

From the Experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA) Part VIII and Final

(Also attached for ease of reference are all the previous 7 parts.)

By Nharnet Team (Jan 13, 2005)

(This is the 8th and final part of our series as brief presentation on the experiences of the ELA that we started to serialize in the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the commencement of our armed struggle we marked last September. Most of the material in the series was gleaned mainly from various issues of the Eritrean Newsletter and summaries from a small Arabic book authored by former ELA leaders, Abdalla Idris and Martyr Mahmoud Haseb. Today's Part VIII will conclude the series by briefly recounting developments starting with the reoccupation of the liberated towns in 1978.

It is a recommended 18-page reading as a sketchy but all the same important part from the history of our armed struggle. In particular, young Eritreans are requested to have a good glimpse on this part of the history and compare it with what they knew from other sources.)

The Setbacks of 1978

By the end of 1977, Eritrea was under virtual liberation by the ELF and the EPLF. The only major urban centers that remained under Ethiopian occupation were Asmara, Barentu and the two Eritrean ports of Assab and Massaw. Entry of the now defunct Soviet Union and its allies on the side of the Ethiopian military government halted for sometime the march for an inevitable victory of the Eritrean cause. With that heavy foreign support, the Ethiopians started to retake liberated zones of Eritrea through a major offensive that was launched in June 1978 from three flanks: the Mereb front, the Shambooko front and the Om Hajer front.

The ELA confronted the enemy at the three entry fronts for the reoccupation campaign and fought with unparalleled bravely and unwavering commitment to the national cause. However, the ELA had already plans of not engaging the enemy in the liberated towns in order to save the lives of our people and to avoid unnecessary martyrdom to the ELA fighters. At the end of the campaign, it was assessed that the ELA destroyed 130 tanks and armoured vehicles and shot down 11 fighter crafts and helicopters. The ELA also captured 40 tanks in various battlefields of that year. During the year 1978, the ELA registered that 1,395 of fighters were martyrs in those confrontations against the enemy.

At the end of the confrontations with the enemy, the ELA turned attention to reorganization of its rank and file. At this time, local forces were provoking the ELA assuming that it was now weak and that it could be dealt with easily. In spite of agreements between the ELF and the EPLF, the latter failed to send its units to ELF-held zones in western Eritrea and in the highlands while the ELF complied and sent ELA forces to northern Sahel and fought the enemy from within EPLF-held areas like the battles fought at Ela-Taeda, Marat and Ela-keb. The latter battle, fought on 24 July 1978 inflicted heavy losses on the Ethiopians in which 50 of their soldiers were made POWs. On the contrary, the EPLF remained provocative and resolved to destroy the ELF under any pretext. For instance, the EPLF on 26 December 1978 attacked ELA units at Tabih; the ELF chose to keep restraint and not to respond such provocations by the EPLF. On the other hand, the ELF felt the third force in the field, the PLF, was intolerably provocative and decided to take action against it which led to the confrontation at Hashenit in October 1978.

The year 1979 went on mainly as a period of reorganization although confrontations against the Ethiopian enemy continued at several places and in the end claimed the

lives of 524 ELA fighters during 1979.

The year 1980 commenced with the Ethiopian campaign to retake Dankalia from the ELA. On 24 January of that year, the enemy launched a full-scale war by sea, air and land from bases in Wollo and Tigrai. The firece campaign that was heroically confronted by the ELA lasted till 19 April 1980. The enemy met heavy losses in men and military materiel. It was during campaign that its cargo ships called 'Massawa' and 'Assab' were captured by ELA marine corps and had to be destroyed on 9 May 1980 when it turned out to be difficult to keep them in ELF hands.

The Battle of Abuma

In the spring of 1980, Brigade 64 led by military staff member Hussein Khalifa, fought one of the fiercest battles at Abuma in which heavy tanks were destroyed in unique acts of bravery. Many enemy soldiers were killed and 30 were taken prisoner. Over 30 pieces of weapons, radio communication equipment and huge quantities of supplies were captured.

The Battle of Mai Mine (Kohaito)

On 6 July 1980, the ELA engaged a very large enemy camp at Mai Mine in which 400 enemy soldiers were killed and 50 taken as POWs. Only a few soldiers fled to Ethiopia across the Mereb River. In that 24-hour battle, the ELA captured 2 T-55 tanks, 5 large military vehicles, 6 field cannons, 2-anti-aircraft guns, over 300 automatic rifles and many other supplies. The ELA units at Mai Mine were coordinated by Mahmoud Haseb.

The EPLF/TPLF Aggression of 1980-1981

The June 1980 military seminar of the ELA believed that the EPLF was bent at destroying the ELF at any cost to the Eritrean Revolution and that more precaution was called for. The evaluation studied the EPLF attacked on ELA units in Administrative Unit 5 (at Shieb,Gedged, Shebah), in the Administrative Unit 10 (at places like Mai Edaga and Mai Ayni), in Administrative Unit 11 (at places like Erafale and Berdo) and other places. The war was already in the making. To avert an unexpected attack on ELA units within the EPLF area, the ELF decided to withdrew its forces from Ansaba. On 28 August 1980, the EPLF attacked ELA forces in Adobaha. The aggression on the ELA started and the TPLF of Ethiopia joined in the fratricidal war declared by the EPLF that lasted till 10 August 1981. The ELA was forced to withdraw to the border areas in the Sudan where it faced many problems. During that fateful period of 1980-81, the ELA lost 1,458 fighters martyred mainly in the destructive war provoked by the EPLF/TPLF alliance.

The armed units of the ELA continued their heroic and determined presence in the Gash-Barka area till the liberation of the country in 1991. At a time when the ELF-RC accepted the transitional authority of the EPLF in Eritrea, the provocative new regime headed by the same Isayas Afeworki in January 1992 launched an unprovoked attack on the ELA units who were already under instructions not to fight against the Eritrean army. Many ELA fighters were martyred in the EPLF attack and many were taken prisoner. The organization eventually decided to continue the struggle for democratization without an army. However, when the regime failed to listen to all peaceful pleas for change and inclusion, the 4th ELF-RC congress in 1995 resolved to use all means at its disposal to remove the dictatorship. In the summer of 1997, the RC declared the formation of mobile political mobilization units with the aim of awakening the masses to resist the dictatorship. The mobile ELA units were and still

are equipped with light weapons to secure their self-defense while conducting their assigned tasks.

END

From the Experiences of the ELA
(Liberation of Major Towns in 1977)
(Part VII)

Under part VI, we recounted the major military engagements of the ELA between 1972 and 1976. We have seen that decisive battles were waged during 1976 in which most of small towns were cleared from enemy presence. A precedent was set for future ELA conventional battles when in February 1976, Ethiopian army presence was cleared from Om Hager and Galuj through successful head-on- collisions. ELA morale went steeply high when, for the first time in the life of the Eritrean revolution, 150 enemy soldiers were captured in one battle and the rest either died or fled to the Sudan for shelter. "Tumhsah" and Idris Ramadan led these major ELA battles before the liberation of major towns. Events of the liberation of major towns during 1977 are briefly recounted here for historical reference (abridged from a booklet published in the early 1980s by former ELA leaders Abdalla Idris and Martyr Mahmoud Haseb.)

Major ELA Military Operations of 1977: These are short accounts of major battles of 1977 that claimed nearly 800 ELA martyrs in one year.

The Battle of Elabered

To harass enemy presence in Keren and Asmara, the ELA on 31 December 1976 started fighting for the road-side Elabered which fell in the hands of the ELA on 19 January 1977. Loss on the enemy side reached about 150 killed, still considered a big victory.

The Battle of Tessenei and Ali-ghidir

The battle started in the early morning of 4 April 1977 and most parts of the city were liberated except the capture of the land enemy stronghold at its major camp located south-east of Tessenei. The camp fell on 5 May 1977 in the hands of ELA army units coordinated by Mahmoud Haseb. 607 Ethiopian soldiers were captured and others managed to escape to Barentu. ELA captured 2 tanks in addition to 1000 pieces of important armoury, 105 war-fare vehicles, 22 wireless radios and other war materiel. Nearby Ali-Ghidir was also liberated during the same period.

The Battle for Barentu (not liberated)

The attempts to liberate the strategic Barentu located in a mountainous region started after the liberation of Tesessenei. Heroic attacks were organized during an extended period of time. However, even the supportive intervention of units from the EPLF, which withdrew later on, was not helpful. Some of the problems that caused failure in the timely liberation of Barentu included: the adverse effects of the 'Falool' movement that slackened morale of many fighters; expansion of the ELA army in different parts of the country, local militia who recruited by the enemy and the physical nature of the region itself. Barentu cost the ELA a great deal.

The Battle of Debaroa

Debaroa was one of the important places that had to be liberated in order to clear the way for the liberation of Mendefera and other towns. The battle for Debaroa started on 14 June and successful ended on 16 June 1977 after the enemy lost approximately 80 killed. Hamid Mahmoud was leading the liberating army.

The Battle of Adi Khuala

The Battle of Adi Khuala, a town near the Eritrean-Ethiopian border at Mareb, that was fought on 12 August 1977 as preparation for the liberation of Mendefera. Woldedawit Temesgen, chief administrator of the Administrative Unit 9 (i.e. Seraye) was one of the key planners for the ongoing operations. At that one-day battle for Adi Khuala, Ethiopia lost 140 killed and 71 taken prisoner. ELA captured 272 heavy and light weapons and 7 military vehicles. No mention was made of the ELA losses.

The Battle for Agordat

The battle started on 14 August 1977. The town was cleared of enemy presence by 31 August and its liberation was celebrated on 1 September 1977. At the end of the battle, 470 Ethiopian soldiers were taken prisoner and some units fled to Barentu. Well over 700 weapons of various sizes, with 100 vehicles and other military materiel were captured. Mahmoud Haseb led the battle for Agordat.

The Battle for Mendefera

Mendefera was liberated after operations unique of their kind for that year. The last brilliant operation that

on its liberation day was the entry on 24 August 1977 of 40 ELF *fedayeen* to the castle in the centre of Mendefera. All the 40 fedayeen, led by the Cuba-trained Debrom Tilluq, were killed after paralyzing the well-entrenched enemy force. In that battle, Ethiopia lost 450 killed and 800 soldiers taken prisoners. The ELA took possession of 2 tanks, 20 vehicles, over 430 heavy, medium and light weapons and others military ware. Hamid Mahmoud was the member of the military staff who led the battle.

The Battles of Adi Ghebrai, Adi Bidel and Hazega

As of the end of 1974 and till 1978, the ELA remained well entrenched in the villages and townships surrounding Asmara after confronting enemy forces at Adi Ghebrai, Adi Bidel, Hazega and other villages in the region and effectively paralyzed the occupation army in the area.

The Battles at Sala'e Da'ero

Sala'e Da'ero, in the immediate environs of Asmara, was a historic battlefield for the ELA which fought several pitched battles against unending reinforcements of Ethiopian army supported by tanks and the air force. All in all, over 70 tanks were destroyed and 3 T-55 tanks captured. Also captured were estimated 900 pieces of various kinds of weapons; many were killed and 270 soldiers and officers taken prisoner.

The Battles fought in the Assab Region

The ELA units in Dankalia confronted all Ethiopian army encampments in the province and forced them out of the region. The liberation of the town of Tio sealed off Ethiopia's effective presence in Dankalia except in Assab. By the end of 1977, the ELA was in control of the largest part of Eritrea that the ELF liberated.

(Part VIII will briefly recount the reverses to the military victories of the Eritrean Revolution after the Soviet Union with its allies - Cuba, Yemen and Libya - took the side of the Ethiopian Derg. Also to be told will be the military aggression the ELA faced in 1980-81 by the combined forces of the EPLF and TPLF.)

End

From the Experiences of the ELA (Part VI)

The last part of this series gave a quick summary of the major confrontations the Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA) had with the enemy between 1965 and 1971. The political developments within the front were told in an article written in commemoration of the 33rd anniversary of the First National Congress. One major change in the ELA after the second congress was the formation of a military staff headed by member of the Executive Committee, Abdalla Idris. (Other members of the military staff were: Tesfai Teclé, deputy chief of staff; Abdulkader Ramadan, head of operations; Mahmoud Haseb, head of military organization and administration, Hussein Khalifa, and Hamid Mahmoud.)

Today's Part VI will attempt to summarize the major military operations that the ELA conducted between 1972 and the eve of the liberation of major Eritrean towns in 1977. (The story of liberation of major towns will be told in Part VII.)

Military Operations: 1972-1976

The battles recounted here are only the ones in which the ELA inflicted very heavy damage on enemy forces and materiel. (Most of the information in this article was gleaned from a booklet written over 20 years ago by former ELA leaders Abdalla Idris and Martyr Mahmoud Haseb.)

The Battle of Dalool

In June 1972, the ELA carried out a number of very important battles, one of which was fought at Dalool. The battle ensued following an ambush on an enemy convoy moving between Keren and Mensura. The ELA units managed to harass the large Ethiopian army for the whole day and prevented it even from reaching water wells in the region. At Dalool, Ethiopia lost 37 killed and many wounded; 21 pieces of different types of weapons were captured. The ELA paid 7 martyrs, among them the leader Alamin Hajaj, and 9 were wounded.

The Battle of Shettel

The frustrated Ethiopian regular army retried in June to go to Mensura from Hagaz. But it met another ambush planted at Shettel near Hirkok on the way to Mensura. The occupation army managed to enter Mensura with difficulty and in a disorderly manner after losing 27 killed and many wounded. The ELA paid 5 martyrs.

The Battle of Duluk

The third consecutive battle in June 1972 took place at Duluk, south of Agordat. This was yet another major battle in which the Ethiopians felt the heavy pressure of a determined liberation army. They lost 34 men together with 11 pieces of weapons and ammunitions. The ELA paid 9 martyrs, and other 13 were wounded.

The Asmara-Adi Qualla Operation

Many significant military operations continued to take place in the field before the liberation of many towns; among these was the Asmara/Adi-Qualla Operation to free Eritrean political prisoners in February 1975. Martyr Abdulkader Ramadan was the overall leader of the simultaneously carried two operations to free prisoners from Asmara and Adi-Qualla. Among the 1,000 prisoners freed by the ELF operation were the current ELF-RC chairman, Seyoum Ogbamichael, and Martyr Woldedawit Temesghen, both of whom were the coordinators of the operation from inside the prison with the direct supervisor of the operation from outside, Martyr Saeed Saleh. Others freed that day included Haile DeruE, again a political prisoner of his own party and government; ELF's Martyr Saeed Hussein, and Mahmoud Saleh Sabbe.

The Galuj-Um Hager Operation

During 1976, the ELA fought major battles inside Eritrea and the border areas with Ethiopia. At the head of the major victories of 1976 was the Galuj-Um Hager Operation that killed 150 enemy soldiers and captured 500 weapons, most of them much need by the liberation army for more forceful attacks on fortified enemy camps.

Derg's Raza Operation/Red March

. The new military regime's Red March of the summer of 1976 was one of the major military events of that year. Atnafu Abate, Derg's second strongman, led the march also known as the Raza Operation. The military regime boasted that it will mobilize up to 500,000 Ethiopians, mainly peasants, to walk into Eritrea and capture the few 'rebels' who had been 'disrupting law and order in the Eritrean province of Ethiopia'. The ELA confronted the 'Red Marchers' at Zalambessa and the crossing points of other border areas and crushed the force within a very short time. ELA took 4,000 prisoners, most of them wretched peasant militiamen, who were released later on. The liberation army was able to capture 6,000 pieces of different weapons.

Before starting the liberation of major towns in, the ELA during 1976 cleared many police and commando outposts and smaller army garrisons in the following townships in the country:

Tamarat
Adebara
Keru
Galuj/Um Hager (as recounted above)
Haicota
Gogne
Tokumbia
Shambuko
Mensura
Areza
Mai Dima
Elabered
Kinafina
Debaroa.
END

From the Experiences of the ELA (Part V)

This is part of the history of the Eritrean Liberation Army whose 43rd anniversary was celebrated last September. Part IV of these series was a brief account about the meetings at Aredaib, Ansaba, Gedaref and finally at Adobaha where the General Command was elected. Internal rivalries that started with the ill-conceived *menatiq/kiflitat* of the ELA continued unabated even after Adobaha. The meetings aimed to unify the front and lay down a democratic basis at a national conference which was not acceptable to some contending forces. As continuation of efforts for unity, the Awate Military Conference of March 1971 elected a 30-person powerful and independent Preparatory Committee to try to bring all factions to national conference. The many efforts did not bear fruit and the First National Congress of the ELF had to be convened in October-November 1971 at Arr without the splinter factions. Today, Part V will provide a sweeping account (rather, listing) of the major military operations of the ELA between 1965 and the first congress of 1971.

Military Operations: 1965-1971

The internal rivalries and political tensions caused by the ethno-regional divisions of the army into five commands did not paralyze military operations. In fact, more daring and successful attacks were launched against the Ethiopian occupation army during 1965 and 1969 as shown below:

The Battle of Adobaha

In June 1965, Tahir Salem, the deputy head of the ELA, led a major attack on enemy force encamped in Adobaha. It was one of the fierce battles in which the ELA fighters showed formidable gallantry and commitment to win. The enemy lost a big force. Tahir Salem was one of the martyrs from the ELA side.

The Confrontation at Hasheek

This was a fierce confrontation that took place during the last days of the year 1965 and much known and celebrated by the ELA units of the day and the supportive masses because in it the enemy lost many soldiers, among them the infamous agent and occupation army guide Teklinkiel.

The Incident of Mihlab

The battle took place during the end of 1965 (date unspecified). It was a sad day in the steadily expanding ELA in which it lost a large number of casualties (21 martyred) whose bodies were later brutally exhibited by hanging inside Keren.

The Attack in Agordat

One of the major attacks on enemy camps in 1966 took place inside Agordat in which the enemy reportedly lost many soldiers, killed and wounded. ELA martyrs at the attack were Danqir and Mohammed Saleh Afrut.

The Karora Operation

On 9 January 1967, an ELA force attacked the enemy post in Karora and put it under its control. All enemy soldiers were either killed, wounded or taken prisoner. All weapons and ammunitions in that enemy post in northern-most Eritrea-Sudan border town of Karora were taken away by the ELA.

The Attack in Keren

On 18 April 1967, an ELA unit launched a heavy attack on a camp in Keren and killed many enemy soldiers.

The Battle Ailet

On 14 June 1967, an ELA unit confronted a large concentration of enemy force at Ailet, north of Massawa. The Ethiopians lost 40 killed.

The Battle of Rora Maria

On 16 June 1967, Eritrean fighters ambushed enemy forces who lost 16 killed in the battle.

The Battle of Bab-Jengeren

Also on 16 June 1967, an enemy force was confronted in one of the fiercest ELA ambush operations in Bab Jengeren; 16 enemy soldiers were killed.

The Battle of Gemhot (Semhar)

On 17 July 1967, ELA units launched fierce attacks on the enemy. Confirmed losses of the enemy were 30 soldiers killed and 14 wounded.

The Battle of Kohaito

The battle of Kohaito fought that summer of 1967 was one of the great confrontation of that period. The enemy was reported to have lost 17 soldiers killed.

The Battle of Amborey, Dambalas

This was also one of the major ELA operations of the year 1967. In it was killed a senior Ethiopian military official. At Amborey, the ELA units could capture a large number of arms and ammunitions.

The Battle of Mihlab

Another battle raged in Mihlab in 1967. Among the enemy losses was the leader of the force holding the rank of major, commonly called "Shambel Yassin".

Two Consecutive Battles in Tukumbia

On 26 July 1967, ELA engaged enemy forces in Tukumbia at which 15 soldiers were killed and 8 wounded. Again on 30 July 1967, a much bigger ELA force encircled the enemy concentration in Tukumbia and managed to inflict much heavier losses on the enemy: 60 killed and 30 wounded.

The Mirara Operation

In March 1968, an ELA unit launched an attack at the military post in Mirara and succeeded to take full control of the camp until it later withdrew taking all the weapons and ammunitions in it.

The Galuj Operation

Also during the spring of 1968, the ELA succeeded to attack the enemy camp in Galuj and take full control of the post. It later withdrew taking all available weapons and ammunitions.

The Battle of Geleb

In May 1968, an ELA unit launched an attack in Geleb, Mensae region, which was considered as one of the successful operations of that year.

The Attack in Mensura

The attack on Mensura was one of the brilliant confrontation put by the ELA against enemy forces. That heroic attack is remembered for the martyrdom of the hero and ELA leader Ahmed Welelo.

The Battle of Halhal

The attack on the police and commando post in Halhal took place on 7 September 1968. It was a heroic attack by ELA fedayeen jumping into the military compound to take it over by force. However, due to a betrayal by a police collaborator, the intended outcome was reversed and the ELA lost over 45 martyrs, among them, the leader of the Second Division, Omar Hamid Izaz.

Between the fall of 1968 and the Adobaha Conference in August 1969, many more significant military operations were launched against the enemy by the 1st and 2nd Divisions as well as the newly formed *Wuhda Thulasia*/ Tripartite Union of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Divisions of the ELA.

The splinter groups remained apart. These were the PLF that was formed under the leadership of Osman Saleh Sabe and became known as the Popular Liberation Forces (PLF-I) after its congress in Sudho-Ela in Dankalia in April 1970. Members of the group included Mohammed Ali Omaro, Ramadan Mohammed Nur, who was the secretary of *Kiyada Ama*, Mesfin Hagos, Abubaker Mohammed Jimie, Abu Tiyara (Mohammed Omar Abdalla) and Abu Ajaj (Saleh Mohammed Idris). Isayas Afeworki and group, had already split from the mother organization in January 1970, in March that year issued their declaration called *Nehnan Elamanan*. After the congress at Arr, a third group which earlier met at Obel, convened its congress at Biltubai and called itself Eritrean Liberation Forces which later became PLF-III. Although the ELF congress of October 1971 decided not to take military action against the Isayas-led group under any circumstance, yet the faction (*Selfi-Natsinet*) joined the others under its factional name of PLF-II.

But, amidst all the political differences in the field, the ELA was still engaging the Ethiopian enemy in a number of confrontations among which were the following:

The Battle of Lekotat

The confrontation of ELA to a large enemy force at Lekotat near Hagaz took 16 days in March 1970. The enemy was pushed back from entering the region and destroying villages, as the grand plan was during that period.

The confrontation at Feru

The battle took place in August 1970 when the ELA attacked at Feru and inflicted heavy human and material losses on the enemy side.

The Battle of Omeli

Fought on 3 September 1970, ELA in the battle at Omeli near Mount Di'ot, repulsed the enemy that was trying to go out to the countryside for wanton destruction and burning of people's homes.

The Battle of Nebagade (Ashqa)

Fought in October 1970, the battle of Nebagade, east of Adi Kailh, raged for three consecutive days. The enemy force was not only stopped from going out to the countryside for burning of people's property, but also lost many men killed. Over 30 pieces of weapons were captured from the Ethiopians at Nebagade.

These period also witnessed many unaccounted for military operations in and around the major towns of Asmara, Keren, Agordat and others.

The Battle of Halib Mentel

This battle was fought during the end of November 1970 near Elaberet in which the Ethiopians lost General Teshome Ergetu, the Supreme Commander of the Ethiopian occupation army in Eritrea. It was following this battle that the Ethiopians committed massacre of civilians in the villages of Basik-Dira and Ona killing nearly 1,000 innocent villagers.

The next article will cover the period between the two ELF congress of 1971 and of 1975. (Most of the facts about the military operations recounted in this part were summarized from a book by Abdalla Idris and Mahmoud Hasab published in 1982 under the title of *Experiences of the ELA.*)

End

From the Experiences of the ELA (Part IV)

Part III of this writing by **Nharnet Team** walked you through non-military developments within the ELA that occurred between August 1965 and June 1968. Those were times when the fighters and the rural people in Eritrea were completely fed up with the activities of the ill-organized divisive five commands of the ELA. We have already mentioned the emergence of *Eslah* (i.e. the Reform Movement), Soldiers' Committees, and late in that year of a secret party within the organization - all calling for a general congress to unify the ELA under one leadership. Today's piece, Part IV, will review the efforts, in the form of meetings, organized to unify the fragmented army.

The ELA Meeting at Aredaib, June 1968

The meeting of Aredaib, convened between 14-16 June 1968, was the first such meeting of the joint leaders of the five divisions of the ELA. It is claimed that the meeting took place upon invitation to other division leaders by the leaders of the first and second ELA companies, who were Abdalla Idris Mohammed and Ibrahim Al Ali. The Aredaib meeting was attended by commanders and political commissioners of the all the five divisions whose names were listed in Part III. The 5th Division had no commander or deputy commander in the field at that time, and at Aredaib it was represented by its Acting Commander, Abdalla Idris Mohammed, and the newly appointed political commissioner, Isayas Afeworki. Also taking part at the meeting were Abu Tiyara, head of the Support Unit, and Omar M. Ali Damer, head of the Training Unit and his deputy Abdalla Idris Drar.

This first ever meeting of the ELA commanders had convened mainly to review the multiple problems of the 5th Division. The Aredaib meeting decided the following

- Called for the convening of a wider conference.
- Tasked the 2nd Division to organize the conference and determine the venue.
- Asked the Revolutionary Command to move its headquarters from Kassala to the field.
- Wanted the Support Unit to merge with the 1st Division.
- Asked the 2nd and the 4th Divisions to provide assistance to the 5th Division, which had financial and other problems. The 1st Division was to assist the 3rd Division.

One of the key issues of contention at Aredaib was the motion tabled by Omar Izaz of the 2nd Division asking that the meeting to elect a new joint field command for the five ELA divisions. However, the proposal was not accepted for fear that it would be considered disobedience to the leaderships based in Kassala and Cairo.

The ELA Meeting in Ansaba, September 1968

The meeting at Arota, Ansaba, usually referred as the Ansaba meeting, was convened between 11-18 September 1968. It was attended by 40 delegates from the 3rd, 4th and 5th Divisions of the ELA in addition to leaders of the Training and Support Units. The 2nd Division, which was engaged in a murderous battle at Halhal three days earlier on 8 September 1968, could not attend this meeting. Likewise, the 1st Division was absent although it sent two envoys to the meeting (Halibe Sete, alias Ahmed Ibrahim Nafie, and Mahmoud Ibrahim M. Saed) asking for a postponement because of the absence of key division leaders in the field and because of the tragedy that occurred at Halhal in which over 45 fighters, including the Commander Omar Ezaz, were martyred. But the majority of the participants of the Ansaba meeting felt that the Battle of Halhal was not necessary and that the meeting should go ahead without the participation of the 1st and 2nd Divisions, which earlier requested several times for the postponement of this meeting. The meeting gave birth to the Tripartite Union whose new leadership, the Provisional Revolutionary Command, consisted of 12 members.

Leaders of the Tripartite Union elected at the Ansaba Meeting were :

1. Mohammed Ahmed Abdu, chairman
2. Abdalla Idris Mohammed
3. Mohammed Ali Omaro
4. Ramadan Mohammed Nur
5. Abraham Tewolde
6. Isayas Afeworki
7. Mohammed Omar Abdalla (Abu Tiyyara)
8. Ahmed Ibrahim
9. Mohammed Abdalla Taha (al-Safi)
10. Omar Damer
11. Abdalla Yusuf
12. Hamid Saleh

Although the meeting participants could have done better by being more patient and postpone this particular meeting and wait for the other two divisions to attend, especially in light of the tragedy at Halhal, the very fact of unifying at least three divisions of the fragmented liberation army was not a negative development. After the Ansaba meeting, fighters and the people intensified their demands for the convening of a general congress. But two leadership members (Omaro and Isayas) are usually singled out to have strongly campaigned against the idea of a general congress, insisting that the 1st and the 2nd Divisions must accept the 12-man Provisional Revolutionary Command as their leadership and abide by all the decisions made at the Ansaba meeting.

ELF Branches Meet in Gedaref, November 1968

In November 1968, branch members of the ELF throughout the Sudan met in Gedaref and formed a central committee that pursued the calls for change in the field, including the dissolution of the ethno-regional divisions of the army.

Efforts for a wider military conference continued. Eventually, even the majority of the 12-man leadership of the Tripartite Union agreed for a joint ELA meeting. However, there were difficulties because two key of its leaders, Omaro and Isayas resigned from the leadership in opposition to the agreement for a conference, although both finally agreed reluctantly to attend the conference at Adobaha.

The Military Conference of Adobaha, August 1969

The Military Conference of Adobaha met between 10 and 25 August 1969 with 162 participants and took decisions as follows:

- Dissolved the system of the ethno-regional autonomous 5 Regional Commands (*Menatiq/Kiflilat*) and agreed to name a 38-man Provisional General Command (*Kiyad Ama muaqat giziyawit Teklalit Merihnet*) of a unified army. After heated discussions, the conference agreed to give 10 seats each to the 1st and 2nd Divisions and 18 seats to the Tripartite Union (consisting of 3rd, 4th and 5th Divisions).
- Formed a preparatory committee for a national congress.
- Formed an 18-member committee to investigate mistakes committed in the struggle for the period up to August 1969.
- Formed a third committee tasked of taking care of the property of the organization.
- Froze the authority of the five field Commanders and of the Kassala-based Revolutionary Command until their cases are investigated and cleared at a national congress of the ELF.
- The Supreme Council in Cairo was authorized to continue as before till a national congress is convened a year later. (The Adobaha Conference was convened without the blessing from Supreme Council.)

Members of the General Command (*Kiyada Ama*) named at Adobaha were: 1. Mohammed Ahmed Abdu, chairman, 2. Ramadan Mohammed Nur, 3. Ahmed Mohammed Ibrahim, 4. Tesfai Teclé, 5. Saed Saleh, 6. Abdulkader Ramadan, 7. Abdalla Idris Mohammed, 8. Isayas Afeworki, 9. Birhan Bilata, 10. Saleh Omar Kekiya, 11. Osman Ajib, 12. Saleh Ibrahim Mohammed (Jimjam), 13. Adem Saleh Al

Haj (Shedeli), 14. Saleh Hayoti, 15. Ahmed Adem Omar, 16. Ahmed Ibrahim Mohammed, 17. Ibrahim Abdalla Mohammed, 18. Yassin Al Haj, 19. Amir Tahir Shihabi, 20. Abdulraqib Mussa, 21. Mohammed Osman Izaz, 22. Mohammed Ahmed Idris, 23. Jaffer Jabir Omar, 24. Abdalla Mahmoud, 25. Ibrahim Jamil, 26. Hamid Mahmoud; 27. Ibrahim Mohammed, 28. Ahmed Hayten, 29. Mussa Mohammed Hashim, 30. Hamid Ahmed Osman, 31. Saleh Faraj Ali, 32. Mohammed Saed Shineti, 33. Abraha Mekonnen, 34. Mohammed Osman Omar Shaeban, 35. Abdulkadir Hamdan, 36. Mahmoud Chekini, alias, Mahmoud Ibrahim Mohammed Saed, 38. Saleh Mohammed Fikak, and 38. Afa Mohammed Hamid.

The differences, mistrust and conflicts that were created during the 1965-1969 period of the Regional Commands (*zemene-kiflitat or ayam-menatiq*) were not to be healed easily. Understandably, the conference was heavily affected by the legacies of the ethno-regional divisions of the preceding five years. Even in the aftermath of Adobha, allegiances to personalities in the Supreme Council continued as before. The former members of the Tripartite Union were still supported by some elements in the Supreme Council and the rest by others.

By all measures, Adobaha was an end of one era and a beginning of another whose story will be told later in this series. The upcoming Part V will focus on the major battles that the ELA fought during that period of ethno-regionalist rivalries between August 1965 till Adobaha in August 1969.

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From the Experiences of the ELA (Part III)

In parts one and two of these series, **Nharnet.com** has presented accounts of the experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army from 1 September till mid-1965. In today's Part III, we will narrate briefly the experiences of the armed wing of the ELF between the formation of the ELA Divisions (*kiflitat/menatiq*) in August 1965 till [the meeting at Aredaib in September 1968].

Formation of the ELA Divisions

In August 1965, the foreign-based Supreme Council (*majlis al-a'ela*) of the ELF decided to form regional ELA divisions based on the experience of the then well admired Algerian Revolution for national liberation. The Algerian model gave emphasis to regional mobilization in which each region had to care for itself. In the Eritrean case, the adaptors of the model believed that regional appeal and rivalry would attract more and more fighters to the ELA which was wanted to expand geographically to cover all parts of Eritrea with an increased number of fighters. As intended, the ELA expanded and covered many parts of the country. However, the regional model had negative consequences to the unity of the army and our people as all such ethnicity- and region-based models of mobilization are prone to eventually create mutual suspicions and hatred among once fraternal peoples.

The Revolutionary Command (seated in Kassala)

In that fateful August 1965 meeting in the Sudan, the Cairo-based Supreme Council formed a new body called the Revolutionary Command (*kiyada sawriya*) which was supposed to lead the armed divisions of the ELA from its headquarters in Kassala. Members of the Revolutionary Command were:

1. Mohammed Saed Adem, chairman,
2. Jaafer Mohammed,
3. Mohammed Ismail Abdu,
4. Ahmed Mohammed Ali Issa,
5. Omar Jabir Omar,
6. Omar al-Haj,
7. Abdu Osman, and
8. Mulugheta Gherghis (who deserted soon and caused the arrest in Asmara of Seyoum Ogbamichael and Woldedawit Temesgehen whom he sent on mission from Kassala in August 1965). After that, more members were named to the Revolutionary Command; the first ones were :
9. Saleh Hidug,
10. Al-Zein Yassin,
11. Mohamud Mohammed Saleh, and
12. Abdulkadir Idris.

Introducing changes in the list of members of the Command continued till the dissolution of the system at

the Military Conference of Adobha.

Regional Commanders (in the field)

The Revolutionary Command seated in Kassala was in charge of five ELA divisions in the field. Key leaders of the Divisions :

1. **The First Division** covering Barka and Gash was led by Mohamoud Dinai, with Saleh Mohammed Idris as his deputy and Mussa Mohammed Hashim, the political commissioner.
2. **The Second Division** covered Senhit and Sahel provinces. The Commander was Omar Hamid Izaz, his deputy Mohamud Omar Adem and the political commissioner was Mohamud 'Chekini (i.e. Mohammed Ibrahim Mohammed Saed).
3. **The Third Division** covered Akele-Guzai and Seraye provinces. Its Commander was Abdulkarim Ahmed, his deputy Hamid Jimie who was replaced after his martyrdom by Hamid Saleh. The political commissioner was Ahmed Mohammed Ibrahim.
4. **The Fourth Division** covered Semhar and Denkalia. The Commander was Mohammed Ali Omaro, and his deputy Ali Ma'etug. Ramadan Mohammed Nur served as the political commissioner.
5. **The Fifth Division**, which was created a year later, covered mainly Hamasien province. Its first Commander was Woldai Kahsai, who was replaced by Abrahm Tewolde after the desertion of the former to the enemy. Deputy Commander was Hishal Osman. The first political commissioner of the Division was Ghilay who was replaced by Isayas Afeworki upon the latter's return from a training course in China.

As noted, the regionalization (or by today's parlance, the ethnicization) of the ELA helped in its manpower expansion and territorial coverage. Military operations increased in number and in intensity. This frightened the Ethiopian occupiers who resorted to strengthening the Israeli-trained Command units, and established so-called "strategic villages" by arming local villagers and re-settlers. When the ELA activities increased further, the Ethiopians started outright genocidal campaigns as of 1967 and drove thousands of people to become refugees in the Sudan.

Foreign-trained military cadres increased in number in several ELA divisions and helped in upgrading political awareness among the fighters and villagers. Many trainees returned from Syria, Iraq, Palestine and a few from China and Cuba. Syria which recognized the ELF as the legitimate representative of the Eritrean people starting in 1963, provided the first shipments of automatic rifles and to the ELA.

In hindsight, the Eritrean fighters saw the creation of the Regional Commands was a negative experience in Eritrea. The regionalist-ethnicist model of mobilization deepened division between the fighters and the people. Each division acted alone and did not care for any coordination with the other ELA divisions. The other divisions were seen as rivals at best, if not 'enemies'. Each regional division also created allegiance to leadership figures in the Supreme Council and the Revolutionary Command in Kassala based on ethno-regional affiliations and individual interests. This led to widespread corruption and abuses.

The fighters and the broad masses wanted change, but change was not easy to work out. The struggle to change the wrong regional organization of the ELA took a bitter struggle. Bodies like the Soldiers Committee, the Reform Committee and even the Labour Party were among the internal movements that had to be created to fight the malaise in the Revolution during the second half of the 1960s.

High-level military meetings were called and convened in the field. The Military Meeting of **Aredaib** (14-16 June 1968) was one of those landmark meetings of the period. The story on those important military meetings between Aredaib and Adobaha will be told in Part IV of this writing.

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From the Experiences of the ELA (Part II)

In part one of this article, **Nharnet.com** briefly reviewed the birth of the ELF and listed names of the pioneers of the armed struggle who joined Hamid Idris Awate's liberation army in 1961 and 1962. In today's part II, we briefly narrate the important military operations that took place between 1 September 1961 to the end of 1964, a year during which the ELA took up engaging the enemy in highland Eritrea starting with Martyr Ghebrehiwet Himbirti's unit in River Mereb in mid-March of that year. Not included in military activities recounted here are many of the *fedayeen* operations in the villages, the highways and

urban centres. (Corrections on Part I: Mohammed Fayd was martyred not at Adal but at the battle of Omal, as told below. Likewise, the Abu Sheneb was one of the participants in the Battle of Togoruba but not as the leader of unit. Regrets for the errors.)

1. The Battle of Adal

As we have briefly recounted in Part I, the Battle of Adal took place on 1 September 1961 in the district of that name located west of Agordat and north-west of Barentu. The fighters, including the leader Hamid Idris Awate, were 14 in number (see Part I below).

2. The Battle of Omal

The second recorded battle of the first armed unit of the ELA took place by end of the same September of 1961 at Omal in the Sawa district. The battle was not an ELA plan but it came as an attack by police units of the Ethiopian authorities who were embarrassed by what had happened at Adal on 1st September. But the enemy could not kill the ELA in the bud. In fact, the armed unit did all what it could and retreated. The first martyr of the ELA, Mohammed Fayd, fell at the Battle of Omal.

3. The Agordat Operation

The Agordat Operation of 12 July 1962 intended to kill Ethiopian Emperor's Representative in Eritrea, General Abi Abebe, and other dignitaries who included Asfaha Woldemichael, the head of the Eritrean government and Hamid Ferej, president of the Assembly, who travelled to Agordat that day to address the soldiers and police and to intimidate the residents of Agordat who by that time were receiving news of the movements of the ELA on a daily basis. The operation killed 8 Ethiopian dignitaries and wounded several others. The Agordat Operation was planned by Mohamoud Mohamed Salih (Hanjemenjee) and its execution was led by Adem Mohammed Hamid (Ghidifil).

Among many smaller military operations of 1962 included: overrunning and controlling for a full day the Halhal police post on 18 July 1962; the setting on fire of Gogne police post on 10 October 1962; overnight simultaneous attacks on police posts of Garsat, Galuj and Barentu on 15 November 1962. The attack at the Sala enemy camp left 6 soldiers killed.

4. Battle of Telay

The Battle of Telay started as a well planned ambush of the ELA against enemy vehicles traveling from Gherger in the Sawa district to Agordat. It was a successful battle in which many policemen were killed and taken prisoner. Those members of the Eritrean police who were captured at Telay were later released after briefing them on the objectives of the liberation struggle. The ELA unit captured 17 guns that battle led by Omar Izaz. It took place in mid-1963.

5. Battle of Ansaba

The Battle of Ansaba, fought in Jengeren north of Keren in the fall of 1963, was another successful battle started as an ambush by an ELA unit on an enemy convoy traveling from Keren to Halhal. The ELA unit captured 23 guns, including a machinegun known as Bren-gun, and ammunitions. The battle was led by Mohammed Idris Haj, who was martyred from a wound he received in that confrontation.

6. The Haicota Operation

The brilliant Haicota Bus Operation was another highly successful military action that took place by the end of 1963. The operation, led by Adem Mohammed Hamid Qindifil, took full control of the police and security headquarters from where 32 guns and 12 grenades were captured. It operation was arranged after an ELA unit entered the town in a hijacked bus. The ELA lost one martyr, Mohammed Karrar.

Other military activities of 1963 included: attack on 24 March 1963 at Shalab that left 8 policemen killed, and another near Haicota on 30 March. On 29 July at Arota five guns and a machinegun captured from police; Adebera police post overrun on 15 September, five policemen taken prisoner. Two Ethiopian agents executed at Dabak and one in Agordat.

By the end of 1963, the ELA had 250 men in arms.

7. Battle of Togoruba

As many of our readers would recall, the Battle of Togoruba was the most significant confrontation between the ELA and the Ethiopians in those early days. In that battle, the Ethiopians sent not the so-called Field Force and the Eritrean police but a large regular Ethiopian army whose aim was to put an end to the ELA. In that Battle of Togoruba, located north west of Barentu, the Ethiopians lost 84 dead and many wounded. The ELA lost 19 martyrs. Fought on 15 March 1964, the Battle of Togoruba was led by Mohamed Ali Idris (Abu Rijeila) led the battle.

8. Battle of She'eb

The Battle of She'eb was started as a planned attack by an ELA unit at the police headquarters that fell

after the death and the surrender of the rest of the policemen. Mohammed Saeed Shemsi, leader of the ELA unit was martyred.

Other major operations of 1964, a year that witnessed intensification of confrontations and the ascent of the ELA to highland Eritrea: at Sawwa in Bab-Jengeren on 22 January, 20 field-force and policemen were killed in an ambush; a few days before the Battle of Togoruba in March 1964, Martyr Ghebrehiwet Himbirti confronted enemy units at River Mereb killing two policemen and a collaborator. On 12 April at Dambals, ELA engaged and killed 9 enemy soldiers, and on 20 April at Bushukua Ethiopia suffered 13 dead while ELA lost 5 heroes whose bodies were exposed in Agordat the next day to intimidate the public. During the night of 13 July, simultaneous attacks were launched against police and army posts in Barentu, Haocota, Galluj and Tamarat inflicting many casualties to the enemy. During the rest of the year, battles were fought at Humbol, Ad Kukui, Dambalas and Haboro-Tsada.

From the Experiences of the ELA (Part I)

1st September 2004, is the 43rd anniversary of the Battle of Adal, which is annually marked as Revolution Day, the day our armed national liberation struggle started. In particular, to members of all ELF factions, *Bahti Meskerem/Al-Fatih min Sebtember* is also yearly commemorated as ELA Day, i.e. Eritrean Liberation Army Day.

Starting today, **Nharnet Team** is pleased to present to its readers short historical notes on the experiences of the ELA. The notes are based on a number of sources, including the Arabic-language booklet entitled "Experiences of the ELA: 1961-1982" authored by Abdalla Idris and Martyr Mahmoud Haseb, who were among the key ELA leaders in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Birth of the ELF

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was established, mainly by students, in Cairo in July 1960. During the early phase of the armed struggle, its Cairo-based political leadership (the Supreme Council) consisted of seven: Idris Mohammed Adem, former Speaker of the Eritrean Assembly as president; Idris Osman Gelaidos, secretary for political affairs; Osman Saleh Sabbe, secretary for foreign affairs; Mohammed Saleh Humed; Taha Mohammed Nur; Osman Khiyar, and Sidd Ahmed Mohammed Hashem. The organization believed in armed struggle and called on Hamid Idris Awate, then in Agordat, to start the struggle in field. Hamid Awate, already a consistent resistance fighter against colonialists, was well trained in use of arms in Rome, and spoke the Eritrean languages of Baria, Kunama, Tigre, Tigrinia and Arabic in addition to fluency in Italian, written and spoken.

ELA at the Battle of Adal

The Battle of Adal that took place on 1 September 1961 was the first organized armed confrontation in Eritrea against the Ethiopian virtual annexation of the territory. The Adal district is located west of Agordat and north-west of Barentu. The only arms in possession of the ELA unit were: 1 Abu-Ashera gun of British make that was held by the leader and 3 old guns of Italian origin. Awate's first ELA unit consisted of the following 13 fighters, most of them without rifles:

1. Abdu M. Fayd
2. Ibrahim M. Ali
3. Humed Qadif
4. Awate M. Fayd
5. Mohammed Bayraq (taken prisoner)
6. Mohammed Adem Hisan
7. Saleh Qaruj
8. Ahmed Fikak
9. Mohammed Hassen Duhe
10. Adem Faqurai
11. Ali Bakhit
12. Idris Mohamoud
13. Omar Karay.

Till end of 1961, only two fighters joined the ELA; they were Mohammed Adem Qassir and Kibub Hajaj.

During 1962, the ELA was joined by important groups of fighters who were abandoning their army ranks and posts in the Sudanese Army. (It is to be recalled that many Eritrean nationals were recruited by the

British to serve in the Sudanese army.) The most important date was 17 February 1962 when 9 former officers and soldiers from the Sudanese Army met and joined Hamid Idris Awate and his ELA unit at the village of Ab-Hashila Shekur south of Tessenei. The new ELA members from the Sudanese army were:

1. Mohammed Idris Haj, who became Awate's successor
2. Omar Hamid Izaz (2nd division commander martyred in Halhal)
3. Tahir Salim (known for his most effective agitation in *Haraka* and later in ELF cells among Eritreans in the Sudanese army)
4. Osman Mohammed Idris (Abu Sheneb)
5. Mohammed Omar Abdalla (Abu Tiyyara) who led the ELA for a short period
6. Adem Mohammed Hamid (Gindfel), who led the successful Haicota operation in 1963
7. Mohammed Ali Idris (Abu Rijeila)
8. Mohammed Ibrahim Bahdurai
9. Omar Mohammed Ali (Damer)

Awate was martyred on 16 June 1962 but his death was kept secret for over three years. Soon after his martyrdom, groups of fighters joined the ELA, most of them abandoning their important ranks in the Sudanese army or police and other civilian positions. Among the 24 important names that joined the ELA that year were the following: Mahmoud Dinai, Hishal Osman, Saleh Mohammed, Saleh Mohammed Idris (Abu Ajaj), Dingus Aray, Mahmoud Maybetot, Abdalla Idris (De Gaule), Al Haj Mussa Ali, Mohammed Idris Kelbai, Saeed Hussein, Ahmed Ibrahim Nefa'e (Halib-Sette) and others. In those early days, up to 80 former soldiers from the Sudan joined the ELA.

Then came the turn of Eritrean police officers to join the ELA in 1962-63, among the most known names being those of Mohammed Saeed Shemsi, Mohammed Yassin Al Haj, Ali Ahmed, Ismail Abubaker (Mazlum) and others.

Eritrean students from Cairo and other places went to Syria for military training before joining the ELA; among them were Abdelkerim Ahmed, later 3rd division leader, Mohammed Ali Omaro, Ramadan Mohammed Nur and others.

By end of 1964, the ELA consisted of six platoons with a total of about 800 fighters. (In part II, **Nharnet.com** will briefly narrate the major military operations of the ELA between 1962 and 1965.)