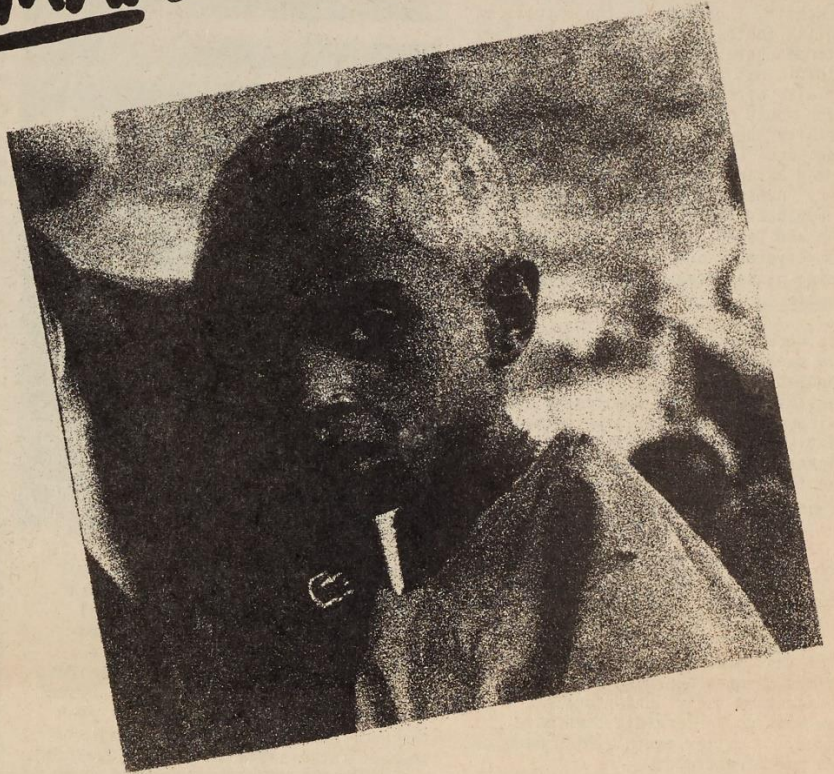


# THIS MISERY IS MAN-MADE



**I**t is not drought but war that is the cause of the famine in Ethiopia. It is now clear that the scale of the famine is enormous - perhaps even larger than the disaster of the early 1970's. If we are not to become lost in our despair at the sheer size of this human tragedy, we must now more than ever, seek to gain an understanding of the issues behind the present crisis.

Drought is an environmental phenomenon. Famine is a social and political one. Yet the links between drought and famine are assumed to be clear; if there is no rain, the crops fail and people starve. It is usually forgotten that while there may be drought in one region, people elsewhere - even close to a drought area - may continue to have food in plenty.

War, being disruptive of agricultural and economic activity, can also precipitate famine. The Marshall Plan rapidly corrected a famine in Europe after World War II. Those countries lacking the technological, infrastructural and manpower resources of Europe in the 1940's, are poorly placed to respond in similar situations. Yet wars continue in the Horn of Africa unabated, and largely ignored.

A quick glance at the history of the war in Eritrea, (currently regarded as Ethiopia's northern, maritime province), will serve to illustrate some of the political and social factors which led to and continue to affect a famine made worse by the recent drought.

The U.S.-backed regime of Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea in 1962, thereby unilaterally revoking the United Nations'(U.N.) resolution 390 a/v which in 1952 federated the ex-Italian colony as an autonomous unit within Ethiopia. The present government in Ethiopia, now backed by the Soviet Union, has continued the wars against Eritreans and other peoples, currently allotting roughly a third of its gross national product to military expenditures.

Numerous major offensives have failed to dislodge the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, (E.P.L.F.), which is now the largest and effectively sole 'liberation movement', from its base in Eritrea. Indeed, this organisation has been able to develop, (with the cooperation and trust of the Eritrean people), an undeniably impressive, integrated programme of rural development, including primary health care programmes, literacy campaigns and construction schemes.

In the early months of 1984, the war moved from guerilla operations to open battle; some commentators suggested that the balance of power was once more tilting Eritreans, like *The Guardian*, on 24th of April, 1984. The tenth anniversary of the coup was celebrated last September, with a commitment to what the Ethiopian government calls 'socialist development',

and a reaffirmation of the Soviet Union's resolution to support Ethiopia. Yet the legitimacy of this war has never been tested in any court of law - or even at the U.N., whose own resolution was violated in 1962.

United States governments have always regarded the Ethiopians as Nationalists first and pro the Soviet style of Marxism-Leninism second. President Reagan recently announced an emergency aid package for Ethiopia. This is a move which one might regard as motivated more by political than humanitarian considerations, given U.S. hopes that the country will one day return to the American fold.

Aid sent to Ethiopia does not reach Eritrea or certain parts of Tigray, whose people must rely on the independent efforts of the Eritrean Relief Association and the Relief Association of Tigray. Despite this however, it would of course be wrong for any reason to deny Ethiopia access to aid. The people of that region require our assistance and must receive it. No human being would wish to cut off aid to starving people and one must be cautious to separate the hopes and needs of ordinary people from the regional and strategic interest of local governments and the superpowers.

It is imperative however, that donors and governments now consider the longer term implications of the struggle in the regions where people have become pawns in the game of larger and geopolitical interests. Six thousand men and women died in a battle in northeast Eritrea earlier last year - the biggest land battle in Africa since the Second World War. The bodies of many of those people still lay on the dry dust of the eastern lowlands last August - brutal and bleached

monuments to a war in which bullets are being brought in preference to food.

The myth that the E.P.L.F. is a "secessionist rabble" needs to be removed. Eritrea's army is a large and sophisticated body of men and women, able to muster at brigade level and fight a mechanised battle over open ground using captured Ethiopian armour. Moreover, there is at least a case to be argued when they claim their revolution is not viewable simply as an "internal matter" within Ethiopia.

Our newspapers, television, radio and government have not seriously debated any of the issues here raised. Indeed, this last year has seen depressingly little in the way of intelligent debate and serious thought. Perhaps we prefer to think of famine victims as drought victims - not as political ones. This is not to suggest that drought is not a factor. But it is only ONE factor. Perhaps we prefer to think of famine victims as passive recipients of aid that the rest of the world gives, rather than victims of a political situation they cannot change but are forced to be a part of.

We need to acknowledge - at the very least - that there is a need for dialogue. A military solution to a now stalemated military situation is not the answer. Aid is not, on its own, the answer. Until the international community gives serious attention to the real circumstances of Ethiopia's tragedy, people will continue to suffer and die needlessly in what has become Africa's longest war. And the famine - a social and political phenomenon - will continue to destroy the lives of thousands of people.

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