

# Ethiopian famine significantly worsens as Western powers fail to respond

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11 October 2008

Oxfam has reported that the number of Ethiopians needing emergency food assistance has jumped to 6.4 million from 4.6 million in June. It cited United Nations figures that there was a \$260 million shortfall for agencies trying to address Ethiopia's crisis.

Oxfam's country director Waleed Rauf cited government figures showing that 6.4 million people need emergency assistance and more than 13.5 million people are in need of some sort of aid, stating that "The number of those suffering severe hunger and destitution has spiralled."

A World Food Programme (WFP) press release of August 28 also noted how severely rising commodity prices are exacerbating the situation created by a regional drought. "The impact of global soaring food and fuel prices on local prices has compounded the problem... Some of the most vulnerable individuals, who would normally have purchased food from local markets after their own crops failed, can no longer afford the price... Global increases in fuel prices are also having a major impact on the daily cost of living, as well as on WFP operations. Transport rates have risen between 30 and 60 percent since January."

Ethiopia is only one of the regions of the world that is facing a food crisis. A recent summit in New York on poverty reviewed--at the halfway point--the progress made on the millennium goal pledges made in 2000 and due to be fulfilled by 2015. One of these pledges was to reduce by half the number in the world suffering hunger.

Oxfam attacked the "lack of urgency" in dealing with the food crisis that is affecting nearly 1 billion people--a sixth of the world population. A press release stated, "Oxfam calculations reveal that so far close to US\$13 billion has been pledged for 2008 to help poor countries cope with the increases in food prices but

only a fraction has been disbursed. The UN estimates that US\$25-40 billion per year in additional funding is required to resolve the global food crisis."

Barbara Stocking, the director of the British arm of Oxfam, said, "A crisis is unravelling in front of our eyes in the Horn of Africa where over 17 million are facing starvation due to drought and high food prices. Yet aid agencies have not closed a \$700 million gap to deal with the crisis. *That is one-thousandth of just the latest commitments proposed for the financial crisis*" (emphasis added).

The development charity Action Aid issued a report, "Failing the Rural Poor", which also examined the progress of the millennium goals relating to hunger. Referring to these goals the report noted, "the world is in the grip of a food crisis which threatens to derail progress towards all the goals. The cost of staple foods has risen by an average of 80 percent in two years. As a result 100 million more people have joined the ranks of the hungry, and a further 750 million are newly at risk of chronic hunger. Action aid now calculates that as many as 1.7 billion people, or a quarter of the world's population, may now lack basic food security."

The report gave a table showing the 10 countries with the highest number of hungry people in their populations. Ethiopia with 46 percent of its population classed as hungry was second only to the Democratic Republic of Congo, which after decades of civil war, has 72 percent of its population classed as hungry.

With the world economy heading for meltdown the fate of the world's hungry can only deteriorate.

In addition the terrible situation in Ethiopia is being worsened by the actions of its government.

The extent of the famine is firstly being massively underestimated by the regime of Meles Zenawi, according to a report last month by Britain's Channel 4.

Moreover, the Ethiopian army is also diverting food aid and pursuing a scorched earth policy in the Ogaden region.

The September 19 report by Jonathan Rugman accused the Ethiopian government of claiming then that only four million were in need of aid, when the United Nations estimate was around eight million. Sir John Holmes, the UN's emergency coordinator stated that "The figure has risen very substantially, maybe even doubled"-an estimate it appears has now been surpassed.

The Ogaden region jutting into Somalia is home to the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The army is accused of withholding food supplies as part of its campaign against the ONLF, to prevent the nomad tribes who inhabit the area from giving any succour to the rebels. Many resort to eating berries, bark or cactus to try to survive. On some occasions children have eaten poisonous berries and have died. The nomads' animals are also dying.

The Channel 4 news report showed one man visibly suffering from lack of food, witnessed by his rib cage showing under his skin. He explained, "I am ill and hungry... Because of the drought we have nothing to eat. The only people who receive food are the military forces."

The army is also accused of depriving people of access to water. Rugman spoke to one man who explained, "We walk for eight hours to collect water. Then the military take the water from us. They say the rebels pass through our villages and that we give them supplies. But what can we give? We are dying of hunger. We have nothing to give our own children."

Ogaden has not had any rainfall for three years. The Ethiopian government has been accused of human rights abuses, and a year ago the UN called on the government to hold an enquiry into the abuses. The enquiry has not taken place.

Channel 4 had seen a confidential report prepared by USAid, the American government aid body, which spoke of "hundreds of areas... have neither been assessed nor received any food assistance... populations we met [are] terrorised by the inability to access food."

"The US Government cannot in good conscience allow the food operation to continue in its current manifestation," the report concludes.

However, Washington regards Zenawi as an

important ally in the Horn of Africa region and a key part of its "War on Terror". Ethiopia is currently conducting an increasingly brutal proxy war on behalf of the US within Somalia. For this reason the damning report on the behaviour of the Ethiopian government in Ogaden has never been published and the US government still refuses to make any criticism of the Zenawi regime.



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