

## ***Drought, War, and the Politics of Famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea***

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DURING almost two decades, beginning in the early 1970s, the Horn of Africa was racked by the ravages of hunger and war. Natural disasters are not new to the region, which historically could count on at least seven major droughts each century, but in the current era they have been increasing, in part due to massive deforestation and the changing pattern of weather.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that in Ethiopia alone, because of soil erosion and deforestation, 30,000 million tons of top-soil are lost each year.<sup>2</sup> A second important factor affecting the severity of famine has been the dramatic escalation in the level and intensity of civil conflict, nowhere more evident than in Ethiopia.

A devastating drought and associated famine contributed greatly to the demise of the imperial régime of Haile Selassie in September 1974.<sup>3</sup> The fall of the Old Order, and the failure of the new leaders between then and 1991 to develop a plan for the rebuilding of society that was widely accepted as legitimate, fuelled an internal war in the Ethiopian heartland, and a struggle for national liberation in the former Italian colony of Eritrea. The latter conflict lasted for over three decades; and during the 1980s, its scale, scope, and intensity increased markedly, culminating in victory for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (E.P.L.F.) in April 1991. Concurrently the internal opponents of Ethiopia's revolutionary régime became better armed and organised, and under the leadership of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (E.P.R.D.F.) they were able to depose President Mengistu Haile Mariam even as the rebels were claiming victory in Eritrea.

Why were those living in the rural areas not able to use traditional techniques of survival to mitigate the ill effects of drought, and avoid

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1985), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Kay Magistad, 'On the Razor's Edge', in *Africa Report* (New York), May–June 1987, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation* (New York, 1975), p. 17.

Evidence indicates that the Government was aware of the severity of the drought by mid-1973; yet, it would only accept outside assistance that was discreetly provided. Prospective donors such as the World Food Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), and the United States Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.) were approached privately and successfully convinced to begin shipping limited food aid quietly without publicly commenting about the seriousness of the problem.<sup>7</sup> However, it was not long before international concern was heightened by the findings of Unicef's own survey of drought and famine conditions that were leaked to a London newspaper, notably evidence that at least one million people were at risk of starvation in the provinces of Wollo and Tigre alone. With the release of the B.B.C. documentary, Haile Selassie could no longer deny the 'hidden famine'.

Although relief camps, administered mainly by the Ethiopian Red Cross, had been set up by August 1973 to cater for upwards of 60,000 victims, nearly 200,000 had died of famine, disease, and malnutrition before the end of the year. Indeed, it is estimated that 20 per cent of all the inhabitants and 90 per cent of all the animals in Wollo, the worst affected province, had perished by then, and that 80 per cent of the crop had been lost. Before the drought, Wollo and Tigre had supplied 40 per cent of Ethiopia's total food production.<sup>8</sup>

The mismanagement of the drought and famine was merely the last element in the case being mounted against Haile Selassie's anachronistic and growingly ineffective régime. This had been founded on a feudal system of government and administration characterised by cultural chauvinism, as well as ethnic and regional inequalities, and was in the throes of a severe economic crisis that had been allowed to escalate out of control.<sup>9</sup> After the Emperor had been overthrown by a *coup d'état* staged by young military officers and policemen in September 1974, Ethiopia was governed by a committee that became known as the *Derg*.

Although the new leaders considered themselves to be revolutionaries, they had initially no clear ideological programme. However, they hastily drafted a populist platform, pledging to eliminate corruption, injustice, and inequality, and to create a unified,

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Julius Holt and John Seaman, 'The Scope of the Drought', in Abdul Mejid Hussein (ed.), *Drought and Famine in Ethiopia* (London, 1976), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Edmond J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: from Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington, 1988), pp. 131-87.



After Jimmy Carter had become President of the United States in 1977, he made human rights the centre-piece of his foreign policy, and threatened to curtail military aid if the Ethiopian Government did not improve its record in this field. The *Derg* broke off relations with Washington at the height of its internal crisis, and the chaos deepened. Urban guerrilla warfare reigned at the centre, and armed opposition groups more vigorously pressed their cause in the countryside, including the Western Somalia Liberation Front (W.S.L.F.).

In June 1977, the W.S.L.F., in collaboration with regular troops supplied by the régime in Mogadishu, penetrated into the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, bent on reuniting their brethren there with those in the Somali Republic. Over the next eight months, these opposition forces came to occupy vast tracts of land in southeastern and east-central Ethiopia. However, the régime in Addis Ababa now began to receive assistance from the Soviet Union and several of its Communist allies, and by late 1978 the Ogaden was effectively back in the hands of Ethiopia. This allowed the *Derg* to turn its attention to the problems faced in the north, and the need for concerted action against not only the E.P.L.F., but also a new group founded in 1975, the Tigre People's Liberation Front (T.P.L.F.).

In Eritrea, the counter-offensive began in May 1978 when Ethiopian forces, with Soviet, East German, and South Yemeni support, pushed their way out of their Asmara fortress. Over the next four years, the *Derg* was unable to bring Eritrea under firm control, but decided instead of abandoning its military strategy to redouble its efforts by introducing a systematic campaign to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Eritreans.<sup>12</sup> The thrust of 'Operation Red Star' was twofold. First, it was supposed to provide the resources necessary for economic reconstruction: to rebuild and reopen factories that had been closed; to repair school buildings, transportation networks, and other infrastructure; to provide jobs for the unemployed; and to improve the distribution of food and other commodities. Second, the campaign aimed to arm workers and peasants, to give them military training, and to provide them with the political and technical education needed to create a sense of *Ethiopian* identity. At the same time the national army was expected to 'deal a death blow to secessionist bandits'.

On balance, 'Operation Red Star' was a failure, particularly from a military perspective. The E.P.L.F. was temporarily neutralised in a

<sup>12</sup> *Evil Days – Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia: an Africa Watch report* (New York, 1991), pp. 113–22.

joint military exercises in the region. The Ethiopian armed forces had grown from about 65,000 in the mid-1970s to more than 300,000 by the early 1980s, while the defence budget had expanded tenfold to \$381 million, not including grants.<sup>17</sup> By 1990 the Soviet Union had provided during the preceding 13 years upwards of \$13,000 million in military assistance, and by then it was estimated that the wars in the north were consuming more than two-thirds of Ethiopia's annual budget.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, this growing militarisation took place while a major natural calamity was unfolding.

#### THE GREAT FAMINE OF 1983-6

The beginnings of the 1983-6 drought and resultant famine can be traced to the intermittent food crises of the previous decade, combined with the political chaos that reigned between 1976 and 1978, and the *Derg's* attempt to implement its socialist development strategy despite adverse conditions.<sup>19</sup> Stephen Varnis has suggested that the famine resulted from the latter's efforts to implement its revolutionary policies despite being ill-equipped to make these work, especially in the face of strong international opposition.<sup>20</sup>

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (F.A.O.) seemed more concerned with the capacity of the Ethiopian authorities to distribute whatever food was received, rather than with forthrightly addressing the drought and impending famine, and hence repeatedly slashed the Government's requests for help between 1981 and 1984, based upon projected needs. Even the United States, traditionally the most generous contributor of humanitarian assistance, delayed responding to Ethiopia's latest crisis. Some in the Reagan Administration argued that it was 'naive to assume that food aid has as its major purpose the alleviation of hunger and poverty',<sup>21</sup> and this was cut from 8,172 metric tons in 1982 to zero in 1984, despite warnings that millions were at risk.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1985* (Washington, DC, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> See Graham Hancock, *Lords of Poverty: the free-wheeling lifestyles, power, prestige and corruption of the multi-billion dollar aid business* (London, 1989), p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Gopalakrishna Kumar, *Ethiopian Famines, 1973-1985: a case study* (Oxford, November 1987), United Nations University, World Institute for Development Economics Research, Wider Working Papers No. 26, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Stephen L. Varnis, *Reluctant Aid or Aiding the Reluctant? U.S. Food Aid Policy and Ethiopian Famine Relief* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1990), p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Jack Shepherd, 'Ethiopia: the use of food as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy', in *Issue: a journal of opinion* (Los Angeles), 14, 1985, p. 5.



and peasant farmers found that it was increasingly difficult without oxen to maintain their fields.<sup>25</sup>

Those peasants and pastoralists in the north who did not emigrate to the Sudan began to flock to administrative centres in search of food, and by late 1984, some international relief assistance finally began to arrive. Even then, the Government did not have the infrastructural or logistical capacity to effectively meet the needs of those more direly affected near their own homes. Some walked for 50 or 60 miles in order to receive food, and on the way countless numbers died. Although there were as many as 286 distribution and 162 feeding stations by 1985, as well as three major shelters, the mushrooming of such relief centres had the unintended consequence of creating an inordinate dependence on external aid. Ideally, the most able-bodied would have come to collect enough provisions to sustain their families for several weeks and then returned home.<sup>26</sup> However, thousands of families stayed, many of them needing medical attention, thereby causing problems when the Government attempted to close down these centres.

In 1985, the famine entered its fourth phase. The *meher* rains were good, suggesting that the worst might be over, and two seasons later, for the first time in five years, Ethiopia appeared to be headed for normal grain harvests. By 1987, the number of people remaining in residual pockets of famine was 2.5 million, down from almost 7 million the previous year. Only a few small feeding centres remained open, and the President announced the goal of food self-sufficiency by 1990.<sup>27</sup>



By the end of 1987 the drought had returned again: almost all the crops failed in Eritrea, and in Tigre it was nearly as bad.<sup>28</sup> By 1989 the yield in Eritrea was only about 75 per cent of normal, and in Wollo and Tigre about 85 and 50 per cent, respectively. More than five million people were at risk in these regions by the beginning of 1990, mainly because armed conflict made it difficult not only to plant and harvest crops, but also to deliver relief assistance.<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt that both the *Derg* and its opponents, the T.P.L.F.

<sup>25</sup> Preston King, *An African Winter* (New York, 1986), p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 40-1.

<sup>27</sup> James Brooke, 'Ethiopia's Post-Famine Goal: self-sufficiency', in *The New York Times*, 10 March 1987.

<sup>28</sup> U.S.A.I.D., 'Situation Report - Ethiopia', Washington, DC, 17 September 1987.

<sup>29</sup> David Holdridge, 'Statement', in *Famine in Ethiopia: Joint Hearing Before the Sub-Committee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the International Task Force of the Select Committee on Hunger, U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, DC, 28 February 1990).

north. The first settlers experienced tremendous hardships, being chosen from feeding centres in Tigre, Wollo, and northern Shoa, and transported by trucks, buses, and cargo planes to camps in Kaffa, Gojam, Gondar, Wollega, and Illubabor that were poorly prepared to receive such a vast influx.

By 1988, despite the programme's obvious failure, President Mengistu repeatedly asserted that it would continue, even estimating that eventually about 16 per cent of Ethiopia's population would be resettled. However, as explained later by the former R.R.C. Commissioner, Dawit Wolde Giorgis: 'Resettlement programs became our Siberia. As a result, in the minds of the people they were equated with concentration camps'.<sup>32</sup> Many of those forcibly resettled were able to escape. Some fled into the Sudan or Somalia, and others took whatever shelter they could find or walked thousands of miles along the border in order to return to their home areas. Still others joined opposition forces.

Some critics charged that the Ethiopian régime deliberately disrupted the efforts of international relief agencies to bring the famine under control by forcibly removing the victims of drought from northern feeding centres, and by sending them to camps in the south and west. Moreover, others contended that this kind of programme violated the most fundamental human rights of all those concerned. The T.P.L.F. and other opposition groups alleged that the main aim was to depopulate Tigre and Wollo, thereby freeing the *Derg* to commit genocide against those that remained.<sup>33</sup>

Reports of as many as 100,000 people dying in the earlier stages of resettlement have proved to be unfounded, although Africa Watch estimates that at least 50,000 deaths can be attributed to the programme.<sup>34</sup> The living conditions in the new sites were extremely poor, and food, shelter, and medical supplies were grossly inadequate.<sup>35</sup> No matter what the motivation, the net effect of the policy was to further improve – at least temporarily – the *Derg*'s ability to control areas of the country characterised by civil unrest, and to advance its socialist policies. Cadres of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia were assigned to carry out the tasks of political education and agitation in each of the settlements, and to monitor and stimulate production.

The villagisation programme, like resettlement, was designed to

<sup>32</sup> Wolde Giorgis, *op. cit.* p. 285.

<sup>33</sup> Firebrace and Smith, *op. cit.* pp. 15–16.

<sup>34</sup> *Evil Days*, p. 227.

<sup>35</sup> See François Jean, *Ethiopie: du bon usage de la famine* (Paris, Médecins sans Frontières, 1986), p. 72.



relief agencies often violated this policy. As a matter of fact, at the height of the crisis, the United States even engaged in cross-border operations to assist famine victims in Eritrea and Tigre.<sup>39</sup>

Foreign donors regularly argued that they did not want to get involved in Ethiopia's political problems, and that their only aim was to help the needy. However, some agencies were invariably drawn into domestic controversies, especially those that looked to the Government to sanction where they worked. For example, the F.A.O. went so far as to support the resettlement and villagisation programmes, while those voluntary organisations that agreed to operate in certain areas also indirectly aided the *Derg* in its political objectives. Concurrently, the Eritrean and Tigrean rebels established their own relief agencies, and they were able to compete with the Mengistu régime for outside assistance, mainly from privately funded donors.

The *Derg* felt the need to levy charges on all the food and other relief supplies being brought into the country, mainly in order to help finance its war machine. As much as \$30 million was raised in 1985 by imposing an import fee that was initially set as high as \$50.50 per metric ton for all donors (except the United Nations, which had to pay \$49). However, this levy was reduced to \$20 following an outcry from all the affected agencies.<sup>40</sup> To make matters worse, some truck-loads of food intended for civilian centres were diverted by military officials in order to meet the needs of their own soldiers and armed supporters.<sup>41</sup> In the north, relief supplies were being deliberately used to induce local residents to join the Ethiopian army, and to pay the soldiers. In some cases local merchants bought the food, which they then sold to the rebels.<sup>42</sup>

By 1987, the *Derg*'s efforts to use food as a weapon were being directly challenged by the E.P.L.F. A U.N. convoy of 23 trucks supplied by Band-Aid and the Catholic Relief Services was destroyed in October, and nearly 450 tons of wheat – enough to feed 45,000 people for a month – were doused with petrol and set ablaze.<sup>43</sup> Three months later the rebels attacked yet another convoy, claiming that it was part of a military operation. Within weeks this was followed by a major victory by the E.P.L.F. at Afabet, and with the fall of this

<sup>39</sup> David Ottaway, 'U.S. Relief Program to Defy Ethiopia', in *The Washington Post*, 31 May 1988. The first time the United States engaged in cross-border relief operations was in 1984–5.

<sup>40</sup> *Congressional Record: U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, DC), 7 October 1987, p. H8297, and Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: even the stones are burning* (Trenton, NJ, 1990), p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> Cohen, loc. cit.

<sup>42</sup> See Varnis, op. cit. p. 162; Pateman, op. cit. p. 195; and Dines, loc. cit. p. 153.

<sup>43</sup> Blaine Harden, 'Food Aid Destroyed in Ethiopia', in *The Washington Post*, 26 October 1987.

same time, the rebels continued their relentless assault to cut the country in half, helped by the fact that they were still receiving some relief supplies via the areas that they controlled along the Sudan border.

In Tigre, the T.P.L.F. had been engaged since the beginning of 1988 in its largest offensive against Ethiopian forces to date. Over the next two years, it captured the entire region, including the urban centres of Axum, Inda Silase, and Mekele. Following an abortive coup against President Mengistu in May 1989, its ranks were swollen by Ethiopian military defectors, including whole units. In addition, the T.P.L.F. made significant strides towards creating a united front comprised of organisations opposed to the *Derg*'s rule. Most significantly, it joined forces with the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement in forming the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (E.P.R.D.F.), which now claimed that it sought to eliminate the last vestiges of feudalism and imperialism, and to form a genuinely democratic society.

In addition to holding all of Tigre by early 1991, the E.P.R.D.F. controlled large portions of Wollo, Gondar, and Gojam, and its forces had penetrated to within less than 100 miles of Addis Ababa. It was also threatening to cut Ethiopia's last north-south supply-line leading from the port city of Assab, the main route for the transportation of relief aid following the earlier loss of Massawa. By April, the Mengistu régime had lost Eritrea, and the E.P.R.D.F. marched victoriously, with little resistance from the Ethiopian armed forces, to claim the seat of governance in Addis Ababa.

#### CONCLUSION

The 'Great Famine of 1983-6' was exacerbated by the ill-conceived policies of the *Derg*. Because of climatic changes, the drought of that period was bound to be major, but under other circumstances its effects might have been mitigated through effective policies and timely foreign disaster relief. But the Ethiopian régime seemed more interested in pursuing a political agenda of statist control rather than a strategy designed to achieve food security. Its tactics used to suppress the northern opposition have been described by some as approaching genocide,<sup>48</sup> based on the allegation that a systematic attempt was made to starve the people of Tigre and Eritrea, and certainly there is clear evidence that the *Derg* used food as a weapon of war. Persistent

<sup>48</sup> See Jean Zeiler, 'Genocide Convention - Ethiopian Famine in the Eritrean War for Independence', in *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law* (Athens, GA), 19, Fall 1989, pp. 589-612.