

WSWS answers questions on coverage of Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict

15 June 1998

I would like to know your source(s) of information for this article, especially the short piece on the Eritrean bombing of an Ethiopian school. I believe this last is a propaganda piece, issued by the Ethiopian government in an attempt to discredit and demonize the Eritreans. I would like to hear your comments concerning the quality and veracity of the news coming out of the region.

EB

12 June 1998

Dear Editor

Your attempt to shed light on to the Eritrea/Ethiopia conflict is very encouraging. Your analysis contains several accurate socio-economic observations and provides the political background of the current conflict. However, in trying to explain the recent incidents you have unknowingly incorporated some of the hideous and false claims of the Ethiopian regime. For example, your comment: "In one of the bloodiest episodes, an Eritrean fighter plane dropped a cluster bomb into a schoolyard in the border town of Mekele, killing a dozen children." It is a known fact among the experts that Ethiopian jets attacked Asmara first and about one hour later an Eritrean jet attacked an air force base in Mekele blowing-up loaded cluster bombs.

Eritreans have suffered great injustice in the hands of the Ethiopian monarchy and communist dictators and thousands of innocent children have died like those in Mekele and it is very regrettable and sad but the Eritreans never deliberately targeted children!! Mengistu did, Haile Sellaissie did and now maybe unknowingly/foolishly Meles Zenawi is doing it again.

Sorry, it was not the Eritreans!!

DO

25 June 1998

Dear DO,

We have attempted to cover the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict as accurately as possible without the benefit of a correspondent on the scene. As to the bombing incident in Mekele, the civilian casualties and the damage to the school house were reported by various journalists who did go the site and their testimony was supported by photographs of both survivors of the attack and bodies of the dead. Those reporting on the bombing had no apparent motive for supporting the Ethiopian regime against the Eritrean.

As international socialists, we are politically hostile to both camps in this war. It is true, as you state, that the Eritrean people suffered terrible crimes at the hands of Haile Sellaissie and the Mengistu dictatorship. But, as the whole history of the former colonial world has shown, such a history of oppression has never stopped the nationalist bourgeoisie from carrying out its own atrocities, once it has gained state power.

(Mengistu's regime, the Dergue, it should be pointed out, was in no sense "communist." Like a number of military dictatorships and bourgeois nationalist regimes from that of Siad Barre in Somalia to Nimeiri's regime in Sudan, it adopted the rhetoric of "socialism" and even "Marxism-Leninism" to justify its own rule and its suppression of all opposition as well as to curry the favor and patronage of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy.)

Ethiopia may well carry out even worse crimes before this war is over. But what will be their source? Is it some Ethiopian propensity for aggression, a tendency from which Eritreans are uniquely immune? It is hard to sustain such a nationalist explanation, given that Meles Zenawi was himself a Tigrayan who came to power fighting in an alliance with the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front against the Ethiopian regime. In any

case, we do not determine our attitude toward this or any other conflict based upon who carried out the worst atrocity. Rather, we start from the social character of the regimes that have organized the mutual bloodletting.

I have no doubt that there are very strong nationalist pressures bearing down upon the peoples of both countries. But what progressive objectives can either side claim in waging this war? Is either the Eritrean or Ethiopian regime waging a struggle against imperialist oppression or fighting to defend or extend a more progressive social order against reaction? Clearly this is not the case. The two regimes are thrown into military conflict because of their organic weakness. Incapable of carrying out a genuinely progressive development of their economies and overcoming imperialist domination, these regimes of the national bourgeoisie resort to military measures in an attempt to seize territory and divert the social aspirations of their respective peoples into chauvinist hatred.

In the end, both geography and world politics dictate that there is no way forward for the working masses of Eritrea and Ethiopia outside of uniting in a common struggle against imperialism and their local oppressors as part of the worldwide struggle for socialism. It is within this context that I would urge you to view the present war. Let us condemn, without any hesitation, every atrocity and act of aggression, no matter what their source. This is necessary not only because the victims are defenseless people, but because these actions impede the revolutionary unity of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples and harm the cause of socialism.

Fraternally,
Bill Vann
for the WSWs

Dear Editor,

Having recently spent some months in Ethiopia as a student-researcher and teacher, I appreciate your insightful comments on the roots of this conflict. While I do not count myself a subscriber to your paper's politics, I do sympathize with them. The callousness and disregard for fact which has characterized too many of the stories found in mainstream media sources are regrettable and do a disservice to the peoples of this region and its proud history. Even more galling have

been the efforts of the Eritrean President to justify his country's actions on the grounds of Ethio-Italian treaties which, as you point out, were agreed too at the point of arms. To have this outrage compounded by the Italian government's arrogant intrusion in the guise of peace broker is sickening. Again, thank you for this intelligent analysis. I only hope that many more will take the time to read it.

EJ
11 June 1998



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