

Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA)

March 8, 1993, Monday

A 'Quiet' Crisis Is Building in the Horn of Africa

BYLINE: Alma **Gottlieb**; Alma **Gottlieb**, a professor of anthropology and African studies at the University of Illinois, recently returned from a trip to Ethiopia. She is co-author with Philip Graham of "Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and A Writer Encounter Africa," to be published in April.

SECTION: OPINION; Pg. 19

LENGTH: 714 words

DOES the world have the capacity to deal with two crises in the Horn of Africa? In my hotel in Addis Ababa, the Somali peace negotiations occupied the visiting journalists, who filed stories on the progress in the cease-fire talks, interviewing the Somali clan delegates about their dissolving homeland. Yet in the country hosting those talks, a crisis unreported in the Western world is in the making.

Only weeks ago, the government violently broke up a demonstration by students at Addis Ababa University who were protesting United Nations sponsorship of the upcoming referendum on Eritrean independence. One of the ironies of the clash was that the current regime is staffed by officials who themselves participated in an earlier generation of student protests. When the brutal Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile-Mariam was overthrown in 1991, the new president, Meles Zenawi, and his associates pledged to institute a democratic government responsive to the needs of the people.

In the days that followed the student demonstration, the government claimed that one student was killed. But everyone I met, from shopkeepers to academics, asserted that between 17 and 19 students were killed and that dozens, perhaps hundreds, had head injuries caused by the weapon-wielding soldiers. In solidarity with the students, a group of university faculty members issued a statement demanding that certain conditions be met, among them the promise that soldiers be kept from the campus. The government's response was to close the university for an indefinite period. Students were given 24 hours to leave the campus.

Following the forced eviction, I saw dozens of the poorer students on the streets outside the university's iron gates. They had joined the lineup of beggars. Many people I spoke with were convinced that government officials had planned the military reaction against the demonstration. Even if they were wrong, the atmosphere has become charged with mistrust.

The growing consensus is that the new government is no better than its Marxist predecessor. "The only difference between the Mengistu regime and the current one," one man asserted, "is that this one is more clever at concealing its evil deeds. It speaks the right rhetoric of democracy and then commits the same human rights violations."

It is a two-pronged brutality: repression of those who challenge the government's own power, coupled with official indifference to the lives of the most powerless. Walking down the crowded streets of Addis Ababa, I glanced at a young woman sitting barefoot on the sidewalk. She extended her hand, and I reached into my pocket for a coin. Seated beside her, an infant, maybe six months old. Why was this young woman here? Perhaps her husband was killed in the civil war or by the famine. What was clear was that the village society, and the broader society that is Ethiopia, had abandoned her.

THE United States shares blame for the human misery that accompanies the increasing level of political repression. For many years Washington has made cruel use of Africa as a pawn in a geopolitical chess game with the former Soviet Union. Human rights abuses in nations supported by the former Soviets were justly denounced by Washington, while the same brutality practiced in nations judged to be "democratic" was politely ignored.

The disintegration of Somalia, Angola, Ethiopia, and other African countries are in large part an outcome of this cold-war policy, which dictated that we spend vast sums on military aid - guns now being used to terrorize innocent civilians and uproot village life - rather than on meaningful and appropriate development projects. Now that communism no longer shapes our foreign policy, it is time for Washington to do some soul-searching.

President Clinton is formulating plans for long-term economic development in the US. While he considers his domestic agenda to be his top priority, the world's poorest populations await his vision and policy innovations in the third world. Until this happens, we will continue to supply food and sometimes soldiers for the crisis of the moment, while doing nothing to avert the next catastrophe. And the world will be no closer to knowing the biographies of the next generation of beggars.