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HARAR, Ethiopia — With rows of Marx and Lenin volumes in his bookcase and piles of tracts on his desk, Ali Youssef, the head of the ideology department here, explained the alacrity with which the process being called "villagization" had been accomplished in his region.

In seven months, he said, half a million houses for more than two million people were built. "There is systemization; there is mobilization," he said, lifting some of the argot from his desktop literature. "They used to construct at midnight."

It is precisely the speed and authoritarianism of the Government's villagization program — the relocation of peasants from their traditionally scattered homes in nearby areas to new villages established in gridlike patterns — that have caused many of its problems, Ethiopian and Western agricultural experts say.

Villagization was heralded by President Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1984 as the answer to many of the difficulties of the impoverished, drought-stricken Ethiopian peasantry, who make up 90 percent of the country's population. By being grouped together, the argument went, peasants would be able to produce more and have easier access to such services as schools and health clinics.

Resettlement Also Introduced

Unspoken, but more to the point, in the view of many Ethiopian and Western researchers, villagization was an effort to increase the power of the state by marshaling people in more easily controlled groups.

Experiments in consolidation and forced resettlement have been tried elsewhere in Africa, most notably under President Julius K. Nyerere in Tanzania, with results that are debated widely.

Along with villagization, which now affects about 40 percent of Ethiopia's population, the Government also introduced resettlement, a program under which thousands of people were moved long distances from one arid region of the country to a more fertile one. This program, smaller in scale and often carried out forcibly, has largely been halted, not because of second thoughts but because of its expense for the war-ravaged and virtually bankrupt economy, Ethiopian officials said.

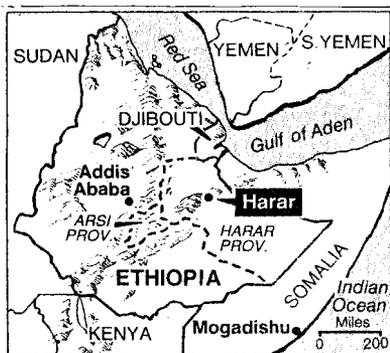
Both villagization and resettlement have been criticized by many Western countries. The two policies are among the reasons that the United States gives for refusing economic aid to Ethiopia, as distinct from humanitarian aid.

This year, the Swedish Government's aid agency, the Swedish International Development Agency, traditionally one of the most generous donors to Ethiopia, withdrew its sup-

Harar Journal

Ethiopia Drives Its Peasants

Off the Good Earth



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Village projects like those at Harar are seen as instruments of authoritarianism.

port of a major agricultural project in Arsi Province because it concluded "the actual purpose of villagization was political."

A 'Frightening' Development

President Mengistu himself acknowledged in an address to the congress of the Workers Party of Ethiopia last November that his agricultural policies were not working.

He said agricultural production had declined by an average of 0.4 percent annually. "It is frightening to see that agricultural productivity is steadily decreasing in this manner at a time when the population is increasing at an annual rate of 3 percent," he said.

Ethiopia Drives Its Peasants Off



The New York Times/Jane Pe

The speed and authoritarianism with which the Ethiopian peasants have been relocated from scattered homes to new villages, a process known as "villagization", has caused many problems, agricultural experts say. Above, a party official discusses the program with peasants in Harar Province.

Visits to villagization projects by most foreigners are circumscribed affairs, conducted in the company of local party officials who unfailingly show model sites. The first stop on such a visit is usually to the local ideology boss, like Mr. Ali, who presides over politics in eastern Harar Province.

Recently Mr. Ali arranged a tour of two villagization projects with three party officials and an agricultural expert, who usually deferred to the party officials. The projects, Dire Tayara and Rare Chillalo, are in the countryside around the town of Harar.

At the first, it was proudly stated that about half the peasants belonged to the producers' cooperative. As an inducement to join the cooperative, priority was given to members for fertilizer and better seeds, the officials said.

At the second, a "mobilization campaign" was in progress. A long line of peasants, swinging hoes, were digging up old bushes to plant grain.

"Once every 15 days, everyone does a campaign," a party guide said. "If necessary, every week."

A Long Way to Walk

A more revealing explanation of villagization is provided by Ethiopian agricultural researchers. But they, too, complain that party officials in the villages are loath to talk frankly about the problems and create barriers that make it difficult to speak to

the peasants.

One of the new villages that have been studied by the University of Addis Ababa lies in a fertile valley surrounded by high peaks 50 miles outside the capital.

For the most part, the land in the villagization project is not collectivized. Peasants keep their land but have long distances to walk to their farms from the new villages.

As a result the peasants have told the researchers, they have been unable to protect their crops from the hyenas, monkeys and porcupines that pervade the hillsides.

Their new houses were often built with the materials from their old places - a strategy used by party officials to force the peasants to move - and were put up so hastily that they were beginning to crumble and leak, researchers found. Moreover the houses were built so close together that peasants had little room to grow vegetables, which previously provided valuable income.

"There are some social gains: greater access to schools in some areas and to water and electricity in some of the villages" a researcher said. "But they do not outweigh the economic difficulties. People have been brought closer to the roads but it is questionable how much the road is being used. If the farmer doesn't have cash, what does it mean being closer to the asphalt road for transport?"