

Ethiopia's Role in South Sudan's March to Independence, 1955 -1991

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Abstract: The historical processes leading to the emergence of the states of Eritrea (1991) and South Sudan (2011) have yet to be satisfactorily reconstructed. The extended conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan since the late 1950s and the resultant war of attrition and vengeance they have waged against each other is considered among the primary factors. Allying with regional and global powers-to-be, the two states engaged extensively in actions designed to bring about the disintegration of the other. This article attempts to recount the retaliatory measures both the imperial regime and the Derg have executed against Sudan's intervention in Eritrea. The policy lines persistently adopted by Ethiopian governments reveal the fact that if Sudan could not refrain from meddling in the Eritrean conflict, then they had to respond in kind.

Introduction

The existing literature on South Sudan's march to independence ascribes this development to the internal problems in the Sudan and successive rebellions of the subjugated southerners. Power politics at the regional and global levels, often associated with the Cold War interplay, assumed a crucial role in the progression of the turmoil in the Sudan. Departing from this customary trend, this article attempts to analyze the situation in the context of the conflict between Ethiopia and the Sudan and how the process ultimately led to the disintegration of the two major states in northeast Africa.

Both the imperial regime and the military junta (the Derg) have accused Sudan of intervening in the internal affairs of Ethiopia by sponsoring the cause of Eritrean secessionism. Various steps were taken to persuade successive Sudanese governments to refrain from supporting the cause of the rebels. When this approach failed to bear fruit, then a progressive action plan was envisaged and put in place to respond in kind. This article seeks to demonstrate the extent of Ethiopia's retaliatory measures by way of exploiting the existing unrest in South Sudan.

The two neighbors have sustained an extended period of animosity and mutual suspicion since Sudan's independence in 1956. The nature and extent of the conflict is not well recorded, primarily because of the absence of first-hand information on the behind-the-scene developments. At some point the tension escalated to the level where Ethiopia labeled the Sudan its number one enemy in the region. The archives in the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs shed a new light on the actual conflict and the role each country played in destabilizing the other. Ethiopia avenged Sudan's active role in the secession of Eritrea by progressively sponsoring South Sudan's bid for independence.

The major foreign policy thrust of post-1941 Ethiopia had been the reinstatement of Eritrea into its domain. Diplomatic missions launched to realize this agenda often resulted in

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headlong confrontation with the outside world. In this regard, Cold War powers, the Arab world, and, particularly, immediate neighbors had posed the ultimate challenge. Successive Ethiopian governments perceived Sudan as a frontline state representing the Arab/Islamic goal of controlling the Red Sea region and thus as a primary policy issue that required careful handling. This article argues that the Eritrean question is behind the tumultuous relationship between Ethiopia and Sudan in the period under discussion.

The dispute began in earnest soon after the federation formula, which had created the basis of Ethio-Eritrean union, was abrogated in 1962. This year marked the beginning of armed resistance in Eritrea, which later evolved into the creation of various rebel groups including the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Sudan's intervention can be traced back to early 1963, as can the genesis of Ethiopia's contact with South Sudan rebels. The two states, which had failed to address meaningfully their respective local problems, then started to seek solutions on the other side of their borders. This article outlines the progression of events leading to the fateful partial disintegration of Ethiopia and the Sudan.

Evolution of Ethiopia's Involvement in South Sudan

Ethiopia's association with the situation in South Sudan can be traced back to the August 1955 Torit mutiny that heralded the beginning of armed rebellion in the Sudan. The imperial regime was sympathetic toward the government of Sudan on the ground that it "both in principle and in fact, opposed to any kind of fragmentation of a national territory on the basis of religion or tribalism."¹ Accordingly, with the outbreak of the rebellion a set of measures were taken.

When the South Sudan army mutinied in Juba in August 1955, the imperial government provided aircraft to transport northern troops to the area to suppress the rebellion. Similarly, an order was issued to the governors of Ethiopian provinces adjacent to South Sudan "to prevent armed fugitives from coming in and to drive those who had already entered back to where they came from." Consequently, the rebels either gave themselves up or fled with their arms to Uganda, Congo, and Kenya. Those who came to settle in Ethiopia as refugees were allowed to reside under the strict condition that they lay down their arms and "cease and desist from carrying out subversive activities against the Sudan."²

The apparent cordial relations between Ethiopia and the Umma Party and military governments from mid-1956 to early 1964 led to their collaboration against southern Sudan rebels. This was particularly true during the governments of Sayid Abdulla Kahlil (1956-1958) and even more so under Maj. Gen. Abboud (1958-1964). A set of agreements aimed at strengthening mutual economic and political/defense ties were signed at the time. The major ones were the Treaty of Brotherhood and Alliance (August 1957), the non-ratified Trade and Commerce Agreement and the Cultural Agreement (January 1960), and the Extradition Treaty (March 1964).³

To this end, Imperial Ethiopia pursued a policy of unconditional support of Sudanese regimes till late 1964. In January 1964, for example, soon after the beginning of the Anya-Nya guerilla movement, a Sudanese delegation came to Ethiopia and requested that when Sudanese troops undertook mopping up operations in the coming months, Ethiopia should close her borders with the Sudan along the Nasir-Pochalla line. In addition to sealing the border, Ethiopia sent the governor of Gambella, Col. Lemma Gebre-Maryam, to Khartoum. In company with high-ranking Sudanese military officials, the colonel proceeded to the area

of conflict and rendered his services in an advisory capacity in the mopping up operations undertaken by Sudanese troops.⁴

Demonstrating the extent of the country's cooperation was the silence it maintained when, under the pretext of undertaking hot pursuit operations, Sudanese government troops, aided by heavy artillery and military aircraft, penetrated deep into Ethiopian territory and indiscriminately inflicted heavy damage upon the lives and property of Ethiopian nationals. Similarly, Ethiopia rejected the offer of assistance and service by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in June 1963 with respect to South Sudan refugees in its territory. It allegedly did so "in order to avoid being instrumental to internationalization of the Southern Sudan problem and in order to safeguard Ethiopia's long existing friendly relations with the Sudan."⁵

In spite of the above developments, Ethiopian authorities were increasingly becoming apprehensive of the South Sudan situation. They were closely monitoring the establishment in exile of the Sudan African Closed Districts National Union (SACDNU), and the extensive campaign of its chief officers, J.H. Oduho (President) and William Deng (Secretary-General), to bring Southern Sudanese grievances to the attention of the world by way of submitting memoranda to the UN, to the Pan African Freedom Movement of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (PAFMECSA), and to African political associations.⁶

A range of factors caused Ethiopia to monitor closely the situation in Southern Sudan. These included the 1945 Fabian Colonial Bureau report (*The Sudan: The Road Ahead*) that came out strongly in favor of Southern Sudan as a separate entity from the north; the subsequent debate in the UN and widespread press coverage of the matter, particularly after the summer of 1962; and the establishment in Britain of an unofficial organization called "the International Committee for the Study of Group Rights" and the pressure it exerted for the consideration of the demands of Southern Sudan. In addition, the apprehension that the issue would be discussed, in private and/or public, during the May 1963 OAU Summit contributed to the policy reorientation.

More importantly, the deteriorating bilateral relations after the October 1964 popular uprising in Sudan had contributed to the revision of Ethiopia's position on the Sudan in general and the South in particular. With the termination of the federal arrangement in Eritrea (1962), Ethiopia's internal politics witnessed the emergence of armed resistance. Soon afterwards, the shift in the Ethio-Sudan political equation led to the commencement of the latter entertaining secessionist elements particularly from Eritrea. Troubled and murky episodes started to emerge under the pro-Egyptian and pro-Arab governments of Sir Katim Khalifa (1964-1965), Ismail El Azhari (1965-1969), and Gen. Nimeiri (1969-1985).

The call for reprisal measures against Sudan for its assistance to secessionist elements was intensifying within Ethiopia. The government of Katim Khalifa had officially announced its sympathy and support for the rebel groups, released all Eritrean prisoners, and agreed to allow Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) cadres freedom of movement in the Sudan. It had also facilitated the delivery of material and financial shipments from the Arab/Islamic states in the Middle East to the rebel groups in Eritrea.⁷ A set of proposals outlined a list of measures to be taken. These ranged from approaching rebel groups in South Sudan to discreetly preparing the UMMA party for acts of sabotage within the north.

The 1963 proposed plan of action, for example, considered the case of South Sudan as a "possible pressure on Sudanese government mainly as retaliation should it consider to support subversion in Eritrea." This plan envisaged the maintaining of a series of contact with South Sudanese, "who should be given assistance on a selective basis" and that

“regular exchange of information and opinion be held on south Sudanese affairs.”⁸ Ethiopia’s association with South Sudan began in earnest afterward. The first contact occurred in December 1963 following the request of the representative of the Kampala-based Sudan African National Union (SANU, the new version of SACDNU), William Deng, to the emperor for financial assistance.

The fact that the 1964 Extradition Treaty remained on paper, and more specifically Ethiopia’s refusal to comply with Sudan’s request to deport Southern Sudanese refugees demonstrated the imperial regime’s intentions. The directive prepared for Ethiopia’s goodwill mission to the Sudan that would discuss the deteriorating relations (November 1964) authorized the delegation to imply that, unless the latter refrained from supporting Eritrean secessionist elements, thereby intervening in the internal affairs of the country, it would be obliged to respond in kind.⁹

Accordingly, memos submitted to the emperor and the state minister for foreign affairs, Ketema Yifru, designed the aggressive policy that Ethiopia should assume in the process. This included sponsoring the South Sudan rebels through supplying arms to the fighters and financial assistance to the leaders in their propaganda campaign within the continent and the wider world. The strategy stipulated the condition that Ethiopia could easily use the southern problem as a counter measure against Sudan if the latter would not desist from sponsoring the Eritrean rebels.¹⁰

The contact with South Sudan factions became more frequent after 1965. In February, the secretary general of the Nairobi-based Sudan African Freedom Fighters Union of Conservatives (SAFFUC), Alphonse Malek Pajok, discussed a previously arranged plan concerning “the future relationship or link between the independent Southern Sudan and the Imperial Ethiopian Government.” He proposed that the link could be defined either by him, for he was mandated by the party, or by the president and chairman of SAFFUC, Dominic Muorwel. Pajok also requested urgent financial and military assistance as well as special treatment by Ethiopia’s embassy in Nairobi.¹¹

The vice-president of SANU, Philip Pedak Lieth, similarly underlined the need to maintain friendship and cooperation between his faction and Ethiopia; and requested around five thousand arms to be secretly delivered via Gambella and financial assistance to the amount of US\$120,000. Pedak was invited to come to Ethiopia, and he convinced the officials regarding SANU’s armed struggle and the assistance they desperately needed from Ethiopia. He was instructed to bring all the military and political leaders of his faction to Addis Ababa for implementation talks, which he did by June 1965. In addition, Ethiopia arranged for Pedak to meet higher officials of the OAU. In spite of the split within SANU and the subsequent creation of the Anya-Nya Liberation Front (Azania) around June 1965, Ethiopia decided to continue supporting the faction militarily and financially.¹²

More expressive of Ethiopia’s stance on South Sudan was the response it gave to Sudan on the return of refugees in June 1965. Following the failure of the March 1965 Round Table Conference (RTC) sponsored by the central government and the subsequent escalation of the war in the south, Sudanese rulers issued a general amnesty declaration in June. Subsequently, they approached Ethiopia to repatriate all refugees currently present in its territories. The Ethiopian response was a categorical denial of the presence of southern refugees inside Ethiopia and the country’s association with any of the factions.¹³

Nonetheless, the two countries managed temporarily to resolve the matter after the July 1965 talks in Addis Ababa. In the Memorandum of Agreement that was signed, they agreed that “neither party should engage itself or allow its own nationals or nationals of the other

party or any foreign state or any other person or institution within its jurisdiction to engage in any type of activities that are harmful or designed to harm the national interests of the other party."¹⁴ Using the lull, the two parties exchanged the list of refugees-cum-rebels to be expelled; this, however, was not implemented.

The accord between the two governments coincided with the internal political divide within SANU and its apparent weakness in 1966. Ethiopian authorities were troubled by the dismissal of Philip Pedak from his vice-presidency in April and particularly the latter's decision to go to Khartoum for peace talks without prior consultation. The report prepared on the matter specially advised caution on the possibility that Pedak and his close allies were spies of the government of the Sudan. In the meantime, Ethiopia was strengthening its contact with the Azania Liberation Front. In a letter addressed to the emperor, the faction's representative in Congo, Akuot Atem de Mayen, appealed for secret aid in arms that could be channeled through its branch office in Addis Ababa.¹⁵

Sudan's official statement on the growing number of Eritrean refugees (about 300,000) in its territory and its appeal to the UN High Commission for Refugees for assistance since March 1967 (which Ethiopia considered was an intentional act to internationalize the cause of the rebels) again changed the equation. Irrespective of Ethiopia's protests, both to the government of Sudan and the UN, the former had received funding to the amount of 1,000,000 dollars for 1967 and 2,125,000 dollars for 1969. Sudan's intentional violation of the rule of reciprocity guiding the conduct between the two countries had for long angered the imperial government. As a result, a policy directive was issued whereby Ethiopia would publicize the issue of around twenty thousand South Sudanese refugees in its territory and seek assistance from the international community. The ministry of interior was instructed to prepare their list and gather them in refugee camps along the Ethio-Sudanese border.¹⁶

Following the executive decision regarding reprisal measures against Sudan, Ethiopia intensified its assistance to South Sudan rebels. The nature of support was so visible that the embassy of Sudan could easily trace the activities of prominent rebel leaders, including Philip Pedak, Steven Lam, and David Goak. These included the attack they launched on Pochalla and Tedo districts from their bases in Gambella and the involvement of the embassy of Israel and British journalists in the process. The response of the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Sudan's accusations betrayed a sinister motive of frustrating the other party. It claimed of not knowing the whereabouts of Pedak and his friends, requested the copy of *The Daily Telegraph* in which the British journalists published "malicious anti-Sudan propaganda," and promised to investigate the attacks on Pochalla and Tedo emanating from inside Ethiopian territory.¹⁷

Ethiopia's contact with rebel activities was further strengthened after the May 1969 coup that brought Nimeiri to power and the status of first-rate-enemy was accorded to Sudan soon afterwards. A range of measures taken by Ethiopia facilitated the clandestine mission of the rebels. These included the establishment in 1969/70 of Gambella refugee camps for about twenty thousand South Sudanese; the UN aid Ethiopia secured (not only for the period stated above, but the back payment to the amount of one million US dollars for earlier dates); and the creation of provisional secretariat for South Sudan refugees that would coordinate security issues and aid distribution.¹⁸

Through a joint Ethio-Israeli venture, selected South Sudanese refugees were sent to Israel for special military training. After completion, they were deployed into South Sudan via the Gambella refugee camps. On one occasion, for example, the government of Sudan discovered the presence in the refugee camps of ten returnees. Ethiopian officials had to

relocate them before the joint investigation committee arrived in the designated area. The fact that the Sudanese side knew about the presence of Israeli trainers in rebel training camps inside Ethiopia and rebel-held Sudan and that they found out about the military operation plans that designated May 1971 as the starting date of a general attack against government forces made the Ethiopian authorities equally nervous.¹⁹

The November 1970 military incursions of Sudan into the Akobo district (Gambella) under the pretext of hot pursuit of the rebels further aggravated the situation. Outraged by the resulting attacks on its nationals, the imperial government sanctioned the deployment of a special army unit to secure the frontier region in addition to issuing a formal diplomatic protest. The Ansar revolt of 1969/70 and the intensification of southern rebel military missions against government forces, coupled with Ethiopia's role in the process, could be considered as synchronized measures targeting the Nimeiri regime. The truce the two countries made following the March 1971 agreement and the reciprocal state visits of Nimeiri and Hayla-Selassie, in November 1971 and January 1972, respectively, temporarily cooled tensions.²⁰

The Addis Ababa Accord of March 1972 between the Nimeiri government and the Anya-Nya, also known as the South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), has to be viewed within the above general context. Ethiopia's role was limited to arranging the venue and applying pressure on the negotiating parties. In this regard, Emperor Hayla-Selassie's personal diplomacy deserves special credit. The Ethiopian sovereign employed his aura and the respect he enjoyed within African circles (as was manifested during the mediation efforts of the Algeria-Morocco boundary conflict of 1964 and the Nigerian Civil War of 1969). The emperor particularly persuaded Nimeiri's Sudan to accept the initiatives for peace talks of the World Council of Churches, the All African Council of Churches, and the Sudan Council of Churches.²¹

Apart from the presence of Foreign Minister Menasie Haile and the emperor's personal representative, Nebiye-Le'ul Kefle, in the formal procedures and the emperor on the occasion of the signing of the agreement, together with the separate audience he gave the two sides, however, Ethiopia's role was minimal. Contrary to the belief that Nimeiri and Hayla-Selassie had arranged for the peace deal beforehand, the talking points prepared for the state visits did not in any way refer to the upcoming negotiation. The premonition that the semi-autonomous arrangement between north and south Sudan might reflect negatively on Ethiopia's intricate relation with its northern province, Eritrea, effectively deterred both the emperor and his government from taking an active part in the negotiation process. One document, for example, simply put Ethiopia's role as an effort of a good neighbor to sustain the national unity of the Sudan, comparable to its contributions to the independence of that country and the 1958 mediation role in the boundary conflict between Egypt and the Sudan.²²

Within two years of the signing of the Addis Ababa Accord, signs started to emerge indicating the crumbling of the deal. According to Ethiopian authorities, the continuing backwardness of the south, the indifference of the central government at a time of massive flooding, the disarmament of the South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA) army without integration into the national force as was promised by the 1972 Accord, the unilateral benefit reaped by SSLM leaders like Joseph Lagu in the process, and the rejection of the Addis Ababa agreement by some rebel factions in the South were among the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the accord.

The reaction in the south against the joint Egyptian-Sudanese plan to construct the Jonglei Canal in October 1974 was considered by the Ethiopian side as the immediate cause for the bloody student uprising in Juba (14-16 October 1974) and the army mutiny in Akobo, Upper Nile State (March 1975). The harsh reprisal measures of the central government against the mutinous Anya-Nya and the subsequent mass exodus into Ethiopia revived the old tension between the two countries.²³ Ethiopia's plea for humanitarian assistance was considered by the government of Sudan as an act intended to internationalize the incident.

The February 1976 mutiny in the town of Wau (Bahr al Gazel), the assassination of northern officers, and the subsequent desertion of one hundred fifty South Sudanese members of the army was, according to Ethiopian sources, the turning point in the relation between the north and the south. Simultaneously, the growing association between Sudan and Egypt as was manifested by the Mutual Defense Agreement (July 1976), the deployment of huge Sudanese military force along its frontiers with Ethiopia, and the increasing assistance Nimeiri's government rendered to Eritrean rebels afterward heavily strained bilateral relations between the two countries.²⁴

The Derg and South Sudan

The conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan first flared up following the antagonistic stance that Nimeiri's government assumed immediately after the September 1974 Revolution in Ethiopia. Nimeiri's retreat from his role as mediator in the conflict between the Eritrean rebels and the Ethiopian government together with his integration plan with Egypt alarmed members of the Derg. Soon afterwards, Nimeiri started to court, train, and arm "anti-revolutionary" and separatist elements, notably the Eritrean ones, irrespective of the Derg's Nine Point Peace Initiative on Eritrea (issued in May 1976), which requested Sudan's assistance. In addition he launched an intensive propaganda campaign via the state media, Radio Omdurman.²⁵

The Derg started to organize politically South Sudanese refugees in Gambella and Addis Ababa as early as April 1975. But no meaningful operation was planned and staged for the coming couple of years.²⁶ The Ethio-Sudan rapprochement from the late 1970s to the early 1980s seemingly contributed to the lack of joint ventures with southern rebels. Following the decline of friendly relations between the two governments, however, Ethiopia continued openly to support the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement and its armed wing (SPLM/A) from the mid-1980s on. In fact, it had a role in the creation of the Movement in June 1983 and significantly contributed towards its crystallization thereafter. Under the general supervision of the Ministry of Defense, Ethiopia rendered material, financial, and moral assistance to what it dubbed "Project 07." The project trained the military wing of the Movement, fully equipped it, and supervised military operations conducted in Sudan.²⁷

Ethiopian officials equally monitored the propaganda campaign of SPLM/A. In a bid to pressure Nimeiri's regime to assume a similar position in relation to its contact with Eritrean rebels, the policy of SPLM was designed to emphasize its commitment towards the national unity of Sudan. Through such assistance, the rebels managed to stage an all front attack on Nimeiri's Sudan. By early 1984, to the delight of Ethiopian officials, SPLA intensified its attacks and managed to disrupt crucial projects like the construction of the Jonglei Canal and the oil exploration in South Sudan. Simultaneously, Sudan's denunciation of Ethiopia's involvement in the conflict increased. The growing presence of the US in the Sudan and the commitment of the Reagan Administration to supply arms, coupled with Sudan's

permission to allow the former to use its airfields and ports, pushed “socialist” Ethiopia to intensify its assistance to SPLA.²⁸

More expressive of Ethiopia’s stand on the matter was the alarm felt at the discovery of Sudan’s plot to assassinate SPLM/A commander Col. John Garang and his followers while they were in Addis Ababa in March 1984. Even more alarming was Nimeiri’s reconciliation talks with a SPLM/A splinter group, Anya-Nya 2, in October of the same year and the establishment of a Peace Committee (with thirty members both from north and south) in March 1985. The assurance that came from its embassy in Khartoum dismissing the latter measures as insignificant and as acts of desperation on the part of Nimeiri came as a relief to the officials. Ethiopia thereafter increased its involvement in the south. It commenced an open propaganda mission through Radio Ethiopia in support of the rebels and contributed its share in the release of West German, French, and Swiss nationals kidnapped by the SPLA.²⁹

The downfall of the Nimeiri regime in April 1985, however, failed to alter the equation of Ethiopia’s relations with SPLM/A. The new government in Khartoum, led by Sadiq al-Mahdi, soon approached Ethiopia’s rulers for rapprochement talks and proposed the immediate reactivation of all joint ministerial commissions. The vice chairman of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) voiced his government’s disappointment at Ethiopia’s failure to take its own steps to set right their troubled relations. The foreign affairs division of the central committee of the Ethiopian Workers Party (EWP) came out with a strong response to this accusation. Ethiopia insisted that the above measures were futile unless Sudan took the initiative to set the record straight and revise its anti-Ethiopian position (i.e., recognition of the cause of Eritrean secessionists). Sudan was requested to initiate policy lines to this effect as well as fully implement them in order to resolve the existing problem between the two.³⁰

The military solution the TMC preferred to solve the South Sudan problem and the anti-SPLM/A rally in Khartoum, allegedly co-sponsored by the TMC and the National Islamic Front (NIF) in a bid to isolate the former and its supporters in the north as well as to bolster the morale of the disillusioned national army, were indicative of the upcoming relation between Ethiopia and the Sudan. The establishment by the TMC (October 1985) of the Ministerial Committee on Southern Sudan that would organize a national reconciliation conference on Southern Sudan, as a result, was interpreted among Ethiopian circles as a futile gesture.³¹

Likewise, the January 1986 proposal of Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the UMMA party, to the government of Ethiopia to amend the troubled relations and enter into dialogue with SPLM/A was dismissed as political manipulation on the part of the former in light of the upcoming general elections in April. In the meantime, Ethiopia intensified its logistic and propaganda assistance to SPLA, its planes parachuting deliveries and conducting air surveillance deep inside southern Sudan.³²

Regarding the reconciliation talks, relatively better attention was given to the initiative of the National Alliance for Dialogue with SPLM/A with the aim of negotiating a ceasefire in the civil war ahead of the April elections. The delegation of around twenty members, assembled from various northern parties, was allowed to come to Ethiopia for the talks scheduled for mid-March 1986. Ambassador Yelma Tadese, Acting Foreign Minister, heralded the beginning of the Koka Dam Talks (19-24 March), named after the lakeside resort where they were held. After applauding the first formal meeting between the

representatives of SPLM/A and the National Alliance for the Salvation of Sudan, Ambassador Yelma went on recounting the essence of the occasion:

The gathering is historic in that it brings together the popular and patriotic forces of the Sudan who had the courage not only to resist the now defunct regime of Gaafar Nimeiri but also to go beyond and challenge that dictatorial and oppressive system to the very end. Some had no option but to take up arms in a militant struggle to resist the oppressive tentacles of the "Nayo" regime while others had to resort to tactics of protest in order to paralyze and dismantle the machineries of the Government presided over by Gaafar Nimeiri. One fact is clear to us here – that without the courageous, combined and selfless struggle of the popular and democratic forces in the Sudan, its people would no doubt have continued to languish in deprivation and instability and our region would also have continued to suffer from the absence of peace and harmony therein.³³

The Koka Dam Meeting got off to a poor start, however, when Col. Garang questioned the credentials of the informal alliance to negotiate such a deal, and accused the government of Gen. Abdul Rahman Swar al-Dahab of escalating the fighting in the south to coincide with the talks. The rebel leader presented conditions to be met for the meeting and any future reconciliation talks to succeed. These included terms that the leadership in Khartoum, present and future, should recognize that the SPLM rebellion was not a southern problem but a national one, that it lift the current state of emergency ahead of any talks on a ceasefire, and that it repeal all defense agreements with foreign nations.

The remaining two conditions demanded the abrogation of the Islamic Sharia laws introduced under Nimeiri and that the TMC led by Gen. Dahab commit itself to the convening of a national constitutional conference prior to relinquishing power. When pressed by a Sudanese journalist whether Ethiopia was playing the "SPLM card" to counter Sudanese support for separatists in Eritrea, the colonel wittily replied "I didn't know that Sudan was supporting the Eritreans, thank you for the information." On the probe regarding the genesis of the SPLM insurgency, Garang again elusively denied any involvement on the part of Ethiopia at any level in the evolution of the movement. On the other hand, the inclusion in the SPLM delegation of Dr. Mansur Kahlid (a prominent northern politician and former member of the Nimeiri cabinet) angered members of the National Alliance, resulting in the walkout from the Koka talks of the Islamic Socialist Front and the Peoples' Revolutionary Committee.³⁴

In spite of the murky start, the negotiating parties, the SPLM and the National Alliance for Salvation (NAS), agreed to hold a constitutional conference in Khartoum the following June and formed a follow up committee that would oversee matters until the conference took place. Their joint communiqué called on the political forces and the TMC to take into consideration that the objective of the constitutional conference was to discuss the main problems of the Sudan and not the so-called southern problem. The SPLM/A, in return, agreed that even though it would not contest in the upcoming general election it would recognize the government to be elected and continue the reconciliation talks afterward.³⁵ Ethiopian authorities deemed the occasion historic and a huge success irrespective of the mixed reaction it faced among the leading political parties in Sudan. Particularly, the confused position displayed by the UMMA party, which was the major proponent of the

Koka declaration but chose to assume a nonchalant position in its official statements afterwards, was considered typical of Sudanese unpredictability.³⁶

Sudan's general election and the talks between Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi and Col. Garang in April and July 1986 were perceived by Ethiopian officials as constructive steps to resolve the civil war. The al-Mahdi government dispatched successive delegations to the region as well as other parts of the continent and the world in an effort to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. One document reveals that in all of these missions, Ethiopia was referred to as the prominent actor in the civil war and that al-Mahdi's government would not accept its involvement in the negotiation process. This was interpreted as a strategy to isolate Ethiopia and wrench Col. Garang from its influence. In the meantime, Ethiopia's support to SPLA in its drive to control the territories of the south vis-à-vis the growing military missions of the central government was intensified. The resultant conflict between the two countries continued to further afflict their relations so much that Sudan decided to recall its ambassador in November 1986.³⁷

In the face of the growing discord between the two governments, the Ethiopian side apparently preferred pressuring the SPLM/A into continuing its dialogue with the National Alliance for Salvation (NAS) on the proposed constitutional conference. The attempt on the part of Sudan to drag President Mubarak of Egypt into the conflict, particularly the latter's willingness to approach the Ethiopian leader "in a bid to put an end to the rebellion in Southern Sudan," demonstrated the extent of the problem. According to the Sudanese foreign minister, Sharif Zein al-Handi, Mubarak was "disgusted over the recent Ethiopian violations taking into consideration that the strategic threat of rebellion in Southern Sudan poses a threat to Egypt as well."³⁸

In April 1987, Sudan took the initiative to mend its troubled relations with Ethiopia and proposed a set of measures to be taken by both sides. The proposal, among others, required that the two assert their respect for the unity and sovereignty of each other and abide by the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Irrespective of its assurance for good neighborly relations, Ethiopia continued to support the SPLA's intensification of its offensive towards the towns of Akobo and Kurmuk in Upper Nile region. In July 1987, Sudanese authorities again extended their readiness for peace talks with Ethiopia through their ambassador in Nairobi. In particular, they proposed face-to-face talks between Ethiopia's President Mengistu and al-Mahdi.³⁹

In September, the SPLM/A leader expressed his readiness for a ceasefire and reconciliation talks if the Sudanese government showed a willingness to implement the Koka Declaration of March 1986. The Ethiopian government similarly agreed to facilitate a meeting between the two leaders during an upcoming OAU summit in Addis Ababa in October. Mengistu and al-Mahdi met for the first time in Kampala, Uganda, on the sidelines of the East and Central African Countries Preferential Trade Area (PTA) summit conference. In the two days meeting, they agreed "to step back from the brinkmanship that could easily lead to war between them" and decided to focus on peaceful means to resolve their differences and to contain the problems that confronted them on their common borders. The two leaders also entrusted the Joint Ministerial Committee with the task of identifying the root cause of the existing problems between Ethiopia and Sudan and recommending solutions.⁴⁰

In the meantime, the effort to reconcile SPLM/A and Anya-Nya II in a meeting held in Gambella in mid-November 1987 had failed, allegedly because of the former's preconditions, including the merger of the two movements under the leadership of John

Garang. The intense battle between the SPLA and the central army in early December 1987 and the alleged involvement of Ethiopia (and Cuba) on the side of the SPLA continued to mar the possibility of restoration of good relations between the two countries.⁴¹

In spite of the above setbacks, the leaders of the two countries again met in Djibouti on 22 March 1988 during the second summit of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD). Even if no substantial agreement was concluded, the fact that they did manage to affirm their commitment towards peaceful coexistence and to exchange views on possible items that could be included in the agenda of the next meeting (scheduled to be held in Addis Ababa in April) was considered promising.⁴² However, Sudan's unilateral peace effort to solve the civil war in the south, as was demonstrated by the Harare and Nairobi missions (February 1988), and even more significantly the shuttle diplomacy of Nigeria's Gen. Obasanjo and Francis Deng (March 1988) were not accepted by Ethiopian officials.

The Harare inter-governmental forum on African problems, in its discussion on Sudan, failed to bring about any result other than urging the warring parties to find immediate peaceful solution to the conflict and facilitate the efforts of Obasanjo and Deng. Rather, the occasion was exploited by the warring parties to propagate their political agenda; as was demonstrated by the composition of their carefully assembled delegation. The SPLM/A was represented by Mansur Khalid, a northern Muslim and a high level official during the Nimeiri regime, while the central government chose the southern Christian, Mathew Obur.⁴³

Ethiopia particularly rejected the mediation efforts of Obasanjo and Deng based on a number of considerations. First, the initiative was originally forwarded by the Woodrow Wilson Center (which Ethiopia considered was a CIA affiliate) with the aim of resolving the crisis in the Sudan independent of the secessionist struggle in Northern Ethiopia. Obasanjo confided to Ethiopian diplomats that the purpose of his mission was to personally reconcile Garang and al-Mahdi. Thus, the authorities perceived the effort to be detrimental to Ethiopia's national interests. Second, the selection of Deng himself was not accepted. According to the document, during the Freetown Talks of December 1977, for example, Francis Deng (leader of the Sudanese delegation) ridiculed Ethiopia's position on Eritrea and argued that Ethiopia should not use the case of Southern Sudan to resolve the war in Eritrea. The Ethiopian side in turn claimed that he was a CIA operative disguised under his current position as a research associate at the Wilson Center.

As a countermeasure, Ethiopia hosted a meeting in Addis Ababa between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and SPLM/A from 18 to 20 August 1988. The DUP was represented by its deputy secretary-general, Sayid-Ahmed el-Hussein, and the SPLM/A by Dr. Lam Akol Ajawin, alternate member of the political-military high command. Discussions were held on the 'national' problem (for SPLM/A insisted its cause should not be considered a South Sudan problem) and possible practical solutions to push forward the peace process. They agreed to arrange a meeting in the near future between Sayid Mohamed Osman el-Mirghani, the patron of the DUP, and Dr. John Garang.⁴⁴

The meeting took place in a cordial atmosphere in Addis Ababa in November 1988. Ethiopian officials were delighted and, to the dismay of religious hardliners in Sudan, both parties deemed the occasion a success. They signed an agreement, the Sudanese Peace Initiative, which included terms like the convocation of the proposed constitutional conference and all the related articles of the September 1983 laws, cancellation of military agreements signed between Sudanese governments and other countries, lifting the state of emergency, and imposition of a ceasefire between the warring sides in the south.

Irrespective of the opposition the agreement met from the National Islamic Front (NIF) and other hardliners, Ethiopia continued to pressure Sudanese officials, including the UMMA leader and Prime Minister, al-Mahdi, into adopting it.⁴⁵

A high level delegation led by Fekre-Selassie Wegderes, the prime minister, was dispatched to Khartoum in a bid to further capitalize on the positive developments. The Sudanese premier promised to convince the Eritrean rebels to open dialogue with the delegation without any precondition and requested an audience for a high level Sudanese delegation with Mengistu and Garang regarding the designated constitutional conference to be conducted well before December 1988. The response given tacitly declined arranging any contact with the Ethiopian leader and Garang, apparently to pressure the Sudanese side into fully committing to the reconciliation process.⁴⁶

The latter were fully disadvantaged following the withdrawal of the DUP from the coalition government in late December and the growing political isolation it subsequently faced. The prime minister confided to the Ethiopian ambassador on his party's readiness to accept the Addis Ababa Agreement (Sudanese Peace Initiative) of November 1988 as well as the commitment to convene all Eritrean factions for peace talks under the principle of Ethiopia's territorial unity. According to al-Mahdi, all of them accepted the proposal except Isaias Afwerki, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) leader. The Sudanese premier promised to take strong measures against him and his faction unless he accepted the offer immediately. Al-Mahdi's special envoy, Mubarak al-Fadil al-Mahdi, reaffirmed these points in his meeting with Mengistu and the Ethiopian foreign minister in early January 1989.⁴⁷

The intensification by the SPLA of its military offensive and its apparent success in controlling strategic towns such as Nasser around January 1989, however, distracted the two states from the positive course of reconciliation. Soon, the Sudanese side resumed its accusation of Ethiopia regarding its involvement in the civil war and meddling in party politics, particularly in favor of the DUP. The Ethiopian side, however, continued to host reconciliation talks among the Sudanese parties. In early February, for example, it organized the Ambo consultative conference composed of the SPLM/A as well as academics and intellectuals drawn from the northern part of the country. This conference ended up calling for the convocation of a constitutional conference, observance of immediate ceasefire and justice and equality for all the people of the country.⁴⁸

Ethiopia hosted yet another peace talks between the Peace Ministerial Committee of the central government and the SPLM/A in Addis Ababa (10-11 June 1989). The major objective of this meeting was to establish "peace corridors in order to guarantee relief flow to needy people in the south."⁴⁹ In a parallel development, Prime Minister Fekre-Selassie Wegderes visited Sudan in June 1989. Afterward, the two countries strove to improve their relations. As was always the case in the region, the new regime of Omar Hassan al-Bashir (June 1989) pushed towards an immediate resolution of the common problems in Ethio-Sudan relations. The two leaders met for the first time during the 25th OAU Summit in Addis Ababa and decided to negotiate immediately with all the rebel groups in their territories. The letters they exchanged showed their eagerness for such an undertaking in the near future.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, they soon returned to the old practice of destabilization missions as the means of realizing their objectives. Bashir's unilateral ceasefire that lasted till September and the unsuccessful efforts of the steering peace committee he established failed to convince the Ethiopian side. Rather, the latter perceived them as a deceptive strategy designed to camouflage the opening of comprehensive military missions against the SPLM/A and the strengthening of Khartoum's contact with the Eritrean rebels. The consequence of this

understanding was the intensification of SPLA military attacks on the army of the central government. One intelligence report, for example, requested the destruction of the vital bridge leading to Juba town; and instruction for the immediate execution of the mission was passed to concerned Ethiopian authorities.⁵¹

The customary accusations started to flare up from both sides. To the frustration of the Ethiopian authorities, though, Sudan resorted to its original claim that the problem in Eritrea was different from the one in their southern region. Ethiopia began to indifferently follow up the US-sponsored mediation talks between the SPLM/A and the central government held in Nairobi from 30 November to 5 December 1989. The fact that the two parties failed to reach a consensus on most of the talking points must have come as a relief to Ethiopian officials. Ethiopia's displeasure over Sudan's open assistance to Eritrean rebels was conveyed to Al-Bashir on December 1989, and the latter at the same time condemned Ethiopia's involvement in the SPLA offensive that ended up capturing the strategic town of Kurmuk.⁵² In the following years, till the fall of the military regime in Ethiopia (May 1991), relations between the two countries remained at their lowest level. They continued to unreservedly support each other's rebel groups.

Conclusion

The imperial regime and the Derg mostly felt that their counterparts in the Sudan were intent on destabilizing Ethiopia and were readily cooperating with forces having a similar agenda. Sudan's support to Ethiopian secessionist elements and anti-government forces remained the central points of disagreement between the two countries.

The understanding that the Sudanese regimes willingly availed their services to the traditional enemies of Ethiopia in North Africa and the Middle East further aggravated the situation. In a bid to appease Sudanese rulers and to discourage their negative activities, the imperial regime went as far as collaborating in the mopping up missions of South Sudanese rebels. The Derg equally sought the mediation role of the Nimeiri regime, which it believed was one of the major sponsors of Eritrean rebels.

In the face of Sudan's persistent support of the Eritrean rebels, the two successive regimes engaged in activities they deemed necessary to protect Ethiopia's vital interests. Apart from labeling the Sudan the number one enemy of the state, the imperial regime went as far as being involved in a plot to topple Nimeiri from power. The Derg's response came by way of giving unconditional support to the SPLM/A.

The end result was the chronic internal turmoil in the two countries and their ultimate partial disintegration, as was witnessed by the birth of the states of Eritrea and South Sudan. In retrospect, what has happened in the region, specifically, the independence of Eritrea and South Sudan (May 1991 and July 2011 respectively) was in part the result of this extended conflict and had the blessing of the two states.

Notes

- 1 Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Folder Number: Sudan, File Number: 36-D2 (Hear afterwards, MoFA Sudan 36-D2). Memorandum to Sudan: 19 April 1967. See also Poggo 2009, pp. 40-47.
- 2 MoFA Sudan 29-D2 5. Report on the Realities of South Sudan: 3 February 1963. MoFA

- Sudan 36-D2. Memorandum to Sudan: 19 April 1967. For the nature of Sudanese regimes in this period and their policy towards the South see Poggo 2002, pp. 67-101.
- 3 MoFA Sudan 26-D2 11. Treaty of Brotherhood and Alliance: 1 August 1957 and the Cultural Agreement of 6 February 1960. MoFA Sudan 1 B and Sudan 26-D2 11. Extradition Agreement of 29 March 1964.
 - 4 MoFA Sudan 36-D2. Memorandum to Sudan: 19 April 1967.
 - 5 Ibid. Felix Schnyder (High Commissioner for Refugees) to MoFA: 27 June 1963; Berhanu Bahta (Director General, MoFA) to Felix Schnyder: 8 July 1963.
 - 6 MoFA Sudan 29-D2 5. Report on the Realities of South Sudan: 3 February 1963. See also Poggo 2009, pp. 113-19.
 - 7 MoFA Ertra 68-D5 20. Memo on Sudan's Support to the Eritrean Rebel groups. Dej. Kefle Ergetu (Chief of Public Security) to the Emperor: 18 & 20 January and 12 April 1965; MoFA Sudan 28-D2 130. Memo to Ketema Yifru (Foreign Minister) on Rebel Activities in the Sudan: 24 April 1965.
 - 8 MoFA Sudan 28-D2 148. Proposed Plan of Action Against Sudan and Somalia: 1955 E.C (1962); William Deng to Emperor Hayla-Selassie: 16 December 1963. Hamid 1986, pp. 165-176. See also Voll 1985, pp. 138-41.
 - 9 MoFA Sudan 28-D2 1. Memo on Ethio-Sudan Relations and Ethiopia's Counter Measures: 8 December 1964; Talking Points Prepared by Sudan: November 1964.
 - 10 MoFA Sudan 29-D2 4. Memo to the Emperor on Ethio-Sudan Relations: November 1964. MoFA Sudan 28- D2 1. Memo to Ketema on Possible Counter Measures against Sudan: 5 April 1965.
 - 11 MoFA Sudan 28-D2 112. Alphonse Malek Pajok (SAFFUC Secretary General) to Ketema: 2 February 1965.
 - 12 Ibid. Philip Pedak Lieth to Ketema: 5 April 1965. Memo to Ketema on relations with SANU: 17 June 1965; Memo to Ketema on SANU: 28 June 1965; Memo to Ketema on Helping SANU: 30 June 1965.
 - 13 Ibid. Memo Regarding Talks with Sudan official on South Sudan Refugees in Ethiopia: 30 June 1965. The RTC had played its role in the split of SANU, for some southern politicians like Philip Pedak had succumbed to the ploy of the government. See below.
 - 14 MoFA Sudan 38-D2. Record of Agreements, Meetings and Communiqués. Joint Communiqué: 28 July 1965; Memorandum of Agreement between the Governments of Sudan and Ethiopia: 28 July 1965. MoFA Sudan 34-D2. Instructions Limiting the Actions of South Sudan Refugees in Ethiopia: 10 March 1966.
 - 15 MoFA Sudan 29-D2 5. Report on the Leaders of SANU: 29 July 1966. MoFA Sudan 28-D2 180. Akuot Atem de Mayen to Hayla-Selassie: 17 November 1966.
 - 16 MoFA Sudan 28-D2 1. Memo on actions to be taken against Sudan: 27 December 1966.
 - 17 MoFA Sudan 28-D2 129. Intelligence Report from Within Sudan Embassy: 15 June 1968. MoFA Sudan 23-D2 36. MoFA's Response to Sudan's Accusation of Ethiopia's Involvement in South Sudan: 25 June 1968.
 - 18 MoFA Sudan 27-D2 teraz [archive] 2. Memo on South Sudan rebels: 29 October 1969; Report on Aspects of Sudan's Enmity to Ethiopia: 28 April 1970. MoFA Sudan 27-D2 teraz 1. Aid Plan for South Sudan Refugees in Gambella: 6 November 1970). MoFA Sudan 27-D2 teraz 5. Report on South Sudan Rebels in Ethiopia: 10 April 1970. See also Poggo 2009, pp. 155-61.

- 19 MoFA Sudan 26-D2. Ketema Yifru to Bitweded Zewde Gebre-Heywot: 1 August 1970. Also see Johnson 2003, pp. 36-37. MoFA Sudan 27-D2 țeraz 5. Memo to Ketema on Sudan's Discovery of the Extent of Ethiopia's Role: 9 January 1970.
- 20 MoFA ye etiyo-sudan wesən gudah [Ethio-Sudanese boundary affair] 3 285. Ketema to Maj. Gen. Yelma Shibeshi (Commander of the Police Force): 10 January 1971. MoFA Sudan 29-D2 2. Memo on Ethio-Sudan Relations: September 1971.
- 21 Regassa 2010, pp. 100-08. Badal 1972. Informant: Ambassador Berhanu Dinqa.
- 22 MoFA ye etiyo-sudan wesən gudah 1 țeraz 1. Report on Ethio-Sudan Relations: 18 October 1982. MoFA Sudan 29-D2 4. Memo to the Emperor on Ethio-Sudan Relations: September 1971. MoFA Sudan 29- D2 6. Talking points with Nimeiri on his Visit to Addis Ababa: September 1971. Regassa 2010, pp. 100-108; Wai 1981, p. 154; Alier 2003, pp. 91-95, 106-108, 113-114.; Deng 1991, pp. 24-31; Poggo 2009, pp. 184-192.
- 23 MoFA Sudan 24-D2 23. Memo on Sudan Political Situation: 1967 E.C (1975). MoFA ye sudan teqawami hayloch [opposition power] 1 țeraz 1. Ambassador Yelma Tadese (Khartoum) to Kefle Wodajo (Minister of Foreign Affairs). On Crumbling Pease Deal: 21 February 1976. See also Wakoson 1989, pp. 8-18; Johnson 2003, pp. 39-50. MoFA etiyo-sudan 3 țeraz 1. Taye Reta (Ministry of Interior, Director of Border Administration Division) to MoFA. On Sudan's Incursions along Gambella: 29 April 1975. MoFA ye sudan teqawami hayloch 1 țeraz 1. Taye Reta to UN High Commission for Refugees: 7 July 1975; Asfaw Legese (Assistant Minister, MoFA) to Ministry of Interior. On Sudan Government Statement on South Sudan Refugees: 11 July 1975.
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- 25 MoFA Sudan 24-D2, Memo to Gen. Teferi Bante on Nimeiri's Press Conference Regarding the Eritrean Situation, 27 May 1975; MoFA etiyo-sudan wesən [boundary] 3 țeraz 2, Report on Foreign Minister Kefle Wodajo's Three Days Visit to Khartoum: 27 March 1976. Also, Erlich 2012, 107-115. MoFA ye etiyo-sudan ye wesən gudah 1 țeraz 1. Ambassador Yelma Tadese (Khartoum) to Tibebe Beqele (Permanent Representative of the Derg in MoFA). Study Report on Ethio-Sudan Relations: 18 October 1982.
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- 28 MoFA ye sudan teqawami hayloch 1 țeraz 1. Wendwesen Habte-Selassie (Charge de Affairs, Sudan) to African and Middle East Directorate (MoFA): 9 March 1984. See also Field 2000, 7. MoFA ye sudan teqawami hayloch 1 țeraz 2. Ambassador Yelma (Khartoum) to Goshu Wolde (Minister of Foreign Affairs). On SPLM/A Appeal to the

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- 29 MoFA ye sudan teqawami hayloch 1 teraz 2. Ambassador Yelma to Goshu Wolde: 29 March 1984; Ambassador Yelma (Director, African and Middle East Directorate) to Ethiopia's Embassy in Khartoum: 31 October 1984; Wendwesen Habte-Selassie (Charge de Affairs, Khartoum) to African and Middle East Directorate: 2 November and 14 December 1984; Analysis Report on the Sudan Peace Committee: 21 March 1985; Report on West German Hostages Hijacked by SPLA: 9 March 1984; West German Embassy to MoFA on its Citizens Hijacked by SPLA: 1 June 1984; Complaint from the Government of Sudan on Ethiopia's Pro-SPLM/A Propaganda: 1 November 1984; Engeda Gebre-Medhen (Charge de Affairs, Paris) to Tibebe Beqele (MoFA). On French Citizens Hijacked by SPLA: 15 November 1984. Ambassador Yelma (African Directorate) to Ambassador Kassa Kebede (Genève). On Freed Swiss Nationals: 8 February 1985.
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- 35 Ibid. SPLM-NAS Joint Communiqué: 26 March 1986; Ambassador Yelma (Acting Foreign Minister) to Wendwesen (Khartoum): 27 March 1986.
- 36 Ibid. Getachew Yesuf (Charge de Affairs, Khartoum) to Ambassador Yelma: 6 April 1986; Ambassador Yelma to Getachew Yesuf (Khartoum): 12 April 1986. Also see Akol 2009, pp. 54-58; Bechtold 1991, pp. 14-15.
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- 39 MoFA ye etiyo-sudan genegunet 3 teraz 2. Sudan MoFA to Embassy of Ethiopia: 11 April 1987; Andargachew Abegaz (Charge de Affairs, Khartoum) to African Directorate: 13 April 1987; Telegram on Mengestu's Message to Prime Minister al-Mahdi: 5 May 1987. Report on Sudan's Discreet Offer for Talks with Ethiopia: 21 July 1987. MoFA ye sudan teqawami hayloch 1 teraz 4. Reports on the Escalating SPLA Offensive and Ethiopia's Involvement: 13 April and 7 May 1987 and 26 June 1987.
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