

Mengistu Hailemariam

**Interview Granted to the
British Television Company
Channel Four**

May 5, 1989
Addis Ababa—Ethiopia

Mengistu Hailemariam

**Interview Granted to the
British Television Company
Channel Four**

Published by the Ministry of Information
Press Department

May 5, 1989
Addis Ababa—Ethiopia

On May 5/1989, Mengistu Hailemariam, Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, President of the PDRE and Commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Armed Forces gave an interview to the British Television Company Channel Four. Following is the full text of the interview. The questions were presented by John Anderwood.

John Anderwood.

Mr. President, first of all, thank you very much indeed for this opportunity of being able to talk to you. As you know our programme is very largely about the economics of Ethiopia. Could you tell us what economic adjustments have taken place in Ethiopia around the past two years, and why you felt it necessary to make these adjustments?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

If you have followed our mode of operation, it will be clear first of all that, in our economic policy, we are guided by a Ten Year Perspective Plan. And the practical effectiveness of this perspective plan is continually tested and evaluated on the basis of its annual implementation. So, we draw the plan, we evaluate its implementation and, then, we take all the necessary measures of adjustment as they arise and present themselves. As there is nothing static in economic life, we are in a continual process of evaluating and discussing the changes introduced and the defects that arise thereof, and following this up with whatever corrective measures are necessary.

Aside from this, we do not, on our part, think in terms of having instituted a particular "adjustment" — in a particular time and set of circumstances. We have made it our working tradition every year to plan and to implement, then to evaluate the implementation of the plan and, finally, to take whatever measures of adjustments have become necessary.

John Anderwood.

I understand Mr. President. That is something that has been explained to us and we are aware that you are just coming

towards the end of the first five years of this Ten Year Perspective Plan. It seems to us that in a sense, the changes and the developments in policy that are taking place on this particular occasion seem to be far-reaching; they seem to be introducing a degree of recognition, on your Government's part, of a need to use market forces a little more than, perhaps, they had been used in the past. Is that perception on our part a correct perception?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

In my opinion—and indeed in the laws and logic of all economic life — it is impossible to ignore or to think outside of the forces of the market place. And there are many other considerations that go along with this. Capitalism, for example, only marks a stage in the process of economic development — as, indeed, does socialism.

Incidentally, what one must bear in mind is that we are neither the one nor the other. We have not yet reached that stage of development. What you see here and all that we are trying to do is to pull ourselves out of feudal backwardness towards more modern and democratic conditions. The efforts to satisfy the needs of our society and the work of restructuring the economy all fall within this framework.

In other words, there is a state sector as well as a very modest cooperative one and, alongside these, there is a very large and significant private sector. But the level of finance, technology and capital at which these sectors operate is really so low that it doesn't make sense to speak either of capitalism or socialism. This is a point that must be emphasized.

John Anderwood,

Mr. President, I am grateful for that explanation. I understand too, you are moving towards democracy and I am

sure the establishment of the PDRE was a major step in that direction. I understand, too, that you have thought about capitalism and socialism and the fact that you have achieved neither of these yet. What I'm interested to know is what you are trying to achieve. Would you describe Ethiopia as a socialist or Marxist-Leninist state at the present time?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

The answer to this is closely related to what I have just said. Having said that capitalism and socialism are but stages on the scale of development, it follows that Marxism is the ideology of a society pursuing the ideals of socialist socio-economics. Now, our long-term objective is to build a socialist society. But this is a very distant objective, an ideal.

We are now at a national democratic stage of revolution. We have yet to lay the technical, social, and psychological foundations for development. And the work of developing the productive forces of the society is one that will take a very long period of time.

Other countries have gone through 60 and 70 years of this process whereas ours is only a little over 14 years old. As such, though we state our ultimate programme objective to be the building of a socialist society, the actual state of our economic conditions is that of a very backward and still developing one.

John Anderwood.

Mr. President, I understand the direction in which your efforts are now being moved. There is one thing which must, obviously, hinder your efforts, I'm thinking of the war that you have to currently fight in the north of your country. How difficult is it for the economic adjustments that you are making to proceed effectively while the war continues?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

A good question. It must be quite obvious how complex and trying life becomes for a developing country when it's already severe economic and social difficulties are further compounded by the burden of war.

This war has now lasted 28 years. The situation in our country, say 15 or 14 years ago was far worse than it is today. Both in the severity of the natural calamities we suffered and in terms of the adverse effects of the world economy, the situation then was far worse than now. The same war was raging on then, too. I can say that our level of development and life, generally, were worse than now.

And the war has its own reasons and origins. The self-styled "liberators" who are causing so much destruction and suffering in the northern parts of our country started the war on the pretext that they were fighting imperialism and neo-colonialism and to have the American military base there removed. In addition, they were able to obtain the support and encouragement of various elements in the progressive world by arguing that they were fighting the feudal government that had proved itself an imperialist puppet and collaborator.

Our aim, the aim of Ethiopian revolutionaries at the time, was to extricate the country from this morass. In other words this war is not one of our making. It was something we inherited and had imposed upon us.

We must bring this war to an end. We must make the country neutral and free from alignment. Our aim is to build a fair and just society that is not riven along national, religious or economic lines. It is in this spirit that we exert all our efforts to solve the problem and bring about peace.

John Anderwood,

I understand that, Mr. President. In your May Day speech, which we listened to with great interest, you reviewed that the country had been having talks in Khartoum. My understanding is that these talks weren't a success as you would have hoped. I'm wondering what hope you now hold out for a discussion to settle the war?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

I believe that all such man-made problems are susceptible to human solution. Thus, we have had the beginning of the first talks. This in itself is a step forward. Of course, it may not be possible to find an immediate solution to a problem of such long-standing. But, as more confidence and understanding grow between the two sides, it is in the hope that a solution will emerge sooner or later that we have embarked on this peace process. I do not believe, thus, that the first contact is an end in itself. One might say it is a start, a beginning.

John Anderwood,

Does that mean, Mr. President, that talks will continue? Do you propose to have further talks with the rebels in the north of the country?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

As a matter of fact, we did not touch upon the core of the problem in these first talks. One might say that we worked on the procedural points that will then lead to a direct discussion of the issue — laying the ground rules, if you like. So, in a sense, one can't really speak of success or failure, yet.

Now, the groundwork has been laid and there is success in terms of setting the pre-conditions for continuing the talks. And the effort will continue.

John Anderwood,

And the final question on the talks, Sir: Are you hopeful that they will lead to a final solution? And if you are, then within what time frame do you hope for success?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

As is well known, the fundamental justification and aim of our revolution is to solve the country's various problems. And the question of peace being one of them, we have repeatedly offered many avenues of solution for this.

The last and most comprehensive of these is the constitutional frame-work approved by our National Shengo (Assembly) for peace and social stability in various parts of the country. This constitution was deliberated upon by the entirety of the Ethiopian people and massively endorsed in the referendum. It is in this framework that we have been working and it is this that we believe will lead to a solution. Because it is a document that has the backing of the vast majority.

If these various groups believe in democracy and in the will of the majority, they also ought to seek a solution. Such is the frame-work for talks, and the hope for future peace is based on this.

John Anderwood,

Mr. President, if I press you for one final time on your feelings about the success of the talks: Do you feel in your heart that these talks will eventually be successful?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

Yes, I do. In fact, I have never abandoned hope on this point. Provided that it takes place in the frame-work of the unity of the country and on the democratic will and participation of the people, I believe that it can only be a matter of time.

What is required is to continue to make determined efforts for the success of the various elements of the solution. And, really, there is no other choice.

John Anderwood,

I understand, Mr. President, I would like to move on to a slightly different area. Ethiopia as a country has a particular type of image in the West. It is an image which deals with things like famine, war, a perception, I think, that your Government is a hardliner Marxist Government, that things like villagization have taken place by force, that people are rounded up in the middle of the night to be forced into the army itself. Tell me, how do you want to counter that criticism, that very negative image that has grown up?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

To be really truthful — and you can all judge for yourselves — the situation our country is facing is not in any way unique to Ethiopia. Neither our strengths, nor our problems nor, indeed, the solutions we seek for them are different from what was and is being tried in other parts of the world.

Let us take the famine, for instance. This was not a scourge created by our Revolution or by our convictions. It is a natural calamity that has occurred at different times in different parts of the world and, sometimes, in even more severe forms than here. During the imperial regime, there was an even more extensive loss of life and livestock than has occurred now. And it is we who exposed it to the world, not the previous government. And yet, the coverage all this received was never as hostile or exaggerated as what we face.

Ranging further afield, one can cite figures and any number of countries where the same tragedy occurred on even bigger scale: India, China, Pakistan, Mauritania, Kampuchea

etc... Today, too, there are parts of Africa where the same problem exists on a similar scale. Sudan is a case in point. But they do not face the same hostility that we do.

One must look at this carefully. The questions to ask are these: What are the causes that make for the recurrence of famine? What did the society, we, do to save lives, in the short-term and in the long-run?

We, as a party, as a government, and as a people have a responsibility, a duty to react. Things have to be done in response. Whether the rest of the world is pleased or displeased with what we do is a different matter. But this government has a particular responsibility to do something.

In the short term, emergency food supplies have to be organized in order to save lives. Water, clothing and medicine have to be provided. We did this with all the internal resources at our disposal and with the generosity of the international community. We do not believe that this is anything to be ashamed of. Quite the contrary.

On the other hand, such emergency relief cannot be a long-term solution in parts of the country where natural and agricultural conditions are so degraded and exhausted that meaningful human life can no longer be sustained. So we felt it appropriate to move people to parts of the country where they can work the land and support themselves — to give them a chance to rebuild their lives. Such measures have been taken in other parts of the world. And it is correct that they were taken in our conditions.

America was built on villages and towns. Currently, there is a similar resettlement programme in Indonesia being carried out with the help of the United Nations and several countries. One can speak of others. The world we see today was built in one way or another by a similar movement of people into

villages and towns – by a movement of people from one continent to another. It really amazes me why it should be seen as something new and unique when we do it.

We should be judged by results. Did our programme result in the saving of lives? Do the people have a better life now? Or did they suffer and perish? This is something that the conscience of society must judge by looking at the tangible results of the resettlement programme. The alternative would have been death on an even bigger scale.

John Anderwood,

I think, Mr. President, if I may say so, my understanding of this area is indeed that there are many external organizations, I'm thinking of, for example, the World Bank or the EEC who now reassess their position with respect to your villagization and resettlement programme for what it is worth. They tell us that, they believe these are valuable and important steps that you are taking. And I agree with you that these are positive things to be done.

I think the question that may arise is whether in the early stages of these programme there was a degree of coercion or force involved. Do you perhaps now accept (the programmes in themselves are very important and positive and, as you said, are programmes which saved lives) that perhaps in the early stages there were some local excesses?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

Yes. In an operation of this massive scale where large numbers of people had to be transported by land, sea and air to and from different corners of the country, yes, we did face certain unavoidable difficulties.

People who had been weakened by the famine may have died of the rigours of the long journey. But what must be borne

in mind is that such people faced nothing but certain death where they were.

Yes, too, the change of climatic conditions when people moved from the high-lands to the lowlands—and vice versa — did cause hardships. The calibre of the cadres and social workers involved in this work may not always have been upto the level of efficiency and judgement we would have wished to see. And their numbers may not always have been adequate, given the pressure of time and the numbers of people involved. But a sensible reaction to this should have been to point to the defects and help us correct them — not condemn the entire programme outright.

John Anderwood,

I understand, Mr. President. It seems to me what you are saying is that you were engaged upon a programme which was indeed very complex and very difficult. And, that, it would therefore be surprising indeed if there were not mistakes or excesses in the early stages of its implementation. Is that a fair assessment in your view?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

Yes.

John Anderwood,

Mr. President, I would like to move on to the final area of our interview. I believe that your Government wants close relations with the West, with the United States, with Great Britain — in the sense that you wish peaceful relations with all nations of the world. Could you express first how great your desire is for close relations, first with the West in general?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

If you will allow me, there is a point from the previous

questions I would like to dwell on a bit before answering this one.

I have already said that the drought is a natural phenomenon that can occur anywhere in the world — and not one of our making or of the society that we are striving to build.

I have also pointed out that we came to end the war and to bring peace. We did not create this war — rather, we inherited it. And I have pointed to the causes of the war.

Further, the path of the National Democratic Revolution that we are conducting in Ethiopia or, if you like, our effort to pull the country out of feudal backwardness into a modern democracy is no different from similar undertakings in other parts of the world. The same things have happened in both the East and West.

So, genuinely, it is not clear to us why we are given this label of a hardline Marxist party and government. In what context and by what form or content can we be labelled as such?

This is presenting us for what we are not, and cannot be. The responsibility for this image is really not ours. You should look to the work of the media and the press for this image we have been given. They are responsible.

By what criteria is one being labelled hardline Marxist? For establishing the equality of nationalities, religions and the sexes? For creating the conditions in economic life and for encouraging people to actively participate — after their own bent — in either co-operative or private enterprise? Or is it for supporting the cause of peace and progress?

John Anderwood,

I understand, Mr. President. It seems to me, in a sense, that there is a change going on within the communist world, which obviously you are only too well aware of, that is a move

away from, if you like, the Brezhnev Doctrine towards a, perhaps, modern approach as epitomized by Mr. Gorbachev. What views do you have on that broad development which, I think, is called Perestroika and glasnost? What do you have on that development and how does Ethiopia fit in that?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

As I said earlier on, now, there is a world of difference between the socialist countries in Europe and the democratic revolutions underway in several African countries. There is also a wide age-gap of 60 to 70 years.

In their case, they have advanced way ahead in setting up and consolidating socialist societies and economies, and are at an altogether highly advanced stage of development. So, it is only natural that, arising from their experiences and their stage of development, they should seek to change, correct and reform certain things.

But we have not built a socialist society. Nor have we a socialist economy in place. We have not reached that stage. And indeed, we do not have a capitalist economy, either. We have not reached a capitalist stage of development. So, the nature of the problems and the questions that confront us are far, far removed from those that they face.

We admire that what they are doing on their part. And we do truly hope and like to see them succeed in their efforts and experiments. But, by whatever criteria you may measure it, our stage of development, the problems we face and the solutions we must seek for them are totally different from theirs.

John Anderwood,

Mr. President, I didn't quite genuinely understand that there are very different economic problems and very different developmental problems in advanced industrial countries like

those in Eastern Europe and in the developing nations like Ethiopia. Is there, however, any kind of analogy between the economic changes that are taking place in Eastern Europe and the kinds of policy adjustments that you are engaged upon here? I realize they aren't the same, I realize that you would not use the same word. But are there analogies in any way?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

To reiterate our objective once again, what we are trying to do is to orient the development of our society in a direction that will extricate it from backwardness. In this task, I may say that there has never been a time or a political and economic forum where we have held back from frankly testing, evaluating and correcting the effects of the measures we have taken; and of assessing whether the direction we are following was the correct one or not.

So, in a way, from the very outset of our revolution, we have always been searching, and doing that which is now generally regarded as a novelty. We have constantly asked the question:- Where are we going? What are the results obtained? Where did we go wrong? What needs to be done? This has become part of our working culture.

At every Central Committee meeting, at every annual economic review and at all the planning sessions — we have never proceeded without paying close attention to such issues. What we have now is the cumulative effect of the continuous re-examination of our policies, of a re-evaluation of every stage of policy formulation and implementation.

We believe it must be a matter of policy for everyone to adopt such practice as standard procedure — taking into account their own particular conditions and goals. So the idea of it is not really new to us. What is different is what is presented as new and important at every stage. And what the level of development can carry.

John Anderwood,

Mr. President, I want to ask you a little about your relations with the rest of the world. Let's begin, if we may, with the West. In broad general terms, is your country looking for closer relations with the Western nations?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

Regarding this, one may take note of what is stated in our political programme. Our foreign relations is governed by a programme that clearly declares our unequivocal desire to co-operate with all countries on the basis of equality, peace and mutual advantage and without any divisions for ideological or whatever reasons. This has been clearly and explicitly laid down from the beginning.

And we really have tried to be true to this policy. We have very good relations with a number of countries on these terms. Italy may be taken as a prime example of this. Our relations with France are also good. So are those with Canada. There are several current instances of fruitful co-operation, be they small or big—even to the extent of setting up joint economic commissions.

To conclude, on our part, there has never, ever been a desire to sever out relations with the Western World — or even to create any difficulties. The problem has always arisen on the other side.

John Anderwood,

I'm interested in your answer, Mr. President. You mentioned a number of specific individual countries — Italy, Canada, France. There are two countries in particular that I would like to ask you about now. The first one is actually Israel. I wonder how you would characterize your Government's relations with Israel at the present time.

Mengistu Hailemariam,

As you know very well, Ethiopia broke off diplomatic relations with Israel in the context of the Arab-Israeli wars and in adherence to the measures taken and the resolutions adopted by the United Nations in respect of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

Furthermore, Ethiopia could not stand aside from the rest of the entire African continent on the point of the forcible occupation of the territory of Egypt, a member state of the Organization of African Unity.

But now, many Arab countries are seeking a peaceful solution to the problem. The recognition by the PLO of Israel's right to exist, and the moves underway towards accepting the PLO around the discussion table have created favourable conditions. Egyptian territory has been returned and Egypt itself has re-established relations with Israel. In these conditions, I think it is obvious that many countries, including Ethiopia, are reconsidering their positions.

John Anderwood,

Is there a prospect or possibility, Mr. President, that full diplomatic relations may be re-established with Israel?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

Do not ask me just when. But in the nature of things, this is inevitable.

John Anderwood,

Mr. President, I would like to move on and ask you about your relations with, not the West, but the East. I think it is reliably perceived in the West that Mr. Gorbachev does not wish to support regional conflicts any longer and I suspect that one of the conflicts he was thinking about when he said that he did not wish to support such conflicts was the conflict that you

have in the north of your country. Does it present you with a problem, in terms of arms supply and so on, that Mr. Gorbachev is taking this current view?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

I think, before anything else, the very concept of “regional conflict” requires examination in this context. Now, we have a particular problem in the North of our country, which you all know. But this is not a regional conflict. It is an internal Ethiopian problem. This is not just my personal position — nor is it that of the government or the party alone. The entire Ethiopian people hold this position.

This generation stands in great debt to its forebears for the great sacrifices they paid in order to keep this country free and independent of the unceasing designs and assaults of colonialist and various expansionist forces in the region. In return, we too, have a duty to face whatever sacrifices are called for and to hand over a united country to our children.

What we do to solve the problems hindering this must remain our internal affairs. So, the problem in the north of our country has nothing to do with whichever definition of regional conflict — including that of the Soviet Union.

One also speaks of the problem of the Horn of Africa. As a geographical designation, this includes Djibouti and Somalia — along with Ethiopia. And here, the only problem has always been Somalia’s claim to Ethiopian Territory.

In this case, too, I can say that we have no problems whatever with Djibouti — we live in excellent good-neighbourliness. As to our relations with Somalia, here again, the situation is not what the world continues to perceive. We are engaged in a very heartening process of dealing with our problems in order to solve them altogether.

This process was started on our own initiative and without any prompting or pressure from outside — and I believe we will eventually achieve our goal.

John Anderwood,

I think, the essence of my question, Mr. President, was that, accepting your point that the conflict in the north of Ethiopia is not in the strict sense of the word a regional conflict, that it is of course an internal Ethiopian problem, my thought was: Where would it leave you if the Soviet Union decided to substantially reduce the arms supplies that it has hitherto made available to you?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

Our comprehensive and all-sided agreement of co-operation with the Soviet Union is not contingent on Eritrea or on one or other piece of the rest of the country. It is firmly founded on the mutual benefit and co-operation of the two peoples.

The Soviet Union has given us all-round help and support at a critical time when we were threatened both by external aggression and by internal secession. Nothing new has happened in this relationship and it is my belief that this mutual understanding and support will continue to the end.

I do not believe that the Soviet Union — which has done so much in the past to help this nation maintain its unity and independence — will now change its longstanding policy of support and in any way work for its weakening and disintegration.

The question of avoiding war and conflict is a vital point for all mankind, around which not only the Soviet Union but everyone must rally. And we do, too.

But it is a different matter when forces arise to violate and destroy the sovereignty and unity of a country, and when they

arm, encourage, aid and abet and pressurise different elements towards this aim — both externally and internally.

Let alone the Soviet Union, I do not think that any Western governments that know and understand anything of the history of this country will stand aside and allow this to happen.

John Anderwood,

I understand. Does that mean Mr. President, that you are confident that, for example, not just in terms of developmental aid but also in terms of the arms that you need in order to stop the splitting up of Ethiopia, the Soviet Union will continue to be a secure source of that material assistance?

Mengistu Hailemariam,

Indeed. That is what I hope will be the case.

John Anderwood,

I understand, Mr. President. My final question, we have talked about relations with a number of different countries, you mentioned Italy, Canada, France, and so on. I would like to ask you, bearing in mind, that we are of course, a British television crew, about your feelings towards the United Kingdom, to its people, to its present government and so on. I would like to ask you whether you are striving for closer relations with the U.K. and whether you have, for example, bearing in mind your country's needs, any particular message for our Prime Minister. And this of course is entirely up to you, but I would ask you whether you may even consider expressing your thoughts to Mrs. Thatcher in English.

Mengistu Hailemariam,

I think my message will get across better and clear if I speak my mother tongue.

But to answer your question. Let me say that we — neither in the past, nor at the present, nor in future — have, or ever will entertain sentiments of ill-will towards the people and governments of the United Kingdom — and, in particular, towards the present government led by Mrs. Thatcher.

In fact, we feel that it is the people of the United Kingdom, more than any other European country, who, by a series of historical coincidences, have come to know and to understand our history the best — and we have fought alongside each other in the past.

True, there have been a series of misunderstandings — for a variety of reasons — in these past few years of upheaval. But even so, we really have no very major grudge to bear here, say, relating to the unity or the sovereignty of our country.

I hope, though, that the current state of relations — which is marked by an absence of warmth or any significant level of co-operation — will change on both sides. We, on our part, will make a special effort to bring this about.

John Anderwood,

Mr. President, I am extremely grateful for those thoughts. I think, for my part, that has concluded the questions I wanted to ask you. The only thing I would say is that if you feel that there are any other areas, any other matters that you wish to make some kind of comment upon, then, we are of course, entirely at your disposal.

Mengistu Hailemariam,

If there is one thing I would like to say, it is this: That the West has consistently misunderstood us, what we stand for and what we are trying to do in Ethiopia. I and my colleagues who, by historical accident, happen to be in the leadership of this ancient and independent but also desperately backward land

have no ambitions outside of a burning desire to extricate our country from its backwardness.

But in the misunderstanding of this in the West, we have been given an image that is not ours, and labelled for what we are not.

I know this is no fault of the people in the West. It is the press and the media that have the professional responsibility to project things as they are and to present, in good conscience, the reality of what is going on here. Are we really not working for the interest of our people? Do we deny them their wishes and beliefs? A fair presentation of our actions would have gone a long way towards dispelling the current widespread image we have been given.

But I am sorry to say that this has not been the case and we have been unfairly treated in our effort to serve the good of our people. We really do not wish to profit by what we do. Nothing but the best interest of our people governs our actions.

Really though, the treatment we have been given by the media verges on the criminal. We wish the media to know and understand Ethiopia and what is going on here better. We are prepared to open our doors and show everything. There is nothing we are ashamed of or would want to hide.

John Anderwood,

Thank you once again very much indeed for this opportunity to talk to you.