

The Ethiopian revolution

THREE days ago President Nyerere, in a message to the Chairman of the Ethiopian Provisional Military Advisory Council, Lt-Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, praised Ethiopians for their outstanding achievements in eradicating the long established feudal system to build a new socialist society based on human equality and justice. In this write up, **CORRESPONDENT COLIN DARCH** looks into the revolution in the context of a book written by a Cuban journalist.

THE outbreak of the revolution in Ethiopia in February 1974 took the world by surprise, even if Ethiopians themselves were not caught entirely unawares.

The epithets which were applied to the relatively slow process of military takeover from Haile Sellassie's indubitable regime — the creeping coup, the bloodless revolution, the revolution that lost its head — showed that observers both hostile and sympathetic were not quite sure of the nature of the phenomenon they were describing.

Even today, given the socialist rhetoric of the various Eritrean movements and the appeals of the Somali government, it is difficult to define the Dergue's position by looking at its enemies.

The revolution was sparked off in February 1974 by a series of strikes and demonstrations mounted by urban transport workers and by teachers and students, with limited economic objectives.

However, when various units of the armed forces in Negelle, Asmara and Harrar joined in and mutinied over pay and living conditions, the Prime Minister resigned, the government toppled, and it became clear that the regime itself was in a vulnerable position.

By June there were dual power structures — the Emperor's cabinet ruling alongside the newly set-up Co-ordinating Committee of the Armed Forces (Dergue, the word used in Ethiopia for the military government) — simply Amharic for "committee".

By July 1974 the struggle had come completely into the open, and members of the feudal nobility were being killed as they tried to organise counter-revolutionary peasant bands.

More information was made public about the extensive and pervasive corruption of the regime from top to bottom, and by September the armed forces were able to remove Haile Sellassie with no public disturbance what-

soever.

But the feudal nobility had not given up, although they had lost the first battle; and in November the Dergue moved against them, executing 59 former government officials and killing Aman Mikael Andom, then Head of State, in a shoot-out at his home.

By January 1975 the regime was dispersing the large and troublesome student population of Addis Ababa and other towns by sending them to the countryside under the National Work Campaign of Development through Co-operation, popularly known as the Zemetcha or "crusade".

This was an attempt to harness the energies of radical students in the interests of the peasants and of the revolution, and was a mixed success.

Then, on 4 March 1975, the military government took the step which irrevocably revolutionised Ethiopian society, by promulgating the decree on land. This turned all rural land over to the people collectively, and ensured that no individual controlled more land than he could till.

At a stroke this measure abolished feudalism, removed the century-old division of the country into north and south each with its different tenure system, and created the basis of support among the poor peasantry.

Implementation of this measure proceeded rapidly, and was followed by changes in administrative structures, urban property rights and other areas as appropriate.

It was clear by 1977 that, whatever the faults of the military régime under Mengistu Haile Mariam, the external threats to Ethiopia's territorial integrity in Eritrea and the Ogaden made national unity imperative.

After the defeat of the Somali invasion, the virtual elimination of the internal oppositions of left and right, and the stand-off in the north against the three or four separatist movements,

Mengistu's government looked as if it had won the allegiance, however reluctant, of a broad spectrum of the Ethiopian masses.

Raúl Valdes Vivo, veteran Cuban diplomat and journalist, has attempted to explain the Ethiopian situation in a book entitled "Ethiopia: The Unknown Revolution".

Vivo is an unashamed partisan of the Dergue and of Mengistu; and he makes some sweeping claims, describing the Ethiopian popular upsurge as "the most spontaneous people's revolution in the history of Africa, and perhaps of the whole world."

His work is of popularisation rather than of scientific history or political analysis. In many ways this is pity, for the Ethiopian revolution has had a short but complex history, facing such major threats as armed urban terror from leftist groups, peasant insurgency led by former landlords, continuous hostile propaganda in the world news media, and an invasion of the Ogaden in which the rôle of the imperialist powers was, to put it charitably, "unclear".

Vivo was in a particularly fortunate position as a Cuban and therefore as an accepted comrade, to act as interpreter of the revolution to the world, and such interpretation should include criticism where necessary.

He vividly describes the course of events in years one, two and three of the revolution, providing the necessary general information on the history of modern Ethiopia for an understanding of later developments.

It is surprising that he, as a Marxist, adopts the entirely political concept of Ethiopian survival as an independent state during the colonial period, without describing the penetration of capitalist relations that accompanied and underpinned that "survival".

Not, despite his attempt to analyse the social and economic basis of the Ethiopian revolution, does Vivo do more than skate lightly over the surface of events, casually deploying as he races along a few key concepts like class struggle.

Despite these criticisms — some of which may be unfairly levelled at a work so clearly intended for the general reader — Vivo's book provides a mass of detailed information in a convenient form. The last chapter, a chronological Diary of the

Revolution, from February 1974 to September 1977, is particularly useful.

The style is lively and immediate, and Vivo recounts a number of colourful anecdotes which may or may not be believed, but which undoubtedly make interesting reading. The most memorable of these is the account of Haile Sellassie's annual blood sacrifices of young Sudanese virgins.

On occasion the author allows his novelistic style to run away with him, as when he describes Haile Sellassie's inner thoughts as he was arrested and taken away in a Volkswagen. The reader doubts whether a Cuban journalist could really have been privy to these reflections.

Similarly, many Ethiopians in the early '70s used the expression "If (rather than when) the Emperor dies...", but it was always an ironic reference to the regime's apparent assumption that things could be left as they were indefinitely.

Vivo goes on to describe a 13-year-old middle-class schoolchild who thought that the Emperor was immortal and never urinated — a teenager even more gullible than the author who recounts his story.

If this book is reprinted some of the more eccentric spellings of Ethiopian names (Bishouat for Bishoftu, etc.) might well be regularised.

Other minor efforts abound: Jonathan Dimbleby's film was called the Hidden Famine, not the Hidden Hunger; there were over 7,500 students at the university, not under 6,000; the range of faculties at the university were more or less standard, not "limited"; Lij Iasu was hardly a "child emperor" in 1916, he was about 20 years old. One could also wish for a more systematic treatment of feudal land tenure.

This book will certainly serve to delineate for the interested reader the course of events since 1974. Whether the interpretation will convince him will depend on his predisposition rather than the mustering of arguments.

There is no doubt that the least one can say of the Dergue is that they have transformed rural society and permanently eradicated feudalism. For the outlines of this process the reader may be satisfied with Ethiopia: The Unknown Revolution; but for the details he will have to look elsewhere.