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Soviet aid to Ethiopia, the Somali President, Siad Barre, after numerous warnings, denounced the treaty of friendship with his country's traditional ally. As a consequence, all Russian and Cuban nationals on Somali soil were expelled. In addition, all Soviet rights to port facilities and to the base at Berbera were revoked. Mogadishu did not, however, go so far as to break diplomatic ties with Moscow; President Barre left himself a way out in case Somalia's fortunes changed, which they did.

After much hesitation, the Soviet Union made its choice between sparsely-populated Somalia and Ethiopia, with its 28 million inhabitants - and it has accepted the consequences. If Ethiopia emerges triumphant from its present troubles, Moscow could maintain a strategic position on the oil-route; in addition, Ethiopia would undoubtedly grant it a share of the mineral wealth - gold, cobalt, zinc, copper and lead - that lies beneath the Red Sea. These deposits, discovered only a few years ago, are estimated to be worth several billion dollars.

Misjudgment

Nevertheless, the Kremlin seems to have misjudged certain factors in its analysis of the East African situation. In order that the U.S.S.R. may be entitled to these riches, to port facilities and to a missile-base on the Red Sea, Eritrea must remain Ethiopian, and this does not seem likely, though, with the intervention of Cuban troops transferred from the Ogaden, there could be a different outcome. Furthermore, in its attempt to manipulate the two enemies, the

Soviet Union was faced with a quandary when the Somali President asked for an explanation of its assistance to Ethiopia. Moscow had to make a choice and, since it opted for Ethiopia, it lost not only its Berbera base and port facilities but also a faithful, well-trained and powerful ally.

Despite the rapid victory of the Cuban mercenaries in the Ogaden, the Soviet Union's new ally is not an immediate asset. It has a great deal of potential but, in view of the threat posed by well-organized and well-armed opposition inside the country, the Soviet and Cuban contingents will undoubtedly meet very strong resistance, which will have to be overcome before any benefit can be derived from this area.

To repossess the territory held by the secessionists and restore internal order, the Addis Ababa government has, to be sure, a large army, but one that is poorly trained. The army's crack units are still surrounded in Eritrean cities by liberation movements and are therefore of no assistance. Apart from the armed forces, the Dergue has set up people's militias consisting mainly of farmers, who are also poorly trained and not very reliable. The military junta relies mainly on Soviet and Cuban intervention to restore order in the country.

In spite of Ethiopia's unstable situation and the growing uncertainty regarding its future, the Soviet Union chose it over Somalia. This decision was based almost entirely on the size of Ethiopia's population, which, according to the Kremlin's calculations, would eventually rectify the situation with the help of substantial supplies of arms and



Guerrillas of the Western Somali Liberation Front search for snipers in a bombed-out Ethiopian commando headquarters.

Wide World Photo