

THE RISE OF WEYANE REBELLION II OR THE TPLF – PART TWO

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One of the unfortunate outcomes of the policy of alienation of nations and nationalities was the Weyane revolt that took place in Tigray immediately after the return of the Emperor from exile. The Weyane uprising was ignited by many factors. These included the general insecurity which prevailed in the post-liberation years which was aided by a large quantity of arms left by the Italians, which stimulated brigandage.

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Factors Which Promoted the Weyane II (TPLF) Rebellion

The brigandage was promoted into a nationalist rebellion because of the usual actions of centerist domination which were aimed to cow down the region. The most obvious symptoms of the officially sanctioned arbitrariness were the high incidence of inefficiency and corruption, and the callousness and rapacity of the Territorial Army.

To the above may be added the ill-advised policy of the imperial government, which unleashed a cruel campaign of retribution against the Raya Azebo and lowland Afars in the same way as in the 1920s. Another factor was that the government had underestimated the disgruntlement of the nobility of Tigray, a section of which it had rudely and crudely alienated.

Given the above, the alienated Tigrean nobility took advantage of the rebellion to reinstate the lost glory and prestige of the region in Ethiopian power politics. These factors led to the great victory of the Weyane resistance which led to the capture of Abiy Adi in Tembien, on 22 May 1943, and the subsequent fall of Qwiha, Enda Eysus and the capital Mekele. A major factor in this was, *inter alia*, the brilliant leadership provided by rebel leaders like Blatta HaileMariam Redda.

According to Blatta HaileMariam Redda, who was interviewed by the monthly magazine *Wegahta* (Nos. 1, 2 and 4 of 1993), the Ethiopian government, shocked by the scale of the resistance, was forced to launch a comprehensive campaign to wipe out the Weyane. At this point Ras Seyoum, who was suspected of collaboration with the rebels, was called to Addis Ababa and replaced by Fitawrari Kifle Dadi and Dejazmatch Fikre Selassie Ketema, who were appointed as Joint-Governors, and General Tedla Mekonnen and General Isayas Gebreselassie, as heads of the government forces. But the huge government forces, which were equipped with superior modern weapons, in contrast with the poorly equipped Tigrean rebels, were to meet their most humiliating defeat in the village of Sergien located between *Dedeba* and *Jegaarta* of the *Enderta* region where *Mekele* is located.

The Sergien victory established that staying power and determination were more crucial than superior weapons. The rebels then moved from strength to strength. Victory provided them with modern weapons which were in short supply on the rebel side. It drew more rebels from the countryside and thousands of deserters from government camps.

In September 1943, the government launched another offensive at Ara, which is also in the *Dedeba* and *Dergaajen* areas. Here again the government forces led by Col. Araya Woldekidan met a shattering defeat. In this encounter, Araya's brother Mammo Gebrekidan along with 16 prominent princes and warlords were captured. In April 1943, the massive government forces which had been mobilised in *Enda Eysus* and *Mekele* attacked large parts of Northern Tigray including Wejerat. But here again, a decisive victory was scored by the rebels who took many captives including a prominent Tigrean warlord, Dejazmatch Abay Kahssay. Besides prominent nobles like Dejazmatch (Dej) Atsbeha, Dej. Teferi, Dej. Alemayehu, Fitawrari (Fit.) Hadigu and Fit. Berhe were killed in the battle fighting on the government side.

The Wejerat victory involved heavy losses on the part of the rebels but it gave them enormous quantities of captured weapons. As Blatta HaileMariam musingly recalls, by far the greatest impact of this was that it unsettled and shook Emperor Haile Selassie and posed the first formidable challenge to his rule. What constituted the biggest shock were the scale, diversity and preparedness of the Ethiopian army which was dwarfed by the speed and decisiveness of the rebels.

From this point on, the Blatta recalls, the rebel forces were divided into a centre wing assigned to confront enemy forces in the Mekele region, a north wing assigned to the Agame and Kilite Awlalo areas, and a southern wing, to face the heavily armoured government forces backed by British weapons and reinforcement which were heading toward Alaje. After this, the rebels began their offensive on Wukuro (in Kilite Awlalo) at the end of July 1943. After the *Wukuro* victory, all roads were cleared of government forces and most officials were forced to retreat to *Mekele*, the Tigrean capital.

Further, following the *Wukuro* victory, prominent barons who fought on the government side became fugitives in various parts of Tigray. But the *Wukuro* victory was also sobering for the rebels, because they lost a number of strategists and brilliant organisational commanders such as Assefa Woldegiorgis, Amare Gebru, Baria Gebre-Egzabher, Kindia Zoldai, Bashay Ayele and several others.

After a brief interlude, the rebels began their offensive on Wukuro. At the time, Blatta HaileMariam recalls, virtually all prominent government officials of Tigray, several of the traditional barons, and war leaders had gathered in *Mekele*. These included governors and battle commanders like Generals Tedla and Isayas; Dej. Mesfin, Governor of Shire; Dej. Gebrehiwet Meshesha, Governor of Adwa; Nebrud Tesfaye, Administrator of Aksum; Ras Mengesha Seyoum; Dej. Maru Aram, Governor of Tembien and Enderta and others like Dej. Zegeye and Shum Geralta Teka Mengesha.

Meanwhile, government forces led by Dej. Kassa Sebhat from the Adigrat area, a second group advancing from Wegerat to Mekele, and a third huge army led by Ras Abebe Aregai, General Abebe Damtaw and British Col. Pluck, aided by modern British tanks and other modern armaments began to move from Maichew and Alage.

As government troops advanced toward Alage, the rebels again took Quiha and General Isayas, one of the supreme commanders of the Ethiopian army in Tigray, was taken prisoner. Besides, the rebels captured huge arms, soldier's uniforms and 27 military vehicles. The captured uniforms and the vehicles, which were decorated with Ethiopian flags, were later used to confuse the Ethiopian army, which received another humiliating defeat at *Enda Eyesus* and *Mekele*, where the rebels were received with pomp and glory. In this way *Enda Eyesus* and *Mekele* were taken by the rebellious Tigreans. This, Blatta proudly recalls, sent a signal to the Ethiopian government that the Tigreans were not only brave fighters but also astute strategists.

Hence, as the Blatta who lent the struggle its millenarian slogans rightly asserts, the Weyane uprising was won by the rebels of Tigray and bombardment was simply an aftermath. Even after 1943, Tigray was never subdued. It was ruled by a proxy bonded by matrimonial alliance with the Royal House of Shoa. But even so, members

of the Tigrean nobility like Ras Seyoum Mengesha and Ras Mengesha Seyoum were viewed grudgingly and with little deference. The risk of a second Weyane thus continued to hover over the head of Haile Selassie, who viewed the region as a time-bomb which could go off at any time. That risk was waived through the 1974 upheaval which ended the rule of the Emperor. Albeit, while the Emperor at least recognised that there was a time bomb, Mengistu did not have the will or skill to defuse it in 1974 or later.

Blatta HaileMariam relishes the Weyane victories and glorifies its "indomitable" heroes. Further, he recalls with resentment but not resignation that finally the Weyane had to face a "superpower" which was forced to use the best of its military capabilities for weeks to end the battle.

Many of the British officers involved in the armed combat were simply wiped out. These included the supreme head of the British battalion Col. Pluck, who was killed by a Weyane rebel. The taste of this humiliation might have in fact forced the British, who glorified the Meqdela victory, to put forth the best of their men and weapons from the barracks and hangars of Aden. But even so, the Royal British air force simply bombed areas. It never really faced or fought the Weyane rebels.

The basis for the resistance or non-cooperation of the Tigrean nobility has, however, its own special motivations as noted below:

After the occupation, Tigray, which had undergone little modernization under the Italians, continued to play the same role for a while. The British, having defeated the Fascist, were undecided about the way they wanted to shape the future of Ethiopia. Like the Italians they wavered between "political Tigrigna"--promoting decentralization and especially Tigrean autonomy--and the option of a "Shoan policy"--the building of neighbour relations with a modernizing centralist authority. The British protected a remotely Ethiopian affiliated "Greater Tigray" (annexed to parts of Eritrea) and they recruited Seyoum and Haile Selassie Gugsa in 1941. Both were nominated--without even notifying the emperor--over their pre-war domains. Another new complex and dramatic chapter of intrigues developed during 1941-1943, at the end of which the emperor emerged victorious over the British military. This was made possible also by the fact that Haile Selassie Gugsa had betrayed his British masters and that Seyoum, in a moment of truth, decided to opt for the emperor, hoping to obtain the long desired negusennet. The shrewd monarch managed to outmanoeuvre the British officers to such an extent that in 1943 they found themselves quelling the "Weyane" popular revolt in Tigray on his behalf.

The more interesting point is, however, that the pain and glory of Tigray, which forms the basis for the resilience and nationhood of its people, was felt by commoners and aristocrats alike. Hence, disavowing the past and the self-proclaimed leaders of the 1974 upheaval, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, one of the few aristocrats to survive the genocide of the power elite launched by Mengistu, was to

couch his manifesto in a manner which even the radicals, who resented him as a leader, could identify with:

Tigray is the cradle of Ethiopian civilisation; its ancient monuments still stand today as proof of the legacy of its proud past. The province has been a battleground where Ethiopians defended their nation from foreign aggression. Heroic Ethiopians have shed their blood defending their freedom at the battlefields of Gunda Gunde, Adwa, Maichew, Tembein, Mereb and Selekleka. In spite of the heavy losses suffered by the people of Tigray and the contribution made by them in defence of the integrity of the nation as a whole, they have never been offered any benefits in the form of development schemes from war indemnities obtained by the government.

Underlying the suffering endured by the people of the region, the manifesto further added:

The people struggle to live off their devastated land and had to suffer the consequences of drought which struck time after time. In addition, the lack of jobs and the overcrowding of arable lands led to these people seeking refuge in other parts of the country and perhaps never returning to their birthplaces. Having learnt that they would have to rely on themselves to alleviate their problems, they rallied with great enthusiasm when the Tigray Development Organisation was set up to implement self-help schemes. It marked the beginning of regional development in Ethiopia. Soon the province's fifty-six districts were connected by feeder-road network. For the first time the highland was connected by road to the Dallol Depression, an area rich in potash and the source of untapped geo-thermal energy which, as UNDP studies show, would serve the energy requirements of Ethiopia and its neighbours. More important still, the existence of this communications network saved thousands of lives during the drought in the area. All the emergency aid was able to speedily reach the victims in their own areas thus avoiding a catastrophic famine situation and the spreading of disease in overcrowded camps.

While most Tigreans, including the youth, could identify with Mengesha on the injustices outlined above, the youth were not keen to ally themselves with an appendage of the old aristocracy.

The Supra-National Challenge of the Elite: Weyane II

A cardinal reason for the rejection of the Tigrean nobility by the youth was the divergence in the class interests of the two groups. Their aspirations did not blend well. The youth saw alignment with the local nobility like mixing oil with water. They disliked their strategies which were controlled by the centre or the Emperor. For instance, consolidation and centralisation were the concerns of all Ethiopian rulers from Theodros onwards, with the exception of Emperor Yohannes IV was a Federalist at heart and in action. Their goals of centralization were mainly pursued by creating institutions which were appendages to the throne.

The above centralizing tendency had for years given different regimes the lever they needed to exert influence and dictate action. However, while this, to a large measure, served their interests in the short-term, its long-term effectiveness was undermined by its undue reliance on the traditional elite and disregard of the larger population from which the elite derived its strength. Even when a shift away from centralisation was made, it was not effective. Hence, again a return to centralization was preferred as a remedy during the post-Adwa victory period of the reigns of both Emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie. This point is further developed below:

Historically the effectiveness of imperial rule was seriously compromised by the decentralization of the military and taxation functions. In recent years', the drive to consolidate power at the centre had emphasized correcting these defects. This emphasis is evident in the order of priorities that has prevailed. The instruments of control and enforcement have received the highest priority. Military reform has been the concern of every emperor since Theodora. It was Haile Selassie's primary concern during his rise to power, and having succeeded where the others failed, he built the military branch of the state into the main support of imperial rule. An early beginning towards the creation of a modern police and security apparatus was made with the establishment of a police force in Addis Ababa.

The rejection of the traditional Tigrean nobility by members of the emerging TPLF also stemmed from the faulty tactics of forced incorporation – rather than a soft process of integration – which Ethiopian leaders opted for, and pursued through their regional protégés.

The very large and heterogeneous population incorporated into the empire under Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Amhara rule chiefly by Menelik II differed from the power holders in language, culture, and religion and were dealt with initially in traditional terms. Amhara (and less frequently their local allies) were allotted land from whose people they were entitled to exact tribute. The result was the establishment of an alien ruling class, whose superior power, status, and economic situation was underlined by cultural and religious differences from the subject class.

The challenge of the youth was different from their forebears because their disgruntlement stemmed from the failure of the regime to create new institutions and distribute modern benefits equitably. On the other hand, the peasants, nobility and the Church resented the manner in which the power of the old institutions was being eroded. But the two conveyed a common concern. The observation below is enlightening:

The older structures, characteristic of the Amhara and Tigray of the central and northern highlands, had as their base a population of peasants ruled by a hierarchy of nobles and committed to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Despite differences between the Amhara and the Tigray peoples and intra-ethnic regional variations peasants, nobles, and priests shared a common culture. Hierarchy, in theory

culminating in the Emperor, was often regionally fragmented, and local lords developed independent bases of power. One of Haile Selassie's goals was to minimize the power of the great provincial lords. In this he had some success by the late 1960s and early 1970s, but his techniques for doing so did not entail the institutionalisation of a genuinely different system of local authority and status. Nor did he wish to undermine the basic principles of hierarchy that marked Amhara society.

The last sentence of the above excerpt is worthy of particular attention because the Amharas at least took comfort because the Emperor was allegedly an Amhara. For the Tigreans, however, the Emperor remained an outsider. Another strong reason for disaffection of the Tigreans was the erosion of their base of power and prestige. The Mengistu regime in particular had developed a great hatred and disrespect for the elite, particularly after its brief alliance with MEISON which lent it the jargon of left-wing politics.

The outcome of the revolutionary struggle since 1974 has left the educated Ethiopians remaining in the country—except some in the military—without power and as fragmented as ever. A few briefly wielded influence in the new regime. Others made their accommodation to the opportunities offered by the expanding bureaucracy and the newly nationalized modern economic sector, but they were dependent on the PMSGE for their enhanced status and income and lacked any voice in the country's politics. Some who were unable to accept the reality of a revolutionary order under military control struggled against the new regime from the beginning, but their successes were ephemeral. Those who survived had fled into exile or had ceased overt opposition by mid-1980.

Although essentially the same, the attitude of the Derg differed from that of Haile Selassie's government a little. The latter used the elite as a countervailing force against the nobility by extending many rights and privileges to them. On the other hand, having eliminated the nobility, Mengistu had no use for the larger elite which he feared and shunned. He thus relied on a well-purged group which was extremely loyal and subservient to him. But the outcome of the leadership style of both turned out to be the same as both drove the elite to different forms of disaffection by denying them an independent power base. This was strongly felt by the Tigrean elite:

Many had stemmed from prominent Amhara and Tigray families, but some were of other ethnic and class backgrounds. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s most, including the military had found a niche in government or (to a lesser extent) in the modern sector of the economy, which gave them a standard of living and a degree of status above that of the peasantry, the urban working class, and petty traders. The educated bureaucrats lacked an independent power base, however, and their situation and prospects depended ultimately on Haile Selassie. The younger educated Ethiopians were a mixed and by no means united group, but their origins, educational background, lack of real power, and the gradual diminution of

opportunities disposed many of them to different kinds and degrees of dissatisfaction with Ethiopia's situation.

One of the outcomes of the failure of both regimes to integrate the non-Amharas was that their nationality elites were forced to seek refuge in the nationality enclaves. This applied even to the Amhara, whose quality of life had not changed much under the succession of rulers from Menelik onwards. But it was a source of greater worry and anxiety for most non-Amharans and one of great stress and strain for Haile Selassie's regime itself. Its manifestations are briefly summed below:

A major source of stress in the empire under Haile Selassie intermittently manifested in rebellion and in other ways lay in the failure to integrate the varied non-Amhara population so that it would have a substantial stake in the maintenance of the political order. The ruling group made no concessions to the cultural, political, or economic interests of the people except those demanded by the limits of their own power and the exigencies of a relatively primitive system of transportation and communication in a territory marked by difficult terrain. When Amhara rule was ended in 1974, land reform, proposed changes in the status of languages other than Amharic, and the termination of the special status of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church directly satisfied many of the grievances of the non-Amhara peoples. But there remained much residual distrust of the central government among many Ethiopians, and in 1980 it did not appear that the PMSGF could rely on the peoples of the South to give it unequivocal support.

One of the clearest signals of the process of alienation of nationalities was that the Amharas, in common with other nationalities, resented the regime. Hence, when Mengistu began the process of weakening of the Amharas, he was met with little or no resistance at all. The situation, which obtained six years after the 1974 upheaval, is revealing because Kaplan notes: "In mid-1980, six years after the beginning of a revolution that did away with the Ethiopian imperial order under Emperor Haile Selassie, the form and substance of Ethiopian society, politics, and economy had been radically changed. Internal conflict persisted, some of it inherited from the old regime, some of it generated by the new regime which by 1977 had proclaimed its Marxist-Leninist orientation."

He elaborates on this adding:

Trends could be discerned, some of which were irreversible: Amhara domination of the political, social, and economic orders had ended, and land reform, of special relevance in the areas outside the central and northern highlands occupied by the Amhara and Tigray..., had completely undermined the basis of the old order in those areas, where 85 percent of the population lived... Whether collective or private landholding would prevail was not certain. The major non-agricultural enterprises had been taken over by the state, and government ownership and control were likely to remain important in any circumstances, whatever the final character of the mechanism and modes of control.

He goes on:

A Marxist-Leninist regime under a well-purged military group dominated by Chairman Mengistu Hailemariam was in power, but it was not clear that its authority was firmly institutionalised and legitimated in the eyes of the great bulk of the population. Coercion--often undisciplined--which had dominated the struggle for power in the first years of the revolution, remained significant as a mode of control after Mengistu consolidated his position in early 1977. In the north among the Eritreans and the people in Tigray, in the east among the Somali, and in the south among the Oromo, dissident movements continued their armed opposition to the regime with varying success.

Operating in such an overall national climate of change, the Tigrean movement (TPLF) had to wage a multi-pronged battle. One was the struggle against centrist domination under Mengistu and the other against the remnants of the old aristocratic establishment in Tigray which, in contrast to the south, largely remained barely affected, because:

In the 1930s and early 1940s the power of the leading families established centuries earlier still existed in this province. The political system of the province, practically autonomous from Ethiopia's government, was characterized by a complex set of rivalries and splits among the leading local figures. In essence it differed only marginally from what had been the general order in Ethiopia.

As observed earlier, this history had made Tigray notoriously sensitive to provocation. Thus, even in 1974 the Derg was in quandary as to how to react to the region. Finally it took heed of the counsel extended to it regarding this sensitivity. Dawit observes:

When the Military Council hesitated to arrest Ras Mengesha Seyoum, the son of the rebellious Ras Seyoum, everyone advised against it, saying that all of Tigray would revolt if he were jailed. Though most of his family and other aristocrats were arrested, he remained Governor up to the time he began his resistance movement. Then there was a fear that people would flock to him and create a serious problem for the Military Council, so everyone associated with him was purged. There were indiscriminate killings and arbitrary arrests. Next to Addis, the Red Terror took its biggest toll in Tigray, particularly in Mekele.

But the wisdom of the Derg did not extend further. Soon Mengistu pushed the exasperation of the Tigray people to bursting point:

All of us could see the TPLF grow. Every measure that Mengistu took pushed the people of Tigray further away from the government and toward the TPLF. The government response was utterly crude; every Tigrean was suspected of being a member of the TPLF. Military operations continued and most of the time government forces were defeated. I urged the government to be magnanimous, calm and patient,

but to no avail. This advice, which was also given by others in the government, was not heeded. We created the TPLF, just as we made the EPLF and ELF what they are today: first by driving the people to rebel, then by arming them indirectly, then by a series of provocations.

Dawit, as an outsider now, probably sees the Tigrean demand for democratic justice and autonomy for the nation differently. But, few in the government conceded its legitimacy until seriously threatened by it. Its demands as encapsulated in the following passage, give the cardinal features of the Movement:

The TPLF is not accurately described as secessionist, for the TPLF supports the voluntary unity of the people of Ethiopia, so long as the legitimate rights of those people are fully realized. Where there are no oppressor and oppressed nations, where the right of every nation without distinction is constitutionally and in practice safeguarded, where democratic social justice prevails and human rights are fully respected, being part of a multinational and democratic Ethiopia is acceptable to the TPLF. Until this situation either arises or proves impossible, the TPLF will continue the just and legitimate struggle against national domination, the abrogation of human rights, economic oppression, social injustice and military brutality.

But it should be noted that the Tigray resentment did not suddenly come to a boiling point. In fact, the 1974 upheaval was greeted with some optimism by the youth of Tigray, as it was elsewhere in Ethiopia. The euphoria of sudden change had awakened hopes of a new democratic order. But that dream faded with the formation of the Provisional Military Government. Soon, the scepticism of the young nationalists, some of whom were former university students, began to grow. It was aggravated when the Derg lumped the Tigrean aristocracy and elite together and waged a campaign of mass arrest and liquidation during and after the Red Terror in Tigray, Addis Ababa and elsewhere in Ethiopia, where of the total number of Tigrean prisoners were estimated at around 70 percent. It is said, in fact, that many non-Tigrigna speaking inmates learnt Tigrigna in jail as a result. Such acts only intensified the tenacity and resoluteness of the TPLF fighters.

Finally in 1989, the administrator of Tigray, Legesse Asfaw, was not only caught with his pants down but forced to flee in ignominy. This vaunted right-hand man of Colonel Mengistu and much dreaded figure of the Derg was for a while unheard of, with rumour of his arrest widely spread in Addis. However, subsequently he reappeared. By then the rumours around him had subsided, but the blemish of his otherwise impeccable record of ruthlessness remained. In fact, it may have figured prominently in the decision which led to his forced resignation along with Fesseha Desta, allegedly on account of age in April 1991.

After the shattering defeats of government troops in Enda Selassie, the TPLF scored victory after victory. Even the famine, which hit the region in 1989 and 1990,

expected to undermine its effectiveness, did nothing to halt its forward march. Instead it enabled it to widen the scope of its legitimacy as well as the territory under its sway. In the aftermath of the total liberation of Tigray the government had gradually and painfully also come to the reluctant realization that the movement is a very serious force to contend with.

This was reinforced by the number of offensives launched but none were successful. In fact, beyond controlling Tigray, in 1990 the TPLF merged with the EPDM, with whom it had cooperated since the early 1980s, and the OPDO and the Democratic officers movement to form the EPRDF and wage the *Theodros* campaign in Gonder, *Walelign* in Wello, and subsequent campaigns in Shoa in 1990 and 1991. This process, which was intensified in 1991, then moved at a pace which bewildered foreign observers:

Part of the problem in attempting to make a clear assessment of the military situation in Ethiopia is the speed with which events change and the claims and counter-claims that are made by both sides. It has, for example, claimed that the TPLF were in Shoa Region and were active less than 200 km from Addis Ababa in 1989 and 1990.

Mengistu had even tried to use food as a weapon in the course of the struggle. Mengistu's strategy of attrition is also deeply regretted by many in Tigray. The peasants also fully realise the implications of this as we shall see in the next section.

But even the use of food as a weapon did not hamper the Tigrean fighters. They were able to coordinate relief and wage very successful battles at the same time. Besides, although they had serious limitations of transport, they were not seriously hampered from reaching the larger starving population because of captured vehicles and fuel. What is more, as was observed in 1989, they did not need to buy arms:

Today ... the Tigrean movement does not have to go looking for armaments. It is supplied by the Ethiopian army. Ethiopian troops are so heavily armed, so immobile, so conventional in an unconventional warfare, that whenever units retreat they leave behind enormous amounts of weaponry and materials – tanks, heavy artillery, guns, munitions – to be seized by the rebels. The secessionist movement has become the most sophisticated and well-armed guerrilla movement on the continent. These are realities.

If most of us were reluctant at first to admit these realities, the ensuing years should have taught us a lesson. But in meetings that were held in Berlin and more recently in Rome and Aden, the Ethiopian government still refused to recognize the legitimacy of the rebel forces. All ten meetings failed even before agendas could be agreed on.

The analyst then concludes his observation about the changing profile and status of the TPLF leadership stating:

War had become a way of life for the leaders of the liberation movement. The rebel leadership has achieved a certain world-wide stature. They are treated like important officials. They have money and exercise authority over the people.

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