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TO : Department of State

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FROM : American Embassy ADDIS ABABA

DATE: June 18, 1969

SUBJECT : An Assessment of The Eritrean Liberation Front

REF : Addis 2443 ^{AF} (NOTAL)

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In Out

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Summary Conclusions

- A. We do not expect that the ELF can attain power in Eritrea except by coincidental consequence of a collapse of Governmental authority in Addis Ababa or the occurrence of major troubles at the borders in other provinces;
- B. It appears the ELF is receiving substantially increased Soviet and radical Arab arms support, money and training; this could ultimately be directed against the U.S. presence in Eritrea, though there is no sign yet that the Soviets and radical Arabs have control over ELF policy decisions; in any case for tactical reasons neither group at this stage would wish to reveal its anti-Kagnew objective for fear of direct U.S. aid to Ethiopia in its anti-ELF campaign;
- C. The end of the current ELF economic sabotage campaign, aimed at world publicity, possible UN action and pressure on the Emperor, is not in sight; the IEG can contain, but not defeat the guerrilla war in Eritrea. The ELF will try to score more small "coups" by attacking sensitive economic targets in Eritrea -- and more Ethiopian property abroad -- in coming months; there is no single IEG policy or program that can prevent this, or protect all possible ELF targets;
- D. We have no indication that the ELF intends to attack Kagnew, though we may assume there is this possibility on the general principle that "the friend of my enemy is my enemy"; on the other hand there are reasons for assuming that the ELF does not intend hostile action against Americans. The past U.S. policy of non-interference in the Eritrean problem should be strictly maintained; we have nothing to gain and much to lose by injecting ourselves into the insurgency. We should consider reductions of Kagnew personnel and land tracts, and any other actions which would reduce the size of the potential target.

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I. BACKGROUND

1. Fortunes of War: June 1967 to June 1969

During March, April and May of this year, the ELF has launched a number of impressive attacks both within Eritrea and outside the borders of Ethiopia. This new, higher degree of activism and effectiveness is all the more noteworthy because it follows a period of some eighteen months which marked a relative lull in the seven-year Eritrean war.

Roughly coincident with the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967, the IEG announced its first general amnesty for the rebels and commenced a program of stepped-up propaganda and mass appeals designed to foster the loyalty of the Eritrean people. It gave arms for self-defense to loyalist villagers, stepped up its own military and para-military offensive against the ELF, sought diplomatic agreements with the Sudan to end cross-border sanctuary for the insurgents, and described them in the public media as a foreign-directed subversive organization with pan-Arab aims.

By the fall of 1967 this new strategy, coupled with initial losses by the Arab states in wake of the debacle of the June War, seemed to be paying off handsomely for the IEG. There was a notable loss of ELF momentum, including some high-level defections to the Government and a shortage of rebel arms and ammunition, as Arab support temporarily dried up. This process seemed to continue through much of 1968, a year which saw the ELF on the defensive within Eritrea. On September 6-7 they suffered the humiliating loss of about 100 killed in a pitched battle with police commandos at Hal-Hal in remote northwestern Eritrea.

Some IEG officials were quick -- too quick, as events have proved -- to see in the spectacular Hal-Hal victory "the beginning of the end" of the ELF as an organized armed force. Within six months after Hal-Hal, the insurgents commenced a series of effective guerrilla attacks on Government installations; and today, only nine months after their heaviest single reverse in the war, the ELF is on the offensive, and has demonstrated its ability to strike selected targets using sophisticated guerrilla tactics more impressive than any used before in the seven-year history of the conflict.

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[Omitted here is information unrelated to the Horn.]

3. U.S. Policy Alternatives

In the face of these potential threats, which we can only very imperfectly gauge, what are the alternatives for U.S. policy? The following are the major different approaches that would be conceivable:

A. A "stand fast" policy at Kagnew. This would assume that the IEG can weather the storms of insurgency and give adequate protection to the station, or that, even if violence continues in Eritrea at its present level, the U.S. would be generally unaffected and/or unable to influence the course of events politically or militarily. At the same time, consideration would be given to some reductions of personnel and antenna-field space at Kagnew, looking ahead to the lease termination date of 1978 and based on the increasing technological obsolescence of certain types of communications ground tasks as satellite communications technology advances. The goal here would be to reduce the size of the target Kagnew presents, not only to possible hostile attack but also to political criticism by elements within the IEG who may come to power after Haile Selassie, and to demonstrate to the IEG that our stake in Kagnew is a limited one.

B. U.S. intervention in the war on the side of Ethiopia through open counter-insurgency training aimed at the rebels and other possible assistance. This would be a dangerous and possibly open-ended commitment which would invite rebel retaliation upon Kagnew and involve U.S. casualties in the field, with the prospect of widening rather than lessening the war and stimulating even greater increments of radical Arab and Soviet aid to the rebellion. We can continue a Military Assistance Program to Ethiopia as a whole, the benefits of which improve the Ethiopian ability to cope with the insurgency without running serious risks.

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C. U.S. diplomatic pressure on the IEG for a "political solution" of the troubles based on restoring a degree of internal autonomy to Eritrea. This advice would be most unwelcome to the Emperor, who seems determined to pursue a hard line with the ELF for reasons of prestige and vital Ethiopian interests. The IEG would see a return to the pre-1962 Federation as leaving a political vacuum along its Red Sea coast which Arab neighbors would try to fill (Nasser's commencement of the Yemen adventure in 1962 was one of the factors triggering HIM's annexation of Eritrea). Now that full independence is the goal of the ELF leadership, they would be unlikely to settle for anything less and the fighting would continue, though with a small net gain in popular support for the IEG for promising more autonomy.

With neither a military nor a political solution in sight, alternative A, above, is our present policy, with the addition that we now suggest commencing serious study of some reductions at Kagnew. Alternative B would be a dangerous and impractical course, and alternative C would not seem to accomplish a U.S. purpose, while dragging us deeply into Ethiopia's internal problems.

The sometimes expressed view that we can retain the U.S. presence in Eritrea under an ELF regime is not tenable. It is possible to conceive of an ELF takeover only in conditions which would render our continued day-to-day operations difficult at best, impossible at worst. An ELF regime, relying on Arab states for its retention of power and being to a marked degree their puppet with substantial direct and indirect support from the USSR and Communist China would not tolerate Kagnew Station.

We conclude that the best U.S. policy is one of (a) continued political and military non-interference in the Eritrean problem; (b) reductions in our profile at Kagnew as technology permits; and (c) continuation of our present or somewhat increased level of military assistance to the Ethiopian armed forces.

A final caveat should be added that developments in the Sudan over the next year may require a reevaluation of these forecasts and policy proposals.

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