

OLF Interview

(REP, M, ENGLISH) Okay. Let me begin by asking you to just say your name and your position so that I have it on the tape.

(EBBA, M, ENGLISH) My name is Fido Tadessa Ebba. I'm head of the diplomacy division in the foreign affairs department of the Oromo Liberation Front.

(REP) And you've been in the OLF right since the beginning, which was when?

(EBBA) Since 1974. Over thirty year now.

(REP) And were you yourself a fighter in the beginning?

(EBBA) You know I was a scientist. I studied in the United States and then Canada. And I hold a PhD in genetics. I started teaching in a university in Ethiopia, and then I was asked to establish a genetic bank, a genetic resource centre, because Ethiopia is so unique in its diversity of plants of animals. This institute was really financed by the international community, UN and so on. But finally, nationalism caught up with me and I understood the situation of my people. From my being in Europe and North America, I was able - very vividly - to appreciate the situation and the position of the Ormo people in Ethiopia. I wanted to start to educate them, there are very few educated people, to get my people out of this position.

(REP) So, did you initiate the beginning of the OLF? Or, how did you actually come to join?

(EBBA) Well we had group studies all over, and finally we prepared our political programme. We convinced ourselves that there are more issues, is a colonial issue. This colonisation happened the same time that the rest of African was being colonised by Europeans. But in our case, an African nation, with the help of Europeans, was able to colonise us and the solution is the liberation of our people.

(REP) This meeting, where did it take place?

(EBBA) In Addis. Some of our people are based in the Middle East. We had study groups all over the country actually, but finally the meeting took place in Addis. Our first congress took place in '76, in May '76 in Addis. The Dergue was then so powerful.

(REP) Now your own position, I mean between '76 and now, what have you been doing?

(EBBA) I had been in different positions, but I have been a member from the beginning, a member of the executive committee. I have been responsible for finance, I have also been doing a lot of diplomatic work. So I have been travelling to Europe, North America, African countries.

(REP) But you've never picked up a gun yourself?

(EBBA) No, they wouldn't allow me to. They wouldn't allow me, but I have trained. But I was never allowed...in fact I got my training in the community. Every community in Addis had a defence force, so I volunteered to be trained as a defence force. So in the morning, I'd get up and be trained by the army.

(REP) So, the Dergue did your training for you?

(EBBA) Exactly! That was elementary.

(REP) Talking about the current situation now: the OLF has for many years tried to have a military campaign against the Ethiopian government. Sometimes it's gone well, sometimes it's not gone so well. And then in recent years, you've had discussions about whether to lay down the armed struggle. Where is that debate now?

(EBBA) People, governments, international organisations raise this issue with us. The thing is we raised arms to defend ourselves. If the cause that we, you know, we started, we want to accomplish is done. If the operation of our people is removed, then we don't need any arms, there's no need for arms. But a year-and-a-half ago, we issued a paper actually, indicating that we are ready to suspend armed activities if the Ethiopian government is willing to negotiate, to talk. Meles came out and he said he's willing but this never materialised.

(REP) When I spoke to Prime Minister Meles, he said that he had been prepared to talk to you, that he had sent out elders from the Oromo community to come meet you, but he'd not received any positive reply.

(EBBA) I'm not aware of that. I don't think our organisation is aware of that. This is not true. We have been trying to reach him through different organisations and individuals, particularly the Norwegians. We have been in touch with them and with Meles and nothing positive has been achieved. Meles first said it was okay, but finally it was closed. This happened not only once, maybe over twelve times with Carter and a committee in the congress, the Lutheran World Federation, a group of ambassadors from Ethiopia, the Germans, so many. They just don't want to make progress.

(REP) So have you given up with that possibility?

(EBBA) We never give up, but you know, it's not in their culture – in the culture of Abyssinians to find a negotiated solution through dialogue. All the time there has never been a transfer of power, political power peacefully. So we now, I'm personally concluding that this won't happen. And Meles is...for one, he knows if he allows OLF to freely work, operate among the Oromo people that he wouldn't have a chance to win, to be a prime minister. And so he wants to hold on to power. Some governments in the West are very supportive of him. They want to keep him there. It seems that it is easier to work with dictators than democrats. That's what happens.

(REP) Now the OLF has its headquarters now - as I understand it - in Eritrea at the moment?

(EBBA) Yes, the major one, but we are all over.

(REP) How do you find that, working in Eritrea?

(EBBA) Well, we have been friends with the Eritreans during their struggle for independence, so this relationship has been there for maybe over thirty, forty years.

(REP) But there was a time when the OLF was actually in the Ethiopian government back in 1991 and there was a very bitter split with the TPLF. And there was also an allegation that you appealed to the EPLF, but the EPLF didn't assist you.

(EBBA) Well in '91, during the transitional government, there were times where we were instrumental with the Sudanese, with the United States government. But in '92 the TPLF didn't want us around. The Eritreans and others worked hard to resolve our differences, our political differences. At the end, you know, at that time the Eritreans were not independent, they didn't declare their independence, the issue was in the hands of Meles. They couldn't fight with Meles at that stage. They couldn't disagree.

(REP) But your impression is that they tried hard to resolve the differences? Because I've heard the opposite.

(EBBA) They did. Issias came several times to Addis. We work together. We had meetings. He sent a high-level delegation. I thought that it was genuine.

(REP) You were there in Addis?

(EBBA) Yes, I was there at many of the meetings, together with Isaias, Meles and so on. They were telling us that, Meles is becoming dangerous, they are warning us really. It's my belief that Eritreans really wanted a democratic Ethiopia so that they can have a peaceful neighbour with whom they can trade. That's what I felt. I don't think that the Eritreans really wanted to dominate anyone in the area. They are a small country – just four million. They are against Ethiopia, with seventy-five million people. So its unimaginable.

(REP) So you then left the government and began the armed struggle against the TPLF and against Prime Minister Meles has been going on ever since then?

(EBBA) Yes, with the help of Eritreans and the American government, we made an agreement with the Meles group to encamp our arms. We did. They didn't. In fact, actually they sent their army to kill our fighters in an area where they were camped. They were able to capture a lot of them, put them in prison. And, yes, the armed struggle has been going on since then. Not only an armed struggle. Our struggle is also diplomatic and political, in all aspects.

(REP) In recent months, there've been reports that the pace of the armed struggle has been increasing. But there has been a lot more clashes between the Ethiopian government armed forces and yourselves, particularly in eastern Ethiopia. How in your view is it going?

(EBBA) Well it's not much yet. We have a small force. We have our forces in the east and west, in the south and southeast. Still we have a small group in the centre. If conditions allow, this group could grow very fast, we are just waiting for an opportune time. It's easy to, if you have trainers and equipment, you can recruit thousands of people within a short time.

(REP) You say you have small numbers. Can you give me some idea of how many fighters you have?

(EBBA) I think it's very difficult...a few thousand.

(REP) Between five and ten thousand?

(EBBA) Maybe.

(REP) So, you say that you lack the weapons and the training. But there have been reports, particularly in the last month or so, of Eritrean planes arriving - particularly in the Somalia capital Mogadishu - to provide you with weapons.

(EBBA) We are not there to receive it. We are not in Mogadishu. We are outside. We are bordering Ogaden, which is very far from Mogadishu, so we are not there to receive equipment. We don't know about this equipment. We don't have any relations with the Union of Islamic Courts, so this is just an allegation. We are not there, even though we have a lot of Oromo refugees in Somalia still, since the late 60's Oromo refugees are in Somalia.

(REP) But are you not receiving arms perhaps indirectly from Eritrea?

(EBBA) Perhaps there could be a link to provide us with arms, but our land is very far from Eritrea. It's a long distance to...our land is bordering with Kenya, Somalia, but never, not with Eritrea. It's very far, with Sudan, it's a long distance.

(REP) But this is why people are saying that the arms are coming from Assab to Mogadishu, from Mogadishu they're going in either directly to yourselves or through the ONLF, the Ogaden National Liberation Front.

(EBBA) No Martin. Again, we are very far from there. We wish we were close by to receive from any source, from any assistance, from people who believe in our genuine cause. We are ready if it's support without any strings attached. Any help for our cause is welcome, but at present we are not operating this with this group.

(REP) A few weeks ago, Brigadier General Kamal Geltu went across the border from Ethiopia into Eritrea with a number of troops. Had he been in contact with you before he made that decision?

(EBBA) We have contacts with almost all sectors of Oromo society, including in the army. We have Oromo members in the Ethiopian army who are working undercover. We've been in contact with many of them.

(REP) But were you in contact with him before he made his decision to come over the border?

(EBBA) I believe he knew that we are there and he has indicated, he has actually in his interview indicated that they have been looking forward to rejoining the OLF.

(REP) So did you negotiate his decision to come over to Eritrea?

(EBBA) We didn't negotiate, but we have been in touch and he has an obligation to come and join the OLF as an Oromo national.

(REP) So you were in touch with him before he came across the border?

(EBBA) Not directly. He was in battles with some members of his group and other Oromos in the Ethiopian army.

(REP) So he's now joined your organisation?

(EBBA) Yes.

(REP) Approximately how many troops did he bring with him?

(EBBA) Perhaps a few hundred, around five hundred or something like that.

(REP) It must be a very substantial increase then, in your overall armed ability, to have somebody at that level with those kinds of troops to come over to you?

(EBBA) The propaganda, the psychological effect is enormous, in the Ethiopian army, it has a most demoralising effect on the Tigrayans.

(REP) Because I can't remember it ever happening at that kind of level before.

(EBBA) Of ever happening in the country actually, a general joining a rebel group. It's very rare, if it has ever happened. But in his interview, he really indicated that they have been working hard to democratise the country, so that Oromos can play their fair share in all aspects of Ethiopian life. This is not happening. The Tigrayans are digging in, strengthening their ability to exploit more of the Omoro resources, human resources, material resources, so they decided finally that they can't continue to wait forever. So, as he said, we'll try force.

(REP) Now you've said that it's a long way from Eritrea to Oromia. So how are going to deploy him then?

(EBBA) Well, individuals can be deployed. We have several ways of doing that. I'm talking of a large quantity of arms.

(REP) But if you're going to move five hundred men that you say he came across the border with, that's a very large redeployment.

(EBBA) Five hundred?

(REP) ...well that's what you said.

(EBBA) Yes. No. I mean removing five hundred into Oromia. It won't be a big problem, no. It won't be a big problem.

(REP) How would you do it?

(EBBA) There are liberation fronts with which we have formed an alliance.

(REP) Such as?

(EBBA) Such as the Ogaden National Liberation Front; the Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front from the north; the Beni Shangul, the Anuak.

(REP) So might you send them through Somalia then?

(EBBA) If the situation allows. The present situation is very risky. Ethiopians are there. It could happen, but we'll choose the best way. These people may not go in one group. We might find a way of taking these people in a small group.

(REP) Does this mark a significant transition in your armed struggle? From one level perhaps, to a different level to a more active phase? The fact that he's come over with these troops, increasing your strength, increase your ability, maybe coming with some arms as well. Will this transform the way that you are fighting?

(EBBA) Not at this stage, but we are expecting more.

(REP) You're expecting more recruits from the Ethiopian side?

(EBBA) From the Ethiopian army, not only from Omoro. From others – from the Amhara and from others. They are mistreated, so we expect more to defect. In fact, our worry is...you see, as there is a division, this mistrust in Ethiopian society based on the ethnic line, there is also this division, mistrust in the army. Disproportionately, the Tigrayans are on the top. The rest are suspected. They are not treated as equals, as Ethiopians. They are suspected. So this causing a lot of apprehension, and we are fearful that there could be a problem in the army itself. There could be fighting which would be a disaster.

(REP) A disaster?

(EBBA) Yes. Within the Ethiopian army...there'll be fighting against the Oromo, the Amhara, people fighting. The whole of society, it could be chaotic.

(REP) You mean it could like a civil war?

(EBBA) Exactly.

(REP) And this wouldn't be an opportunity for you to, perhaps, further your aims?

(EBBA) No. We really don't want a civil war. We want a change of government, but we don't want people to kill each other.

(REP) So how do you think a change of government will take place?

(EBBA) If we have more of the army on our side, if people in the Ethiopian army refuse to fight. And the security force, the police, refuse to obey orders. Student uprisings, strikes and demonstrations have been going on and on now for almost ten months. This might be intensified, particularly after the formation of this alliance.

(REP) Which alliance are you talking about?

(EBBA) The Alliance for Freedom and Democracy. That's bringing in the Amhara, Sidama and other ethnic groups. Actually the aim of this alliance is more than toppling the present government, it's to create harmony among society, the ethnic groups.

(REP) Almost to put back together again the ethnic differences that the TPLF brought in?

(EBBA) Exactly, so we have to assure the people that they can live together in peace. In particular, there are a lot of Amharas among the Omoros as settlers. And these will have been there for four, five generations. And through this alliance we are trying to solve this problem of mistrust.

(REP) The OLF has been active now since the 1970s. That's more than thirty years, maybe forty years. Do you think that you are now coming finally to a moment when your aims might be realised?

(EBBA) I feel so, particularly the consciousness, the level of conscience of our people. The youths which makes up almost, you know, people of age thirty alone, make up almost seventy percent of the population. These are the people who are being affected by what's going on. They want change. These are new people. And, yes, thirty years...but South Africa, struggled for how many years. The Palestinians did the same and finally, they see the fruit of it.

(REP) Finally, are you not embarrassed by the lack of democracy among your major allies, the Eritreans? The repression, the lack of toleration? It is now one of the most repressive states in Africa. Does this not embarrass you?

(EBBA) You know we have been there. The degree of human rights violations is just incomparable to what's taking place in Ethiopia. And the West is impressed with Ethiopia, with Meles. There's no comparison.

(REP) You think there's more repression in Ethiopia?

(EBBA) Unbelievable. This goes to the family level! There's no comparison. The Eritreans, they are very different. They have a different outlook on their lives, on their society. They want to be independent. They don't want to be influenced by others if it's not to their advantage. It appears that the West doesn't like that. That's what I feel. I have many Eritrean friends. The situation of about 3.5 to 4 million people confronting the largest army in Africa, with the huge population of Ethiopia, and at the same time, a country which the West is helping, ACTIVELY. It's very hard to blame them.

(END)