

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH THE SOVIET AMBASSADOR, COMRADE ANATOLY [P.] RATANOV IN ADDIS ABABA ON DECEMBER 6, 1977 [DECEMBER 7, 1977]

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Comrade Ratanov gave the following information:

Militarily, the Eastern front is presently the most difficult problem for the Ethiopian side. Due to the correlation of forces the initiative is with the Somali side. The Ethiopian troops are forced onto the defense. The Ethiopian side is making all-out efforts to mobilize around 60,000 to 70,000 men. About 20,000 men will already be available within the next few weeks. They will be trained in short training courses. The Ethiopian side will be able to go on the offensive in about 1 1/2 to 2 months.

The technical superiority of the Somali troops is most prominent in heavy artillery. Although the Ethiopian side has - due to Soviet deliveries - at its disposal over 510 heavy guns while Somalia only has 126, there is a lack of soldiers who can handle the heavy artillery. The training is still taking up time.

300 Cuban military experts (artillery, tank drivers, pilots) are expected to arrive soon.

The Ethiopian side currently has about 137 tanks on the Eastern front. The Somali side has about 140.

40 Ethiopian tanks cannot be used in battle due to minor repairs. Though these repairs would normally be done by the tank drivers themselves, they are not capable of doing so. On the Somali side such repairs are possible because the Soviet Union had established the necessary repairs station.

In the last days, the Ethiopian side has for the first time launched air attacks on mobile objects using the MIG 21. The negative opinion about the MIGs has meanwhile improved (the F5 is a much improved model with a wider operational range).

Comrade Ratanov gave the following explanation of the Eritrean problem:

If it were possible to give the Ethiopian side a breathing-spell in Eritrea, it could focus its efforts on the Eastern front. A dialogue has to be initiated. This has not been done so far. In this regard, it would not be advantageous to show all our cards right away.

It is of critical importance that the Ethiopian side is not willing to grant the Eritrean population autonomy within the bounds of its old territories. They assume that other peoples still reside in Eritrea (e.g. Tigré and Affars). This has to be taken into consideration. Therefore they want to trim Eritrean territory. The area of the Affars around the port of Assab as well as the Tigre are to be separated. [This w]ould be almost half of the Eritrean territory.

Should the Ethiopian leadership stick with this point of view, it will be difficult to find a common ground for negotiations. (Various peoples live, for example, in Dagestan and Georgia.

There are autonomous territories within the individual republics of the Union.) The most important thing is to get both parties to the negotiating table.

The first point of the 9-point program on Eritrea states autonomy with respect to tribes/peoples but not with respect to territories. Mengistu has stated in a previous speech that Ethiopia would be willing to grant more autonomy to Eritrea than it had had before. But he has not yet stated what he meant by this. [...]

[Source: Stiftung "Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der ehemaligen DDR im Bundesarchiv"(Berlin), DY30 IV 2/2.035/126; document obtained and transl. by Christian F. Ostermann (The National Security Archive)]