

Problems of Ethiopian Ex-Combatants

Nico Belo

This article describes the problems of former Ethiopian soldiers with their reintegration into civil life. During an anthropological field study, 60 ex-combatants were interviewed. They reported feeling frustrated about the lack of interest in their living conditions on the part of the Ethiopian public and Ethiopian and Western Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). They felt that they had no future perspective. Some of them admitted knowing former soldiers who had contracted HIV/AIDS, or who were guilty of criminal violence.

Keywords: ex-combatants, reintegration

Interviewing ex-combatants

After the fall of the communist Mengistu regime in 1991, between 350.000 and 500.000 communist soldiers were demobilised. Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) started to work together with the Ethiopian government in order to reintegrate former soldiers into civil life. Governmental organisations such as the German Technical Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the British Overseas Development Agency (BODA), as well as such international organisations as the European Union and the World Bank have contributed money for demobilisation projects. The EU, for instance, contributed 10 million euro in the 1990s, while the World Bank provided funds amounting to 170 million euro (references: spokespersons of the EU and the

World Bank, also confirmed by NGO-workers). These organisations financed such projects as the building of schools and public toilets, road construction and agricultural activities.

When I began my fieldwork in Ethiopia in September 2002, my intention was to examine the ways in which Ethiopian and Western NGO's were assisting the 200.000 ex-combatants who fought in the war against Eritrea (1998-2000). After a quick investigation by means of interviews with NGO-workers and Ethiopian officials, I could only conclude that neither Ethiopian nor Western NGOs were doing anything for these former soldiers. Many organisations in Ethiopia gave accounts of projects for ex-combatants completed in the past, but none of them had documented evaluations, so it was not clear whether project targets had been reached, or whether the living conditions of the participants had indeed improved in the years following the projects. I therefore used the rest of my six-month fieldwork period to investigate a different question: 'Which factors stimulate the reintegration of Ethiopian ex-combatants and which factors restrict this reintegration?'. Interviews were done with 23 ex-soldiers demobilised after 2000, and with 37 former Mengistu-soldiers demobilised after the fall of Addis Ababa in 1991. These former soldiers were interviewed in Addis Ababa, Awassa, Nazareth and Debre Zeit. They were located with the help of friends of the Ethiopian inter-

preter. The interviews were semi-structured and included the following questions:

How many soldiers were there in your family?

Why did you choose to become a fighter?

How long did your training last?

How much salary did you receive?

During which periods were you involved in combat?

Did you spend time in hospital?

When and why were you demobilised?

How much demobilisation money did you receive?

What kind of reactions did you get when you returned home?

What would you like to do?

Are there matters you feel angry or disappointed about?

What kind of education or job would you like to have?

Incidental questions – possible when the atmosphere was ‘open enough’ – about traumatic flashbacks, criminal involvement by ex-soldiers or the problem of HIV/AIDS were generally answered vaguely by the ex-combatants. Only six of the sixty interviewed persons have told more about either the problem of HIV/AIDS or the criminal conduct of former soldiers.

Results and discussion

Only four of the interviewed 23 ex-soldiers – demobilised after 2000 – talked about traumatic flashbacks, sleep problems and fits of trembling. The others were reluctant to answer questions about complaints and symptoms, or simply said that they were ‘very well’ and all they wanted was more money from the government. Perhaps they had no symptoms, or they regarded it as a sign of weakness to talk of such matters. Another explanation could be that psychiatric symptoms are taboo in Ethiopia, because people often attribute them to ‘evil, diabolical powers’. Those who speak openly about their mental problems risk isolation from the community. The prevalence

of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among ex-combatants therefore could easily be underestimated.

Three of the 37 interviewed Ethiopian ex-Mengistu-soldiers told me about friends who had chosen to commit suicide, because they had not seen their families for years and did not dare to return to their distant homeland ‘empty-handed’. They killed themselves, because they no longer had ‘any hope’. Those three ex-Mengistu-soldiers admitted that they themselves had considered suicide, but that they had rejected the idea because they felt responsible for their children at home. Getach (50): ‘My children are taking care of me nowadays. When there is work I earn 10 Birr per day by helping the carpenters. Otherwise I’m at home or in the church.’

Nearly all of the combatants demobilised after the war with Eritrea in 2000 told me that they had a bitter feeling of being neglected by the Ethiopian authorities and the Ethiopian public. They said they had been promised jobs, houses and land if they joined the army. They had therefore stopped their education and joined the forces. After the war, however, they received the mere sum of 4000 Birr (around 444 euro). Fifteen of these ex-combatants had immediately spent this money on clothes and furniture. Only eight of the 23 had invested the money in shops or *gari's* (horse-taxi's) which, in three cases, became a successful business.

The former Eritrea fighters interviewed also said that they felt frustrated, because they spent most of their time hanging around at street corners. These frustrations were expressed very clearly by Girma (18) and Haile (20), both unemployed and living in Addis Ababa. Girma: ‘We have lost

friends, blood and limbs, but they have given us less than five percent of all we did for the country. They have used us!' Haile: 'We have been thrown away like an empty bottle.'

For disabled persons in Ethiopia the future is dark, because, according to themselves and Ethiopian NGO-workers, they are seen as worthless people by the general public and potential employers. Fourteen of the 23 interviewed ex-soldiers who fought in Eritrea told about long periods spent in hospital.

With regard to expressions of frustration, I found an important difference between the demobilised Eritrea-fighters and the ex-Mengistu-soldiers. Only six of the 37 interviewed ex-Mengistu-combatants expressed feelings of frustration during the interview. This can be explained as follows: the ex-Mengistu-soldiers were seen as the defeated communist enemy. They were glad that they were not sent to jail or sentenced to death, but only had to undergo 'political education'. These ex-combatants had no expectations about money or other help from the 'new' Ethiopian government. They survived by doing odd jobs, such as carrying heavy wood and selling potatoes, tomatoes, or cigarettes, and by begging. Mohammed (56) seemed to be the most successful working ex-Mengistu-soldier, because he started working as a cemetery stonemason in the 1990s, and now has 10 young stonemasons working under him. Of the interviewed ex-Mengistu-soldiers, Sejaye (48) seems the least prosperous, as he earns only five Birr per day for his six children by selling small things. Sejaye (48): 'I have been wearing these clothes now for five years.' Of the interviewed ex-Mengistu-combatants, eight are working on the land, while three of them seem relatively successful. None of the inter-

viewed soldiers who fought in Eritrea are doing agricultural work.

Two ex-Eritrea fighters gave information about the increased incidence of burglary in the Ethiopian city of Awassa, whereby intruders steal televisions and other property by night. One of them mentioned friends who have been jailed for criminal acts, or others who are still at large, mugging people at street corners and robbing truck drivers by night. A spokesperson of The Ethiopian Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC), the governmental authority which checks the permits of the Western and Ethiopian NGOs in Ethiopia, has confirmed nation-wide rumours about burglary and grave violence, committed by frustrated ex-combatants with 'no hope left in their hearts'. There are no official facts, because the Ethiopian authorities have no statistics about criminal violence. Concerning the related problem of HIV/AIDS, only three ex-Mengistu soldiers told me that friends of theirs had been widowed through this disease: their wives had worked as prostitutes after the fall of Addis Ababa in 1991 for lack of any other work. The exact number of HIV-infected ex-combatants is not known, due to the refusal of former soldiers to take the AIDS-test. International health organisations estimate that nowadays 20% of the 200.000 Ethiopian soldiers demobilised after 2000 are infected by HIV¹. That means that 40.000 ex-combatants are spreading HIV nation-wide.

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¹ According to a BBC-radio reporter, Addis Ababa, 2002.