

Land reform – rebel style

IT WAS SAID, during the reign of Mary Tudor, that when she died the word "Calais" would be found engraved on her heart – because that last bit of the English domain in France was lost during her five years on the throne.

When Colonel Mengistu, socialist leader of the military government of Ethiopia, eventually goes to join his ancestors, the name engraved on his heart is likely to be "Tigray", one of the country's northern provinces.

Not that Mengistu has actually lost Tigray. But for the past eight years his army has been fighting a losing war with the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), a guerrilla movement seeking near-independence from Addis Ababa for the area's five million population.

The TPLF are estimated to control as much as 85 per cent of Tigray, the national army being in command of only a few garrison towns and the main roads between them.

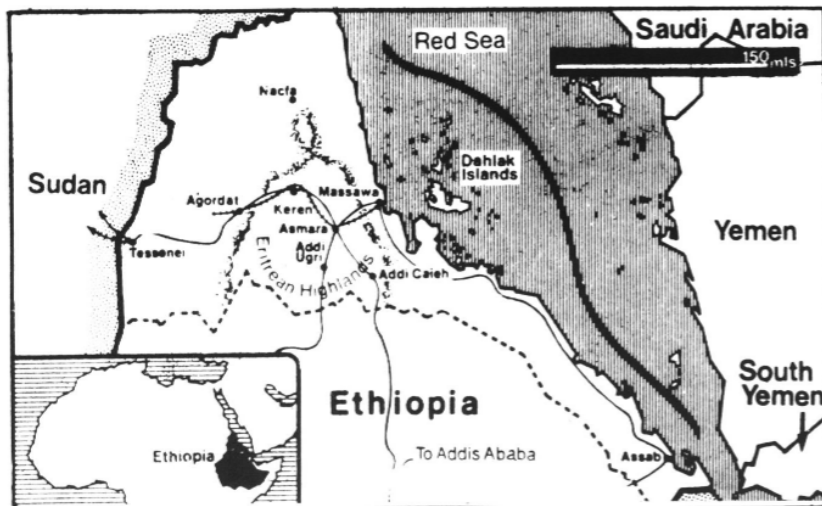
SO STRONG are the TPLF in their territory that they recently introduced their own scheme of land reform in an area called Adi-Nebried, a Tigrayan district of 17,000 people.

A booklet* published in the United Kingdom describes the method they used. It explains that 90 per cent of Tigrayans make their living from the land but that, over the centuries "a great deal of imbalance" had developed in the size of holdings. "Those with a large amount of land wielded a great deal of power, while those without suffered injustice and poverty."

Under their ancient laws, every Tigrayan was entitled to a piece of land of his own. But successive monarchs introduced changes which gradually whittled away this traditional entitlement. Land was taken from peasants to give to the church or to monasteries. In some cases, peasants had their freeholds taken away and were made tenants of the church. The monarchs also granted land rights to their favourite generals and courtiers who levied private taxes on the peasants in the areas concerned.

The result of these changes was the gradual impoverishment of the Tigrayan peasant, a process that gathered pace whenever the territory experienced drought or invasion by locusts. Every such natural disaster forced more peasants to sell or mortgage land in order to buy food and pay taxes.

By the time of the 1974 revolution, 25 per cent of the peasants owned little or no land. Of those who still owned some, 45 per cent had less



than a hectare. By contrast, a very small group owned a very great deal of land. These included the church and those in positions of power.

Like most of the land-reform schemes we hear about, the Adi-Nebried scheme was a simple, physical share-out. The basic principle was that everyone should have a proportion of his share in land near his home and the rest in small parcels of land further afield.

The land was categorised according to its fertility: fertile, medium and poor. One unit of fertile land was taken as equivalent to one and a half units of medium or to two units of poor land. The aim was to give everyone some of all three qualities of land but this was not always possible.

By Bert Brookes

THE LAND was distributed on the basis of *tabayas*. There are nine of these units in Adi-Nebried, each consisting of about three villages. All the land in each *tabaya* was divided up and allotted to those living there, lots being drawn for the land remote from homes.

The amount of land allotted to each person depended on the number of mouths he had to feed. A couple with one child, for example, got one unit called a *gibri*. Families of other sizes were allotted shares.

The sexes were treated equally – a new departure for Tigray where, formerly, women had not been allowed to own land – and couples who separate are required to share their land equally. Additions to families entitle them to more land, although the booklet does not explain

where the additional land is to come from.

All the land of Adi-Nebried was included in the share-out, including that held by churches and monasteries whose entitlements under the redistribution were based on the numbers of priests, monks and nuns living there.

In all, some 12,500 hectares were re-distributed.

The land-reform scheme in Adi-Nebried shows what can be done to level up the scales of justice and give every inhabitant a fair share of Nature's bounty.

But it is the type of scheme that is practicable only in a country area where land is used almost exclusively for growing food. It is hardly workable in towns, cities and industrial areas where the land is much more valuable, is hardly divisible into small plots and where land values are much more prone to change.

Even in a rural area such as Adi-Nebried, difficulties will arise as families change in size, and especially if the total population of the district tends to rise. Presumably, frequent revisions of holdings – with much scope for argument – will be necessary. And what is to prevent the new holders selling their land to pay debts, thus producing the imbalance that occurred before?

The people of Tigray, if further land-reform schemes are contemplated, would be well advised to consider the merits of land-value taxation, under which every citizen receives the benefits of owning land without the problem of physically dividing it up.

*Tekeste Agazi, *Agrarian Reform in Tigray: A Case of the land reform in the District of Adi-Nebried*, £1.35.