

British government refuses aid to Ethiopian famine victims

David Rowan

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On November 19, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) organisation defended comments made by the prime minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, on the escalating famine crisis in the country.

The UN statement was issued in response to remarks made by the British minister for international development, Clare Short.

In an interview given on November 11 to BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, Zenawi had stated that the current famine crisis in Ethiopia could dwarf that of 1984-85 when up to 7.9 million people were affected and up to one million people died of starvation.

Zenawi's comments were echoed in numerous statements from aid agencies, but Short told reporters that UN representatives had been "very irresponsible" in their assessment of the famine crisis in Ethiopia and accused them, along with Zenawi, of exaggerating the scale of the problem in the country.

Short went so far as to deny that a famine crisis even existed. She stated, with her characteristic mixture of cynicism, hypocrisy and myopia, that because four million people are dependent on food aid every year in Ethiopia the present figures of those needing assistance expressed nothing particularly unusual.

Conveniently ignoring the role played by the policies of the International Monetary Fund on the economy of Ethiopia, Short stated, "You don't get famine conditions without gross misgovernment.... If you keep giving people handouts of food you undermine local agriculture."

Short went on to state that the famine in southern Africa was far more severe than in Ethiopia and that there was more danger of significant loss of life due to people being weakened by HIV/AIDS and in particular because of "misgovernment in Zimbabwe."

Representatives of aid organisations stated that both

areas affected by famine deserved equal attention, but made the point that 14 million people are affected by the southern famine across six countries, whereas in Ethiopia a similar number of people are threatened with famine in just one country. UN officials called the scale of the famine gripping Ethiopia "unprecedented".

The figures used by Zenawi in the BBC interview were taken from reports issued by the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) of Ethiopia, the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) and other joint World Food Programme (WFP), donor and government assessment missions. These organisations highlighted the deteriorating food situation in the drought-stricken eastern half of Ethiopia.

The FEWSNET report placed the figure of people needing urgent food assistance through the end of 2002 at between 4.5 million and 6.3 million, rising to a peak of between 10.2 million and 14.3 million by early 2003, depending on rainfall and whether sufficient international aid was forthcoming. On the basis of this information the International Red Cross launched an urgent appeal for \$11 million in food aid.

According to the WFP, 84 percent of crops have failed in Ethiopia and it estimates in the first quarter of next year Ethiopia will need between 350,000 and 500,000 tonnes of grain. If worst fears are realized, some 2.2 million tonnes of food could be needed in 2003. "These figures are staggering," said Georgia Shaver, the WFP representative in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.

Wagdi Otman of the WFP told reporters that the organisation was not being "alarmist" in its assessment of the famine crisis developing in Ethiopia and stated that the prime minister was "perfectly right to alert the International community right now because what we

are seeing is a slow response to the signals we have been giving since June.”

Similar comments have been made by other representatives of aid agencies within Ethiopia.

David Snyder of Catholic Relief Services told Reuters that a lot of people were making comparisons to the famine of 1984-85: “The potential for this to get really big in three or four months is definitely there. Everything depends on how fast the world community is going to pledge food and get it to Ethiopia.”

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), malnutrition rates in the worst affected areas are now in excess of 25 percent—15 percent is seen as critical.

Commenting on the situation facing Ethiopia, Andrew Pendleton, a spokesman for Christian Aid, told the *Today* programme, “Ten percent plus of the Ethiopian government’s revenues are spent on repaying international debts. That is an enormous amount of money to take away from a country that is critically poor. In the long term we have to look at why this keeps happening again and again.”

The immediate cause of the famine is the complete failure of both the February to May Belg rains and the main Meher rains that usually last from June to September, which has led to severe drought in eastern Ethiopia and western Eritrea.

The UN, together with the government of Eritrea, launched an appeal November 19 requesting \$163.4 million in food and non-food assistance. Out of a population of 3.75 million, 1.4 million are affected by drought.

Ethiopia suffers frequent and prolonged droughts, but lacks the infrastructure to collect and save sufficient water during good rainy seasons to provide supplies when the rains fail. But drought is just one factor that has had a devastating effect on the whole Horn of Africa region. More fundamental is the damage wrought by years of war in this region. Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a two-and-a-half-year war, which only ended three years ago. Neither country has yet recovered.

Prior to that, a 30-year war ravaged both Eritrea and Ethiopia as the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front fought to break away from Ethiopia. The Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front, which brought Meles Zenawi himself to power at the head of a national coalition, began as a separatist tendency in this war which fought

first against Haile Selassie and then the Stalinist-backed Mengistu regime.

Meles Zenawi has drawn attention to the famine, but in leading his country into a futile war he has played his part in causing it. The same can be said of his economic programme. His acceptance of IMF policies has meant that farmers have been forced to switch from food production to coffee growing. Collapsing commodity prices have left them without the means to grow food or the money to buy it.

Short’s comments reflect UK government policy toward Africa and certain differences with the United States, which backs Zenawi. A recent article in the *Economist* drew attention to the policies of the Department for International Development (DFID), headed by Short, which is now directing money away from project-based Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as Oxfam and Save the Children. Instead the UK is giving aid directly to “favoured” African governments.

Against a background of falling aid levels, Britain is increasing its aid to Africa. The total aid from the 22 richest countries fell from \$56 billion in 1999 to \$53 billion in 2000. In contrast, aid from Britain to Africa was 0.26 percent of national income in 1997 when the Labour government came to power and will increase to 0.40 percent by 2006 or £4.6 billion (\$7.1 billion). This year the UK gave £1 billion to Africa.

Three of the top five recipients of British aid are former colonies: Tanzania, Uganda and Ghana. This mechanism is described as “part of a process of building modern, effective states.”

The identification of a government as effective is entirely bound up with the economic interests of British imperialism and the extent to which various nationalist ruling elites are willing to cooperate with Britain. Short does not intend that the small matter of 14 million people dying of hunger in the Horn of Africa should disrupt the direction of UK government policy or its ability to regain colonial control over large swathes of the continent.



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