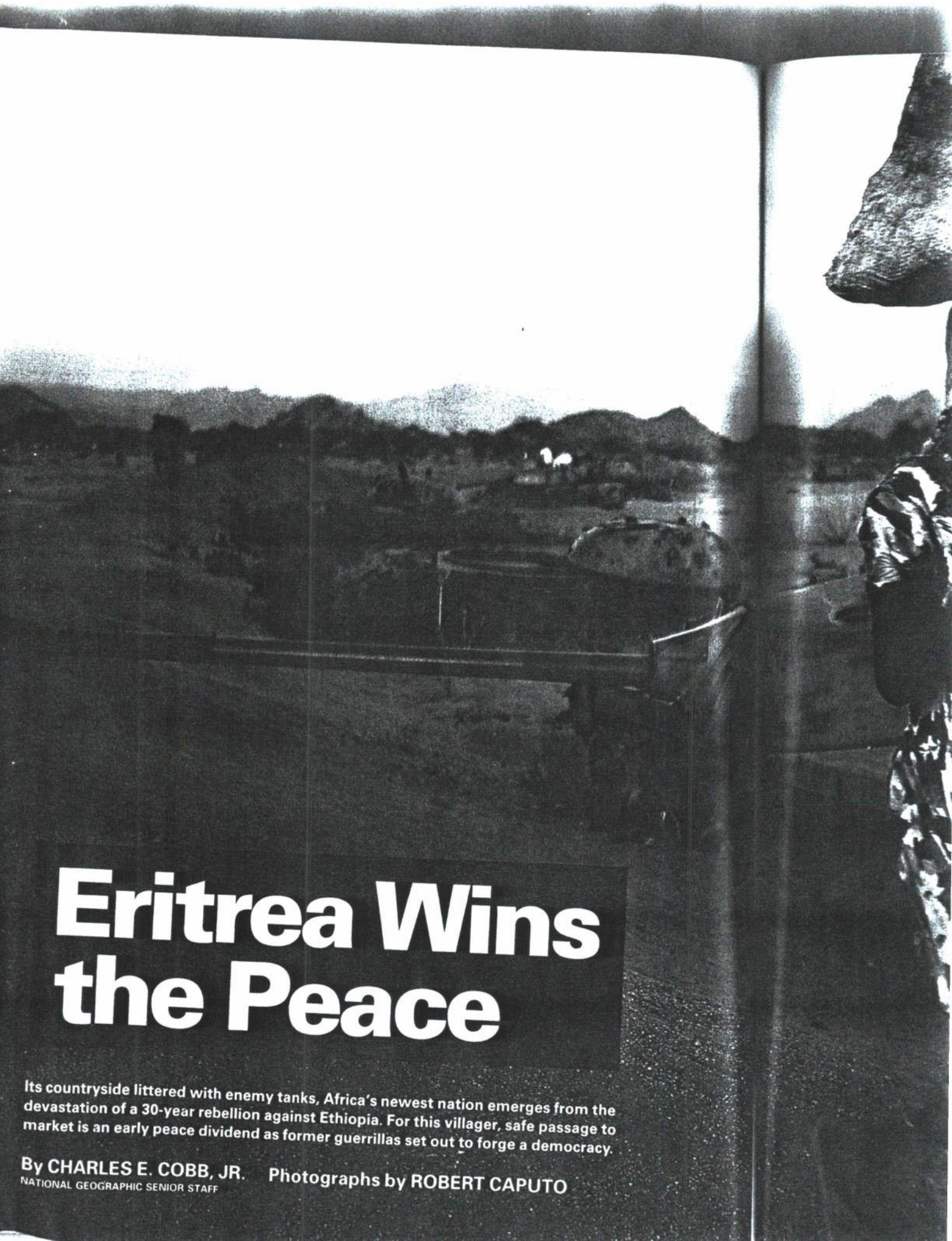
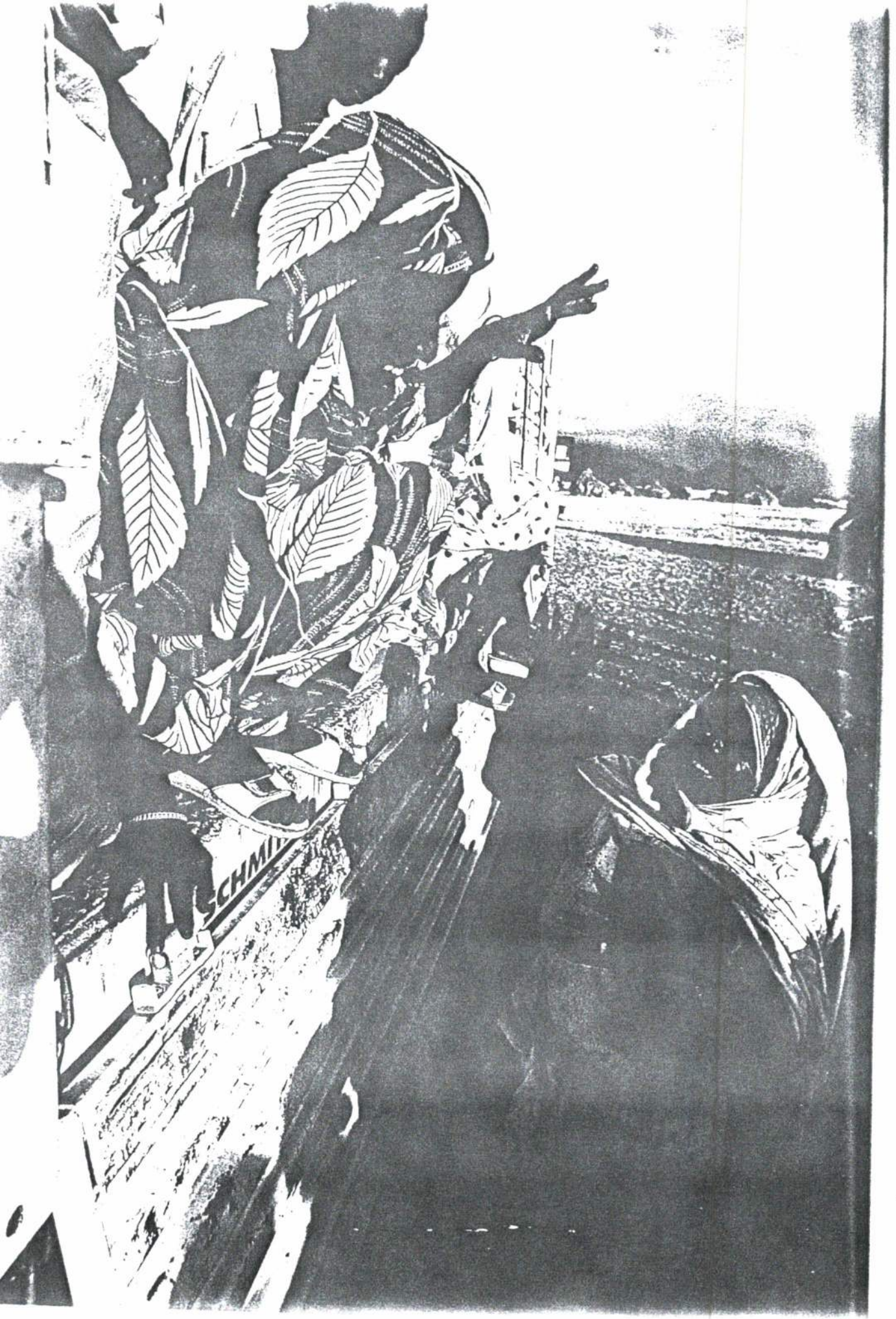


Eritrea Wins the Peace

Its countryside littered with enemy tanks, Africa's newest nation emerges from the devastation of a 30-year rebellion against Ethiopia. For this villager, safe passage to market is an early peace dividend as former guerrillas set out to forge a democracy.

By CHARLES E. COBB, JR.
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SENIOR STAFF

Photographs by ROBERT CAPUTO



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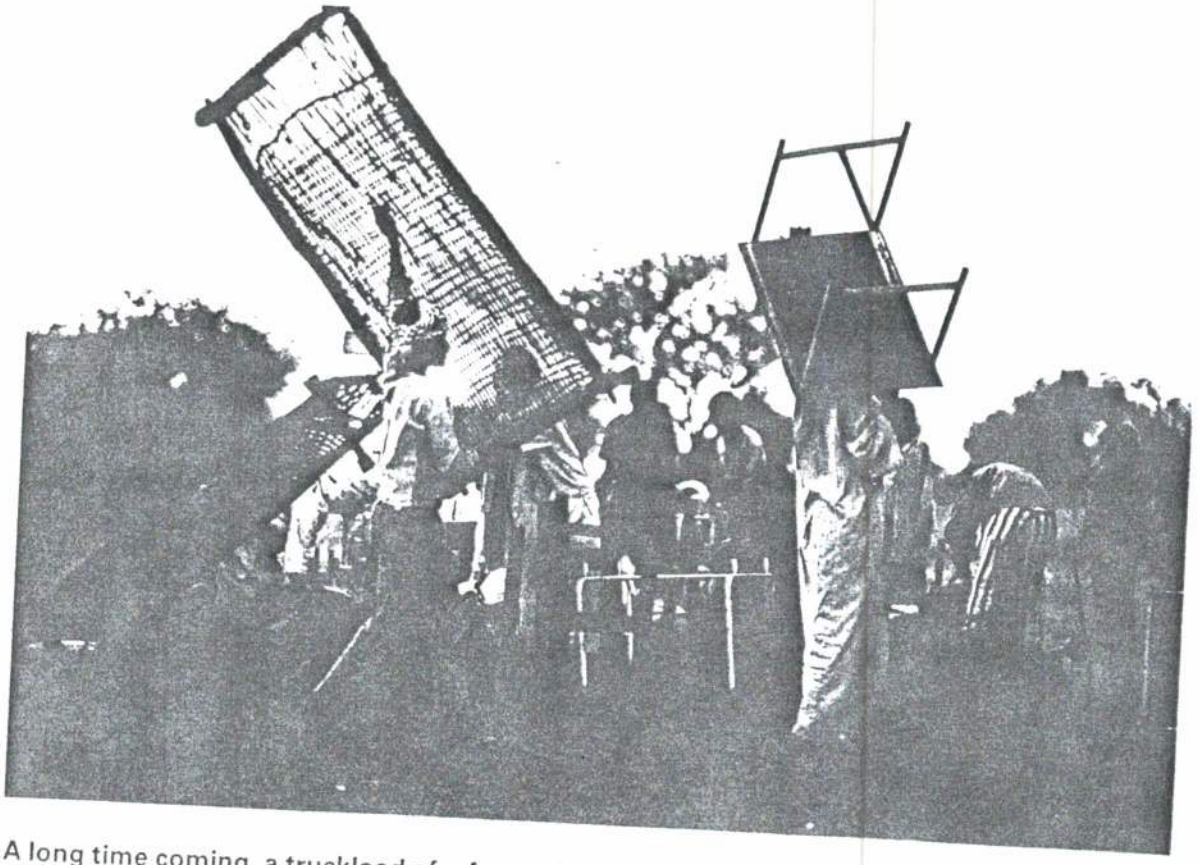


A long time coming, a truckload of refugees joyously return to Eritrea after years of languishing in camps in neighboring Sudan. By day's end they will have unloaded their sparse belongings (above) at a new government-built town in the arid western lowlands. Most of their home villages were too heavily damaged to allow return. Nearly a million Eritreans remain refugees or exiles following the continent's longest war in this century.

OUTSIDE NAKFA, a small town deep in the mountains of northern Eritrea, a stooped figure zigzags across a rocky field. It is dusk, and the sounds of children at play have died down. The man, who is wearing a tattered army fatigue jacket against the chill, stops abruptly to peer behind a thornbush before moving on again. "My cows, my cows," he wails. "The Ethiopians took my cows." Then he disappears into the gloom, his distraught words floating back on the breeze.

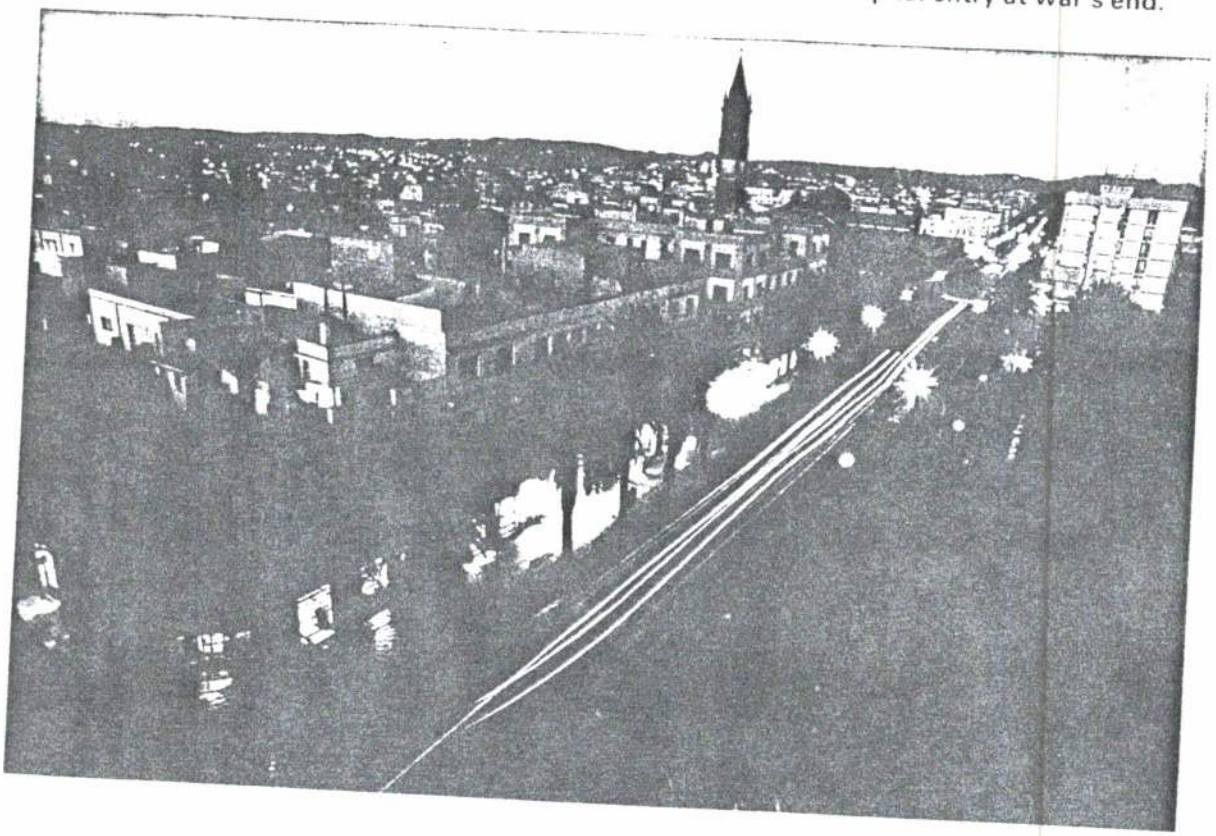
In rural Africa if you lose your cows, you lose your dignity. Or, as it was with Gerie, the man from Nakfa, your sanity. Years earlier Gerie had left home to join the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a guerrilla army fighting for independence for the Ethiopian province of Eritrea. When he returned, a lucky survivor, he found that his hometown had been pounded to rubble by Ethiopian air raids and artillery shelling. His house and all his worldly possessions, including his cows, were gone. The loss was more than Gerie could bear, and his mind snapped.

Eritrea's war with Ethiopia began in 1961 and dragged on for three decades—the longest fight for independence in modern African history. More than 150,000 Eritreans died, 60,000 of them guerrilla fighters, and hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians. What this means for Eritrea, a place the size of England and with only three million people, is that virtually every family lost someone to the war. Given the magnitude of the suffering, it would not be unreasonable to expect many Eritrean families to be mired in the daily anguish of men like Gerie.

But Gerie seems a remarkable exception. Eritreans are adjusting to the effects of war

ROBERT CAPUTO has covered stories throughout Africa for the GEOGRAPHIC, including "Tragedy Stalks the Horn of Africa" (August 1993), which he both photographed and wrote.

Palm-skirted Liberation Avenue blazes a path at dusk through the unharmed capital of Asmara, home to 400,000 people. Espresso bars and art deco facades recall the years – 1890 to 1941 – when Italy ruled Eritrea as a colony. During the Ethiopian occupation rebels declined to attack the crowded city and thus found it preserved for their triumphal entry at war's end.



with composure, veiling their hurt with gentle smiles and ironic understatement. And sometimes even with dancing.

I met Saleh Hamid, a former guerrilla, at Mai Habar, a rehabilitation center for disabled war veterans 30 miles southeast of Asmara, Eritrea's capital city. Strolling through the camp one afternoon, I heard music coming from one of the dun-colored tents where more than 2,000 ex-soldiers lived while they recovered from their injuries. Inside, some two dozen men and women were sitting on *tolish*—straw mats that double as beds—playing cards and drinking coffee, soda, and tea. A few women were weaving colorful baskets from dyed sisal fiber. It seemed a timeless African village, basking in the communal gaiety that follows a good harvest, except for the row of wooden limbs hanging on the tent wall in front of me.

Someone shouted—a whoop that filled the tent. It was Saleh Hamid, standing on his one leg, looking across at me and laughing. Saleh (in Eritrea the first name is the correct short form) leaned over and turned up the battered transistor radio, which was playing an Ethiopian pop song. He began dancing, twirling about the tent, using a crutch for support while springing around the floor.

Saleh too had fought for the EPLF. One day during an Ethiopian air attack near the port city of Massawa, his right leg was hit below the knee. The leg was amputated in an EPLF hospital in the mountain redoubt of Orota, where an artificial limb was made for him.

"Don't feel sorry," Saleh said emphatically. "I have gained my country. We have freedom now."

The roots of the war for freedom can be traced to the creation in 1890 of the Italian colony of Eritrea. Its arbitrarily drawn borders brought together nine ethnic groups, including the agricultural, mostly Christian Tigrinya, the animistic Kunama, and the Afar and other Muslim groups who now make up half the nation's population. Neighboring Ethiopia, a 2,000-year-old feudal "empire" dominated by the Christian Amhara, continued to press its claim to Eritrea, which offered an outlet to the Red Sea.

Border skirmishes have flared between former allies Sudan and Eritrea. Fundamentalist Islamic groups based in Sudan hope to destabilize Eritrea's secular state.

Red Sea rivalry

Roughly the size of England, Eritrea with 600 miles of coast takes its name from the Latin for Red Sea – Mare Erythraeum. War erupted in 1961 when Eritrea, loosely federated with Ethiopia, saw its autonomy threatened. Eager for sea access, Ethiopia was preparing to annex the northern enclave. Eritrea in victory allows Ethiopia use of its ports.

British rule replaced Italian during World War II, and in 1952 the United Nations, despite Eritrean calls for independence, made the colony an autonomous federated state within Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government immediately began whittling away at Eritrean identity, banning display of the Eritrean flag and requiring Eritreans to use Amharic, the official Ethiopian language. In 1961 a small group of Eritrean rebels armed with bolt-action rifles fired on an Ethiopian police post near Agordat in western Eritrea. The war had begun.

Emperor Haile Selassie's answer was to annex Eritrea as the 14th province of Ethiopia, dissolving the Eritrean parliament in Asmara. After Selassie's ouster by his military in 1974, torture and execution of Eritrean insurgents by Ethiopia's Stalinist rulers became routine, and the rebels' resistance grew stronger.

On May 24, 1991, EPLF forces marched into Asmara and took over Eritrea. It had been a lopsided war: One of Africa's largest mechanized armies, backed with billions of dollars' worth of sophisticated weaponry provided first by the United States and later by the Soviet Union, against go-it-alone Eritrea, whose fighters had to make do with weapons seized from the enemy. In April 1993, under UN supervision, Eritreans voted overwhelmingly for independence.

EVERYWHERE I WENT in Africa's newest nation, I encountered forms of Saleh Hamid's dance, even in towns and villages devastated by cluster bombs, mortar, and napalm. Rather than instilling bitterness and self-pity, this little nation's crusade has imbued Eritreans with consideration for one another and with self-reliance.

"We have accomplished a mission," Eritrea's president, Isaias Afwerki, told me in his sparsely furnished office in a drab government building in downtown Asmara. "Now there is another: constructing a nation from scratch." He paused. "We know we don't have the knowledge. We know we don't have the resources. We know we don't have the experience. Our conclusion is: Let's face it."

A Healing Land

Wrapped in a traditional shawl, or *gabbi*, an elder from Adi Hawesha savors his walk home past the year's cut of fodder for village livestock. Too often fields yield little in a region prone to drought and insect plagues. To the natural perils are now

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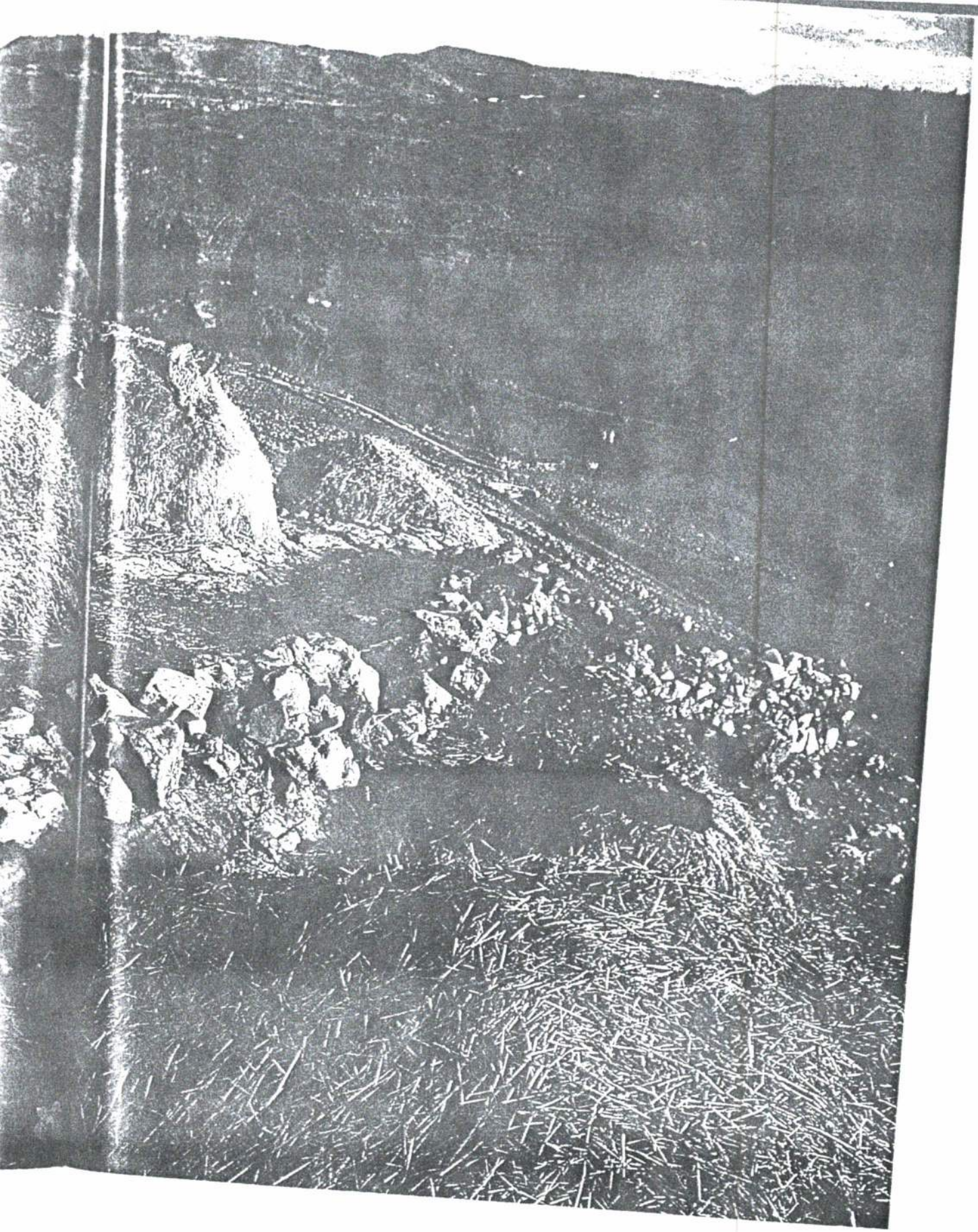


added the scourges of war: land mines, stripped-away forests, fields slashed by trenches. Undaunted, the new government has dispatched students and soldiers to repair the countryside. Vows one official: "*Everyone* will participate in the work of independence."

Isaias, a former engineering student, has spent 29 of his 50 years with the EPLF, guiding the movement through its transition from Marxist ideology to pragmatic nationalism. Wearing plastic sandals and an open-collared shirt, he projects a nonchalance that belies the difficulty of his mission.

"A homegrown Eritrean" was how a schoolmate described Isaias to me. "He is setting an example, which is really not the case in most of Africa."

For a start President Isaias turned down the official palace for a brick house in the middle-class neighborhood of Gejeret. He drives a 1991 Toyota. And like the other ex-rebels in the government, who hold the majority of senior positions, Isaias drew a stipend of only 125 birr ($20 U.S.) a month until July 1995, when his salary was set at 5,000 birr a month. Such self-sacrifice helps explain why U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher observed that Eritrea offers new hope for the Horn of Africa.

The human machine does all the work at threshing time on a remote highland plot. One side rests while the other pounds away at stalks to separate grains of sorghum, a staple for making bread and porridge. For years many fields went untended, leading to periods of famine. Even as rural areas revive, Eritrea depends on foreign aid for at least one-third of its food.

THE HORN OF AFRICA is stingy ground—not the stuff of breadbaskets. The western part of Eritrea is a parched lowland; in the south extinct volcanoes rise over expanses of lava. Much of the rest of the country is mountainous. The climate often betrays hope: Severe droughts periodically blister the region, and swarms of locusts devastate crops of corn, wheat, and lentils. During the war Ethiopian soldiers felled trees to deprive the EPLF of wood to conceal and fortify their network of trenches. Because of this—and constant cutting for fuel and housing by Eritreans themselves—erosion gullies scar the land where eucalyptus and acacia trees once grew.

The economic landscape is no less stark. Eritreans have a per capita income of less than $150, well below the $350 average for sub-Saharan Africa. The country's awkward shape hinders transportation; there is only one paved road in the long eastern panhandle. By the government's reckoning, repairing the war damage—including building houses, schools, hospitals, and roads—will take two billion dollars. The United States provided about 20 million dollars in economic assistance in 1995.

Skilled labor is scarce, and demobilizing some 50,000 guerrillas is a further drain. Eritrea's population is growing by 3.5 percent a year—one of the highest rates in Africa—and nearly half a million war refugees, most in Sudan, await repatriation. A further threat to progress comes from AIDS.

As Eritreans often said to me, "We are starting from below zero."

It was on the dusty outskirts of the 16th-century port city of Massawa where I began to appreciate the energy and ambition that freedom has unleashed in Eritrea. Tewelde Andu, the mayor, had taken me to see a work in progress—the rebuilding of the narrow-gauge railroad that once snaked down the fog-shrouded Arborobu escarpment from Asmara to the Red Sea coast. Before its destruction in the war, the railroad had been a vital, if antiquated, artery for goods flowing to and from the interior.

I watched a crew of about 20 men, all volunteers, pulling up corroded, twisted rails with

crowbars and shoveling rocks into wheelbarrows. They paused only to share swigs from one of their water bottles.

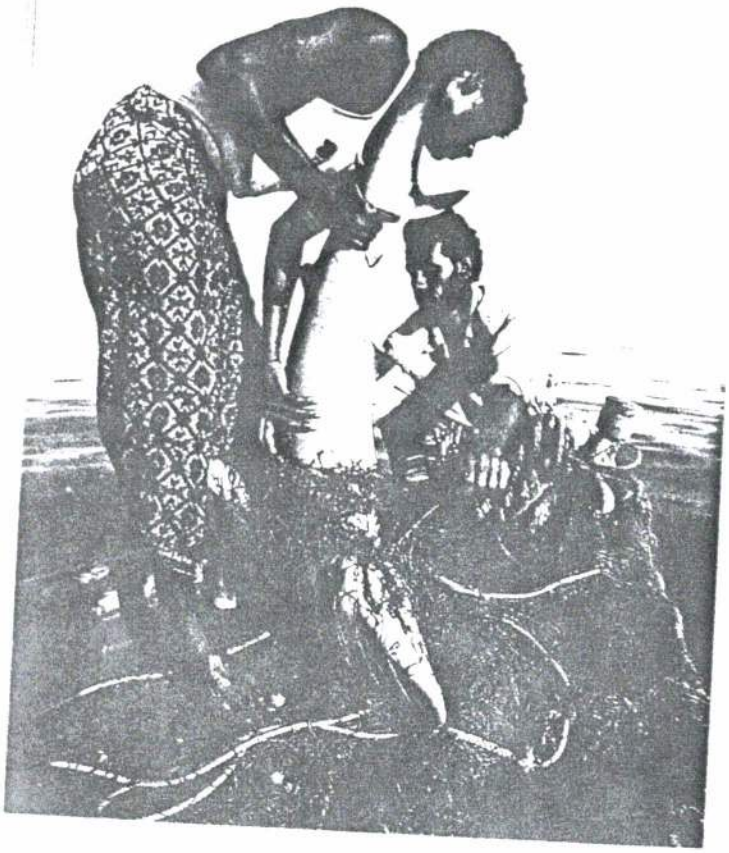
They had laid five miles of track, allowing trains to carry commuters between the port and the northern outskirts of the city. Meanwhile Asmara was 60 miles away—and up. Looking across the sweltering desert plain toward the distant mountains, I wondered how a few volunteers with hand tools could possibly complete the railroad.

Tewelde, as if reading my mind, acknowledged the magnitude of the task. "The Italian engineers we consulted said it was too costly," he said. "Maybe so, in the way they think, but we have unlimited determination. Come and see. In two years you will be able to ride from Asmara."

He yelled a greeting to one of the volunteers, a big man wearing an NFL T-shirt and plastic sandals. "Meet Giorgis Tesfamikael," Tewelde said, as the man came over, wiping dust and sweat from his face with a white handkerchief. "Giorgis is our minister of transportation." I shook Giorgis's toughened hand and expressed surprise at finding a minister of state in a work gang.

"Let them see that people in Africa do their own jobs," he shot back. "It's not all the time we ask for help."

Eritreans may not like asking for handouts, but judging from the condition of Massawa, help is clearly needed. Thirty years ago Massawa was a prosperous city of 80,000; today it has only 20,000 residents. When Ethiopia's defeated soldiers fled in 1990, they looted all the banks, and for ten months Ethiopian aircraft pummeled the city, gutting many of its grand old houses. The Imperial Palace overlooking the sea, used by Haile Selassie as a



Working a sea of plenty, fishermen net a shark off the Dahlak islands. The catch goes to Yemen for coveted shark-fin soup. Though the Red Sea is Eritrea's richest potential resource, citizens show little taste for fish, something a national promotion hopes to remedy. For economic growth Eritrea must rely on leftovers – Italian-built factories that date from when Eritrea was a successful trading state. At a reopened plant in Asmara, women turn out shoes as blue as the sea.

winter retreat, had been a splendid structure, with mahogany paneling, marble floors, and cornices trimmed with gold leaf. Now it's a mess of iron and brick, with pigeons roosting on exposed beams and daylight pouring in through a hole in the dome.

In the old quarter I walked past once gracious houses built out of pink coral rock and shaded by palm and eucalyptus trees. Many had gone up during the Ottoman era, from the mid-16th to the mid-19th centuries, and although scarred by napalm and tracer bullets, they recall Massawa's days as "the pearl of the Red Sea." Arched passageways and streets barely wide enough for a donkey and cart lend mystery to Eritrea's oldest city, built at the hub of trade routes that linked Egypt and Greece before the birth of Christ.

COMMERCE is the goal of Dessu Tesfazion, general manager of the Red Sea Trading Corporation, headquartered in a nondescript concrete house set back from a quiet side street in Asmara. At first I thought I'd come to the wrong place. The languid, casually dressed young men on the porch didn't look like businessmen, but one of them said, yes, this was Red Sea Trading, and sent me up to the second floor.

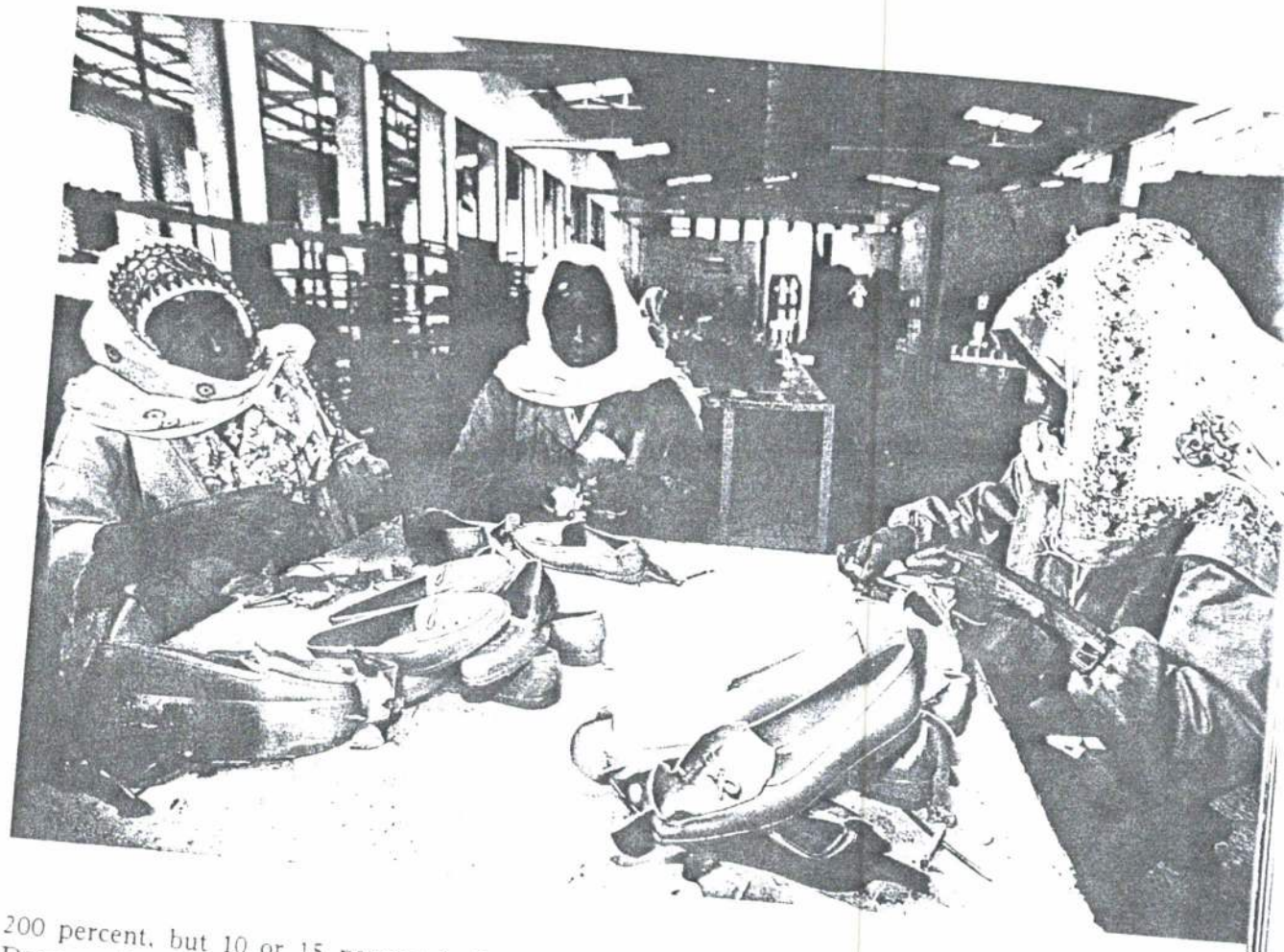
Dessu, a youthful man of 50 wearing blue jeans, handed me his business card. The company logo is the prow of a cargo boat inside the circle of the numeral 9. "*Bado Tshiate*," Dessu said, pointing to the number. "It means Zero Nine. We will never lose the name."

Zero Nine (nine for the number of ethnic groups in Eritrea) was formed in 1974 as an EPLF hit squad, whose job was to do whatever it could to undermine Ethiopia's war effort. The squad's first victims were two Ethiopian colonels, shot in downtown Asmara. Of Zero Nine's 14 original members, four, including Dessu, survived the war.

As the war intensified, Dessu explained, and shortages of basics such as milk, grain, salt, and butter became acute, the squad turned to shopkeeping and trade, which also provided cover for military activities. "I had a small shop," he said. "I looked like any salesman, with cloth, tins of biscuits, and flour on my shelf." Soon they were importing scarce commodities from Yemen and Saudi Arabia; with the profits the squad members bought trucks and a boat.

From these beginnings emerged Eritrea's most powerful trading company. Today Red Sea Trading Corporation is Eritrea's largest exporter of sesame seed and gum arabic. Imports range from TV sets to cement. The company has 20 million dollars in the bank in a country whose entire economic output amounts to 300 million dollars a year. Dessu hopes to open offices in London and Washington, D.C. But profits are not everything, he said; freedom is not a license to exploit. In 1994, when sellers inflated the price of cement, Red Sea Trading reined them in by offering its cement at a markup of only 10 percent.

"Those merchants wanted a profit of 100,



200 percent, but 10 or 15 percent is fine," Dessu said. "We're not socialists, but our profit is to help the people. This is not government price setting. Of course, we are close to the government."

That a country with deep roots in the political left officially advocates free-market economics seems incongruous, but Eritreans are above all a practical people. "Inefficiency and bureaucracy are the problems of government-run companies," said Hagos Ghebrehiwet, who heads the economics division of the political party born of the EPLF. "We have to make things happen, make a difference and change lives."

IF ERITREANS are long on will, they remain short on expertise. There are, however, small signs of progress. At Winna Technical School in the highlands north of Nakfa, the machine shops that turned out bullets during the war are recycling brass and steel shell casings into rods to reinforce concrete. Winna's 120 students will graduate from the three-year program with the skills to run their own machine shops or garages, become carpenters, or teach in trade schools.

Meanwhile a million or so Eritreans exiled by the war, many of them highly educated and with diverse talents, are scattered across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Few have come home.

"I came thinking of medicine," said Mekonnen Asmerom, an expatriate who returned in 1991, "but I saw that the real problem was housing. For the moment it's the biggest problem in Eritrea." Mekonnen, a 37-year-old whose family emigrated to Italy when he was 17, trained there as a doctor specializing in infectious and tropical diseases. He came back "because I wanted to do something that could really help the country."

I met Mekonnen by chance one afternoon as I drove past a tank graveyard on the western edge of Asmara. A sign caught my eye: SPACE 2001 ERITREA. A man operating a cement mixer ushered me to the boss's office, a modest building made of reddish adobe brick. Mekonnen, who founded and runs the homebuilding enterprise, has a 30 percent stake. The rest is owned by the city of Asmara, an Eritrean charity called the Children of Martyrs, and a Belgian company, all of which helped finance start-up of the business.

A two- or three-bedroom house with veranda, carport, and fenced yard sells for $10,000 to $15,000—a moderate price in Eritrea. Mekonnen has built 20 models, and demand has forced him to nearly double his original production goal of 300 houses a year. The design is especially popular among returning young professionals with families. "Look," Mekonnen said, "they can take lower salaries, but if they're used to suburbs in California, especially the children, they won't accept to squeeze into one room."

Last year Mekonnen hired a general manager, which means he can go back to being a doctor. When I next visit Eritrea, I'll look for him in downtown Asmara, in one of the smart new office buildings that seem to be sprouting all over the city.

AS THE NERVE CENTER of Ethiopian communications in Eritrea, Asmara came through the bombing almost unscathed. For their part the EPLF forces, which generally avoided attacks on urban areas and in any case did not want their future capital in ruins, limited their attacks on Asmara to sporadic ambushes.

Asmara impressed me as frozen in time, a blend of faded Italian flavors and traditional African life. Battered Fiat taxis and Vespa scooters share broad, palm-lined streets with donkey-drawn *arebias*—small carts used to haul wood, farm produce, or passengers. At 7,600 feet above the sea, the city is dry and cool, perfect for walking—and many do, window-shopping or browsing in the scores of boutiques that front the narrow streets. These streets are invariably tidy, and beggars are nowhere to be seen.

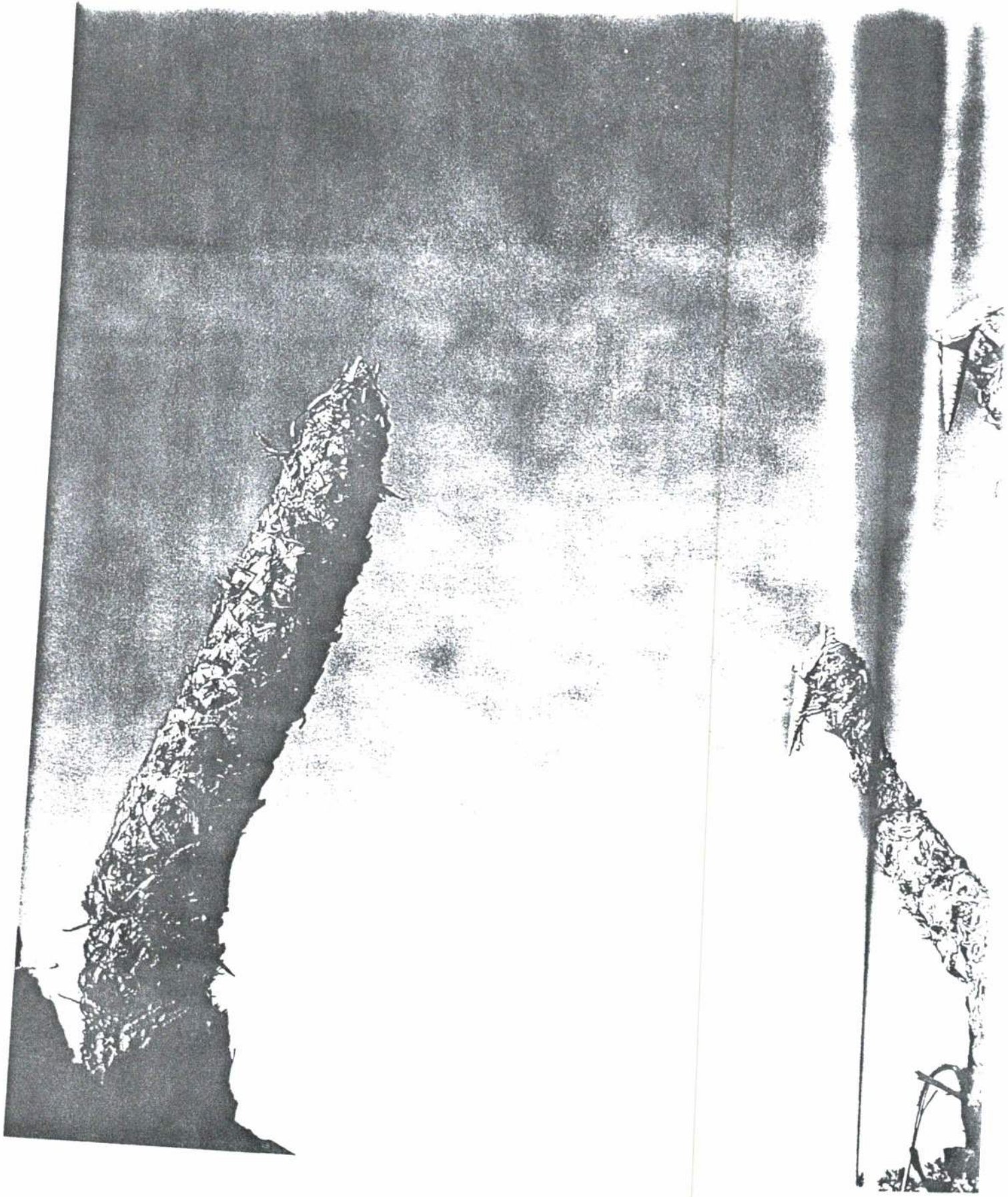
Eritreans themselves seem surprised by the changelessness of Asmara. "I never thought these same cafés would be here," said Mesfin Yoseph, raising his voice above the hiss of a cappuccino machine in the Bar Royal on Liberation Avenue. Home on a visit from Los Angeles, where he works for a real estate company, Mesfin is thinking about moving back to Eritrea after 26 years in the U.S.

That Eritrea is still something of a blank slate can be seen as an asset, says Sebhat Ephrem, formerly the field commander of the guerrilla forces, later administrator of Asmara Province, and now Eritrea's minister of defense. He believes Asmara has an advantage over African cities like Tanzania's Dar es Salaam, which have grown explosively in recent decades. "They are faced with the question of curing major problems. Here it's a question of preventing them."

Slowing the spread of AIDS is at the top of the list, "lest the liberation gained through sacrifice is aborted," Sebhat says. In 1994 it was estimated there were 60,000 carriers of the virus in Eritrea, most of them young adults, and of the 1,700 AIDS cases reported so far, 80 percent were in Asmara.

The city's population, now 400,000, is growing fast enough that containing urban growth—and the attendant ills of inferior housing, traffic congestion, crime, and pollution—is also becoming an issue. An uncounted number of Eritreans live in a slum called Abba Shawul near the *idaga*, the bustling market in the heart of Asmara. Yet even in Abba Shawul I felt none of the anger and alienation that

Hard-schooled on the battlefield, wounded veterans now test themselves in a classroom at Denden Camp in Asmara. "They're treated like heroes," reports photographer Bob Caputo. "Villagers bring food and gifts. They realize the debt society owes the fighters." Outside Afabet, broken bones of tanks and trucks (bottom) memorialize the rebels' greatest victory. In this narrow ravine, fighters trapped and disabled an enemy convoy—and with seized weapons forced the Ethiopian Army into a decisive retreat.



Desert Savvy

Under a torrid, cloud-forsaken sky, Arabo Mohammed tends to his thirst, collecting cones full of palm sap, out of which he'll make a sweet wine. Migrating between water holes on the dry eastern panhandle, Arabo belongs to the Afar

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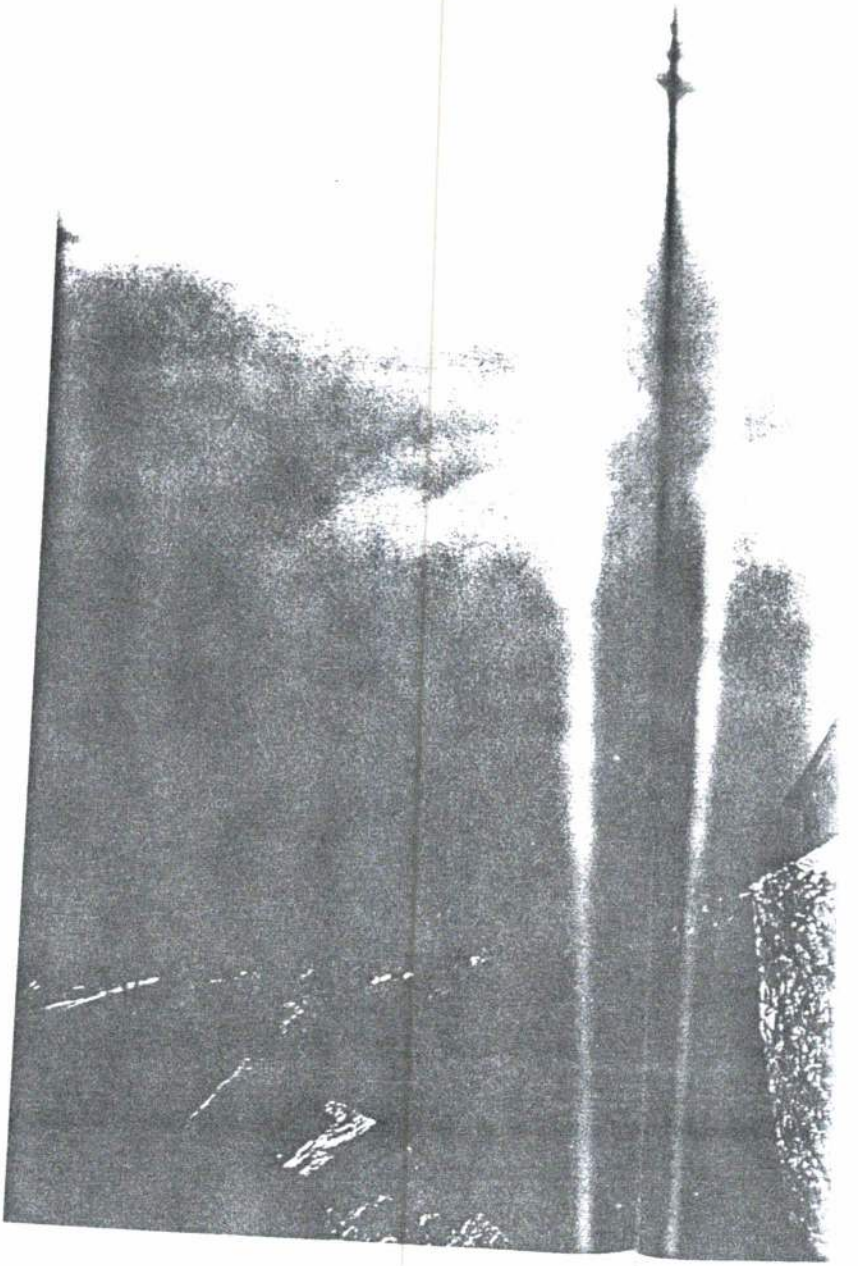
tribe, an Islamic people of mostly semi-nomadic camel and goat herders and one of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups. To guard against the tribal divisions that lacerate most African states, Eritreans discourage political parties based on ethnic or religious af[illegible]



The outer world scarcely exists for inhabitants of the mountaintop Bizen Monastery. Coptic monks live here in austere isolation, their days given to prayer, penance, and teaching acolytes to chant in the ancient liturgical language of Geez. The monks could not transcend the war though. Both armies used the cliff as an occasional lookout.

usually surround such places. If the wood seller who rents a room in a tiny crumbling house with a roof held down by rocks and branches is typical, most people see it as a way station. "This is not for always," he said. "Now we have opportunity."

Indeed Asmara is alive with entrepreneurial energy, as new money flows in and apartments, restaurants, and shops open. You can now test-drive a Mercedes-Benz at a local auto dealership. Initially foreign and domestic investment was expected to create 30,000 new jobs, thereby lowering the nation's high unemployment rate. Jobless Eritreans survive by virtue of a traditional safety net—the extended family system.

Danny Dafla, an ex-guerrilla who started a small graphics firm in a house near Asmara University, hopes the new consumerism will not erode Eritrean idealism. "The war was perfect," said Danny, who joined the EPLF at 14. ("My rifle was larger than me.") "You really wanted to give yourself for everyone. No exchange of anything except love."

The Ministry of Tourism recently commissioned Danny to design a promotional magazine. He is excited about the prospect of making some money but clings to the wartime ideal of self-sacrifice. "If we can hold enough of it," he said, "miracles can be done."

IN THE EPLF'S seemingly miraculous battle against the odds, women fought alongside men. In fact, by the end of the war women made up nearly a third of the entire fighting force. Now, by law, women in Eritrea have equal property rights—unusual in much of Africa today. They also have rights to their children in divorce, and forced marriages are banned.

Yet the clasp of tradition has only been loosened, as Abeba Habtom knows. Abeba, an official with the Ministry of Education in Asmara, still wears her hair in the closely cropped style of the EPLF guerrillas. "I'm 42 years old," she said. "My husband's relatives, and mine too, wouldn't mind if we got a divorce and he married a younger woman."

Abeba is childless in a society in which married women without children are considered failures. She attributes her inability to get pregnant to the lingering stress of combat. "I have been in the field all this time, and anyway there are children we can adopt. But they don't see it that way." The divorce rate among former guerrillas is reportedly high, but her husband has stood by her despite his family's disapproval. "He has understanding and depth," Abeba said.

Unlike Abeba, who is part of the urban elite, at least 80 percent of Eritrean women are

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illiterate villagers. Tzighe Gebrekristos, whom I met in Embaderho north of Asmara, is 30 years old and tired. After a land mine killed her husband, her brother-in-law became the absentee owner of their plot, so she must now work the land as well as raise four young children, two boys and two girls.

The last thing Tzighe wants is for the boys to be farmers—in her mind that's condemning them to poverty. "I want them to be office men." And the girls? "I need them only to get married and give birth. That is our culture, so we cannot go out from our culture. Girls are born to marry."

"If you want real change," said Fozia Hashim, who is Eritrea's justice minister (one of two female ministers in the new government), "you can't say, 'here's a five-year plan.' You can have a plan for building houses and roads, but changing the mind of a person is not made by calculations like that."

In the calculus of change, fashioning a stable, secular democracy—an entirely new idea in Eritrea—requires drafting a constitution, formulating the legal basis of political parties, and holding elections. The goal is to do all this by 1997. Until then the EPLF will remain in power as the renamed People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ.

"I'm for a bill of rights and checks and balances," said Bereket Habte Selassie, an Eritrean who was once Ethiopia's attorney general and now heads Eritrea's constitutional commission, a group of 50 people appointed

by the transitional government. "There are many questions. Do we want a parliamentary system like the British? Or a U.S. model? It will be controversial. One of the problems I see in African countries is they took so-called 'models' and used them without change."

The commission aims to draft a truly democratic constitution and is holding meetings in towns and villages throughout Eritrea, soliciting ideas directly from the people. It's a challenge. In the dirt-poor villages where most Eritreans live, the abiding worry is not the brightness of the political future but whether the clouds have rain in them.

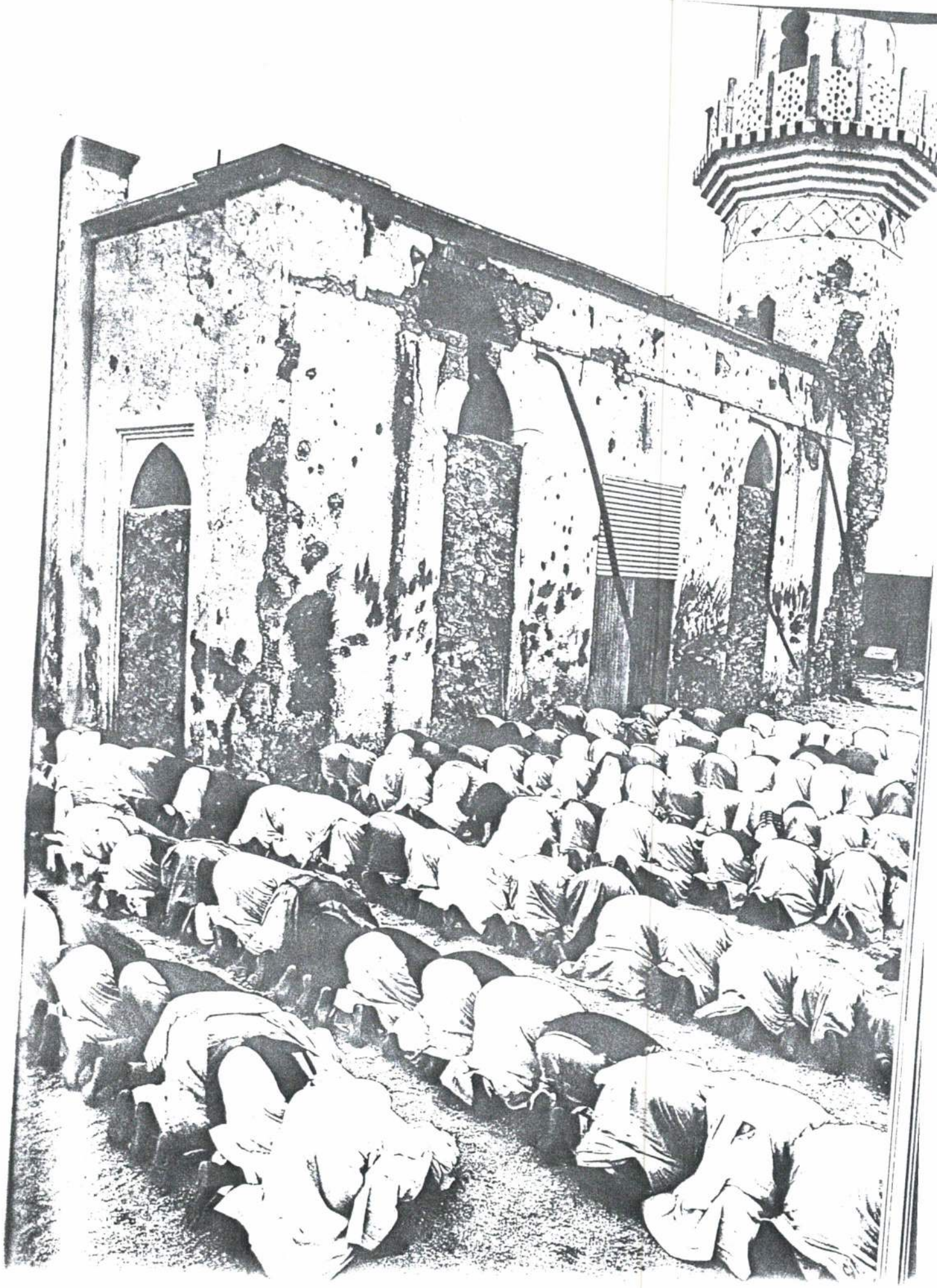
IF HARD WORK were the only requirement, Eritreans like Mikele Tasfaledet would be rich. The first time I visited Mikele, a well-muscled man of 61, he was laboring with two oxen to turn the sun-hardened earth outside Embaderho. *"Hone! Hone!"* he shouted, urging them forward. *"Haba!"* he yelled, leaning left or right to turn them in the direction he wanted. Behind the plow a young boy from the village scattered dried manure on the 30-by-50-foot plot. Mikele has three other plots of about the same size, which he plants with cabbages, potatoes, wheat, and millet. "We can grow to eat," he said, "but not to get the money we need. It's not enough."

Mikele, who has a family of five to feed, was better off before 1978, when the Ethiopian soldiers forced him to flee. Then he had four oxen and a truck, and he sold cloth and surplus grain from a shop in his house. "I'm starting all over," he said.

One morning nine months later, I visited Mikele again. Inside his *hudmo*, a rectangular house of fitted stones typical of the central highlands, the walls were bare, and the dirt floor was as hard as baked earth. A hole in the thatch roof served as a skylight. It let in so little light that the two wooden doors at the front of the house were kept open, allowing four cows and various chickens to join us as we perched on low wooden stools, talking and drinking rich cardamom-flavored coffee.

Mikele's 19-year-old daughter, Nazreth,

Ranks of the faithful pray at a battered mosque, the sole building left standing in the town of Nakfa at war's end. Ethiopian pilots used its minaret as a sighting point for bomb drops. The Muslim half of Eritrea's population lives mostly in the lowlands, many of them herders. The Christian half is concentrated on farms in the highlands, the site of such shrines as Mariam Darit (below), built into a baobab tree near Keren.



sat on a bed, a platform of dried mud, readying herself for the six-mile walk to school. Nazreth was a ninth grader. Her schooling, like that of so many Eritrean teenagers, had been held up by the war. Mikele's wife, Tukabu, was baking *taita*—a slightly sour, pancake-like bread—on a charcoal fire.

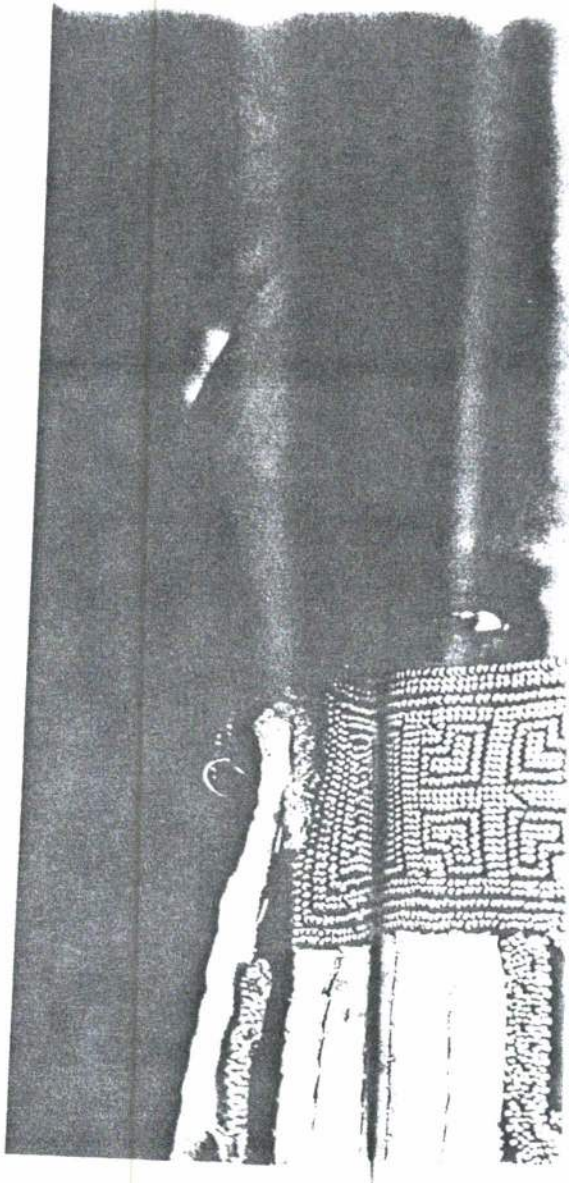
The crops are good this year, Mikele said. "We're going to collect enough grain to last us for at least half a year." The vegetables had done well too; he had been able to sell some beans and cabbages in Asmara. But one good season has not turned him into an optimist. "We're doubtful we'll have enough rain next year," he said. "We're always doubtful."

A HUNDRED MILES west of Embaderho, in Gash Barka, a low, dry region along the border with Sudan, Samir Gebreselassie beamed at me from a sea of cotton. This is Aligidir, a plantation established by the Italians in the 1920s, abandoned during the war, and now coming back to life. Samir is one of 2,300 former fighters and refugees who have taken up an offer from the Eritrean government: five acres of land, free and clear, to be planted with cotton, with two more acres for sorghum after a successful first year.

"I never expected to own land," she told me. "It feels very good. I was not expecting to be alive."

Each settler also receives $1,500 in start-up money as well as training programs and free use of tractors, excavators, and other heavy equipment. There are compelling reasons for this largesse. The textile factories in Asmara depend heavily on cotton from Aligidir, which is by far the largest domestic producer. And by promoting the tense border region as a land of opportunity, the government hopes to counter efforts by the Eritrean Islamic Jihad to subvert the area's mostly Muslim population. Allied with armed Islamic fundamentalists from other countries, Eritreans opposed to the nation's commitment to remain a secular state have been infiltrating from Sudan and attacking villages. A number of Eritreans have been killed.

Aligidir is divided into three 9,000-acre sections; less than half the available land has been taken. Lack of water is the big problem. The nearby Gash River runs through the plantation but is dry most of the year, and the area's sole reservoir holds only enough water to irrigate 11,000 acres.

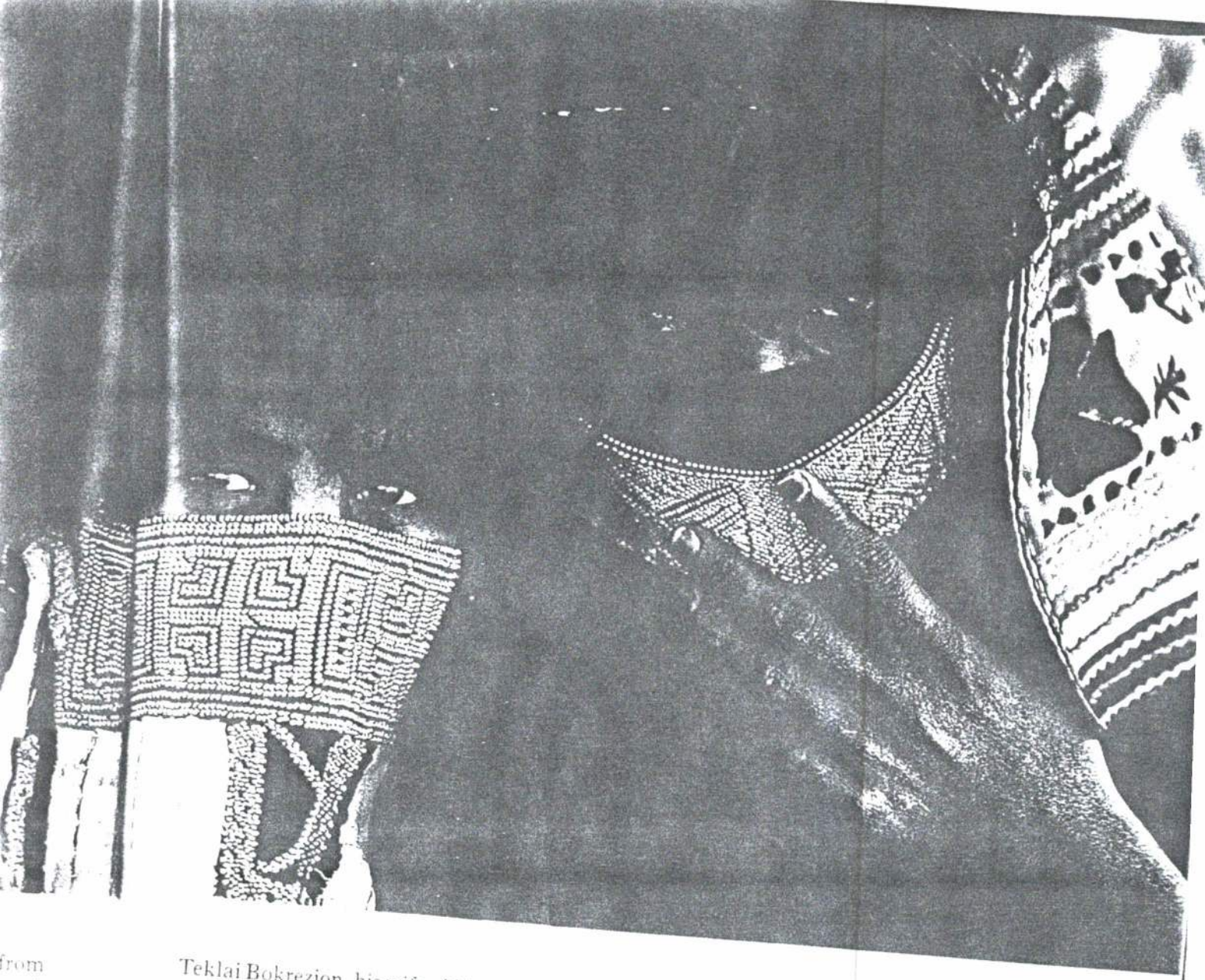


Unveiled curiosity lights up the eyes of two Rashaida women, their fancy beadwork belying the drab duties of goatherding. New laws guaranteeing sexual equality—the right of women to divorce, to vote, and to acquire land—promise to shake up traditional culture. "In places it was once hard to see women," says a student returning from abroad. "They were restricted to the house. Now I see them building roads, talking in meetings. Amazing."

"I was not expecting to get something from this," Samir said, running her fingers through the dry, powdery soil. "There was a time I was afraid of this land." But the cotton has done so well that Samir must hire laborers to help her pick it all. "Now we are getting bigger and bigger," she said proudly, looking into the pouch of her apron, filled with fat puffs of cotton.

NOT FAR FROM ALIGIDIR, in the village of Tessenei, are two long sheds that serve as a reception center for refugees coming home from Sudan. Within 24 hours the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission whisks each family to its chosen destination.

On a blistering day in December I climbed aboard one of the 12 UN trucks that were carrying some 200 families and their meager belongings. I squeezed into the space occupied by

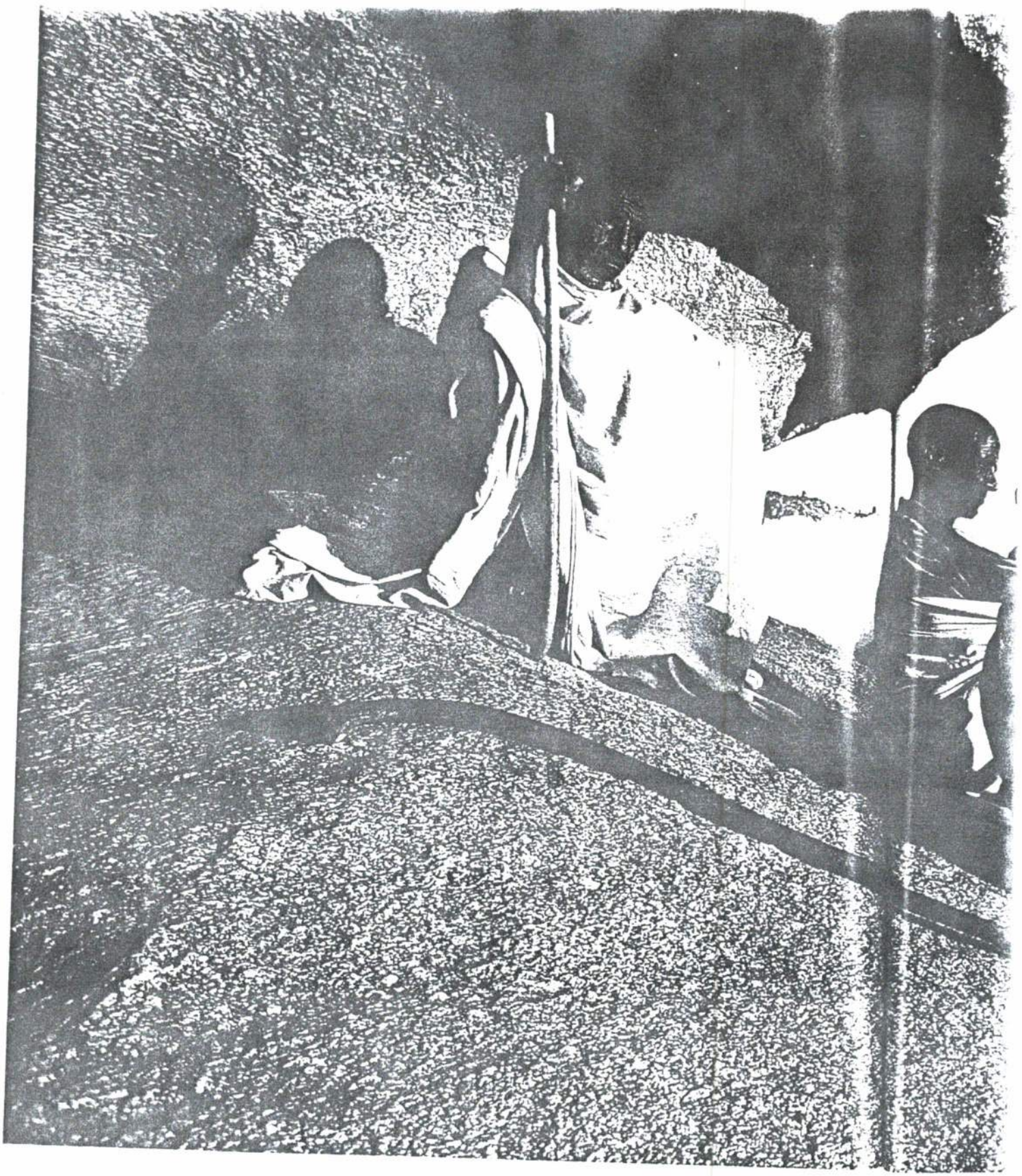


Teklai Bokrezion, his wife, Akberet, and their three children. Dust swirling, the truck lurched eastward from the Sudanese border. On the short ride to the reception center the air was thick with anticipation, and hardly a word was spoken.

We gathered in the meal shed for a dinner of taita and vegetables prepared by volunteers, and I asked Teklai about his plans. He said he would not be going home to Himbirti, his village near Asmara, because he'd heard it had grown beyond recognition. His choice was a new village, Alebu, built by the Eritrean Relief group a few miles from Tessenei. "I don't know my home anymore," Teklai said. "Here I know there is land."

By nine the next morning we were in Alebu, not so much a village with a recognizable center as row after row of circular grass huts—500 in all. Less than a third of them had been taken. After much pacing, Teklai settled on a hut that appeared to my untrained eye indistinguishable from the others but that Teklai calculated had the most surrounding land, an irregular plot of no more than a third of an acre. Soon the hut's walls and ceiling would be braced with wetwar, long tree branches he had carried with him from Sudan for the purpose.

Although the countryside had no irrigation yet, two hand pumps in the village suggested a reliable water supply. A large rectangular hut would serve as a clinic. A school was planned. Teklai reckoned he should be able to grow enough crops to sell the surplus. Eventually, if all went well, he would open a small general store. "Everything that is good requires that you build slowly," Akberet said. Teklai nodded in agreement. "If you work, you will get more," he said, and I heard Eritrea speaking.



Heightened Prospects

Meditating on the sunset from an outcrop above Debre Sina, village elders look across a land freed from the storms of war. With elections in view and an ambitious reconstruction plan in place, Eritrea hopes to play a calming role in the

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tempestuous Horn of Africa region. "It will be a very hard road," says a foreign observer, noting that Eritrea remains one of the world's poorest nations. "But this is a country that won a war on its own, against all odds. Nothing is impossible."