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BRIEF REPORT

DJIBOUTI INDEPENDENCE

Background and Outlook

The Republic of Djibouti achieved independence on 27 June, 1977 - the last of 18 French territories on the African Continent to become independent. France had ruled the territory, known before independence as the Territory of the Afars and the Issas, for about 115 years.

Until 1976 there was no certainty about independence from France, but the question was finally settled, as expected, on 8 May, 1977, when 98% of the voters (in a 78% poll) opted for independence in a referendum. At the same time elections to the Chamber of Deputies resulted in Mr. Hassan Gouled becoming Chief Minister and, since 28 June, President of the new independent Republic.

Djibouti has already joined the O.A.U. as its 49th member, and it will become the 22nd member of the League of Arab States. Later in the year it will no doubt be admitted to the United Nations to become the world organisation's 148th member.

Basic Facts

Area: 21 783 sq. km. (For comparison : Lesotho 30 444 sq. km; Swaziland 17 400 sq. km; Transkei 25 328 sq. km; South West Africa/Namibia 826 350 sq. km.)

Population: A 1973 estimate gives a figure of 200 000, but other estimates range up to 500 000. The population is divided ethnically mainly between the Afars and the numerically stronger Issas, who are linked to the people of neighbouring Somalia. A break-down of the population of the main city of Djibouti illustrates the division : 20 000 Afars and 50 000 Issas, plus 60 000 other Somalis. The two groups live in separate areas of the city. (There are also an estimated 12 000 French and other Whites.)

G.N.P: R59 million, according to a 1973 estimate. (For comparison : Lesotho R67 million; Swaziland R72 million; Transkei R410 million; Botswana R65 million.)

Resources: Djibouti is 90% desert, 9% mediocre pasture and 1% wooded area. It has no known mineral resources. Livestock, especially the sale of hides and skins, provides the only source of income for the majority of the population. Fishing exists, but is not well developed. There has been hardly any industrial development, and the infrastructure is very limited, with less than 100 km of tarred roads in the whole country.

The only substantial local source of revenue and economic activity generally is the port at Djibouti, together with the Franco-Ethiopian railway which links the port with Ethiopia. The port and railway together contribute about 25% of the country's G.N.P. But, in fact, even more

important/

important for the small economy has been France's military and civil presence in the Territory.

The Railway and Port

The railway, jointly owned by France and Ethiopia, was begun in 1896 from Djibouti, and it reached Addis Ababa in 1918. It is 780 km in length, but only 100 km are in the Republic of Djibouti. Over 60% of Ethiopian imports and 40% of exports use this railway and the port. Thus, although the port is a considerable asset for the country, it is almost entirely dependent on the Ethiopian transit trade. Traffic on the railway is reported to have been disrupted in recent weeks by the sabotaging of bridges by guerillas within Ethiopia.

After the closure of the Suez Canal in 1967, the use of Djibouti's port for servicing and fuelling was drastically reduced. Even though the Canal is open again, it seems unlikely that use of the port will reach its former level. The port is badly in need of modernisation, and Aden, across the gulf, is more efficient and cheaper, as is Berbera on the Somali coast. Further, Jeddah, on the Saudi Arabian Red Sea coast, has been providing fuel at 30% less cost than Djibouti.

Strategically, the port of Djibouti does not have the importance it once had. The Soviet Union has well established facilities at Berbera and Aden on both sides of the gulf on the approaches to the Red Sea, while the United States has links with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the two dominant powers in the Red Sea. Djibouti was important for France as a staging post, in case of need, for its Indian Ocean possessions, but it was a very expensive base to maintain, and France's needs and interests in the Indian Ocean are no longer considered so important. (France will, however, retain a military presence in Djibouti for the time being, by agreement with the new state.)

Political Parties

Until mid-1976 the dominant party, led by Mr. Ali Arif, was based mainly on the Afars and pro-French. It had not pushed for independence. Mr. Arif's party was defeated in 1976 by a party supported mainly by the Issa people, in alliance with a small Afar group. This alliance, which pressed strongly for independence, was joined more recently by a militant political group based in Somalia.

In the elections of May, 1977, a movement known as the Popular Rally for Independence, comprising various political groups from both the Issas and the Afars, was successful. In fact, all candidates came from the ranks of this movement. It should be noted, however, that two of the principal Afar parties did not participate in the election.

Mr. Hassan Gouled Aptidon was named Chief Minister by the elected deputies (subsequently to become President), and both Afars and Issas were named to the Cabinet. Hassan Gouled is leader of the main Issa party.

Djibouti's Neighbours

Djibouti's land borders are largely with Ethiopia, but it has a short border also with Somalia, and both these countries have a direct interest in the future of the new state. (It has for many years been an issue of dispute between them.) Although Ethiopia has another port at Assab, its

only rail link with the sea is through Djibouti, and moreover Assab is vulnerable, because it lies in Eritrea where there is a growing and violent secessionist movement. Somalia has strong ethnic links with the Issa people of Djibouti, and there have in the past been efforts to incorporate the territory in Somalia. Although Somalia now formally supports Djibouti's independence, it still has the option, in any violent conflict with Ethiopia, of moving to cut off the latter's link with the sea.

Somalia has no cause for concern at present, as the new Djibouti Government, under Hassan Gouled, leans politically towards Somalia. Djibouti's relations with Ethiopia are thus likely to be strained. (The Afar-based government of Ali Arif before mid-1976 leant more towards Ethiopia.)

While Sudan is not an immediate neighbour of Djibouti, it is involved in the disputes of the region. Sudanese relations with Ethiopia have seriously deteriorated, with each accusing the other of supporting insurgents. Ethiopia is particularly sensitive about alleged Sudanese support for rebel movements in Eritrea, which lies along the Red Sea coast between Sudan and Djibouti. Sudan and Djibouti will be fellow-members of the Arab League, to which Somalia also belongs.

The Wider International Context

Outside interests in the Red Sea Horn of Africa region, which must be of concern to the new state, are those of the Arab states, the Soviet Union and the West (notably the United States and France), as well as black African states. The currently changing political pattern in the region is complicated, and only a few pointers can be given here.

Somalia over the years has developed a strong relationship with the Soviet Union, based on reciprocal arrangements, whereby Somalia has given the Russians extensive facilities at the port of Berbera, and in return the Russians provide military equipment and training. With this support, the Somali army has become the most powerful in the Horn of Africa. However, two recent developments have raised a question mark over the future of the Somali/Soviet relationship :

Firstly, Ethiopia's government now claims to be Marxist, it has ended the special relationship with the United States and it is accepting Soviet and Cuban assistance. This puts the Soviet Union (and Cuba) into the position of supporting both sides in the very deep conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia. Apart from the differences over Djibouti, Somalia has claims to large tracts of Ethiopian territory in the Ogaden region, and is alleged to be supporting the guerillas there operating against the Ethiopian government.

Secondly, the Arab states are now taking a greater interest in the Horn of Africa, and Somalia is developing closer links with them as a member of the Arab League. In particular, Saudi Arabia is developing a new leadership role, with the apparent intention of ensuring that the Red Sea becomes an "Arab lake of peace". In its initiatives it has the support of Egypt and Sudan, and it is attempting to influence North and South Yemen. Somalia is an important part of of this developing pattern, and Saudi Arabia is seeking, with offers of substantial aid, to provide an alternative to Soviet assistance.

Ethiopia is thus faced with a severe challenge from the gathering Arab pressures, at a time when its internal security situation is rapidly deteriorating, especially in Eritrea. If the secession of Eritrea should succeed, with the support from Arab states, then the only remaining non-Arab-controlled gap around the shores of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden would be closed.

These developments create some problems in the relationship between the Arab states and Black Africa, and there is African criticism particularly of the Arab support for the Eritreans. (This goes against the firm O.A.U. policy against secession.)

The West is apparently not playing a significant direct role in these developments, as there is no need to do much to counter Soviet influence while this is being eroded by the initiatives of the Arab states in the region themselves. Moreover, the United States currently enjoys good and improving relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan, the principal states involved.

While France in the past tended to side with the minority Ethiopia-inclined Afars in Djibouti, it is significant to note that President Giscard d'Estaing visited Saudi Arabia in February, 1977, immediately before the March conference in Paris, which settled the arrangements for Djibouti's independence - an independence to be dominated by the Issas. France still has to be concerned with the maintenance of the rail link between Addis Ababa and Djibouti (on which both Ethiopia and Djibouti depend economically). But the French government is presumably hoping that Saudi Arabian influence will now help to keep the peace in Djibouti, as the French presence and influence is reduced. While Djibouti will continue to need French financial and technical aid, its development as an independent state will depend primarily on avoiding involvement in the threatening conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia. In a nutshell it could be said that Djibouti is politically dependent on Somalia and the Arab states, while it still has considerable economic dependence on Ethiopia's transit trade.

John Barratt
Director : S.A.I.I.A.

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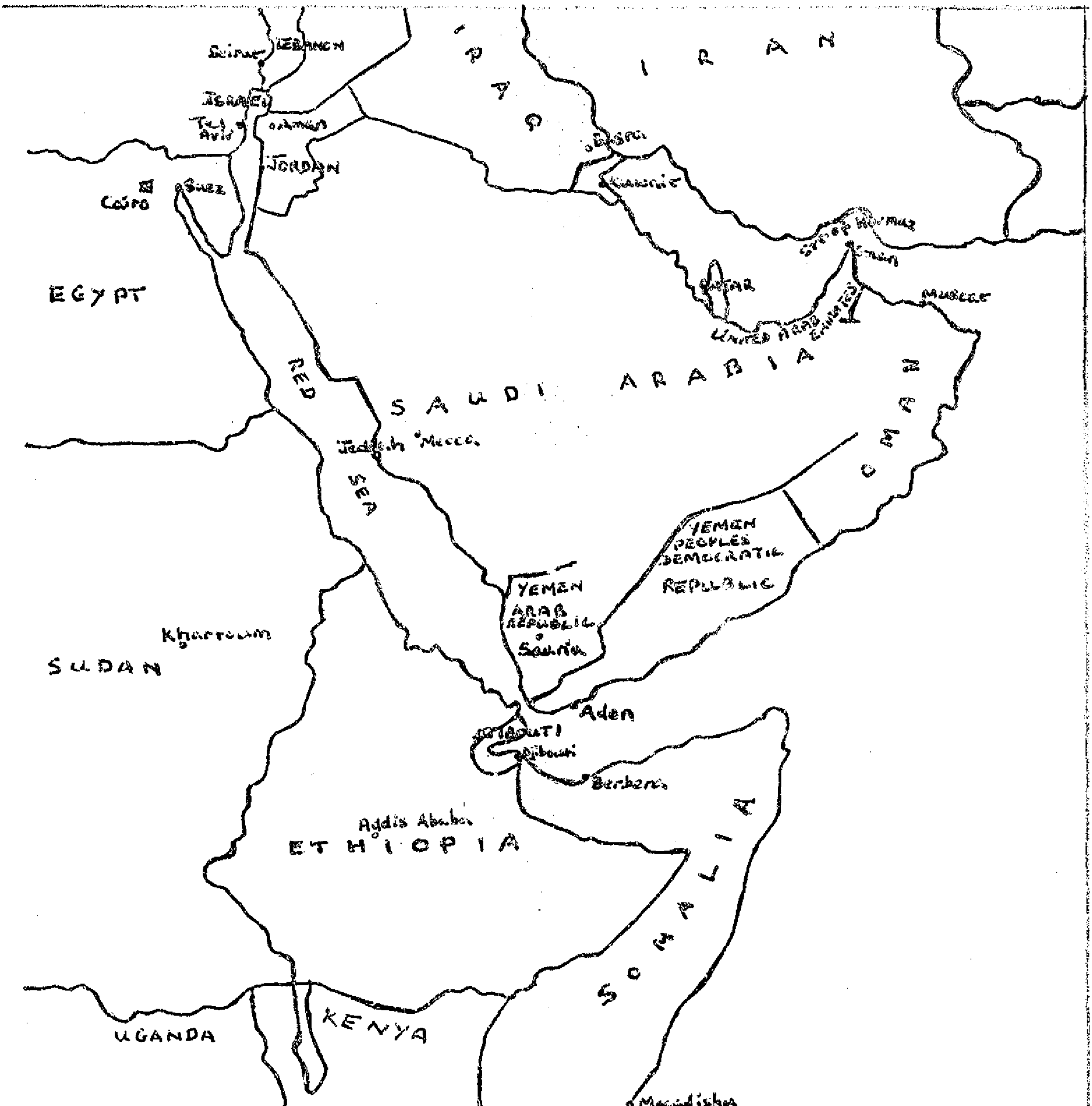
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