

Aid withheld as famine grips Horn of Africa

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Up to 16 million people face famine in the Horn of Africa, which includes Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. After three years of drought, Ethiopia is the worst affected, with the World Health Organisation estimating that 8 million people face starvation.

In the southeastern Ogaden plains, 1.3 million people are at risk and 600,000 are in danger of starvation. The people of this area are pastoralists, keeping cattle, sheep, goats and camels to provide for most of their needs. This year the rains have failed completely and 90 to 95 percent of the livestock has died. Even camels, the hardiest of animals, have stopped lactating and will soon die. The plains are littered with carcasses and herdsman are forced to kill their remaining emaciated livestock and dry them out to use as a last resort in an attempt to survive.

Villages have been abandoned as families, weakened by hunger, have trekked hundreds of miles in search of food and water. Over the past three months, tens of thousands of people have migrated to Gode, the largest town in the Ogaden area.

In a two-week period at the beginning of March, a local feeding centre admitted 500 children under five years of age. In the evening, mothers had to take their children back to the makeshift camps set up at the edge of the town. There is no proper shelter, no drinking water and no medicines. When water does arrive in tankers it is rationed to one litre a day, a pitiful amount given the intense heat. Many people are forced to drink unsafe water and there is a growing incidence of kidney failure, diarrhoea, pneumonia, measles, tuberculosis and other respiratory infections. Parents are left to helplessly watch their children die.

The Ethiopian government has been warning about the impending famine for many months. They issued the first caution last November, and in January they said they needed 1.2 million metric tonnes of food aid this year if they were to avert disaster.

Food must be distributed urgently, or there will be a crisis of 1984 proportions, when nearly one million people died. After that famine, Ethiopia's government set up an early warning system and a special reserve of 350,000 metric tonnes of food as a rapid response mechanism. Last year, the government had to sharply increase the number of people being given aid from two million to seven million, running down its food reserves. Thousands of tonnes of food were distributed from the reserve stocks, after the West had given written assurances that

supplies would be replaced as soon as possible.

In 1999 the West delivered less than half of the food promised for the year—220,000 metric tonnes out of a total 463,000 metric tonnes pledged. The European Union (EU) pledged 145,000 tonnes, of which only 78,000 tonnes were delivered. It is now a whole year behind in the delivery of its pledges. Consequently, food stocks in Ethiopia were reduced to 30,000 tonnes—enough for only two weeks emergency supply. Othman Mahmoud, regional representative for the charity Oxfam, warned of catastrophe if supplies did not arrive soon. "They should have topped up the food reserve," he said, "but they didn't."

Last Monday, BBC correspondent Richard Lister told the "Today Programme" that out of the 20 emergency warehouses in Addis Ababa, four had grain in them and these were only a quarter full. Over the past few months the government has only been able to distribute 70 percent of the absolute minimum food requirement to those who needed it.

In the same programme, Michael Curtis, a representative of the EU Development Programme, denied that the EU had failed to deliver its pledged food aid. Despite the fact that the strategic reserve is almost non-existent, he cynically described it as a kind of "nest egg" to be used in hard times and said it was better that the food was being distributed rather than "sitting in the warehouse". He claimed that the EU replenished the reserves at the beginning of each year by purchasing food locally, "to support the local economy". This year, he said, the Ethiopian government had launched its own programme to purchase 100,000 tonnes and had asked the EU not to do the same because if too much grain were bought locally it would distort the market and drive up the price.

Curtis then made the outrageous claim that food aid had not been delivered from abroad because "the ports we use are stretched to the very limit". This was despite the fact that last month not one single cargo of food aid was unloaded at Djibouti, the port used by Ethiopia.

On Sunday, April 9 the *Observer* newspaper carried a front-page article reporting that the British government has halved its long-term aid to Ethiopia. The paper said, "Despite fresh evidence of the massive scale of the disaster threatening Ethiopia, International Development Secretary, Clare Short, has cut Ethiopia's three-year aid programme from £39.3m to £19m." The paper reported that Short is also cutting the aid

budget promised to Mozambique by £24 million, saying the country is "cash rich", and its government is "too weak" to see long-term aid projects through successfully.

Short attempted to justify the cuts, stating, "The failure of the last three years' rain is the root cause of Ethiopia's current crisis, but there is little doubt that the continuing conflict with Eritrea is hampering the response to the relief effort and valuable resources are being diverted to perpetuating the conflict."

Ethiopia is landlocked and has been involved in a border war with Eritrea for just under two years. The Eritrean regime came into existence after a 30-year conflict in which the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front was eventually backed by the Reagan administration in the US, due to its opposition to the Soviet-backed Ethiopian military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu was toppled in 1991 and Eritrea won independence in 1993. The two countries both subsequently became client states of the US.

The ostensible cause of the war is a dispute over 160 square miles of mountainous territory, but this is only a focus for more deep-seated antagonisms. Eritrea's ruling elite has sought ever-greater independence from its larger neighbour so that it can exploit its coastal facilities to strengthen its ties with the major global corporations. The imperialist powers view the Horn of Africa as a strategic area because of its proximity to the sea lanes linking the oilfields of the Persian Gulf with the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. In 1997, prior to the outbreak of the present war, Eritrea decided to create its own currency and stop using that of Ethiopia. It also demanded that Ethiopia pay higher rates for the use of its port facilities. Ethiopia responded by imposing tariffs.

The war has exacerbated the already desperate situation facing the masses. Up to half a million are under arms, resources are being squandered and tens of thousands of lives have been lost. Last month, the World Food Program appealed for \$7.9 million in aid to feed an estimated 212,000 Eritreans. The organisation calculates that one quarter—850,000—of the small country's 3.5 million people are in need of assistance as a result of being displaced by the war. The only assistance villagers receive is 33 pounds of grain each month from a government agency.

The flow of aid into the area could undoubtedly be speeded up if the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa were used to transport aid, but Prime Minister Meles Zewani has rejected Eritrea's offer to use its ports.

None of this lessens the responsibility of the Western governments, the IMF and the World Bank for the tragedy unfolding in the Horn of Africa. Since 1991 the economies of both Ethiopia and Eritrea have been liberalised, state enterprises privatised and the countries opened up to the international market in line with IMF demands. The two are among the world's poorest countries: real GDP per capita is US\$960 in Eritrea and US\$427 in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has an

annual per capita income of \$100 and Eritrea less than \$200. Even prior to the present drought, Ethiopia's daily calorific consumption was just 1,600 and less than 25 percent of the population have access to clean drinking water.

Yet both countries are saddled with massive debt repayments. In a report issued last Friday, Oxfam said that poverty was the underlying cause of the famine in Ethiopia, and that similar famines would recur until this was addressed. It pointed out that in 1996 Ethiopia's foreign debt amounted to over \$10 billion—more than 10 times the value of its exports—and that more money was spent on debt servicing than on health and education.

United Nations figures show that international aid to Ethiopia fell from more than \$1 billion in 1991 to \$600 million in 1997. In contrast, the cost of annual debt servicing more than doubled between 1995 and 1996, reaching more than 40 percent of annual exports. The proportion of GNP taken up by debt service has nearly trebled since 1980.

Ethiopia was to have been one of the first to receive debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative, but the IMF has blocked this, declaring the country "off-track"—i.e., that it had not gone far enough with its structural adjustment programme. Since last September, the World Bank has also cut off aid to the region. They refuse to fund any new projects in Ethiopia and Eritrea, saying the two countries "should be fighting poverty not each other".

International aid is increasingly being used as an open instrument of foreign policy by the imperialist powers. Frank Lyons, Head of the United Nations Development Programme in Nairobi, made this clear when he said recently that "the nature of aid will have to change—especially in those countries which face problems in the way they are governed." Those regimes that incur the displeasure of the West will have aid denied to them, while those who bow to their wishes receive special attention. The imperialist powers may consider the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea contrary to their interests, but they take a different attitude to other wars in Africa. Last November 29, President Bill Clinton signed a law allowing the US to provide direct food aid to the Sudan People's Liberation Army, which is engaged in a bloody conflict for the control of oil supplies. The move marked a significant change in US policy and means that food aid can be used directly for military purposes.



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