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**SED CC, Department of International Relations, 16
February 1978, Report on Conversation with
[Vice-president] Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Member of
the Politburo of the CP Cuba, in Havana**

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Summary:

Ambassador Langer discusses with Rodriguez the current situation in Ethiopia, focusing on the Eritrean liberation movement and the ongoing war with Somalia. They also discuss levels of assistance by various outside powers to the region

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SED CC, Department of International Relations, 16 February 1978, Report on Conversation with [Vice-president] Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Member of the Politburo of the CP Cuba, in Havana, 13 February 1978 [Participants: Comrade Polanco, Deputy Head of CC Department for International Relations CP Cuba; Comrade Heinz Langer, Extraordinary Plenipotentiary and Ambassador in Cuba] [Welcoming remarks]

Rodriguez: The initiative and the efforts of the SED merit the highest recognition. The [Ethiopian-Eritrean] meeting in Berlin was of great historical importance. We fully agree with the strategy of the SED; this fully conforms with our common concept of efforts towards a peaceful solution of the Eritrean problem as agreed between us. I would like to emphasize that there is complete agreement among us and that the politburo of our party completely approves of the strategy, the estimate, the arguments and the conclusion in this matter. The leadership of our party has for some time expected a declaration by Mengistu on the Eritrean problem. This had been agreed up between him and comrade Valdez Vivo in the 5-point program at the end of last year. Comrade Werner Lamberz had detailed this still more in his talk with Mengistu and there was, as you know, the affirmation that this declaration would still come in December. Obviously the Ethiopian comrades have not been sufficiently ready for it and still have numerous reservations against a decisive step towards the solution of the Eritrean problem. We also completely agree with the view that the Ethiopian leadership apparently does not have a clear concept, either on a general solution of the national problem in Ethiopia nor on the specific problems in Eritrea. They have until now not really seriously believed in it and have not seriously concerned themselves with it but instead only considered the demand for a peaceful solution as [in itself] a kind of political solution. They probably still have the thought in the back of their minds that a peaceful solution of the Eritrean problem will mean a capitulation by the Eritrean movements, which means that the military solution would be the preparation for a further peaceful strategy. One can certainly not neglect the military measures in this matter, but the Ethiopian comrades still do not have the deep recognition of the necessity of a political, i.e. peaceful solution of the Eritrean problem. Thus just as much as one can certainly argue that the leadership of the EPLF does not have an understanding of the historic importance of the Ethiopian Revolution, one can also argue that the awareness of the responsibility for the Revolutionary development in the entire region is not deeply rooted in the Ethiopian leadership. [...] It is necessary that we continue our intense efforts on this common line in order to have all participants make a common effort. In this respect the written agreement that was achieved is of enormous significance. The further strategy in the Ogaden will be decisive and of utmost importance for the question of how things will continue, probably also for the solution of the Eritrean problem. Comrade Mengistu certainly did not want to make any concessions on this question as long as he seemed close to being defeated on all fronts. It will be important not to have a growing feeling of capitulation. From this point of view his reservations and hesitation with the promised declaration are understandable. Now we are rapidly approaching another situation which will lead to certain decisions. There are two possibilities which might be expected after the success against Somalia on the eastern front. On the one hand [there could be] a generous, calm, objective, and thought-out approach to a peaceful solution of the Eritrean problem, an approach which is not caused by coercion, [but] which is based on the authority of victory and which therefore can take advantage of a vastly new possibilities for a peaceful solution. This would be a strategy in conformity with a remark by Aforki which relates to the generosity which they - the Eritreans - had expected from the Ethiopians. We would encourage this way of proceeding which would be in conformity with our views. On the other hand, however, a worsening of the situation is possible. Based on the success at the eastern front and carried by the euphoria of victory and given the possibility to withdraw strong and experienced Ethiopian units, the Ethiopian leadership could aspire to a decisive and quick military solution in Eritrea. Unfortunately there are significant forces within the PMAC calling for such a solution. Comrade Mengistu has now asked the leadership of the CP Cuba for the second time not only to give military support in Ogaden but also to deploy Cuban units in Eritrea. Towards the end of last year he dramatically called on us, arguing that Cuban troops should immediately intervene in Eritrea since otherwise the final loss of this area was imminent and hence would have incalculable consequences for the Ethiopian Revolution. In close consultation with the Soviet comrades, Comrade Fidel Castro favored a massive intervention in the Ogaden

against the Somali invasion. He emphasized that this now was clearly a domestic Ethiopian matter and that we would have the OAU, the African states, international laws and conventions, as well as the UN on our side. Comrade Castro refused to intervene in Eritrea. We have promised every kind of aid except for military units to our Ethiopian comrades. We have based this on the view that this was a justified national cause of the Eritrean people which could not be solved militarily. Now, a few days ago, Comrade Mengistu has asked again and spoke of a dramatic and dangerous development in the situation; again he demanded to have Cuban units deployed at the Eritrean front. Comrade Fidel Castro and all the members of our politburo are of the opinion that we cannot afford to make any mistakes in our handling of the Eritrean question. A wrong move now could endanger our entire policy and important positions in Africa. We would be confronted by the majority of African states, the Arabs, international organs, probably also the countries of the Non-Alignment Movement, and others. Therefore we continue to oppose a military intervention in Eritrea. In coordination with our Soviet comrades we have agreed to occupy the entrance to the Mits'iwa Islands from where a certain degree of control can be exerted and from where in an extreme emergency a limited military intervention would be possible. In this connection it is very important that we immediately think about Aforki's demand for a guarantee by the Socialist countries. It might be necessary to work out a common basic view with the Soviet Union before the next meeting because it is to be expected that Aforki will not only present concrete proposals but will also expect from the representatives of the Socialist countries a concrete response. Our view is based on the fact that we have and will take on a moral obligation towards the Eritreans when we urge upon them the political and peaceful solution according to the concept agreed among us. They could certainly then not withhold the pressure of the enemy on their own. There is the danger here too that the Ethiopian comrades may not pay attention to the changed situation and are looking for an easy success which would be costly for us in political and moral terms with other countries. Comrade Rodriguez also informed us about some other questions: - [Iraq] - A few days ago, Comrade Nagere, member of the politburo of the Meison group [All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement, defeated by Mengistu] (supposedly in the second rank of this organization behind Prof. Haile Fidda) has asked the Cuban comrades for consultation. The Cubans have consulted with Mengistu who did not oppose such a meeting but characterized Negere as a traitor. He will come in the next few days to Havana, and our Cuban comrades will inform us immediately about these talks via our ambassador. - On the situation in the Ogaden, Comrade Rodriguez informed us that a large counter-offensive had been in preparation since 25 December 1977. There have been two major campaigns in recent days which caused losses of more than 3000 men on the other side. It is a serious problem that the Ethiopian comrades do not want to take prisoners of war and thus act very cruelly. These blows have caused the enemy large material losses as well while our own have been very small. In the last movement in the Northeast there was a smaller loss of human life but the material losses have been very great. The Somalis have over 40 tanks, numerous medium-weight and heavy weapons, flak artillery, armored cars and a great amount of weapons and munitions. In part, they have left behind NATO war material which was not even unwrapped. In the fights around Dire Dawa, the Somalis had to pull back, leaving almost their entire armament. Up to now, there have been only preparatory blows. Most of the units marked for action have not been deployed yet, and the main blow has not even yet begun. The enemy is fleeing and giving up positions faster than had been expected. We are therefore in a situation where we have to undertake a series of fast actions so that the enemy will not have time to rebuild his forces. It is our plan to complete the main actions by the end of February 1978. This means that by early March we can expect a great victory at this front. This is, as is well known, the time for the next meeting. This will have a great effect. As agreed upon with our Soviet comrades, in no case will we transgress Somali borders. [Final remarks.][Source: SAPMO-BArch, DY30 IV 2/2.035/127; obtained and translated by Christian F. Ostermann.]