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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

AIRGRAM

DEF 15 *Esth 715*

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A-30
NO. ~~SECRET~~ ~~LIMDIS~~

TO : Department of State

INFO: ADDIS ABABA

PASS: CGUSASA, CINCSTRIKE, DOD

FROM : AmConsul Asmara

SUBJECT : The Eritrean Liberation Front and Kagnev Station

REF : A-174 of October 9, 1968

DATE: April 10, 1969

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The reference airgram contained our assessment, as of six months ago, of the potential ELF threat to Kagnev Station. At that time we concluded that the ELF lacked both intent and capability to damage the U.S. presence in Eritrea, but that the beginnings of a more militant policy plus a larger degree of anti-American influence in the Front could be discerned.

INCREASED TEMPO OF ELF ACTIVITY

In view of recent events, we think it timely to take a further look at the possibility for hostile action against Kagnev. After a midwinter lull, the ELF has in March and April shown a high degree of activism and effectiveness against Ethiopian security forces. March saw the destruction of three oil tankers and two buses on the vital Asmara-Massawa highway, and the spectacular sabotage-bombing of an Ethiopian Air Lines commercial jet in Frankfurt, Germany; while in the first week of April, the ELF has staged a sophisticated attack on the main electric power and water supply systems of the city of Asmara (ourtel 197).

Taken together, these recent incidents show a shift in ELF tactics and also a more sophisticated capability, previously lacking, to conduct skilled sabotage operations with modern explosive devices and weapons. They have also served to highlight the inability of IEG security forces to protect important economic installations fully against surprise attack.

COMMUNIST SUPPORT

Based on the scant intelligence available, we conclude that the latest round of ELF attacks has been carried out by well-trained ELF "Commando" units schooled in Syria during the past year. In retrospect, small attacks against power pylons in Eritrea in the fall of 1968 were probably training

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In Out

Drafted by: DPO: JFCampbell

Clearances: CO Kagnev: Col. Hamer

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STATE DEPARTMENT SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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missions preparatory to the more recent major attacks. There may also be some degree of participation by smaller groups who have been trained recently in Communist China. German police believe that the Frankfurt airport attack of March 11 was carried out by two Syrians and one Ethiopian, using a highly sophisticated explosive device manufactured in Hungary, which had never been previously observed in the West (Frankfurt's 1765). The April 4 attack on power installations included use of explosives as well as firing of bazooka shells, and the weapons supply of the ELF - which has seemed to include more modern arms over the past six months - is believed to be largely from Communist sources.

This circumstantial evidence leads us to believe that the ELF has significantly improved its capability for sabotage and terrorism over the past six months, relying on Communist help, often channeled through Syria. Reflecting these changes, there have also been some alterations in the military organization of the movement, although the structure of the ELF's political arm, its "Revolutionary Council," is not known to have changed. [REDACTED]

KAGNEW

Throughout the past six month period, there has been no clear indication of a change in the traditional ELF policy of friendliness to Americans, although the US presence at Kagnew has been verbally attacked in occasional Radio Damascus broadcasts. However, in view of the recent rebel onslaught against major Ethiopian economic targets, Kagnew Station is continuing to maintain an alert security posture.

Under the US-Ethiopian Agreement on Defense Installations of May 22, 1953, the IEG is wholly responsible for the external security of Kagnew, while the USG assumes responsibility for internal security. Kagnew is not a fortress, but a highly complex and far-flung communications facility, operated on separate parts of land mostly in and near Asmara, though several isolated substations are as much as thirty miles out of town. Its open antenna fields include substantial "shared-use" land used by local farmers. Thus, as has been noted in all previous USG studies of the security of the installations, there is no means by which absolute security can be guaranteed in the face of a determined and effective group of saboteurs.

INCREASED US SECURITY ALERTNESS

A number of specific steps have been taken since last October to enhance the security alertness of Kagnew Station. We have had periodic meetings with the Governor General of Eritrea and local security officials to improve joint Ethiopian-US security plans. On all occasions, the Governor General has stressed Ethiopian Government responsibility for the external security of Kagnew, and has been most cooperative. It should be noted that none of the recent ELF attacks on Ethiopian economic installations have occurred within the Asmara city defense perimeter, where most Kagnew installations are located.

Kagnew's own security improvements during the past six months include: (1) an increase in night security patrols; (2) improved night-lighting at some tracts;

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(3) use of night-viewing scopes and anti-intrusion devices.

Recommendations

Our analysis suggests that the ELF capability for sabotage against Kagnew has increased since the submission of Asmara A-174 of last October 9. However, we would emphasize that there is no indication that the ELF desires or intends to damage Kagnew. One of the conclusions of A-174 bears repeating at this time:

" . . . we should scrupulously avoid any change in our traditional stance towards the ELF, our view that the insurgency is strictly an internal matter for Ethiopians and Eritreans to decide. While maintaining our close relationship with the IEG, we should continue to avoid actions which directly link us to IEG security forces in prosecuting the war against the ELF. To become directly involved in military field operations against the ELF would be, in effect, to invite ELF retaliation upon Kagnew and the US presence here. The USG 'hands off' policy towards the insurgency over the years has complemented the ELF 'hands off' policy towards Kagnew."

A recent [redacted] report [redacted] in which ELF officials are quoted as stating that in their contacts with American officials they have found the Americans more "flexible" than their contacts with the Soviets would seem to underline this point. We conclude that it behooves us to maintain our "correct" attitude in any further approaches by ELF representatives to the USG, and to avoid any appearance of intervention in the Eritrean insurgency.

The latest ELF public statement directed to Americans is a newspaper interview granted by ELF Secretary General OSMAN SALEH SABBE to the Christian Science Monitor in Amman, Jordan, published in the March 28 edition of that paper. Mr. Sabbe stated in the interview:

"We have said before, and we repeat, that we are not against Americans or their interests in Eritrea. The United States assists the Ethiopian Government in many fields, including military aid. But whenever we meet American officials, they justify this by saying it is simply part of their worldwide aid program. And they have diplomatic relations with Ethiopia.

"We have never damaged American interests in Eritrea. We never intend to do so, as long as United States forces in Eritrea remain neutral."

This statement can be interpreted both as a reassurance and a warning (see Asmara telegrams 202, 205). It is a reiteration of what ELF representatives have told us in private meetings over the years, but with the added hint that the rebels might "damage" US interests in Eritrea if the US alters its consistent policy of leaving the insurgency alone.

Beyond recommending that we rigorously adhere to a policy of non-interference in the insurgency, prudence compels us to make two further recommendations,

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which we trust will receive the prompt attention and action of the Department and other Washington agencies.

Recommendation #1

We recommend that the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) commence regular monitoring, translation and publication of ELF broadcasts over Radio Damascus ("Voice of the Eritrean Revolution.") These Damascus broadcasts are the main propaganda effort of the ELF, and they are not currently covered on a systematic basis by FBIS. Until these broadcasts are more regularly covered, with the results sent by rapid means to end-users including this Consulate General, we are somewhat in the dark as to changing elements in ELF propaganda and attitudes toward Kagnev Station. To be sure, the ELF's public propaganda, geared as it is to radical Arab consumption, is no certain guide to ELF intentions toward our presence in Eritrea. But a careful analysis of the Damascus broadcasts may give us some hints of vital security importance to Kagnev Station.

Recommendation #2

We recommend that the USG intelligence community determine that collection of accurate information on future meetings and congresses of the ELF political leadership receive a high priority. We believe that the decisions taken at such meetings are the key indicator of ELF intentions towards Kagnev; and further that the present ELF non-interference policy towards Kagnev could only be altered after serious discussion among the ELF leaders followed by a conscious decision to harass Kagnev. There are reports [redacted] of a major ELF congress to be held in June or July of this year, and we feel that US intelligence coverage of such events has an important bearing on the continued security of Kagnev Station.

Action Requested

We would appreciate having the Department's prompt response to the above recommendations.

JACKSON 