

July 17, 1977

**Memorandum of conversation between Soviet
Ambassador to Ethiopia A.N. Ratanov and Cuban
military official Arnaldo Ochoa**

Citation:

"Memorandum of conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia A.N. Ratanov and Cuban military official Arnaldo Ochoa", July 17, 1977, Wilson Center Digital Archive, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 73, d. 1637, ll. 141-146; translated by S. Savranskaya
<https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/111849>

Summary:

Memorandum of conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia A.N. Ratanov and Cuban military official Arnaldo Ochoa concerning the situation in Ethiopia and the recent losses of objectives in Eritrea by the Ethiopians as well as possible means to strengthen the Ethiopian army

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Memorandum of Conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia
A.N. Ratanov and Cuban military official Arnaldo Ochoa, 17 July 1977

TOP SECRET Copy No. 2
From the journal of 24 August 1977
A.P. RATANOV Orig. No. 297

REPORT OF CONVERSATION
with the head of the Cuban military specialists Division General
ARNALDO OCHOA
17 July 1977

During the discussion held at the Soviet Embassy, the Soviet Ambassador outlined the following considerations on the military and political situation in Ethiopia.

The capture of several strategically important objectives in Eritrea and in the eastern regions of Ethiopia by the separatists and by the Somalis has showed that the PMAC:

1. Underestimated the military capabilities of the Eritrean separatists, and thus did not take serious measures to strengthen the group of troops in Eritrea. At the same time the PMAC was hoping that it would be able to persuade the leadership of the Eritrean organizations to take part in negotiations on the political settlement of the Eritrean problem.
2. Did not expect that the units of the Somali regular army in Ogaden would participate directly in the military actions. It is significant that the Ethiopian command did not take measures for building a defensive barrier in the regions adjacent to Somalia. Apparently, the PMAC was concerned that such measures could be perceived by Somalia as an Ethiopian refusal to settle their disagreements with Somalia peacefully.
3. Overestimated its own military capabilities. Did not take into account the fact that the old army practically did not go through the school of revolutionary struggle even though it took part in the revolution, since the main demands of the rank and file soldiers were for a raise in pay and for improvement of the retirement pensions, and a certain part of the officer corps was against the Revolution altogether.

It should be also mentioned that in relation to Eritrea, during the three years since the Revolution the Ethiopian command has never attempted any offensive military operations against the Eritrean armed forces, and that the troops of the Ethiopian regular army were practically dwelling in their quarters.

Only two or three months ago the PMAC, having received weapons from the socialist countries, hastily began to organize new units of the regular army, and the people's militia.

Currently the armed forces of Ethiopia consist of 6 divisions of the regular army (55 thousand people), 8 divisions of the people's militia (about 100 thousand people), and police formations (40 thousand people). However:

1. The Ethiopian army is inferior to the Somali army in the quality of armaments.
2. The members of the people's militia have not had a sufficient military training yet.

All this led to the situation where the separatists were able to establish control over 75-80% of the Eritrean territory, including the cities of Keren, Nacfa, Karora, Decamere, Tessenei. Their armed forces consist of 18 thousand people.

The Ethiopian command in Eritrea has 20 thousand soldiers of the regular army, and it is currently transferring there 5 divisions of the people's militia. This should give it the opportunity to establish control over Eritrea assuming that Sudan does not introduce its armed forces there.

If the military effort in Eritrea is successful, the PMAC hopes that the separatists and the Arab countries who support them would have to agree to a political settlement and accept internal autonomy for Eritrea.

In the Ogaden the detachments of the Front of for the Liberation of Western Somalia (up to 5 thousand people), introduced mainly from Somalia, have recently established control over the most part of the territory. The front is engaged in combat near the cities of Harar, Jijiga, Gode, Dire Dawa.

The PMAC has up to 10 thousand people in the Ogaden. Currently detachments of the people's militia are being transferred there. The Ethiopian command considers the situation in the Ogaden most dangerous since Somalia continues to transfer its military personnel and heavy weaponry to that region.

Therefore, the PMAC has a opportunity to change favorably the military situation in Eritrea as well as in the Ogaden, However, it would need to solve the following problems.

1. To provide the armed forces with the means of transportation (helicopters, trucks, etc.) for a quick transfer of the reserves when and where they are needed.
2. To create fuel reserves and to obtain means of transportation for them.
3. To create reserves of food and medicines.

Also it is necessary to strengthen the political work in the armed forces, for which they would need cadres of political workers, which are currently insufficient.

In socio-political terms the forces of the revolution predominate over the forces of the counterrevolution. Still, even though the PMAC undertook certain measures for the organization of the peasant and urban population (peasant and urban associations have been created everywhere), the level of political consciousness of the broad masses of the population (mostly illiterate) remains very low.

Elements of confusion can be observed in the Defense Council. Mengistu Haile Mariam still remains the main leader of the Ethiopian revolution. The PMAC needs to solve the following political tasks:

1. To take additional measures to strengthen its social base. In order to achieve this it is necessary to make the socio-economic policy more concrete, so that it could assure the peasants that the land would remain in their possession, and that the regime would not rush with collectivization. In addition, some measures in order to, as a minimum, neutralize the national bourgeoisie, are necessary to assure it that the regime would not expropriate its property.
2. To develop the nationality policy and to make it more concrete (to create autonomous national regions), even though now it would not be an easy task because

cadres from non-Amhara nationalities which were discriminated against before the revolution have not been prepared yet.

3. To create a political party and a broad people's front with participation of not just workers and peasants, but also with the national bourgeoisie.

4. To conduct a more active foreign policy, especially toward African countries, to provide support for Mengistu's statements at the OAU Assembly in Libreville [Gabon] that Ethiopia was not going to export its revolution, and that it would follow the course of nonalignment; to make the program for political settlement of the Ethiopian-Somali disagreements more concrete.

In the course of further discussion we came to common conclusions that the difficult situation dictated the necessity of creating in some form a state defense committee, which would be authorized to mobilize all forces of the country for the defense of the revolution; of organizing the highest military command, and at a minimum, of two fronts (Northern and Eastern) with corresponding command and headquarters structures.

We also agreed that the current structuring of the armed forces should be reorganized in the future according to modern military concepts applicable to Ethiopian realities. However, the military incompetence of the officer corps and conservatism of a certain part of it present obstacles to this restructuring. For example, the General Staff currently nurtures ideas of creating tank divisions and an anti-aircraft defense system of the country by removing those kinds of weapons (tanks, anti-aircraft launchers) from existing infantry divisions.

On July 16 the Cuban comrades found out that at the last moment before the group of [PMAC General Secretary] Fikre Selassie Wogderes was about to leave for Moscow it was decided to ask the Soviet Union to supply tanks, armored cars, and the like at a time when they have not yet prepared their cadres for work with the technology they were receiving from the Soviet Union according to the agreements signed earlier. Arnaldo Ochoa told Mengistu that such a light-headed approach to serious business might undermine the prestige of the Military Council. Arnaldo Ochoa had the feeling that Mengistu understood what he meant.

Another example of such a light-headed, even irresponsible, approach to the military questions is the idea that somebody is suggesting to Mengistu about the necessity of preparation of an offensive on Hargeisa (Somalia), which would give Somalia a reason to start a more massive offensive in the Ogaden with tanks and aircraft, not to mention the catastrophic political consequences of such a step for Ethiopia.

Arnaldo Ochoa said that the military failures in Eritrea led to certain disagreements within the PMAC. A significant part of the Council proposes that they should now, before any military measures are taken, try once more to engage in negotiations with the Eritrean organizations. The majority of the Council, however, thinks that in the existing circumstances, when the separatists are on the offensive, they would not agree to negotiations, or they would present ultimatums demanding the separation of Eritrea. Therefore, the majority of the Council believes a combination of military and political measures should be undertaken, i.e. to propose negotiations to the Eritrean organizations only after having achieved some military successes.

Arnaldo Ochoa also informed me that in one of their recent conversations Mengistu said that Ethiopian-Chinese relations were becoming more and more complicated with every day. The PMAC found out that the PRC was providing military assistance to the People's Front of Eritrean Liberation. In relation to this, the PMAC made a decision to limit all relations with Beijing to the minimum without engaging in an open

confrontation, and to devise measures against Chinese ideological penetration in Ethiopia.

AMBASSADOR OF THE USSR
IN SOCIALIST ETHIOPIA

[signature] /A RATANOV/

[Source: TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 73, d. 1637, ll. 141-146; translated by S. Savranskaya.]