

# Eritrea: African Success Story Being Written

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By JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr.

ASMARA, Eritrea, April 28 — On the outskirts of this lovely Italianate capital, the Government recently built an unusual steel plant. There is no iron ore nearby. Instead, former rebel soldiers are melting down the Ethiopian tanks once used to crush them, and turning them into construction girders.

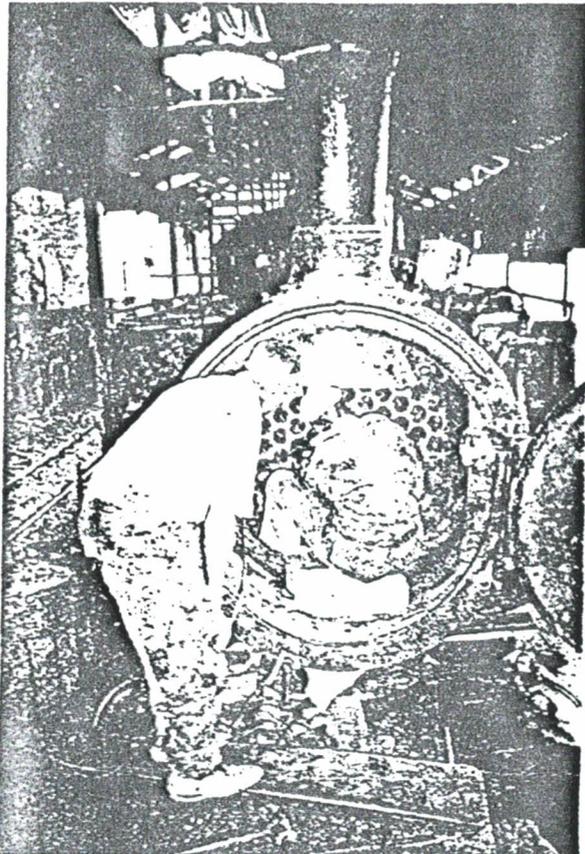
The plant, called Orot, is the namesake of a military base run by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, where, cut off from international help, rebels made bullets and spare weapons from scrap during the 30-year war against Ethiopia. The officer who oversaw that short-string operation is now in charge of beating battle debris, if not into plowshares, into badly needed construction material.

"It's a pleasure to be making something for peace," said the former officer, Tekeste Ghebre-Egziabher. "It was only a matter of time."

Five years after winning the war that led to independence, former Eritrean rebels are rebuilding their shattered country with the same tenacity and self-sacrifice that served them well in the longest civil war in recent African history.

When the Ethiopian Government of Lieut. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam finally fell and the Eritrean front's soldiers marched victorious into Asmara in May 1991, they found a faded and crumbling capital.

Nothing had been painted or fixed since the 1960's. Few people dared go out at night for fear of crime. The palm-lined main boulevard was crowded with beggars and prosti-



James C. McKinley Jr./The New York Times

After winning independence from Ethiopia, Eritreans are rebuilding. Two workers, called out of retirement, repaired a 1930's-vintage train.

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## Eritrea Is Writing A Story Of Success

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tutes. There were hundreds of dingy bars and discotheques where there had once been clean, bustling cafes.

Five years later, the city has been restored to something like its old state. New streetlights illuminate the avenues, where bright red late-model Mercedes-Benz buses and yellow Opel taxis cruise along. There are no beggars or prostitutes in sight. The police, sporting new uniforms and riding new Honda motorcycles, have cracked down on crime.

At night, crowds of well-dressed people parade along the avenues, stopping in cafes and restaurants that look as if they were transported from prewar Italy, the onetime colonial ruler.

Since ratifying its independence in a referendum in 1993, Eritrea, with a population of more than three million, has become an African oddity, a country that works well despite receiving little foreign aid and having an average per capita income of \$140 a year, diplomats say.

It is poorer than Ethiopia, yet it has none of the street crime and beggars that mark Addis Ababa. It receives a fraction of the aid Kenya gets, but it has none of the corruption. It is divided almost equally between Muslims and Christians like the Sudan, but that has not led to a religious war like the one afflicting the Sudanese.

Though in ancient times Eritrea was part of the Kingdom of Axum, over the centuries its nine ethnic groups — some Christian, some Muslim — were conquered by various powers like the Turks and the Egyptians, so they did not see themselves as Ethiopians. Still, the region only began to emerge as a distinct national territory during the Italian colonization from 1885 to 1941.

After Italy's defeat in World War II, the United Nations overlooked the desire of the much of the population and, in 1952, made the region a semi-autonomous part of Ethiopia, with its own constitution. A decade later, Ethiopia annexed the land and abolished the constitution, prompting the Eritreans to begin their long fight for independence.

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LEAD STORY A NEW WFR SERVICE FROM

## Leaders' Discipline And National Pride

Eritrean officials and diplomats here say that what has set this country apart is the discipline of its leaders and the strong sense of national identity forged during the long war for independence.

The entire Government, from President Isaias Afewerki down to foot soldiers, has worked for years without normal salaries, subsisting on small monthly stipends.

"There is almost a demonic determination to get things done," said Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie, the chairman of the commission drafting a new constitution. "It's one of those things I think comes out of suffering. The 30 years of war — one of the dividends of that was this tremendous sense of discipline."

President Isaias has been restrained in accepting financial help from abroad, keeping international borrowing at a minimum and limiting the power of international relief groups working here.

Rather than hire foreign contractors, he created a national youth service and put teen-agers to work, along with idle troops, to rebuild roads. When the Government found that it would cost \$400 million to rebuild the railroad from the capital to the main port, Massawa, it decided to do the job itself. The President called septuagenarian railroad men out of retirement to rebuild steam engines brought by the Italians in the 1930's.

But critics say country's success has come partly at the expense of personal freedoms.

There is a reason there are no beggars on the street. The police have rounded up all of the ragged and disabled street people and virtually imprisoned them in an old tuberculosis hospital. A reporter who visited was not allowed to enter. Officials say other able-bodied beggars were put to work on public projects.

"It doesn't mean that we don't have poor people or beggars, but they get the assistance properly, not by begging in the streets," said the Tourism Minister, Worku Tesfamihael. "Those who can't work get assistance. Those who can work but prefer to beg are sent to work."

## Jehovah's Witnesses Suffer Reprisals

One group that has felt the darker side of Eritrea's nationalist fervor is the Jehovah's Witnesses. For religious reasons, they refused to fight in the war and abstained from the 1993 referendum on independence.

In response, the Government closed shops owned by members of the church, evicted them from public housing, dismissed those who had Government jobs and took away their passports.

An official statement said the ac-



Turning tanks to girders, former rebels are rebuilding Asmara.

tions were being taken because the group had "dissociated themselves from the liberation of their country" and had "acted as disinterested spectators, oblivious to the injustices meted out to their people."

There has been no outcry here about the treatment of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who are believed to number no more than a few thousand, or anything else the Government is doing, for that matter. No one has organized a political party opposing the front, which enjoys enormous popular support. The only newspaper is Government-owned, and there is little open debate. Politically, the country is still in the grip of postwar euphoria and nationalism.

The new constitution being drafted will guarantee freedom of speech and assembly as well as the right to form political parties. Dr. Bereket said. But the President has said he wants to ban parties based on ethnicity or religion, and it is unclear how that conflict will be resolved.

## Elections in '97 For a Parliament

If adopted, the constitution will set up parliamentary system under which a powerful chief executive will be elected by Parliament from among its members. Elections are scheduled for 1997.

For now, the only viable political party is the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, as the front was renamed last year.

"Frankly, I think it will be several years before we see the emergence of credible political parties in this country," said Yemane Gebreab, a senior party official. "Right now there is a high degree of consensus in the society."

The biggest threat to stability so far has come from the front's own rank and file — disgruntled demobilized soldiers who are having trouble finding jobs.

Last June, disabled former fighters at the Mai Habar rehabilitation center outside Asmara blocked a highway, hijacked several trucks and took hostages to protest meager severance benefits. Troops were called to quell the protest. Three disabled veterans were shot to death.

That incident followed another protest in 1993, on the eve of the independence referendum, when thousands of soldiers marched against the Government's announcement that they would have to work for another two years without pay. The Government relented and gave the soldiers a \$25 monthly allowance.

## Racing Against Time To Revive Economy

In a sense, the Government is racing against time to revive the economy and create jobs before the legions of former guerrilla fighters lose patience.

"I think our biggest problem is the economy," Mr. Yemane said. "For ordinary people that's the main issue for them."

Officials here have pinned their hopes on tapping Eritrea's considerable natural resources, which have been off-limits to development for three decades because of the war. The country possesses oil deposits under the Red Sea, substantial gold deposits in its mountains and miles of pristine beaches and secluded islands, perfect for resort operators.

Already there are signs that the economy is poised to take off. Several high-rises are under construction in the capital, including a \$65 million housing complex near the airport. Shops in Asmara are full of European goods hard to find elsewhere in the region, and the city market is booming.

In the capital's streets and markets, many people said they were willing to give the current leaders more time. Though most say they earned barely enough to put food on the table, much less to save money, they said the peace and stability they have enjoyed since independence were more important to them.

Even disabled veterans are reluctant to criticize the President, their former commander.

Girmai Woldeab, 35, lost his sight when a bullet hit him in the head during an offensive against Massawa in 1977. Now he scrapes by on a monthly disability check worth less than \$20.

"The Government cannot yet stand on its own two feet," he said. "It's unable to provide everything we need. Sometimes the money runs out, but I try to live on it, even though I may not eat my fill."