltimore: Publish America, LLP, 2010.
- Bejene Solomon. *Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñoč Andenät Mahebär Wuldät, Edegät, Wudeqät*. Addis Ababa: Image Enterprise PLC, 2004 E.C/2012.
- Dire Dawa Textile Factory Workers' Union. *Dire Dawa Factory Workers' Day*. Harär: Harär Printing LTD, 1980EC/1988
- Fantahun Ayele. "The Ethiopian Army: From Victory to Collapse, 1977-1991." PhD Dissertation, Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 2009.
- Fiqreselassie Wogdres. *Eña ena Abyotu*. Lose Angeles; Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publisher, 2006 EC/2014.
- Gebre Tareke. "The Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977 Revisited." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2000, p. 637.
- Gilkes, Patrick. "Revolution and Military Strategy: The Ethiopian Army in the Ogaden and in Eritrea, 1974-1984." in *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, April-1-6, 1991*. Addis Ababa University: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1994.
- Laitin, David D. "The War in the Ogaden: Implications for Siyaad's Role in Somali History." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 1979.
- Mamo Wudneh. "Yä Tañäq Ṭor Säfar Mäsärätu ena Edegätu." 1970 EC.
- Mengistu Haile Mariam. *Teglaçen: Yä Iteyopiya Hezeb Abyotawi Yä Tegel Tarik, Volume I*. Lose Angeles: Tsehai Publishers, 2004EC/2011.
- Mesfin Wolde Mariam. "The Background of the Ethio-Somalian Boundary." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July 1964.
- Tefera Haile Selassie. *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1991: From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy*. London; New York: Kegan Paul International, 1997.
- Tripodi, Paolo. *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia*. London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1999.
- Yä Mälaw Iteyopiya Säratäñoč Mahebär. "Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñoče Enqeseqaè." *Kefel 1*, 1976 EC.
- Yä Mälaw Iteyopiya Säratäñoč Mahebär. "Yä Iteyopiya Säratäñoče Tarik: Kä Eisäma Gizèyawu Komitè Esekä Mäcisäma Hulätäna Gubaè," *Kefel 2, Yekatit*, 1976 EC.